Wanderers in Contradiction. The Italian Road to Modernism (1903-1922)

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Romance Studies in the Graduate School of Duke University

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My dissertation, *Wanderers in Contradiction. The Italian Road to Modernism (1903-1922)*, analyzes how a generation of intellectuals approach the cultural revolution brought by Modernism. In Chapter One, dedicated to Pirandello’s essay *On Humor*, modernist themes, such as the perception of life as an unstoppable and unrepresentable flux, are examined in the Italian work that best represents them in the context of nineteenth-century ‘negative thought.’ Chapter Two, which is devoted to the writings of Giovanni Papini and Giuseppe Prezzolini, and Chapter Three, in which I focus on the work of Ardengo Soffici and Aldo Palazzeschi, analyze the ‘positive’ response to Modernism. These intellectuals highlighted how the cultural crisis was an opportunity to reject dangerous forms of essentialism, and opened the way for a new form of art committed to the representation of contingency. Conversely, Chapter Four, which deals with Giovanni Boine and Piero Jahier, and Chapter Five, on Scipio Slataper and Carlo Michelstaedter, illustrate the ‘negative’ reaction to the modernist crisis of values. These authors, who abandoned a purely epistemological perspective in favor of a religious or ethical one, manifest an anti-modernist thread within Modernism itself. Therefore, my research contributes to three different general areas of scholarship: literature, philosophy, and history. Broadly speaking, it advances the understanding of Italian culture and the way Italian intellectuals participate in and are influenced by European interactions. It also engages with philosophical debates concerning the crisis of metaphysical Foundations, including the role of Italian writers in this process.
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Acknowledgments

I have incurred many debts in the process of writing this dissertation. My most important one is obviously to Roberto Dainotto, without whose advice, comments, and support this project would never have been written. There is more: without his mentoring I would have continued to interpret Modernism just as a “battle of ideas.” This dissertation owes much to my committee, whose guidance has shaped each stage of my graduate career. I want to thank Fredric Jameson, Michael Hardt, Luca Somigli, and Federico Luisetti for their constant suggestions.

I want to thank my mother for her support and care and my father for being a “healthy communist” (our time will come).

For being my wife and for our old-fashioned humanist faith this dissertation is dedicated to Laura.
Introduction

“In our days everything seems pregnant with its contrary”
Karl Marx

I. Summary and Methodology

The purpose of my research is to show how the main modernist topics that in the early twentieth century characterized European and American literature and philosophy were also being actively debated in Italy during this same timeframe. This work fits into the critical tradition directed at identifying the existence of an Italian Modernism that began with *Modernismo/modernismo* (edited by Giovanni Cianci) and has recently been relaunched by the contributions of Luca Somiglì and Mario Moroni (*Italian Modernism*) and of Romano Luperini, Massimiliano Tortora, and Raffaele Donnarumma (*Sul Modernismo italiano*).

While the great novelists of Italian Modernism (Luigi Pirandello, Italo Svevo, Carlo Emilio Gadda, and Federigo Tozzi)\(^1\) had already been studied by critics sensitive to indications in this sense (whether or not they used the word ‘Modernism’),\(^2\) the same approach had not been applied to authors who had introduced modernist themes in Italy, preparing the way for Modernism.\(^3\) Thus my analysis is not a rejection of the former works dedicated to Italian

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\(^1\) But the same can be said about Eugenio Montale, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Massimo Bontempelli, Umberto Saba, and others.

\(^2\) We should mention at least the recent book by Riccardo Castellana on Federigo Tozzi (*Parole cose persone*). Cf. Castellana: “what unites them is nihilism and more generally the crisis of foundations that began in the late nineteenth century. Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Bergson are starting points and *maestri* for the Vocians as well as for Pirandello, Tozzi, and Svevo.”

For entirely different reasons, however, Marinetti and Futurism are not particularly highlighted in this work. In a Burgerian perspective, the avant-garde is considered a moment internal to the modernist horizon. In that horizon, however, it expresses a narrower and in some ways opposite meaning in relation to the modernist outlook. Cf. Donnarumma: “Tracciatò del Modernismo italiano,” in *Sul modernismo italiano* 16: “If we have been accustomed to thinking of modernism under the hegemony of the avant-garde, and as a function of it, we could now reverse the discourse and look at avant-garde as a unilateral moment of modernist logic.” Furthermore, compared to the writers discussed in this work, Marinetti seems to have had a rather limited understanding of the ontological and epistemological crisis taking place. The matter will be treated in the second and third chapters in relation to the so-called Florentine Futurism.

\(^3\) An important exception is Thomas Harrison’s *1910*.

Another important exception is Adamson: *Avant-Garde Florence*, an excellent introduction to the main themes treated by the authors in question, but little different from what Italian critics have written over the last 30-40 years.

An English-language study of this generation was also produced by Peter M. Riccio, a student of Giuseppe Prezzolini (a major protagonist of the modernist movement in Italy) at Columbia University in 1929: *On the Threshold of Fascism*. In addition to providing a (rather concise) bibliography of the authors discussed here,
culture of the early twentieth century, but, thanks to the introduction of the concept of Modernism in those frameworks, a dialectical reading even of those interpretation. This dialectical reading clarifies the action of Italian culture at that time and at the same time introduces in the European debate the specificity of the Italian situation: this specificity in turn elucidates the European and American field.

My methodological approach – which makes reference, in particular, to the works of György Lukács and Antonio Gramsci – explores the historical and social functions of Modernism as the hegemonic ideology of intellectuals during the imperialist stage of capitalism. Consequently, the work of a number of intellectuals who were active in Italy at the beginning of the last century is examined as relating to the dominant cultural logics of the period: on the one hand, the logic of modernist European ‘style’ (particularly French and Austrian literary debates); and, on the other, the ‘philosophy of crisis’ (i.e., Nietzsche, American and British pragmatism, Bergsonism, German Lebensphilosophie, and neo-Kantianism), which can be considered as the philosophical self-consciousness of Modernism.

In addition to giving due consideration to previous works on Modernism published in English, my research includes an extensive analysis of Italian-language critical literature on the early twentieth century. If we look at Italian literature of the early twentieth century under the concept of Modernism, and if we single out its often explicit relations to wider European and American debates, we can begin to dispel the age-old myth of isolation and/or backwardness that supposedly characterized Italian culture during those years. Furthermore, the philosophical, as well as literary, expressions of Modernism give good reason to place the dominant Italian culture of the time within the wider context of the crisis of epistemology and values that constituted the hegemonic function of Modernism in that period. In this regard, my study, which rather than concentrating on ‘major’ authors such as D’Annunzio, Tozzi, or Svevo (although they do appear as terms of reference), focuses on authors who are generally

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Riccio pointed out the presence of some of the most important names of European Modernism on the pages of the review La Voce: Rimbaud, Gide, James, Weininger, Tyrrell, Sorel.
considered ‘minor’ ones, intending to show Italian and foreign readers alike the incredible extension which the modernist perspective acquired in Italy already at the start of the century. Finally, the exposition of modernist topics in Italian culture of the time is consistently correlated with the social and historical structure in which specific intellectuals operated, as well as to their more general cultural and political intents. The political and social problems of the time, as understood by the intellectuals (the spreading of nationalism, the appearance of mass society and of the new horizon of the Metropolis, the transformation of men of letters into cultural workers, the collapse of traditional religious values, etc.), are analyzed in the broad context of the philosophical crisis expressed by Modernism. The structure of this work follows the tradition of cultural criticism that focuses on the relation between the history of intellectuals and the great social changes that characterized the formation of new horizons of thought (at this level of methodology I have found the works of Luisa Mangoni and Mario Isnenghi to be particularly important).

The choice of authors was obviously not done at random. The focus centered on authors who had accompanied their artistic production with active work as cultural operators. The purpose of this decision was to better clarify the complex relationship between modernist issues and the activity of bourgeois intellectuals as mass society was arising in Italy. Furthermore, the authors selected are particularly exemplary and paradigmatic in relation to a variety of different issues.

The initial chapter on Pirandello focuses on three core concepts. Modernism is first outlined as A Dialectics of Historicism: a historical-philosophical excursus situates the main modernist themes on the broader Romantic and historicist horizon that makes up its background. Modernism is, then, analyzed in the second part of the chapter, by examining what can be considered, at least in Italy, as the most representative work on the subject:

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4 Modernist issues were of course not dealt with only by the authors here discussed. We can find them in ‘pure artists’ such as Dino Campana, Clemente Rebora, Camillo Sbarbaro. However, discussing these authors would have meant specifically addressing the connections between the philosophical crisis and the new forms (and new poetics) of artistic production, a subject which (besides having been abundantly studied by numerous critics) would have made this work excessively lengthy.
Pirandello’s essay *On Humor*. The chapter ends with an analysis of the novel *I vecchi e i giovani*, allowing for the construction of a definition of the historical context in which modernist topics appeared and were dealt with in Italy. This context is essentially the one relating (here the works of Francesco De Sanctis and Alfredo Oriani become particularly meaningful) to the ‘failure’ of the Risorgimento (Italy unification process).

The failure of the Risorgimento remains a decisive theme in the remaining four chapters of my study, starting with an analysis of Modernism and Nationalism in the works of Giovanni Papini. Here, the participation of Papini in the nationalist movement\(^5\) is related to the modernist crisis of epistemology, since he was the first to introduce the debate in Italy from the pages of the journal *Leonardo*. The interconnections of modernist issues with some of the political theories of the time (for example Pareto’s and Sorel’s), how these issues relate to the new role of the intellectual and what modernist authors thought about it are the main allied goals of this work, which more than a history of ideas (a definition that I find ideologically abstract) should be regarded as a history of intellectuals.

*The Standpoint of Life* that occasionally appears in the works of Papini – the acknowledged inability to assume reality among the symbolisms of the I – is the main theme of the third chapter on Ardengo Soffici and Aldo Palazzeschi, a chapter that also investigates the connections between Modernism and Futurism. Thanks to his extensive association with the Paris avant-garde, Soffici was the first to introduce a thoroughly Nietzschean perspective in Italy, aimed, with its rejection of every essentialist component, at determining the new century as the century of a ‘becoming’ finally freed of all metaphysical encrustations.

Additionally, with his progression through interventionism, return to order, and then Fascism, Soffici was also the first to show the risks connected with this option.

Up to this point, my study has focused on authors willing to look with favor on the epistemological and cultural revolution under way. However, starting with the fourth chapter

\(^5\) Cf. Adamson: *Embattled Avant-Gardes* 13: “Nationalism is often thought to have become bound up with modernism only during and after World War I, but prewar modernist discourse and avant-garde practices contained nationalist inflections of many sorts.”
(“The Colored Hardness of Being”), which deals with Giovanni Boine, we encounter an author who, though forced to work within the hegemonic function of Modernism, rejects its fundamental assumptions in an attempt to re-establish on an unswerving basis the relationship between life and the Value of life, between existence and representation. Here, the cultural models of reference appear entirely changed. Boine looks particularly at authors such as Gobineau, Mistral, and Kierkegaard, in the often-frustrated attempt to re-establish a “religious experience” having nothing to do with either traditional Metaphysics or the new perspective of the “death of God.” Through this approach, he links this philosophical assumption to the reconstruction of a social structure based on the myths of a religion of the land and of the race capable of making sense of the senseless present.

After considering the religious option, the fifth chapter, In the Folds of Zivilisation, focuses on the ethical (tendentially neo-Kantian) perspective of going beyond the modernist perspective. While my study on Scipio Slataper and his Ibsen examined the attempt to reinstate the ‘tragic’ option as breaching the impossibility of tragedy envisaged by Modernism, in the section on Carlo Michelstaedter the terms of this approach are reversed. Here, I show how Michelstaedter was able to confront Modernism not only in theoretical terms (like Boine and Slataper), but taking it directly, in both the alternatives of Life and Form, as the cultural ideology of a precise moment in history. With Michelstaedter, the two routes I have analyzed in the course of my research turn out to be one and the same: the route of attempting to change the world on theoretical grounds in order to propose, no longer within the view of Metaphysics/Truth, but on the Gramscian horizon of “consent,” a cultural perspective outlining the image of reality in terms of Nature. Michelstaedter, who is the ‘bad conscience’ of Modernism, clears the view for a whole generation. He lends fulfillment to my research, too, which can be viewed as a presentation for foreign readers of Italian Modernism, as well as an overall analysis of Modernism to be viewed in connection with the more general studies on that movement and with the works published in Italy on the early twentieth century.
In conclusion, my research has fundamentally a threefold purpose: demonstrating the existence of the main Modernism themes among the Italian intellectuals active at the beginning at the twentieth century, putting them in relation with the European philosophical and literary production; then, analyzing how the modernist themes itself are in relation both with the way in which these intellectuals are imagining their role in society (a critical role of course, but also a role aimed at the formation of consent among the lower strata of intellectuals themselves) and how the modernist themes are linked to completely different political positions; third, analyzing how the historical situation of Italy (from liberal Giolittism to the War of Libya and the formation of the colonial empire, from the uprise of socialism to World War I) determined and transformed, step by step, the Modernist themes themselves.

II. Modernism and Italian Modernism

Franco Moretti wrote

leftist readings of modernist literature (Marxist readings included) are more and more distinctly based on interpretative theories – Russian Formalism, the works of Bakhtin, the theories of «open» works, deconstructionism – that in one way or another are themselves part of Modernism. This sudden loss of a conceptual distance usually results in endless vicious circles arising from the act of interpretation: this is exactly what happened in our case, so that a critique that was intended to criticize – or even demystify, imagine that! – has turned into a loquacious apologetics (Segni e stili del moderno 235).

During this last thirty years or so, with the hegemonic advance of theoretical developments which, for convenience, we can place under the heading ‘postmodernism,’ Modernism has undergone a profound reassessment.¹ This reassessment, however, did not involve the part of

¹ As is known, this neologism acquired its current meaning at the end of the nineteenth century, becoming widespread in Spanish-speaking countries before spreading to English-speaking ones. The term did not take hold in Italy, where it was already used to refer to “religious modernism.” The similarities and differences between religious modernism and Modernism tout court are discussed in Chapter Four. The critical literature on the concept of Modernism is extensive and differentiated. See at least Nicholls: Modernism: A Literary Guide; Weston: Modernism; Butler: Early Modernism; Sheppard: Modernism – Dada – Postmodernism; Hannah: Key Concepts in Modernist Literature; Bell: Ashes Taken for Fire; Scholes: Paradox of Modernism; Jameson: The Modernist Papers; Leigh: Modernism; Ardis: Modernism and Cultural Conflicts; Williams: Modernism and the Ideology of History; Ellison: Ethics and Aesthetics in European Modernist
modernist literary production which had traditionally been interpreted as its principal
objective (the ability of works of art to elevate the chaos of reality into unity, to give it *form*),
but the chaos itself, and the mimesis of it which art produces. The emphasis placed by the
new theories on the capacity for criticism (compared to what has been called bourgeois
‘rationality’) of a culture directed at exposing as fictional\(^2\) (think of Nietzsche’s ‘take on
Ethics) the ‘grand narratives’ along with their outcomes and corollaries, has caused critics to
direct their attention at those elements of Modernism (which certainly do exist) that had
followed objectives similar to those of the now hegemonic new culture. In other words, if
Baudelaire, in “The Painter of Modern Life” (1859-1860), had perceived that the traditional
ideal of immutable ‘beauty’ had entered into a dialectical relationship with “a vivid sense of
the flux and movement in life,” anticipating that, from then on, art would have one face
turned towards contingency and another towards eternity, the new cultural hegemony lays
particular stress on the elements of ‘flux’ and ‘contingency,’ identifying them as the best
grounds on which to criticize a bourgeois thought that is assumed to be the other side of the
coin.

This puts me in a tricky situation: while I find myself in agreement with the above
considerations on the idea that there exists a Modernism entirely devoted to the
simultaneously critical and liberating ideas of ‘contingency,’ fictionality (these aspects are
examined in Chapters I and III), and even nihilism, I wholeheartedly reject the opinion that
this approach lies somehow outside the boundaries of bourgeois culture. On the contrary, it is
my opinion that Modernism – in both its nihilistic and *formative* intents – represents the

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As regards the epistemology-related philosophical crisis, which in this work is interpreted as the speculative self-consciousness of literary modernism, see at least Berman: *All That is Solid Melts Into the Air*; Burrow: *The Crisis of Reason*; Cacciari: *Krisis*.

\(^2\) This is an epistemology-based philosophical approach that Burrow has brilliantly called epistemological phenomenalism. Cf. *The Crisis of European Reason* 60: “They are an epistemological phenomenalism, purporting decisively to detach science from metaphysics; and a conventionalist or pragmatist version of what scientific theories are and what gives them validity.”
cultural logic of a specific period in history, known as Taylorism, marked by the opposite but complementary phenomena of ‘specialization’ and ‘rationalization.’

We then need to consider a further element. The other Modernism, the one that is unwilling, so to speak, to accept the new skeptical/relativistic horizon as a positive development but is nonetheless forced to operate within it, also exists (its repercussions in Italy are discussed in Chapters IV and V). This front, while flirting with (basically pre-capitalist) cultural myths that are fading away, and, like the other, still nailed to the non-dialectical (and non-historical) *modus pensandi* of bourgeois thought based on binary oppositions (life/form, *Kultur/Zivilisation*, and the many others that we will encounter), perhaps managed to express a higher level of criticism of the new bourgeois horizon. It did so because better than the other it was able to outline the connection between the new cultural horizon and a capitalism which no longer needed to count on the authority of symbolic values (God), since it now found expression in a principle that emerges as the complete absence of all principles; it found expression, that is to say, in its ability to handle what Carlo Michelstaedter – the last author examined in this work – called “the system of relativity.”

If the symptomatic analysis of the new existential and cultural conditions shows that the authors examined were more or less concurrent in identifying certain predominant and intertwining issues (the decline of the notion of the ideas of truth and objectivity; the impossibility for *form* to contain in itself the spreading of life and the contradictory impressions of the subject about it, and therefore the resulting crisis of an *ingenious* idea of representation – also linguistic – of reality), the approaches and judgments related to the new cultural horizon are extremely diverse. While Prezzolini and Palazzeschi limit themselves – albeit at the highest level – to analyzing the matter in its intellectual and theoretical ramifications, finding in them an immediately positive outcome compared to the ‘abstract’ systematic truths passed on by the nineteenth century, Boine and Slataper oppose this perspective, recognizing it as the cultural outpost of a new form of capitalism that is definitely

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3 Or rather, if necessary, only in times of crisis. Cf. Raymond Williams: *The Politics of Modernism*. 8
supplanting the old, and address their view towards the Truth which the new horizon has thrown into crisis. Michelstaedter, finally, not only shifts the theoretical question back to the level of its socialization, but also refuses to consider the problem in terms of a conflict between Truth and relativism (or nihilism). For him, the old presumptions of truth which the new cultural horizon have uprooted have far from vanished; they no longer exist in the supposedly timeless mists of religion or grand systematic philosophies, but now rise from relativism itself, i.e. from consensus, from the voice of the majority to which the individual must adapt, while interpreting this adaptation as his own free choice. Far more difficult to discern than the former truths, the new ones are now internalized by the individual who believes them his own, and who in turn disseminates them in the form of ethical rules (duties), knowledge, and, of course, words. Thus, as we shall see, Michelstaedter also focuses on two closely intertwined problems traditionally considered to be crucial theoretical issues of Modernism: the collapse of the idea of ‘imitation’ (i.e. the decline of the rhetorical concept of ‘model’ and the poetic ones of mimesis and imitatio) and the consequent proliferation of styles, which is the correlative in art of the unstoppable proliferation of points of view. For Michelstaedter, this proliferation is at the same time real and apparent, because the decline of traditional models (i.e. of the philosophical-cultural models connected with the idea of a possible Truth) does not imply the disappearance of the concept of imitation, but brings it back to the horizon of a consensus that arises from the variety of conflicting views. Michelstaedter, that is to say, realizes the need for bourgeois ideologies to free themselves of any ideological residues of pre-capitalist origin in order to be able to continually change (without of course renouncing to presenting themselves as Truth, without renouncing their ideological functions), and also realizes the connection between the modernist modus pensandi and the social atomization taking place, i.e. the need to reorganize – to rationalize – through consensus, the disintegration of society, culturally perceived as the proliferation of opinions that no longer refer to fixed models. In historical terms, this means that the attack brought against feudal thought by the bourgeoisie in its revolutionary phase must now be
ideologically transformed (without losing the possibility of constant change which capitalism needs to survive) into the defense of the *status quo*.

Michelstaedter looks at Modernism as a hegemonic ideology, i.e. as the dominant cultural function of a specific historical period, and can therefore break out of the binary oppositions of bourgeois thought which – on two different fronts – are still ‘blocking’ other writers. Michelstaedter not only understands that, while universal norms were undoubtedly the expression of a dominion, that dominion is no longer the ruling one, but he also contextualizes in those binary oppositions as a conceptual clash clash concealing the real battle: the battle against those who, epistemologically, can use both elements of those pairs as weapons for their own struggle, and both in their favor. They can even use to their benefit the conflict that is implicit in those pairs. Finally, as we shall see, Michelstaedter understands that the two fronts of Modernism show, though in different ways, one thing in common: in both, the idea of History is suppressed through the suppression of dialectical thought. This happens because one front identifies dialectical thought with metaphysical thought and rejects it as such, while the other, more directly interested in recovering the possibility of a Truth, identifies dialectical thought with the horizon of contingency. We will return to this shortly.

Let us discuss first the question of Italian Modernism. Although a number of critics were against introducing the term ‘Modernism’ in relation to the Italian cultural production of the early twentieth century, starting in the 1920s attempts were made to reconnect that tradition with contemporary European literature and with the grand philosophies of the crisis. Among these we can mention the works of Giacomo Debenedetti in the early 1920s, the writings of Antonio Banfi on Simmel and Husserl, and a seminal but now forgotten book by Norberto Bobbio, *La filosofia del decadentismo*. Similarly, in the period immediately

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4 This point will be the main theme of this entire work. Cf. Lukács: *History and Class Consciousness* 249: “Once theory and praxis are united it becomes possible to change reality, the absolute and its «relativistic» counterpart will have completed their historical role. [...] the premise which historical materialism and relativism apparently have in common (man as the measure of all things) has for them qualitatively different meanings, not to say entirely opposite.”
following World War I, a number of literary critics such as Giuseppe Petronio, Leone De Castris, and, especially, Carlo Salinari – while still using the term decadentismo instead of Modernism\(^5\) – began to analyze the link between Italian literature of the beginning of the century and what J. W. Burrow called “The crisis of Reason,”\(^6\) meaning the crisis of the great systematic philosophy of Platonic/Hegelian\(^7\) derivation (a combination which Modernism itself, as we shall see, felt the need to establish\(^8\)) in favor of a philosophical paradigm centered, on the one hand, on Heraclitean presuppositions, and, on the other, on a process of subjectification of the same philosophical perspectives.\(^9\)

However, there is little doubt in my mind that the real birth of critical reflection on Italian Modernism coincides with the publication of Eugenio Garin’s *Cronache di filosofia italiana* in 1955. In Garin’s book, the Italian cultural production of the early twentieth century is for the first time presented in direct dialogue with the theoretical and epistemological issues at the core of the contemporary philosophical debate in Europe and America, in connection with the set of epistemological problems (the conflict between life and form, the image of life as an unstoppable flux that refuses any accommodation, the crisis of language and of the ability to communicate, etc.) that can be placed under the emblematic heading of the “death of God,” a phrase that of literary Modernism is the philosophical self-consciousness.\(^10\)

Garin’s analysis gives us four essential points: 1) Italian Modernism cannot be identified by

\(^5\) This is similar to what happened, in the English-speaking world, with Edmund Wilson’s book *Axel’s Castle*, where the term Symbolism was used in place of Modernism. Today, in Italy the term decadentismo has narrowed its scope and overlaps with what is generally referred to as Aestheticism or ‘decadent literature,’ expressions that in Italy are chiefly used in connection with the works of Gabriele D’Annunzio and the literature he inspired.

\(^6\) The same orientation, in more recent years, has been followed by critics such as Giancarlo Mazzacurati (*Pirandello nel romanzo europeo; Stagioni dell’apocalisse*) and Guido Guglielmi (*L’invenzione della letteratura*).

\(^7\) Cf. Broch: *The Sleepwalkers* 36: “the historical and epistemological portrayal of the four-century-long process which under the guidance of rationality dissolved the Christian-platonic cosmology of medieval Europe, an overwhelming and terrifying process ending in total fragmentation of values.”

\(^8\) Equating Dialectics with Metaphysics (the desire to reconduct by force the ‘different’ to the ‘phony’ unity of objectivity) is a point that these authors find necessary (think of the Machians, who consider historical materialism itself a metaphysical theory). But the binomial pairs designed to separate the phenomenon from the essence through a hierarchical option (however introduced) fail to realize that phenomenon and essence are both parts – dialectically connected – of the (historical!) laws of an objective reality and of the theory (and praxis!) that approximates it.

\(^9\) Cf. Luperini: “Il modernismo italiano esiste,” in *Sul modernismo italiano* 7: “In fact the criterion of reality and truth changes radically. The paradigm of objectivity falls apart.”

\(^10\) Nietzsche’s phrase, which refers to the end of the solid structure of Being, is all the more useful and emblematic because it brings into vogue the contemporary decline of great systematic-metaphysical philosophy and of traditional religious beliefs.
simply referring to the European literary production (there are too many differences with the premises of Italian literature of the time, starting with the rejection of the novel)\textsuperscript{11}: we must refer instead to what was behind both Modernisms: the philosophy of the crisis; 2) the ‘names’ that count are all mentioned by the authors in question: non only the fundamental Nietzsche, Bergson, William James, but also Ernst Mach, Boutroux, Weininger, and others to which we shall return; 3) modernist themes are dealt with not only by the ‘extraordinary’ Pirandello, Svevo, Gadda, and Tozzi, but by most of the authors of the time; 4) the modernist crisis appears first of all with the features of an epistemological crisis concerning the theory of knowledge (we will return to this later with Lukács).

So let us look at how this crisis was dealt with by Italian modernist writers.

We begin of course with Papini, as early as 1902, and must immediately point out – considering ‘his’ Berkeley and his \textit{esse est percipi}, the secret but indispensable source of the “group of young men” gathered around the journal \textit{Leonardo} (1903-1907)\textsuperscript{12} – how the new epistemological viewpoint is closely connected with the psychologist and subjectivistic perspective that is prevailing in Europe:

classification requires, always or almost always, another mental work, that of \textit{simplification}, and of \textit{reduction}. If the mind accepted in full all representations as it receives them, it would be practically impossible to arrange them in an orderly fashion, such is the multiform variety of phenomena. The mind must attenuate or forget certain aspects and magnify certain others, ignore certain characters and emphasize others (“La teoria psicologica della previsione,” in \textit{Filosofia} 1296).

And one year later: “I can, in myself, cause wonderful changes, by merely changing points of view and planes of knowledge” (\textit{Prose morali} 28). After reading \textit{La teoria psicologica della previsione}, Giovanni Vailati wrote a letter to Papini marking the birth of Italian pragmatism. Shortly after, in 1904, Adolfo Levi (another collaborator of \textit{Leonardo}) published \textit{La filosofia della contingenza}, in which he discusses Boutroux, Renouvier, Ravaission, and Bergson.

\textsuperscript{11} And in this work we will also see why Modernism is itself a theory of the novelistic.
\textsuperscript{12} Lukács would specifically speak of Kantian epistemology being gradually reduced to a Berkeleyan epistemology.
The figure evoked in Papini’s lines is the Nietzschean “wanderer,”13 “he who finds delight in change and transitoriness” (Human, All Too Human 304), who understands that the downfall of the value system and the transformation of reality into a non-recomposable ‘flux’ are necessary steps for the revolt of Life against whatever seeks to congeal it in definite forms (the “spirit of resentment”).14 The collapse of the equation between form and meaning, between sign and substance, the attack against any objectivity unwilling to accept its own transience, the resulting crisis of the classical notion of Subject15 and of the instrument meant to express – in stable forms – the subject and its relationship with reality: language. Whether the model of reference of the new perspective really is Nietzsche is still a matter of debate, and in any case regards this work only marginally. There is a twofold distinction to be made here: in the symbolist and decadent field (in Italy the emblematic name is D’Annunzio), Nietzsche is still considered in a ‘Wagnerian’ perspective and in isolated elements of his speculations (the Übermensch, ruling the herd, anti-democratic thought, the salvific function of art, etc.); in the more properly modernist field, instead, Nietzsche’s distancing himself from Wagner is duly acknowledged, but Nietzsche is then assumed as the champion of a set of issues which, while being part of his discourse, are treacherously bent, on the one hand, towards the skeptical-relativist (and intuitionist) positions of the “philosophy of life,” and, on the other, towards the ‘conventionalism’ of the theories of Ernst Mach,16 William James, Hans Vaihinger, and many others.17 The reasons why the Machian model prevailed in Italy over the Nietzschean one will be discussed in various parts of this work.

13 No coincidence that Thomas Mann regarded Nietzsche as the great forerunner of modernist writers. Cf. Eagleton: 151: “Of course there had been unbelievers in abundance before him, but it is Nietzsche above all who confronts the terrifying, exhilarating consequences of the death of God.”
14 Cf. Burrow: 186: “it is the antithesis and enemy of what here he consistently calls ‘life’.”
15 Cf. Eagleton: Culture and the Death of God 96: “The human subject is now present only in so far as it is absent, knowable only in its perpetual lack.”
16 Cf. Ercolino: The Novel-Essay 20: “The philosophies of Henri Bergson and Ernst Mach, with the stress they put over the concept of “flux” and their interpretation of science as an abstract simplification of complex inner and outer realities.”
17 Burrow: 61: “A central figure is the scientist and epistemologist Ernst Mach […] reality for us, as the world and as consciousness, is an unstable sequence of sensory events; everything else is abstraction. Knowledge is not the impossible notion of correspondence to a reality external to us but the stabilizing and reconciling of sensation in concepts and theories governed by the scientific criterion of economy. […] There could be no scientific ‘picture’ of the world, for the world was the sensory flux. […] Clearly, a possible version of this idea was a practical,
In any case, this perspective was the hegemonic starting point for a whole generation. Even authors who shared none of the enthusiasm of the young Papini and Prezzolini (the discuri of the Leonardo) for this situation of skeptical-relativist uncertainty in which everything seems possible were forced to come to terms with it.

Carlo Stuparich, an author we will deal with only in passing, portrayed the situation as follows:

Those who are untrammeled by knots accept this cleaving, adapt to it, and thus resolve their lives [...]. Those who must deal with a central knot painfully resist the tendency to cleave, and with an agonizing effort try to concentrate, to neutralize the forces of disintegration, to precipitate all the molecular tensions in its center (Cose e ombre di uno 67).

What takes place in Italy as well as in the rest of Europe has been described in many ways, but there is probably no better way to summarize the state of affairs than referring to the “death of God”. Ibsen represented the predicament in Peer Gynt; Otto Weininger resorted to the problematic term “feminization”; the young Lukács called it the Soul overwhelming the Forms (Gestalt); Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Thomas Mann based it on the concept of Zivilisation. In more recent years, Massimo Cacciari uses the term Krisis, Claudio Magris speaks about the separation between Life and Totality, Guido Mazzoni (Teoria del romanzo), studying its effects on literary fiction, rightly speaks of a gradual shift towards the mimesis of contingency. Bergson, in a passage translated by Papini in 1910, presented it as follows:

_Our intelligence [...] cannot conceive nor express movement if not as a function of immobility [...]. All this philosophy starting with Plato up to Plotinus is the development of a principle that we shall express as follows: «There is more in immobility than there is in mobility». [...] the opposite is true. (La filosofia dell’intuizione 62-9)._

pragmatic version of the concept of truth, defined in term of usefulness. This was the line of thought developed (...) by the American Pragmatist William James.”
Aside from the question of definitions, what leads to a split in the modernist horizon is the attitude towards the new epistemological situation. As said, there are two Modernisms: one willing to accept the new conditions as liberating, willing – as Mazzacurati wrote about Pirandello – “to extract the antidote from the poison”, and one forced to operate under the new hegemonic conditions but unwilling to accept it as a positive development. It is no coincidence that it was the neo-Kantian Giovanni Amendola (the philosopher of reference for the so-called “Vocian moralists”) to immediately understand what was going on:

“Prometheus ceased to exist the moment he was freed” (Né ideale né reale, in Leonardo).

Amendola sees the paradoxes that arise from the dismantling of the traditional metaphysical paradigms. He observes the appearance of a Subject who, having ceased to be dependant on ‘models,’ does not create his own laws but declares the arbitrariness of all laws. The new subject is not Prometheus: it is Proteus. Three years later, in Heidelberg, another Kantian, Wilhelm Windelband (and we will see later in this work how neo-Kantian philosophy was, before the resumption of Hegelianism operated by Marxism, the true philosophical barrier – though ultimately defeated – against the philosophy of the crisis), denounced the progressive slipping of Georg Simmel’s Kantianism towards a Bergsonian “philosophy of life,” reiterating the need for moral resistance. “We are the ones for whom Kant existed” echoes Prezzolini, now an idealist, from the pages of “La Voce,” referring of course to the Kant of Practical Reason.

Here we are at the core of what Italian critics have called the conflict between “Florentine irrationalism” and “Vocian moralism.” This division (thus referred to by Emilio Cecchi in a letter to Boine: “they think that our moralism is more naive than their barber-shop

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18 Together with religious thought.
19 The progressive subordination of neo-Kantianism to the philosophy of the crisis is clearly apparent, for example, in a book that is fundamental for understanding the period in question: Vaihinger’s The Philosophy of As-If (1911). Cf. Calinescu: 184: “Hans Vaihinger devotes an important chapter to Nietzsche and offers a rich – if somewhat biased – collection of quotations that support his contention that the author of Zarathustra is a philosopher of the will to illusion and a forerunner of the “Metaphysics of As-if.” [...] but his discussion is confined to matters of epistemology alone. [...] As a rule, Vaihinger selects only the passages in which Nietzsche speaks positively of lying, mythologizing, and fiction, and leaves out all those in which the apparently opposite ideas are expressed.”
20 In Italy, neo-Kantianism arrives among the operating sectors of the bourgeois intelligentsia especially through Ibsen and Weininger. In the field of politics the situation is different, thanks to the debate taking place especially on the pages of Critica Sociale on Austro-Marxism and socialism as a moral doctrine.
nihilism”), the painful need for a firm standpoint against what Amendola calls “the unbridled freedom of the particular,” is in my opinion entirely justified, but should be understood, on the one hand, at the level of the artistic models of reference (for example, and forgive the broad strokes: Péguy, Rolland, Claudel, Slataper’s Ibsen, or Boine’s Unamuno, as opposed to Apollinaire, Cendrars, De Gourmont, etc.), and on the other hand at the level of philosophical inquiry, with Berkeley, Schopenhauer, pragmatism, Bergson, Mach, Poincaré, and the philosophy of contingency on one side, and religious thought, Austro-German neo-Kantianism, reactionary anti-capitalist perspectives such as those of De Maistre and De Bonald on the other.  

The point is, as we will have occasion to dwell upon, that even the reaction against the modernist perspective (which is itself Modernism) is forced to operate assuming the same starting points of the latter, thus subordinating itself to it. If, as many have said, Modernism is not just a set of narrative techniques but the expression of a cultural tendency, of a cultural hegemony which, building on elements taken from Romanticism (starting with the rejection of the idea of objectivity/authority and the demand for qualitative values) – and socially connected to historical changes that undermine the pre-Taylorist social model (universal suffrage, the emancipation of women, massive urbanization, technological advances) – then it represents a challenge to the concepts of tradition and imitation, and at the same time becomes (as Bradbury and McFarlane understood) the mimesis of chaos and an effort towards its ‘artistic’ (and quasi-religious, according to Eliot) overcoming. But above all, Modernism expresses itself as a proliferation of styles and points of view, that is – with

21 Not coincidentally, the authors belonging to the latter position often base their literary works on the idea of tragedy. In this period the tragic form (think of the last essay in Lukács’ Soul and Form) comes to represent the literary form most contrary to Modernism (and to the novelistic). We will return to this aspect on further occasions. Cf. Eagleton: 177: “the idea of tragedy [...]. It represents a memory trace of nobility in a drably bourgeois epoch, a residue of transcendence in an age of materialism. [...] Tragedy is everything that modernity is not.”

One point that it is important to clarify is that the notion (supported especially by Kermode in The Sense of Ending) that this side of Modernism – involved in mythical thought, literary hierarchies, ‘totalizing’ works of art – was more inclined to turn to fascism, does not correspond to historical fact at all, as we shall see.

22 This is what Marshall Berman – referring to Kierkegaard – called anti-Modernist Modernism (All That is Solid 14).

23 Calinescu: 72: “the expression of the spiritual needs of a whole epoch.”

24 Cf. Modernism 1890-1930.
the decline of the traditional idea of ‘imitation’ and of the ‘model’ function that it presupposed – as a proliferation of ‘contradictions’ that in the ‘flux’ which life seems to have become do not consider themselves as such because they become the sole reality of life, which is now assumed as a critical element, destructive of nineteenth-century style systematic thought, and hence critical of ‘bourgeois’ rationality.

But Modernism has its own formal logic of a ‘system’ of contradiction, an unamendable contradiction that arises from a wholly epistemological interpretation of reality. The theory of knowledge – a branch of philosophy which, in the imperialist stage, becomes the hegemonic form of philosophy – puts itself on the same level of knowledge precisely because of its inability to arrive at a ‘firm’ conceptualization of reality. Thus what is basically a historical limit comes to be seen as an anthropological limit of rationality (“there are no facts: only interpretations”). But this movement always conceals, if not the solution of the ‘myth,’ the formal logic that rearranges the ‘divided’ material by referring to the ‘true’ way of being of Life, which thought (whether metaphysical or dialectic) supposedly betrays. The apparently progressive function that manifests itself as an attack against the reifications of nineteenth-century bourgeois common sense is reduced to the absolutization of the epistemological perspective, which becomes the theoretical ‘bust’ of a nihilistic perspective: it equates itself to the ‘reality’ of a Life that refuses any concretion of itself. In other words, the relationship between subject and nature is examined on epistemological grounds as a presupposed identity that has been shattered by the attempt to institute objective truths. This positioning allows these authors to stay (at least until the outbreak of war) on this side of the creation of the pseudo-objectivities of mythological components, securing themselves in the image of an unstoppable Becoming. It is in becoming that all things (including the subject) reveal their fictional nature as a constant oscillation between their apparent objectivity and an external space (the space of epistemological judgment) where that objectivity is always denied. However, this external space is still the domain of a judgment built on binary
oppositions (starting with the ones regarding Life and Form; ‘living’/‘rigid’) declaring the eternal logic of becoming as the place of unamendable contradiction.

The formal logic of nihilism that ends with humor or with the ‘tragedy’ of Life and Forms (and of all the other binary oppositions that branch off therefrom) is the presupposition of what will later lead – in a second phase of imperialist cultural logic – to hypostatize one form or another (hence the production of ‘myths,’ including fascist myths) as the ‘true’ expression of Life, its formal expression. This is the point where a Form – be it Germanism, Latinity, Authenticity, Duration, etc. – stands for Life. The subject that sees himself ‘becoming’ projects these data into ‘reality,’ and believes that only by adapting to them will it be possible for him to avoid ‘betraying’ it. Pirandello writes:

A humorist might picture Prometheus in the act of sadly contemplating his torch, seeing in it the fatal cause of his torment. He has finally realized that Jupiter is no more than an illusory ghost of himself, the shadow of his own body cast as an immense figure by the torch he holds in hand. There is only one way to make Jupiter disappear, and that is by Prometheus extinguishing his torch. But he knows not, wants not, can not; so the shadow remains, fearsome and tyrannical, for all the men who fail to see through the fatal deception (On Humor 141).

We are dealing with an ontologization of the Krisis that appears as the denunciation of any reason capable of creating forms, i.e. capable of mortifying the flux of life (a flux that, as the intellectuals of the time continually reiterate, is now anything but dialectic) into well-defined constructions. But this is not Prometheus: it is Proteus! Because in such a perspective the psychological substantiations of a specific, objective time in history become – through the Trojan horse of epistemology – the true (and eternal) reality of the world. It is a ‘subjective’ dissolution of an objectivity considered on the grounds of subjectivist instances, which, by claiming the vanity of all concrete things (i.e. by declaring any search for truth to be the

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25 The link between psychology and epistemology is obviously unbreakable. It is the epistemological approach itself – epistemology taken as the main branch of philosophy – that requires shifting the analytical focus toward psychology, toward the mental processes that lead man to know, or interpret, reality. Cf. Burrow: 160: “The nearer we approach to the end of the century the more fashionable seems a denial, on psychological or epistemological grounds, of the existence of an enduring ego through the indeterminate, irreversible flux of sensory experience and images, which was all that the phenomena of consciousness seemed to present to introspection.”
repression of life), reduces reality to a game of representation. It is the crystallization of an unresolved conflict in an eternal temporariness meant to be the overcoming of that conflict. This is what Lukács calls the “destruction of reason”: it is not a matter of mysticism or vulgar skepticism, as Marxist critics in Italy (and elsewhere) have represented it, inevitably setting up a reaction and unwittingly consigning the book to oblivion. Novalis would say that “irrationalism” means forgetting that “where no gods are, specters rule,” and those specters, observes Michelstaedter in Italy, are not the ‘forms’ of thought, are not the biological/epistemological presuppositions of a ‘knowing’ mind (“a disorder of the brain,” Soffici calls them), they are forms of consensus: forms, that is to say, of cultural perspectives (whether epistemological or moral) that are in a dialectical relationship with a social practice. So long as Modernism is considered merely a battle of ideas, it will inevitably be glorified over the narrow materialist metaphysics of the positivists: instead, Modernism should be considered to represent the cultural logic of a specific historical period. The destruction of the norms of objectivity conceals the mystification of an objectivity built on ‘time’ that can be reified either in the epistemological perspective of an impossible Truth or in the ‘moral’ forms that oppose it from a subordinate position. Being does not disappear, but reappears to objectify multiplicity as truth, from time to time different. Here the two roads merge into one, because it is always consensus that is socialized in cultural forms as Value. And consensus can employ either relativism or the Truth, provided both are kept away from their relationship with the historical/social developments that signify them.

When war breaks out, Bergson attacks Prussia’s militarism with the instruments of the philosophy of life and calls upon the French troops to exert their “élan vital” (La signification de la guerre), Simmel retrieves the Kantian perspective (and in Italy Amendola talks about a “moral trial”) to signify the conflict as the overcoming of the ‘skeptical’ culture of ‘money,’ and Thomas Mann shifts the horrors of Zivilisation across the border. In Italy, where Giuseppe Rensi identifies the conflict as an unsurpassable, eternal horizon of contradictions (if all contrasting opinions have the same value, war is inevitable), Soffici calls the soldiers to
the modernist ‘game’ of war, and, on the other front, Arturo Stanghellini explains what war-
time Kantianism is: “Now, the words «Duty» and «I demand» I saw them standing against the
sun as if written in block letters, so incisive and stirring were the colonel’s words”
(Introduzione alla vita mediocre 29).

The autonomy of a judgement that the intellectuals now imagine as an opportunity to
intervene more easily, because of the war, on a superstructure that supposedly determines the
structure (and the apotheosis of that autonomy conveyed by a war presented as a clash of
civilizations, of cultures), reveals the slippery slope towards a ‘consensus’ that in both cases
aims at putting into theory – whether the apotheosis of nihilism or the desperate search for
Truth – the space of disalienation. But the issue is historical. It’s not a matter of taking sides
with Stirner or Kant, with Nietzsche or Weininger: though separated, the two roads work
together. With the Great War, and later with the various Fascisms, the balance of power is
upset, hegemonies change (Palazzeschi turns to God and Man, Soffici turns to the Duce and
to the eternal values of Italianity), the previous skeptical/epistemological perspective takes on
a critical value, but it is the erosion of objective reality (i.e. of a culture operating in
dialectical relationship with the social processes) triggered by that perspective that prepares
the ground for the newly emerging myths, chief among which is the typically fascist-
intellectual idea that to change the world one must first change the consciences.

In 1921, fascist intellectual Curzio Malaparte lucidly writes:

The sweeping, assured conceptions of life had crumbled, devoured by the particular.
The plague of «fragmentation» was eating at the foundations of society, was filtering
through the consciences, was undermining the motionless scenarios of life […]
everything that had buckled under the weight of the useless, the trivial, the fragmentary,
and the chronological, now rises again to reassert its strength. (“La rivolta dei santi
maledetti,” in L’Europa vivente 123).

And in the fatal year 1922:
We now refuse to let our degree of power and authority depend on the state of
development of our industries, on our availability of raw materials, on our production
levels, on the games and balances of the stock exchange. (*L'Europa vivente* 468).

With the dismantling of the historical-dialectic perspective set up by Modernism, the return to
the thought of Truth by way of Fascism can finally show itself to be completely extraneous to
any economical-social affiliations. Once the risk of materialism has been averted, fascist
intellectuals can present modernist thought as the expression of the ‘bourgeoisie,’ which they
now, in theory, oppose.
Chapter 1: Pirandello, the *Krisis, I vecchi e i giovani*.

A Dialectics of Historicism

I. A Strange Historical Novel

*The Old and the Young* is the only historical novel written by Luigi Pirandello. It was planned during the last decade of the nineteenth century, advertised as early as 1905 and printed by the publisher Treves in 1913, after first appearing in serial form on the periodical *Rassegna Contemporanea*. The novel has always represented a problem for the critics of Pirandello, who, starting with Emilio Cecchi, considered it a belated product of Naturalism (perhaps written following the model of Federico De Roberto’s *I Viceré*), extraneous to the new themes of the 1908 essay *On Humor*, which had already produced, among other things, the modernist masterpiece *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (1904). These misunderstandings, as explained below, are the inevitable corollary to the emerging of a new ideological perspective — the Modernist perspective — which in Italy has its most important embodiment in this novel. In fact, not only does *The Old and the Young* express the epistemological perspective of Modernism in terms of ‘humor,’ but it also explores its relations with historical issues of broader scope, which Pirandello identifies, in general terms, in the post-Risorgimento malcontent. This is where Modernism in Italy has its historical sources. All the more important, finally, is that this historical perspective, anticipating here our conclusions, is ultimately outlined (and in a novel presented as ‘historical’) in terms of the absence of the transformative capacity that history itself should express. *The Old and the Young* was an

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1 All the quotations from *The Old and the Young* are taken from the translation by C.K. Scott-Moncrieff, published by E.P. Dutton & Co., New York, 1928, with modifications where necessary, because the translation in question is based on the 1913 version and not on the final version of 1931.
attempt to give a historical background to the epistemological crisis, which attempt ultimately ends with the cancellation of History, defined as a ‘formal’ construction.

It was only in the 1950s that the lukácsian literary critic Carlo Salinari sensed that the novel’s cultural milieu was that of the 1908 essay and, in the 1970s, he reiterated — thus connecting the issues of ‘humor’ to formal novelistic features — that the narrative’s apparent realism was in fact subordinate to a swarm of intradiegetic impressions that greatly reduced the formalizing capacity of the external narrator. This tangle of impressions swept away the supposed objectivity in a flood of opinions, and at the same time reduced historical events to “ancillary reasons” (Salinari: 96) acting as simple reagents for the psychology of the characters. Salinari realized that Pirandello was transforming a historical crisis into an anthropological crisis.\(^2\) Salinari, I mean, related certain theoretical nodes of the speculation contained in \textit{On Humor} (the multiplicity of opinions as opposed to the objective guarantee of the external narrator, the exponential growth of the psychological component over the historical-realistic one, etc.) to the production of a historical novel whose ultimate purpose was to analyze the subjective (or subjectivist) motivations behind its characters’ actions on reality. With this narrative positioning, what went into crisis was precisely the unity of purpose of a specific political group (whichever) that should have led to a (historical) change of the political situation. Emblematically, in fact, all the political sides represented in the novel (the supporters of the past regime; the old liberals currently in power with the Historical Left; the Socialists, united in Sicily in the newly created movement of the \textit{Fasci})\(^3\) are embodied in highly contrasting figures, underscoring the lack of unity and purpose that is an integral part of the absence of a common value system, that is, of stronger social bonds. Thus in \textit{The Old and the Young}, psychological fragmentation — and consequently social

\(^{2}\) Cf. Salinari: \textit{I vecchi e i giovani}, 100-1: “tends to transform that historical crisis into a general crisis affecting the very roots of man. The crisis of bourgeois society becomes the crisis of all society, and even the crisis of man as such.”

\(^{3}\) The workers’ movements in Sicily were defended by the first Crispi cabinet, including through the decriminalization of strikes. It was an attempt to bind, through a new set of rights, the peasants to capital, while improving the production capacities of industrialists and landowners. These policies came to an end with the growing socialistic demands.
fragmentation — becomes the real protagonist of the novel. Each character has his own political reasons, which are different because arising from different personal motivations: the individuals’ particular interests having replaced a common shared program. The typical movements of the historical novel are subject to the full hegemony of Modernist ideology, where the character’s right to a ‘point of view’ deprecates transcendental values and opens to relativism, introducing in the lack of ‘cohesion’ the modernist germ of ‘meaninglessness.’ This germ destroys any possible symbolic core and leaves the individual to mean only himself: “Point of view […] is something a little more than sheer technique and express the increasing atomization of our societies, in which the privileged meeting places of collective life” (Jameson: Ideologies of Theory 11).

Pirandello points out the historical causes that, at least in Italy, accompany the emerging of the Krisis, namely the disenchantment of the post-Risorgimento years, which are examined in the double light of Sicily now transformed into a colonial market for the House of Savoy, and Rome already a Simmellian metropolis that rules out any ‘significant’ experience, a receptacle of corruption and political careerism. In other words, Pirandello – and this is the novel’s real ‘historical’ component – gives voice to that rise of an anti-political category criticizing parliamentarianism and trasformismo can be observed as early as the 1880s, focusing on the myth of the “two Italys” (paese legale and paese reale, roughly meaning the administration and the people), a myth later resumed by the nationalist movements of the early twentieth century (as we will see in the part dedicated to Giovanni Papini). These political issues were discussed from the 1880s in the so-called parliamentary (or anti-parliamentary) literature, anticipating the criticism against what Carl Schmitt would later call “absolute parliamentarianism”; that criticism involved politicians and intellectuals

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4 I am using the German word following the example given by Massimo Cacciari in that extraordinary interpretation of the raising of Modernist perspective that is the book Krisis. Saggio sulla crisi del pensiero negativo da Nietzsche a Wittgenstein.

5 The attitude towards Liberal and Socialist southern Italy during the first decade of the twentieth century is probably an integral part of the harsh judgment expressed by Pirandello: in fact, in order to maintain his majority, Giolitti was forced to apply protectionist agricultural policies and the systematic repression of peasant uprisings (land rent was the major source of income of the southern deputies who represented the backbone of Giolitti’s majority); on the other hand, Turati was strictly focused on the theory of the temporary hegemony that the factory workers of the north were to exercise over the peasants of the south.
from all sides (Sighele, Bovio, Del Balzo, Lombroso, Colajanni) and, especially in the 1890s, was revived in the elitist conceptions of authors such as Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto and Enrico Corradini, until merging, during the first years of the twentieth century, with various sectors of the Florence avant-garde who will make it one of their main issues.

It is understood that “no historiographical reason alone can determine the historical roots of the experimental field that opens in Europe between 1900 and 1930” (Mazzacurati: Pirandello 32); but it is equally true that the perception of a “betrayed Risorgimento” represents (as does for instance, outside of Italy, the decline of the Habsburg Empire) the acme of the intellectual disenchantment (the squandering of Ideals) that is one of the direct antecedents of that heideggerian “crisis of foundations” that represents the philosophical self-consciousness of Modernist literature. It is the loss of a direction that, with the fading utopia, leads to abandoning all hopes of authenticity and reconciliation, preserving only the image of a fragmentation that becomes a reflection on the uselessness of any ideology: exactly what The Old and the Young stands for. The new image of an anti-historical Chaos, as maintained by Robert Dombroski and Vittorio Spinazzola, is an attack against the reassuring ideological certainties of the liberal bourgeoisie of the età giolittiana, but it is also the perfecting of that ideology – the cultural logic of the Belle Époque, aimed at ‘resolving’ History from within the existential condition of the individual, which considers every ideal construction as a simulacrum, failing to understand this state of mind as being part of a historical crisis.

Pirandello, re-modulating the traditional idea of representation, unwillingly gives narrative form to the loss of organic/rational unity caused by the new conditions of work based on specialization, namely the lack of connection between different activities which, as such, are reified by the process itself, and reflecting, a posteriori, the modalities of their functions on the previous capitalist horizon (ideologically, that of Realism; historically, in

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6 Cf. Lukács: History and Class Consciousness 88: “On the one hand, the process of labour is progressively broken down into abstract, rational, specialized, operations so that the worker loses contact with the finished product and his work is reduced to the mechanical repetition of a specialized set of actions. On the other hand, the period of time necessary for work to be accomplished (which forms the basis of rational calculation) is converted, as mechanization and rationalization are intensified, from a merely empirical average figure to an objectively calculable work-stint that confronts the worker as a fixed and established reality.”
Italy, that of the Risorgimento), likening it to itself. So the new condition of dominance casts its shadow over the past, stifling its ‘qualitative’ elements with the new abstraction.

Accordingly, far from progressive will appear to be the image of History, which, delivered from the past rhetoric of the Risorgimento (impersonated in the novel by the old Garibaldino Mauro Mortara), will be transformed into a course governed by chance and varying personalisms, reflecting the course of national unification which proceeded on luck and confusion. And also reflecting a post-unification Italy in the hands of the ‘prose’ of political trasformismo and opposing power brokers, old and new, where there is no trace of the improved economic conditions that the common people had hoped for in 1860. It appears evident, then, that the revolution has failed, and that the new nation does not embody the long-cherished dream of the liberal patriots. For the Italian intellectual groups, the political crisis, which culminated in various cabinets led by Giovanni Giolitti, is transfigured in a cultural clash between idealism and empiricism, between the moral blackmail of the heroism of the Risorgimento and the prudent reformist/conservative politics of Giolitti himself. For the Italian cultural world, the Giolitti cabinets represent the world of prose (and based on this view, nationalism and syndicalism, as well as the industrial groups which after the economic crisis of 1907 will reject Giolitti’s coalition politics finding support in the nationalist movement, will find fertile ground).

This is what, in 1892, the ‘progressive’ and ‘northerner’ historian Alfredo Oriani described as a Cavourian Italy, based on the exclusion from the government of the radical

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7 Cf. Pirandello: *I vecchi e i giovani* 145: “‘The fruits of the Revolution!’ I go over there, I see the railway, the train burrowing underground […] which is like a dream to me; And I say ‘The fruits of the Revolution!’ I go and stand under the pine, there, I look towards the sea, I see Porto Empedocle […] has now grown to be almost a town […] the work that had been accomplished, which he saw to be without fault and glorious.”

In this respect it can be noted that, while in the 80s and 90s the intellectuals still harbored the dream of national regeneration which was to revive the values of the Risorgimento, a hope, to Pirandello (but not only him) that restoration was no longer possible, and even the process of the Risorgimento had lost its hue of heroic idealism and had fallen into the realm of “prose.”

Cf. Isnenghi: *Il mito della Grande Guerra* 55: “A historical recapitulation in the key of defeat is what Pirandello presents in his novel *I vecchi e i giovani*, an efficient synthesis of the revisionism being conducted on the Risorgimento and the years that followed, and of the disorientation which, complementarily, causes it and arises from it.”

8 Cf. Gramsci: *Quaderni* 1980: “The manner in which historical events are represented in the ideological interpretations of the formation of Italy might be called «fetishistic history» […] Oriani’s *Lotta politica* is the best known of these mythological schemes, the one that produced the longest series of degenerate sons. Among them
followers of Mazzini and Garibaldi (unless converted to the monarchy’s raison d’état),
outlining an epos of the Risorgimento that also included betrayals, useless acts of heroism,
changes of thought; and a post-unification horizon dominated by group interests and
partialities:

The grand epos of conspiracies and battles was replaced by the prosaic management
of interests, with inadvertent initiatives that would slowly change the country’s
political and social conditions. All political enthusiasm was accused of being too
emphatic, and all eloquence of being rhetorical […]; the battles of books and the
insurrections were replaced by those of industry and commerce: labor became
specialized, patriots became a nuisance: there was grumbling against the posts they
were granted in retribution for their sacrifices (Oriani: 323).

With the radicalization of this historical perception, the culture of the Krisis spreads among
Italian intellectuals; it is that culture that Pirandello examines in The Old and the Young, and
right on the terrain of History, but where History — this is the point — is already the
ontological perception of a more general situation:

Why yes, indeed: the skies of Italy, in these days, were raining down mud, and people
were rolling it into balls and throwing them; and the mud was sticking everywhere,
[…] on the medals won in the past on fields of battle (these, at least, ought surely to
have been held sacred!) and on crosses and orders and gold-laced coats and on the
door-plates of Government and newspaper offices. It rained torrents of mud […]
This was the bankruptcy of patriotism (The Old and the Young 256-7).

we find la Federazione, l’Unità, la Rivoluzione, l’Italia, and so on. In Oriani we clearly see one of the causes of
this manner of conceiving history through mythological figures. The critical canon which says that all the
development of history is its own documentation, that the present illuminates and justifies the past, is mechanized
and externalized and reduced to a deterministic law of rectilinearity […] and the event detached from the whole of
world history, from the system of international relations, to which instead it is by necessity connected.”

9 On these grounds, the clash with Benedetto Croce was inevitable. When in fact, in 1928 (i.e. during Fascism,
which Pirandello had adhered to), Croce wrote his Storia d’Italia, he took care to defend from accusations not only
the Risorgimento but also the politics of post-unification Italy, for example by considering trasformismo in simple
terms of Realpolitik, and strongly criticizing the idealists who felt offended by that. He likewise rejected the
accusations of pro-South revisionism; the controversy on banking scandals as subjects “beloved by cheap
moralists”, and the activity of the Fasci Siciliani (the two historical events in Pirandello’s novel). To Croce, all of
this was defined within the framework of an idealizing pessimism (direct forerunner of Fascism) which, by playing
on the myth of the Risorgimento betrayed, had begun to spread through the intellectual world of Giolittian Italy.
But Croce refused to understand that the heritage of this culture, of the Krisis, though politically dangerous, was
now a part of modernity, and therefore (unlike Gramsci) he continued to treat them as unrelated. Cf. Storia d’Italia
241: “philosophy of intuition, pragmatism, mysticism […], there is clearly visible in them all the natural result of
irrationalism, that is a weaker and less definite grasp of distinction: the distinction in the domain of theory,
between truth and falsehood; in the sphere of practice, between duty and pleasure […], between contemplation and
passion, poetry and emotion.”

27
And in fact the novel had opened reminding that “the retaining walls had fallen, the dykes had been trampled down […] in the emptiness of a time without events” (5-6). Not casually is excluded, in the novel, a division based on social status: by attributing the stances taken by the characters to their own personal interests and desires, Pirandello eludes the possibility of a historical/symbolic reconciliation for the novel, but, and this is modernistically emblematic, not for the characters who raise that impossible reconciliation to the level of an ideology, for example Don Cosmo Laurentano, “whose great tomes of philosophy had no doubt addled his brains” (14). Furthermore, this fragmentation also extends, as if required by ‘humor,’ to the psyches of the individual characters, always presenting the implications of their positions and preserving them forever in a spiritual mobility which is yet another aspect of the question. This allows the reader to see the reasons even of the more repulsive or ridiculous characters, forestalling any protest with a justification. But what the reader registers is only the reflection of the character’s consciousness, his inability to decide, which is a sign of the impasse of his unconscious faced by the growing mechanization, a process that follows laws that lie outside his consciousness, appearing as a well-defined, rational whole: just like a law of nature.

The world is reduced to a game of interpretations and that, as such, can only be pacified in Don Cosmo’s Vanitas Vanitatum, which represents the moment in which humor incorporates History into itself, thus destroying it. But, this is the point, if the image of the external narrator is fated to collapse to be replaced by the various points of view of the characters, also, as Don Cosmo’s point of view exemplifies, this totally heterogeneous perspectives have to be reorganized in a general design that absolutizes their irreconcilability. The correlative to this, in the text, is the fact that History can express itself only through juxtaposed decodings, unable as such to become fundamental values, therefore unable to stop a ‘becoming’ that is, anyway, not the historical becoming. Because, as well understood by Gramsci, if we forget that that Krisis is a historical fact, we can end up giving in to its

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10 Cf. Pupino: Pirandello o l’arte della dissonanza 205: “While another element of the historical novel was the extradiegetic narrator, who, from the heights of his omniscience, recounted the events with complete knowledge […] I vecchi e i giovani likewise recovers the same narrative structure taken from a literary tradition that, for example, had already proved so fertile in Manzoni […] But while it recovers that structure, […] it changes it too.”
ideological enchantment, and see in History the end of History itself — that is to say, the inability to escape from an existential condition, which is ultimately the condition of the bourgeois subject.

The weakening of the occasions of protest becomes an accusation against History as being truly incapable of producing change (and in fact there is no clash of values between the “old” and the “young”) \(^{11}\) and, consequently, on the erosion of any ideology now viewed in terms of an increasingly precarious ‘form,’ as indicated by the novel’s \textit{mise en abyme}:

He was just turning away from the mirror when, lowering his gaze to the surface of the bracket that supported it, he noticed a quantity of neat little worm-nests, arranged there as though in a pattern, and bent down, curious to examine them. They had done their work well, those worms! And yet nobody seemed to give them any credit for their labour… The fruit of it, however, was there, plainly visible [...]. He put out his hand to one of the little heaps, took up a pinch of it and rubbed his fingers together. Nothing! Not even dust… (\textit{I vecchi e i giovani} 65-6).

This is how modernist ideology, theorized by Pirandello (as we shall see) in his essay \textit{On Humor}, and the historical judgment on what was taking place in Italy, come together to create the embodiment of the modernist perspective in history as — this will be explained in more detail below — the celebration of an epistemologically understood ‘becoming’ and, at the same time, the criticism of the ‘real’ becoming that is expressed in history.

\textbf{II. The Unstoppable March of Life}

Before we begin our analysis of the \textit{Krisis} and of its relations with the poetics of Pirandello, it is interesting to note that the first to become aware of it in Italy was the Hegelian literary critic and patriot Francesco De Sanctis. This is all the more interesting because in the early twentieth century this figure will have to be dealt with by some of the major theoreticians of the time, including Croce, Gramsci and Pirandello himself. The end of the epic period of the

\(^{11}\) Cf. Luperini: \textit{L’autocoscienza del moderno} 99: “The members of the past and present generations are equally marked by ineptitude, unrealistic aspirations and opportunism. The conflict between generations is no longer a conflict of values”.

29
Risorgimento, the so-called transition “from poetry to prose” (with the removal of Mazzini’s republican followers from the government, the monarchy’s support for the old liberals, the Battle of Aspromonte between Garibaldi and the official Italian Army, etc.) marks the decline of a revolutionary phase that had disrupted the pacified vision of a unified Italy. The rise of movements such as the Scapigliatura (Bohème), similar to what Lowy and Sayre have defined “Resigned Romanticism,” in the ‘industrial’ north of Italy, “when capitalist industrialization appears more and more to be an irreversible process and when the hope for a restoration of precapitalist social relations […] was tending to fade away” (Lowy & Sayre: Romanticism 69-70), hints at a vaguely Baudelairean crisis which intellectuals, having lost their guiding role and been assimilated into the new culture industry, find themselves having to reckon with. So much so that a critic such as Gino Tellini would write that “The entry into modernity is marked by discontent, impatience, apprehension […]. One can feel that something is not right” (Il romanzo italiano 113). This is accompanied by another key element that brings us back to the main topic of our discussion and that is directly connected with the kind of ‘relativism’ that we have already seen at work in Pirandello’s novel: the collapse of the omniscient narrator, which is also part of the “progressive drift towards the mimesis of contingency” (Mazzoni: 195) of the modern novel, a drift that is complementary to the progressive atomization of the individual in a changing society. A novel as Memorie del Presbiterio, by the Scapigliato author Emilio Praga, already shows a proliferation of points of view that can hardly be reconducted to the eye of the narrator (and of the narratee), where the I at the center of the scene, reduced to a mere particular, can now express itself alone, thus showing “in the background the image of a disintegrated, patchy reality […] disorientated by the loss of the ideals of the past” (Tellini: 117), by the loss of a shared Kultur in an increasingly atomized social fabric. In other words, the value of the particular is growing beyond its early-Romanticism significance and rising to a more prevalent role, although in this case, before the yet to come abstract theorizations (as in Pirandello’s Don Cosmo), it still
remains a measure of ambiguity that keeps it in the anguish of a loss without allowing the creation of the harmonious construction of an absolute ‘negative,’ an Arcadia of nihilism.

This brief overview serves as an introduction to the speech given by De Sanctis at the University of Naples in 1872, which was basically an attack against Hegelian-style Philosophy of History, against positivism, and also, I believe, against the new vision (the Modernist one) that was advancing.

De Sanctis rejects Hegel’s ‘absolute rationality,’ declaring the necessity of a fusion between fact and ideal on equal terms, while at the same time negating the absolutization of either. He also rejects positivist thinking, affirming that the blunders of thought should not be considered errors but rather elements arising from the dual dialectic between thought and contemporary reality, that is, part of a historical reason which however is not ‘justificationist,’ as in Hegel, but emerges from the concepts of action and labor, in which individuals act and struggle and, in their network of social relations, win or lose. De Sanctis understands the epistemological background behind the valorization of the ‘particular’ operated by historicism. In that he sees the Krisis and a dialectics of Historicism, when he speaks about the rise of a fatalistic resignation which is ethical indifference. Appealing to a non-synthetic dialectic of the ideal and the real, De Sanctis rejects this ‘particular,’ finding in it the signs of the anthropological abstractions of which Lukács would write many years later, such as the

12 In the fourth chapter of this work we will see the philosopher Giovanni Amendola writing about the “the uncontrolled liberty of the particular.”
13 The lack of an implementary perspective among the resolutions of militancy had already appeared in De Sanctis’s essay on Guicciardini of 1869, where he outlines the figure of a “skeptical”, non-partisan intellectual to be rejected in its entirety: “His gaze, cold and calm when sudden, is that of a God, high and serene above the storms, but a slightly ironic God, inclined to make fun of men […], and looking on with a half ironic, half compassionate gaze; and in reality the most worthy of compassion is he himself” (“L'uomo del Guicciardini” 16-7). The image of the moderate and “apota” intellectual (to use the term coined by Prezzolini in 1922, roughly meaning ‘one who does not let himself be fooled’), the man who, says De Sanctis, “blocks our way, if we do not have the strength to kill him in our consciousness” (25), is, not surprisingly, widely treated by Gramsci in his Prison Notebooks in terms of a “cynicism” that involves exiting History. In turn, Gramsci will make Guicciardini into a type of intellectual opposite to Machiavelli, in which that act of criticism is foreign to any political dimension other than the realpolitik of the dominant class. Accordingly, Gramsci even defines Cavour a “man” after Guicciardini, recovering at least in part the judgment on the Risorgimento given by the historian Oriani. It should also be noted that the diagnosis of a new condition of apathy, or melancholy, or acedia, appears in the reflections of a number of authors between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: as well as in De Sanctis, we find it in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, Simmel and Benjamin, to name a few.
14 Cf. Lukács: The Historical Novel, 175: “Capitalism competition is swollen into a metaphysical history dissolving mystique by “eternal law”.


struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest introduced by Darwinism. For that matter, De Sanctis had already acknowledged the rise of relativity, which had accompanied the triumph of the new ideology of scientism:

Today we take a keen interest in studying things in themselves, in their outward appearances […] today chemistry, natural history, anatomy, physiology, pathology are no longer special studies but part of the general knowledge, and one feels their influence […] even in everyday life. […] This manner of conceiving life has weakened our sense of the stable and absolute. Finding ourselves in a constantly changing environment, we view things in their development, in connection with their origins and the environment in which they grow; we are developing a strong sense of the relative. (“Il darwinismo nell’arte” 358-9).

And he had linked the expanding defense of the concept of ‘life’ to a reprise of the category of natural law:

it is the driving force in the struggle for existence, the right of the strongest is consecrated as a legitimate means, and war, conquest, slavery, the oppression of inferior races are considered the result of natural laws, no longer generating in us aversion and protest […]. Such doctrines I have seen always appear in times of decadence, when, having lost all our dearest ideals, nothing remains to man but the brute. It is not without anxiety that today one repeatedly hears that the purpose of life is to enjoy life (“Il darwinismo nell’arte” 366).

De Sanctis is tracing the steps of the “alienation of the traditional humanistic paradigm” (Mazzacurati: Pirandello 94), to the point of glimpsing, on the subject of a-vitality, whether skeptical or cynical, the composition of a ‘plastic’ discourse aiming at justifying it, that is to say, the recomposition of a general discourse that again reifies human activity ahistorically, objectifying it on the level of total contradiction: the anthropological antinomy that would fatally imprison the human species in the “muck of contradictions.” The dialectic of Historicism is the return to this abstraction.
Then De Sanctis’s attack is against the predominance of both: that of science and that of life, that of the ‘general’ and that of the ‘particular.’ An attack on a science that rejects the pitfalls of History, its ‘filth,’ “it does not follow any longer the course of events but the course of ideas” (La scienza e la vita 18), but without forgetting that “to-day we run to the other extreme; life in inviolable, one must give it full sway” (28), a situation that abandons life to its historical course, should it even lead to dissolution; leaves the contending forces to themselves, and makes out of the state a neutral, hypocritical, thing, more a spectator than an actor; [...], and reveals the indifference which has taken possession of all our souls and the lack of enterprise and moral courage which we conceal under the formula, laisser faire and laisser passer [...] and abandons society to the tide of opinions (28).

As can be easily seen, the themes of the Krisis, historicized by De Sanctis in the crisis of the unified Italian state, are at the door. He even formalizes some of its weapons: “That is no philosophy which produces isolated ideas without cohesive power, and which opposes institutions no with institutions but with irony and caricature” (29). Also: “when life is rotten, philosophy is rotten” (34), and it could not be otherwise. Yet, starting now, the defenses of ‘life’ as non-alienated authenticity will begin to multiply, and even the opposing positions will be forced to fight on their ground, which will not be the ground of historical discourse on which they had started. Its arrival on the scene will lead to the prevailing of the epistemological discourse in which it will be ideologically formalized, as we shall see below.

III. Krisis

There is no innocent Weltanschauung
György Lukács, The Destruction of Reason

15 The same idea will be used to defend realism as an excellent methodology for unveiling the falsehoods related to systematic thought, but also, as clearly evident in the essay on Zola, as the negative form of an ideal, “like the dissatisfaction of the artist for the reality by which he is surrounded, and a longing for a clearer sky” (294). And in fact “just as the ideal without a strong sense of reality is empty and abstract, so your realism will remain dumb and insipid if you don’t have a strong sense of the ideal” (300).
The epistemological crisis that stands behind Modernism occurs when there appears an imbalance between life and totality. When the Subject, discovering itself to be an aggregation and not a unity, abdicates its role as an organizer of reality and, unable to establish itself at the apex of a hierarchy, admits to being a particular among particulars, assigning equal rights to each of them. In turn, the end of the hierarchies of reality leads to a crisis of the hierarchies of speech, to the inability of language to reduce the world to essentials and control it in the unity of meaning. The signifying word, the word capable of referring from the particular to the general (which still symbolized the infinity of the Romantics: the statue of Isis), is replaced by the mere sign of the externally communicating word described by Benjamin in *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*, by Kierkegaard’s “chatter”, an “an arbitrary multiplicity of nouns demoted to mere labels” (Guarnieri: 49); that same word that Benjamin will try to save by going back to the early German Romanticism and discovering the mnemonic trace of the ‘noun’ that is expressed beyond the bourgeois notion of language (in a different dialectic of Historicism), and the same word that Pirandello instead will eventually consider the substance of the world.\(^{16}\) The unachieved hierarchical connection of signs is part of a leveling of values that extends to all levels of existence: ‘Organizations’ (and here the return to Kant plays — as we will see in the last chapter of this work — a fundamental role) are now referred to the representational capacity of a subject that is no longer universal but purely particular, and thus demoted to the rank of ‘forms,’ which, coming into an unequal dialectic with Life, are destined to be swept away every time. Swept away not as essential steps in the progress of history (and therefore significant in that context), but as arbitrary constructions used for a ludicrously attempted reconciliation, with the ‘historicity’ of history being replaced by the epistemological judgment of life, expressed by a becoming that declares everything (we will analyze this point in the chapter dedicated to Soffici and Palazzeschi) to be

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\(^{16}\) Exposing the word as ‘chatter’ emphasizes the possibility of restoring its authentic functionality. This is a restoration of *value* as nostalgia for what language still preserves of its primitive capacity. And it is the qualitative/value-related entity connected with the primitive element that allows the development of a revolutionary impulse, in the attack against the ideological order which finds in “chatter” its mirroring and stabilization.
contingent. This is the realm of the Subjunctive, shortly to be introduced by Musil, where symbols are silent, “semiosis is unlimited,” and objects have no codes because they have no referents. The ‘particular,’ legitimized by early Historicism along with an inevitable “rejection of metaphysics,” (Tessitore: Storicismo 10) now stands sovereign, but will really become so, thereby revealing its ideological nature, only once it is formalized in a negative system that postulates the absence of all sovereigns.

Nietzsche, rightfully considered by many as the ‘father’ of this transformation by virtue of his critique of the ‘triumphalism’ of Hegelianism (“which is ‘yes’ to any power”) and Positivism, had actually warned against this ‘degeneration’ (and against the surrender it implies) since the time of his second Untimely Meditation:

Imagine the extremest possible example of a man who did not possess the power of forgetting at all and who was thus condemned to see everywhere a state of becoming: such a man would no longer believe in himself, would see everything flowing asunder in moving points and would lose himself in this stream of becoming: like a true pupil of Heraclitus, he would in the end hardly dare to raise his finger (62).

The lack of a distinction between the fundamental and the accidental, the “consciousness of wrong” that all form entails, leads to the hypostatization of the transformation that ends up identifying with life itself, replacing the metaphysics of the past with epistemology. Vitalism, relativism, pragmatism, ‘machismo’ (Ernst Mach): what these positions have in common is the ‘theoretical’ possibility of inhabiting the flux that life has ‘theoretically’ become. The emphasis on the protean, fugitive nature of life (as identified in the philosophy of Henri Bergson and, in a different manner, of Georg Simmel) and the attack on the ‘forms’ of reification, reveals the connection between this philosophy and the qualitative thought of

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17 The rights of the particular. That is, the rights that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the particular begins to demand in face of and against the great systematic constructions of enlightened Reason, as opposed to the order of the general, which, heir to theological thought, asserts the possibility of perfectibility through the perspective solution of the puzzle of apparently conflicting truths; or, again, the right to dissonance, which is first and foremost the right to the preservation/exaltation of a specificity that is both territorial and temporal; or, lastly, the attention (already present in Vico) for peculiarities that, if not part of the history of God, are certainly part of the history of mankind, a concrete part of their work, their ‘doing.’
Romanticism, but, with the absolutization of becoming, already lays itself open, as we shall see below, to degenerating into an ideological form of ahistorical thought. On the social level, moreover, the segmentation of modern life (specialization, the division of labor, etc.) coexists with and is complementary to the process of rationalization later laid out by Max Weber. And besides, “the appearance of the autonomous, independent existence of the individual is all the more pronounced, the more completely modern bourgeois society is developed” (Lukács: European Realism 9), but also all the more its situation is formalized in the general discourse on the condition humaine. In fact, in order for the chaos of particulars to become truly functional to the ideological discourse of the bourgeois class, it must then, as said above, transition to a new form of abstraction which, denying the possibility of absolute values and ideals, assumes the ‘unsolvable’ horizon of the conflict between these particulars as a new, eternal, ahistorical ‘metaphysics’ that exalts and protects the disenchantment of the world. The purpose of this is precisely the elimination of History as a transformative force, and corresponds with the claim of the bourgeois subject to identify with life itself, representing it in an “evil” totality which must of course be understood to be immutable. Kierkegaard’s ‘melancholy,’ the inability to reach for a significant goal, underlines the risk of the new totality, which will ultimately dodge even the longing for a purpose, doing away with the problem in a new classicism aimed at epistemologically crystallizing the conflict in order to avoid it in History, thereby confirming that “the utopian ideal of all bourgeois action would be to make all enterprises so calculable that every element of risk is eliminated” (Mannheim:

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18 Cf. Lowy & Sayre: Romanticism 35: “The ethos of modern industrial capitalism is […] the spirit of rational calculation. Many Romantics felt intuitively that all the negative characteristics of modern society – the religion of the god Money (Carlyle called it mammonism); the decline of all qualitative, social, religious values; […] the tedious uniformization of life […] stem from the same source of corruption: market quantification.” Romanticism’s valorization of the particular (and thus of History), precisely because it was an opposition to abstraction, can be seen in some of its manifestations as an attack on Capitalism and its system of abstract categories. The fetishism inherent in the commodity world thus appears as the ‘objective’ image of the social determinants of labor: it clearly has no true natural character but conceals this deficiency by masking its historical ‘nature.’ In this view Marx’s insight can be seen as an attack against the capitalist reification in which the Enlightenment dream seems paradoxically to materialize, with the bourgeois subject attempting to become an atemporal subject and at the same time atemporalizing its scale of values. This form of attack was indeed identified by Lukács, who saw in the rationality of economic processes the peculiar character of modern capitalism.
68). The theorization of the insolvability of the contradiction inherent in life works exactly in this direction, and is realized, as we shall see later, in a renewed capacity for abstraction.

The categories of historical reason are nothing more than the abstract formulation of the structural forms of the human world, where the different Systems acquire objective reality by virtue of their connection with the individual’s need for ‘meaning.’ Thus, what becomes prevalent is the image of becoming, but of a becoming with no direction that with every step forward destroys the creations of the past, refusing any point of perspective and dispelling all meaning into non-being. And so we have the claim of Lebensphilosophie, where “the infinite multiplicity of human symbolic acts is the expression of the infinite potentialities of a nonalienated nature” (Jameson: Marxism and Historicism 51), and which accordingly presupposes a priori that life is not alienated too. Mannheim had already recognized this point of contact between Historicism and Philosophy of Life, and had outlined its dynamics starting with an analysis of Müller’s thought, highlighting its origin in the absolutization of “pure becoming” (149):

*the emphasis on life and diversity*, as the elements which cannot be comprehended by bureaucratic rationalization and generalization, anticipates a line of thought which consolidates itself into a single position of thinking, at first in opposition to centralism and subsequently in opposition to revolutionary natural law – and which points to the later “philosophy of life” (*Lebensphilosophie*), to give its modern name (136).

Similarly, when Lukács denounces the philosophy of Simmel, his one-time teacher, as an attempt to absolutize the crisis of bourgeois culture, insisting on the contiguity with Bergson in a line of development aimed, through the assumption of a metaphysics existing within the experience of the individual, at liberating man from the structures of form (and, implicitly, at admitting ‘contradictoriness’ as the nature of life), he will in fact reiterate the historical need for an image of society (Marxist society) in which contradictions may be reconciled, but on the field of History, certainly not from an aesthetic perspective. This fundamental distinction stems from a basic difference between the two: while, to Lukács, rational mechanization,
connected with the new modes of production and labor, has penetrated deep into the psychological makeup of the worker, reducing it to a reckoning horizon, to Simmel it never comes to be fully reflected in ‘objects,’ but always preserves something “for itself”, projecting in the work (and market) environment only the external praxis of labor, while safeguarding the vital core connected to the reality of Erlebnis (and the search for this Erlebnis would in fact become, as we will see, one of the main lines of development of Italian Modernism). In other words, in the full imperialist stage, Lukács realizes that the domination of the commodity-form (including the commodified version of labor-power), breaking the ties of the past organic production system and reformulating relationships between people based on the mediation of the abstract laws of that production system, affects every aspect of life, because it represents the entire structure of society within the working environment. It is no longer episodic in nature but permeates all of social life and reshapes it in its own image, because it is vital for it that all of society should function in its own way. Simmel, instead, as observed by Vittorio D’Anna, borrows from Herder the idea that every age “revolves around a core meaning that makes it a meaningful totality” (77) which, in the modern world, is technical-scientific rationality, which redefines values according to a qualitative scale but then overturns the Marxist hypothesis by considering modern capitalism defined precisely by the emergence of these values, and not by the social and production-related issues that determine these values, thereby expanding the context of spiritual life to include economic constructions.  

The Krisis, it should be added, will of course develop not only in this direction but also in an Ancien Régime-style restoration of objectivity, tragically and ridiculously tending to suppress the dissonant flow of opinions and contradictions, exacerbating any possible Order, it too fictionally ahistorical, as an extreme mechanism of defense against chaos.

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19 On this (binary) opposition Simmel will base the tragic essence of modern capitalist society: on the chasm created between external phenomenal forms and subjectivity.
20 Not surprisingly, already in The Philosophy of Money (where nonetheless ample use is made of the Marxian concept of “abstraction”), production (driven by its own logic) appears, before the individual, as “fate in front of inconstancy”, that is to say, as the objective before the subjective, where the latter is determined by the former, but only in aspects that are, so to speak, not fundamental.
However, even this ‘variant’ originates from the multiplication of particulars: the various absolutes, which oppose one another and are formalized each in their own enclosures, expose the inevitable emerging of contradictions, which takes us back to the dialectic of Historicism. In both cases the result is once again a falsifying harmonic formalization. But while the latter will prove to be easily assailable because no longer capable of holding back the Nietzschean “anarchy of atoms,” all the particulars demanding their rights, now far from the reality determined by the new production system, the former will be able to conceal itself precisely by proclaiming the rights of all particulars in a much more capable manner, as now we will see analyzing On Humor.

IV. The (A)historical Trap of On Humor

The Old and the Young cannot be read without first reading On Humor. Pirandello’s essay is in fact, at least in Italy, the most articulate descriptions of the Krisis; it is not its theorization but its formal mimicry, an introjection into theory of the component of continuous ‘movement’ (becoming) in which the crisis unfolds. The foremost target of the essay is immobility, the fetish of the ‘given’ that passes itself off as reality and behind which the humoristic perspective aims at identifying another form of reality, changing and evolving, which the new art has the task of representing:

Art, like all ideal or illusory constructions, also tend to fix life; it fixes it in one moment or in various given moments – the statue in a gesture, the landscape in a temporary immutable perspective. But – what about the perpetual mobility of successive perspectives? What about the constant flow in which souls are? Art generally abstracts and concentrates; that is, it catches and represents the essential and characteristic ideality of both men and things. Now it seems to the humorist that all this over-simplifies nature and tends to make life too reasonable or at least too coherent (Pirandello: On Humor 142).

That mobility is of course not limited to artistic expression, but proceeds on the existential level in the dialectic between life and form, materializing in the usual image of a flux:
Life is a continual flux which we try to stop, to fix in stable and determined forms, both inside and outside ourselves, because we are already fixed forms, forms which move in the midst of other immobile forms and which however can follow the flow of life until the movement, gradually slowing and becoming more and more rigid, eventually ceases. The forms in which we seek to stop, to fix in ourselves this constant flux are the concepts, the ideals with which we would like consistently to comply, all the fictions we create for ourselves […]. But within ourselves, in what we call the soul and is the life in us, the flux continues, indistinct under the barriers […]. In certain moments of turmoil all these fictitious forms are hit by the flux and collapse miserably (On Humor 137).21

This opposition between life and form (already noticed by the literary critic Adriano Tilgher) is itself born of a deeper sense of historicism, expressing itself in a sequence (this time actually historical) consisting of, broadly speaking, three moments: the criticism of the associated concepts of Tradition and Rhetoric22; the valorization of the rights of the particular; and what Pirandello called “lanterninosofia”23 (that is to say, the fictionality of all purpose) and the consequential leveling of values of all form/interpretations, where “it will be worth as much as something thought to be real, since in the final analysis neither one nor the other will bring any satisfaction” (On Humor 124).

And yet, returning to the dialectic of Historicism, one can easily see that On Humor is based on a contradiction: the transition from the historical evolution of humor to its final transformation into an ahistorical element, an anthropological component of human existence:

We needn’t look too far back to find humanity of our past for it is still within us, the same as always. At most, we can admit that, due to the alleged development of sensibility and progress of civilization, those dispositions of the mind and those conditions of life which are particularly conducive to humor – to be more precise, to a certain type of humor – are more common: but it would be completely arbitrary to deny that the ancients had or could have had those same dispositions toward humor (15-6).

21 The points in common with Bergson’s philosophy (starting with Le Rire) and with Simmel’s later speculations are evident.
22 Cf. Pirandello: On Humor 94: “it is among these solitary writers who rebelled against rhetoric, and among these people who wrote in dialect that we must look for the humorists”.
23 Cf. Pirandello: On Humor 124: “It leads us to reflect that since life is fatally lacking in what from the point of view of human reason would be a clear and definite purpose, it becomes necessary for life, if it is not to drift aimlessly in the void, to have a particular, fictitious and illusory purpose for each human being, whether of low or high station.”
Humor (“the feeling of the opposite,” the ability to always see the other sense of things, the ability not to settle down in generalizing propositions or systems), says Pirandello, has always existed. But its centuries-old existence does not cancel out — we are now in the first part of the essay (discussing the phenomenon’s passing through time and history) — the historical ability that is expressed in change and transformation. Compared to the past, people have become more apt to understand humor, and therefore have changed, meaning that human nature can change: thus it does not appear to be ontological, but determined by history.

Here begins the long, historical critique that Pirandello raises against the associated concepts of tradition and rhetoric, by which he means the formalization of an art having external significance elaborated on abstract and apparently immutable aesthetic concepts:

When-ever a rebel poet gave the filing cabinet a well-aimed kick and created a new form of his own, the rhetoricians would growl at him for quite a while. Eventually, however, if the new form succeeded in obtaining recognition, they would take it, disassemble it like a little machine, give it a logical formulation and catalogue it, perhaps by adding a new box to the file (On Humor 30).

And:

the skepticism, tolerance, and realistic character, which Italian letters acquired almost from their beginning, were certainly dispositions and conditions favorable to humor; the greatest obstacle was the dominating rhetoric, […] a purely mental literature (93-4).

24 Cf. Pirandello: On Humor 24: “Socrates has the feeling of the opposite”.
25 Pirandello intends this word as a correlative to Tradition. It is certainly not “Rhetoric” à la Perelman, rightly identified by Renato Barilli in Pirandello’s novels, which actually expresses a demystifying movement very similar to that of humor. Also on the concept of Rhetoric insists the criticism, which Pirandello borrows from De Sanctis, against writers who consider form as being extraneous to content. Cf. Pirandello: “Soggettivismo e oggettivismo nell’arte narrativa,” in L’umorismo e altri saggi 205: “Those who conceive and consider form as something external, something fake […] something pasted on. These are the last survivors of the old Rhetoric.” The overlapping of form and content, one of the great themes of Modernism, is characterized by the opposition to the old imitative strategy of Rhetoric, suggesting two different ideological perspectives corresponding to two different moments in the system of production and, therefore, different social organizations.
26 In fact, On Humor is also a theory of the novel, or at least a theory of the novelistic: the criticism of the concept of Rhetoric is similar to the criticism expressed by the novel and by Historicism; in each case it is an attack on the concept of Imitation, i.e. on the established rules.
Pirandello’s criticism, and it’s no surprise he mentions skepticism, is against the abstract formal generalizations that claim to swallow up dissonant particulars. In other words, it is an attack against an art of classicist aesthetic value. It matters little that Pirandello includes the Romantics among the accused, because to him the problem arises with the canonization of Romantic works of art, that is when they become imitative models, as such reactivating the same motive purported by classicist aesthetics:

Rhetoric not only permitted but recommended imitating any model that it considered classic. And imitation was a quality and an honor for any writer, a certification of proper studies, of proper literary education, of devoted obedience to schooling, to the precepts of beauty, indeed, of the beautiful, the good, the true (“Un critico fantastico” 170).

Pirandello’s attack against imitation is an attack against abstract generalizations masquerading as immutable Truths, and in this sense his attack originates from a historicist consciousness, meaning the historical consciousness of the changing of mankind, thus of its categories of judgment, over time. And in fact Rhetoric represented “an older and essentially precapitalist mode of linguistic organization; it is a collective or class phenomenon in that it serves as a means of assimilating the speech of individuals to some suprapersonal oratorical paradigm” (Jameson: Ideologies of Theory 127). Humor is precisely what disrupts this imitative phenomenon, because it uses the tool of ‘reflection,’ “the pool of icy water in which the flame of feeling dies out,” meaning the critical, subjective, discordant element:

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27 And in fact in Pirandello we also find the Romantic exaltation of ‘original creation,’ as well as the refusal of foreign models. Cf. Pirandello: On Humor 94: “My only intention, in the first part of this book, is to refute those who have tried to maintain, on the basis of certain preconceptions and certain divisions and considerations, that humor is a wholly modern phenomenon and an almost exclusive prerogative of the Anglo-Germanic peoples.”

28 Cf. Pirandello: “Un critico fantastico” 169: “we are still dominated by Rhetoric and, without realizing it, we still follow its rules and precepts, not only in literature but in every aspect of our life: Rhetoric and imitation, after all, are one and the same.”

29 In this sense, we could say, Rhetoric still presupposed, as its receiving horizon, the presence of a common Kultur, of an ‘organic’ society.

30 Cf. Luigi Pirandello: On Humor 19: “Then in my time came criticism, and that was the end of that. For a long time we groped in the aspects of happiness and the amusing aspects of sorrow began to emerge from their long hiding.”
It has often been observed that humoristic works are disorganized, disconnected, interrupted by constant digressions. [...] The disorganization, the digressions [...] are precisely the necessary and inevitable consequences of the disturbance and disruption which are produced in the organizing movement of the images through the work of the active reflection, which evokes an association through contraries (119).

While in traditional works of art reflection ‘enjoys’ the organization of ideas and images in a harmonious form, says Pirandello, in humorous works of art it “is not hidden, it does not remain invisible: it is not, that is, almost a form of feeling or almost a mirror in which feeling contemplates itself; rather, it places itself squarely before the feeling, in a judging attitude, and, detaching itself from it, analyzes it and disassembles its imagery; from this analysis and decomposition [...] the feeling of the opposite” (On Humor 113).

It is precisely at this point that the concept passes from art to life, pointing out that not only works of art, but all our ideal constructions, even the ones we make in everyday life, are conceptualizing abstractions (this is the great issue of the form-Gestalt)31: “Our knowledge of the world and of ourselves totally lacks the objective value [...] This objective value of reality is continuous illusory fabrication” (132).

In other words, the condition of the humorous artist assumes an existential character:

The condition of a man who is constantly somewhat off key, who is like a violin and double bass at the same time; of a man in which a thought cannot originate without the opposite or contrary thought originating at the same time, and who finds that for each reason he has to say yes, there arise one or more that compel him to say no and keep him suspended in perplexity for the rest of his life; of a man who cannot give into a feeling without suddenly perceiving something inside him which mocks, disturbs, disconcerts and taunts him – is a condition which, in its very abnormality, can only be bitterly comic (124).

31 This is one of the major themes at the basis of the various Modernist philosophies. In Italy one of its first theorizations is found in Giovanni Marchesini’s 1905 essay Le finzioni dell’anima (which Pirandello appreciated), but the subject had already appeared many years before. We will follow the matter more closely in the next sections.
Such is the humorous condition. Challenging the imitative abilities of realistic art leads to viewing humorous art as a construct that mimics the flow of life, and then to an existentialist view that, exalting that flow, aims at preserving mankind from the pain produced by the discovery of the illusoriness of its ideal creations. Which is the same as saying that the historical consciousness of the changing of ideas in time is becoming the epistemological consciousness of an ungovernable movement declaring an unbridgeable gap between man and existence, precisely what On Humor is about:

Man does not have an absolute idea or conception of life, but rather a feeling that changes and varies depending on the times, the circumstances, and luck. Now logic, by abstracting ideas from emotions, tends precisely to fix what is changeable and fluid. It tends to give an absolute value to what is relative, and thus it aggravates an ill which is already serious in itself since the prime root of our ills consists precisely in this feeling that we have of life.

The consciousness of historical change, as expressed in the first part of the essay, establishes the ‘change’ and then, through Pirandello’s ‘reflection,’ becomes an ontological consciousness that ultimately excludes History itself, making it too one of those “ideal constructions” to be viewed with skepticism:

The humorist does not recognize heroes, or rather he lets others represent them. For his part, he knows what a legend is and how it is created, what history is and how it is made: they are all compositions, more or less ideal; and the greater the pretense of reality, the more idealized they are. The humorist amuses himself by disassembling these compositions, although one cannot say that it is a pleasant amusement (On Humor 143).

Here, in equating history to legend (a theme that will be fully developed in The Old and the Young), emerges a nodal point in the Krisis of the early twentieth century, a point that is

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32 Cf. Luperini: Pirandello p. 51: “it could be argued that the consciousness of humor tries to recapture and almost mimic the mobility and unpredictability of life, taking on its fluid, contradictory perspective, and in so doing prevailing over the rigidity of forms”.
33 Herder: 254: “The spirit of change is the kernel of history.”
34 Here we can discern the secret bond that in modern capitalism links together the seemingly opposite poles of atomization and rationalization.
complementary to the crisis of the legislating subject and the subsequent decline of the paradigm of the One Truth.

Now, this is not the place to add a new chapter to Lukács’ *The Destruction of Reason*, for at least three reasons: to begin with, this dialectic of Historicism is in no way inevitable; secondly, we are not dealing with mere ‘irrationalism’ (at least in its common meaning); third, we can no longer avoid considering certain consequences of the *Krisis* as being highly critical of the rational/schematic construction of the bourgeois ‘state,’ precisely because of their Romantic origins. In this regard, however, the problem (which should have been noticed by the critics who in recent years have naively praised the ‘multiplicity’ in Pirandello) is that those demystifying consequences, which could dismantle the equally naive pretensions of rational logic and realism, were eventually recomposed in a formal, ontologically significant scheme equating reality (and Truth) with the flux of life, and preserving the authenticity of the subject with which they attempt to identify. In short, after exposing the hypocrisies of the modern bourgeois subject, “the logic of his mental constructs” (Dombroski: 8), *On Humor* ends up perfecting that very logic, compensating the ‘damage’ caused by History with a new ideological vision conducted on an extreme level of abstractness,\(^{35}\) replacing History with Becoming and Historicity with the Theory of Knowledge. The negative horizon therefore remains affirmative, and the historical problem of contradictions in a… historical moment, is resolved “in metaphysical terms, in a perspective that destroys the world and, as a political trade-off, entails the rejection of choice in the field of history and thus an attitude of acceptance” (Guglielmi: *Ironia e negazione* 147), of indirect apology. While it is true that in *On Humor* this condition still maintains a distressful background, distress is simply identified as the tragic relationship existing between life and forms, and will later be resolved later by Pirandello (for instance in *Uno, nessuno e centomila*) entirely in favor of the first term.

\(^{35}\) Significantly, in the Preface to *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Pirandello makes his noted distinction between “historical” writers and “philosophical” writers, the latter being interested not so much in the story as in its universal meaning.
Equally difficult to understand is how *On Humor* could be seen as corresponding to Michelstaedter’s *Persuasion and Rhetoric* (as we will see in the last chapter of this work). Or rather, while the analysis of what Michelstaedter calls rhetoric, the inauthenticity of human relations, appears acceptable, the stand taken by Pirandello is totally opposite:

In certain moments of inner silence, in which our soul strips itself of all its habitual fictions and our eyes become sharper and more piercing, we see ourselves in life, and life in itself, as if in a barren and disquieting nakedness; we are seized by a strange impression, as if, in a flash, we could clearly perceive a reality different from the one that we normally perceive, a reality living beyond the reach of human vision, outside the forms of human reason. Very lucidly, then, the texture of daily experience, almost suspended in the void of our inner silence, seems meaningless, devoid of purpose (*On Humor* 138).

In Pirandello, perceiving the operation of rhetoric does not lead to the tragic search for the true center of *persuasion*, but to the hypostatization of this inauthenticity as an authentic part of life, where inauthenticity dreams of being authentic. In Michelstaedter the conflict between the two terms remains a conflict, open to a situation of real criticism, whereas in Pirandello the conflict is resolved with its ontologization, which, as such, ceases to be conflicting, if not in the inefficiency of an epistemological judgment: life vs forms. In Pirandello there is no trace of the hatred that Musil’s Ulrich will feel toward attitudes expressing love for the contingent (though perfectly aware of the catastrophe of the particular), because here the Bachtinian sense of romance has become all-encompassing, and the ‘different’ is no longer a possible criticism of the ordinary, but an “absolute existential condition” (Gioanola: *Pirandello e la follia* 22) which invades not only the external but the psyche of the subject, denying it any possible self-enclosed identity, hence the loss of its organizing ability and the consequent attitude of ‘seeing’ itself; which is the existential correlative of the ‘reflection’ expressed in humorous works of art:

we shall see that reflection becomes something resembling a diabolical imp that takes apart the mechanism of each image, of each phantasm produced by emotions; it takes
it apart in order to see how it is made; it releases the mainspring, and the whole mechanism squeaks convulsively (Pirandello: *On Humor* 125).

“Releasing the mainspring” evidently entails the subsequent inefficacy of ‘feeling,’ that is, the inability to continue to believe in those images and in any relative action: the inability of the intellectual to remove himself from an epistemological perspective during the imperialist stage of Capitalism. This inability is the sign of a historical condition, but when the mechanism obligates to equate history with legend, i.e. ideology, this horizon becomes unsurpassable, showing that nihilistic negation “can produce the same paralyzing effect of the illusions of progressivism” (Mazzacurati: *Pirandello* 77), and that it makes use of relativism precisely in order to masks its ideology, proclaiming the impossibility of meaning, which becomes, in its abstract theorization, the equality of all meanings. Meaning is transformed into simulation, and humor is the weapon that can break it apart, to the point of suggesting the relativization of every value as redemption, in a multiplicity that seems no longer capable of being resolved but that reveals its own background in the theoretical discourse that describes it.

It matters little that this ‘humorous’ attitude is not all-encompassing in the poetics of Pirandello, enclosed between the past naturalism and the future “theater of myths,” because that attitude functions as the novelistic to which it corresponds: whenever it appears it takes over (hegemonizes), forcing all other views, including opposing ones, to be analyzed in its own light, to fight on its own ground. This hegemonizing ability is of course explained by the theory’s referring to a specific social praxis: the praxis that, on the plane of labor and work, consists in the disintegration generated by ‘specialization’ (the impossibility of relating to the whole product being manufactured) and in the reverberating of that specialization in the forms of a new ‘rationalization.’

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36 Furthermore, Pirandello himself will eventually consider humorous most of the works he wrote before the essay in question. One thinks, of course, of the *Lettera a Capuana* regarding *L’esclusa*. In comparing this attitude to the novelistic we are of course referring to the analysis of Mikhail Bakhtin.
V. Nature, Again

every yes a no, which ultimately assumes the same meaning as yes
Luigi Pirandello, On Humor

As we have seen, On Humor emerges from a historical viewpoint. In other words, it highlights the historical motives underlying its own development. At this point, before proceeding to The Old and the Young, we can point out, in the theoretical writings that precede On Humor, the same crisis, though not yet elaborated in a complete dialectic, as it emerges from the shadows of a dark pessimism that has not yet, in Mazzacurati’s words, extracted the antidote from the venom, or not yet cancelled out History by equating evil with its therapy.

In 1893, in an essay entitled Arte e coscienza d’oggi, the young Pirandello, with his vaguely Socialist sympathies, examines The Malady of the Century, the then-famous novel by Max Nordau, the protagonist of which is a young man called Wilhelm Eynhardt:

Wilhelm Eynhardt […] is only interested in philosophizing at the expense of those who suffer […], even disregarding the moment in history […] He chooses to compare this moment in life to some other bleak period experienced by mankind; he chooses to see it not only as the twilight of an entire religious, political and philosophical conception; but as the twilight of peoples; not merely a fin de siècle, but a fin de race (244).

The “bleak period” mentioned by Pirandello coincides, in philosophy, with the arrival of the indomitable relativism that we have discussed above:

The old rules have collapsed, and the new ones have not yet arrived or firmly established themselves; it’s only natural that the idea of relativity has expanded so much as to make us lose our sense of proportions. The field is open to any speculation. Our intellect has acquired an extraordinary mobility. No one is capable of establishing a firm and unwavering point of view […]. Never before, I believe, has the life of man been so ethically and aesthetically disrupted.Disconnected from any principle of doctrine or faith […]. That, in my opinion, is the principal cause of our intellectual malaise. […] sand castles that are blown away by the slightest wind;
sudden glories that last one day, like a newspaper; fashions, schools, cliques, are created, destroyed and swept away in an instant (“Arte e coscienza d’oggi” 240-1).

And we also find a hint of the title of his future novel:

As for the old, you have heard them: they say that so much science has passed before them with little or no effect on people’s minds, leaving them cold, and they return to God […]. The young appear to be in even more distressing conditions. Born in a period of fervent activity, when their fathers had no time for love being busy at war or at rebuilding […] amid the clashes of opposing political and philosophical currents; educated with no guiding criteria and lacking an inborn life force (“Arte e coscienza d'oggi” 239).

This situation gives rise to a bleak, distressingly existentialist view:

The impression I get from modern consciousness is one of a dream full of anguish, populated by sad or threatening wraiths, of a nocturnal battle, a desperate struggle in which they clamor for a moment and then disappear, replaced by others, a thousand banners behind which opposite factions mix and disperse, where everyone fights for himself, for his own protection, against friend and foe alike. A constant clash of discordant voices, an endless commotion. It seems that everything in it trembles and wavers (“Arte e coscienza d’oggi” 246).

And the corresponding aspects in active life are also described: “From uncertainty of thought comes uncertainty of action. No ideal today manages to materialize in a truly intense desire, or in a strongly felt need. And as we believe in the vanity of life, we believe in the uselessness of fighting” (“Arte e coscienza d’oggi” 243).

Three years later, in “Rinunzia,” Pirandello violently rejects relativism with an ethical outburst (a reaction to modernist epistemology that we will also find in some of the authors writing for the review La Voce), although it appears as an unsurpassable horizon: “By negating, we have destroyed; and thus declared our impotence to assert, renouncing an issue that is of the highest importance for us” (254).

But let us get back to On Humor. In the last pages, Pirandello presents a modified version of the myth of Prometheus for the purpose of declaring that Nature is horrible only
because of the fragile constructions of civilization and reason that mankind attempts to oppose to it:

Tomorrow a humorist could picture Prometheus on the Caucasus in the act of pondering sadly his lit torch and perceiving in it, at last, the fateful cause of his infinite torment. He has finally realized that Jupiter is no more that a vain phantasm, a pitiable deception, the shadow of his own body projecting itself as a giant in the sky, precisely because of the lighted torch he holds in his hand. Jupiter could disappear only on one condition, on condition that Prometheus extinguish his candle, that is, his torch. But he does not know how, he does not want to, he cannot; and so the shadow remains, terrifying and tyrannical, for all men who fail to realize the fateful deception.

Once again we are dealing with an ontologization of the Krisis, transferred onto the image of a primordial Chaos (before the “torch”) that now becomes the Origin to retrieve by preserving contradictions in their juxtaposition, recoverable by denouncing all reason capable of creating ‘forms,’ of mortifying the flow of life in well-defined constructions. Which means that the flux (Nature) represents the last ontological refuge of a subject with no way out. This reference to an Origin develops a binary reasoning (before/after the torch, nature/culture, life/form, etc.) that eludes history and focuses on a moral perspective.

Once again the rights of the particular will change in a view from above that, by defining Nature as an ‘integer,’ aims at the surrender of ataraxia:

Conclude! Of all the pressing needs that afflict humanity, this one is no doubt the saddest and the most vain. […] the strongest recognition of not having concluded anything comes when, leaving behind the ephemeral contingencies, the everyday hassles, the passions and desires, the tasks we impose upon ourselves […] we tear down the illusory limits of our present consciousness, we expand the boundaries of our habitual view of life, we rise to contemplate and consider nature from a tragic, solemn height.

A ‘classic’ view that finally throws a bridge between Nature and Time and eternalizes both outside of change, except, of course, the change eternalized in the flux:

Because nature, in its eternity, does not conclude. And we who live in it, we who are it, but who for a short time have seen and considered ourselves as separate and distinct parts, when the time comes to return and lose ourselves in its eternity, recognize as vain, illusory, arbitrary all our conclusions (“Non conclude” 358).

In a desperate attempt of defense the intellectual changes his opinion on the *Krisis* and establishes the innocence (and authenticity) of Becoming. He tears away the encrustations of his bourgeois common sense (which is what Gramsci appreciated in Pirandello), and gives back to the class to which he belongs a perfected ideology, in which the flux that Nature represents can judge and destroy historical ‘forms,’ by relating them to its own eternity.

**VI. The “Old”**

> it no longer preserved any trace of her former beauty
> […] her spent, waxen face the aspect of some horrible mask of grief.
> Luigi Pirandello, *The Old and the Young*

Although the novel has no protagonist, the events revolve around the members of the Laurentano family, in particular the three siblings Ippolito, Cosmo, and Caterina, and their respective children.

Ippolito and Caterina, in particular, express the apparent contrast between the past Bourbon regime and the new liberal era: Ippolito is forever loyal to the old monarchy, shut up in his estate in paranoid rejection of the new state of affairs, and Caterina had run away with a follower of Garibaldi during the years of the ‘revolution.’

While at first glance Ippolito, with his guards in Bourbon uniform, his interest for the ‘dead’ things of ancient Girgenti, his archeological culture, might appear to represent the condition of the old feudal nobility, as well as the condition of the *buffo* [comic] character (i.e. the character unable to go beyond a one-sided interpretation of things) closed inside a metaphysical, authoritarian dogmatism, at a closer look one can see that that even he is

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38 Cf. Pirandello: *The Old and the Young* 114: “Don Ippolito gazed at the temples where they stood grouped austere and solemn in the dusk, and felt a vague sorrow for these survivors from another world and another life.”
clearly part of the new contradictory, prosaic condition. This condition is evident both in his ridiculous marriage with a fifty-year old bourgeois (whom he marries because of his dismay at growing old and who is then ‘stolen’ from him by a deputy after the unconsummated marriage), and in his political activity, which he embarks on on the side of the clerical party and in which he does not hesitate to attempt an alliance with the emerging, and by him morally abhorred, socialist forces. Lastly he appears as fully integrated in the parliamentary climate (on which we know Pirandello’s opinion) and in the new bourgeois mentality:

“Friendship counts for in nothing these days,” Don Ippolito replied curtly. Weighed against material interests, it is nothing!” (95).

Ippolito continues to conceal to himself, in the form, the reality of his actions. Donna Caterina, instead, has definitely opened her eyes on the collapse of the old ideals, however not by resolving this new consciousness in an anthropological vision like her brother Cosmo, but with a straightforward acknowledgement, it too anti-historical, of the impossibility of change:

Do you gentlemen tell him. What has Roberto done, and why, in the name of what cause does he come here to-day to ask for the votes of the people? In the name perhaps of all that he did as a boy, in the name of his dead father, in the name of the sacrifices and of the sacred ideals for which those sacrifices were made and that agony endured? Why, he will make people laugh at him! […] all the old people here cry: Things were better in the old days! And I say the same, do you hear? I, Caterina Laurentano, Stefano Auriti’s widow! (85).

The failure of the liberal class entails as a consequence the failure of all ideals, equating them to ridiculous illusions:

In Sixty, dear Roberto, do you know what we were doing here? We were melting our souls in little saucers, like pieces of soap; the Government sent us down a straw each, as a present; and then we, poor fools that we were, set to work to blow into our soapy water, and oh, the bubbles, the bubbles, each one prettier and more iridescent than the last! But then the people began to gape with hunger, and when they gaped, pop went all those wonderful bubbles, one after another, and ended, my son, if you will pardon the expression, in drops of spittle... (250).
Then it should not surprise that this passage is almost identical to one that we find in *On Humor*: “the small erratic self of Mr. Friedrich Schlegel, who with a bubble pipe and soapy water started merrily puffing up bubbles – vain appearances of the universe, worlds – and blowing them out of existence. This was his game” (7).

The fall of ideals goes hand in hand with the advance of the new conception of humor: not only are illusions brought back into the game of contradictions, but each time they are destroyed by the contact with a reality that seems to save nothing, and whose task, similar in this to that of humor (which becomes its counterpart) is “to make mankind aware of the reality of its condition, dispelling all hopes, mirages, and idealizing fabrications with which it deludes and deceives itself” (Spinazzola: 20).

In the novel, the climax of this demystification comes during the gathering of old liberal *Garibaldini* in the home of Donna Caterina, immediately after her son’s electoral defeat:

Each of them had adapted himself as best he might to his own fate, had made a niche, a position for himself. Sebastiano Ceraulo […] had been appointed, by personal influence, secretary in the Provincial office, and now trained over his scalp with pitiable industry the wisp of long, carefully waxed hair that remained on it […], Marco Sala, sentenced to death by the Bourbon Government […] had gone first of all into the sulphur business […], then had come to grief; and for some time supported his family by gambling […] Mattia Gangi, who had flung his cassock to the winds to take part in the Revolution, now, asthmatic, irritable […] was teaching in the elementary school *alauda est laeta* […], Filippo Noto […]. Before 1860 he had fought a duel with a young officer in the Bourbon army over a woman […]; this amorous adventure had served him as a patriotic precedent; but he cared little for politics; […] became aware that those other persons which they had been years and years before were still inhabiting their bodies (216-7).

The hegemony of disillusion39 is not examined as a contingent event, but is radicalized as a pivotal element of the defeat that has been the lot of these men (as well as of their political

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39 Cf. Pirandello: *The Old and the Young* 220: “The defeat of the moment, which affected Auriti, made more evident the other, far more serious, irreparable defeat which had been inflicted upon each of them by time and life.”
opponents, both clerical and socialist): Pirandello’s solution lies not in the reaction to this disillusion, but rather in its deepening.

Moreover, Pirandello is all the more ruthless, in this demystifying process, in that he exposes the class-based nature of the Historical Left’s liberalism, where the vaunted ideals of the Risorgimento are accompanied by fierce criticism and mockery aimed at the Socialists, to the point of expressing a preference for the clericals: a preference that reflects the ‘problematic’ (in the Lukácsian sense) nature, the total inconsistency, the lack of ‘authenticity,’ of the political situation of the time. And the old patriots’ appeal to realpolitik definitively sweeps away the heroic virtues of the entire process of the Risorgimento, that is, in Italy, the revolutionary stage of the bourgeoisie:

They give us a glimpse of an ideal humanity and justice, with which nobody can find fault, for which everybody must feel enthusiastic; and so they make proselytes to their cause among those who cannot distinguish between the poetry of the ideal and the reality of social life! […] And with the proclamation of the right to work, anyone can see where we shall end; we have seen it already, for that matter, in France, in 1848… (224-5).

In defense of the idealism of the ancient battles steps in old Mauro Mortara. One might say that it would have been better if he hadn’t. Mortara is a character who expresses total alienation in face of the changed historical situation, and is, therefore, the comic character par excellence, the bearer of a definite system of values that ends up creating an impenetrable screen between himself and reality:

He would not allow any argument, this Mauro Mortara. In his perpetual meditative wanderings through his rustic solitude, he had systematized his world for himself after his own fashion, and walked in that world, confident, like a god, stroking his long white beard, his eyes beaming at the satisfactory explanations which he had

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40 Cf. Pirandello: The Old and the Young 223: “What scenes there would be in the Chamber! The first thing would be to abolish all the schools! Abolish all taxation! Abolish the army and the police! Law and order, soap and water! The frontiers levelled, and universal brotherhood! Yes, yes, cut the heads off the mountains, reduce them all to hillocks of uniform height!”.

41 It must be remembered that at the head of the Liberal Party of Girgenti there was Canon Pompeo Agro, formerly a leading figure in the clerical party, which he later abandoned for not being elected bishop.
managed to find for everything. Everything that occurred to him must comply with
the rules of this world of his (The Old and the Young 133).

His main activity is the metaphorically impossible preservation of the big room where, at one
time, he conspired together with his companions; it was the room of the Laurentano brothers’
father, who had strongly opposed the unification of Italy, a fact ignored by Mortara42: “Mauro
 […] was determined that everything should remain as it was […] a shrine of liberty” (135).
His fear that the room might become ‘contaminated’ underlines his neurotic personality in
which History is distorted, in an ambiguity that is a sign of the very problem we are
discussing, an ambiguity that is the judgment that humor (life) gives of the comic (the
systematic construction); reducing to a monad unrelated to time precisely the character who,
more than all, preserves a cultural idea of collectivity, of common goals:

Why should these gaolbirds […] come and spoil for us old men the satisfaction of
seeing that community, Italy, changed by our efforts to a power of the first rank?
[…] It’s all the priests’ doing, you know. Double-dyed rascals! Scum of all the vices!
Sinks of iniquity! Quietly fanning the flames, so as to dismember Italy once again…
The Sanfedisti! The Sanfedisti! (133-4).

Confusing the Socialists with the Sanfedisti43 denotes an irresolvable perspective blindness
that will not only be punished by death (Mortara will be shot down by a group of soldiers as
he runs towards them, armed, to support them against the workers of the Fasci), but by a
fortuitous death that leaves an unanswered question, hence a death that is not ‘significant’
inasmuch as it is not a true conclusion. He will be found wearing the four medals earned as a
patriot, but “armed like a brigand” (472), like one of the outlaws who fought against the new
Savoy monarchy and its armies in southern Italy for years. Thus humor takes its final

42 Cf. Pirandello: The Old and the Young 39-40: “More than once he had been on the point of giving Mauro to
understand that the idea of a united Italy had never entered the head of Gerlando Laurentano, his father, […] nor
did he think of saying anything now; But rather allowed Mauro, snorting and quivering with rage, to turn his back
on him and go off to shut himself in the old Prince’s room, a room as sacred to him as the Country itself, the cradle
of Freedom and now almost its temple”.
43 The peasant army which, under the command of Cardinal Ruffo di Calabria, nullified the liberal revolution that
had broken out in the Kingdom of Naples in 1799.
revenge, and, in the question mark that ends the novel, highlights a misunderstanding that, for the elderly idealist, will be the ultimate sentence.

With this misunderstanding, and with the many others that make up the novel, the framework of the historical novel is recognized as emptied of all meaning: not because criticism is prevalent (it was the same in _I viceré_), but because it is totalizing, founded on an anarchy of particulars and rejecting a symbolic line of march, even if limited to a historical moment. And in this irresolvable game of particulars, Pirandello, as he did in _On Humor_, raises the _Krisis_ to consciousness, i.e. to acquiring the full awareness of an epochal turning point; but then, with the symbolic glorification of that anarchy, the awareness is unconsciously revealed to be an integral part of the _Krisis_ itself.

VII. The “Young”

he shall take his toy sword and his wooden horse, the ones he played at soldiers with, in Sixty
Luigi Pirandello, _The Old and the Young_

Speaking about this novel, in his famous _Lettera autobiografica_, Pirandello explained that it contained the tragedy of his generation, a generation forced to seek a balance between the burdensome heritage of Risorgimento idealism and the new political situation, between the declining role of the intellectual and modern mass society. That tragedy, which can be identified with what Weber calls the destiny “to live in an age alien to God and bereft of prophets” (_Science as Profession and Vocation_ 351), and Pirandello defines, through the socialist Prince Lando Laurentano, “time for talk” (288), meaning not only the supervened impossibility to act, the indestructible inertia governing the times, but also the lack of a solid connection between words and things, and the consequent degradation of values that puts
everything on the same level because it sees everything as inauthentic. Pirandello hypostatized this fate, transfiguring it into an unsurpassable historical situation, and thus into the end of History, “utilizing the historical/political crisis at the basis of the novel as an opportunity for the emerging and the disclosing of a negative ontology of existence” (Masiello: 77). The fierce criticism of idealizing illusions works in this direction, because it transforms the “unhappy consciousness” of a historical moment in the tragic consciousness of the relationship between life and forms, immortalizing in this opposition one aspect of the historical process. With the decline of liberal ideology, and the socialist one being impossible to endorse (both appreciated by the young Pirandello), there advances the image of an irony unconsciously set at defending the status quo.

Roberto Auriti, the youngest of Garibaldi’s Thousand, is therefore the “young” figure who expresses both the decline of the ideals of the past, unable to effectively deal with the new situation, along with the loss of any significant goal (the Benjaminian sense of acedia):

it was well known that Auriti had never reaped any reward from the Liberal principles for which he had fought in his boyhood, nor from his persistent loyalty to them in later life […]. No one denied him that respect, indeed everybody was quite prepared to do him some honour […]. But the honour of electing him to Parliament, no, what an idea! That honour was not, could not be for him; and the clearest proof of this lay in the ingenuousness of such an illusion (159).

He was in a hurry to write to Rome, to report the loss of the election without delay to his mistress, to her who for so long had lulled to sleep his aspirations and his dislikes, and with whom he, submerged now in indifference to everything that was not related directly and minutely to her person, lazy and forgetful, satisfied only the brutal appetite of his senses (227).

But the socialist front, in both its old and its young, is also involved in the judgment of humor: the former, represented by Spiridione Covazza, is mired in the Party’s inactivity; the latter, represented in Girgenti by the characters nicknamed Propaganda and Compagnia, are custodians of an uncertain, sentimental socialism which, having replaced religion with Marx

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44 Cf. Jameson: *The Ideologies of Theory* 131: “a growing conviction of the gap between words and real meaning of real experience – arises form the increasing autonomy of culture in the middle-class world. It reflects the disintegration of the older codified social wisdom; a proliferation of private languages and private philosophies that is itself but the reflection of the increasing atomization of the private existence.”
(Propaganda was a former sacristan), will prove utterly unable of developing a blueprint for renovation. But then the disaggregation operated by humor, the “philosophy of distance” (i.e. the perspective overview revealing the inauthentic essence of all illusions), reaches deep into the mind of the characters, implicitly announcing the inevitable failure of their ideals:

which had penetrated to the depths of his being and stirred up a feeling that was entirely new to him, a feeling almost of stupefaction at all his red rags, all his blazing furies, which in a flash had revealed themselves to him, as though seen from outside, as foolish and vain […], which he could not have expressed in words to himself even, save at the cost of forfeiting all faith in and support of his work (24-5).

Even the ‘very young’ appear completely inept for their times. Antonio Del Re, planning an exemplary act of violence, refuses to admit that his anger comes from his fierce jealousy for Celsina, and, calling upon the Liberal deputy Corrado Selmi with the intention of killing him, ends up standing with a dagger in his hand while Selmi regards him with amusement, holding the glass from which he has just drunk poison. Celsina, instead, who should express the type of the new socialist woman, emancipated and aware, will put her illusions to sleep, dreaming of going to Rome to become a famous singer, and will refuse Antonio’s proffers of love, explaining that with her political views she can hardly be expected to take the name “Del Re” [the King’s].

What is certain is that all the issues come to a head in the character of Lando Laurentano. Lando, the son of Don Ippolito Laurentano, resolves the inactivity of the Krisis in the exacerbated glorification and invocation of disorder, directed, in his ideas, at entirely reversing the order of things with a flood capable of sweeping away the consolidated ‘forms,’ which he identifies with the liberal state. That is why Lando is a socialist:

it was for such a moment of flood that he longed! It was for this that he had immersed himself in the study of the new social questions, in the criticism of those men who, armed with imposing arguments, were trying to raze to its foundations a constituted order of things convenient for some, unfair to the majority of mankind […], to strip, destroy, scatter all those forms, the accumulation of centuries, in which life had become ponderously set. […] A slow, long and patient task this too, alas! (291).
The conclusion of this reasoning is already a negative judgment that Pirandello lays on the character, who, on the one hand would fly to Sicily to fight with the Fasci, and on the other is unable to leave Rome, where he leads a life in the style of D’Annunzio (of which he does not fail to see the ‘inauthentic’ nature),\(^45\) where he wants to remain because of his unrequited love for the young wife of the Minister D’Atri, whose lover (Corrado Selmi) he hopes to see dragged into the banking scandals.

‘Humorously’ undecided, Lando remains in a personalist situation that sublimates in the sphere of national political struggle (as revealed by his inaction); he uses socialism to satisfy his idealistic need for a cleansing destruction, longing for a ‘vital’ authenticity for which, however, he is not willing to give up any of his class privileges. It is only when Parliament, to protect itself from the scandal, tries to save Corrado Selmi, that Lando is overcome by a ‘political’ indignation that forces him to leave for Sicily.

Involved in the Socialists’ preparatory meeting, Lando breaks out with quixotic resentment against any non-maximalist solution, revealing his personal goal in an overwhelming vital flow:

But a sound agrarian law, a moderate reform of the conditions of tenure, a slight increase in the meagre rate of wages, sharecropping upon honest terms […] Could he feed his mind upon these and not think of something more? No, no: this was not enough for him! […] he heard ringing in his ears, like a peal of sardonic laughter, the lines from Leopardi’s *Hymn to Italy*:

\[
\textit{To arms, to arms, and I alone} \\
\textit{Will fight, and I will fall alone!} \textit{(316).}
\]

Lando lives the struggle not as politics, but as a cultural clash of life against ‘form,’ not played out on the abstract plane of Don Cosmo, but applied to real life, and therefore part of an implementary illusion that Pirandello cannot but reject. In fact, upon arriving in Sicily and

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\(^{45}\) Cf. Pirandello: *The Old and the Young* 292: “He would devote himself then to violent exercise […] or to sensual pleasures, the scented and dazzling outward refinement of which was powerless to conceal their grim vulgarity”.

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witnessing the fierce repression ordered by the Prime Minister Crispi, his dreams of renewal shift towards a moderate reformism interwoven with inter-class fantasies:

Lando Laurentano had found himself called upon by his friends in Sicily to answer, if not for a deliberate crime […], certainly for a colossal piece of folly […]. How could his friends have deceived themselves into thinking that they would succeed in a few months, by their preaching, in breaking that hard, agelong shell of stupidity fortified by distrust and bestial cunning, which encrusted the minds of the peasants and sulphur workers of Sicily? How could they have believed in the possibility of class warfare, when all connexion and solidarity of principles […] were lacking? It was not class warfare, impossible in the prevailing conditions, but rather a coalition of classes that was the object to be secured (428-9).

So then he flees, he flees to escape ridicule, “owing to his invincible repugnance to the idea of figuring as an apostle or a hero or a martyr, exposed in the dock of a military court to the wondering curiosity of the ladies of the Palermitan aristocracy who were known to him personally” (430), counterbalancing his defeat with a new, slightly different, plan of action:

Lando would be glad to seek a haven in Malta, the scene of his grandfather’s exile, not because he ventured to compare his own lot with his grandfather’s but because he had intended for some time past to visit Burmula and trace […] the spot where his grandfather was buried (431).

Lando’s fate reflects the critical progression of humor, the apotheosis of the particular which, reluctant of being contained in forms, even the progressive forms of History, wants to pour itself into Life, but without enclosing itself in a general project that will contain its own defeat, willing instead to materialize in a life of action. But this perpetual destructive movement that Lando dreams, or at least dreamed, does not accomplish the generalizing project of reconciliation required by humor to exist. In fact, the logic must be recovered on the level of speculation, not action: the particular must go back to being general. Lando Laurentano cannot give up the myth of the movement that On Humor inherits from Historicism; it does criticize ‘forms,’ but refuses to perfect that criticism in a totalizing scheme:
But, as he read, he was irresistibly led on to translate all that he read into action; and, if he had a volume of history in his hands, he would feel an indescribable sense of discomfort at seeing, reduced to words, what had once upon a time been life; reduced to ten or twenty lines of print, uniformly arranged one after another, in precise order, what had been a disordered movement, stir and turmoil [...], a fixed life, stereotyped in unalterable forms, logical constructions, mental architecture, inductions, deductions – away with them all! (290).

Lando does reject History inasmuch as it is a ‘formalizing’ process, but, in Pirandello’s view, he is defeated because of his inability to interpret the new situation of caducity in its harmonious aspect – that harmony that any ideology needs in order to survive (i.e. to conceal).

**VIII. Dialectic of Historicism: Don Cosmo’s Statements**

I regard myself as already detached from this wicked world, nor do I make any complaint!

Luigi Pirandello, *The Old and the Young*

Don Cosmo sees everyone’s reasons and does not judge: “Cosmo […] had never token sides with anyone” (16). The rights of the particular, those with which we began, find fulfillment in him in the realization of the vanity of the world, that is, in the juxtaposition that, apparently, can find no synthesis:

He looked at the trees that stood facing the villa: they too seemed to him to be absorbed in an endless dream, from which the light of day, the air that stirred their foliage, might try in vain to arouse them. For some time now, the long faint rustle of their leaves in the wind had wafted him a message, as though from an infinite distance, of the vanity of all things and the crushing tedium of life (42).

Yet, what appears to be the abandonment of the world to the anarchy of particulars is actually, in the recomposed image of a natural ‘flux,’ the resumption of an epistemological judgment that, with History being deleted, claims to be universal, directing its verdict at anything that
refuses to acquire the disaggregating characters of that very flux: “Realities of a moment… nonsense. [...] So it is with everything… – sighed Don Cosmo” (467). The movement originating from historicist consciousness is converted here into a new “natural law” directed at making disenchantment not a tool for critical analysis, which it still was for the Romantics, but the custodian of an immobility that exalts movement:

He kept constantly in mind his sense of his own precarious existence in the place of his habitation, nor did he let this distress him. This feeling, which melted lightly and vaguely into the impenetrable mystery of the world around him, made every responsibility, every thought, an intolerable burden (58).

Looking upon them as already far remote in time, Don Cosmo was unable to discern either their meaning or their object. His aspect, to Lando’s eyes, suggested the same feeling that we derive from the inanimate objects that look on, impassive, at the transience of human affairs. (467).

The criticism of illusions, of the particulars that cannot be recognized as mere forms, finds its accomplishment in the description of a Nature that is ever in motion, ever destroying the given, to which mankind must strive to make itself similar, in order to prevent the pain that comes from its contradictory existence:

One thing only is sad, my friends: to have understood the game! I mean the game played by that frolicsome devil whom each of us has inside him, and who diverts himself by representing to us outside ourselves, as reality, what, a moment later, he himself reveals to us as our own illusion, laughing at us for the efforts we have made to secure it (468).46

By proclaiming the inevitability of disharmony, Nature eliminates historical progression and reforms the harmonious appearance that Romantic historicism had thrown into crisis: it requires man to adapt to its laws, working the same way as capitalist rationalization, reforming, although only apparently, the consistency of a plot, of a rational scheme. The illusions that particulars bring with them must necessarily collapse under its judgment, because ‘rhetoric,’ the perception of the inauthenticity of the human world, must exist as a

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46 The frolicsome “devil” is obviously the tool of reflection, so defined in On Humor.
totalizing cultural horizon, eliminating the hope of an authentic life which, as such, would exalt the two horizons that could undermine, by revealing them, the contradictions of an economic system: nostalgia and utopia. Two realms in which ‘action’ is still significant, where thought is still capable of providing alternative models of existence, capable of shattering the apparent unidimensionality that is both cause and effect of the abolition of values.

That is why, after demolishing every illusion, the critical diagnosis “rises to assail all of history in radical terms […] and condemns it to ontological partiality” (Mazzacurati: *Pirandello* 240), because it prepares a ‘return’ to Nature that purports Being in the anthropologization of the judgment: you suffer because you do not assimilate yourself to Nature! Learn not to put your trust in anything, learn to accept this many-sided game of interpretations as the only possible horizon, then you will see the world for what it really is, and then you will stop suffering: this is the ultimate message of *On Humor*.

Don Cosmo’s statements are fortified by an external position: the space of Nature. His statements do not persist in the artificial space of Civilization, because that space, in order to produce the harmonic formalization of disenchantment, must be rejected entirely, that is, completely defined as a place of unresolvable contradictions, of complete inauthenticity. To this must be opposed an external (and eternal) space acting as a new standard of judgment, which preserves the perception of the immutability of the social space in which we are immersed, excluding any dialectic idea of ‘totality.’ In this manner, the *Krisis*, the unsubduable apotheosis of the particular, can be ‘overcome’ by losing our awareness of it, renouncing the ability to think historically:

Living in exile as he did, his mind always absorbed in thoughts of eternity, his eyes turned to the stars, or to the sea at his feet, or to the deserted country round about, finding himself suddenly assailed by all these topical trivialities, he felt as though he were being stung by a swarm of irritating insects (*The Old and the Young* 62).
The perfect consistency of Don Cosmo (corresponding to the epistemological solidity of *On Humor*) is where the Pirandellian contradiction between History and Nature is finally suppressed, suppressed in the ideological image of that which is no less than a cultural revolution: Modernism.
Chapter 2: Modernism and Nationalism.

The *Krisis* and the Political Project of Giovanni Papini

my mission […]. To deny, to awaken, to provoke, and to tempt […]
to point at the depths […] hated by the paradise of unity and order
Giovanni Papini

We are facing a problem of “national education”
Giovanni Papini

I. The Process of Decay of the Absolute Spirit

Eugenio Garin wrote:

It would be very wrong to isolate the movement of ideas that predominated in Italy
between the end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth; it
would be wrong to consider it no more than a “provincial” episode, comparable to
certain aspects of French (Sorel, Bergson) or, perhaps, North American (James)
culture; separating, or worse, contrasting it to parallel developments in the philosophy
of life, in German historicism, and even in Husserl. The critique of science, the
distinction and antithesis between natural sciences and humanities, between life and
forms, and so on, are topics of import everywhere (*Intellettuali* 354).

A discourse on the development of Italian Modernism as something more than a provincial
episode should no doubt start with Giovanni Papini. Exemplary figure of a whole generation
(the one born during the 1880s, the one which opened the twentieth century in Italy), not only
did Papini collaborate with all the major literary journals (*Leonardo, Il Regno, La Voce,
Lacerba*, etc.) and movements (religious modernism, Futurism, etc.) of the time; of that
generation, he also represented and assimilated concerns and temptations — those, in sum, of
the new intellectual in the “age of Giolitti.”¹ No reflection on how the new intellectual could
deal with the incipient mass society, in fact, can dispense with Papini.² He was, among other

¹ As maintained by Garin and Frigessi, two of his most rigorous critics, Papini deserves a privileged position as the
“witness of a crisis of modern thought.” Garin, in particular, argued that Papini was the first to realize that the
crisis regarded the classic philosophical way of conceiving reality. Cf. Isnenghi: *Grande Guerra* 45: “Papini is
socially and psychologically representative, a *historia rerum gestarum* […] of twentieth-century intellectuals.”
² Giorgio Petrocchi observed that Papini signifies much more than is generally thought. And of course we can
mention the flattering opinions expressed by Bergson (who offered to write the introduction to Papini’s book on
things, the one who introduced Italy to otherwise “absolutely unfrequented […] patterns of thought” (Baldacci: in Esperienza futurista VI): from Bergsonism to James; from Kierkegaard (introduced in 1907 by Harald Höffding in Leonardo) to Borel and Milhaud. As it has been remarked, Papini had an uncanny “ability to identify, timely and constructively, the new values emerging on the national and international cultural horizons” (Isnenghi: Papini 20). An extraordinary cultural organizer, and a philosopher in his own right, Papini tried, right from the outset of his intellectual adventure, to gain a hegemonic role in his generation, initially in agreement (based on their shared distaste for Positivism) and later in fierce contrast with Benedetto Croce, whose role was more stable, but no unchallenged.³ His plans were only partially successful: Papini did manage to acquire a position of prestige (“I am Papinian, I am Nietzschean!”, Giuseppe Ungaretti wrote to Enrico Pea, Lettere a Pea 42), but not such as to allow him to convey, on his own terms, all the intellectual energies that he believed were at the basis of his political project. To that goal Papini addressed his continuous (and constantly frustrated) system of alliances (from Prezzolini to Croce, from Corradini to Vailati, from Amendola to Marinetti).⁴ But there’s more: the “Zarathustra from Bulciano”⁵ (Parnaso 30), as he was affectionately nicknamed by Pietro Pancrazi, symbolized the perfect combination between the emergence of issues related to “negative thought,” the Krisis, and

Pragmatism), by William James, by the young Gramsci, by Gobetti, Stuparich, Eliade, Borges, up to Montale, who, at Papini’s death, said that everyone owed him something of themselves.

³ It is well known that in the first number of La Critica Croce expressed his moderate approval for the Leonardo (the magazine that Papini and Prezzolini founded in 1903), considering it part of a general and healthy reaction to Positivism and viewing it in terms of Bergson’s idealism, which had a number of goals in common with his own. Equally known is Croce’s attempt (between 1903 and 1908) to draw the two young men closer to his own viewpoint (in which he was partially successful, at least as regards Prezzolini) and the fact that his relations with Papini gradually deteriorated. It should also be remembered that even in France, Remy de Gourmont, an author greatly appreciated by Papini, had remarked the development of two different brands of idealism.

⁴ Cf. Panetta: “Introduzione” to Benedetto Croce – Giovanni Papini, Carteggio LIV: “With his Estetica […] Croce had gained in intellectual circles so great a success as to stimulate, by contrast, an opposition no less extensive, and much stronger, at bottom, than expressed by those who have talked about idealistic hegemony.” Croce’s dominant position was in fact far from unyielding (take, for instance, the harsh polemic with Boine in La Voce, or Slataper’s complaint about the inability of the ‘distinction’ to consider man as a whole), but it was hegemonic precisely because it forced other intellectual positions to take a stand on his own ground.

⁵ Pancrazi, letter dated December 9, 1916.
issues related to twentieth-century reactionary thought (both capitalist and anti-capitalist). He interpreted, from an inevitably petty-bourgeois position, the role of the ‘traditional intellectual’ (in a Gramscian sense), both in his subversive-populist temptations and his subordinate role as a mediator of consent. On the one hand the possibility of becoming a spokesman for the modern industrial bourgeoisie, on the other, as we shall see below, the typical petty-bourgeois temptation to ‘go it alone,’ through the technicalized mythicizing, to put it with Furio Jesi, of the ‘popular’ component. But also interpreting – and this will be the subject of our focus – what Marx called “the process of decay of the absolute spirit,” i.e. the necessity of the transformation of the world based on the call for a change of consciousness: “With confidence in the potential of the Word to influence the world by itself, and abundantly stressing the prevalence of ideology over practice” (Isnenghi: Papini 11). That need, and this will be our starting point, is not only part of the gradual nationalist-imperialist transformation of the capitalist horizon outlined around that time by Lenin, but also a crucial point in the condition of the intellectual under the Krisis – his inability, that is to say, to break out of a psycho-epistemological analysis based exclusively on a theory of knowledge.

That there is a crisis is apparent to Papini. Yet, such crisis is and remains merely one of consciousness. Its overcoming, accordingly, necessitates neither social nor material changes, but rather epistemological ones. Epistemology is thus sublimated as ‘critique’: the intellectual has to be critical of everything and ‘doubt’ before every ideology. No surprise then that Papini, like Prezzolini the other ‘Dioscuro’ of Leonardo, would recover sophistic themes.6 From these perspectives, Papini did not represent, as some have suggested, an artist lost in dreams of a magical palingenesis, a philosopher lacking philosophical culture, an incoherent, screaming Capaneus trying to disguise his makeshift culture. When Papini protested against those who called him a “cannibal and a weathercock” (Papini: “Cannibale e Girandola,” Autoritratti 990), he was expressing a genuine malaise and an even more genuine

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6 Cf. Papini: “L’altra metà” (1911), in Filosofia 324: “Sophistry? So they say. But I know that people call sophisms the explanations that they don’t like. [...] I know that sophistry is the name given to the living, constant persuasion that truth is not in one place only but everywhere”.
consistency. He was expressing, in other words, Contradiction as the horizon of his work, sublimating it in terms of ‘life,’ in the modernist battle between life and form. He was also grasping (in the only space available to the petit-bourgeois intellectual: the space of consciousness/spirit) a much more structural contradiction involving an entire social stratum: that of the intellectual bourgeoisie excluded from the management of the Giolittian system, forced to witness the gradual degradation of its prestige and functions, and therefore in desperate search of “compensatory ideological formulas” (Carpi: La Voce 27) capable of supporting the value of its work. The two phenomena – the Nietzschean crisis of values underlying the Modernist ideology, with the consequent demotion of Truth to ideology, and the emerging of social structures created by the progressive establishment of the monopoly stage of Capitalism – take place together, in the increasing atomization of society and the corresponding ideological inability to grasp, in a totality, the process of rationalization of an economic system that seems to transcend it and appears not to function as a whole.

Incidentally, it is precisely an inability to read the two phenomena together that elicited, during the 60s and 70s, the label of “irrationalist culture” appended to the work of Papini’s generation; and it is the same inability that led again, in the past twenty years, to the indiscriminate recovery of that whole culture as an ‘extraordinary’ critical progression aimed at attacking the Metaphysical idea of Truth in which bourgeois common sense found stability, its vision of Values. The first judgment stems from a ‘classic’ notion of Reason and does not take into account the revolutionary perspectives attached to the Modernist ideology by virtue of its romantic background (its demand for qualitative values); while the second judgment is

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7 Cf. Papini: “Viva la Contraddizione,” in Il Popolo d’Italia (December 1914), in Politica 19-21: “Coherence – that is, inertia, Ptolemaism in thought – is the supreme virtue of fools […] the hated contradiction is the true sign of a living mind […] that everything, around us, changes and moves from day to day any thought that wants to follow the shifting, fleeting flow of things […] any thought that wants to be the life and not merely an unstable crust of ice on the unstable wave of history, must necessarily change from year to year and from day to day to follow the perpetual transformation of all.”

8 Cf. Soldateschi: Il tragico quotidiano 49: “identifying the problem of an intellectual class subjected to a process of massification, primarily understood as the degradation of its functions and prestige.” Not surprisingly, the majority of that generation will be forced to live on newspaper articles, the only impaired function still remaining to the traditional activity of criticism and popularization.

9 Cf. Jameson: “Modernism and Imperialism” (1990), in Modernist Papers 152: “I want in fact to suggest that the structure of imperialism also makes its mark on the inner forms and structures of that new mutation in literary and artistic language to which the term “modernism” is loosely applied.”
set in purely ‘moral’ terms (that is, along the same epistemological track that originates with Modernism).\textsuperscript{10} It loses sight of the domain of History, and with it, inevitably, of the doubly determined connection between cultural output and the production system.\textsuperscript{11} This is not surprising when we consider that it is precisely at the onset of cultural standardization that lie the origins of the condition of the traditional intellectual as we still understand it – of the intellectual led to consider a political function in the usual separation of theory and practice: a battle of ideas! (“we were expecting salvation from a culture of ideas”, will write Prezzolini, \textit{L’italiano inutile} 61). Yet the struggle appears paradoxical at a time when nihilism (in its various gradations) was becoming the backdrop of cultural production, and the critique of ideologies (and of all forms) was used to underpin an allegedly political project. Or rather: it appears paradoxical until we consider that that movement was an integral part of an ideological perspective (Modernism, precisely) that was based not on deriving the concept of ideology from a historical view of society, but from the permanent contradiction purported to anthropologically clutch each individual.\textsuperscript{12} Such a view, as we have seen in Pirandello, is part of the fragmentation of reality; that is, of the inability to reproduce the unity of reality, caused by the new production systems, i.e. from the decline of the unitary product as the object of the labor process and the resulting rigidity (fragmentation and rationalization work together) of partial rationalizing systems (specialization). With the loss of the sense of the whole, perception is reduced to fragments, and there emerges a false consciousness. This of course is deemed to be Truth, the inescapable everyday reality, which attacks all forms as ‘not life,’

\textsuperscript{10} Cf. Valesio: “Foreword: After The conquest of the Stars,” in \textit{Italian Modernism} XIII: “a kind of degradation of philosophy as systematic thought. The philosophical tone of modernism is one of indifference towards the principle of non-contradiction”.

\textsuperscript{11} Cf. Adamson: “Modernism in Florence,” in \textit{Italian Modernism} 222: “Modernism […] was also an effort to use the aesthetic realm to reinvigorate modern society and culture. Modernists were acutely aware of the social and the cultural wounds opened by the disruption of commodification, urbanization, and secularization. Modernism […] is the effort to overcome this crisis through the conviction that art has a fundamental role to play in restoring […] the qualitative dimension of human experience. If commodification undermines experience by reducing it to the quantitative and fungible, art can restore or reinvent qualitative experience by coming to understand itself in its own terms.”

\textsuperscript{12} Which, for that matter, is what Lukács said about modernist ideology: the abandoning of a linear conception of history falls into notions that presuppose an immutable \textit{condition humaine}, and consequently, a cyclical sense of history. In this regard see the interesting book by Louise B. Williams, \textit{Modernism and the Ideology of History}, which focuses on the same anti-historical conclusions found in Yeats, Pound, Hulme, Ford, and Lawrence.
preparing the ground for the harmonic face of ‘negative thought,’ the symbolic value, Lukács might say, which is the absence of any symbolic value.

II. Nationalism and Spiritual Revolt

Papini reaches adolescence when the hegemonic thought, in Italy, is Positivism: a scientific culture still closely connected to the emerging socialist movement. The young Papini, born in Florence of a follower of Garibaldi who had fought at the battle of Volturno, is a positivist and a Mazzinian (Mazzini’s political theories would always remain an important part of his culture) and, like almost all the young people of his generation, harbors socialist sympathies. From this vaguely leftist position Papini witnesses the reactionary convulsions that during the late nineteenth century accompany the governments led by De Rudini and Pelloux (e.g. the Bava Beccaris massacre, the restrictions imposed on the right to strike and on the freedom of the press), the last attempts of the old unitary Liberal Party to avoid recognizing the new role of the masses in Italy, or to recognize it only in terms of ‘public order.’ This situation reinvigorated, among the parties of the extreme left (especially the Radicals and the Republicans), the thirty-year old myth of the “two Italys” (paese legale and paese reale), which will persist at least up to the Fascist era and would be a fundamental part of the cultural heritage of anti-Giolittism. Meanwhile, after the failure of the colonial mission in Abyssinia, Italian nineteenth-century imperialism was going through its last throes.
with the failed attempt to settle an economic base of operations in San-Mun Bay in China.\textsuperscript{17} The two defeats, rather than curbing it down, stimulate the rising of nationalist sentiments. Before Papini these very sentiments had found vigorous expression in the writings of one of the main characters in our story: Alfredo Oriani.

Oriani – a novelist and historian that Fascism would then celebrate as one of its most important forerunners – was particularly adept at providing the ideological bond between the new colonial aspirations and the recent history of the Risorgimento, still, in the Mazzinian perspective, ‘betrayed’ (connecting both these historical issues to the anthropological myth of the advancement of civilization):

All of Italy’s millenary efforts to constitute itself into a nation, the blood of her heroism and the tragedies of her genius were directed to this day, when, immortal actress, re-entering history after circumscribing herself within the confines of its rights, she would once again sail the seas bearing a new civilization (\textit{Dogali} 336).

Also, colonialism was an additional aspect of the growing need to secure friendly markets, all the more so given the protectionist stance taken by the government towards the developing industrial sector. With the decline of the myth of Italy as an agricultural country due to the unsustainable competition of American and Asian production, to be followed for years by the lamentations of the intellectuals for the dying rural culture, the country’s extraordinary industrial growth was linked to the protective tariffs established in 1887 for the textile industry, widely advocated (since 1883) by the new model of industrialist-parliamentarians represented by Alessandro Rossi.\textsuperscript{18} Following the economic theories of List, Rossi realized (from the limited viewpoint of a liberal industrialist educated on positivist principles in an industrially backward country like Italy) that free-trade had become a face value designed to defend the economic interests of the powerful monopolistic structures of industrially stronger

\textsuperscript{17} Cf. Papini: “Il nostro impegno,” in \textit{Lacerba}, November 1914, in \textit{La paga del sabato} (Milan, Studio Editoriale Lombardo, 1915), in \textit{Politica} 294: “Those who remember the heaviness in the air and in the hearts during those days of March 1896, when the news of Adwa arrived, know what the blow of defeat can mean for a young man.”

\textsuperscript{18} Cf. Isnenghi: \textit{Papini} 116: “rural world […] an organic community opposed to the community of disorder and urban atomism, both proletarian and bourgeois.”
countries (England, France, Germany, United States), and forcefully demanded government intervention to protect the nascent industry: in other words, he invoked the protectionist economic function of the State. The new policy gave its fruits: the country registered soaring growth rates until at least 1907, and experienced, for the first time on a large scale, the social phenomena related to industrialization, foremost of which was the influx of vast numbers of workers in the Milan-Turin-Genoa triangle. At the same time, the economic and political power gradually began to concentrate in the hands of industrial and, especially, financial groups, such as the Banca Commerciale. It is in this favorable economic climate that Giolittism emerges, along with anti-Giolittism – a parliamentary strategy aimed at facilitating bargaining between industries and workers in a reformist-conservative horizon. The discontent of the petty bourgeoisie (intellectual and otherwise), excluded from the benefits of the economic take-off, leads it to sublimate this condition of crisis on the horizon of a ‘crisis of culture’ and ideologically to take the field. Defining the crisis in these terms made it possible to assume the cultural horizon as the privileged place for the resolution of conflicts, free from “the capitalist logic of fragmentation” (Carpi: La Voce 39) because based on the assumption that, on an ethical level, culture and art still granted the possibility of operating from a apparently autonomous position of superiority.

19 Cf. De Rosa: “Economia e nazionalismo in Italia (1861-1914),” in La cultura e le origini del nazionalismo 305: “the aspiration for protectionism and, connected to it, after the creation of reserved markets, albeit conquered by force, has always represented, even when nationalism had not yet outlined its features and program, the explicit or hidden thread of Italy’s unification, at least until the First World War.”

20 Cf. De Felice: L’età giolittiana 9: “the most serious and modern reformist attempt of the entire liberal period, directed at expanding and strengthening the hegemony of the bourgeoisie.”

21 And only partly compensated by employment in the bureaucracy, a condition that traditional intellectuals will tend more and more to view (consider Piero Jahier) as a degradation of their duties, as opposed to the higher, sacerdotal value of culture. Cf. Carpi: 130: “The task and the privilege of testifying the possibility of neutralizing the all-engulfing, leveling mechanisms of the bureaucratic Moloch is unreservedly entrusted to culture, to art.”

22 In Italy we will have to wait until Gramsci to arrive at the idea that culture means acquiring awareness of the historical context in which we live; that Truth emerges both culturally and historically, that is, socially rather than individually. Cf. Prete: “L’intellettuale in scena e fuori scena: da «Leonardo» a «Lacerba»,” in Nichilismo e imperialismo 59: “where Papini ends, Gramsci begins, where the avant-garde intellectual declares his failure (screaming it in a thousand forms, in exaltation and self-punishment), the new intellectual-politician tries, no longer for theater, but in real relations of power, to give his own interpretation of social processes, his own new mediation.”

23 Cf. Emilio Gentile: Il mito dello Stato nuovo 22: “During the Giolittian period, with the industrial revolution and modernization, the middle class had grown in numbers and functions; but what had not grown, in proportion to the role they had in society, was their political activity and participation in power, still a monopoly of the traditional ruling classes […]. In its search for consensus politics, Giolitti’s liberalism neglected the middle classes, which, due to their intellectual and economic conditions, had become […] an important and restless social force.”
Through the favorable economic situation and his protectionist industrial policy, Giolitti managed to unite around his operation the vast industrial sectors of northern Italy and, thanks to concessions on the right to strike, the emerging economic labor organizations along with large portions of the working class they represented. In addition, the constant repressive action against the grievances of the peasants of southern Italy favored the interests of the traditional landowners of the South who ensured the stability of Giolitti’s parliamentary majority. The idea of a ‘conciliatory’ function of the State within the economic struggles was favorably acknowledged by Turati and the majority of the Socialist Party: as a matter of fact, Giolitti’s policies were well suited to Turati’s project of a temporary hegemony of the workers of the North over the peasants of the South. The nascent Taylorist perspective, however, not only excluded the non-unionized sub-proletariat but was also a hard blow on the middle class. With the inevitable progressive increase in taxes and the cost of living, Giolittism alienated the very sector that was supposed to provide its ideological-cultural legitimization, and extended the discontent to the socialist-reformist option (and its positivistic background) at a time when Sorelism was beginning to take hold in Italy.

In January 1900 Papini makes this entry in his diary:

All day long an idea for a novel has been whirling around my head. It would be entitled Giovani, and it would depict (based on my own experience) a group of modern young people, their lives, their thoughts, their goals. The basic idea would be that Italian youth today is lacking a common connection, a guiding idea – it lacks moral fiber, it lacks a great ideal capable of rousing the hopes of everyone. We have a great and justified mistrust for men of the generation in government, but on the other hand we realize that we are no better than them. We lack unity of philosophical doctrines, we lack faith, perseverance […]. There is no unity, no action, no goal […].

24 From 1896 to 1907 Italy’s industrial production had the highest rate of growth in Europe.  
25 Again emphasizing their economic, instead of political, nature.  
26 Cf. Castronovo: “La cultura industriale e il nazionalismo,” in La cultura italiana e le origini del nazionalismo 260: “It was only in the Giolittian period that the necessity of choosing industrialism finally prevailed among the ruling class […]. And this decision was accompanied, as is known, by a shift towards liberalism and reform […]. The principle of government neutrality in disputes between capital and labor.”  
27 Cf. Schinini: 181: “Next to the availability of Turati and of the reformist currents, there were strong anti-Giolititian currents among the uncompromising and revolutionary or syndicalist sectors, which accused Giolitti of working to corrupt the socialist movement from within, of co-opting the moderate members of the trasformista system, and of continuing, in Italy’s Mezzogiorno, the traditional policy of repression of workers and peasants, marked by repeated killings of proletarians.”  
28 Papini, as we learn from his early diary, begins to read Sorel in May 1900.
It's a twilight of souls, perhaps even night. Will the dawn ever come? (“Diario 1899-1902,” in *Il non finito* 21-2).

Viewing his experience in generational terms will be a constant feature in Papini, as it will be his feeling of the absence of an ideal perspective: the sensation of being stuck in an empirical horizon, in a narrow cultural and political context created, within a ‘materialistic’ perspective, by the previous generation: “I was smothered in facts, but facts were not enough for me. No matter how deeply I fathomed them, no matter how many of them I got together, I could never exhaust the Infinite” (*The Failure* 181). This generational accusation leveled against ‘the old’ will eventually end up equating Positivism and Socialism,29 Utilitarianism and Parliamentarism, in a common horizon against which to oppose a (precisely) generational subversion:

Even the Chamber is a gathering of men […] a marketplace for the exchange of votes and wallets, where to seek the highest bidder and buy the loudest dealer […], in Florence […] a new generation is growing that is working for an integral resurgence of the highest forms of spiritual life (Papini: “Giovani e vecchi nell’arte,” in *Il non finito* 276-282)30

Yet it would be a mistake to consider the new generation in terms of an unbridgeable separation from the previous one; in terms, that is, of the ‘idealistic uprising’ (both Dannunzian and Crocean): that will be how the intellectuals will try to idealize their position, reserving for themselves a cultural space for action that, in order to channel the new energies, must necessarily appear ‘different,’ unrelated to the previous empirical-materialistic perspective.31 This will be “the attempt of the generation of the eighties to explain their

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30 Conference held at Palazzo Corsini in January 1903. The generational issue will mark the opening of the Leonardo: “A group of young people…”
31 Cf. Corradini: 12: “during the age culminating in socialist materialism, began the regeneration of the spirit.” Prezzolini, in an article of 1903 symptomatically entitled ‘Alle sorgenti dello spirito,’ was the first to realize that Positivism, Humanitarianism, Verism, and the Historical Method were all heading in the same direction. Both Giolittism and the Socialist Party were constantly being accused of being unable to provide an ideal philosophy: they lived from day to day, favoring with this behavior the mixing of political parties and ideologies; the accusation was not unfounded. Cf. Schinina: 71: “Giolitti’s method of government is basically a continuous mediation both between social partners and political groups and between the institutional powers.”
maladjustment and make sense of the crisis” (Isnenghi: *Grande Guerra* 54). Reality, however, is very different: many positivistic myths (above all, Darwinism and the struggle for life) will be intertwined with the emerging prospects of the twentieth century, finding emphasis not only among the recognized masters of the new generation (Taine, Mosca, Pareto, etc.), but even among the leading exponents of Positivism, often in a significant nationalist perspective aimed at recovering, ambiguously, the prospects of early romantic nationalism. We should not be surprised, then, by the frequent references made by Enrico Corradini (the chief ideologue of Italian Nationalism) to the concepts of a national ‘organism,’ of life as a struggle, of the feral nature of mankind, of race, of power (also think of Scipio Sighele’s studies on the ‘imperialistic’ attitude of inorganic matter). These are not merely issues referable to D’Annunzio and ‘supermanism’ (although this is also present): they are an outgrowth of scientism to be used in a renewed ideological perspective drawing from different sources, not excluding the anti-dogmatic Modernist which characterized Positivism as an extreme Metaphysics. Indeed, it is precisely the modernist ideology that allows to channel effectively these issues on the track of the idealistic reaction traced by Oriani, projecting beyond deterministic mechanism, itself burdened by the myth of the gradual, unstoppable transformation of society towards socialism.

Oriani himself will provide the ideological cement required to hold these diverse perspectives together within a historical context, by referring the origins of the current crisis

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32 We should not be surprised to see this name: Papini was the first to realize the link between Taine, and his outline of a theory of elites, with the new theorists of the bourgeois uprising such as Alfredo Oriani and Vilfredo Pareto. Cf. Papini, letter to Prezzolini dated August 24, 1903, in *Storia di un’amicizia*, I, 64-5: “Taine […] I have found the source of Pareto and the criticism of reason and the praise of privileges.” For that matter, even Papini’s *Crepuscolo dei filosofi* is inspired by Taine’s *Les Philosophes classiques*. Cf. Landucci: “Darwinismo e nazionalismo,” in *La cultura italiana e le origini del nazionalismo* 149: “Oriani […] remains one of the most significant examples showing how naturalism could coexist with outright anti-positivism, and how Hegel could form an alliance with Spencer and Taine and perhaps even Darwin.”

33 Cf. Giovanni Papini: “Roberto Ardigò,” in *Leonardo*, June 1904, under the title “Un teologo positivist,” in *24 Cervelli*, in *Filosofia* 495-7: “Did he really cease that day to be a priest? Certainly not […]. We will have no difficulty finding the Christian theologian behind the atheistic positivist […]. Ardigò […] drew from Scholasticism and metaphysics the desire of a grandiose construction, the confused will to enclose the world in a longing embrace.”

34 This myth also supports the new generation’s rejection of imperialistic-materialist ideologists like Mario Morasso, although they had introduced, at the height of the Murzocco, the new myth of the intellectual’s political commitment and the fundamental notion of *partito-manipolo* [roughly, *party-platoon*]. Cf. Pieri: *La politica dei letterati* 18: “Prezzolini, Papini, and Croce considered Morasso a contemporary of the past, unable to entrench his struggle in the spirit of idealistic reaction.”
(and the necessary reaction to it) to the failure of the ideals of the Risorgimento as envisioned in the Mazzinian triad of regeneration-ideality-people,\(^{35}\) and by directly connecting the idea of a unitary, non-national process (the work of a minority)\(^{36}\) to the narrow empiricist perspective then prevailing in the cultural and political life of Italy. Thus scientism and Giolittism come together under the mark of a ‘materialistic’ culture, along with, on the ‘positive’ side, the ethical view of the State and the fundamental role played by the intellectuals (the guardians of those ethical values) in its construction.\(^{37}\) We are evidently dealing with a petty-bourgeois project founded on a populist basis:

The artifice of involving the people allowed to shift the issue of who should represent them, that is, it allowed to legitimize the aristocracy of thought that [...] Oriani had identified in the intellectuals driven by philosophical idealism and by the civil passion of the Risorgimento (Pesante:173).

The liberal State, embodied by Giolittism and its politics of *trasformismo*, did not seem capable of setting the nation on the tracks of the civic mission envisaged by the Risorgimento: in that regard the parliamentary system began to be seen as “a barrier between the nation and the State” (Gentile: *Il mito dello Stato nuovo* 21), and the accusation was extended to the subservient policies of the Socialist Party. Giolitti’s ability to draw the opposition into his majority (thereby preventing a real alternative to his government), favored the emergence of a new right-wing position only partially similar to the position of the liberal *Destra Storica* [Historic Liberal Right], represented by Sonnino and Salandra, and tending rather to recuperate, in an already imperialist perspective, the authoritarian image embodied by Crispi:

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\(^{35}\) Mussolini understood this well. Cf. Mussolini: ‘Foreword’ to Oriani: *La rivolta* III-IV: “At a time when «la politica del piede di casa» [home-oriented politics] seemed the apex of human wisdom, Alfredo Oriani was dreaming of an empire [...] Garibaldi was dead, Mazzini appeared remote to the new generations that followed a prophet of dubious German race. The politics of materialism and positivism were triumphant in the universities, in the newspapers; in the political parties and in the hearts of men, the souls were deeply asleep.” In his “Foreword,” Mussolini recovers a ‘similar’ expression used by Corradini: cf. Corradini, *Discorsi* 257: “at political rallies, the Italian voice of Giuseppe Mazzini was drowned out the foreign voice of Karl Marx.”

\(^{36}\) Cf. Papini: “Il grande esame,” in *Il Resto del Carlino*, June 1915, in *Politica* 428: “The Risorgimento was a test for the aristocracy of a scattered, tired-out race, and came through by a miracle [...] It was not a exam passed in concord by an entire organized and willing population.”

\(^{37}\) Cf. Oriani: *La rivolta* 62-3: “The bourgeoisie led the revolution during the initial stages, preserving a certain spirituality of intentions and ideas; afterwards, the irruption of labor degraded it to the immediate satisfaction of a plebeian novelty. But the bourgeoisie was also to blame. [...] the formula of profit pervaded all levels.”
“Crispi was the last great statesman that Italy has had. […] the last to feel in himself the strong conscience of the nation”, writes Papini in 1904 (in Vecchio e nuovo nazionalismo 101).\textsuperscript{38} The abandonment of the prospects of the Risorgimento, that would involve liberals and socialists alike, made it possible to recover a project that had been ‘betrayed’ by the ‘material-empirical’ perspective, that is, “by the narrow-minded, cowardly Italy of a bourgeoisie dedicated only to its own affairs and by a proletariat spoiled by rampant materialism” (Bobbio: La cultura italiana 17). Yet this attack against the bourgeoisie cannot be seen as a class-based attack, but as a criticism, only apparently revolutionary, against the conduct of the ruling political elite, a bourgeoisie (neither ‘ideal’\textsuperscript{39} nor ‘active’) that had become, in the words of Corradini, “the den of sentimental socialism” (Discorsi 10). Oriani contemplated the dream of a spiritual political class capable of implementing a process of regeneration harking back on the ideals of Mazzini, which, in an above-class perspective, would view the colonial project as the natural continuation of the Risorgimento (but with the fundamental addition of the ‘popular’ element), and attract the loyalty of individuals no longer under the technical definition expressed by the word ‘State’ but under the spiritual one expressed by ‘Nation.’\textsuperscript{40} The distance from the Liberal Right is evident, and corresponds, in Italy’s industrial backwardness, to the bourgeoisie’s gradual assumption of a reactionary

\textsuperscript{38} Cf. Corradini, Discorsi 252-3: “not because Italy had been won by Abyssinia, but because Italy had been won by the Italians […]. The Italy of the Kingdom, constitutional Italy, the Italy of the so-called parties of order, liberal and moderate; more moderate, a word of weakness, than liberal, a word now meaningless. […] Against that stood only one man, Francesco Crispi.”

A partial bonding between these two Rights will only take place during the Great War and later with Fascism. Symptomatic was the attitude of a liberal, anti-fascist intellectual such as Giuseppe Antonio Borgese, who in his youth had long been tempted by nationalism. Equally symptomatic was the stance taken by Croce: siding with Sonnino (a collaborator of the “Giornale d’Italia”), rediscovering Oriani in 1909, and praising Giolitti’s politics during the Fascist period. The opinions of Prezzolini (and not only him) about Croce as a ‘preparer’ of Fascism are well known.

\textsuperscript{39} Cf. Papini: “Freghiamoci della politica,” in Lacerba, October 1913, in Politica 89: “Giolitti […]. Today he takes an idea from the nationalists, tomorrow from the socialists, yesterday it was from the radicals, and so on. His power, not based on ideas but on facts.”

\textsuperscript{40} This populism, writes Asor Rosa, crosses the entire front of the intellectuals of the Giolittian period, breaking out violently at the height of military conflicts like the one in Libya and the First World War. We can mention, by way of example, the speech held by Pascoli in 1911, La grande proletaria si è mossa, all the more emblematic because of its link with the issues of the Risorgimento. Insightful pages on this subject have also been written by Mario Isnenghi, for example, the following excerpt on Soffici’s Lemmonio Boreo, in Grande Guerra, pp. 38-41: “the reduction […] of the proletariat to common people and of the common people to peasants, the return of the intellectual to the people and thus to the land, […] Later on, since the alliance between the reason of the intellectual and the power of the people was not always sufficient, recourse is made to the practical intellect of a petty-bourgeois adventurer of uncertain fortune, a former lawyer’s clerk. With that, the protesting trio is balanced and fully made up.”
stance, while pursuing the economic benefits of protectionism and the formation of monopolies that the State guarantees. It should be added that it is not possible, at this time in history, to speak of a bond between nationalism and large-scale industry (this will come later). When Papini becomes the editor-in-chief of Corradini’s Il Regno (at the end of 1903), the nationalist ideology expresses, the petty bourgeoisie’s wavering between attempts at mediation and the temptation to take power directly through subversive action: two levels that will be systematically intertwined.

In any case, in the image of the ‘missed’ Risorgimento offered by nationalism, an image invoked under the umbrella of a lost ideality, the intellectual found a historical role in the dyad (entirely biased towards the first term) of culture and politics:

a stinging rebuke of our fathers, of our immediate predecessors, who proved themselves incapable of preparing what was necessary for a country that had just returned to new social life. The generation that came after the Risorgimento – which might be called, with undisguised sarcasm, the generation of the sons of the liberators – was not up to its task. While it was successful […] in reviving the economy, it failed to give our nation the attitudes and ideals that find expression in a great culture. That generation […] did not understand that the only greatness that Italy could regain, squeezed as it was between Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, and Slavic cupidities, was that of culture. Mazzini had hyperbolically expressed this idea when he said that Rome must become the center of a new civilization (Papini: Filosofia 1375).

The myth is a cultural one, as cultural should be the political action to undertake, in the mark of a nationalism/patriotism aimed at making Italy, following Mazzini and Gioberti’s Primato degli italiani, the center of a spiritual renewal acknowledging the hegemonic role of the traditional intellectual, guardian of the cultural and spiritual heritage and of the strategy for its furthering. This perspective crosses the entire span of Papini’s work. At the age of 66 he would skillfully describe it reporting the occasion when, as a young man, he attended a speech given by Giovanni Bovio in Florence:

41 Only many years later would the two directives converge, finding factual fulfillment in the conferment to Mussolini’s government, through Salandra, of the tradition of the Risorgimento, and ideological fulfillment in Giovanni Gentile’s Origini e dottrina del fascismo.
42 This is the ‘Introduction’ to the volume La coltura italiana (Florence, Lumachi, 1906), an article previously published in the Leonardo at the end of 1905.
We were expecting the birth and expansion of a Third Rome, the Rome of the people and freedom [...] prophesied by the sufferings and hopes of Mazzini [...]. It seemed to me that that speech should change the appearance of things, shake everybody’s soul. Instead, to my surprise and chagrin, the city was still the same, melancholy and dull as ever. [...] That very evening, in the Basilica of Santa Croce, where a Requiem Mass was being held for the dead of Adwa, [...] to console myself I made my first project of a new Primacy of Italy, more modern and full of facts than Gioberti’s. [...] All around, the eloquent tombs of the great increased my grief [...]. What could I do to restore honor to my country? [...] These were the dark and bitter feelings that led my generation, a little later, to revolt against the cowardice of the bourgeoisie, and to hope for a second Italian Risorgimento (Passato remoto, in Autoritratti 759-75).

We have then Mazzini and Gioberti, the primacy of Italy and Adwa, the Risorgimento, the redemption of a generation and, above all, faith in the ‘word’ (that is, in the ‘idea’), in its capacity to change the world. These are recurring themes, fixed points among the seemingly contradictory whirl of positions expressed by the young Papini. In addition to these issues, others, equally constant, will take shape: the view of Socialism as a bourgeois movement and the attack on materialism, exemplified in the double target of Mammon and Caliban; the idea of the supremacy of inner life; the view of History as the work of elites; the critique of Positivism; the dyad of Idea and Action, which will find expression in Pragmatism and in the Man-God project; the awareness of belonging to a generation embodying the true Italian Romanticism (the first Sturm und Drang); the attention for the Particular (beyond the ‘falsities’ of Metaphysics) that would be the heritage of the intellectual and artistic tradition of Italy; the primacy of the Theory of Knowledge, i.e. of a psycho-epistemological approach tending to glorify, on the horizon of play and contradiction, a pluralistic modus pensandi capable of deploying a destructive criticism against any allegedly self-contained operation: Art, Science, Philosophy.

These reasons, interwoven in varying combinations, ultimately become functional within a political-moral project directed at exalting the hegemonic position of the Spirit, of the country where it is best embodied (Italy), of the intellectuals by which it is represented, in a pedagogic/educational project of which Papini puts himself at the lead. In his role as an Educator Papini thus develops, during his very first years of work, the “Party of Science”
(when he still considered himself a Positivist) and, afterwards, the “Party of Intellectuals”, emphasizing, in his Discorso al gruppo vinciano, the ‘capacity for change’ that that role represents:

A Sturm und Drang of the spirit, […] we establish a table of values, but rather than simply upturning the old table, as Nietzsche did, we make ourselves a new one. And the greatest value of our table, unlike that of the philosopher from Rocken, is not strength, the will to power personified in the warrior, in the beautiful, tawny, lascivious beast, but instead the highest and noblest function to which man has ascended – Intellectuality (in Il non finito 263-78)

Papini’s rejection of Nietzsche, the hero of his adolescence, underscores now his need to distance himself from the image of the philosopher as it had been popularized in Italy through D’Annunzio and Morasso, i.e., respectively, in the “worship of externality […] against the future domain of the spirit” (Papini: “A Gabriele D’Annunzio,” in Il non finito 189), with vitality as an end to itself, and in the industrialist rhetoric of ‘vulgarly’ imperialistic-material inspiration. It is the position defined ‘idealistic,’ announced in the name of Leonardo, that will provide, in the perspective of a Romanticism transcending the incomplete, sentimental version given of it in Italy, a sublimated version of nationalist ideology: the version invoked by a pedagogical vocation which Papini coherently interpreted as a merely psychological factor and occasionally glorified as the “duty of the genius,” exemplifying it in the verse by

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43 Cf. Papini: “Su Nietzsche” (1902), in Il non finito 233: “as if Gorgias or Stirner or Guyau were anything more than Nietzsche’s messengers and daily food.”
44 In fact, Papini will turn to Nietzsche (with an article in La Voce in 1910) only when the Dannunzian model falls into crisis.
45 Cf. Papini: “Al di là della vita,” in Leonardo, November 1903, in Filosofia 1323: “There are, among men, two major types of life: the exterior and the interior, and I strongly doubt that the first is the richer and more intense.”
46 Cf. Papini: “Intorno ai Murri,” in Il Regno, October 23, 1904, in Prose morali 1315: “Today, to cars speeding at 100 kilometers per hour I prefer, despite that devil of Morasso, Nausicaä at the river and Gargantua on the towers of Notre Dame.” This position is most likely linked to Papini’s place of origin, Tuscany, a region whose economy was still largely based on farming and commerce rather than manufacturing. On this aspect see Luca Avagliano: La rivoluzione industriale.
47 Cf. Papini: “Guerrazzi,” in Il Regno, August 21, 1904, in Scrittori 538: “so far we have not had any true romantics in Italy. […] Prati and Aleardi, distant echoes, enfeebled and distorted by the great Teutonic romanticism”. The quotations on this matter are countless and run across the entire oeuvre of Papini. It should at least be mentioned that in Florence lived a Germanist (expert in Romanticism) who was highly appreciated by Papini: Arturo Farinelli. We will meet him again in the part of this work dedicated to Scipio Slataper.
48 Cf. Papini: The Failure 117: “All the spirit of Sturm und Drang was with us.”
49 Cf. Papini: “Diventar genio,” in La Voce, October 10, 1912, in Prose morali 77: “The genius, in an absolute sense, is a Redeemer of mankind, who saves and enlightens it at the cost of his own suffering and agony.”
Petrarch quoted in *Un uomo finito*: “Io venni sol per isvegliar altrui” [I came only to arouse people]:

to be their masters, their leaders, their prophets […] A nation that is not moved by some Messianic passion is foredoomed to crumble. […] In Italy Mind has always been recognized; therefore the reign of Mind must begin with us! […] I felt like a Christ obligated at all hazards to promote a new redemption […]. I had made myself; I must now make others. I had destroyed; I must now rebuild. […] Knowledge alone no longer satisfied me now: I demanded action. […] I had to impress my will upon things and upon people. […] My desire was, in short, that with me, through my work, a new age in the history of mankind should begin […]. What was my life’s great plan? To influence my own species, change it fundamentally (*The Failure*: 100, 167-170, 253).\(^{49}\)

The ‘new’ demiurge Educator\(^ {50}\) (who will be complemented by the momentarily self-punishing metaphor of the *Pilota cieco* [Blind Pilot]) proposes the rejection of D’Annunzio’s ‘aesthetic’ perspective:

He dreamed of being for his country what poets should really be, according to etymology and ancient stories, that is, makers and remakers of men and of the lives and customs of man […] He did not fail as an artist, but failed hopelessly as an educator. He believed that a nation could be healed and revived through aesthetics (Papini: “Il Dannunzianesimo,” in *Scrittori* 820-1).\(^ {51}\)

Papini therefore puts forth, in an already pragmatist horizon, an action strategy with a spiritual ‘foundation’\(^ {52}\):
What is the highest, purest, noble part of man? The mind! [Anima: Soul, in the Italian version] Well, then, to act on man in a direction of improvement, you must act on his mind. Only along spiritual lines is a complete and radical evolution, a total transformation of all beings and all values […] If anything new and great is to come of man it will come of the Spirit; if we are going to perfect man, we must first perfect the Spirit […] All questions, national, social, moral, are at bottom nothing but questions of Mind, spiritual questions. Transform the internal, and the external is transformed; renovate the Mind and the world is renovated (The Failure 171-2).

The primacy of the Spirit/Mind represents the container in which the various perspectives envisaged by Papini and embodied by a cultural nationalism of intellectual hegemony will react, justified by a philosophical perspective capable of representing, in a pragmatist horizon, both a modernist criticism of the ideology and the bond between Thought and Action (first in the magical horizon of the Man-God and then, the thaumaturgical dream having failed, in the practical horizon of Propaganda for the cultural hegemony of the conscience):

should we be mere spectators of the world? Why, having realized the trend of the world, don’t we try to fight it, to prevent it, to become actors and authors? […] by moving toward the particular and action, philosophy tries to save the world, and theory becomes action. […] To save it by pursuing the particular and action, to change it by seeking out new manners of knowledge (Papini: Filosofia 350).

III. Life, Contingency and Pragmatism

Papini’s intellectual adventure begins with the problem of knowledge: a problem he defined, in January 1900, as “the keystone of modern philosophy” (“Diario 1899-1902,” in Il non finito 18). The young Florentine considered writing a book on the subject, and later imagined a project of “integral philosophy” that would develop, in his own words, “the radical relativism associated with the theory.” Browsing through Papini’s youthful notes, we find further details of such an approach:

This is not a book of theory but an act of life. […] My criticism is a state of mind […], our most objective theories are no more than the logical expression of an inner, deep, subjective substratum, sentimental and constructive. Every law is the synthetic

expression, often unconscious and deforming, of an inner process of sensitivity. […] A real, irrefutable state of mind, far more valid than an elaborate, abstract theoretical principle […]. What I am heralding is a philosophy of life, of action and of liberation (“Corso di una filosofia futura,” in Il non finito 190).

The young reader of Bergson moves in view of the modernist conflict between life and forms, experienced from the perspective of the experimental psychology which Papini was then exploring; but what interests us most is that, at the same time, and having established a link between life and action, Papini attacks both Positivism and Socialism, viewing both as Forms, i.e. as ideologies, mere expressions of psychological (rather than material) needs that, in an epistemological perspective, are destined to be swept away:

not to act like certain positivists I know, who think they are objective because they have given a more or less scientific form to their emotional preferences. […] Socialism aims precisely to improve material well-being […], a matter of belly […], and we must not forget that theories are always the expressions of feelings and needs (Papini: “Il socialismo. Il dominio del gregge,” in Il non finito 182).

The “philosophy of contingency” (which Adolfo Levi, an editor of Leonardo, identified in 1904 with Renouvier, Milhaud, Le Roy, Boutroux, Bergson), soon to be interpreted as the…

54 In Italy, the first theorization of this conflict, prior to Pirandello’s On Humor, will be attempted in 1905 by Giovanni Marchesini, a sui generis positivist (also quoted in Pirandello), with the volume Le finzioni dell’anima. Marchesini, on the basis of James Sully (a psychologist particularly esteemed by Papini, who will introduce him to Croce) explicitly speaks of a process of absolutization of psychological reality opposing the flow of life. Cf. Marchesini: 7-8: “We shall call fiction that inner article by which we attribute a form of objective truth to beliefs that are due to a singular arrangement of the mind caused by intimate needs, secret inclinations […] so that one prefers to contemplate self-idealization rather than one’s true, genuine reality. […] this way the individual lives not so much the reality as a metaphor of himself.”

55 Papini: “Discorso al gruppo vinciano,” in Il non-finito 272: “There is only one place where we allow ourselves to have, if not a system, a common direction – and that is epistemology. Epistemology, which is almost the necessary introduction to every speculation, is analysis rather than synthesis, and it analyzes that which is more established and fundamental in the world: the facts of the mind.”

56 Papini dedicated a volume of “La Cultura dell’Anima” to Boutroux in 1909. In Boutroux Papini could find, in addition to the common critique of positivism, the fundamental conception of intelligence as a producer of ‘signs,’ of constructions built on raw facts.

Cf. Papini: Letter to Benedetto Croce dated August 27, 1906, in Croce–Papini: Carteggio 151: “Indeed, in my opinion one of the characteristics of this philosophy is emancipation from reality – that is, contempt for the raw fact when building theories and hypotheses, and contempt for what exists and appears fixed, while searching everywhere for any means, including those of the mind, to change reality.”

57 Cf. Levi: 222-33: “When Le Roy says that the mind is essentially activity, he is echoing Ravaisson (as well as Maine de Biran), who argued that the mind is basically activity […] he wants to prove that science, far from letting us understand reality, is nothing more than an abstract work of reconstruction that tends to give satisfaction to the rationalist necessity of the spirit, and because of this feature of arbitrary construction it is radically contingent.”

Cf. Prezzolini: L’italiano inutile 66: “I came to know of Iginio Petrone, Boutroux, Bergson, of the movement criticizing science and of the new solutions given to the problem of determinism and free will: I learned that it was called «philosophy of contingency» because of its main hypothesis […], I thought I had found in it the key to the
value of ‘play’ and ‘contradiction,’ becomes the crowbar with which to break apart the alleged certainties of Science and Philosophy purporting a universalistic vocation: the equivalent of what, in politics – the elimination of the ‘individual’, the ‘different, particular, personal, concrete’$^{58}$ – will be identified in the rejection of the ‘difference’ that characterizes democracy and socialism:

democratic, egalitarian, progressive politics are one of the manifestations of the mathematical and physical spirit. […] the exclusion of qualitative values and the tendency to generalize and universalize […] the love of equality and universality (which in politics is internationalism) and the hatred for all that is qualitative diversity, for example, personality or eccentricity of the spirit. A democrat is a man who seeks to abolish all differences between men (“La politica del due più due,” in *Politica* 184-6).

Correspondingly, the relativistic platform (the defense of thought working as Life) will make it possible to reconstruct Truth in the action-ideal perspective through the Trojan horse of James’s *will to believe*. $^{59}$ All this will be realized in the work of intellectuals towards a Nationalism built on spiritualistic-cultural, or, to put it in Papini’s own word, ‘emotional,’ that is to say purely psychological bases. The criticism of scientific constructions $^{60}$ (a conception related to the one supported in those years by authors, frequently mentioned in the debate between Papini and Vailati, such as Mach and Poincaré), of the philosophy that defended them and, by extension, following the critical progression of the epistemological-

\[\text{universe, I felt I had come in possession of a religious and liberating wisdom […], the beginning of spiritual freedom […] I decided to go to Paris, where I could follow the lessons of Bergson.}


$^{59}$ Cf. Papini: “Il socialismo. Il dominio del gregge,” in *Il non finito* 191-2: “immobility is the sister of death […]. I believe […] that my doctrine is not, therefore, doomed to perish, because it is not something that overlaps reality, but the conscious reflection of reality itself. […] I proclaim the advent of human Gods.” This is the first reference to the future project of the Man-God.

Cf. *Il crepuscolo* 7: “I believe that my book is what many others, more scholarly and civil, are not: that is, a work of life.”

Cf. Papini: “Il pragmatismo messo in ordine,” in *Leonardo*, April 1905, in *Sul Pragmatismo*, in *Filosofia* 404: “If by skepticism we mean the instability of doctrines, the mutability of goals, the predominance of individual preferences in choosing the means by which to represent theories, then, of course, we must confess that Pragmatism is also skeptical; but if by skepticism we mean the impossibility of realizing an adaptation between the mind and things, that is, the inability to achieve anticipations and expectations that actually do materialize, then Pragmatism is even one of the opposites of skepticism.”

$^{60}$ Cf. *Il crepuscolo* 141: “Even the sciences that seemed to deserve the reward of positive virtue, that seemed to have avoided the plague of wild theology and the impure contact with barbaric metaphysics, are still tainted […] with theological and metaphysical sins.”

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pluralist perspective, of any metaphysical construction,\textsuperscript{61} is only the first step towards a Pragmatics aimed at binding Idea and Action.\textsuperscript{62} This is not, of course, to be understood as Action in the strict sense of the word, but as the conquest, within the political horizon of Nationalism, of a moral hegemony leading to the transformation of reality. As outlined by Papini in \textit{La teoria psicologica della previsione} (his first article), moving “war against the absolute” by laying down the “Dizionario della Distruzione Critica di ogni ragione” (“Progetti,” in \textit{Il non finito} 240-1), means preparing an embryonic theory of ‘form’ for critical/destructive purposes that will be the background against which to organize both the ‘theory of games’ and Pragmatism\textsuperscript{63}:

classification requires, always or almost always, another mental work, that of simplification, and of reduction. If the mind accepted in full all representations as it receives them, it would be practically impossible to arrange them in an orderly fashion, such is the multiform variety of phenomena. The mind must attenuate or forget certain aspects and magnify certain others, ignore certain characters and emphasize others (“La teoria psicologica della previsione,” in \textit{Filosofia} 1296).

The development of game theory – “I can, in myself, cause wonderful changes, by merely changing points of view and planes of knowledge” (Papini: “Piccoli e grandi giuochi,” in \textit{Prose morali} 28), becomes the exemplification of an essentially skeptical theory of

\textsuperscript{61} In this the influence of Bergson is certainly decisive. Cf. Papini: “L’altra metà” (1911), in \textit{Filosofia} 289: “Bergson’s world is the world of complete freedom – a mad world. It is we who, for the necessities of knowledge and practice, invent concepts and cast over the flowing river of reality the tethers and crusts of laws”. But, while remembering that in 1913 Papini edited an important translation of \textit{Introduction to Metaphysics} for the publisher Carabba, we might add that in that work Bergson was strongly inclined towards pragmatism; this was not unexpected, considering the close links between the two positions (there was a deep respect between Bergson and James). Papini therefore had the chance to read in Bergson’s text statements such as the following: “We do not aim, in general, to learn for the sake of learning, but to learn in order to make a stand, to draw a profit, and to satisfy an interest” (p. 43); “The state, taken in itself, is a perpetual becoming. I have extracted from this becoming a certain average of quality, which I have supposed invariable: I have in this way constituted a stable and consequently schematic state” (p. 47); “What is ordinarily called a fact, is not the reality as it would appear in an immediate intuition, but an adaptation of the real to the interests of practice” (p. 85). Papini met both Boutroux and Bergson in Paris at the end of 1906.

\textsuperscript{62} Cf. Papini: “Marta e Maria (Dalla contemplazione all’azione),” in \textit{Leonardo}, March 1904, in \textit{Filosofia} 1350-1362: “to remake the world instead of contemplating it […]. The union between the world of the mind and the world of things is uninterrupted and continuous. […] every action that one performs is woven of threads that come from both communicating domains, and the exterior, reproducing itself as imagined, produces the interior, and the interior, projecting outward, changes the exterior.”

The opening of this fundamental article clearly reprises opinions expressed by Marx in his \textit{Theses on Feuerbach}. The same phrase will reappear five years later in an article on Eucken, proving that Papini believed he was elaborating the program of the “spiritual revolution” (as opposed to the ‘material’ one).

\textsuperscript{63} Cf. Baldacci: “Introduzione” to \textit{Il crepuscolo X}: “Teoria psicologica della previsione in which the positivism of the first cultural experiences […] already showed a connection with pragmatism.”
knowledge of modernist inspiration, where, however, instability is turned into power:

“Everything is useful to me, I to none, [...] I dominate over the things I choose, because I employ them as playthings” (“Piccoli e grandi giuochi,” in Prose morali 26). The attack on Universal ideas proceeds together with the ability of the ‘superior’ individual who is able to act in this absence of Fundamentals, even as he moves his attack, through the theory of form, against every General construction:

The remarkable agreement between those who think they understand and those who think they are understood is so touching that I’m almost inclined to believe in the pre-established harmony of Gottfried Leibniz. [...] In order to become popular, grand empty expressions are required [...] Progress, Justice, Humanity. [...] each active state is incomplete without faith [...]. If the world, as the old metaphor goes, is a tragicomedy, we must not delude ourselves that there will also be spectators (“Piccoli e grandi giuochi”, in Filosofia 21-7).

It is no surprise, then, that in that same issue of Leonardo Papini presents his first attack against Socialism, now seen as a movement of bourgeois derivation (because of its materialism) focusing on a philosophical attitude of Positivist (thus ‘formalist’) origin.

The rejection of Positivism (with the criticism of the supposed objectivity of Science) is only the first step towards a critical project aimed at setting every definition in terms of a pre-comprehension based on psychological-emotional grounds:

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64 Cf. Casini: Alle origini del Novecento 57-8: “they wanted to put forward [...] a kind of radical epistemological relativism, inspired by the French philosophy of contingency. [...] in all [...] sectors of doing and knowing you are free to adopt a multiplicity of points of view, all equally legitimate, and to apply them to develop alternative truths and behaviors, not incompatible with each other.”

65 This article will be the cause of Papini’s first rift with Croce. Cf. Papini: letter to Benedetto Croce dated July 17, 1903, in Croce–Papini: Carteggio 39-41; “The matter, then, is not to change life but our idea of life. And that, no doubt, means changing life itself [...] The roots of this sentimental logic are different in every individual, and are therefore not affected by a universalist conviction as is yours.”

This will be the case of Papini’s entire controversy with Croce. Cf. Luigi Croce: “Giovanni Papini e il futurismo,” in L’uomo impossibile 36: “Papini, unlike Croce, realizes [...] that a whole image of man centered on his ability to build a world to his own measure is being lost.”

66 Cf. Papini: “Socialismo e borghesia,” in Leonardo, February 1903, in Politica 95: “From its origins up to our own days what has socialism done if not assimilate bourgeois and religious tendencies and ideas, and adapt them to its purposes, exaggerating them? [...] One of the salient features of the bourgeoisie, as it is daily represented to us by the Populars themselves, is its concern for material well-being [...] The Socialists fully accept this view: they too want [...] to increase material well-being.” Papini’s assumption was of course comforted by the alliance between Turati and Giolitti.
Philosophers, like all men, are moved by feelings and instincts. Philosophy is but an emotional, vital reaction that outwardly assumes rational manifestations [...]. In every philosopher there is always a pre-philosophy made up of vital, effective elements (Papini: “Morte e resurrezione della filosofia,” in Filosofia 338).

After turning to Pragmatism, Papini’s project will find full expression in Il Crepuscolo dei filosofi, the manifestation of this psychology-based epistemological triumph, in a hierarchical perspective where History submits to the Ego:

And instead of court-martiailling philosophy in general [...] I have preferred to judge, assail, attack and execute it in the person of its major representatives of the last century, identified as live men, concrete and determined [...]. The personality, the feelings, the substance are there, hidden, implicit but present (Il crepuscolo 9-16).

This is not a project with skeptical-relativistic aims: the critical progression (with its corollaries of exaltation of Life, of the ‘particular,’ etc.) is an initial step for the rejection of...
philosophy as a generalizing conception; a conception that remains unchanged and unsurpassed as long as one wants to remain in pure contemplation:

When philosophers set out on their pilgrimages in search of the Holy Grail of the Absolute, they feel the desire to base themselves on something every man can agree on. But this initial unity cannot be found in knowledge, because words confuse and conceal the true secret harmony. [...] So he who wants to find something that can be agreed upon by everyone must resort not to Knowing, like other philosophers, but to Doing (Papini: “Unico e diverso,” in *Filosofia* 355). 70

The primacy of action that follows the recognition of the instrumental/ideological value of theories 71 implies the ‘romantic’ recovery of the category of the ‘manifold,’ which Papini ultimately finds in a whole philosophical horizon of, precisely, romantic origin; a horizon that has its starting points in Bergson and, above all, in William James 72: “Thus began the battle between the One and the Many, which has been fought under a thousand names for twenty-five centuries” (Papini: “L’altra metà,” in *Filosofia* 232). If traditional philosophy, which despises the particular 73 and the manifold, has failed (failed to arrive at a real Truth, producing only incomplete ‘forms’ and weak definitions), 74 then it is necessary to take a different route – a route connecting “the search and discovery of the particular” (Papini: “Morte e resurrezione della filosofia,” in *Filosofia* 348) with “action as the creator of beliefs” in order to “increase our power to change things” (Papini: “Il Pragmatismo messo in ordine,” in *Filosofia* 403).

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70 Papini: “Unico e diverso,” in Leonardo, February 1906 under the title L’Uomo-Dio, in *Sul Pragmatismo*.
71 Cf. Papini: “L’altra metà,” in *Filosofia* 305: “Pragmatism has shown that even in the highest and seemingly uninterested forms of intellectual activity were concealed practical reasons.”
72 Cf. “L’altra metà”, in *Filosofia* 363: “There is only one metaphysics and its formula is this: The universe is the product of the constant and universal opposition between the classical principle and the romantic principle, of the one and the different. I call classical all that is universal, unitary, passive – and romantic all that is personal, particular, active. Whatever tends to immobility and universality is classical; whatever tends to change, motion, and personality is romantic.”
73 Cf. “L’altra metà”, in *Filosofia* 232: “from Socrates onwards the particular (…) has been considered the riffraff of the universe. The world of the philosopher is the world […] of the universal.”
74 Cf. “L’altra metà”, in *Filosofia* 264: “we fail to realize that knowing means nothing more than unifying, separating, impoverishing, and immobilizing.”
Cf. Papini: “Che valore ha la scienza?,” in *Il non-finito* 307: “a choice is always a choice, that is a diminishing, an impoverishment, a subtraction of reality. To define, as the verb itself says, means to set boundaries, to put up walls between one thing and another.”
At this point Giovanni Vailati comes into play. The mathematician, a reader and correspondent of Mach, having read “Teoria psicologica della previsione,” considered it a masterpiece and wrote to Papini: “I perfectly agree with you in thinking that the ability to predict (that is, to form expectations conforming with what will really happen) is the essence and the specific purpose of scientific research in general” (Vailati: Epistolario 324).

This is the birth certificate of Italian Pragmatism. Vailati readily agrees with Papini on the need for a genealogical operation on scientific discoveries and suggests that he read F. C. S. Schiller. There is certainly a good deal of truth in the vision of the ‘two pragmatisms’ in the Leonardo (the logical-analytical one of Vailati and Calderoni and the magical-implementational one of Papini and Prezzolini, having in the background the further differentiation between Pierce and James), provided however that one avoids making a Manichean separation between serious and non serious scholars: the ‘miracle-workers’ on one side and on the other the first signs of analytic speculation simply directed at preserving philosophy from the imperfections of language. Preferring this perspective leads to losing sight of the pluralistic substrate (“the pluralist nature of the pragmatic theories compared to the unity and organicity of systems,” Papini: “Introduzione al Pragmatismo”, in Filosofia 392) linked to the critique of nineteenth-century Metaphysics in which the four thinkers operate; a common ground of opposition to Croce’s philosophy built on the defense of the ‘particular’ and on the subterranean, but basic, disagreement between Philosophy and

75 Cf. Santucci: Storia del pragmatismo 120: “Mach suggested that we could see in the laws of nature so many limitations to our expectations. They are explained by the need to orient ourselves in reality, which in the Copernican age was still inspired by harmony and later turned to quantitative investigation.” And, as a demonstration of a European commonality of topics, it is worth remembering the name of another reader of Mach: Robert Musil.

76 Vailati: letter to Giovanni Papini dated October 1, 1902.

77 A difference of purpose that Calderoni repeatedly points out: cf. Calderoni: “L’origine e l’idea fondamentale del Pragmatismo,” in Calderoni and Vailati: Il pragmatismo 20-1: “The only way to determine and clarify the meaning of a statement is to indicate what particular experiences the statement means to say will occur, or would occur, given certain circumstances […]. It is nothing else […] that an exhortation to translate our statements into forms that make it easier and more straightforward to apply to them the more «objective» criteria of truth and falseness.” Papini will reiterate this difference in an article remembering Vailati: cf. Papini: “Giovanni Vailati,” in La Voce, March 1911, in Filosofia 659: “For him […] philosophy was rather a thoughtful refinement of means than a rushing or flying towards ends.”
Psychology.⁷⁸ And it is certainly a European terrain, involving the decay of the notion of truth and the emerging of an existentialist viewpoint (at least in perspective):

Everything is relative. […] Every principle contradicts itself. All systems of metaphysics are but restatements in different language of two or three general formulas inevitably reducible to some mystic Unity – a unity which cannot be comprehended, which is nothing and means nothing. Philosophies are made to justify our prejudices, to humor our sentiments, to serve the requirements (The Failure 92).

All my tables of value were broken in the course of my inner convulsions. All hope has paled in the darkness of these years […]. The performance is over; the scenery has been turned to the wall; the lights are out […]. There lie the violins, abandoned, voice-less, beside scores that will never be opened again (The Failure 290).

In 1905, at the Congress of Psychology in Rome, Papini meets William James. After reading Il Crepuscolo dei filosofi, James writes to Schiller that Papini is “a jewel,” a “little Dago” who with his Man-God will leave behind all other pragmatists. But did James, who admired the criticism of Renouvier’s monism and frequented the Society for Psychical Research in London, really understand Papini’s project?

Papini has indeed based his pragmatist adventure on the concept of the “will to believe,” reiterating, in agreement with James, “the primacy of action over theory, since the former is the final cause of the latter” (Invitto: 37). At this point, however, their roads diverge: Papini does not stop to point out the importance of emotional factors on the development of theories, but proceeds from here, as will Schiller, to criticize the very concept of Truth. Truth is ‘invented,’ because axioms are simply empirical propositions or teleological conventions that “have succeeded so well in displacing all rival hypotheses”

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⁷⁸ Croce himself, writing on the Giornale d’Italia at the end of the 1905 Congress of Psychology in Rome (which Papini, Vailati, and Calderoni had all attended) emphasized the irreducibility of the philosophical horizon with the psychological one. Amendola will open a third front (it is the front of “Vocean Moralism”), warning Papini that giving priority to the psychological issue would necessarily lead to skepticism, but also warning Croce that “Paying excessive attention to the blurry boundaries of the spirit can represent not the weakness of one who is seduced, but the desire of one who wants to dominate […]. When reflecting on the problem of knowledge you are already in the middle of the river of which you speak – you are not just lazing on the shore chatting about how to stay afloat,” letter to Benedetto Croce dated April 18, 1911, in Eva Amendola Kühn: 265. Not surprisingly, James, after reading Amendola’s “Né ideale né reale, wrote to Papini “It helps me understand the constant accusation of subjectivism that people charge us with, and it is a challenge that we should be able to deal with,” in Di Giovanni: 78.
But even sophistry-for-power/truth theorized by Schiller (who also considered writing a *Protagoras* to attack Plato’s), which in Italy would find expression in Prezzolini’s *L’arte di persuadere*, with the glorification of Man capable of having his theories accepted as truth, was not enough for Papini, who at this point really moves into irrationalism. The will to believe is modulated on a Novalisian project allowing the transition from will to action in a spirit capable “to act on things without recourse to instruments and media, thus eventually achieving omnipotence and the power of working miracles” (*The Failure*: 130). This plan (and its inevitable failure) does not concern us, but it is fundamental to understand how it is related to Papini’s political project.

Let’s try to summarize: the theory of ‘form,’ the exaltation of a pluralist horizon preserving the ‘particular’ in its more realistic essence than the various monist perspectives, the *will to believe* in its ability to combine ideas and actions, the supremacy of Mind over Matter (redoubled by believing in the ability of the will to dictate the action, where “thought literally becomes father to fact”, Papini: “La volontà di credere,” in *Filosofia* 445), the disdain for any basely materialist perspective exemplified by the dream of being God:

What was my love for everything crazy and absurd except a revulsion from the commonplace, from the ordinary, from the safe and sane? […] I did not accept that reality; but only because I wanted another – a purer, more perfect, more angelic, more divine reality; and I did my best to see the spiritual harmonious world I looked forward to come into being, as the statue, which the artist has seen in his mind and willed to be, springs from a rough block of marble (*The Failure*: 129-34).

80 It would be improper to use an article such as “Franche spiegazioni” to justify a skeptical attitude of Papini towards the occult. The pages of *Un uomo finito* prove that Papini really did experiment with magic. We should remember that there was considerable interest for this subculture in those years: consider Amendola being the President of the Theosophical Library, or the series of esoteric texts published by Laterza, the publisher of Benedetto Croce.
81 A project long in the making, the first signs of which appeared in 1902. Cf. Papini, letter to Giuseppe Prezzolini dated April 6, 1902, in *Storia di un’amicizia* 35: “One morning a few days ago Marucchi came to see me […] and we came to the conclusion that man, after all, I mean the superior man, tends to become God.”
82 Cf. Papini: “Introduzione al Pragmatismo,” in *Filosofia* 389-90: “One of the principles dearest to pragmatists is this: that the meaning of theories consists solely in the consequences expected by those who believe them true. […] His sympathies will go to the search for the particular […]. His dislikes, of course, will go to all forms of monism; […] a certain enthusiasm for everything that demonstrates the complexity and multiplicity of things; for whatever increases our power to change the world; for everything that is closely linked with practice, action, life.”
A philosophy proposing to change the world, but, opposing the material transformation advocated by Marxist and attacking socialist internationalism and bourgeois humanitarianism as expressions of generalizing/synthesizing worldviews, emphasizes the ‘difference’ contained in reality: that aptitude for the difference, the preamble to the creation of the Truth (as opposed to traditional and unsuccessful philosophical speculation), which is reflected in the individual personality of the man of exception.

These features, moreover, do not belong only to individuals. They can also be features of a country or of the elite that it expresses. The failure of the magical dream of the Man-God opens to Papini a possibility that had always been within his project, as we shall now see:

Yet in making myself over, in straightening my course, in starting a new journey I need something to lean on; I must take root again somewhere […]. I was born in a certain spot; I belong to a certain race, I have behind me a certain tradition and a certain history. To concentrate, to collect myself, means simply closer contact with my native soil, with my people, with the culture form which, willy-nilly, I have come (The Failure: 298).

The features that would lead to the Man-God were at work since 1903, and would continue to work in Papini’s description of Italy and its culture:

Machiavelli […] had put an end to a priori ramblings […] and thus established the natural method for the study of the human world […] the aversion to Aristotelianism, or, in conclusion, to abstract intellect […], the desire for a closer adherence to reality (Papini: “La Toscana e la filosofia italiana,” in Politica 826-9).

IV. A ‘particular’ Country, a Country Closer to Life

84 The link between individualism and the will to power of the Nation (the Nation as a collective individual) is, moreover, accurately described by Corradini himself. Walter L. Adamson (From Modernism to Fascism) considered these two terms irreconcilable, but their separation will begin only in 1913 thanks to the work of Alfredo Rocco, who will see in individualism the origins of liberalism and socialism. Before then, the ‘individualist’ component is not at all unpopular among Corradini’s nationalists. This ambivalence will persist in its effects even during Fascism.
In the February 1903 issue of *Leonardo*, with the article “L’ideale imperialista,” Papini distances himself from the nationalists of the *Marzocco*, such as Corradini. Although acknowledging a shared animus against the myths “of democratic and bourgeois progress” (Papini: “L’ideale imperialista,” in *Politica* 32), Papini’s accusation follows the themes of his criticism of Morasso and runs on the tracks of his traditional motifs:

> Anyone who has even a faint notion of your ideas knows what your kind of domination is. Indeed, it appears that you don’t even recognize any other; that, for example, next to the domination by the spear, there also exists domination by the intellect. Your conception of power and domination is essentially material and exterior […] let me remind you that there are also moral conquests […] The course of mankind runs […] form external action to internal action […] The formula of our evolution, admitting there is one, is mankind’s growing inner life. […] it is the advent of the domination of the mind (Papini: *L’ideale imperialista*, in *Politica* 26-8).

We know of Papini’s fortuitous meeting with Corradini, and of the offer he was made to work as editor-in-chief for Corradini’s new magazine, *Il Regno*, which would see the light in November that same year:

> Corradini told me that before the year’s end he would start a new magazine, with the intention of restoring to Italy its awareness of being a great nation and to the Italian bourgeoisie, frightened by socialism – made stronger by the reaction of ’98 and by Giolitti’s tolerance – its class consciousness […]. I, who had always suffered for our humiliations in Africa and had just read Nietzsche and Pareto, was quick to accept. […] He knew nothing of Pareto […] he needed an editor-in-chief and wanted me to take the job (*Passato remoto*, in *Autoritratti* 843).

The ‘theory of elites’ elaborated by one of the most important sociologist of the time, Vilfredo Pareto, to which we now return, no doubt provided the Director of *Il Regno* with an important “theoretical glue” (Casini: 80) on which to base his work, but it would be wrong to unreservedly accept the image of Corradini that Papini, and especially Prezzolini (when he will become a follower of Croce) would present once that experience was over. If we

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85 Cf. Papini: letter to Giuseppe Prezzolini dated October 27-29, 1902, in *Storia di un’amicizia* 52: “an article by Corradini full of philosophical naivety and glaring contradictions.”

86 Prezzolini and Corradini will come to blows in 1909 after the harsh opinions expressed by Prezzolini on *La Voce* on the value of Corradini’s literary work. Cf. Prezzolini, “Introduction” to *Vecchio e nuovo* IV: “everything

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consider a speech made by Corradini in 1902, “Le opinioni degli uomini e i fatti degli uomini,” we can easily note that the points of contact, expressed in a common Orianesque/idealistic and anti-positivist horizon – were many:

at this time […] the physical and exact sciences are held in the highest regard […]. But certainty came in through the door and went out through the window, and in some so-called sciences we now have more tendencies, schools of thought, and assertions, but fewer certainties. […] We need an idealistic reaction against realistic action […] to demonstrate how effective the words of the wise are on feelings, behaviors, human affairs (Corradini: Discorsi 19-31).

The “words of the wise.” i.e. confidence in the intellectuals’ ability to act, as Papini also understood it, is the common substrate of the magazine’s ‘two souls.’ Of course Papini’s emphasis is more on spiritual-action, in accordance with his own philosophical perspective and his view on Nationalism, where the intellectual’s intervention is not mere ideological support for political logic, but an integral part of a change of consciousness aimed at the transformation of Man: “to change the Italian soul and at the same time raise the soul of all men. This is the first great spiritual program that the Italians have set themselves for many years” (Papini: “L’Italia e la sua ultima generazione,” in Per Giovanni Papini 113): 87

To awaken the middle class by means of the aristocracy, and lead it against socialist democracy […], to make it the center of the resurrection of the industrial aristocracy […] to arouse a national life, both spiritual and political, in its highest form […]. Already in “Il Regno” we have dealt with the history of aristocracies […] that every society, in every time, is ruled by a minority that we might call the political class or elite or aristocracy (Papini: “Un programma nazionalista,” in Vecchio e nuovo 23-5). 88

that was a thunderous memory of imperial Rome; clatter and rumbling of sentences on Italy […] was the typical, spontaneous, natural product of the group headed by Enrico Corradini.”
87 Papini: “L’Italia e la sua ultima generazione” (1905), an essay written for the Russian magazine Vjesi.
88 This address was delivered by Papini, at the request of Corradini, in Siena on February 21, and later repeated in Florence, Livorno, and Arezzo.
In other words, Papini declares the need for a momentary trial against the bourgeoisie, to be followed by its reactionary turn\(^9\) (the abandonment of the humanitarian ideals which led to its previous triumph and which are represented by Giolittism allied with Socialism), and places this requirement along the path of a spiritual renaissance aimed, on the one hand, at criticizing the “democratic mentality” (Papini: *Vecchio e nuovo*) and, on the other hand, at glorifying a generational aristocracy capable of completing the work of the Risorgimento, restoring Italy (with its natural proximity to the ’particular,’ with its anti-monistic realism) to the role it deserves beyond the base materiality of the present:

To explain first of all that it is not worth living the life of mediocrity and routine conducted by the majority of mankind. […] To make people feel the need to do something important that can give meaning and some sort of beauty to life […]. To make Italy a center of culture, and a few Italians the initiators of new achievements of the mind. To give Italy back its intellectual primacy (Papini: “Campagna per il forzato risveglio,” in *Prose morali* 35).

To this end there occurs a convergence between the classic motifs of Nationalism and Pareto’s theory of elites. On the one hand, we have the accusation of socialism being a movement of bourgeois derivation\(^90\); the exaltation of the Homeland as an organism that is more important than the individual classes and, at the same time, the glorification of the middle class as the only class capable of assuming an inter-class role\(^91\) (the bourgeoisie’s

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\(^9\) Cf. Papini: “Per la vita contro la vita,” in *Il Regno*, December 1903, in *Politica* 34-36: “the state of mind of the contemporary bourgeoisie […]. A singular state of mind, coming from continued cowardice […] and a flimsy desire to dominate […] seems to sometimes forget the danger that threatens it, the barbarian who is knocking at its door, the scaffold that is being prepared for it […] is not so much the victim of murder as of suicide. […] To repel the socialist surge it should mostly fight against itself, since it is largely responsible for that surge itself […]. To save the bourgeoisie we must start by bringing it to trial.”

\(^90\) Cf. Papini: “Cos’è il socialismo,” in *L’idea liberale*, November and December 1904, in *Politica* 131: “When a party opposes another, but fails to identify any principle that is genuinely and substantially new, it does nothing more than extend, that is, universalize and magnify the principles of the party it wants to fight. […] The bourgeoisie had proclaimed the abstract and juridical equality of men, and socialism wants to add their economic equality.”

\(^91\) Cf. Papini: “Un programma nazionalista,” in *Vecchio e nuovo* 6-7: “Squeezed between the selfishness of the people and the selfishness of the classes, the Homeland is no longer a way of life and is becoming a memory in history. […] the bourgeoisie is anti-national because it does not have enough class consciousness, as we shall see. It is forgetting its origins, which are intimately connected with the recent establishment of the nation, […] it cannot even see any means for salvation, one of which is precisely nationalism, that is, the pursuit of ends that concentrate on a single goal all the forces of all the people and all the classes.”

Cf. Emilio Gentile: *Il mito dello Stato nuovo* 85: “On the one hand, he considers the bourgeoisie, as the proletariat, closed in its class selfishness and condemns the antagonism between the two classes, because it weakens and divides the nation’s forces […]. On the other hand, Papini appeals to the bourgeoisie for it to rediscover its class
ancient aspiration of representing man *tout court* and thus the acceptance of class struggle from a rightist position\(^92\), the perspectives for expansion (in both economic and Darwinist terms)\(^93\); the extolling of the caste of ‘producers,’\(^94\) exemplifying the importance of the creation of wealth over its distribution. On the other hand, however, the clash between the two classes is reduced to a struggle between their respective representatives, and as such comes down to a clash of ideas between two opposite groups of bourgeois ideologists (reinforcing the perception of an identity of purposes between bourgeois politics and Socialism): “*a new form of bourgeois exploitation, carried out by the bourgeois by mounting a verbal opposition against bourgeois exploitation*” (Papini: “Cos’è il socialismo,” in *Politica* 135). It is against this elite of ‘demagogues,’ that a new elite must be built, a generational elite capable of replacing the scientistic and materialistic culture of the former generation with the dream of a moral action that, in the wake of Mazzini and Gioberti and of the lost *Primacy*, can remind Italy, against Giolitti, that it is “the heir of Rome” (Papini: “L’Italia e la sua ultima generazione,” in *Per Giovanni Papini* 108)\(^95\):

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consciousness against the proletariat, and he identifies the bourgeoisie with the nation, considering the bourgeoisie the only protagonist of national events, heir to the tradition of the Risorgimento, the custodian of patriotic values, the forerunner of a national rebirth.”

\(^92\) Cf. Papini: “Un programma nazionalista,” in *Vecchio e nuovo* 27-8: “We accept […] the idea of class struggle […] Now the socialists would want to attack, but they want the attacked not to defend themselves nor to counterattack […] If class struggle it must be, then let it be a real battle, […] the bourgeoisie is still alive and can live again and must live again. And it must convince itself that flattering its future gravediggers is not good policy […] and it has to stop mumbling the old formulas that served as instruments in the days of conquest, but that now should be cast away as useless.”

\(^93\) Cf. Papini: “Un programma nazionalista,” in *Vecchio e nuovo* 30-1: “The necessary complement to any nationalism is expansionism […]. Expansion, either in the form of colonies, or of men, or of capital or goods, is now a necessary condition of life for the great nations of the world. Italy, for the present, has only a strong expansionism of men […], and colonies would be necessary to us more than to anyone else.”

\(^94\) In January 1904 Prezzolini calls the industrialists to organize their defense by setting up employers’ associations and applying lockouts. He invokes an Italian Chamberlain capable of leading the rally. As explained by Emilio Gentile, it was no less than a plan of reaction. But, again, at this time the alliance with the industrialists is not an incontrovertible fact: the petty-bourgeois intellectual wavering between the prospect of an alliance and the temptation to act single-handedly with the support of the Mazzinian-styled popular element. In this regard cf. Asor Rosa: *Scrittori e popolo*, I, 33: “The strong, indeed, disproportionate ethical tension of Mazzini’s teachings is the foundation on which was built this attempt to react to the inexorable consequences of capitalist exploitation, without questioning its assumptions and social conditions. The people […] perform the principal function of absorbing any particularistic and subversive drifts of the lower classes in the overall development of society, in which all classes, united in comradeship, must take part.”

\(^95\) Cf. Papini: “L’Italia non ha un’idea fissa,” in *Il Giornale d’Italia*, April 19, 1906, in *Politica* 55: “we are pursuing a national purpose, not a cosmopolitan one; an Italian purpose, not a humanitarian one […] Mazzini and Gioberti […] Italy, according to them, was entitled to be resurrected only to accomplish something great. The ‘spiritual mission of Rome’, and the “primacy of the Italians”.”

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The new generation – the one born during the 1880s […]. And this generation does not even keep away from politics as if were afraid of soiling itself at every step. It would like, however, that there were a political life, but in the full sense of national policy, not parliamentary policy; a policy of expansion, not a policy of fear […]. Therefore, after its initial, rash enthusiasm, it has partially set aside the socialist bands and has concluded that before any collectivist project there should be another, more heroic program: the imperialist one (Papini: “L’Italia e la sua ultima generazione,” in *per Giovanni Papini* 112).

And so it is a political project with nationalist leanings and oligarchic tendencies that is grafted onto the theories of Pareto⁹⁶:

we want a policy in defense of the middle class, because at present only the bourgeoisie virtually possesses some of the requirements that are necessary to the class charged with reorganizing our national life. Because, if national policy is more important than class policy, it is also true that the country cannot do without social classes. Classes are the instrument of the nation, and sometimes classes can be reduced to restricted oligarchies⁹⁷ (Papini: “O la classe o la nazione,” in *Vecchio e nuovo* 119-20).

These oligarchic temptations (Pareto’s idea of the “vital few”) are present throughout the entire work of the young Papini who, still in 1917, expressed high esteem for the Italian sociologist: “of one, among the Italians who actually exist, to whom one can apply without error or shame the abused adjective ‘great’” (“Pareto,” in *Politica* 933).⁹⁸ The theory of a cyclical rotation of elites (in part similar to the theory developed by Gaetano Mosca on the “ruling classes”)⁹⁹ will allow Papini to support his viewpoint within a cyclical conception of History emphasizing the dominant function of a small number of people, as opposed to the

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⁹⁶ Papini, together with Vailati and Calderoni, paid a visit to Pareto in Céligny in September 1904. At Papini’s request, Pareto would write a few articles for *Il Regno*.

⁹⁷ In *Il Regno*, no. 37, August 8, 1904.

⁹⁸ Papini: “Pareto,” in *Il Resto del Carlino*, January 21, 1917, in *Testimonianze*, Milan, Facchi, 1918. Papini considers Pareto the greatest living sociologist and believes his work to be the most important published in Italy after Vico. Pareto will reciprocate Papini’s esteem asserting that Papini was one of the few who had understood him. A letter from the publisher Vallecchi shows that, again in 1920, Papini advised him to print the works of Pareto.

⁹⁹ Unlike Pareto, Mosca would never develop a system of his theories. We should also mention an important previous work by Pasquale Turiello: the volume *Governo e governati*, published in 1882. On the development of the various elitist theories (and their relations with the theorists of fascism) cf. Giorgio Galli, *Storia delle dottrine politiche*, Milan, Il Saggiatore, 1985. We cannot of course make a direct connection with Fascism: we will simply point out that Mosca was among the signatories of the Manifesto of the anti-fascist intellectuals, and that among his pupils there was Piero Gobetti (who, among other things, will convince the publisher Alberto Cappa to print the first monograph on Pareto, in 1924). The connection can only concern a number of issues (e.g., the Risorgimento as a failed revolution, the criticism of Giolittism, the political leadership of the intellectuals, etc.) which will be actually passed on by these theorists to Fascism.
masses: an organized minority capable of coming to power. In this manner, the protest of the middle classes could operate in a conceptualized ideological perspective of apparently realistic value. However, the concept of History as a periodic alternation of elites is not the only point that Papini finds in Pareto: that view stemmed from another embryonic theory of ‘form’ (psychologically-oriented) on the grounds of which every ideology could be seen as a “masked logical action” pertaining to all illogical human desires, the passions and interests (always the same throughout the ages) driving the perpetual clash of ambitions. In other words, Pareto provides Papini with a link between the historical-political conception and Pragmatism (and with the corollary of the Man-God project): “He [Pareto] carries out in Italy, in the field of social sciences, a work similar to that carried out in the field of thought sciences by his two friends Giovanni Vailati and Mario Calderoni” (Papini: “Pareto,” in Politica 937). This connection between society and ‘thought’ offers – just as the Man-God project is nearing its final draft (1906-1907) – a perspective for elitist-generational action based, through the will to believe, on the work for ‘moral change’ that pertains to the role of the Educator. In this way all Papini’s issues come together:

Italy must propound to the world the principles in whose name its has resurged […] when I speak of a spiritual mission for Italy I am not addressing “all” Italians […], all great movements were brought forward by enthusiastic, organized minorities […]: it is necessary that a number of Italians create certain moods (feelings, goals, etc.) […] the young […] the constant concern for finding something that can change the more common approaches and the deepest basics of human life. […]. The main purpose to which this capricious and fertile activity of the Italian mind should be aimed would be recognizing the superiority and the power of the spirit on mankind […]. Italy must show the world that what we can do and enjoy with our mind and soul is worth far more than all the “quantitative” victories of the mechanical civilization of our times. […] to search for […] some new conception of life capable of changing the

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100 Well-known is the debate between Prezzolini and Pareto, which took place on the pages of Il Regno between late 1903 and early 1904, on the actual possibility of the bourgeois elite rebelling against the socialist elite. The doubts of Pareto (who, in any case, while declaring himself a simple ‘spectator,’ would always work in that direction) are counterbalanced by Prezzolini’s certainties on the possibility of such a rebellion.

101 Cf. Bobbio: On Mosca 39-41: “he was inclined to see the main cause of the error of these theories in the very fact that they too were the product of non-logical actions masquerading as logical actions. […] the facts […] were distorted by the manner in which the protagonists themselves, or the historians or the politicians, had an interest in presenting them […]. Most of men’s actions flow not from logical reasoning but from feeling.”
appearance of civilization, as did Christianity and the Renaissance (Papini: “Il mestiere d’Italia e il sogno d’una grande nazione,” in Politica 57-62).\textsuperscript{102}

Then, and precisely on the basis of Mazzini\textsuperscript{103} and of the myth of the Risorgimento (“The fate of Italy is the fate of the world”), Papini launches a project for the transformation of consciousness in an anti-dogmatic (anti-Positivist, anti-Metaphysical)\textsuperscript{104} direction with his

*Campagna per il forzato risveglio* (1906):

> I move towards mankind. [...] I feel – like an early-day follower of Mazzini – that I may have a mission in my country, and that I must do everything I can to make Italy less deaf, less blind, and less cowardly [...]. I want a few hundred young Italians to lose certain qualities and acquire certain others. [...] this is not a political or religious movement, but a purely spiritual and internal one. Above all it is a moral one, but not in the usual sense of the word, that is, preceptive and restrictive. [...] I do not come to proclaim astonishing, prefabricated truths [...] I speak to a few hundred young people born in Italy around 1880 [...]. With their contagion they will change the moral climate of a country, and the contagion of this country can go on to change the world (Papini: “Campagna per il forzato risveglio,” in *Prose morali* 33-4).

The myth of the national question (connected to the myth of the ‘Risorgimento betrayed’) thus becomes the focus of a nationalist agenda of cultural-moral imprint by which the intellectual, left out of the political control room, regains a role of prestige at the head of a

\textsuperscript{102}Cf. Papini: “La coltura delle virtù,” in *Il Giornale d’Italia*, September 7, 1906, in *Prose morali* 1324: “Italy does not have a fixed idea, that is, it lacks the concern of a purpose in the world – and that this special mission [...] could consist in attempting a profound renewal in the lives of men founded on the supremacy of “spiritual values” [...]. When I say “Italy” I only mean “a few Italians”; [...] I will represent the last remaining buds on the grand old tree of the homeland, the hopes for a new, extraordinary blossoming. [...] Every age has its own “elite” which invents, creates, guides, educates, and commands. To the “representative men” we must oppose “representative minorities”. It is they that in every time have governed the minds, as the “political classes” of G. Mosca, or the “elites” of V. Pareto have governed the States.”

\textsuperscript{103}Cf. Papini: letter to Soffici dated November 17, 1907, in Papini–Soffici, *Carteggio*, I, 156: “I am studying Mazzini and I am full of faith. One has to do something that makes it worthwhile being born.”

\textsuperscript{104}Cf. Papini: “Campagna per il forzato risveglio,” in *Leonardo*, August 1906, in *Prose morali* 37-38: “There is [...] also a *rhetoric of concepts* and it is, almost always, philosophy. There are those who seriously enjoy putting together sentences without meaning, [...] and in this war we will find a good ally in Pragmatism.”
few hundred young people (men-Gods) ready to carry to effect the spiritual dream of a “Third Rome” moving to the ‘ideal’ conquest of the world\textsuperscript{105}.

to become a laboratory […] for preparing a new civilization in which the values of the body, of the external world, are replaced by the values of the soul, the inner world […]. In short, the issue is to make Italy once again the spiritual center of the world (Papini: “In quante maniere non ha capito l’Italia,” in Prose morali 40).

The subsequent failure of the magical dream will not change this ideal of action: Papini will simply reach a compromise, identifying (in 1908, just as La Voce was being launched) in Christianity (and in religious Modernism) the channel in which to introduce his propaganda campaign for a ‘moral renaissance’\textsuperscript{106}: “In the Western world, at this time, only Christianity seems capable of serving as a basis for something that can make mankind less unfortunate, more than the invention of the airplane or of the real secret of dialectics” (Papini: ‘Dove mettete la morale?’, in Testimonianze 17).

To preserve the function of the spiritual action of a minority Papini will even give his endorsement to the union between Christianity and Socialism invoked by the Roman Modernists:

the restoration of the Kingdom of the Spirit to humanity. […] and therefore accepting in full the socialist project as a postulate, as part of our own, greater and more far-sighted project. […] to give the Church back the awareness of human misery –

\textsuperscript{105} Cf. Oriani: La rivolta 173: “A third Italy having no ideal meaning in the world would be the most absurd miracle in modern history, resurrection without life, the reappearance of ghosts that are only passing by. Too little.”

\textsuperscript{106} During these months Papini begins his collaboration with Il Rinnovamento, the journal of the Milanese religious Modernists, while at the same time planning with Casati a new journal, Il Commento. Cf. Papini: letter to Giuseppe Prezzolini dated January 27, 1908, in Storia di un’amicizia 150: “Even Casati believes like me that it would only take a few active young people to change the face of Italian Culture.”

In this regard consider what Papini writes in his article on Berkeley (whom Vailati considered the father of Pragmatism), the philosopher whose works he was translating for Croce’s publisher Laterza. Cf. Papini: “Giorgio Berkeley” (1908), in Il Rinnovamento, in Four and Twenty Minds 36 and 48: “Berkeley was one of those men who cannot or will not decide whether to devote themselves to thought or to action. They are enamored of ideas, but they would have ideas triumph at once in the reality of daily life. They would influence men, they would transform the world, but they rely on thought and word as instruments. […] he published […] a little work in which he sought to remind his fellow citizens that nothing but moral renovation could save England from greater disasters. […] He was a practical man who used theoretical means. […] he saw that morality was based upon Christianity, and that a morality based upon religion is necessary for any society that is to escape an evil end.”

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give socialism the awareness of its spiritual ends (Papini: Carteggio with Soffici, I, 352-3).¹⁰⁷

But the Socialism Papini has in mind is certainly not Turati’s: it’s the Bergsonian and, politically speaking, union-based socialism of Sorel, an author who had acquired great popularity with the publication of his Réflexions sur la violence¹⁰⁸:

The old Catholicism, as understood by Prezzolini, corresponds rather to Reformist Socialism and State Socialism […]. Modernism, instead, is more like Syndicalism, which strives to fight the «political clergy», that is, the deputies and the socialist careerists and profiteers, and tries to bring the labor movement back to its character of revolutionary intransigence (Papini: “Il Cattolicismo rosso di Prezzolini,” in Testimonianze 838).

We need not dwell further on this point: both religious Modernism and Sorelism were superficial moments in Papini’s intellectual development, but it is important to reiterate that the issues relating to the ‘task of the minority’ and the affirmation of the Primacy of the Spirit remain fundamental motives even after the end of the magical dream. And, next to these two issues, another one persists intact and is expressed, in Papini’s momentary interest for religion, by his definitive break with Croce:

The philosophical world is made of universal concepts, of general terms, and of abstractions. The religious world is made of infinite but personal realities, of spiritual but concrete, active realities […]. Dogmatic accommodations, dialectical justifications, and rational apologetics are later additions that overlap the religious experience while at the same time clarifying, sterilizing and immobilizing it. The philosophical expression of religion is one of the many superconstructions that the logical and discursive spirits have built on all things (Papini: “La religione sta da sé,” in Testimonianze 56).¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Papini: letter to Ardengo Soffici dated September 11, 1908.
¹⁰⁸ Cf. Corrado Rosso: “Papini e Bergson,” in Giovanni Papini, 237: “We know that Sorel proclaimed himself a faithful disciple of Bergson, and that he founded, in his name, the movement called «gauche bergsonienne». More or less forcibly the vital momentum was transferred to the revolutionary elites that assert themselves through violence, sensing and affirming new values.” Already in 1907 Papini had expressed to Croce his intention to read all the works of Sorel. Sorel’s popularity was soon recognized also by Corradini. Cf. Corradini: Discorsi 55-7: “Trade-unionism has come to unmask the rogues and confuse the cowards. The state of war between the classes must be unceasing […]. In his Reflections on Violence Sorel often glorifies the state of war as a fortifier of the bourgeoisie […], trade-unionism is extremely warlike. […] it is a new form of aristocracy born of the labor forces.”
¹⁰⁹ Cf. Papini: “La religione sta da sé,” in Il Rinnovamento, II, 1908, in Testimonianze 44-5: “But can you really say that explaining and representing or ideally remaking reality, or a part of reality, is greater than that reality or
By countering the Hegelian position of the inferiority of religion to philosophy, Papini, in fact, returns again to the Modernist contrast between Life and forms and, consequently, to the defense of that Particular which conceptualizing abstractions must necessarily suppress. But, after Papini’s short ‘religious experience,’ the Particular will be identified (while Soffici bursts on the scene) in the much stronger link that ties the intellectual to his land (Italy, Tuscany, Bulciano) and to his tradition and culture, which for Papini is the culture of the realistic Particular as opposed to the generalizations of Metaphysics, and therefore, among other things, the Italian Vico should be ‘saved’ from the Germanizing Croce: “Vico, by going against extreme Franco-German rationalism, had to take sides, being the opposer he was, with the more realistic Anglo-Italian rationalism […] . He was a man who knew the value of small things, of particulars […] and, in short, of experience, which is the experience of reality” (Papini: “Giambattista Vico,” in Filosofia 480-1).

The rejection of Hegelianism, seen as a tool for reducing the different to the identical, attacks, modernistically, the unity created by conceptual thought as an arbitrary construction, and connects, nationalistically, the homeland to the preservation of the Particular under attack, and hence it proceeds, imperialistically, to spread to the world the kind of thought that its country would represent:

We have to be Italian in everything, even in thinking. […] we realize that we have dwelled exceedingly on the foreign present and forgotten our own past […] part of that native force which has many times made of Italians “carrying the pen and the sword” the keepers and inspirers of the West (Papini: “La tradizione italiana,” in Filosofia 1218).

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part of reality? […] than the rationalistic prejudice of believing that conceptual thought can fully know and definitively judge that which is not conceptual thought.”

100 Cf. Papini: letter to Ardengo Soffici dated May 23, 1908, in Papini–Soffici: Carteggio, I, 225: “You have called me back, no less, to the land, to our land.”

111 Cf. Papini, The Failure 300: “But the moment I crawl into my shell, mind and body, brain and heart, the moment I would really get inside a race […]. No matter what I do I am a Tuscan.”
With this perspective Papini begins his collaboration with La Voce, directed by the now Crocean Prezzolini, working at restoring to Italy the awareness of its culture by returning to the “great countrymen” (Papini: “L’Italia risponde,” in Filosofia 974), and rejecting, as per the journal’s Crocean positions, Corradini’s Nationalism while still proclaiming himself a nationalist:

you have to think that by defending the homeland you are not only defending the interests of a small few and, sometimes, even the interests of all, but what to us is worth more than anything: a civilization, a tradition, a language, a culture. These are the things that really make our homeland […]. This, in a nutshell, is our nationalism: the necessary material defense and the love, study, and spreading of our culture (Papini: “Nazionalismo,” in Politica 77-9).

It has long been debated, and rightly so, about Papini feeling uncomfortable among the people of La Voce, about Papini working in the shadow of the defeat of the “great miraculous dream” (Langella: 115) and unable to accept the new project of slow moral education, related, in Prezzolini’s words, to the political and economic problems of the nation. But we must not forget that Prezzolini himself had inaugurated the journal complaining, with La nostra promessa [Our Promise], about the miserable conditions in which spiritual matters were held, and, above all claiming that La Voce had been founded in the context of an elitist project designed to create an intellectual caste not subservient to the management of political power, albeit reduced to functions of mediation in the ‘limited’ activity concerning the

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112 Papini: “L’Italia risponde,” in La Voce, December 1908, in Eresie letterarie, Florence, Vallecchi, 1932. Cf. Papini: letter to Ardengo Soffici dated April 4, 1907, in Papini–Soffici, Carteggio, I, 130: “As for foreigners, haven’t we already discovered in Paris that one of the reasons for our friendship is our common origin, homeland, country?”

113 In 1907 Croce had published his famous essay Di un carattere della più recente letteratura italiana, where Nationalism was included among the currents belonging to “the great industry of emptiness.”

114 Cf. Prezzolini: L’italiano inutile 107-8: “We too, after all, were nationalists. Papini had inaugurated La Voce with a beautiful article, L’Italia risponde […]. But we went to war against the nationalist faction precisely because of the elyngio, i.e. its rhetoric.”

Cf. Papini: letter to Giovanni Amendola dated June 8, 1909, in Eva Amendola Kühn: 183: “As for nationalism, remember that it was never opposed in La Voce, so there is no contradiction. What was opposed was the manner in which it is supported by some people.”

115 Cf. Papini: letter to Ardengo Soffici dated December 30, 1908 in Papini–Soffici, Carteggio, I, 408: “I have received the 2nd no. of La Voce […] it seems chilly, cold, frosty. Neither fish nor fowl.”

Cf. Papini: letter to Giuseppe Prezzolini dated May 18, 1908, in Storia di un’amicizia, I, 215-6: “Up to a certain point your program, then, is the same as mine, because the first thing to do, as far as regards the improvement of intelligence, is precisely to force people to think well […], however it is not my program completely. I think that it stays too much within the limits of the method and communication of knowledge […] a Critique that is a bit more liberal but nevertheless a Critique.”

116 It is worth recalling Amendola’s claim that Rousseau had ‘moved’ more men than Louis XIV.
study of the social dynamics. Papini tries to put his usual ideas at the service of this diminished function, and the result is a curious mix that is itself the image of the condition of the intellectual and his malaise:

to work alongside the State; doing what the State fails to do, and doing better what it is under the illusion of doing. […] The history of our Risorgimento is there to show that in some cases the involvement of independent entities of action, in competition with those of the State, is decisive and conclusive […]. This union for culture should have not thousands of members but a few active, enthusiastic men in constant contact with all the living forces of free education, to direct them and multiply them. Employees? Perhaps – but free, spontaneous, independent employees. […] a central office of volunteers that can impose itself not by dint of authority but through wisdom, perseverance, and the usefulness of its work (Papini: “Il ministero libero dell’istruzione,” in Prose morali 247-51).

At the same time, and precisely because of this malaise, Papini perfects his project for a ‘return to earth’ and, on the grounds of his readings of Weininger, establishes an interpretation of reality set on a binary basis (Male/Female; Country/City; Dante/Petrarch; Stone/Honey; Genius/Ingenuity; etc.) which allows him to rebuild, in the image of the Nation/Region, the bond between Spirit and Particular in the perspective of a reactionary Romanticism that ultimately hypostatizes the lesson, to use Soffici’s term, of Italianity, which

Cf. Carpi: 32: “Few people like Amendola believed that it is the business of culture […] to carry out the important task of repairing the life of our nation, and that therefore it was necessary to restore (or establish) the social primacy of intellectuals: in this he was absolutely in line with the program of La Voce.”

Papini: “Il ministero libero dell’istruzione,” in La Voce, in 3 numbers during 1911.

Cf. Papini: letter to Giuseppe Prezzolini dated July 3, 1910, in Storia di un’amicizia, I, 255-6: “it seems to me that you tend to overvalue external changes to public bodies and undervalue inner changes in individuals, which are the only ones that really count.”

The works of the Austrian philosopher spread quickly among Italian intellectual circles. On his good fortune in Italy see the now classic volume by Cavaglion: La filosofia del pressappoco.

Cf. Papini: “La campagna,” in La Voce, August 5, 1909, in Prose morali 818-21: “Here, in the newspapers and in the cities, you suffocate, smother, drown and die from the heat, from the stuffiness, from the stench of the closeness and the printworks […]. Let’s get away; let’s flee to the country […] the question here is not to know: it’s to feel, to sense, to enjoy, to love. […] the harshness of talking and the simplicity of life against literary fiction and boring luxuries.”

Cf. Papini: “La pietra,” in Fieramosca, December 19-20, 1911, in Prose morali 1331-4: “I thought of stone, which is truly the heart, backbone, and hide of this country […]. Real men, strong men, are similar to stone and not to mud, honey, or wax.” Cf. Soffici: letter to Giovanni Papini dated August 19, 1908, in Papini–Soffici: Carteggio, Vol. I, 314: “Upon reading the words that you wrote about that sky I perfectly imagined Bulciano and I thought that it must be beautiful in this period. The memory that I have is of a town made of stone with yellow patches of wheat here and there, stone houses, stone roofs; and even the people and the oaks and the sheep and the flowers seem to be made of stone when I think of it.” So the ‘stone’ image was probably suggested to Papini by Soffici.

Cf. Asor Rosa: Scrittori e popolo 63: “Regionalism is the expression of a feeling of bourgeois realism, which seeks in the detailed analysis of concrete situations the way out of a very real crisis of ideal perspectives. Going back to the country, to the city, to the customs and habits of the region, means in this context trying to find a way towards a more secure hegemony by gaining awareness of new social tasks. Therefore, regionalism is not the negation of the nation, but a faster and safer road to it.”
proves to be the ‘realistic’ solidity of life beyond the conceptualizing deceptions of ideologies.\textsuperscript{122} The themes relative to the ‘return to order’ now seem ready, but Papini has yet to live his paradoxical Futurist experience.

V. Thinker, Soldier, Farmer, God

When Papini and Soffici, eager to get out of \textit{La Voce}, plan a journal based on “rockets, paradoxes, immoralism, freedom” (Papini: \textit{Carteggio} with Soffici, II, 321), Italy is deeply changed. With the economic recession of 1907, the industrial classes, made strong by the protectionist policy, turn their backs to Giolitti and begin to polarize their positions against industry workers (the \textit{Lega Industriale Torinese} [Turin Industrial League] was created in 1906, leading to the founding of \textit{Confindustria} [Confederation of Italian Industry] in 1910), just as the ranks of revolutionary syndicalists in the Socialist Party were beginning to swell.\textsuperscript{123}

The respective positions begin to expand beyond the boundaries of wage bargaining: the employers (in industry and agriculture) begin to engage in disputes, as noted by Riccardo Bachi, even on simple matters of principle, while ‘workers’ demands now overflowed widely from wage-related issues to include matters involving the organization of labor” (Gaeta: 163).

The war in Libya (1911-1912), conducted with the consent of the Catholics and the participation of the nationalists, breaks the link between socialism and Giolitti’s liberalism, thereby shifting the government’s axis to the right and, by suggesting the mirage of expansion, allowing the regrouping of an anti-Giolittian front including the liberal Right, the Nationalists and the Clericalists (the coalition that will come into power in 1914 with the Salandra cabinet). Meanwhile Corradini, at the first Nationalist Congress of 1910, agitating

\textsuperscript{122} Cf. Papini: “Alfredo Panzini,” in \textit{Il Popolo d’Italia} under the title “Il romanzo della guerra,” December 18, 1914, in \textit{Stroncature}, in \textit{Scrittori} 841: “He may take a peek at the pits of ideology but he keeps his feet firmly planted on his native land. Which is the land of Romagna and the land of Italy.”

Here we get a glimpse of a certain kind of boorish nationalism that will be typical of the fascist period. Cf. Papini: “Il pensiero di Napoleone,” in \textit{La Stampa}, March 1912, in \textit{Política} 600: “Culture, before the young Bonaparte, was purely Italian and particularly Tuscan”.

\textsuperscript{123} In 1907, the FIOM [\textit{Federazione Italiana Operai Metallurgici}, Italian Federation of Metalworkers] opted for compulsory membership to the union, marking a gradual stiffening of the relations with employers, which were becoming increasingly organized in alliances that made them better equipped to resist against workers’ strikes. From 1913 onwards almost every strike ended with the defeat of the workers. In 1912, the revolutionary syndicalists became the majority in the Party.
the myth of Italy as a “proletarian nation” and transposing the ‘struggle’ from classes to nations, brings Socialist issues back into the nationalist discourse, preparing the ground for the future economic debate with large swathes of revolutionary syndicalists:

the associations of industrialists and agrarians were given voice […] by the right-wing liberals, like Salandra […] and […] by the nascent organized nationalism. The latter, presenting itself as a mediator and unifier between the middle classes and the intellectuals […] will provide a blueprint for social integration and organic systemization, including the popular masses, based on the idea of a national productive community (Schininà: 287).

It is in this juncture that Nationalism proposes itself as the ideology of the agrarian and industrial groups (i.e. as the ideology of the nation’s monopolistic capital), finding a connection with the vision of the State and the duties of Producers124 suggested by Alfredo Rocco, namely: cartelization, corporatism, protectionism, expansionism.

At the three nationalist conferences, Papini and Prezzolini are not even mentioned; the group referring to Corradini, Federzoni, Coppola, Occhini, etc., which converged around the magazine Idea Nazionale (funded by industrial groups) since 1911, is now following a path that is far from the perspectives of the circle of Florentine intellectuals and aimed at finding a consensus that cannot be that of the intellectuals-technicians proposed by La Voce, let alone that of Papini’s men-Gods. In this situation the immoralistic opening of Lacerba emphasizing the rights of an imaginary ‘party of geniuses’125 comes as the last attempt of the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia to directly manage a project of revolt, modulated, on the one hand, on the Modernist component of attacking the constructions of rational logic (and its corollaries: social conventions, lifestyle, aesthetic canon)126 and, on the other, on a

124 Cf. Corradini: “Diritti e doveri nazionali dei produttori,” in Discorsi 341: “you know not what you are, nor what you could and should be politically, nationally. Very good at taking care of your business […], full of intelligence and industriousness […], you lack an advanced consciousness. Just beside you, below you, the proletariat managed to acquire it; they had their Karl Marx; you didn’t.”

125 Cf. Papini and Soffici: “Introibo,” in Lacerba, January 1, 1913, in Prose morali 89: “He who does not acknowledge to men of genius, seekers, artists, the right to contradict themselves from one day to the next is not worthy to look at them […] All is nothing in the world, except genius. Let nations go to ruin, let peoples die of grief if that is necessary for a single man-creator to live and succeed.”

romanticism of reactionary inspiration\textsuperscript{127} that, by insisting (as usual!) on the need for a change in Spirit, breaks out in an attack on Modernity as a mere quantitative transformation. Such an attack, of course, gives room to the image of Italy and of its traditions that embodies and defends that Spirit, in a movement that will inevitably escalate on the horizon of war, confirming the combined operation, according to Papini, of Modernism and Nationalism. In war, the petty-bourgeois intellectual sees the opportunity for a romantic reactivation of qualitative values that he naively identifies with his own protest.\textsuperscript{128}

We will get to the war shortly, but first it should be said that it is also in this perspective that takes place the paradoxical and momentary alliance with Marinetti’s Futurism,\textsuperscript{129} an Italian avant-garde movement with an apparently critical-destructive function: “In Futurism there was first of all the intention of creating an avant-garde atmosphere in Italy too […] and its nationalism is more fruitful than the one that consists in bringing out the Roman eagles and the century of the Medici” (Papini: “Aspettativa,” in \textit{Filosofia} 854).

Futurism is love of motion and commotion, and I have always been the enemy of my own peace and that of others; (…) I was the leader of the only \textit{Sturm und Drang} that there was in Italy before Futurism. Futurism is a mad love for Italy and for the greatness of Italy, and I have dreamed of a renewed primacy of my country since childhood; I was one of the first propagandists of nationalism, and in 1906 I started a \textit{Campagna per il forzato risveglio} [Campaign for a Forced Awakening] (Papini: “Accettazione,” in \textit{Filosofia} 876).

It is highly significant that when adhering to Futurism Papini remembers his now distant “Campagna per il forzato risveglio.” Futurism, as already intuited by Prezzolini, offers him “a pulpit from which to get to the masses that he had never been able to reach” (\textit{Discorso su 127} Cf. Papini: “Freghiamoci della politica,” in \textit{Lacerba}, October 1913, in \textit{Politica} 86.
128 Cf. Isnenghi: \textit{Grande Guerra} 98: “the looming conflict like a sort of yearned-for point of arrival, a solution to social and individual evils.”
129 Cf. Viviani: \textit{Giacche rosse} 33: “\textit{Lacerba} […] was considered the official organ of Futurism […] I remember that at one point the Futurists of Milan – and especially Marinetti – insisted in every way to have this qualification placed under the masthead of \textit{Lacerba}”.)
Giovanni Papini 75), a synthesis between politics and philosophy, on the horizon of an elitist cultural action which had always been at the core of his project 130. “The most revolutionary work is that which consists in changing feelings, in rejuvenating and cleansing minds, in accustoming to daring and folly. […] A true revolution begins in the mind, not on the barricades” (Papini: “La necessità della rivoluzione,” in Filosofia 915).

Papini’s early dream, the alliance of the ‘few,’ will soon shatter against apparently aesthetic issues and, especially, against charges of a dogmatic involution of the Futurist groups in Milan, just as the interventionist campaign is looming on the horizon. 131 Actually, Marinetti’s glorification of the mythological-industrial apparatus was a theme that did not belong to Papini’s worldview; indeed, he tended more and more to promote the also mythological recovery of the rural culture and its alleged value system which will find full expression after the war, in the name of Carducci before than in the name of Christ. On the other hand, however, immoralism, both of the Milanese and Florentine Futurists, could find support in the belligerent and reactionary exaltation of the feral instincts of man 132 (another old theme of Papini’s) that democratic society (and its presumed hegemonic philosophy: Croce) tried to suppress. 133

With great consistency, Papini interprets it ‘spiritually,’ finding in the German instance the model of everything he has fought against so far:

130 Cf. Papini: “Discorso di Roma,” delivered at the Teatro Costanti in Roma on February 21, 1913, in Lacerba, March 1913, in L’esperienza futurista, in Filosofia 892-893: “we want, instead, to prepare in Italy the advent of this new man who does not need crutches or consolations, who does not fear the void and the empty heavens; who aspires to creation […] Italy, which for so long has trailed behind the great nations, must resume its place as a creator and a forerunner.”

131 See the famous controversy with Boccioni. At the bottom of Papini’s criticism of what he calls the “typographie novelties” of Futurism (and this should give pause to those who call “avant-garde” the entire Florentine movement) there is of course his ancient fear (not coincidentally he draws a parallel between D’Annunzianism and Futurism) of a purely external/material transformation instead of a spiritual one.

132 Cf. Papini: “Picchia e non ascolta,” in Lacerba, April 17, 1915, in Prose morali 202: “Civilization is a long tour that begins with the first scratch and ends with a giant Krupp mortar. But both acts of violence – the lesser one and the greater one – coexist and are necessary for the development of our species.”

133 Cf. Isnenghi: Grande Guerra 112-114: “When taking position against […] interventionist intellectuals in December 1914, […] Benedetto Croce sensed that at stake were all the principles of the world of which he was considered and considered himself to be the cultural interpreter. […] Before this band of petty bourgeois in a state of agitation and potential uprising, Croce’s severe condemnation could not be late in coming […] and these, conversely, assign him this role of ideological guarantor of a society that compresses or excludes them, and as such they put him under indictment.”
Our whole being rears up before the German. [...] We are indebted to France, over the last two hundred years, for half of our culture and art [...] German civilization is mechanical and abstract. It starts with metaphysics [...] It sways between useless nebulosity and narrow-minded materialism (Papini: “Il dovere dell’Italia,” in Politica 278-9).

War appears as the opportunity to finally bring to fruition, in a generational perspective, the old nationalist-Risorgimento project:

This is no time to draw back. Now that we are at the final attempt to remake a nation out of this rabble of classes [...]. There’s a new generation that is brighter, stronger, more daring, more cultured, more honest than the people who preceded and govern us. This generation has now the right to take its place. They have wasted our homeland: the least they can do is to leave us the effort at getting it back on its feet. The war will not be enough. Afterwards there will have to be a complete change of the ruling caste (“Il nostro impegno,” in Politica 297-8).

The transformation of Lacerba into a loudspeaker for interventionism (with the temporary suspension of articles dedicated to art and literature) is still a Risorgimento-based rejection of Giolitti’s political order, the delicate balance of which is now seen in terms of fragmentation, of failure to build a Nation, which now, thanks of the conflict (while the construction of internationalist Socialism is falling to pieces), has the task of representing Unity not

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134 Also see the article “I veri padroni d’Italia. I tedeschi della Banca Commerciale,” where the gradual monopolization of the powerful financial and industrial groups of Germany is clearly denounced.

On the persisting of Risorgimento-related topics cf. Papini: “Finiamola!”, in Lacerba, September 1914, in La paga del sabato, in Politica 293: “But, ultimately, we can believe this: that if tomorrow Italy should go where it must go and our regiments cross the border and our ships heave in sight of Pula and Trieste, all Italians will take their places to finally win the last war of unification.”

135 Cf. Vallecchi, letter to Giovanni Papini dated August 6, 1914, in Papini-Vallecchi: Carteggio 19: “What shall we do about Lacerba? It seems to me that before the greatness of the moment it would be impossible to continue printing words in freedom or graphic experimentations. Why not dedicate these issues to the matters of the moment? Why don’t you raise the flag of Latin civilization held high by the liveliness of your mind?”

Cf. Papini: letter to Ardengo Soffici dated August 4, 1914, in Papini–Soffici: Carteggio, II, 396-7: “I believe therefore that Lacerba should take part, in any way possible, in the spiritual manifestations of the moment [...]. I am not considering the matter as related to politics in the strict sense of the word [...]. What interests me is this: This is a conflict between two civilizations: the Latin-British-Slavic one and the German one. If Germany were to win, resulting in the crushing of France, we and all the civilized peoples of Europe would be subjected to its influence, if not spiritual, material and cultural. [...] The barbarism of moralism, of militarism, of drudgery and mental obtuseness.”

136 Cf. Papini: “Gli scopi della guerra,” in Il Resto del Carlino, October 1916, in Politica 1113: “Today a great number of workers, the very ones that the Socialists, they say, represent, are part of another organization called the Italian army and are involved, like the others, in doing their duty. Indeed, very many socialists [...] are fighting against Austria, proving that they have understood that this war is as socialist as its is nationalist.”
through parliament but through the army: “Giolitti worthily represents his deputies; but the Italian Chamber does not represent the Italian people especially now” (Papini: Giolitti, in Politica 992-3).

As can be easily expected, the image of the army as a ‘unifying’ force leaves the way open to populism, which materializes in the long-awaited coming together, in the trenches, of soldiers and intellectuals: a populism which, of course, focuses on the docile image of the peasant willing to obey and to die for his lieutenant and his Nation.

Papini links his typical pedagogical perspective to these myths for about a year (“Not only do we have to materially redeem Istria and the Trentino – we have to morally redeem all the people of Italy,” “La nostra guerra,” in Politica 424); but something breaks down already in late 1915: “In the end we are reduced to a chastely irre dentist war against Austria […]. I can not, by force, get excited over such a war” (“La mia vigliaccheria,” in Politica 245). Papini in fact declares his unwillingness to give up his opposition, and rejects the role of mediator and controller of the people on behalf of the ruling class that the war situation assigns to the petty-bourgeois intellectual. To the enthusiastic Soffici he writes: “Rid yourself of this regimental rust, if you can” (Papini: Carteggio, III, 60):

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137 This is outlined, with rare psychological insight, by Gadda in his Diario di guerra e di prigionia, and by Boine in the harshness of his Discorsi militari. Cf. Isnenghi: Grande Guerra 143-5: “What, specifically, does a writer expect to achieve […]? To live […] finding support and a sort of warmth – a participation that has no need for words, but for actions, repeated gestures, a common destiny – in other men […] the remission of himself to the group […] the mystique of integrating with the group […] removed from loneliness, but also from doubt and responsibility […] the intellectual use of the war offers the variant of the intellectual’s self-denial as such, and of employing the war to enhance a subordinate rooting […] the need for a peaceful shipwreck amidst the group.” Borgese’s Rubè will be the novel of this social-psychological process.

138 Cf. Prezzolini: L’italiano inutile 165: “The chance to be with a man who did not belong to my world of writers and dreamers was a discovery. I thought I would more willingly live in a house with him than with many of my closest friends.”

139 Cf. Corradini: Discorsi 359: “Talking with you is for me a source of joy and pride. I’ve always had the desire to understand you better, to better understand the simple, generous people.”

140 Cf. Soffici: letter to Giovanni Papini dated September 7, 1916, in Papini-Soffici, Carteggio, III, 67: “The only thing that sustains me and makes me proud, despite everything, is the increasingly greater understanding of the Italian people that I am acquiring through the soldiers.”

140 The General Staff was also quick to realize this and prevented La paga del sabato from reaching the Front, considering it an “anarchist publication.”
nine-tenths of the time this war is the exact opposite of Marinetti’s motto: marcire e non marciare! [to rot, and not to march!] Real enthusiasm could have been aroused three years ago, when we were looking forward to chopping off the Germans’ claws, beaks, tails, and peckers. Today, anyone who understands anything can see that there is no other prospect than a mediocre accommodation […]. Now, I am greatly surprised that you – a skeptical, smart, brilliant, artistic, etc., etc., man – can be taken up by a deal that is basically anything but intelligent (Papini: Carteggio with Soffici, III, 122).

Papini (perhaps also because, being unfit for military service, he was not physically present at the front), intuitively understands before many others, that the form of power reserved for the lower classes is part of a pyramid structure that does not place the intellectual at its vertex (which had always been his goal), but, anticipating the ‘return to order’ by a couple of years, finds no way of replying if not by attacking Modernity as a whole and recuperating, again in a binary perspective, the image of a country (Italy) that wants to stand up to modernity (and for which the intellectual must fight):

We have to save Italy because Italy will save the rest of the world. […] And for all of Italy, the true Italy – not for the interests of a single class, a single institution, a single party. The three forces that will be left stronger after the war (Church, Finance, Labor), that is, Priests, Industrialists and Bankers, Workers, are only working to forward their own interests. […] Where are the truly free, the independent, the unwaged spirits, those who speak and think and work for the greater, general interests of Italy and not for particular, partial, and often vile and dangerous interests? It will be up to us, to us few idealists and mystics, to resume the interrupted work (Papini, Storia di un’amicizia, I, 298).141

In other words: a patriotic, populist142 religion of Carduccian143 inspiration in which the Tuscan poet is reproposed, in opposition to Croce144 (Prezzolini had forecast that Croce would be for his generation what Carducci had been for his own), as a symbol of Papini’s creed:

141 Papini: letter to Giuseppe Prezzolini dated September 20, 1918.
142 Cf. Asor Rosa: Scrittori e popolo 49-50: “It is the primitive peasant or paleo-communal community that in which the poet identifies his ideal of government […] Carducci was laying out an actual corpus of populist themes and motifs, from which his disciples would literally draw.”
143 Cf. Papini: L’uomo Carducci, Bologna, Zanichelli, 1918, in Scrittori 621: “this Carduccian religion […], we will forever maintain that Italy is the most glorious and victorious nation in the world.”
144 Cf. Papini: “Renato Serra,” in La Voce, October 15, 1915, in Scrittori 920-1: “the admiration that […] years ago, he had for Benedetto Croce. […] One, the academic, unable to read a poet […]. The other […] all subtlety and sensitivity […]. Serra, a just man, admired in Croce the industrious, tireless worker, the assiduous scholar […]. On the other hand, his religious loyalty went clearly to Carducci, whom he especially considered the last master of Italian sentiment.”
“they put their hopes only in appearances. Changes in classes, shifts in aristocracies […],
transformations in political regimes, in economic systems […] the values of modernity […]
have led us to war […]. Quantity instead of Quality, the Outwardly instead of the Inwardly”
(“Amore e morte,” in Prose morali 922-3).

And so for Papini the ‘return to order’ becomes the ultimate abolition of a historical
perspective that is the other side of its defeat, and dissolves in a regressive Romanticism that
presents its reactionary retreat as a revolutionary movement,145 centered once again on the
usual necessity (but now already in a Christian perspective) of a change in the human spirit:

It is man not yet freed of his feral nature and greed that wants to extend the
boundaries of his command […]. It is the appetite for eating and enslaving, the
indestructible prerogative of all terrans […] The rot is in man, the seed of war is in man (“Perché? (Dopo due anni),” in Politica 1103).

The root of wars – and of all evil – was thus in human nature, in the soul […] There
has been no shortage of transformations in the world, but all of them incomplete and
hypocritical. The changes were skin-deep, not affecting the core […]. Moving people
from one country to another, changing conditions, regimes, political systems or
philosophies, we have seen that it is of no use, or useful only as whitewash (La
seconda nascita, in Autoritratti 546-54).

In other words, Papini appropriates the judgment on war that had been pronounced in 1914 by
the Socialists, narrativizing it as a clash between opposing imperialisms:

there is a grain of truth in the Socialist interpretation: that war is originated, rather
than by political, ideal, or national motives, by a general cause of economic nature
[…] The most general and recognizable economic fact of the last decades of the past
century and the first years of the present is the increase in population and production.
Up to 1914 too many goods were being manufactured and too many people being
born. There was a superabundance […]. Hence the need for all countries – because
none are entirely self-sufficient – to import food and raw materials and export
manufactured goods. Double rivalries on the world markets: competition to buy up
grain, coal, and metals, and competition for cornering markets in which to dispose of

145 Cf. Papini: “L’uomo Carducci,” in Scrittori 681-2: “Like almost all those who seem rebels, Carducci is a
conservative. He wants to recover […] the indigenous, autochthonous traditions […] reactionary revolutionary
Carducci.”
But then, while inaugurating the intellectual regret for the *belle époque*,\(^\text{146}\) he transfigures the conflict, following his usual schemes, on the idealistic plane of the usual clash between Spirit and Matter, with (as the ‘biennio rosso’ [two red years] erupts), Italy on one side and Capitalism-Socialism (Modernity!) on the other. War is now seen as a clash between “Matter and Matter” (“Amore e morte,” in *Prose morali* 921), recovering the ancient dualism between Mammon and Caliban:\(^\text{147}\)

We can conclude, I think, that the present contrast between Capitalism and Bolshevism, between Mammon and Caliban, is the same that was put into verse in the Middle Ages under the name of disputation between the Fat and the Thin. And their war is a war between full Pigs and empty Pigs, between sated Beasts and hungry Beasts. […] I believe in a humanity that goes beyond mammonism and calibanism (Papini: “Mammona e Calibano,” in *Politica* 233).

The old dualism is now formalized on a decidedly anti-historical level aimed, as always, at promoting the transformation of souls, but this time in an evangelical direction:

It is not enough to change regimes and statutes. The souls of men must be changed too […]. All the evils from which we suffer do not come from outside but from within […]. Changing the face of the earth and all the constitutions will be nothing, will mean nothing, will be pointless until the soul of each of us is renewed and rebuilt […]. There is however a guide where even today we can find the principles of this ‘second birth’ […] the Gospel” (“Amore e morte,” in *Prose morali* 924).

While Nationalism is preparing ideologically to ‘capture’ Fascism, Papini, having moved close to the position of the ultra-catholic writer Domenico Giuliani, links his previous ‘religion of the earth’ to Catholicism,\(^\text{148}\) and finds in Christ, the Man-God, the project that he

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\(^\text{146}\) Cf. Papini: “Paul Fort” (1918), in *Testimonianze*, in *Scrittori* 1188: “only now, the beauty of that great European peace that we thought was so sultry.”

\(^\text{147}\) Cf. Papini: “Amore e morte,” in *Prose morali* 918-20: “We have been deceived, and we have deceived; we have lied to ourselves, and to others […]. Earth has never been a paradise – but it had never been, as now, a hell […]. A five-year experience, a mammoth experience of murder, theft, lying […] now they continue to slaughter one other by themselves, in the family. There are not enough dead to satisfy their hunger […]. Caliban is on the same road as Mammon. The victorious president and the enriched servant have the same psychology. Seize, snatch, devour.”

Cf. Papini: *Story of Christ* 451: “Plutocracy and demagogy, sisters in purpose and in spirit, […] contend with each other for control of the seditious masses”.

\(^\text{148}\) Cf. Papini: *La seconda nascita*, in *Autoritratti* 588: “How is it possible – Silverio said to me – that you feel nostalgic for the good old life, for our healthy Christian civilization of countries gathered round the church like
had been unable to carry out: the transformation of man’s consciousness, which is the
transformation of the world (the “process of decay of the absolute spirit”):

During the war […] I reread […] Tolstoy and […] Dostoyevsky, and that drove me to
reread the Gospel […], I came to think that the only salvation for mankind, and
absolute safeguard against the return of the present horrors, could only be a radical
change of the soul: to pass, that is, from wildness to holiness […] but, continuing in
my lonely and anxious meditations, I came to persuade myself that Christ, the teacher
of morals so contrary to the nature of man, could not have been merely a man, but
God. And at this point intervened […] the secret but infallible work of Grace (“Il
Croce e la Croce,” in Filosofia 609).\footnote{Papini: “Il Croce e la Croce,” La Nuova Antologia, March 1932. And in the same article he writes, 584: “as if
the history of man were not mainly […] the history of ideas, of opinions, beliefs, and feelings.”}

It is evident that, on these grounds, the resistance to Fascism expressed by the newly-Catholic
you see, even in these days, that there is a Justice. […] What was founded by murder is about to collapse for a
murder.” This is of course a reference to the murder of the congressman Giacomo Matteotti. On this matter also
see Papini’s correspondence with Pancrazi.} ultimately reveals itself to be a blunt tool now that it has to deal “with the composite
synthesis of the Fascist regime, rebellious and normalized, neo-pagan and concordatario”
(Isnenghi: Papini 112). As Togliatti remarked in his Lezioni of 1935, the various sources and
motivations of the Fascist ideology, including certain anti-capitalist myths, allowed a
composite doctrine that could put together the myths of Romanity/Latinity with the critique of
mercantilism and of a “proto-globalization of Anglo-Saxon derivation” (Cervo: 31): a right-
wing Romanticism that had always been a feature of Papini’s worldview, so much so that in a
few years’ time, proving the continuity of this theme, Fascism will appear to him as the last
war of independence. This was conducted in the meta-historical restoration of ancient values,
not excluding, as also shown by Prezzolini, the fulfillment, through Mussolini, of the
generational project described above.\footnote{Cf. Prezzolini: L’italiano inutile 186: “Mussolini seemed to me a thing of my generation, the man who had
translated into politics all that could be transposed of what we had thought and hoped.”}

Even so, it cannot be sufficiently stressed that we should avoid making a direct
equation between that generation and Fascism, because those years and those environments

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the history of man were not mainly […] the history of ideas, of opinions, beliefs, and feelings.”}
\item \footnote{Cf. Papini: letter to Domenico Giulioti dated June 18, 1924, in Giulioti–Papini: Carteggio, I, 232: “And yet
you see, even in these days, that there is a Justice. […] What was founded by murder is about to collapse for a
murder.” This is of course a reference to the murder of the congressman Giacomo Matteotti. On this matter also
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generated both Fascism and anti-fascism. The radicalness of the modernist experience provided the opportunity for a break-away that the socialist movement could have made its own.\(^{152}\) As will be explained by Gramsci, always attentive to and interested in that generation, understanding Truth as the social/cultural truth of the hegemonic ideology of the ruling class was a point that could lead to revolutionary results — provided, of course, that the intellectual would be able to overcome the mystification of his alleged autonomy: the same mystification that puts him, even unknowingly, at the service of the ruling class, whereby his criticism is almost exclusively addressed at mere social fictions instead of at the real bases of a… social structure. What Modernism sees as the ability to gain knowledge of life in limited, fragmented segments (the falsifying forms of a Totality which the epistemological viewpoint considers non-recomposable),\(^ {153}\) what it sometimes overturns, in the illusion of control, in the exaltation of the unknowability of life, is the operation of an economic system that seems to transcend it, deforming (in many different ways) all its aspirations to freedom. The critique of the totalizing claims to dominate reality, the same critique that Papini moved to science and then to philosophy, is a critique against the identitary violence imposed by metaphysics. Yet the ‘particularism’ that stems from it, when it fails to understand itself, to see itself as alienated and distorted, ends up finding in aberrations such as Nationalism and Fascism the opposite of mechanization/capitalist rationalization, instead of a degenerated/perfected expression of it.\(^ {154}\) The absence of Totality in fact requires a replacement: a surrogate that can

\(^{152}\) Cf. Emilio Gentile: *Il mito dello Stato nuovo* 25: “it was a grievous error of Italian socialism to have ignored for many years the existence of the middle class as a social force, with its own aspirations and capacity for autonomy (of course relative) in political decisions.”

\(^{153}\) Cf. Papini: *The Failure* 271-2: “What I ask for and plead for humbly, or bended knee, with all the fervor and all the passion of my soul is: a little certainty. Something I can believe in with surety, just one, small, tiny atom of unquestionable Truth! […] I need something that is true. I cannot do without it. I cannot live unless I have it […]. I have never sought anything else. From my earliest days I have lived for nothing else, I have fathomed a thousand, yes, ten thousand hearts. In vain! […] I ruined my eyes reading the old and the latest books. In vain I have deafened my brain with the wranglings of numberless rival philosophers. In vain […] I turned inward upon myself, harkening to inner voices, humbly preparing the way for the great revelation. But nothing! Absolutely nothing came, and no one answered me! […] many obstructions fell, many walls were torn down and leveled […]. But behind every partition, emptiness; beyond every wall, darkness; and an echo so perverse that to every “yea” of hope there answered a faint but neverending “nay”!”

\(^{154}\) For that reason “modernism and nationalism can be said to have been engaged in a pas a deux,” in Adamson: “Modernism in Florence,” in *Italian Modernism* 223.
be formalized even, as in Pirandello, in the harmony of the loss of meaning; or, as in Papini, in the dream of a regressive, resistant community: Italian, Christian, and yes, even fascist.
Chapter 3: The Standpoint of Life

I. The Style of Reality. Ardengo Soffici Between Modernism and Anti-Modernism

The luckiest man is the one who can live in contingency the way flowers do
Ardengo Soffici

Everything is wonderful and symbolic […]
Even these flowers – here: you can smell the odor of Africa
Ardengo Soffici

“For all his life – wrote Giuseppe De Robertis – Ardengo Soffici was at the mercy of the seasons” (*Fior fiore* 188). By this he meant, following a critical tradition that spans from Boine to Edoardo Sanguineti, that the metonymic chain relating to the Nietzschean assumptions of anti-morality, irony, contingency, lightness, the ‘joy of becoming,’ is activated in Soffici only in the presence of the midday light that allows to transfigure in oneself, in happy acceptance, the world deserted by the certainty of all Values. By interpreting the difference between himself and Soffici as the contrast between ‘being established’ and ‘being propagated’ (which is basically the contrast between the antithetic principles of Form and Life), the ‘moralist’ Boine was revealing the rift within the Vocian-Lacerbian group that opened the twentieth century: he was reasserting, pointing out the two different routes, the impossibility of experiencing tragedy in a Modernism expressing a Panic “Yes” to the insubstantiality of the world. But also, in the emptiness of expressionist anguish

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1 Cf. Sanguineti: *Tra liberty e crepuscolarismo* 148: “that to read you have to wait for the sun to shine on it.”
2 Cf. Soffici: “Giornale di bordo,” in *Opere IV* 62: “When will he [Nietzsche] be finally recognized as the true shaper of the spirit of our century, the prophet of spiritual health?”
3 Cf. Soffici: “Infanzia” in Vanden Berghe 160: “Everything seems to me carved or dipped in gold, sunny, cheerfully colored, charged with freshness, in full bloom like in the springtime. Really! Spring is all I see! […] But what about the sorrows? The evils? The fears? Nothing! They’re all gone, engulfed by that lake of gold!”
4 Cf. Boine: *Plausi e botte* 75: “It’s as if life came to him from outside, and, traveling in open order towards the cauldron of his soul, got trapped along the idyllic streams of his senses and, liking it there, decided to stop. […] But not beauty, you can’t capture beauty with the nets of the senses as it goes by; it flashes inside of you, and you reflect it in things through sudden lacerations. Beauty does not disperse you: it makes you.”
revealed by the sun as it shone on the impressions emerging from Soffici’s writings, breaking reality into fragments under a gentle, pale blue breeze which is the praise of the groundlessness of an existence that can only be re-articulated by feelings and not by the abstractions-conceptualizations (forms) of the mind, Boine was unconsciously revealing the assumption that was to become hegemonic. The promise of freedom – freedom from the bonds of logic, of metaphysics, of causality – prospected by the imperfect nihilism of the early Soffici (imperfect because, differently than in Palazzeschi, the identity and integrity of the artist is still safeguarded) should have made clear that the significance of Renato Serra’s opinion of Soffici was not in the constantly repeated phrase “Soffici is a gift” but in the one immediately following, which says that Soffici is “something that flows” (Le lettere 446).

That statement expressed in a nutshell the inclination – excellently described by Lukács in his essays Aesthetic Culture and The Parting of the Ways – towards the ‘superficial’ equality of all the ‘particular’ aspects of life (Nietzsche had written: “equal rights for all”), towards the abandonment of all symbolic or hierarchical components, and towards the overwhelming power of moods with their continual surrendering (even though these surrenders admittedly promise a meaning) to the inevitably transitory aspects of life.

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5 Cf. Boine, letter to Leopolda Casati dated September 30, 1916, in Carteggi IV 1066: “If I decided to become an impressionist my reputation would be made right away; but as soon as I go home or recover my senses […] these episodes seem no more than frivolties […]. In the evenings the green of the grass becomes so dark that it’s frightening.”

6 Cf. Boine: Plausi e botte 125-7: “even this eighteenth-century skepticism […] this lighthearted fragmentation, this Mediterranean epiphenomenalism craved by the sobbing Nietzsche […] observations of run-of-the-mill amorality […] and his epiphenomenalism of colors and life is still too theoretical, too affected, to assert itself with the immediacy of natural, happy things. […] This morning the Giornale di bordo that I’m leafing through is illuminated by a young sun that soaks in blazing light everything I read. The pages and the images roll away one after another, and they’re all beautiful. […] just as it happens, just as it comes, so happy about what escapes.”

7 Cf. Boine: Plausi e botte 125-7: “Boine thought he could overcome those difficulties with reason and logic, or by resorting to some esoteric or religious doctrine; and all I could do was to fret about them, […] with an anarchical voluptuousness of irony that made me judge all things to be founded on Nothing; […] there’s always a warm feeling of sympathy; so much so that his despair often seems a struggle that the author of those pages is having with himself, or rather with his deeper self, attracted more than he would like to those decried alleged errors of mine.”

8 Cf. Soffici: “Gustave Courbet,” in La Voce, May 1911, in Opere I 224: “What I mean is, once you conceive the world not as objective reality, having its own laws, values, and necessities, but as a flow having a rhythm that is close to the particular sensitivity of the individual, it is clear that every part of that world is alive and vibrant.”
flowing, without rhyme or reason, that keeps on going, heedless of all the plugs we put up with our morality, our good and evil” (Soffici: Opere IV 7). Soffici, “a writer essential to our twentieth century” (Pampaloni: 7), sidesteps the banally superomistic model of D’Annunzio’s Nietzsche (which he insightfully calls “Wagnerian”9 and relates, remembering Bergson and contrasting Croce and his systematization,10 to that anti-vital ‘mechanicalism’ which in 1914 will be expressly attributed to the “German scum”); he singles out the issue of Life beyond any moralizing intent (while these intents are still alive in Papini) and, with elitist but rational cynicism,11 opens to the Wildean flow of sympathy with a world of which all aspects are egalitarian to him: “To show – as Friedrich Nietzsche (almost a brother) says – «how a man who has the starkest, most frightful view of reality, who is capable of the “most profound thought,” finds, despite all this, no objection to living»” (Rimbaud, in Opere I 163).12 The tragedy to which both Boine and the young Lukács still aspire, though from different sides, will be reduced here to the creation of the work of art: to the voluntary return to a Form that can explain to Man, with the recompositional privilege that pertains only to ‘genius,’ the new cultural dominant of a world in which “truth is the deadlock of the spirit” (Giornale di bordo, in Opere IV 185) or, in the words of Nietzsche, where “the will to truth is a concealed will to disappeared from life, because the mood proved intolerant of what was permanent and recurrent. It was born when life was stripped of all values, and it now values the products of moods, that is to say, the products of fortuitous circumstances devoid of any necessary correlation with values. In a sense the unity of aesthetic culture does exist: as a lack of unity. Aesthetic culture has a central tenet: the peripheral nature of all things. This culture also has a symbol for everything: namely that nothing is symbolic.”

9 Recognizing the rift between Wagner and Nietzsche, in Italy and elsewhere (think of Apollinaire), is one of the seminal moments in the transition from Symbolism to Modernism.

10 Cf. Soffici: “Ignoto toscano,” in Opere I 17: “declared that he hated a good deal of philosophers, who […] are always putting reason everywhere without realizing that in so doing they are reducing life to nothing and replacing it with an abstract term. […] the only thing he liked about philosophy was dialectical activity, which flows like a vein of life through life, but he denied any absolute value to any system that congeals its conclusions in dogmas.”

11 Cf. Soffici: “Giornale di bordo,” in Opere IV 146: “the cynic’s is the definitive position before the spectacle of life. To look at everything with an unchanging eye, to make no distinction between good and evil, between vice and virtue […], isn’t that the demonstration of a high spirited mentality, of the deepest, freest, most loving understanding of the world and of its total legitimacy and magnificence?”

12 Cf. Soffici: “Ugo Foscolo” (December 1909 in La Voce), foreword to the volume Il tomo dell’Io (1910), in Opere I 426-8: “to embrace life after recognizing the infinite vanity of everything […], to replicate in oneself […] the whole construction of life, with its goals and renunciations; means – to say it with the words of the most profound philosopher of our time – Henri Bergson – to establish one’s life comme une conquête sur le néant […]. The greatest heroism is to see the world as it is, and to love it, […] a life rooted, so to speak, on negation and nothingness (…). To love the world as it is, to enjoy its illusions and appearances as if they were reality […]. So how can it be that a nihilist poet is able to create? […] to voluntarily enter through those gates, and become a man among men again, bears the mark of heroism.”
death” (*The Gay Science* 255). In this sense, irony (and self-irony) will come to mean, following a literary line that Soffici develops starting with Foscolo mediated by Sterne, the dialectic point towards Style\(^\text{13}\) (similar in this to what in Foscolo is Work-Activity)\(^\text{14}\); the spiritual unity which the artist, having learned from Nature the ever-contradicting reality of the real world,\(^\text{15}\) elevates:

Irony, which is the ultimate culmination of thought and knowledge, the highest and most definitive achievement of every science, is not the spirit that animates art; however, it must necessarily be one of the foundations of a new aesthetics. [...] the state of mind that one attains when [...] one realizes that the basic principle of our metaphysics, [...] was no more than – Nonsense; a simple operation, but poorly formulated [...] that the greatest truth lies in the phenomenon and in the concatenation and variety and infinite multiplicity of phenomena. [...] resulting in the pure laughter of the man who awakens [...] over the falsehood and the misery of rules and categories [...]. Serene in its essence, it does not embody a doctrine, nor the negation of a doctrine; but from irony, which is higher than all doctrines, it takes its momentum [...]; aristocratic acceptance of the world for what it’s worth [...]; gay science of man healed of the «disease of transcendence» (“Primi principi,” in *Opere I* 709-11).

To all of this – the core of the aesthetic reconciliation in which Soffici’s Modernism finds expression – we will later return, making the necessary connections with Soffici’s extraordinary work as an art critic and with his role as a liaison between the Italian and French avant-garde.\(^\text{16}\) For now let us try to imagine that the ‘seasons’ mentioned by De Robertis are not the seasons of climate but the seasons of history. Let us, I mean, examine the three main positions that Soffici takes during his life (Soffici the Modernist, Soffici between the First World War and the struggle for imposing Fascism, and lastly Soffici the Fascist and then the Neo-Fascist),\(^\text{17}\) in relation to the changes in the hegemonic perspective of the

\(^{13}\) Probably Soffici took the concept of Style from Thomas Carlyle, according whom “Style” is what mythicize experience, “the ultimate resistance against dispersion, against dissolving into insubstantiality.”

\(^{14}\) Cf. Soffici: “Ignoto” (1909), in *Opere II* 12-3: “the idea of nothingness [...] is [...] done away with by the I, which takes its place. No work can have its roots in God or Truth, which are synonymous with Nothing [...]. «In any case – he would always conclude, quoting his master Foscolo – the matter is not to live, but to works.”

\(^{15}\) Cf. Soffici: “Ignoto” (1909), in *Opere II* 18: “he frequently contradicted himself: he realized this, and to apologize, he would exclaim with a smile: «I learned that from nature!».”

\(^{16}\) Cf. Martini: 28: “His criticism is a *historiographical revolution*. Soffici was the first in Italy to recognize the main direction of modern art, the line that goes from Manet and Monet to Cézanne and then on to Picasso.”

\(^{17}\) Cf. Adamson: “Ardengo Soffici and the Religion of Art,” in *Fascist Visions* 49: “Soffici offers us an excellent vantage point for appreciation the continuities between the spiritual quests of Italian intellectuals in the post-
intellectual class (and to what determines those changes). We will see then, as wrote Alessandro Parronchi,\textsuperscript{18} that the issue is not so much the psychological ‘need for order’ that Prezzolini – still believing in the intellectual autonomy of the atomized man – was invoking in his essays on his friend Soffici,\textsuperscript{19} but the feeling of becoming organic to the ‘spiritual’ changes of the world which the intellectuals (the same intellectuals who had obviously upheld, and would continue to uphold, theory-as-praxis)\textsuperscript{20} see as the voluntary participation in the spiritual changes that they advocate, but which instead is their inability to acknowledge their subordination to the hegemonic horizon of a consent created by changes that are anything but spiritual.\textsuperscript{21} In other words, we will try to understand the workings of Soffici’s theoretical speculation starting with the aesthetic, moral, and political reconciliation (where aesthetics, morality, and politics are intended to embody a ‘return to order’ that is also the return to the spiritual unity – the Style – of an entire nation)\textsuperscript{22} put into effect, by rejecting the whole ideological arsenal of Modernism, in the years immediately following World War I. This approach, I hope, will not only demonstrate the substantial continuity of Soffici’s work over the years, but also provide a better outline of the role played by Modernism in Italy between the Giolittian era, the War, and the Fascist period.

\textbf{II. The Style of Italy}

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\item \textsuperscript{18} Cf. Parronchi 6-7: “while Soffici remains basically consistent and unitary, the cultural and political world around him had changed so radically as to give a negative value to what had previously been considered positively.”
\item \textsuperscript{19} Cf. Prezzolini: “Foreword,” in Soffici: \textit{Opere} XLII: “Soffici’s transformation from anarchist to Fascist seems to me entirely natural, […] like an \textit{inclination of the soul}. Anarchists are independent people who recognize no authority, and when they change they cling blindly with equal force to the opposite principle of authority.”
\item \textsuperscript{20} Cf. Soffici: “Taccuini,” in \textit{Opere} IV 246: “Civilization is a spiritual fact: purely; nothing else. A civilization is judged by the spiritual values it recognizes and establishes.”
\item \textsuperscript{21} But the point of Fascism, in insisting on the ability to change reality through the ‘will’ and ideologically connecting the will of the individual to the necessity for it to become ‘national’ and shared by all, was precisely to signify the revenge (and psychological compensation) of the atomized individual. It may be interesting in this regard to note that, according to Mussolini, Pirandello was doing Fascist theater without realizing it, because in his works the world is always a creation of our will. Mussolini, that is to say, was effectively outlining a possible instrumental dialectic of Modernism.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Cf. Soffici: \textit{Opere} V 154: “There can be no civilization unless all the expressions of material and spiritual life that make it up are informed with a principle of homogeneity, hence with a single style.”
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There are two books (*Battaglia fra due vittorie*, by Soffici, and *L’Europa vivente*, by Suckert-Malaparte) that cannot be taken into account separately from each other. Both were published in 1923 for the series “Problemi del fascismo” directed by Malaparte, and each book was prefaced by the other author. In his introduction to Soffici’s book (strategically entitled “Ragguaglio sullo stato degli intellettuali rispetto al fascismo” [Report on the state of the intellectuals vis-à-vis Fascism]), Suckert limits himself to observing, while already declaring that Fascism must be a reaction to all of modern European civilization, that Soffici’s *Lemmonio Boreo* (1912) had been the ‘innocent’ herald of a new age. Soffici, in his foreword to *L’Europa vivente*, goes much further, embracing in no uncertain terms – and with the usual assumption that the changes of the world are first of all changes of the Soul which it is up to intellectuals to control – the Manichean dualism that sees counter-reformist Fascism as a revolutionary resistance to the degeneration which had been introduced in Europe – and here Hegel and De Sanctis are instrumentally mentioned – by the Lutheran Reformation. This is the acme of the “pilot-fish” *modus ragionandi* which the Florentine reviews had been unconsciously preparing (and which had been reinforced, with the nation at war, through the mediation of intellectuals serving as officers), because this meant recuperating the project of a battle that, being essentially a cultural one, provided the intellectuals with the opportunity to operate in it from a position of prestige:

What is happening in Italy is not the crisis of a nation but the crisis of a civilization. […] This inability to diagnose the “disease of the century” and investigate its origins, is entirely historical, not occasional, and largely indicative of the nature of the disease […]. The current European crisis cannot be sufficiently explained by purely economic or social considerations […]: the present-day economic and political troubles are but an aspect of the very historical malady that has been afflicting our

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23 This is a collection of articles mainly appearing in Soffici’s *Rete mediterranea* and Mussolini’s *Popolo d’Italia* between 1919 and 1922.
24 Look at what Soffici writes to Prezzolini when preparing a reprint of his works in April 1963, in *Carteggio*, II, 297: “I don’t know if you have read Malaparte’s *Foreword*. It is well written and has a special importance.” On Prezzolini’s suggestion, Soffici rewrote the text for publication in his *Opere*. For this reason we will be quoting from the original edition.
25 A ‘lasting’ interpretation, originating in 1920, that Soffici himself confirmed on several occasions. Cf. Longanesi: “Lemmonio Boreo: il primo fascista,” in *L’Assalto*, October 24, 1925: “a total revolution against all non-Fascist Italy […] fight every ideology, every party, because *all* of them are responsible, involved in the democratic Babel.”
civilization not since yesterday but for centuries. [...] I have referred above, regarding the Reformation, to the emerging of the critical, skeptical spirit that was to become such an important part of modernity. I should have said, more accurately, that the Reformation is not the dawn of the modern critical spirit, of Western and Northern inspiration, but its separation from the dogmatic, Catholic spirit, of Eastern and Southern inspiration, that constitutes the essence of Latin civilization. [...] This history of Europe is all in this irreconcilable contrast (Suckert: “Il dramma della modernità,” June 1922, in Le riviste di Piero Gobetti 135-6).26

By entering the debate between Latinity and Germanism,27 a debate that Croce – in Pagine sulla guerra – accused of being anti-scientific, Soffici and Malaparte reopen the issue, which had erupted in 1914, of the clash of civilizations. The terms of the matter, however, are now (this is the point) completely reversed, because reversed is the historical perspective that reflects on modernity (and on Modernism). As a consequence, equally reversed is the outlook that, reactivating the clash between the classicists and the Romantics, reflects on the nature of art, while nationalism is becoming the hegemonic ideology of monopolistic capital and the bourgeoisie consummates its “betrayal” in the degenerated terms, typical of non-competitive countries, of Fascist autarky.

The Soffici of late 1909, who looked upon the atomization of society only in its aesthetic terms, who looked upon the Krisis only through its ideological directives, explained in his Lettera a un giovane pittore that the ancients, who shared a common heritage of moral and religious values, scorned nature28 because they were always trying to relate their

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26 Suckert: “Il dramma della modernità,” in Le riviste di Piero Gobetti 137: “This is where the drama of modernity comes from: from the separation of the critical attitude from the dogmatic one, and from the decomposition that came after it and is still going on in our society.”

And this is what Soffici writes to the ‘apota’ Prezzolini in February 1926, in Carteggio, II, 69: “this is a critical time for critics.”

As we know, the debate on the Reformation and Counter-Reformation was particularly heated in the journals that supported Gobetti. The positions are extremely diverse, from the Oriani-inspired but antifascist Calvinism of Gangale (who was not far from the positions of Boine) or Ansaldo (but Sorel too was close to Calvin), to the Luther-Hegel-Hitler line of Bonaiuti (who however was against Fascism), to the connection between Protestantism and socialism drawn by Missiroli. As for the responses to Suckert’s piece see at least the articles by Angelo Crespi, Gioacchino Niccolatti, and Mario Fubini (who accuses him of “philosophical extremism”). Cf. Gobetti tra riforma e rivoluzione and Pogliano: Piero Gobetti e l’ideologia dell’assenza.

27 On this topic see at least Romeo: La Germania and Mangoni: Una crisi di fine secolo.

28 Cf. Soffici: “Lettera a un giovane pittore,” in La Voce, December 1909-January 1910, in Opere I 349: “The voices of the great souls rose up […] towards the absolute in a harmonious hymn […]. But now – and by now I mean the last hundred years or so – it is no longer so. […] Philosophy and science have had their way over the comforting canons and the venerable ideas of beauty and nobility of the past. Man has come to doubt everything, even himself. No more religions, no more princes, no more nobles to serve; and if there still is an absolute to which to sing our hymns, there is no agreement on what name to give it and how to worship it. You see, it was a
inclinations to those abstract ideals; the same Soffici who, in 1911, in an extraordinary essay on Courbet, defined the French Revolution as a “death blow dealt to the classical world” (Opere I 210), where ‘classical’ refers to any artist (or idealist philosopher) who saw in the volatile forms of nature “a symbol […] of some transcendent truth” (Opere I 214) to which those forms should be adapted – thereby fully placing himself in the anti-Platonic mainstream of Modernism; and again, the same Soffici who, in 1914, would use that ideological vector to create, still in the context of the clash of civilizations, the bugaboo of an Austro-German ‘feeling’ dominated, by his account, by the metaphysical violence which, in the Bergsonian contrast between Life and Mechanicalism, wanted to constrict the world inside the ‘abstractions’ of logic and thought, now drastically reverses, following Malaparte, the terms of the contrast:

the degeneration of Italy, from the end of the Renaissance onwards, and its acceleration, especially after the Risorgimento, come from the gradual absorption, by our educated classes, of the Protestant mentality […]. And that is the reason why, first, our arts, our literature, our philosophy, gradually lost their native character, serene, measured, realistic in the ancient and classical sense; and, then, our morality and our politics suffered the same transformation. […] Italy managed to resist the scourge in part; but was unable to avoid its ultimate consequences; and this explains all our miseries, our quarrels, our failures up to the rally of October last year. […] So defining and preaching Fascism as an anti-reformist movement is equivalent […] to paving the way for it to the complete restoration of Italianity, indeed, of Latinity, which is the same as saying universality (Soffici: “Preface” to L’Europa vivente 647-8).

sort of shipwreck; […] in the great upsetting of beliefs and principles everyone tried to salvage their own individuality. Artists […] threw themselves on nature as if onto a lifeboat.”

Cf. Soffici: “Gustave Courbet,” in La Voce, May 1911, in Opere I 215: “So what difference is there between this superior model, this «concept of the mind» to which everything must adapt, that sits there like a mold, like a die in which to cast artistic material so that is can be shaped in its image and likeness, and the Platonic Idea? […] for such an Idea […] is synonymous with God – a philosophical god, at any rate.”

Cf. Soffici: “Intorno alla gran bestia,” in Lacerba, August 15, 1914, 12: “If ever there has been perfect barbarism in the world, that would be German barbarism. […] A Germany victory in Europe would not be a historical event, but the subversion of all historical necessities; violence committed in the natural course of events, a sort of disease against which the energies of life rise in revolt […]. The German is first and foremost imbecile, and his mentality, therefore, mechanical […]. The German harbors no doubts, because he lacks a sense of the complexity of life.”
Soffici maintains the ‘anti-mechanical’ angle, now attributing the qualifier to the economical and social changes and, in the field of culture where he can move with ‘autonomy,’ reverses his metonymic chains but not the structural terms of their operation. What is still at work is the binary structure of which the positive side (the side Soffici is on) breaks loose from the metonymic sequence of cerebralism and abstraction (formerly the regulatory-idealistic-conceptual one, now the mechanical-subjectivistic one) to end with Style: that same Style which had previously predicated the *Erlebnis* of the contingent and now exorcized the “siege of nothingness” (Ramat: *Protonovecento* 367) in an artistic expression meant to represent the cultural structure and the tradition of an entire nation: “Fascism is neither reaction nor subversion, but the rediscovery, through revolution, of the raison d’être and the order of the Italian people” (*Periplo dell’arte*, in *Opere* V 137). Therefore, the Manichean intent borrowed from Malaparte operates as the recovery of the “rhetorical rule” (the principle of imitation of classicism) which Romanticism had put in check and which Modernism (in this sense consider also Wölfflin’s contraposition between Renaissance and Baroque) had reverberated as praise of freedom in overcoming the immobilizing abstractions of the pre-existing conceptual models – accurately delimited ‘wholes’ – signifying these (think of Bergson) as the retroactive (and mechanical) interpretation of the data of reality. This means evoking the notion of fluidity used by Serra. It is also the typical reading of reality in superstructural frameworks, which brings Soffici to misinterpret his continual becoming organic to the historically dominant ideology as an anthropological fact (first Life and its corollaries, now the whole structure of a “reality” called “Italy”).

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31 Cf. Malaparte: *L’Europa* 356-7: “they thought they could explain the current European crisis on economic and social grounds […]. Putting forth arguments of, shall we say, a mechanical nature, that is, economic or social.”

32 Mechanical because subjectivistic: because unrelated to the ‘concreteness’ of the *modus vivendi* of an entire race of people.

33 Cf. Fleming: 6: “The question to which Modernist theory responds cannot be answered coherently in the form in which they are posed, outside of the Romantic context from which they were extracted.”

34 At this time, the opinions on the opposing metonymic chains expressed by Wölfflin and Soffici are clearly poles apart, but if we consider instead the modernist Soffici, we find that they overlap. Cf. Wölfflin: 39: “In its final result, the pictorial style will have to destroy the plastic form. Its purpose, in the end, is the reproduction of lights’ life in all its manifestations.”

Cf. Soffici: *Opere* I “a nucleus of luminous vibrations […] the principle of movement, in Impressionism, is provided solely by the deformation of the bodies operated by the ambient light, and by the shimmering colors.”
A good example of this can be found in his change of opinion about Weininger and the male/female dichotomy (another element clearly separating this Modernism from that of the so-called Vocian moralists). If for the avant-gardist Soffici the Weiningerian terms of the feminine (to which we will return when dealing with Slataper) correspond, in their anti-Logos and anti-Morality anarchy, to Modernity itself based on the positiveness of the interconnected concepts of Life and Nothingness, for the Fascist Soffici the ‘feminine’ becomes another link in the metonymic chain, nostanghew having a negative connotation, to be opposed, behind the exteriority of terms such as “moral” in the field of philosophy or “plastic” in the field of art (and the hierarchical changes of the pair color/design also come under this heading), the Platonizing rediscovery of a Truth (Latin and Catholic: hence universal) that Italy expresses resisting the Spiritual (modern, Romantic, Baroque, avant-gardist, internationalist, skeptical, female, etc.) model.

Thus, Germany, defeated on the battlefield, once again looms threateningly on the horizon of the Spirit. No longer the concretion of the anti-Modernity (mechanical, religious, conceptualizing, regulatory, Crocean) that the Lacerbian Soffici saw as the target of

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35 Cf. Boine: “Epistola al tribunale,” in *La Voce*, V, 34, August 21, 1913, in *Il peccato* 191: “this is female, so to speak, […] anarchy. There’s something in the later Soffici that is full of verve […] brash happiness […] (and Soffici would have us believe that it’s the Revolution!).”

36 Cf. Soffici: letter to Papini dated July 11, 1912, in *Carteggio*, II, 303-4: “In my mind I was forming an idea of woman and life completely different from W’s. […] If you closely consider his man, his genius is one who believes in an absolute, and the greatness of this being is proportionate to the idea of the absolute. If we start with this concept, woman is in fact the negation of everything, she is nothingness. So what happens if instead we start from here, from Nothingness? What happens is that our greatness […] our intensity of life will be in direct proportion to whatever there is in us of feminine character. […] Woman will represent anarchy, freedom, life without ideals and imperatives. Just life. […] With idealism, with Kant taken to the extreme, you get death.”

37 Cf. Soffici: “Taccuini,” in *Opere IV* 344-7: “What distinguishes the male being from its opposite is primarily an aptitude for logic, for discipline, for moral and intellectual order in every field of human activity, from politics to art. […] The Italians, heir to the civil and spiritual characteristics of Greece and Rome, have always maintained – despite the mixing of blood and the barbarian contaminations – their legacy of manhood […] plastic science […]. The female being is the opposite of all this, […] nihilist and anarchic delirium. […] Romantic individualism.”

38 Cf. Soffici: “Pittura tedesca,” in *Estetica e politica* 145-6: “What chiefly distinguishes the painting of the southern countries (especially Italy) from the painting of the northern ones (especially Germany) is the presence in the former and the almost complete absence in the latter of truly plastic qualities.”

39 Cf. Soffici: *Opere V* 219: “while color, composition, subject, etc., each taken individually, have only the value of sensual pleasantness, geometrical or decorative convenience, dramatic, historical, anecdotal, scenic, etc. representation, only drawing has a spiritual, and in some ways, absolute, value. Drawing […] from its intrinsic character of a *sign* expressing the spirit of whoever uses it for artistic purposes.” While Soffici speaks of “Going back to the sign,” Malaparte explains what it means: “The sign; that is, the symbol.”
‘spiritually’ revolutionary action, but expression of the disintegrating tendency that pertains to modern individualism,\textsuperscript{40} Germany found contemporary expression in the avant-garde:

so that philosophy, once synonymous with wisdom, became synonymous with rational madness, cerebralistic delirium, which […] led ignorant scholars to deny the existence of everything, even themselves. Ideologies and utopias corrupted the soul of the people, fostering subversion and tumult; stupid, bizarre, puerile aesthetic theories brought disarray into the fields of literature and art […]. Huguenotism, Jansenism, modernism, mysticism, occultism, idealism, rationalism, materialism, superomism, pragmatism; socialism, communism, nihilism, Romanticism, naturalism, symbolism, decadentism […] We’ve set our aim on the atheism confessed by entire social classes, imposed by law in revolutionary Russia; we see skepticism and relativism being broadcast as the greatest achievements of philosophical inquiry; […] for what pertains to the arts, futurism, cubism, surrealism, Dadaism. […] It’s all the manifestation of the satanic pride of barbaric man (in \textit{Opere VI} 443-5).

The process of ‘subjectivizing’ reality, now encompassing in the field of common immanence the instrumentally twin foes avant-garde and socialism,\textsuperscript{41} becomes, following Malaparte, who explains that the Latin nations (having arrived late on the scene of the industrial market, when it was already monopolized) are out of touch with modernity, the ideological break-up of a spiritual unity which is the very real unity of a people. Overcoming class divisions,\textsuperscript{42} the people operates in the objective reality of a common modus vivendi and pensandi that bases in classicism the principle (a principle that does not need to be reformulated: only rediscovered) of recomposing the organicity (ideological because social)\textsuperscript{43} that is the Style – the particular raised to Expression – of a race: “And that only when a profound political thought will be expressed and divulged, corresponding to the true essential character of our

\textsuperscript{40} Cf. Soffici: \textit{Opere VI} 412: “individualism taken to the extreme […]. As is known, Lutheranism or Protestantism was the most glaring and far-reaching expression of this aspect of the German spirit as opposed to the spirit of the Mediterranean people, especially Latin people, and of Roman and Catholic civilization. The movement known as idealism, then, constituted its most complex philosophical development; from which, finally, came what, with a more vague term, was called Romanticism, […] unbridled freedom, […] individual arbitrariness.”

\textsuperscript{41} Cf. Battaglia 105: “I’m sure that Lenin and Trotsky are convinced Dadaists.”

\textsuperscript{42} Cf. \textit{Opere V} 227-8: “The extremes: idealism and materialism have in common the denial of transcendence, (…) so it was basically an anti-Latin century, and especially anti-Italian. […] The Romantic, abstract modernism that Bolshevism adopted as official art during its early years was nothing but decadence; nothing but decadence is the prosaic, proletarian verism that it has recently adopted in place of that. […] doing violence to the divine balance, […] the unity of reality […] it places […] in immanentist thought all of reality.”

\textsuperscript{43} Cf. Malaparte: \textit{L’Europa} 353: “national trade-unionism is anti-class and pacificatory, the heir of socialism; and is at the same time the negation of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, or, in practice, of class struggle.”

\textsuperscript{44} But, for Soffici, social because cultural!
race, will it be possible for us to move towards a goal in the belief that we can reach it [...] of Dante, Machiavelli, Oriani.” (Battaglia 55-6). But that race, being heir to Rome and Catholicism, with its ‘particular’ always expresses – implicitly opening up to imperialism – a universality. The Style of this universality (which is Style because it is Universal) is precisely what the artist will have the task of recovering, against the loss of the “high road” (Periplo 130) which now equalizes in the same accusation materialism and Modernism (just as Fascism instrumentally equalizes socialism and bourgeoisie), that is to say, the elements that line up, in abstraction, against the unity of a Spirit that is basically hierarchy because it is basically Nature. In other words, the old accusation of ‘abstraction’ (the protest of Life against Forms) is treacherously linked to a project of Platonic inspiration that envisages the Reality of the world as its return to the Truth (not abstract but concrete, inasmuch as belonging to the tradition of a whole nation), and which at the same time is the expression of a place (Latinity) and a way of feeling (Unity of the Spirit) that pertain to a kind of Life that is no longer the expression of Modernism but is betrayed by it:

the revolution and modernism [...] But those foreign artists had not considered [...] that their feelings, ideas, and images, being, precisely, particular and typical of their times, could not be so if not for a short time [...] while only the primordial, native, simple, essential core of things endures forever, behind the changing customs, the

44 Like Papini, Soffici makes the usual distinction, of which we already know the implications, between “material imperialism” (which obviously pertains to the Anglo-Germans) and “spiritual imperialism.” Look at what Gioacchino Volpe, the official historian of Fascism, wrote in 1934, referring to Oriani, in Saluto a un maestro 113-5: “La Rivolta Ideale. [...] Fascism finds much of itself in him, in his idealistic concept of life, in his recognizing the values of religion and family, in his aversion for pacifism and internationalism, in his ardent patriotism and aspiration for an empire, an empire full of spiritual content.” This quotation comes from a collection of articles by Volpi published in 1951 by a group of neo-Fascist Roman students. Significantly, the book includes a sympathetic foreword by Soffici.

45 Cf. Soffici: “Taccuini,” in Opere IV 306: “The Italians are the only ones who are not diminished or blunted by being patriotic, because the Italian homeland, like the Latin one, coincides with the universality that distinguishes it.”

46 Cf. Soffici: Opere V 262-67: “It is evident that the deprivation of a unitary religious concept in turn deprives art and aesthetics of the most secure foundation of the principles that provide a manner, deemed obvious, with which to consider and define beauty [...]. The disorder cast upon his spirit led him towards individual arbitrariness, to the creation of forms freed from the restraints of natural order, subjective forms, hence cerebral, that is, abstract; [...] And indeed, what was the art of Greece and Rome [...] if not an accurate affirmation of the tangible reality of the world and nature, a harmonious revelation of their immutable and necessary order.”

47 And sometimes Platonism of the lowest quality. Cf. “Taccuini” 360: “And during the High Middle Ages, all of Latin Europe spoke the everyday Roman language [...]. We can therefore say that these nations became such only by separating themselves from that first civil entity denoted by that language; whereas we became more Italian the more we remained true to it.”

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contingencies of history, the transformations of society; and that only in that substantial, unalterable core lies [...] its vital element (Taccuini 380).

Along this line, of course, even his beloved France (still a ‘sister’ country in 1920) will eventually turn out to have been ‘Germanized,’ i.e. to have become prey to the metic cosmopolitanism (increasingly referred to as “Jewish”\(^{48}\) pertaining to the systematizing intelligence that is now considered equivalent to the relativistic degeneration – both being extraneous to Reality – introduced by the avant-gardes.\(^{49}\)

This is a complex set of elements which had emerged in ideologically embryonic form in the book that (between the victory in World War I and the success of the March on Rome)\(^{50}\) had expressed, in the battle for the conquest of hegemony, all the fluctuations of the ideological development of early Fascism; a book which Soffici, coming out of the war as “another man,” and already declaring that “at the present time […] political facts are often so closely adherent, or threaten to become so, to spiritual and aesthetic facts,” had sublimated as a “sacrifice on the altar of the Spirit and the Fatherland” (Battaglia XXXV-XXXVI). Here, in fact, the ideological fluctuations of the intellectual — between the temptation to rebel and the opportunity to play a subordinate but ‘real’ role (between the ancient dream of ‘running’ the revolt and the concrete role of educating and ‘containing’ the citizenry acquired from the populist perspective developed during the trench war); between the usual perspectives of anti-bourgeois ideality and its acrobatic channeling into the anti-modern line (between the Front

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\(^{48}\) And Telesio Interlandi, in his 1940 report on La condizione dell’arte, would place on the same level Judaism, Bolshevism, Americanism and, even calling into question Marinetti, avant-garde art. Cf. Interlandi: 22: “Breton […]. They are the children of Marinetti […]. This is the work of Bolsheviks, of Jews and bastards.” Soffici, intervening on the subject, declared his agreement on the matter of the penetration of Judaism, but, in accordance with his views, said that no “Judaism can seriously attack authentic genius. Like the spirit of a strong people, even the spirit of a true artist who belongs to that people cannot be won by any opposing force” (32).

\(^{49}\) Cf. Soffici: “Periplo” 24-5: “the exasperated Picassism and Braquism, […] the funereal puppetism of the metaphysicians, the tacky neoclassicism, as well as negrismo, the mechanism of the Futurist followers; Dadaism is proof of that. […] the chaotic confusionismo, always employed by those who, having turned their backs on the magnificence of the real world, chase the shadows and the mirages of systematic intelligence.”

\(^{50}\) Cf. Renzo De Felice: “Soffici, gli intellettuali e il fascismo,” in Pampaloni: 69: “one of the most illuminating documents I know for understanding the mood of the Fascist intellectuals of the time, Battaglia fra due vittorie. […] more general position of the intellectuals who came to Fascism having experienced the war in palingenetic terms.”
and early Strapaese) — clearly indicate the gradual subordination of the composite Fascist ideology to the reactionary convictions of the nationalist one. The nationalist ideology, interacting with the forma mentis of a traditional intellectual who has gone through the maelstrom of the war, comes down, thus becoming organic to the interests of the ruling class (industrial and agricultural) that makes theory into praxis, to the pair Fatherland/Spirit and to its attendant cortege of topics (right of ownership, natural law, hierarchy, populist corporatism, and, especially, the usual primacy of Spirit over Matter which indemnifies the intellectual while relegating him to a subordinate position).

Here the process of reactionarization of the bourgeoisie takes the road of forced inter-class ‘universality’ which, as such, needs to reformulate as ‘unity’ the forms of the disintegration (the actual conflicts) that brought it to power. Here, also, in an indissoluble bond with the native soil which, as said above, is an expression of universality, converge both Soffici’s Classicism and Malaparte’s Counter-Reformation:

We will be great even without going through, with a delay of three centuries, the Reformation; indeed, we will be great only by going against the Reformation. The new power of the Italian spirit, of which there are clear signs already, can be nothing if not anti-European. The evils from which we have been suffering for almost one hundred years all come from our having tried repeatedly, and each time in vain, to assimilate the modern European spirit, which is the opposite of ours. […] we have a millenary civilization to defend, which takes its strength from the values of the spirit,

51 As we know, Soffici will take an active part in the Strapaese adventure. Maccari, for his part, was keen on claiming (in “L’omino di bronzo” and other articles) the continuity of the journal Il Selvaggio, via the Corriere Italiano, with the Florentine reviews of the early 20th century. On this subject cf. Mangoni: L’interventismo della cultura.
52 Cf. Soffici: Battaglia 59-60: “For several months, gazing out my window after work, I could see a man in the field out front, occupied at cultivating his land. […] When his companions went on strike he never left his field.” And look at what Gioacchino Volpe wrote to Mussolini, almost at the same time, cf. Volpe: 50-2: “The Italians have tolerated for more than a year, with much acquiescence, the insane racket of the iconoclasts, […] the preaching of hatred and vile materialism […]. A country with many peasants: and peasants can even make a revolution happen, but their own, not the one that others would like. […] We have to stimulate the bourgeoisie.”
53 Malaparte, more理想istically, spoke about a political return to the Vandée.
54 It is no coincidence that Soffici recuperates for Fascism his experience at Corradini’s Il Regno.
55 Cf. Battaglia 85-6: “Cowardly by instinct and by tradition, the people, left to themselves, are pure matter made for servitude, and will remain in servitude forever and under all circumstances. […] feel and live just like the more primitive beings, the beasts: oxen, for instance. Except that oxen are yoked and sent to the slaughterhouse.”
56 Cf. “Taccuini” 274: “to win over matter to the benefit of the Spirit.”
against a new one that is heretical and false, which takes its strength from the values of the physical, material, mechanical world (Malaparte: L’Europa 377-8).

So what Soffici is now presenting, with his new opinion on modernity, as what has been called the need to equalize ethics and aesthetics, is a totalizing project of Platonic derivation capable of bestowing on Fascism – seeing that Matter is determined by the Spirit – the task of ‘culturally’ changing every aspect of life. This change is predicated on a (because all aspects of life are intertwined), classical-hierarchical model which assigns intellectuals the role of ‘aestheticizers.’ Furthermore, as in the classical system aesthetics is interconnected to all other aspects of the Spirit, “aestheticizing” means also to absolve to a moral, i.e. political, duty: “Wise politicians have always given due consideration to the suggestions that true artists could offer even in political matters. […] artists […] need only realize where aesthetics is going to also understand where the other spiritual faculties are headed” (Taccuini 319-20).

The connection between all the forms of the Spirit (economical, political, artistic, etc.), which Soffici would antedate as the conflict between classicism and Byzantinism (West vs East) – delineates an anthropological restructuring of society in which the intellectual (like the political leader who is his ‘historical’ counterpart)59 regains, within mass society, a respectable educational-pedagogical function. This manoeuvering sets art as one of the connective elements of society, while at the same time doubly linking the practice of art with the spiritual action (and political too, since one refers to the other) of a renewal that is first of all a return: “convinced that Italy, perhaps more than any other country, could, if it

57 Cf. Battaglia 120: “The spirit that once again dominates in art, in literature, in philosophy, in science is a spirit of traditional nature, of classical discipline (don’t call it academic): there is a general tendency towards the restoration of the realistic fundamental principles of authority and of hierarchies. It therefore seems natural and necessary that politics too should take this spiritual path. […] This means that there will be less and less room for the revolutionary and anarchic romanticism of German-Jewish origin.”

58 Cf. Soffici: Battaglia 167: “since the manifestations of the human spirit are all connected to each other and interdependent, every political principle must necessarily correspond to an aesthetic principle, as well as a moral one and a logical one.”

59 Cf. Soffici: “Etica rivoluzionaria” (1941), in Italia e Civiltà, May 20, 1944, in Sull’orlo dell’abisso 142-43: “The nature of a revolutionary Leader is dual: he is a creation of the people, who express him from their totality, give him their aspirations, their ideas, their will […]; but as he exercises these powers, faculties, and virtues, the Leader himself becomes the creator, the master, the guide. […] In this he shares the same nature of a poetic or artistic genius; with this difference however, that while the latter operates in the absolute, […] the revolutionary genius operates in contingency and in the sphere of time, that is, of historical praxis.”
wanted to, stop this collective rush to the edge of the precipice and put everyone back on the right path – which all considered is still the one that it had traced long ago […] believed it to be my duty as an artist and a citizen to raise this call to order: to Italian order” (“Periplo,” in Opere V 7). That is why “it is impossible to conceive a total revolution of the nation’s spirits and consciences without that revolution implicitly including also a revolution of taste and aesthetic concepts, […] considering that the spirit is one and indivisible, and that «tout se tient»” (“Periplo,” in Opere V 136-7). For Soffici, the relationship of a spiritual interdependence between arts, politics, morality, and religion, becomes all at once the reason for the birth (since Fascism is a typically Italian movement, it partakes of the ‘spiritually unitary’ structure of Italianness), the reality, and the purpose of Fascism. Since the truth is only true if it is so in every sphere, the duty of Fascism will be the construction of such a unifying principle, which, however, is also the very essence of the object “Italy” that finds expression in Fascism: “the one and only genuinely Italian political system, as it was imagined, through the ages, by all our great men, poets, historians, thinkers, from Petrarch to Carducci, to Oriani” (Sull’orlo dell’abisso 82). The culmination of this process, what the genius achieves in the field of art now creating the expression of a people, will be, bringing together in itself all the elements of the new metonymic chain, what Soffici calls Style:

it’s a cardinal factor of unity, of cohesion between the various elements that make up a people and a civilization, and therefore between that people and the genius who interprets its spirit. […] without this common language between the artists and the people it is impossible […] to produce really great things, […] his spirit’s aptitude for

60 But obviously the cultural structure of Fascism is anything but a unitary one. This is clearly demonstrated by the battle launched by Soffici, together with others, against avant-gardistic Marinettism. The debate about which one (among “La Voce,” “Lacerba,” and Marinetti’s Futurism) could be regarded the real cultural precursor of the regime is lively and harsh. Cf. Marinetti: in “Crítica fascista,” 1, 1927, 8: “The Vocians, almost all children or followers of Croce, have no right to intervene on the subject of Fascist art. Like their teacher, they have relentlessly belittled the creative genius of our race […]. Almost all the antifascists of today (for instance, Salvenini) have the same typical Crocean and Vocian mentality.” An unrealistic picture of national ‘concord’ will be realized, we could say, only during World War II, when Alberto Viviani, in Origini del nuovo spirito italiano (1942), will consider the ‘precursor’ to be virtually the whole cultural movement of the early 20th century, linking the Leonardo to Nationalism and Milanese Futurism, the work of the young Papini to the work of the young Mussolini, interclassism (via Oriani) to La Voce, and so on.

61 Cf. Soffici: Opere V 155: “If Fascism does not bring its order in these matters too, if it does not reconcile the activities of the mind with all the other activities attending to its politics and economy, it will fail to achieve the desired and necessary unity. […] it would mean that Fascism does not represent an all-inclusive principle of civilization.”
the contemplation of things, for the love of nature, […] in which he senses and recognizes a divine principle, that his art must express and reveal. When this happens the artist’s soul adheres to reality, it immerses itself in it completely, it permeates itself with it; and having become, so to say, its speaking conscience, it expresses its innermost meaning using the symbols of forms, and the poetic language of drawing and plastic art (Periplo 75-6).

The genius, understanding that for whoever exists in ‘reality’ (this is where Soffici’s ‘synthetic realism’ comes from) “the laws of life are the same as the laws of art” (Periplo 80), draws on the universality expressed by Italian man (and his tradition) to talk about man tout court:

art must draw deeply from the sources of the people among which it arises, penetrate fully into the reality from which it takes inspiration; come to light as a legitimate creature engendered in the bowels of the national motherland. Only with these premises, that is, to contain in itself all the strength of the particular human complex that has nurtured it and from which it was born, will art become great and able to speak universally to the man dwelling deep inside every individual of every other nation. Therein lies the true sense of tradition and the need for it (Opere V 174-6).

The universality which the genius presents therefore relates to the Value socially expressed by the concept of the ‘classical,’ which at the same time is the externalization of the formal order of art (one however not autonomous but one with morality, politics, etc.), and the overcoming/rediscovery of what Modernity has dissolved in the metonymic chain. The reversal of the preconditions Order / Disorder does not cease to be inherent in the Synthetic will, which, as we shall see, was also touched on by the early Soffici, but the Synthesis now connects genius to a spiritual (and social) structure which, being ‘concrete’ (extraneous to metaphysical abstraction because concretely present in the life and tradition of a People),

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62 Cf. Soffici: “Periplo” 51: “Everything that in art is obscure, messy, abstract, decadent, romantic, is not Italian. […] Realism. Let us understand by realism the concept of totality, […] the outer world and the inner one, subject and object. Giotto, Masaccio, Raphael, Titian, who, working on the data of the sensible world, depicted the truth, but with the style imposed on them by the great feeling they had for that data, are realists; and, since these conditions are also those of classicism, they are also classics.”

63 Cf. Soffici: Opere V 401: “between romanticism and classicism: in short, between order and rebellion to order, the one that wins, and always will, is order. At least in our West.”
allows to assign the whole metonymic chain of skepticism/relativism\(^{64}\) no longer to modernity but to a degenerated modernity\(^{65}\) that Fascism, given the equivalence of the terms “eternal” and “Italian,”\(^ {66}\) fights against:

we believe that Fascism is the only chance of salvation from the danger looming over the world […]. At a time when every political side and everything else is called into question, every principle distorted and turned upside down, every foundation undermined […]. The liberal, democratic bourgeois society […] has come […] to obliterate and upturn all the values that have always been at the basis of the life of our nation […]. With its skepticism, and with its irony – which is a consequence of the former (Soffici: in Estetica e politica 179-80).

Classicism is therefore not only the cultural equivalent of what Fascism is doing in the field of politics, but it is also the expression of the ‘aestheticizing’ (in the Adornian sense) duty that sublimes values into ‘unity.’ Classicism connects “philosophy […] with action, reality with imagination, and accordingly poetry with politics” (Battaglia 172).\(^ {67}\) Thus Style is the style of art, but of an art that is form of life of a race of people; because the ‘classical’ is what that people realistically expresses and – through the work of the intellectuals who idealize and universalize it – allows that people to reveal itself to itself in its own universality and absolute reality a reality that has nothing to do with the conceptualizations (ancient or modern) that a degenerated intelligence (i.e. a degenerated politics/morality) builds on it\(^ {68}\): “what is the

\(^{64}\) Cf. Soffici: “Varietà,” in Gazzetta del Popolo, August 17, 1928, in Estetica e politica 236: “what characterizes intelligence […] their ability to arrive, through analysis, to synthesis. Perplexity and skepticism are therefore rather the demonstration of an impotent intelligence.”

\(^{65}\) Cf. Soffici: “Taccuini” 348-9: “Much of the so-called internationalist, immoralist, anarchic, anti-social, irrationalist «modernity», […] is merely the expression of femininity spreading from the Semitic and Slavic East and the Germanic North over the Mediterranean West. […] communism, pacificist and societal democratism, individualistic rebelliousness […]. In general, everything that today opposes the Fascist restoration of Italianity, the vigorous reaffirming of realistic values, of traditional wisdom […], mystic cerebralism, metaphysical relativism, Freudian psychoanalysis, and Bergsonian vitalism: regarding morality: certain shoddy Nietzscheanism and DAnnunzianism […], all the so-called «avant-gardes» […] the Jewish-cosmopolitan-sodomitic sects.” Again along this line, remarkable appears the fact that Soffici complains that a number of foreign ‘material’ products (like items of clothing) being imported in Italy are altering the local culture. Still believing in the primacy of Spirit over Matter, he fails to understand why Fascism (which expresses that primacy) is incapable of blocking capitalism.

\(^{66}\) Cf. Soffici: “Taccuini” 403: “saying and repeating some eternal Italian truths.”


\(^{68}\) Cf. Soffici: Opere V 457-8: “classicism is no more than popularity raised to its purest and highest expression in art and poetry; the popular spirit sublimated by virtue of forms and style in the works of true artists-creators […]. Works which, for the same reason, the people understand and love, as they love the works that reveal to them their
greatness of an artist if not his ability to raise everything he deals with from the ground of vulgar contingency up to the sphere of absolute reality?” (“Periplo” 46). Of course the opposite is also true, and the opposite implies the possibility for the superstructure to be directly implemented as praxis: only in a time of non-degenerated morality and politics (realistic and classical: Italian!) will the artist be able to bring his task entirely to fruition: “to produce a work that combines in itself the maximum of reality and the maximum of ideality or spirituality. All true artists strive to this goal. But only in the rare and happy times in which a civilization reaches the peak of its development that goal is achieved by the artistic geniuses who represent and embody it.” (Periplo 276)

It is true that along this line, Soffici, connecting to the old anti-academic position and thereby redeeming his youth as a “necessary error,” does not propose the slavish repetition of the old models (think of the controversy with La Ronda); but this is so because, by extending the accusation of Pre-Raphaelitism to the avant-garde movements, he leaves himself the chance to present the movement of reaction as a revolutionary movement with, acting as a corollary in the usual rejection of the ‘abstract,’ the definitive equation between archaism-decorativism-academicism and avant-garde (and following this road he would end up, through a series of ideological-historical acrobatics, first connecting Impressionism to traditional Italian classicism, thereby maintaining that he had never gone ‘Parisian,’ and then claiming the ethnic Italian origin of the artists he loved). Style, then, being the genius’s better, indeed, their divine part, that move them, incite them, excite them, illuminate them, guide and form them, making them more and more prepared for their function of civilization.”

69 Cf. Soffici: “Taccuini” 302: “At the present time […], the true revolutionary and authentic «avant-gardist» is he who opposes the general carousing of aesthetic decadentisms, dilettantisms, romanticisms, and Bolshevisms, in the name of harmony, serenity, and health, typical Italian virtues.”

70 Cf. Soffici: Medardo Rosso 62-3: “if we were to seek a definition for this part of the works of Medardo Rosso, the most appropriate would not be impressionistic, but rather classical […]; but doesn’t classical mean perfect and final, whatever theory the artist may have followed in his path towards this happily achieved perfection?”

71 And Soffici’s considerations, in their organicity to the practice of a political action, would spread like wildfire among the intellectuals. Cf. Severini: letter to Carrà dated June 10, 1922: in Carrà-Soffici: Lettere 255: “the fact of having established and developed, with extraordinary consciousness and order, from Giotto to Masaccio and up to Raphael, the rules of composition and construction, gives us the right to say that the law has always been formulated and laid down by us.”

72 Soffici: Trenta artisti moderni 374: “I have an idea […]: instead of it being any knowledge that we may have about the individual, the character, and even the origin and the lineage of an artist, that explains and enlightens his work, it is the critical analysis of the distinctive character, the quality and style of this work that will reveal the
ability to give Expression to the ‘reality’ of a Nation, is not the formal abstraction that develops from life while betraying it (decorativism and avant-garde), but life’s empirical tangibility (Realism), which is both concrete and symbolic because it corresponds to the particular of a people (aggregated as a ‘unity’ in a Nation) that is the universal of the world. Thus the formalization of the pragmatic perspectives of inter-classism (unity) and imperialism (universality) in the field of culture, ultimately finds, precisely thanks to the figure of the genius, the end of populism as a necessary and complementary element: the mass that expresses all this empirically is in fact unable of creation, it requires a genius – who is “homeland made man” (Battle 124) – to become aware of itself in a Style that is more and more Nature and Symbol; that does not admit, in referring to tradition, disagreements that would undermine its ‘spiritually’ identifying and materially corporatist structure (on pain of entering into degenerated modernity). So the populist drive provides the artist with his ‘material’ and ‘reality’: “my spirit is nothing but the product, the ethereal essence of the Italian reality” (Periplo 225). Because only in connection with this reality it will be possible for the genius to be concrete and not abstract; only through a social connection with this collective personality will it be possible to overcome the disconnection of the forms of the Spirit (i.e. modernity) and restore art to its ‘actuating’ function (which corresponds to restoring politics to its ‘aesthetic’ function):

The _conditio sine qua non_ of a work of art is its unity. […] poetry, painting, and even music, are in a relationship of absolute interdependence, for instance, with politics, as personality, the spiritual origin, and even the true nationality of its author.” From here to Cézanne being a son of Romagna or Piemonte and Rimbaud being Rambaldi is but a short step. Soffici’s viewpoint fully corresponds with what Giovanni Gentile had to say in the _Manifesto degli intellettuali fascisti_: “Fascism is a recent and ancient movement of the Italian spirit, closely tied to the history of the Italian nation, though not without meaning and interest for every other nation. […] It is freedom, but freedom to be won through law, freedom established by renouncing all petty arbitrariness and wasteful, irrational ambition.”

Cf. Soffici: _Opere_ V 337-8: “popular poetry in the strict sense of the word does not exist, the mass being unable to create anything.”

Cf. Soffici: “Taccuini” 256-9: the sense of this reality, and accordingly to bring it back to life, forever and everywhere. […] He feels nothing more, he sees nothing more except that ghost, which he wishes to seal in a symbol. […] Here lies the strength and the resonance of true style.”

Cf. Soffici: _Opere_ V 207: “whoever attacks, fights, and discredits the tradition of a people is trying to shatter and destroy the very foundation of that people’s civilization, that is, the main reason for its existence and higher life. […] Which does not consist in forms, modes, transient appearances, but in the spirit, the essence, the profound consistency that inspires the soul of the people.”
this is with religion and moral customs, […] as economics is with metaphysics; […] in short, everything is necessarily in relationship with everything else, so that our civilization might automatically recover its balance, unsettled centuries ago, and be rebuilt in its ancient, lost glory. The French saying tout se tient is the common, familiar expression of this typically Italian idea (in Opere V 530-1).77

The classical order becomes freedom78 because it is the ‘reality’ of a people that is expressed in a Style79 inhering in a real (and universal) tradition. Such a tradition is anti-modern80 because of modernity it rejects the treacherously twin concepts of materiality81 and abstraction.82 It relates instead to a State that is Fascist inasmuch as it is Italian, and is Italian inasmuch as it is the opposite of the metonymic chain which,83 through abstraction and disintegration (through mechanicalism and transitoriness) is at the basis of modernity.

Arriving at a realistic mimesis (this point will be further examined when we look at Michelstaedter) therefore means arriving at the hegemonic concept that is called reality and is expressed by Style:

Aristotle, who was not an ignorant man, believed that mimesis, the imitation of nature, was the foundation of poetry, and of all the arts […]. So Aristotle was a realist […]. Realism is not the slavish copy of visible reality, nor the uninterested, mechanical representation of the forms and aspects of nature. Realism means the imitation of reality (or mimesis, to use Aristotle’s term); but of reality as it appears to the artist who imitates it […], he must of necessity imitate reality to make himself understood and to make others understand its deepest meaning, its poetic meaning, and its religious meaning (in Opere V 291-4).

77 Cf. Soffici: “Taccuini” 436: “Style is the search for unity. In unity is peace.”
79 Cf. Soffici: “Periplo” 70: “dominated by style, which is the virtue of transforming the truth into ideal reality – in the Platonic sense.”
80 This viewpoint is also at the basis of Italian anti-Modernism, with Malaparte attacking Joyce and Svevo, Berto Ricci railing against the European-cosmopolitan Pirandello, and Chiarini denouncing the non-national genius of authors such as Proust and Dos Passos.
81 Cf. Soffici: letter to Giuseppe Prezzolini dated January 10, 1964, in Carteggio, II, 306: “Rome or Moscow is a fundamental motto. And Rome is back […]. Rome means: man in his entirety, […] to save the world from the death of the soul, the death of individual thought, from scientific and mechanical barbarism.”
82 Cf. Soffici: Opere V 436-7: “Under the arcades of the Odéon Theater in Paris, at the start of the century, one of those bouquinistes still had a big pile of Japanese prints, which he sold for a couple of soldi each. […] From these prints […] originated most of the deviations of modern French painting. […] Gauguin, of Van Gogh, […] Matisse, of Picasso, of Braque, derives mainly from that spiritual and aesthetic contact with Far Eastern art, of which it retains the exotic flavor and abstract artificiality.”
83 And it is no coincidence that this metonymic chain will be reactivated, in part, when Soffici loses the practical-hegemonic reference of the ideology he has chosen. When, I mean, Neo-Fascism, with which he takes sides, will of course fail to play the same pragmatic role that had been of the Fascist regime. In the second Giornale di bordo we will find again, for example, his reflections on the ‘fluidity’ of life; art, instead (as witness his last letters to Prezzolini), will become more and more a consolation against skepticism. Once praxis is gone, there remains only the refuge of dreams.
The sinister shadows that the Fascist Soffici casts over his previous experience cannot be
ignored. They should not lead, either, to the facile equation Modernism-Fascism. These men
of which Soffici was one, wrote Gramsci from his prison cell, were once young: the story is
more complex than that of a mere rejection of early positions; it is more complex because it
does not proceed – as Soffici himself believed – along purely ideological lines. Papini himself
could not understand how the *modus ragionandi* of the early Soffici could dissolve so quickly
when he got to the Front line. The theoretics of ‘dilettantism’\(^{84}\) that the young Soffici
formulated in the metonymic chain of Modernism not only included many of the elements
that he would further develop in later years (in particular the topic of Italianness), but more
importantly, between Form and Impression (between plasticity and color, between life and
representation), already pertained to an aesthetic reconciliation directed at representing in the
‘form’ of a crystallized conflict (and flow) the (aesthetic) overcoming of it: “Read Nietzsche,
friend […], if you want to see how one thinks and writes and sings after diving into
Nothingness and being lucky enough to resurface with eyes washed clean and a heart full of
love and joy. […] the man to whose spirit we all owe our brave reconciliation with the
world.” (“Claudellismo ancora” (1912), in *Opere I* 560)

**III. Impressionism and Contingency**

Soffici’s Modernism is rooted in his study of French Impressionism. The abandonment of that
set of aestheticizing ideas which focus, in the steps of a misunderstood Nietzsche,\(^{85}\) on the
Orphic role of the artist as the guardian of the moment of ‘understanding’ that only Art can

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\(^{84}\) Cf. Prezzolini: *Amici* 148-9: “Everything – seen or heard – is expressed in essential terms, like a musical
rhythm, and with that pulse that is proper to life […] no longer ruled by religion and with no more laws, that takes
this faithlessness and tragic loneliness both as a symbol and a banner, whether of desperate rebellion or proud
resignation you couldn’t say, vaunts it and clings to it […]. Skepticism, vagrancy, amateurism."

\(^{85}\) This is the Nietzsche who, in the very first years of the 20\(^{th}\) century, pertains to the ‘Parisified’ Italians like
undoubtedly in 1905 and coincides with the Tuscan artist’s gradual approach to the Florentine milieu of the
«Leonardo». […] by distancing himself from Canudo, Soffici intended to assure his Florentine friends (and
himself) of having actually abandoned the French-style symbolism that had characterized the early stages of his
work in Paris.”
express, by rediscovering, beyond all appearances, the Sole truth of the world, is the point where Soffici enters the plane of a typically twentieth-century immanence willing to confront the new and much more complex horizon of epistemology that Modernism is bringing into play.

Returning to Italy in 1907 after spending seven years in Paris (first frequenting the symbolist Art Nouveau milieus and then – also because of his interest for the Leonardo being published in Florence – closer to the “ungrateful children” of symbolism, as André Salmon called them), Soffici, leaving behind his fin de siècle tastes, and having already produced his first campaign in support of Medardo Rosso (and his Italianness), arrives in Florence bringing a knowledge of contemporary artistic research in Europe that Papini and Prezzolini cannot ignore. The article published in the single issue of Il Commento (February 16, 1908) is the battle cry that opens his career with La Voce:

There is […] not one modern artist in Italy! […] it is only natural that neither is there any art criticism, […] none of our critics, except perhaps Angelo Conti, has even one of the qualities required for such a mission […]. Was it not one of them, Mr. Enrico Thovez, who a few months ago cheerfully insulted the French painter Paul Cézanne from the pages of «La Stampa» [...]. But if Italy would wake up […]. As for us, we will do our best to disturb its slumber, and from now on we will begin to beat without mercy (93-5).

No doubt facilitated by the cultural backwardness of the sector, Soffici, starting with his article on Cézanne published in the review Vita d’arte, not only prepares the ground for introducing the Impressionists in Italy, but also begins to outline a personal line of

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86 See Soffici’s letters to Papini from 1903 to 1906.
87 Soffici’s culture at the time of his departure for Paris (1900) is basically the culture of a faithful reader of the Marzocco, a journal open to the great French literature of the second half of the 19th century (in addition to the great symbolists, the journal featured, for example, writings by the future “Vocian” Thomas Neal on Anatole France, Bourget, Vigny). In the arts, as is well known, his preferences go, in Italy, to Segantini and Fattori, and in France, to Millet and Puvis de Chavannes, whose works he had seen at the Arte e fiori exhibition held in Florence in 1896. Cf. Paolini: in Corsetti and Moretti.
88 Working with journals such as La Plume, Revue Blanche, Cri de Paris, Europe Artiste, Soffici comes into contact with Apollinaire, Picasso, Jacob, Fort, Jarry. Cf. the ever fundamental Richter: La formazione francese.
89 In 1913 his friend Serge Jastrebzoff (see the recently published correspondence), director of Les soirées de Paris, would write to inform him that in France he was considered the greatest art critic in Europe. It may be interesting to note that Les soirées was the journal in which Papini published his essay on Bergson and Croce in 1914.
90 Thovez had defined Cézanne’s style the style of a child with no aptitude for drawing.
Modernism at which Prezzolini, once taking up the positions of Croce, would look with extreme suspicion. Prezzolini’s impression of a return, through Soffici, to the immorality and anarchy of the “Leonardo” can be appreciated in Soffici’s reference to a horizon of ‘negative thought’ that looks upon the Impressionists as the last link of a chain originating in the late eighteenth century and aimed at destructing the aesthetic norms and hierarchies (but it is clear that the issue is not limited to art alone) directed at replacing reality with an ‘abstract’ image, a schematic symbolization, of it:

Impressionism, [...] the result of a genuine spiritual revolution that started with philosophy and simultaneously passed into the fields of science and art. [...] one need only look with some insight at the work of an Impressionist painter to immediately realize that its main feature is not establishing a hierarchy of beings and things according to certain idealistic, intellectual, and even ethical principles, [...] but rather placing on the same level every natural phenomenon that manifests itself through forms and colors; the legitimation and poetification of every manifestation of life; the equalization of the different values of the visual universe (Soffici: “Cubismo e futurismo,” in Opere I 617-8).

The contingentist assumption is here linked to an image of Life (which Soffici calls Nature to oppose it to conceptualizing Reason) that breaks open, following Bergson, the gates of the

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92 Cf. Papini: letter to Prezzolini dated March 2, 1908, in Storia di un’amicizia 165: “Until you decide to give up the Crocean rigidity of the degrees of the spirit and recognize that there are ways to pleasantly suggest feelings and ideas without doing philosophy or art, you will never understand poor Soffici.”

93 Cf. Prezzolini: letter to Papini dated March 6, 1908, in Storia di un’amicizia 179-80: “this method is not new to me. It’s the same one used by the contingentists and the pragmatists to escape the rigor of definitions [...] arbitrariness [...] what remains for you is not confusion, but the personal aspect.”

94 Cf. Soffici: L’italiano inutile. The contrast is anything but arbitrary if one considers that in 1923, to separate himself from the approach to Fascism taken by many writers of his beloved “Voce,” Gobetti would write: “The original sin of these souls was «Il Leonardo».” (in L’Ora, October 1923). And this is the same Gobetti who in 1920 (Energie n°8, August) saw instead a line of continuity between the two journals.

95 Cf. Soffici: “L’impressionismo e la pittura italiana” (in La Voce, I, December 1908-January 1909), in Opere I 7-9: “The merits of impressionism are great and varied. First this: to have done away with aesthetic rules and hierarchies [...]. With the same blow that struck off the king’s head, the French of the late eighteenth century also decapitated the scholastic Hydra; by abolishing the monarchy and the castes, they were also taking down aesthetic hierarchies, and the freedom that was restored to the people was later also restored to art. The coup de grace would be finally administered by Impressionism.”

96 Cf. Soffici: “Autoritratto,” in Opere VII II, 731-2: “For some of us Florentines of La Voce and Lacerba, in those years Bergson was the most widely read thinker and the most loved [...] Those were the years when the Impressionist school still seemed the liveliest and the one that best expressed the spirit of our times. And since it seemed to me that, in this regard, that form of art reflected very well the master’s way of conceiving reality and its appearances, I asked him what he thought about it. [...] Bergson knew little of that school [...] But when I told
intellectual constructs that try to lock Life inside the ‘forms’ of the mind: “it’s utter foolishness. It’s the stuff of shallow dreamers who make up an «Ideal» above or outside reality and then give themselves up to despair because things in real life are different from what they would like” (Soffici: Opere II 453). In the work of the Impressionists, the technical assumption (borrowed from Laforgue) of the reproduction of nature in the fluidity of luminous vibrations becomes the instance of a cognitive disjointedness that reformulates reality in the equalizing light of subjective sensations, which alone communicates the transitoriness of appearance and ‘surface.’ The pliability of plastic volumes, their continuous, unstable intersecting in shimmering light, becomes the correlative of the volatilization of reality, where the ‘superficial’ opens the door to insubstantiality which is also plurality. The constant perception of a vital motion, of a perpetual becoming, makes Impressionist drawing – and here Soffici’s insight is remarkable – “the psychological articulation of classical or traditional drawing” (Opere I 13); life, freed from all constraints, denounces as

him what I thought, […] the shimmering colors, […] the dialectic […] of lights and shades, which represent nature in its constant transformation, […] in its perpetual flowing, corresponded very well, in my opinion, to his concept of creative evolution, of élan vital, of a sensible world in fieri, that acute philosopher declared himself very impressed by my assumption, and agreed with much of my reasoning.” The meeting took place in the first days of April 1910. Prezzolini, to whom Soffici described the meeting in a letter, would remember it in 1913 when writing La Francia e i francesi, which outlines the relationship between Bergson and Impressionism.

97 Melange posthumes (containing the fundamental essay on Impressionism of 1883) had been published by Felix Fénéon in 1903. And Fénéon himself, in Au delà de l’impressionism (1886), had spoken of the need to “synthétiser le paysage dans un aspect définitif qui en perpétue la sensation.” On this subject cf. Mangoni. As is well known, Fénéon’s writings (as well as those of Geffroy, Duret, Duranty) were studied by Vittorio Pica, who in 1909 published his analysis of the Impressionisti francesi. His book, however, though consulted and appreciated by Soffici, fails entirely to outline any relation with Modernist topics, which Soffici’s essays regularly do.

98 Cf. Soffici: letter to Papini dated May 12, 1908, in Carteggio, I, 216: “And you really need to let go of all that philosophical and scientific crap […] People who live in cities and feed on books, subtleties, and speculations will never understand what the light of the world and the fluidity of life are.”

99 Prezzolini was quick to understand what Soffici was saying. Cf. Io devo, in La Voce, IV, 7, 1912: “The most daring, cinematographic, chopped up Impressionism, the apotheosis of the fragment, of any fragment, is followed by the reaction, already started by Cézanne, to give solidity, cubicity to the figures of things: to “compose” the picture.”

There are two Vocian ‘fragmentisms’: one (Soffici’s) aims at the value of vitalistic nihilism and at the dream of identification with Nature that overcomes every conceptual barrier (the centrifugal flow of things); in the other, the fragment is always the ‘whole’ of a now lost epic which the ‘bad infinity’ of morality dreams of rebuilding. Look at what Boine writes about Soffici’s Giornale di bordo, in Plausi e botte 121-2: “the fragment and the whole are empty words in art because in the fragment there is always the whole […] the theory of fragments […] a certain desperate Epicureanism which is actually the passive conclusion of his life experience.” Cf. Cecchi: letter to Boine dated February 23, 1915, in Carteggio, III, 150: “They think that ‘moralism’ is more ingenuous than that barber-shop nihilism of theirs.”

100 Cf. Thomas Harrison: in Somigli and Moroni.

101 Cf. “Lettera a un giovane pittore,” in Opere I 351: “evocative and suggestive rather than representational, psychological, you could say […]”, it serves, rather, to reveal the innermost rhythm and harmony of the creative soul, and the particular transformation that reality undergoes as it reverberates in the mind or the imagination of
arbitrary and mechanical the elements by which it is composed and seeps through the cracks between them: “Unenclosed by logical boundaries, unlimited by decorative necessities, the spots of color begin to shimmer, suggesting an infinite space beyond the finite arabesque of forms” (Opere I 224). The “philosophy of the morning” of the ‘wanderer’ Soffici – the same one recognized in a ‘phenomenized’ Rimbaud and then backdated up to Foscolo finds in a nature that “does not exist independently of the intellect that conceives it” (“Impressionismo a Firenze,” in Opere I 283), the redemption of a freedom finally extraneous to – finally freed from – that which is extraneous to nature itself (to its constant variability and ever-changing character). Taking up the nihilist position proposed by modernity (Soffici calls this “heroism”), refusing any moral ‘rejection’ and accepting instead with love what he calls the totality of Life, brings Soffici (also thanks to his reading of excerpts from several works by Bergson) to the point of support for practical purposes, and with this immobility we try to reconstruct motion.” For more in general on the relationship between Bergson and the avant-garde see the work of Antliff.

102 The confirmations to his point of view that Soffici may have found in La filosofia dell'intuizione (a collection of excerpts from several works by Bergson that Papini published in 1913) or in books by Bergson that Soffici had already read in French, are too many to count. The following are a few examples. Cf. 52: “the symbol responds to the most inveterate habits of our thought. As a rule, we place ourselves in immobility, in which we find a point of support for practical purposes, and with this immobility we try to reconstruct motion.” For more in general on the relationship between Bergson and the avant-garde see the work of Antliff.

103 Cf. Nietzsche: Human, All Too Human, I, 304: “He who has attained to only some degree of freedom of mind cannot feel other than a wanderer on the earth – though not as a traveler to a final destination; for this destination does not exist. […] he may not let his heart adhere to firmly to any individual thing; within him too there must be something wandering that takes pleasure in change and transience.”

104 Cf. “Rimbaud,” in Opere II 116-7: “Reality, which up to then had shown the appearance of a clear relationship of forms, actions, feelings, colors […] all invariably assembled in a logical order, […] suddenly became vehemently vibrant to his perception, breaking up into elements that, removed from their respective ordinary centers, were now to be found in new positions, in new relations with each another; (…) is struck by previously unknown analogies and references: in the drawing near of distant things […] pain, joy, despair, and, above all, irony.”

105 Cf. Soffici: “Ugo Foscolo,” in La Voce, II, 1909, then Foreword to the volume Il tomo dell'io, in Opere 423-5: “Ugo Foscolo too was one of those wretches for whom philosophy is vanitas vanitatum, «substance and nothingness eternally synonymous» […] Appearances are so verisimilar that one needs only let one’s mind wander to mistake them for reality. […] Thus, closing our eyes to the great insolvable problems, we leap into life.”

106 Highly significant, in this sense, is Soffici’s rejection of Ibsen’s ‘Kantianism.’ Cf. “Anton Cecof” (1913), in Opere I 463: “evoking destiny, the ancient Ananke that weighs upon living beings and their actions; but to get there he needs to stylize life, to schematize it.”

Prezzolini, instead, also in 1913: “Cinque anni di Voce,” in La Voce, V, 52: “We are the ones for whom Kant existed. And we hope to persuade others that Kant […] existed […] profundity in life and capacity for action and construction.”
Nietzsche’s *Ecce homo*) to develop an autobiographical perspective (further developed in works such as *Arlecchino* and *Giornale di bordo*) which, refusing the constructiveness and the alleged hierarchicity of the novel form, opens to a ‘possibilistic’ structure of reality that mimics existential fragmentation as a continuous, and conflict-free, empathy between the I and the World. This is what determines as reality the flow of appearances. The equalization of the aspects of life leads to the abolition of the hierarchies of values: in the field of art, this assumption becomes the elimination of the elements that Soffici calls extra-artistic (thematic and utilitarian), and, along a line that begins with Baudelaire’s *Salon de 1846*, turns into the principle of pure art, which however is the correlative of the same phenomenalism that conceptualization rejects as it tends towards nature/life: “For the artist there are no values but artistic ones. To him, everything is on the same level, except art, and in art there is no rule of measurement other than life” (“*Giornale di bordo*” 192). For Soffici, the aestheticization of reality that that principle represents has the purpose of overcoming the formal abstraction, applied to reality by force of habit, that denies, to whoever experiences life in that manner, its true essence (which is fluid), and also denies the possibility of the constant transfiguration of reality offered by that same anti-hierarchical aestheticization: “The newspapers stuck between slats of beech seem white flags, and we have fun waving them around before reading them, pretending we are making alphabet signals from the top of a

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107 Cf. Soffici: “*Giornale di bordo,*” in *Opere IV* 42: “I’ve carried my loves around in towns and fields. I have taken delight under all skies. Blessed be life. […] I have seriously thought about death […] I have been unhappy under all skies. Blessed be life!”

108 Cf. Soffici: “*Giornale di bordo*” 118: “even a trifle can be divine for those who enjoy its charm […]. But you want the great tirades, the great architectures, the grave, sublime constructions. Well, I don’t: for me everything is on the same level.”

109 This is also the source of the close bond that Soffici establishes, epistemologically, between color/light and the ‘fluidity’ of life. Cf. “*Giornale*” 144: “the multicolored fluency of all-divine life.”

110 Cf. Soffici: “*Aldo Palazzeschii,*” (in La Voce, V 1913), in *Opere I* 517-8: “an unlimited opening beyond all conventions, all lyrical concerns, all ridiculous didactic, civic, humanistic preconceptions, […] is the pure artistic creation. It also means to implicitly declare the vanity of all the ideals, of all seriousness, of all life, of everything except the painful joy of feeling it and asserting oneself at least by singing it, or by forgetting it while singing. Irony, irony […] tragedy and consolation of our modern spirit!”

111 Cf. Soffici: “*Taccuino*” (1914-1915), in *Opere I* 481-2: “Suddenly raising my eyes from a newspaper in the everyday café, I find myself at an intersection of angles, rectangles and zones, of shadows, of deep colors which the tall windows send back broken and distorted, compenetrated by surfaces and crossed by an external reality drawn onto a single plane and organized for a new vision. […] so the world can be seen in a completely different way from the usual! Reality is not as it presents itself to our eyes every day if not because the long habit, by dulling our senses, makes them adapt to a spectacle devoid of emotions, made for the utilitarian tranquility of all.”
ship’s mast.” (“Caffè,” in *Opere I* 450). Similarly, ‘greatness’ is devalued, because the *Erlebnis* expressed by lyric intuition beyond any idealizing preconception can of course refer to anything presented by a reality *sub specie theatri* (for instance, a couple of mating slugs in *Giornale di bordo*)\(^{112}\): “I love life too much not to devoutly appreciate even the crumbs […] I am overly sensitive to the nuance, the fleeting glimpse, the trifle, to my eyes as important as the whole universe” (“*Giornale di bordo*” 56).

The cognitive *impasse* determined by casting away the totality of life leads to putting the form at the service of life, but the form then turns (against any repression of the flow which represents Truth)\(^{113}\) into the possibility of cynically using – in the ‘moods’ that the ego experiences having broken down the conceptual and ethical barriers that separated it from reality (to the point that “when you live you don’t write”) – any part of reality that is contained in any suggestive, transient forms.\(^{114}\) ‘Becoming’ is now the point… of Being, but the synthesis occurs only within a flowing that refuses reconciliation: “Don’t talk to me about God, just tell me that the world is beautiful and that I am rich too. […] Now I also understand that being and non-being come together in becoming. Yes, all these forms, these colors, these sounds, these smells, are not separate things in themselves, but all exist in an endless divine flowing!” (“Arlecchino,” in *Opere II* 326). Since the point of life is movement, as ‘his’ Foscolo says; since all Truth is the unity of an idea mechanically applied to the mobility of reality (the deception, Nietzsche would say, of the ‘first cause’), becoming solves the contradiction of Nothingness by giving form to the contingent that represents it:

\(^{112}\) Cf. Soffici: “Svalutazione della grandezza,” in *Lacerba*, I, 1913, in *Opere I* 582: “Once you regard a work of beauty as the perfect expression of an intuitive insight, it becomes clear that every one of those expressions cannot be of more or less good quality, but equivalent to every other.” This opens the controversial point of the affinity between Soffici’s impressionism and Croce’s theorization of aesthetics (which had already been pointed out by Boine and Prezzolini). My opinion is that both the elements of affinity (pure intuition, lyricism, etc.) and the elements of contrast (Soffici’s insisting on technicism, his aversion to systematizations that separate philosophy from criticism, etc.) fit into two ways of understanding the ‘crisis’ of modernity which are so different that even apparently concurring principles acquire entirely different meanings.

\(^{113}\) Cf. Soffici: “Giornale di bordo” 61-2: “this bad taste, this desire to reach the truth, «the truth at all costs» […] You have to […] stop at the surface, at the fold, at the skin, worship appearances, […] at the sounds, at the words, at all the *Olympus of appearances*. Those Greeks were superficial – in depth… […] page of *Twilight of the Idols* […] This Nietzsche is so much our own! How easily his thought takes shape inside us!”

\(^{114}\) Soffici’s method could be called ‘sketch writing,’ with reference to the tradition of 19th century Tuscany, but there is no doubt that the underlying epistemological references are completely different.
In order to live and be great, men have always needed to lean on something firm and stable. Some have leaned on God, others on Reason, which is a sort of god, others still on the idea of social duty. As for me, I kick out every foundation, shove away every prop, and remain alone, balancing on a spider’s thread suspended over a dark abyss. […] And I am happy. Just as being and non-being come together in becoming, all these distant, dissimilar, and opposite things come together in me in an elated melody, an enrapturing flow of delight, that rises and falls, widens and narrows; it touches the sky and nothing exists except me. Yesterday I was seeking the truth without finding it, today I can feel it is real, in this music, in the serenity of this spring, and I am happy (“Arlecchino,” in Opere II 327-8).

The “ironical smile” of those who “think about death, the end of all things” (“Moréas minimo,” in Opere I 490) is already an introduction, although Soffici fails to see this because he considers the juxtaposition between life and forms as a tragic conflict, to the ‘classical’ reproposal of the blasé who looks down from above, who – reformulating the ‘crisis of foundations’ as the tragedy of modern man – believes himself a flaneur, who looks at the shocks of modernity as the artistic transfiguration of a reality that was previously ‘abstract.’

The advent of the Dionysian (which Lacerba, among other things, would reformulate as a continuing affront to moral and social conventions, which are themselves arbitrary conceptualizations) conceals in Soffici the Apollonian of an amor fati that is the ‘multiple’ epic of the privilege of the genius to devote himself to unreality as acceptance of factuality: a ‘heroic’ acceptance that finds in Style (in ‘work,’ activity) the only non-conceptualistic,

115 Cf. “Di due visioni,” in Opere I 326: “he does not see the reality that stands before his eyes if not in its appearance, its requirements and its practical destinations. In close relationship with his own needs and material aspirations. Likewise, the ideas that it suggests to him are of a practical nature, utilitarian, social, commercial, […] on the other hand […] the artist […], the painter’s vision is essentially disinterested, artistic, just as we have seen the philistine’s being essentially utilitarian and practical. […] to extract from it the essential character capable of imparting to others the lyrical emotion that he felt himself. […] thus begins the transfiguration.”

116 Cf. “Giornale di bordo,” 180: “Rimbaud said that morality is a weakness of the brain. I think it’s worse: some kind of arteriosclerosis of the intelligence. […] In front of dazzling life, it is perhaps the sin against the Spirit that Jesus Christ spoke about; the one that will never be forgiven.” This would be the point scored in the immoralist game of the Almanacco purgativo (celebrated by Apollinaire in the Mercure de France) of 1914.

Cf. Prezolini: letter to Soffici dated April 16, 1908, in Carteggio, I, 11: “Your idea is to live and think and act in a rambling manner; […] and you think that the philosophers should have broken out in laughter after building their systems; in short, you do not believe in truth, nor in the attainability of truth. […] an immoral charlatanry. Of these ways of living it seems to me that you have chosen the first: lightness.”

117 Cf. Soffici: “Giornale di bordo,” 155: “The hero of yore was he who faced death: the modern hero is he who accepts life.” And we are back at Foscolo; cf. Il tomo dell’io 47: “but if Bayle was not terrified by his own Pyrrhonism, if in all things he found discord and uncertainty and error and endless night, and yet was strong enough to keep his eyes always open in that Chaos, I would judge him the most heroic intellect ever created by nature.”
non-abstract formalization that can redeem it. But if the genius is he who, receiving the reality of men, gives it back to them clarified and strengthened into Style (“that the truth rises from the people to the genius and redescends from the genius to the people”), then this Soffici is already formalizing into amor vitae the populism of an aestheticization that he sees as the breaking up of the conceptual-utilitarian aspects of the world: the true reality (realism) of the inconnu beyond the crystallization of thought, which the ‘people’ are close to and which the genius’s Style, without upsetting the melody of nature, illustrates. The heroic return of work into form has nothing to do, then, with the ethical turn that Slataper will take, but is the beginning of a realism which, however, arrives when reality is already transfigured – given that it can be panpoeticized by the genius – into what is called ‘concrete’ only because it is opposed to the abstractive principle that Soffici, biologically, considers “a disorder of the brain” (Opere II 493). The return to a reconciliatory (classical) function, with the corollary of the people that express it in concreteness, is always ready in Soffici precisely because his nihilism (and the conservation of the I is a sign of this) expresses its Arcadia: the cynical use of the world and of the goods, transfigured into ‘color’ and evaporated into non-defined forms, that it contains: “I love these silken nights in the shop windows, the atrocious colors of the ribbons, the acid shades of the veils. […] My eyes see the springtime in the flashes of the cutlery, of the silverware” (“Giornale di bordo” 192).

IV. Style, Genius, People

For Soffici, right from his essay on Cézanne, the element of fluidity, the fundamental assumption of the sympathetic union between the I and Reality, does not center on the transience of the aspects of living as the ultimate element of a form that constantly negates

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118 Soffici: “Ignoto toscano” (1909), in Opere II 11n.
119 Cf. Soffici: “Arlecchino,” in Opere II 324-5: “I had got to the point of negating myself when I went to bed. Now I find myself again. […] I feel, I see, I hear, and I think. I am. – The yellow earth that sticks to my shoes is earth; this that I touch is my face warmed by my blood, and those things in the air are two finches in love. […] I feel soaked in mirth: this morning, I love the young peasants.”
itself,\textsuperscript{120} but rather focuses, like an unending counterpoint, on the concept of ‘popular’\textsuperscript{121} and then of ‘Italian’\textsuperscript{122} as the main road to overcoming both classicist abstraction and the admittedly necessary point of disruption (\textit{Krisis}) that Impressionism represents:

In short, he had to realize that all this work was mostly empirical and descriptive, and that it lacked the seal of the divine will which draws unto itself the forms of things, examines them, concentrates them, and sends them back, transformed, to live an eternal life in the universe – and which is called style […] he could achieve what the Impressionists could not: he could bathe in an atmosphere of spiritual unity the animate and inanimate beings of his compositions. […] they were no longer depicted as isolated or fragmented personalities; but united in a harmony of lines and shades, tamed by his will and forced to reveal a vision that was inside him and of which they became like signs gleaned from the world of appearances (\textit{Opere I} 228-31).

Soffici’s recounting of the “end of the models”\textsuperscript{123} and of the arrival at an art finally freed, along the line of what is called realism, “from all religious, philosophical, ethical, and social preconceptions” (\textit{Courbet}, in \textit{Opere I} 215), develops in dyad with the counterpoint – which

\textsuperscript{120} Cf. Soffici: “Cubismo e futurismo,” in \textit{Opere II} 619-21: “It can be easily inferred from this, that while the immediacy of the representation gave paintings a formerly unknown flavor and liveliness, it was nonetheless cause that the reality portrayed could never rise, in the figuration, to that amplitude and universality of expression […] which in short constitute style, and instead would deteriorate into the transient, the anecdotal, and sometimes even into the utterly illustrative. […] a quivering, elusive swarming […], until everything vanishes and drowns in a dazzle of white light. For that is what impressionist painting was becoming, unless it was already so, […] until […], Paul Cézanne, […] getting a grasp on things again, reconstructing them artistically in their firmness, reasserting the volumes, the chiaroscuro, the drawing, and everything else that the others had denied, gave start to that reaction.”

\textsuperscript{121} Cf. Soffici: \textit{Opere I} 232-3: “where the green of the trees, the fields of wheat, the people, the hill, the houses, and the sky do not melt in an intense luminous vibration, but stand out clearly, each with its own distinct, individual, plain character. […] raises any vulgar fact to the dignity of a perpetual symbol of life. […] he saw the mystical force that bursts out of mute things, […] he felt the fierce power that erupts from the innocent hearts of the people.” Cézanne’s self-imposed exile in Aix-en-Provence obviously becomes the correlative of Soffici’s retirement in Poggio a Caiano: cf. Soffici: letter to Papini dated May 10, 1908, in \textit{Carteggio I} 214: “It seems to me that since I came back here […] I have rediscovered my land, my mother, the taste of bread and water. I feel perfectly in tune with the rocks, the cows, the wheat coming up in the fields […] and with our dear, good language of peasants and geniuses. […] I will be an artist and a Tuscan, because I feel that we have a magnificent heritage to take on and increase.”

\textsuperscript{122} Cf. Soffici: \textit{Opere I} 234-5: “should France fail to acknowledge Paul Cézanne as the prophet of an art made to fill our souls, a reborn Italy that really understood his future artistic destiny could take advantage of this lesson.” Soffici would be very pleased to learn of Cézanne’s Italian origins from Vollard’s book in 1914.

\textsuperscript{123} Cf. Soffici: “Courbet,” in \textit{Opere I} 218-21: Millet […] still looked at the world somewhat with the eyes of the past, […] had given those peasants and workers a solemn appearance […]. The common people of Gustav Courbet […] their attitudes are always simple and real […]; no particular escapes him, however repulsive or discordant: the imbecility and the vinous, earthy color of the faces […]. The fact is that Gustave Courbet, an uneducated man but of modern sensitivity, had soon realized that there is no abstract model of beauty and order against which the artist must gauge his impressions; […] unrestrained love of nature […] to have great things be expressed by the most repugnant being or corner of the universe, […] that beauty is diverse and that its forms are infinite, that everything is legitimate and beautiful which is given life by the genius and imprinted with a strong individuality.”
Soffici believes also to be found in Rimbaud\textsuperscript{124} – of the popular (and of the genius who ‘organizes’ the popular, bringing it out of its routineness)\textsuperscript{125} through which Style (both the plasticity of the coloristic element and the ‘nationality’ of the cosmopolitan element) is made possible. Menalio and Lemmonio (the two self-portrayals of this Soffici) – the guardian of the \textit{élan vital} who believes that philosophical systems are based on grammatical frauds, and the intellectual-warrior who, regaining possession of his land, dreams of rectifying its wrongs through the return to the true spirit of the race\textsuperscript{126} – are not antithetical figures,\textsuperscript{127} because in Soffici the link between culture and society (with the former always prevailing) is already clear; by this I mean that here Soffici is already introducing the doubly determined relation between art and society, where, however, for the moment, the ‘negative’ metonymic chain is not brought out (Fascist corporatism), but acts as the internal counterpart (Giolittanism, socialism, academicism, Dannunzianism, etc.) of a battle which finds in European modernity, in the potential for destruction of the modernist ‘germs,’ an all-important ally with which to rebuild, at the same time, culture and society.\textsuperscript{128} What Impressionism introduces as the breakdown of an abstractly hierarchical way of thinking is in fact the counterpart of the

\textsuperscript{124} Cf. Soffici: “Rimbaud,” in \textit{Opere I} 153: “the tragedy of modern man […] for whom life is what for Michelangelo’s Prisoners is the marble block from which they strive to free themselves and move through the air […] . It’s true, however, that, in spite of everything, into his prose and poetry has transpired the true sense of reality as he sees it with his temperament of a man of the people.”

\textsuperscript{125} Cf. Soffici: “Primi principi,” in \textit{Opere I} 689: “instinctive, uneducated artists, who lack all critical and reflective faculties, are unable to fully valorize their expressive discoveries or to make them, and only them, the material of all their work. Instead, they reshuffle these fortuitous riches in the inert matter which is the predominant substance of their common and uncultivated being. As they are not supported by a true creative will, they are unable to channel their sensitivity in a given direction, to break away from the usual ways of conceiving reality.”

\textsuperscript{126} Here (1912) we can already see the link between culture and politics (theory as praxis) that will be given further development by the future Soffici.

\textsuperscript{127} Cf. Soffici: “Arlecchino,” in \textit{Opere II} 509-10: “to joyfully give myself up to the festival of illusions, to identify with the appearances of all things, to twinkle like a fly in a ray of sunshine, following no other rhythm except the one of my solitary, unique being […] was perhaps the beginning of my healing. […] Menalio […]! Tear yourself away from the depths that draw you into them but at the dark bottom of which sleeps infinite nothingness, eternal chaos, and know thyself instead: you are not the son of the gloomy north, and your childhood was spent at the foot of the golden hills of Fiesole. […] the vigorous tallow of my ancient race permeates and energizes my whole being. […] Onward! A bold, vigorous balance now sustains my going into the world. As solid as a cypress of my home town.”

\textsuperscript{128} Cf. Soffici: “Ricordi di vita artistica,” in \textit{Opere VI} 109-10: “Our relationship began […] to a current that formed between us originating from a common essence […] that could be said of Italianity. […] Papini was then, as I was myself, […] a «good European», that is, a man who aspired to go beyond the limits of cultural and spiritual parochialism and move freely in a wider aura of universality. […] a scouting mission […] almost a «virus» capable of providing a stimulating impulse, a stirring jolt.”
‘utilitarian’ and ‘moral’ way of behaving that the ‘philistine’ bourgeoisie\textsuperscript{129} (and on these grounds also socialism, which derives from it) sets up against a people that, in its closeness to the ‘natural’ element, expresses the matter of a Style that rearticulates that admittedly necessary destruction:

The freedom with which on the other side of the Alps they now look at drawing, at composition, at color, and in general at all the modes of expression of an artist; the belief that any attempt is legitimate, as long as it is sincere […]; the emancipation from all false criteria, […] once all these things are grafted into our taste for balance […] they cannot but lead to a powerful, boldly modern art […] Italian painters will learn that […] drawing, technique, and coloring are not fixed, unchangeable things […] but in constant change, flowing like life itself. […] the possibility of a virile lesson from the attempts of Impressionism […]. So what I recommend is not slavish imitation; but to exploit and surpass (“L’impressionismo e la pittura italiana,” in \textit{Opere I} 26-9).

Soffici’s double movement had already been expressed in embryonic form in his unfinished novel of 1908, \textit{La famiglia Turchi}. In this ingenuous spiritualistic redemption of the \textit{verismo} of De Roberto’s \textit{Viceré} – a rough model for his book\textsuperscript{130} – Soffici had outlined the possibility of the ‘rebirth’ of that double movement, related, on the one hand, to Bergsonian-style anti-ideistic contingentism\textsuperscript{131} and, on the other, to the realistic option. Realism, taken in its positive element of rurality,\textsuperscript{132} appears in \textit{La famiglia Turchi} capable both of superseding the

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\textsuperscript{129} Cf. Soffici: “Giornale di bordo,” in \textit{Opere IV} 7: “I too had always believed that certain metaphysical philosophies, whether optimistic or pessimistic, were basically the product of philistinism: the elevation of bourgeois aspirations to a system.”

\textsuperscript{130} Cf. Soffici: letter to Papini of April 1908, in \textit{Carteggio}, I, 201: “«I viceré» […] what the book is missing (as usual) is a whiff of idealism.”

\textsuperscript{131} Cf. Soffici: “La famiglia Turchi” in Vanden Berghe 110-2: “«What a Harlequin is the heart of man!» […] Only when they abandon themselves to the flowing course of life and let themselves be carried by it will men like us find peace. […] Sometimes I imagine that in some infinitely ancient time life flowed with a divine rhythm, moving and winding as if dancing, and that suddenly something stiffened, grew cold, and broke the elasticity of movement; and I believe that this something was like a question: Why? Where? How? And that from then on everything changed. […] if I had to give a definition of what is called Evil I would be unable to do so without referring to this physical image of elasticity. […] and evil begins precisely when sympathy turns into a closed soul, into a rigid will that resists and fights back instead of letting itself be permeated and carried. […] I suspect that this something that rebels and resists is precisely your thinking.” Note the title of his future work appearing at the beginning.

\textsuperscript{132} Cf. Soffici: letter to Papini of June 1908, in \textit{Carteggio}, I, 218-1: “A nation that has people like these peasants, who listen to (and understand) the Bible and Sacchetti and work their hilly land honestly and almost sacerdotally, must have hope, and its children must nourish and exalt its hope so that it may become reality.”
He threw himself into the flow of life as if in his own element, and the soul of the people pervaded and invigorated him like new, hot blood. [...] A tragedy of Aeschylus, a canto of Dante, a tale of Boccaccio [...] had seemed absolutely clear to him and fully alive because imbued with that same understanding. His mother, a peasant woman from a peasant family, bending in tears over the body of her old father [...] he always pictured her as if carved in stone, for all eternity. But what struck him most, when he was digging up ancient memories, was the concordance that formed in his mind between those people and the land that provided them with shelter and food [...]. As he strolled about town with his heart full of joy he studied the monuments and the appearance of the streets [...] and everything lived for him and with him of a harmonious life. He would grasp, for instance, a mysterious relationship between the prose he was creating and the mass of a firm stone building with its well-shaped windows (“La famiglia Turchi” 72-5).

The presupposition of organicity with a territory-race allows the possibility of ‘concrete’ art, which is also what that land-race gives expression to. In this connection, art not only transcends the dangers of abstraction (what Soffici – in perfect accordance with his rejection of philosophical conceptualizations – calls the risk of ‘classicism’134 and relates to bourgeois – as opposed to rural – ‘sensitivity’), but also avoids the impressionist menace135 which, after throwing classicism into crisis, now threatens to deny the heroic return of unity that Style aims to express through realism (in identification of the ‘subjective’ with what is called

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133 Cf. Soffici: “La famiglia Turchi” 70-1: “aspired to come together in a firm and fluent whole. […] To create a man who combined in Himself all the attributes of his race.”

134 This is the point from which stems the disagreement with Maurice Denis, the author of Théories. Cf. Soffici: “Arte francese moderna,” in La Voce, January 1913, in Opere I 304-6: “in order to be great and eternal, art must submit to discipline, to order: before they can pass into the work of a painter, emotion and feeling must first be purged by his intellect or reason. These are the basic points of Denis’s doctrine, and anyone who has studied the problem of art knows that they are true […]. Classicism, all right, but first we need to agree on what we mean by classicism. It is certain that modern art – as the true art of any time – must tend towards discipline, order; […] Are these words to mean some new law produced by extensive research or laid down from inside the renewed artist; or some transcendent aesthetic imperative, good for everyone and for every time? […] Denis’s classicism is objectivism […], the idealistic subordination of the purely artistic element.”

135 Cf. Soffici: “L’impressionismo e la pittura italiana,” in Opere I 16-7: “Having lost their sense of forms and volumes they were left occupying themselves with the harmonious blending of shades and with plein air lighting. (…) confronted by nature […] they let themselves be won, be absorbed by it.”

Cf. Del Puppo: Modernità e nazione 60: “Soffici was denouncing the limits of a form of painting that, trying to contrast the primacy of drawing, had reduced the world of natural phenomena to a sort of indefinite mass of colored light vibrations. […] lost the sense of width and universality, reducing themselves to translating transient, illustrative aspects, to the point of insubstantiality and disintegration.”
This is why Lemmonio makes a stand – significantly after realizing the decline of Italian art through his reading of books and magazines – in defense of the rural underclass and against bourgeois and socialist philistinism; and it is also along this line that Cézanne, who was already in instrumental agreement with the Tuscan primitives, becomes the emblem of the reconciliatory attitude that, on the plane of plasticity and volume, reformulates into realistic ‘firmness’ the volatilization of luminism. Similarly, Rimbaud’s principle of reality being continually transfigured by the rejection of all formalistic ‘laws’ is resolved in the point of a heroic ‘serenity’ (and it is no coincidence that in this regard Soffici mentions Plato and Goethe) which, after showing the ‘possibilistic’ structure of reality itself, settles where life (the life that – against the mere verism of the ‘camera’ – is already transfigured) is concrete, in raw material and in the art that turns it into Style:

would transfigure them and give them the fantastic appearance of a scene out of paradise; but that the whole sky, like a molten metal more dazzling than gold, had poured over the earth, cloaking it in its splendor [...] – everything he could see in the square and in the roads that ended there from the surrounding countryside stirred his imagination with forgotten visions from poems read in other ages, from paintings seen here and there during his youthful wanderings [...] But those were memories. And reality was more interesting still. Lemmonio continued to watch that feast of innocent childhood, so perfectly in tune with the beings and things among which it was taking place; he listened to the ingenuous songs, gazed at the young bodies, so healthy and perfect, the faces and bodies of youths and adults [...] as if they were all a symbol of the best part of himself, of his soul, nourished and given substance by those things for which he felt so much love. And that proud tenderness grew stronger and stronger, becoming in him a passion for his motherland [...]. Those who love you, o wonderful land, will watch over you, are watching over you, for your continuous purification (in Opere II 282-5).

Through his critical considerations on Cézanne, who steps beyond the ‘changeable’ and gives voice to the essence of phenomena, and Rimbaud, who feels “love for the people” (69),

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136 But, as is the case for artistic expression, it is always the genius the one who defines that reality.
137 Cf. Soffici: “Lemmonio Boreo,” in Opere II 37-9: “regaining possession of his land [...] Florence, Prato, Pistoia. [...] the humble houses where a genius can be born without anyone knowing, without Magi or shepherds, to one day change the face of the world. [...] he was already anticipating the delight of being close again to the soul of his countrymen.” And in the final notes for La famiglia Turchi, the protagonist, underlining a clear continuity, was already taking on the appearance of an ‘avenger’ wanting to “cauterize the wound.”
138 Cf. Soffici: “L’impressionismo a Firenze” (1910), in Opere I 288-301: “the gigantic effort of synthesizing in an organic whole the sense of volume and luminosity [...] You can feel the throb of truth all over [...] fully penetrating through transient reality, he has captured its eternal spiritual essence.”
Soffici acquires the theoretical possibility of redefining as Style not only the formalizing point of art, but also its ability to go beyond abstraction and, through its relation with the social element, to give a new direction to existence (and at this point it should not come as a surprise, as can be inferred by the connection – aimed at the recovery of ‘plasticity’ – between Cézanne and the Tuscan primitives, that Soffici considers this ability to be typically ‘Italian’). If for Soffici art has the capacity to ‘rebuild’ the world, the it is incorrect to say, as has been said, that in Soffici there are a ‘Rimbaud side’ and a ‘Rolland side’ (Jean-Christophe was a generic model for Lemmonio Boreo): the controversy with the more orthodox Vocians (especially the dispute with Jahier in 1912 regarding Claudelism) should not be seen simply as a clash between those who look eagerly at the social potential of art and those who prefer artistic production to be grounded on anarchy and ‘incendiary’ urges. It should be viewed, rather, on the level of artistic models (Peguy, Rolland, Claudel vs Apollinaire, Cendrars, De Gourmont, Picasso), as a clash between two different ways of understanding modernity (and Modernism), and, on the level of intellectual activity, as two different ways of understanding (thus the creation of Lacerba, which Prezzolini and

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139 Like Papini, Soffici was not uncomfortable with La Voce simply because the review tended to give social issues (symbolized by what was called a “Salveminian tone”) a position of prominence compared to the ‘great’ problems of thought and art, but because that prominence implied Prezzolini’s denial of the idea that art could change the world. Cf. Soffici: “Autoritratto,” in Opere VII, II, 655-6: “went up the hill of Fiesole, and after wandering for some time through the woods and the crags of Monte Ceceri, I finally lay down on the patchy grass […]. this need then made me appreciate like never before the inconsistency, and even the ridiculousness, of the literary work I had done in cahoots with the professors, the statisticians, the economists, the politicians, and the seminarians of “La Voce”.”

140 Cf. Soffici: “Ugo Foscolo,” in Opere I 432: “Thus the Italian intellect […] has always recoiled from the mad flight almost in horror, and trying instead to reconnect with things, […] of thought which, not resigned to stiff, abstract formulas, will circulate, articulated, and spread everywhere, permeating all the work, or all the action. […] is the genuinely Italian way to serve the truth.”

141 In a letter to Prezzolini, Rolland expressed a positive opinion on Soffici’s novel (he was one of the few).

142 Cf. Soffici: “Claudellismo ancora,” in La Voce, IV, 1912, in Opere I 556-7: “By dint of living, studying, and reflecting, I have come to believe that the purpose of man and the universe, the immortality of the soul, the absolute, god – are unnecessary issues, […] all destined to founder in a flood of words […] The only truth […] has remained for me […] the I […] Which is to say that morality, social responsibility, these natural conclusions, inevitable in any system, are for me, on the definitive plane […] of words without meaning […] Therefore, the truly, modernly heroic man, in my opinion, is he who, spurning these falsely compassionate crutches of a supreme being, […] of an extraterrestrial comparison with existing things, remains proud, balanced over the void, feeding on himself, or facing life with its blacks and whites, indeed all now flowing with the most wonderful colors, freely jumps into it, as into an ever-renewing iridescent whirlpool, giving his all and taking all, […] certain that it alone is beautiful, true, and eternal.”
Palazzeschi would consider more than anything “Soffici’s creature”) the pragmatic role of theory\(^{143}\).

I have said that the final plane of skepticism […] is the plane of art, mere expression of the I. Now, you say to me: «in you, Soffici, there is the idea that to be a poet one must rid himself of his social consciousness, of human solidarity» […]. Who says so? […] when Rimbaud […] ends his season in hell with a renewed love for mankind; when, in a word, poetry seizes something and lifts it into its reign of unbiased passion, above all contingencies and biases; I admire and applaud (\textit{Opere I} 558).

Here the artistic reconstruction that Work represents is meant to be a social reconstruction, which, having taken its ‘realistic’ model from the people (the people who, according to Mazzini, express inalienable values), returns to the people as a sublimated \textit{mimesis}, ‘poeticized’ in a form that expresses – no doubt ideologically – the plastic structure of well-defined, ‘eternalized’ social relations:

It seems to me that the universe and all mankind is a \textit{chaos}, a senseless \textit{anecdote} that goes round and round, falls down, flounders in \textit{nothingness}, from nothingness, towards the nothingness that will ultimately swallow it. […] Then I think that all \textit{geniuses}, who in my opinion are those men who shelter in their souls a kind of nostalgia and a premonition of this \textit{infinite nothingness}, work to \textit{ramener} everything towards Unity. Through style, art […] tries to condense in a figuration […] In art I love that common-man severity and seriousness that give the idea of a life without masks […]. The seriousness with which the peasant accepts without complaint his destiny of being a peasant, and the poet of being a poet, the priest of being a priest, a mountain of being a mountain, a bird of being a bird, and so on. […] \textit{realist} in the sense that Dante is, or Michelangelo, or Donatello (\textit{Carteggio} with Boine 39-40).

Soffici’s realism, which is an aesthetics freed of spurious elements\(^{144}\) and reconducted, as a totalizing principle, to the equalization of the self with Life, aims at an art that is ‘concrete’ non because it intervenes as an element of society, but because it is already part of that

\(^{143}\) And in fact Prezzolini, probably having Rolland in mind, initially supported Soffici, but after reading his novel was quick to change his opinion about it, reaffirming his ‘militant’ position. Cf. Prezzolini: letter to Soffici dated February 1, 1912, in \textit{Carteggio}, I, 214-6.

\(^{144}\) Cf. Soffici: “Necessità di una nuova estetica,” in \textit{La Voce}, VIII 1916, in \textit{Opere I} 684: “so far, every aesthetics has belonged, together with logic and ethics, to one or another system of philosophy. […] more or less resented its amphibious, bastard origin, and appeared impure […] asked for a logical, reasonable connection with the imagination.”
society treacherously chosen as real reality; the same society (peasant and rural)\textsuperscript{145} that Lemmonio decides to fight for, because he knows that only if it wins, then art, the art that society expresses in the populist work of the genius, will share its victory.\textsuperscript{146} The line of development, harking back to Oriani and Corradini, which attaches to the popular element a subversive function with an anti-proletarian slant (with the usual ideological baggage of anti-materialism, Risorgimento betrayed, nationalism,\textsuperscript{147} socialism as positivism, etc.), finds in the intellectual who is the protagonist of the novel the perfect representative of a struggle that, insofar as it is a social struggle, is also a struggle for Style (and vice versa): a struggle for the ‘form’ – real and ideal – of society. The overcoming of what Soffici calls “abstraction” (“beyond abstraction, towards art”)\textsuperscript{148} is the aestheticization of life which the genius attains by filling of himself what is known as the people. This is not mimetism, but a forced transfiguration that is hypostatized as mimetic (and at the same time the maker of that ‘reality’) but only because ‘true reality’ has already been ideologically chosen/established, fixed in the eternity of a Style that expresses it: “I wish the beings I represent would show that they are devoted to their condition, and that it were impossible to imagine that they could fancy being anything else” (in Opere V 519).

The three basic elements of the young Soffici’s artistic view – the impressionistic assumption of interpenetration between the environment and the figures; the recovery of a ‘plastic’ language; the reference to the source of popular art – are in fact the same elements that determine his analysis of both Cubism and Futurism. Only that, in this case too, his

\textsuperscript{145}Cf. Soffici: “Idillio nero,” in La Riviera ligure. June 1910: “Beatrice! – that day you took sides (…) with the people of the city […]. All this is not nice, I know, but what sadness, and heavy too! And mostly, how everything mysteriously accorded with the roughness of the ground, it too dirty but promising flowers, herbs, and young plants. And how nicely all things lived, beings and things […] Here, spring does not arrive like a beautiful virgin clothed in youth and opulence […], no, here it is a young beggar girl with blond hair and green eyes.”

\textsuperscript{146}Cf. Soffici: “Il caso Medardo Rosso,” in La Voce, July 1909, in Opere I 38-9: “There is, for example, a category of painting in which he excels […]: I am referring to his portraits of children. […] in these works you can feel, in embryo, that common-folk energy which, erupting at a later stage, will make of these little scamps, […] able workmen, fierce stabbers, adventurers, or geniuses. […] of the love that the people – the real people, the genuine, healthy people of the fields – still have in common with the animals […] like a piece of Italy […] sent around the world to refresh the souls of the weary and the corrupt.”

\textsuperscript{147}Particularly interesting, in this respect, is the fact that the terrible prank that Lemmonio sets up against the visiting foreigners can be taken, if we consider their nationalities, as an attack on the four great industrial powers: the United States, England, France, and Germany.

\textsuperscript{148}Soffici: “Disegno-Deformazione,” in Opere I 329.
analysis appears pre-directed by the choice of a ‘reality’ that is more and more so inasmuch as it is Italian (and popular).\textsuperscript{149} Glossing on the Italianess of Futurism (synthesis of impressionist volatility and cubist plasticity)\textsuperscript{150} Soffici writes:

instead of the embodiment of multi-color luminosity, […] the sober firmness of bodies and objects, the weight […]. (I shall note, in passing, that in this respect the best Italian art, whose principal merit lies precisely in this sobriety, firmness, weightiness, balance, is essentially cubistic […]. And the mother of Picasso is Italian) (“Cubismo e oltre,” in \textit{Opere I} 634).

some of the painters of the Futurist group have done research in this direction and the results obtained could let one hope that Cubism, the essence of which, as I said, is Italian, might find its logical, full, and fruitful development in Italy (“Cubismo e oltre” 655).

Futurism, which in 1909-1910 Soffici still considers, following Morasso and D’Annunzio, the mere thematic change of a worn-out symbolist perspective, gives him his first (immediately disappointed) hopes in the days preceding the opening of the exhibition at the Padiglione Ricordi in Milan in April 1911. He writes about it to Prezzolini, full of Italian expectations:

that independent exhibition in Milan. […] It is an immense pleasure for me to see these manifestations of freedom = intelligence = rebirth. Can it be, then, that our beloved and unfortunate Italy is finally awakening? […] Having exhausted itself by dint of fertility, our race is unable to sprout new branches, it will have to grow shoots from the ground itself. […] the fatality and, I might say, the providential nature of our reawakening […], in the midst of the decay, the dissolution of French culture (\textit{Carteggio}, I, 172-3).

History records the merciless review published in \textit{La Voce},\textsuperscript{151} the punitive expedition to Florence organized by the Futurists, and the subsequent reconciliation\textsuperscript{152} (also thanks to the

\textsuperscript{149} Cf. Soffici: “Gli studi Picasso,” in \textit{Opere VI} 210-1: “When I would meet him like this at his house I could recognize in him the Italian he was by way of his Genoese mother. When I mentioned this to him he was pleased; in fact he told me that in my company he felt like a fellow countryman; […] and developed in 1907 in the \textit{Demoiselles d’Avignon}, which I had liked so much when depicted by Picasso (also because there was a nice slice of watermelon like the ones I used to eat, and this reminded me of Italy).”

\textsuperscript{150} A position that Boccioni would agree with and that would elicit the following observation from Ugo Tommei, highlighting the hegemonic capacity of Soffici’s discourse: “After the failures of cubism, then, a careful study of the undeniable merits of this art in conciliation with the ideas of a movement already expressed by the Futurists – suggested the possibility of a complete art. This promise – so to speak – was chiefly the work of Soffici […]. There was also talk of a moving cubism, or better, of the solidification of impressionism” (“L’esposizione di pittura a Firenze,” in \textit{Il Quartiere latino}, 4, 24, December 1913, 4-8.
Paris spring of 1912 during which the ‘Milanese’ painters could finally admire the works of Picasso, Braque, Lager, Gris, Delaunay) that would lead to the short-lived participation of Papini and Soffici in the movement, with the famous line “Futurism is a movement, and movement is life” (Soffici: “Ancora del futurismo,” in La Voce, July 11, 1912). What Soffici now outlines as the overcoming of the apparently incompatible ideals of impressionism and cubism evolves into the inclusion of the previous analyses about impressionist ‘dynamics’ and cubist ‘stasis’\(^{153}\) in the common plane of the deformation/transfiguration of reality, which is anti-mimetic but also extraneous to the absence of relations with the substantial forms of reality, which, through the work of the genius who ‘transfigures’ them, should constitute the very material of art.\(^{154}\) Soffici, who in 1911 had detected in the works of an already Italianized Picasso (by way of his mother and, through the connection with Cézanne, along the line of the Tuscan primitives) an effort towards Style and ‘concreteness’ aiming at “interpreting the nature realistically, deforming its aspect according to a hidden lyric necessity, for intensifying its suggestiveness, […] for translating […] the truth deforming and transforming it” (“Picasso e Braque,” in Opere I 624), now directs himself – also referring, with Boccioni, to Rosso’s observations on the interpenetration between environment and figure\(^{155}\) – and explicitly opening to the primacy of Italian art\(^{156}\) (and the crescendo towards

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152 Particularly interesting, in this regard, are the suggestions that Boccioni gave Severini (who paid a visit to Soffici in late 1912) on how to behave in his presence. The suggestions also reveal the intention (of Marinetti and Boccioni) to always act as “one man.”

153 Cf. Soffici: “Cubismo e oltre,” in Lacerba, I, 1913, in Opere I 640: “Impressionism conceived the visible world as an aggregate of luminous vibrations, a glittering flow in which forms are distinguished only by a greater or lesser intensity of shades […]. Cubism looks to reaffirm tangible concreteness […]. Impressionism negated the limit, the boundary: Cubism proclaims the existence of the line.”

154 Cf. Soffici: “Cubismo e oltre,” in Opere I 652-3: “Given that Cubism – it is argued – sets as the first tenet of its research the principle of pure painting, why not give up entirely the study of reality and exercise ourselves in simple pictorial or plastic chords with no other material than volumes, planes, masses, lines, shades free of any relationship with the real world? […] it is also necessary that the artist never entirely abandon the study of the substantial forms of reality, since: I) Lyrical activity cannot be completely internal, like philosophical activity: the appreciation of abstract forms of painting cannot be conceived, nor can fertile emotions gush forth, without contact with the artistic spirit of the surrounding world.”

155 Cf. Soffici: “Il dinamismo nella pittura futurista,” in Opere I 667-8: “like Impressionism, it considers bodies as having no absolute form of their own, but a form that changes according to the light and the setting: however, like Cubism, it also considers them in their concreteness and palpability […]. To distort an object according to its particular lighting and to the influence that surrounding objects – the environment – may have upon it is to shift its
nationalism will also make a victim of Cézanne), to what he emblematically calls “the style of movement”:

cubism resolutely negates movement in favor of stasis, just as impressionism had negated the compactness of bodies in favor of vibratility. [...] futurism [...] looks at [...] bodies as having a form that is not absolute but variable according to lighting and setting: but it also looks at them (like Cubism does) in their concreteness and palpability [...]: to bring inside the object the elements of the things outside that modify it. [...] to place in the planes and the volumes of the object the planes and the volumes of the objects around it, and vice versa. [...] to depict the movement of bodies, not by means of vibrations, but through the displacement, intersection, and interpenetration of the planes of reality (“Teoria del movimento nella plastica futurista,” in Opere I 1355-8).

In agreement with Roberto Longhi, according to whom the futurists had attributed motion to masses, dynamizing crystallized forms, Soffici develops a hierarchy of the three elements, to alter its rhythm. To alter the rhythm of an object according to that influence is to bring inside the object the elements of the things outside that change it. To make this change using planes and volumes is to place inside the planes and volumes of the object the planes and volumes of the objects around it, and vice versa. The plastic dynamic of the Futurists consists in this movement. The movement of volumes and planes intersecting each other in a synthetic, vital competition. A synthesis consisting in portraying the movement of bodies not through vibrations, but through the displacement, intersection, and interpenetration of the planes of reality.”

Cf. Carrà (also to get an idea of how far Soffici’s reflections had come): “Piani plastici come espansione sferica nello spazio,” in Lacerba, March 15, 1913: “In order to be objective, the Cubists simply consider things by moving around them and giving us a geometric reading. [...] We Futurists, instead, using the power of intuition, try to put ourselves at the center of things, so that our selves and their uniqueness may form a single compound. [...] achieving that sense of perpetually mobile that is characteristic of all living things [...] Thus going beyond the Cubist concept of the immobility of what is apparently inert, we Futurists amalgamate every thing in a constructive enharmonic relationship of planes, shades, and colors, reaching a complex unity as is life itself.”
movements in which futurism is characterized by its ability to simultaneously overcome the insubstantiality of impressionist reality and the anti-realistic abstractness that cubism continually grazes as it ‘moves away’ (conceptualization) from the forms of ‘reality.’ What these forms were is revealed by Soffici to Carrà in July 1913 (but they had been engraved in all his intellectual development up to then):

The good thing about Futurism […] is that it carries out its artistic pursuits in the modern sense. If we could do this also in a purely Italian sense we would get good results. […] I see here along the country roads fine things of that sort. Absolutely Italian. If we could manage to put some consciousness and feeling in those pursuits we could do something important (Lettere 26).

And then in April 1914: “Popular art is the true source from which we must draw” (51). It is precisely through this art (decisive here is the model of Henri Rousseau, cunningly associated with Paolo Uccello) that Soffici reformulates modernity as a necessary passage – also on account of Rimbaud and his Alchimie du verb – through the territory of kitsch (sign boards, overdoors, sale signs, tavern frescoes) which however (Soffici is alien to any “loss of a halo”) does not mean the ‘degradation’ of the artist, but the bonds of the genius (who is entitled to transfigure/sublimate anything, since in the unity of the work all is allowed) with whatever his race (and his territory, which is its correlative) produces as ‘concrete.’

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159 Cf. Longhi: “I pittori futuristi,” in La Voce, April 10, 1913: “the representation of movement is essentially based on the line, or on the mass commented by the line. Now, it is clear that in order to move away from Cubistic immobility towards a new style, it is necessary to pass from the “line as a function of mass” – if one wishes to preserve the mass, i.e. the corporeity of objects, which is what the Futurists want – to “mass as a function of the line.” The idea of giving movement to the “mass” would cause Longhi, among other things, to brilliantly declare that Futurism is to Cubism as Baroque is to the Renaissance.

160 Cf. Soffici: “La pittura futurista” (public lecture held at the Teatro Verdi on December 12, 1913), in Opere I 661: “the possibility of emerging from the static character of Cubism, which conceived reality only through the firmness and fixity of its volumes and planes, to create a plastic style appropriate to the movement of modern life. A style that, of an object interpreted pictorially, would render not only the values of stability and concreteness, but also the values relating to the motion that transforms it by modifying the trend and the character of its lines.”


162 Cf. Soffici: “Acrobatismo clownismo,” in L’Italia futurista, III 1918, in Opere I “the artist no longer as an apostle, an educator […] but as an acrobat, a tumbler […]. Which in no way constitutes a degradation; this should be clearly understood.” Soffici’s clownism (developed recovering a Laforguian theme) has nothing to do, for example, with the clownism of Palazzeschi, which is the capacity for self-criticism that art poses on itself.

163 Cf. Soffici: “Autoritratto,” in Opere VII, I, 105: “such a pure sense of color as color […]. These are feelings that take one’s soul back to the primordial ages of nature, that take it to live in something like the golden age. […] I remember […] that to draw the bricklayers working on the tower, I would watch the ones who in those days were
‘poeticization’ of the popular is possible because the genius does not limit himself to exhibiting that which exists, thereby taking part in a commodified life,\textsuperscript{164} but aesthetizes the existing – as chosen by him – loading it with the values of the classical that his art (which is born from it and ‘clarifies’ it in Style) expresses in a steady relationship, increasingly free of ‘barriers’ (as explained in Soffici’s article entitled \textit{Raggio}\textsuperscript{165}) with that same reality. That is why, as Del Puppo correctly observes, «Lacerba is as responsible for Marinetti’s futurist hypostasis as it is later for the traditionalist, classical, or \textit{strapaesana} one» (\textit{Lacerba} 16); and that is also why (while Carrà points out to Soffici that they had defended that kind of expression since 1910 and publishes in \textit{Lacerba} his article \textit{Vita moderna e arte popolare}) the break-up with the Milanese movement soon becomes inevitable. The heuristic principle that Soffici assigns to art is in fact extraneous to the mimetic-excitatory principle that Marinetti (much farther than Soffici from the horizon of the \textit{Krisis}) interprets, in the suppression of the bridge with reality represented by the ego, as the need to write, materially, the life of matter.\textsuperscript{166} Soffici, instead, referring to the aestheticization of what is ‘common,’ which he believes to be the estrangement from utilitarian-bourgeois sensitivity, believes that “The material used by the artist is always inert, dead, expressionless, unless it is lead by the artist to BECOME SPIRITUALIZED; to become, that is, the pure element of lyrical symbolic
representations. Which amounts to disappearing as a material’ (in Opere I 740). In a letter to
Barbantini of January 1921, lastly, Soffici, now a journalist for Mussolini’s Popolo d’Italia
would review that whole experience as follows:

my futurist escapade, which was neither an escapade nor futurist, and actually not
even an interlude in the development of my painting. […] there’s a continuity that I
would like to see recognized. More than futurist attempts it was an attempt to give a
conscious expression to instinctive popular pictorial expressions: if you have ever
seen certain shop signs or street vendor signs in Tuscany you would realize that the
inspiration for my art came from the country’s, or rather the region’s, everyday life.
The Futurists, with their dynamism, their interpenetrating planes, and similar
nonsense, were doing something else altogether (Soffici: quoted in Rodriguez:
Picasso alla biennale 44).

Which of the two lines would be historically successful would become clear in a few years’
time. And the moment is inevitably marked by the upcoming war\(^{167}\): not because the themes
that emerge from the war with hegemonic force had not already been a matter of discussion
among the representatives of the avant-garde, but because those themes are now related, in a
subordinate position, to the interest of those who act in practice, conveying this as the
‘universal’ action of an entire nation of people. It is not enough to show, as some critics do,
that a number of themes (one being ‘classicism’) were already present before 1914 to argue
that the old binomial ‘war-return to order’ no longer stands: this ‘solution’ implies continuing
to believe that History is the history that intellectuals make up under purely ideological
directives. These directives are directly related to the changing interests of the ruling class. In
this sense, Soffici – with all his ‘people’ who, through the genius, express themselves in Style
– is already prepared:

\(^{167}\) Cf. Soffici: letter to Papini dated August 4, 1914, in Carteggio, II, 396-7: “I believe therefore that Lacerba
should take part, in any way possible, in the spiritual manifestations of the moment […]. I am not considering the
matter as related to politics in the strict sense of the word […]. What interests me is this: There is a conflict
between two civilizations: the Latin-British-Slavic one and the German one. If Germany were to win, resulting in
the crushing of France, we and all the civilized peoples of Europe would find ourselves subjected to its influence,
if not spiritual, material and cultural. […] The barbarism of moralism, of militarism, of mental drudgery and
obtuseness.”
A lot of proletarian and processional flag-waving [...]. I try for a moment to feel moved myself, to share in my soul the unanimous exaltation, the collective life, the hope of future justice: but in vain. [...] The only thing that strikes me agreeably are the bright, screaming, anarchic colors of the banners [...]. But is this enough to make up for the revulsion and disgust for the barred shops, for the interrupted strolling, for this idiot crowd that bumps into me and drags me with it as it rushes along the pavement like a herd? ("Giornale di bordo," in Opere I 65).

V. Style, War, Spirit

To think that even in 1913 it would have seemed absurd to Soffici to have to stick a bayonet into the belly of his friend Apollinaire for patriotic reasons! But that a little later he would have slashed open even Goethe if necessary for Italy to triumph over the hated Krauts. [...] he came out transfigured, having experienced there the participation of a nation, [...] he achieved a communion with his people (Prezzolini: "Preface" to Opere I XXXVI).

The interventionist struggle, also given the singularity of the Italian case with its ten months of debate, allows the Lacerbian intellectuals to shift the battle for avant-garde theorizations to the arena of active politics, also reassembling – albeit briefly – the cultural front: both the one with the Milanese Futurists and the one with the Vocians. The ideological block now finds space for expression both on the populist side – voicing the protest against the government’s fence-sitting, the intellectuals pose as representatives of an alleged popular will – and on the cultural side where, initially, a number of elements pertaining to the modernist perspective are presented with an anti-German function:

Rémy de Gourmont was [...] a critical spirit, and because of that also a skeptic; but his skepticism was consoled, vital, thirsty for happiness [...] an Epicurean skeptic, and as such he hated metaphysical and religious nonsense; he hated [...] the empty talk of German-style philosophies [...] he asserted the legitimacy of any phenomenon, considering it an integral part of that great and wonderful phenomenon that is the universe [...]. Like all the finest modern thinkers he considered irony the highest form of philosophical expression; [...] to see his homeland threatened and contaminated by the sickening Teutonic brutality and barbarism (Soffici: “Rémy de Gourmont,” in La Voce, VII, 1915, in Opere I 503-4).

While, in France, Bergson (La signification de la guerre) attacks Prussia’s militarism with the instruments of the philosophy of life and calls upon the French troops to exert their "élan
vital,” in Germany Simmel retrieves the preceding Kantian perspective to signify the conflict
as the overcoming of the culture of ‘money’ and the recovery of the broken link between
‘end’ and ‘means’; while Stefan George invokes the “holy war” as the purgatory of a
declining civilization, Rilke, in his *Fünf Gesänge*, sees the war as overcoming the avant-
garde’s social isolation.\(^{168}\) In Italy, in the meantime, Alfredo Rocco (in his journal *Dovere
nazionale*) writes about the need for the bourgeoisie to regain control of the ‘scene,’ and the
‘Crocean’ Prezzolini fantasizes about an invigorating barbarousness; in its *Almanacco* for
1915 *La Voce* retrieves (together with the canonical reprinting of Oriani) an article originally
written in 1893 by Salvemini (he too now an interventionist) in which he talks about “hateful
peace”\(^{169}\); Mussolini (who during the war in Libya had called for women to lie down on the
tracks to prevent the trains from leaving) asks the ‘Florentine’ writers to provide copy for his
new war paper; the immoralist Tavolato invokes “knuckleheads of the world, unite” and, also
in *Lacerba*, Ugo Tommei prepares the future Fascist theme “Either war or revolution.”\(^{170}\) The
autonomy of judgement that the intellectuals now imagine as the opportunity to intervene
more easily, because of the war, on the superstructure (and the apotheosis of that autonomy
conveyed by a war presented as a clash of civilizations), reveals the slippery slope towards a
‘consensus’\(^{171}\) in which independence is already being limited to the control exercised, for the
moment, over the petty-bourgeois sectors of the population. Such control is predicated yet
again on the aestheticization (Ottone Rosai’s “politics of the artists”) of political-practical
events.

\(^{168}\) There are of course many more examples (in this regard consider also the secondary role that Adler’s Socialist Party would have in Austria). And in England, while Bertrand Russell asks himself why so many of his colleagues
changed position at the outbreak of war, those colleagues buy a page in the “Times” to outline the country’s
mission of civilization against Prussian arms. The exception to this was of course Karl Kraus, one of the few who
was able to situate the issue well beyond the humanitarian terms of the pacifists (which were the terms of
Unamuno, Rolland, Palazzeschi): cf. *Die Fackel*, no. 404, December 5, 1914, 4: “I know very well that from
time to time marketplaces must be turned into battlefields, so that they may go back to being marketplaces.”

\(^{169}\) Cf. Salvemini: “Quando si deve fare la guerra,” in *Almanacco della Voce* 177: “I cannot ignore the fact that
there are peaces that are much more horrible and hateful than war: they are the peaces that consume nations on a
low flame […]; the peaces in which workers die […] by being worn out day by day.”

\(^{170}\) Cf. Tommei: “O la Guerra o la Rivoluzione,” in *Lacerba*, October 15, 1914: “War: there’s no way out,
Socialists of my country. Either you help us rally and fight the battle outside, or you fight the one inside, with our
help perhaps […]. The important thing would be that you free us from the gout and the scoundrelry that command
over us. Getting rid of you folks, afterwards, wouldn’t take much effort.”

\(^{171}\) And in October 1914, Fernando Agnoletti, also in *Lacerba*, reiterates his support for Enrico Corradini.

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The recovery, for military purposes, of more forthright avant-garde topics\textsuperscript{172} leads Soffici (and consider how leaving for the front would later be compared to his leaving for Paris, the capital of the avant-garde)\textsuperscript{173} to view the war as the overthrowing of an alleged Teutonic cultural hegemony. \textsuperscript{174} Germanism becomes, at the same time (as we have seen, these themes had all been prepared for some time), the embodiment of what is abstract: “The German mentality is an abstract mentality.”\textsuperscript{175} Retrieving the ideological baggage of the Risorgimento, and presenting interventionism as a “Fourth War of Independence”), the representation of all that is alien to a popular national consciousness finds its highest expression\textsuperscript{176} in the Italian will to war: “This war is the purest result of a sudden and miraculous contact between a disinterested, conscious “élite” and the deep soul of the people […]]. There must be about two hundred of us in Italy that are the real promoters of this war: scholars, philosophers, artists. Our luck was that we found a people, the flower pure and simple of the people, ready to receive our seed, \textit{to give a strong, healthy body to our loving idea}” (Sfogatoio, unpublished). Italy, as Soffici writes to Apollinaire in 1915, marches “surtout pour la civilisation, pour la vie” (102). The same Italy is now experimenting on a large scale the process of national reconstruction of the ruling class which the intellectuals experience as a struggle for separating themselves from the ‘prosaic’ empiricism of the old liberals allied with Turati’s socialists – is more and more the abstract term of a national

\textsuperscript{172} Cf. Soffici: “Autoritratto,” in \textit{Opere VII}, II, 777-8: “they were spontaneous, fertile manifestations of youth. They were the new generations which in that commotion of conflicting feelings and ideas were creating a new Italian spirit.”

\textsuperscript{173} Cf. Soffici: letter to Apollinaire dated May 19, 1915, in \textit{Carteggi} 90: “Nous combattrons bientôt pour la même cause qui est celle de l’intelligence et de la beauté.”

\textsuperscript{174} Cf. Soffici: “Autoritratto,” in \textit{Opere VII}, II, 793: “my elderly mother all alone with her troubles. When it came time to leave, her apprehensions, her hugs, her tears were the same as when, twenty years old, I had left for Paris. But she was also the one who had once secretly sewn the cockades and tricolors of unified Italy […]]. Thus ended my long advance towards the appointed goal.”

\textsuperscript{175} Cf. Soffici: letter to Prezzolini dated August 15, 1914, in \textit{Carteggio}, I, 255: “We believe that Italy has but one duty – this: To side with all its strength with the civilized Europe represented by France, England, Russia (yes, even Russia) in order to crush and suffocate once and for all the Austro-German brute, those two disgusting nations that have always stood for barbarism, stupidity, and ugliness.” At the bottom there is the usual conflict between spirit and matter.

\textsuperscript{176} Cf. Soffici: “Autoritratto,” in \textit{Opere VII}, II, 763-4: “our political party was Italy, with all its past – historical, cultural, artistic, spiritual – that is, with its centuries, indeed millennia, of civilization. A civilization that was not only national, but, by diffusion and extension – I mean for the fact that it had been the model and the paradigm of all others, developed in various forms – European, or better, universal. […] we thought that the Germany of that time represented a mortal threat for this kind of civilization […]]. It was as if an unstoppable enemy was trampling and violating a part of us […] the best of our being, the essential part.”
reconciliation (that will be peremptorily expressed ‘after the victory,’ also as the superseding of the battle for interventionism) which Soffici outlines as the ‘concrete’ and irrevocable element of a race that – in the usual link between the genius and the people (populism)\(^{177}\) – he perceives to be himself (because under his terms it is ‘himself!’): “Italy is cowardly, tepid, poor, and I feel all these defects in myself. [...] to fall back into dejection along with our entire race. I never thought I was such a sensitive thermometer of Italian society” (letter to Carrà dated September 20, 1914, in *Lettere 67*). Resentful towards Marinetti, Soffici had previously written: “Italy absolute sovereign, all right [...] patriotism, all you want [...]. But the word freedom [...] allow me to put it before everything else” (in *Opere IV* 160-1). Yet Soffici is now on the road that leads to identifying these two concepts in the line of a universality (the ‘classical’) that is the cultural pastime, as Malaparte clearly shows in *La rivolta dei santi maledetti* (1921), of inter-class reconciliation:

The sweeping, assured conceptions of life that had redounded to the glory of the late eighteenth century had shrunk, crumbled, to the point of fitting inside the minds of everyone. The infinite was gone, devoured by the particular. The plague of the «fragmentary» was gnawing at the foundations of society, seeping into the consciences [...] , everything that had buckled under the weight of the useless, the trivial, the fragmentary, and the chronological, now rises again to reassert its strength and its will to live. The August of 1914 produced this result (14-27).

The recompositional structure that the intellectuals regain in the trenches as intermediaries between the high command and the mass of subordinates (a function that Gaetano Mosca had already theorized for the ‘cultured class’), gives them back a social role that is expressed – through psychology and/or coercive means – as a ‘bridging’ function appropriate for administering the consciousness industry\(^{178}\) focused on maintaining the unity of action and intent. Moreover, the apparently directorial role conceals to the intellectuals the reasons of their own subalternity that is intrinsic to the whole structure, because that subalternity finds

\(^{177}\) Cf. Soffici: letter to Papini dated July 13, 1918, in *Carteggio*, III, 160: “The soldiers who so valiantly fought on the Piave and on the Grappa are a little our own creature.”

\(^{178}\) The expression is Mario Isngnghi’s.
psychological compensation in that same function of intermediation, which, while attributing to the people the role of an ‘uncorrupted force’ in which the intellectuals can now take part (this is the myth of the guerra-farmaco [war as medicine])\textsuperscript{179}, reserves for the intellectuals a superiority, in terms of culture\textsuperscript{180} and consciousness, that becomes the element which, in the ‘natural’ hierarchy (from the general to the infantryman), now legitimates their ‘command’\textsuperscript{181}:

“the patient, kind-hearted, unsuspecting infantry soldiers, who, clustered around the finest men of the Italian small bourgeoisie, have traced roads, climbed mountains, conquered with their blood miles of trenches” (Malaparte: \textit{La rivolta} 54).\textsuperscript{182} The historical dimension of the war allows the intellectuals to establish the myth of “Us” in which to test (between the mystique of submission to the group and the usual myths of political rebellion) the effectiveness of a theoretical-cultural perspective they had always wanted to put on the plane of practice. Yet, as it becomes clear that the people want very little of the political-heroic myths of the avant-garde, the resolution for action is almost immediately forced to abandon the ideological-antagonistic perspectives of the battle for interventionism (marking the defeat of Marinetti’s Futurism) in favor of the unifying myths that look upon the Motherland and the rural world as the hegemonic perspective, directed, on the one hand, towards the national-popular idyll, and, on the other (but it is the same movement), at laying out the denunciation

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\textsuperscript{179} Cf. Soffici: “Errore di coincidenza,” in \textit{Rete mediterranea} (1920), in \textit{Opere III} 43-4: “This wounded man, whom I imagine miserable and alone in the world, must be in need of everything; and if I could, I would cover him with goodness and tenderness; […] there is something delightful in this surrendering to fate that is like resting in the womb of nature triumphant, which will do with us whatever it pleases or is necessary.”

\textsuperscript{180} This would chiefly, but not exclusively, be the case of Renato Serra’s \textit{Esame di conscienza di un letterato}, in which the mystique of submitting to the group conceals a newly found social role that is expressed, among the young bourgeois who guide the people, in referring political action to the literary, and more generally, cultural tradition.

\textsuperscript{181} Cf. Soffici: “Kobilek” (1917 in \textit{La Nazione}, and later in a book published in 1918), in \textit{Opere III} 122: “these men […] I wonder if this representation of death should not be preferred to the representation of so bleak a life. However, I also wonder whether that assumption equally applies to myself, with all that I am gifted with a conscience that illuminates and enriches. In any case my fate is tied to theirs, and this is very comforting.”

\textsuperscript{182} Soffici: “Errore di coincidenza,” in \textit{Opere III} 56-8: “by all appearances a blasphemer and a rebel, is one of the most generous and faithful soldiers of Italy: an obscure hero, you might say, on whom the country can always rely. […] ready to give his life if necessary […] I picked up a bowl and some bread and began to feed him. He laughed, and his eyes were smiling and grateful. […] the wounded are almost all laborers or peasants: lower-class people, in short. (…) so many children whom their mothers had put to sleep with a loving caress […] With my heart full of love and charity, I wonder if this holy people of mine isn’t doing this to give me another proof of its noble history, its infinite kindness, to make me love it even more.”
of a perspective – in the increasingly subaltern militarization of the country – that gradually comes to include (in addition to the foreign enemy that threatens Italianity) the entire nation not at the front (pacifists, socialists, liberal-Giolittian bourgeoisie, etc.). At first, Soffici tries to call the soldiers to the ‘game’ of war using the modernist approaches experimented in *Lacerba*: “each of us has 792 chances of coming out unharmed against one of falling to danger” (‘Errore’ 13). He invokes, as the butterfly effect, the possibilistic structure of reality, and tries to take part in the symbolist-futurist perspective of analogies (airplane fumes as wreaths, the sound of bullets as smacking kisses); but he is soon forced to abandon this strategy to turn, ‘independently,’ to what he now interprets as the common fate of a race of which even the intellectuals – though in a position of prestige – are a part:

The last kisses of friendship are delivered in secrecy and silence, among the smiles of those about to die. The elation of victory, the disheartenment of sacrifice take their places around the golden wings of the Angel at the top of the Castle […]. In the hours of fighting, in Udine, the hearts of men grow larger and stronger. From the sacred mountains, from the even more sacred river comes the undulating thunder of the artillery, like a wind of might and victory, an immense surge of love and faith that casts each passing moment in a radiant light of future glory. Even the city’s life is quickened by it. It’s like blood roused by fiery passion […] we would prefer to forget the epic, return to our spirit of months ago: impossible; our instinct brings us back to the acute, lasting travail of our race. In Udine you can love a woman; but her name is Talie, and in the end you realize that in loving her you have loved the great name of our homeland (“La giostra dei sensi,” in *Opere II* 477-80).

By renouncing a position of rebellion and becoming organic to the hegemonic perspective, Soffici can regain his modern role of organizer of consent, in the terms of an individuality that strives to agree with the moral (and ‘natural’) structure of an entire people – reflected in

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183 The enemy too is of course depicted as an element of disruption of the natural and popular ‘tradition,’ which however manages to survive the occupation. Cf. “La ritirata,” 226: “makes me think of the airy farmhouses of my Tuscany, just like everything in the towns around here reminds me of the most Italian regions of Italy. […] the women dressed in bright colors, and the farmers working in the fields […] a shepherd boy tending his flock […]. From thought to thought, as I contemplate this spectacle of beauty and life that is so much ours, I come to the usual reflection on the monstrosity of the fact that for hundreds of years it was admitted that all this was Austria.”

184 Soffici: “Errore di coincidenza,” in *Opere III* 36: “my death? The idea of this game of accuracy of which I was supposed to be the stake […] I’m having fun exploring it. […] the smallest acts and movements carried out as required by the exercise of life, without knowing that their consequences will in turn give rise to something terribly important […]. With this, however, that just a little shift in the concatenation of these events, facts, and movements, together with all their effects and consequences, would be enough to make them deviate from their direction and thereby upset the whole system of intersections.”
the ‘naturalness’ of the military hierarchy – that can lend concreteness to that structure. The overcoming of the “germs of national dissolution” (Volpe: Saluto a un maestro 24) – which Soffici interprets, but in his usual Paretian-populist perspective (the genius), as the recovery of a formerly despised humanity – is therefore seen as the retrieval, in a state of war, of the ‘realistic’ virtues of a (peasant) race which Style presents in opposition to the particularistic fragmentation (absence of corporatism) that could deny victory and grant success to the solvent (and abstract!) metonymic chain – because it is always the Spirit that determines Matter – which the ‘German’ already expresses. The attribute of ‘classical’ that Soffici presents as emerging from the war in contact with humanity, is thus the attribute of organicity for those who turn theory into practice acting compulsorily (through populism, through the historical presence of the people as an ideologically predetermined element) as a universal subject:

And this miracle of finally living in absolute truth, external and internal. [...] an approach [...] indeed a perfect connection with the men of my race, thus a renewed affection, ardent, exclusive, for my country, Italy. [...] I believe that a jealous cult of

185 Cf. Soffici: letter to Papini dated July 9, 1917, in Carteggio, III, 108: “You forget that life is directed by a small number of superior persons. So it will be up to us to guide the people against Germanism.”
186 Cf. Soffici: “Kobilek” 99: “They are good lads, friendly, cheerful, not at all fearsome or boastful, but serene in their simple Italian courage. And here again [...] I realize, after two years of military life, how wrong and vain it is to confine oneself, as I did, in the circle of people of our profession; among artists, poets, philosophers, whether real or soi-disant. This war will have taught many of us, sectarians, members of questionable elites, how much humanity, beauty, spontaneity of life and feeling can be found outside our artificial borders, [...] that mass which after all is almost all of mankind and which we address en bloc and with contempt as the «bourgeoisie»!
187 Cf. Soffici: “Kobilek” 103-4: “He speaks wonderfully, with the clarity and strength of language that belongs to those Tuscans who have done good studies and who can give concreteness and substantiation to the most complex ideas; who can express the most refined sensations. I like his classical realism [...] to continue the discourse of the race that has been going on for thousands of years.”
188 Cf. Malaparte: “La rivolta,” in L’Europa 123: “Mankind, which until now has been suffering from particularism, [...] to rediscover the ancient Pelasgic sense of the sun, of the earth, of the sea. [...] The broad and assured conceptions of life that had made the glory of past centuries had broken down, crumpled, shrunk. Man had lost his oceanic sense of life. But when touched by the eternal and immutable truths that had been brought back to light by the social and national suffering caused by the war, men realized that the circle of their horizon limited their capacity to think and act freely.”
189 Cf. Soffici: “Le radiose giornate,” in Rete mediterranea, December 1920, 378: “to disavow the immense, fatal power of ideas and feelings [...]. Because of their thinking in this brutal, obtuse manner, the Germans lost the war.”
190 Many scholars have remarked that, in books dealing with wars, both the descriptions of the settings and of the characters represent an objective correlative of the contingent military situation (i.e. victories and defeats). Cf. Soffici: “La ritirata del Friuli,” in Opere III 266-7: “The soldiers of Italy, the braves of the Motherland, are all ready to die so that the Mother may live. [...] And it is the soul of the Italian people [...] that is expressed in this moment [...]. High above, the wide, clear, infinitely pure sky spreads the great calm of its golden light.”
the nation as a whole, alive and concrete, historical and current, is now more than ever an absolutely necessary condition of animating force, […] and therefore of original style in thought and in lyrical expression. […] the very substance of our ingeniousness […]. And my own transformation is ultimately nothing more than the rediscovery of my original self (Soffici: “Dichiarazione preliminare,” in Rete mediterranea, March 1920 14-8).

The coming together of the nation presented in Kobilek as a firm bond between the draftees and the higher ranks can be characterized as the organizing of one’s personality (“The sense of one’s homeland is the sense of one’s personality”) in relation to what in that juncture represents the object-Italy (the positive features of which had been identified for some time: the ‘popular’). Accordingly, the army becomes the model of an existence to be reverberated throughout the country, and contrasted (as would happen after the defeat at Caporetto) with civilian life, which is given the blame for both the lost battle and (but it’s the same thing) for the metonymic chain described above: the chain referring to fragmentation and disintegration:

“Freedom […] (this may seem strange to you, my boy, but it’s true), freedom is first of all order. And order means: to each his due, and to each his place” (La Ghirba, November 18, 1918). The old intellectual ‘disorder’ – what Soffici, quoting Bino Binazzi that quoted Rimbaud, calls “the period of unbridled Dionysian freedom […] during which each of us had ended up considering sacred the disorder of our souls” (Rete mediterranea, I 5-6) – turns, at the time of Caporetto, into the disorder of a routed army (Soffici speaks about “disgraceful confusion”) that can entail the defeat of the popular Italian values (and of the art related thereto) to which the intellectual had treacherously linked his discourse:

192 Cf. Soffici: letter to Prezzolini dated November 28, 1917, in Lettere 122-3: “I have spent several months together with Italians who are fighting and suffering […] an (obscure) purity of soul that I never imagined could be so great in simple people, uneducated and attacked on all sides by the widespread cowardice and selfishness of the middle classes of Italy.”
193 Cf. Soffici: “La ritirata,” in Opere III 301: “there was an incredible crowding, a thronging, a massing together of men, beasts, and vehicles, […] a dark flood of beings and things.”
194 Cf. Soffici: “Pittura metafisica,” in Rete mediterranea, March 1920 77-8: “The principle followed by Carrà is that for painting to achieve its full expressive capacity it must leave out the facile sensistic emotivity of Impressionism […] and render instead that which in things is permanent, internal, fixed, essential […] you could even call it classicism. […] And we Italians could not but be destined to take the lead over the others in this quest, to advance in which we have the guidance of all the greatest among our forebears.”
And to think that back home there are those who doubt […]. People who laugh, joke, endure hardships with such patience and perseverance in the face of imminent death, and if they were to be deprived of their right they will have reason to become terrible. We who have lived side by side with the bodies and energies of these great simple men, will be with them again against the rottenness of an Italy that should no longer exist (“Kobilek” 113).

The populist perspective ideologically legitimates the attack against the ‘rear lines’ (shirkers, pacifists, traitors, etc.)\(^{195}\) and the part of the country that expresses them, already presenting itself, for those at the front, as the ‘enemy’ to be reckoned with in the post-war period that now promises (at least until a complete victory) to involve no demobilization. Gioacchino Volpe’s call “to remove the many gaps, discontinuities, cracks” is therefore – after Caporetto – the reopening of an opposition in which however – compared to the battle for interventionism – the front is meant to represent the moment of social reunification (‘order’).

The opposition between front and rear lines which should be an element of the disintegration is actually, right from the outset, a fake opposition, because preserving the ‘disintegration’ is the goal of the rear lines, while its overcoming (the solidity of a connection) is the goal (in Soffici’s view, ‘Italian’) that the front already expresses. The defeat of this goal would be tantamount to letting go of Italianity: and “Italy does not die, but is born here” (“La ritirata,” 372):

We watch the soldiers as they go by, in silence, afraid of us; but ready to jump to obey an order […]. And the evil is not here. […] We are the flower, now languishing, of a plant that is rooted in misery. The evil is in the roots. The evil is down there below us: in the ignominy of those who divide, who deceive, who lie, who manipulate. Those who abandon. The evil is everywhere; but not here. Here there is only suffering. This is not the way of infamy. This is the way of the cross (“La ritirata,” 349-50).

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\(^{195}\) Cf. Soffici: letter to Prezzolini dated November 22, 1917, in Carteggio, I, 298-9: “everything that happened is the result of internal stupidity and meanness which have never been thoroughly unmasked and punished. […] the blame can largely be attributed to non-military Italy. […] But wasn’t it natural, since socialists, priests, and Italians of all sorts had been giving him that same advice for years? […] The Italian soldier was still the same. There was no sign of rebellion or insubordination.”
For Soffici (and not just for him) the historical subject that emerges in the front (and from the front) is not the element of an ideological battle, because in its action it means to signify – while Giovanni Gentile realizes that the war issue will permeate the future of Italian life – its ‘universal’ and Counter-Reformationist task of bringing the social classes together, which is the point of expression of its action, both national and revolutionary. The point, in other words, at which the bourgeoisie appears, by way of inter-class nationalism (and here Mazzini displays a considerable mythopoetic capacity), once again – after the failure of the Risorgimento – as a revolutionary force (which Soffici will see as a ‘revolution of the classical’ based on the dyad of ‘national’ and ‘popular’):

to continue as a class war the national wars for the liberation of Italy. […] the historical and social continuation of the Risorgimento. The Fourth Estate […] the continuator of the revolutionary, political, and social function of the bourgeoisie. […] fundamental transposition of the concept of class from social values to national values. […] A national war, therefore, not a class war […]. The proletariat […] has taken the field to vindicate Mazzini against Marx (Malaparte: L’Europa 417-22).

Soffici portrays Caporetto as “the edge of the abyss” that will ultimately motivate the rebirth of the nation under the banner of a Unity whose ‘concrete’ roots, thanks to life at the front,
are planted in the ‘realistic’ naturalness\(^{202}\) of a people of peasants and soldiers, revealed to itself by the worthy teachings of its officers\(^{203}\): “My faith is strong and does not waver. There is an inevitability of life and greatness for Italy. […] To take these wretched or misguided men and bring them together in a tight, regenerated, powerful unity. To restore their bodies, their consciences, their wills. To make them into new tools, better tempered than before, for the necessary victory” (“La ritirata,” 385). The improvised performance which the new hegemonic block puts on for the people as a ruralistic, Italocentric perspective already presents itself as the naturalness of a tradition whose victory (the return to it) is the revolution (which can also be exported abroad as a duty of civilization) of eternalized values (“I rediscover the sense of eternity”) relating to a population that, in powerful unity, attains its ‘natural’ Style, rejecting any contaminating element. The post-war battle against the old Italy that might rise again, even in Bolshevik guise,\(^{204}\) is the ideological battle of a block that, thanks to the war, has clearly envisioned the hegemonic function of its position\(^{205}\) and can therefore present itself with a universal\(^{206}\) — natural — facade that it calls ‘realistic’:

I do not take the viewpoint of a single class, I take the viewpoint of the Nation, which is a living organism, which is healthy when all its parts are healthy, which really cancels out classes only if and insofar as the classes consciously face each other, and each one knows its limitations and the limitations of the other, and blends in with the other in a multiple and unique system of forces. This will happen. Indeed, this has already happened, in part, during the war. (Volpe: 34-5).\(^{207}\)

\(^{202}\) Cf. Soffici: “La ritirata,” in Opere III 218: “She asked me what I thought about life under the war, and I replied that it seemed very nice and extremely natural.”

\(^{203}\) Cf. Soffici: “Kobilek,” in Opere III 117: “A true realist, the soldier faces things in all their concreteness: he acts according to his nature and is never wrong. […] tempered by centuries of civilized environment […]. The only ones he willingly listens to are us, his officers […]. And our words are so close to the facts as to be confused with them.”

\(^{204}\) Highly indicative in this regard is Soffici’s insisting on communism as a non-natural phenomenon and on Russia as the realm of ‘chaos.’

\(^{205}\) Gentile: Dopo la vittoria 63-4: “war, the common act of a people, united in a single will. […] The essential is there, in the energy and conscience of a people; and that is where we must seek the real effects of the war, and the real prizes.”

Think of Soffici declaring Mussolini to be the conveyor of fifty years of ideas; think of Malaparte, who – following Sorel – ethnically identifies him as the traditional hero of a race.

\(^{206}\) The game is clearly been played on a double track: violence and illegality are pursued until taking power, and then, without a break, everyone supports the order of the Fascist State. What I mean here is that, in the same battle, the terms of the parties in play are already those of the universality that would relate to the situation after 1922.

\(^{207}\) And Volpe would be a contributor of the journal Gerarchia directed by Soffici in 1924.
The art which at this point Soffici wants to express both as the representation of that world and as ‘education’ to that world, to that reality (and in this sense the combination war-return to order is indestructible), is precisely the expression of that Italianity that is such because, as a compact block, it represents the Style (the harmonic composition of all the parts) of a people expressed by the genius as the ‘natural’ values of a race which, as said, being Italian, is also universal.208 The conclusive dismantling of the Bergsonian-Impressionist perspective (by now extended to the entire metonymic chain of the avant-garde)209 which appeared in 1920 in Rete mediterranea210 (just as Soffici was writing the articles that would make up Battaglia fra due vittorie) is the final act – and here Soffici is perfectly in agreement with what Giovanni Gentile has been theorizing for some time211 – of being made organic to a hegemonic perspective in which theory – perceived as tied to classical, eternal values – fuses with those who determine the praxis:

The “thinker” of Fascism is and remains Mussolini: for he has thought and thinks Fascism while creating it […]. The fact is that in Fascism the Mazzinian truth thought and action achieves its most rigorous meaning, where the two terms are so combined as to perfectly coincide, no longer assigning any value to any thought that is not already translated or expressed in action (Gentile: Origini 21).

The triumph of the Spirit that the Italian people express through the genius as a connection (tout se tient) of all its activities (whoever believes in Matter is now out of bounds) ends up

208 Cf. Soffici: “Commercio con Apollinaire,” in Rete mediterranea (March 1920), in Opere VI 237-9: “Apollinaire was an idealist of the purest sort, and not only that, but an idealist of the Platonic kind, and, as such, he loved traditional absolutes, harmonious principles, and intellectual hierarchies; in short, he was completely imbued […] with classicism; which is not academy or archaism, as fools believe, but order and perfection and Apollonian clarity of ideas and forms. […] this character of Italianity by election and by birth (he was born in Rome and had an excellent knowledge of our language).”

209 Cf. Soffici: “Restaurazione poetica,” in Rete mediterranea, March 1920 65-6: “that it be true poetry, profound, powerful, capable of eternity, and not impressionistic titillation. […] I cannot say how far back it goes, this convenient trend of considering lyricism a little game for sensitive people only affected in their senses or in their hearts by the colorings, the sounds, the smells […] and the movements of apparent reality […] from Verlaine to the more talented among the Futurists, […] the value of which consists solely in representing and describing a transient state of the world and a temporal state of his soul.”

210 Manet is related to Japanese decorativeism; Monet is dealt with in terms of degenerating into “hallucinated luminism”; the world of Degas is “citified and artificial”; Van Gogh – significantly – is attributed with a “Germanic nature” unable of attaining a Style.

211 Also in Rete mediterranea, Soffici praises the book Dopo la vittoria.

Alessandro Del Puppo (in “Lacerba” 197) has brilliantly brought to the attention of scholars a review by Gentile, appearing in “La Critica” in 1921, on Ferdinando D’Amato’s book Il pensiero di Enrico Bergson. His terms are very close to Soffici’s: “Bergsonism is empiricism, sensualism. […] full-on sensation, above any discrimination […]: pure, fleeting, unnamable, unidentifiable sensation.”
overturning – this is the common thread that runs through all the work of Soffici – the avant-garde assumption of the “death of art” in a society and tradition where, since all activities are inter-connected, everything can be art, and the perfection of art corresponds to the perfection of society (and vice versa). But this social perfection is evidently the very essence of what has been interpreted as the object-Italy and which here the genius represents as the Style of a self which however is now a Self entirely equivalent with the Country, with the ‘truth’ of the Country (realism). What is being re-established, emblematically, is what Modernism had thrown in crisis: the binomial life-representation:

a vision of the human world conceived as a work of art […]: the socialist world […] the man who invented that world was a poet, as poets were all those who created systems and principles in their philosophies and sciences, and gave names and the appearance of truth to the constructions of their imagination. Plato, Pythagoras, Vico, Galileo […]. Then it became clear to me that that capitalist bourgeois and that proletarian were nothing but dramatis personae, and their economical relations nothing but the poetic elements of their conflict […]. Once I got into this way of thinking, I could see how such a principle could be easily applied to any other manifestation of the intellect […]. Political, economical, agricultural works […], the products of the mind are works of art, but perhaps so are the simple acts of normal life. […] In short, I now saw the world, or rather the life of man, no longer as a sequence of disorderly, arbitrary, unruly events, but as a representation (“Intermezzo. Tutto-Arte,” in La Raccolta, I, 1918, in Opere I 720-4).

The victory of the people²¹² narrated by the genius is therefore the victory of Italianity expressing itself in Fascism as the truth of a race that rejects (and eliminates) the elements that belong to the metonymic chain of the ‘disintegration,’ thereby binding itself to the eternity of relations (social and artistic) that the genius propagates as aestheticized reality which he calls ‘concrete’:

I was absolutely delighted […] with the riots in Florence. For the first time since the war I had the feeling of Italy’s youthful strength and the certainty that we will come through magnificently well. […] Even the government for once has done good. […] Now the fascists should crack the skulls of the bourgeois (more despicable than their adversaries – they too bourgeois) […]. I am neither a reactionary nor an aristocrat: I

²¹² Gentile: Dopo la vittoria 17-8: “Victory is to the people […] in the steady consciousness of its law, which is no longer the interest of a particular people nor of a class, but which is justice […] Today the winner is an idea.”
am a man of the people […] in the manner of Machiavelli: […] I see good material in the people and I hate the idea that this material should take the place of the molder. Everyone in his proper place, that’s my motto. Now they’re trying to reverse all the parts, and the arguments that seem to me the most appropriate to adequately respond to these attempts are machine guns, bombs, and cannons (Soffici: letter to Prezzolini dated March 6, 1921, in Carteggio, II, 24-5).213

The real value of this ‘realism’ will become evident when, on the eve of the Second World War, Soffici will declare himself confident of victory because the Italian people “are on the side of the truth”214; it will be definitely formalized (now in more low-key terms) when, in an interview to RAI (Italian state radio-television), the 73-year-old Soffici explains the terms of his artistic (thus, in his conception, also moral and social) journey: “My work is a sort of identification between myself and the country in which I live. […] it happened that I became the country, and the country became me.”

VI. The Phantasmic Spectacle of Contingency: Aldo Palazzeschi

Life is like water, it must flow,
woe if it stops, it rots
Aldo Palazzeschi

Where no gods are, specters rule
Novalis

In a keynote for a conference on Palazzeschi in 1976, Fausto Curi remarked that Man of Smoke (Palazzeschi’s major work)215 was the work in Italian literature that was at the same time the most saturated with Nietzsche’s ‘juices’ and the less contaminated by his ‘poisons.’ By this he meant to separate Palazzeschi’s artistic production both from the Wagnerian and superomistic Nietzsche of D’Annunzio, and from the Nietzsche performatively utilized by

213 Soffici is referring to the clashes that took place after the Socialists won the elections in Florence.
214 Soffici: letter to Prezzolini dated April 29, 1940, in Carteggio, II, 118.
215 The first idea for Il codice di Perelà came in 1908 (the year of publication of riflessi and of Pirandello’s essay On Humor). On this matter see the correspondence between Palazzeschi and Marino Moretti.
writers such as Papini and Soffici. This statement, though acceptable on a general level, must however be situated within the broader context of the contemporary crisis of epistemology that finds its formal logic in Modernism (which, at least in its initial assumptions, may be said to correspond to those “Nietzschean juices”). This logic, the formal system of the contradiction which in ‘becoming’ finds expression as the triumph of epistemology itself – as an analysis of reality entirely derived from the epistemological perspective – allows Palazzeschi to remain (at least until the outbreak of World War I) on this side of the creation of the pseudo-objectivity of mythological components (be they D’Annunzio’s Superman or Soffici’s Genius), locking itself in the image of a Becoming where nothing is, and everything is representation. It is in becoming that all things (including the subject) reveal their representational nature as a constant oscillation between their apparent objectivity and an external space where that objectivity is continually denied. However, this external space is still, as we shall see, the domain of a non-dialectical judgment built on binomial pairs (Life and Form; living/rigid) declaring the eternal logic of becoming (flow) as the place of unamendable contradiction. This is where the ‘juices’ become so many ‘poisons’ (as Gramsci, a reader of Pirandello, well understood): the progressive function aimed at breaking down the objectivistic concretions of bourgeois common sense is reified in an epistemological conceptualism (basically the usual belief of the intellectuals in their sphere of independence) that acts as a theoretical ‘bust’ for the nihilistic perspective. The intellective knowledge of epistemological derivation – the kind of knowledge that during the imperialist period increasingly tends to become the hegemonic form of thought – presents itself as the

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216 That Palazzeschi had read Nietzsche is now certain: proof can be found in statements made by the author, in Piero Pieri’s comparative reading of a passage from Il controdolore and aphorism 14 from The Wanderer and His Shadow (which Palazzeschi read in the French edition of 1906), and in La biblioteca di Palazzeschi (2004), edited by Simone Magherini. As is widely know, Curi’s work can also be viewed in the context of the revaluation of Palazzeschi initiated by the Neo-Avanguardia during the 1960s. Cf. Curi: “Palazzeschi e Nietzsche,” in Palazzeschi europeo 61: “Palazzeschi […] plays Nietzsche against Nietzsche, and at the same time plays Nietzsche against D’Annunzio, against Marinetti, against Papini, against Soffici.”

Cf. Dolores Prezzolini: letter to Palazzeschi dated December 7, 1929, in Palazzeschi-Prezzolini, Carteggio 64-5: “Yesterday I read a nice book on Nietzsche that just came out in Italy, and I’m sending it to you. […] Perhaps because I think that you would love Nietzsche, especially in this wandering life of his.” The book was Nietzsche en Italy, by Guy de Pourtalès. Palazzeschi replied, in a now lost letter, promising that he would send her another book on Nietzsche.
limit of all knowledge, taking as a pretext for this its constant failure to fully implement its
own capacity to conceptualize reality. It is precisely the blind alley of non-dialectical
conceptualization that produces the retreat from reality and determines the escape from it as
the solution (defined ‘tragic’) to what is seen as the anthropological limit (“there are no facts:
only interpretations”) of rational knowledge itself. But this retreat (which these authors of
course identified as a deeper understanding of reality: delving into reality beyond any falsifying conceptualizations – ‘forms’ – of the mind) always conceals, if not the solution of the ‘myth,’ at least the formal logic that rearranges the ‘divided’ material by referring to the true way of being of Life, which thought (either Metaphysical or Dialectic) supposedly betrays. The principle of perpetual motion of everything that is contained in reality conceals, in the motions of the ‘deeper understanding’ of that reality, the static nature of that formal logic. The gradual erosion of the objectivistic assumptions that are the basis of reality (and the corollary attack against the assumed conceptual concretions represented by Subject and Language) is inserted by Palazzeschi in the framework of a “psychological novel” directed, on the one hand, at describing his personal journey from a neurotic situation of pain – relating to the search for an objective truth – to one of cheerfulness, and, on the other hand, at signifying reality in the form of a continuous ‘possibility’ (the continual emergence of what the presumed objectivism wants to suppress) which he calls “fantasy” [fantasia: fantasy, imagination]: “bestows in truth […] takes away in fantasy” (“La piramide,” in Tutti i romanzi 480). Fantasy – that is to say, reality considered from the point of view of possibility – is precisely the space of a judgment of reality that is assumed as the absence of judgment because it is equated to the ‘reality’ of a Life that denies any concretion of itself except the

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217 But of course what appears to be a an ‘intellectual’ issue is a social issue.
218 Equating Dialectics with Metaphysics (the desire to reconduct by force the ‘different’ to the ‘phony’ unity of objectivity) is a point that these authors find necessary (think of the Machians, who consider historical materialism itself a metaphysical theory). But the binomial pairs designed to separate the phenomenon from the essence through a hierarchical option (however introduced) fail to realize that phenomenon and essence are both parts – dialectically connected – of the (historical!) laws of an objective reality and of the theory (and praxis!) that approximates it.
219 Here, as before in Papini, the emphasis on psychology is the necessary move of an agnostic epistemology that fictitiously overcomes its social background (atomization) and makes itself a general law. Or rather, it raises atomization to a general law against which there is no appeal.
one that it represents. But this means that it becomes its own proof, the court of reality, the space of immobile Nature – whose fundamental property is contradiction – which expresses itself in the self-consciousness of a subject that has reached (in Palazzeschi’s terms) the stage of Cheerfulness, that is, that has acquired the basic traits of Nature itself. The relationship between subject and nature is examined on epistemological grounds as a presupposed identity that has been broken up in the attempt to establish objective truths. Palazzeschi’s artistic path during the Belle Époque is the supposed self-consciousness of that identity. Thus the experience lived, without renouncing the epistemological perspective that declares the vanity of all objective reality (but also without relinquishing the furthering of knowledge which remains fundamental in preserving the social structure), becomes the Weltanschauung of a subject who can ‘live’ (i.e. judge) because his judgment – equated to Life – lies surreptitiously outside the space of mere subjectivism which is only able to create forms.

VII. From Archetypes to Simulacra

Palazzeschi’s literary career begins with the obstinate rejection of time and becoming.

Modulated on the repetition of three-syllable feet, the 25 poems published in 1905 tell about a world stuck outside any possible history or development. There is no movement in the congealed universe of I cavalli bianchi [The White Horses]. The inertia that this poem conveys both thematically and stylistically is warranted by a fairy-tale eternity. Immutability and eternity are twin concepts: when time is excluded immobility sets in. Taking as models the dramatic works of Maeterlinck, the Chansons, and a defamiliarized, sapiential...

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220 This is the triumph of epistemology which, coming after Kant’s epistemology had been degraded into a Berkeleyan subjectivism (remember Papini, Prezzolini, and Soffici’s interest for Berkeley), brings authors such as Nietzsche, Mach, Bergson, and William James together with neo-Kantians like Vaihinger and Simmel.

221 This is a huge difference with the right-wing anti-capitalism of feudal or semi-feudal derivation, in which the philosophical and/or religious conception hinders scientific/technological development.

222 Here it is obligatory to make reference to Livi: Dai simbolisti ai crepuscolari.

223 Fundamental are the many references to Pascoli discovered by Febbraro. It should be added that a book such as Poemi conviviali (consider the poem “Sileno”) is very much aware of the divide between life and form that is being explored by the Modernist perspective.
Pascoli, Palazzeschi builds a Gulliverized, orbicular world whose principal elements (directly drawn from the repertoire of Art Nouveau: villas, gardens, castles, etc.) contribute to evoke an estranging atmosphere of iteration. The characters in the collection seem blocked in the last degree of a contemplative attitude that appears to be their only initiative. The sing-song rhythm creates an objective void from which any element relating to the sphere of ‘reflection’ or psychological inquiry is banished. It is a world that can survive only at a safe distance from reality (from the accidentality of becoming), grounded on a discourse that seems the communicative wreck of itself. The ‘mortuary’ mechanism of obsessive repetition\textsuperscript{224} is the real recurring element in the book: “absence of matter, absence of history, absence of age: three aspects of the same rejection, the rejection of time, of becoming” (Livi: \textit{Tra crepuscolarismo e futurismo} 215). Through the door of timelessness the early Palazzeschi thought he could attain the separation of art and life\textsuperscript{225} (of form and life), interpreted as the separation between the ‘certain’ and the elusive. But a fairy tale removed from its canons (actionless) and a myth reduced to an enchanted protocol (whose ritual is more venerable because, from a Nietzschean point of view, its origin is more remote, more forgotten), only serve to flaunt a narrative sclerosis that determines a distressing lack of sense:

Therefore, I regret having to observe that, sometimes, the evocation of certain images, the representation of certain gestures, does not correspond to the feelings of the reader, who would undoubtedly prefer to draw therefrom expressions that were more alive and more emotional (Corazzini: “A traverso lo smeraldo,” in Donini: 141).

Corazzini expressed his “reservations of a crepuscolare towards lyrical writings that avoid any speech situation related to the sender/receiver circle” (Pieri: \textit{Ritratto} 35). Despite the thematic affinities, the common anti-Dannunzian\textsuperscript{226} and Flemish-related tradition (Jammes, Rodenbach, etc.), Palazzeschi’s earlier productions cannot be said to belong to the school of

\textsuperscript{224} In \textit{Interrogatorio della contessa Maria}, Palazzeschi will write (with a drastic change in his poetics): “To repeat oneself means to go back, to die.”

\textsuperscript{225} Cf. Guntert: “Poesia e vita in Palazzeschi,” in \textit{il Verri}, 5-6, 1974.

\textsuperscript{226} As is well known, Borgese was the first to speak of “leftovers of a sumptuous Dannunzian dinner,” in \textit{Studi di letterature moderne} 81.
crepuscolarismo.\textsuperscript{227} If by crepuscolarismo we mean the intimist retrieval of the contradictions of the bourgeois subject as opposed to the myth of the Dannunzian Ego, or the subjectivistic/autobiographical use of material taken from the poetic tradition to reveal the descent of that subject into the territories of kitsch, it is clear that the road chosen by the young Palazzeschi (the one of cognitive elusiveness and incomplete communication)\textsuperscript{228} does not fall under that heading. Eliminating the first (and the second) person, rather, Palazzeschi’s writing tends to exclude the partiality of personal affirmative truth. The use of an objective, impersonal strategy excludes also the mock-pathetic ‘realism’ of crepuscolarismo and eludes the contingencies of the psychological subject that would find expression in ‘reflection.’ The absence of any attempted evaluation prevents any possible referential communication\textsuperscript{229} and ordains the reification of the subject, which, however, for this Palazzeschi, functions as its immunization:

The tank is quite large / and the water as deep as four men at the least, / they say there are eels inside it. / Folks stand around it angling all day. / The eels are quite big, / bigger than a swaddled-up baby, they say, / folks stand around it angling all day.

(Palazzeschi: Tutte le poesie 23).

La vasca delle anguille [The Eel Tank] is a good example of what we have been saying. The text presents the typical geometric construction of the early Palazzeschi. Based on a single returning line, which, as expected, underscores the absence of any real action, the poem is played out on the opposing pair in/out, inside/outside. On the one hand we have two circumferences (the people around the tank and the tank itself), on the other the appearance of an enigmatic and desired center, said to contain – as in a fairy tale – a coveted object of extraordinary value, made real by the impersonal “si dice” [literally: it is said]. The presence

\textsuperscript{227} Cf. Somigli: “Aldo Palazzeschi, Futurista per gioco” 119: “if anything, it has, a posteriori, more elements in common with the metaphysics of De Chirico than with the contemporary crepuscolarismo.”

Cf. Palazzeschi: letter to Marinetti of April 1911, in Carteggio 46: “Govoni […] is my brother-german from my own family. […] what a greater man he is, with his discretion, than that Don Juan gone bad of Guido Gozzano with his psychological disgracing of himself.”

\textsuperscript{228} Tamburri (in La «difficile musica» 28) speaks of “opacity of signification.”

\textsuperscript{229} Cf. Tamburri: “La poesia ossonimorica di Palazzeschi,” in La «difficile musica» 81-2: “This opacity or, if you will, lack of communication, is a narrative strategy […]. What stands out as the common denominator in Palazzeschi’s earlier poems is his inconclusive \textit{ars narrandi}. 179
of an empty, forbidden, inaccessible nucleus is a constant in this Palazzeschi.\footnote{The cross of the eponymous poem is located at a crossroads, \textit{La fonte del bene} is in the middle of a meadow, \textit{Il tempio pagano} is in the middle of a valley, and so on.} The ‘center’ (a lost center) has a prominent function, being the place of an enigma that has no solution.

The “loss of the center” (Mayakovsky would soon write that “all the centers are shattered”) – together with the obstacle that always stands between it and the eye of the beholder: a wall, a gate, etc. – determines the interruption of the hermeneutic circle of all the characters, inducing them, through the obsessive repetition (driven to the point of immobilization), to seek a replacement for the missing meaning:

\begin{quote}
At the end of the long lane is the giant niche / which is surrounded by tall cypress trees. / The statue was removed a long time ago. / The moon shines on the gleaming white marble / which seems to rest against the deep black / of the tall cypress trees. / At the base there are / four men wrapped in black cloaks. / They look at each other in silence, / they don’t move a finger (\textit{Tutte le poesie} 22).
\end{quote}

The absence of the object at the center prevents a conciliatory hermeneutic action. However, this does not lead, as will be the case for the later Palazzeschi, to a condition of opening (i.e. to a proliferation of opinions, allowed and determined by the missing center itself), but to a condition of congealment reflecting a ‘mortification’ of life. The choice of a mythical/fairy-tale time, the option to favor objectivity, the compulsion to repeat that predominate throughout the work, all point in the same direction: they are projected towards the construction of a monolith that, in the absence of any historical-reflective element, can ensure stability, immobility.\footnote{In particular, Palazzeschi’s aptitude for repetition can be considered, as Savoca does on the grounds of \textit{Beyond the Pleasure Principle}, a mechanism directed, through the control over things which repetition entails, at supporting the immobilist solicitations of the death drive.} This trend towards Unity is an inclination that is typical of the early twentieth-century subject, forced to get by amid the disappearance of the presuppositions that justified reality (‘models,’ as Alberto Savinio will later say\footnote{Cf. Savinio, “Fine dei modelli,” in \textit{Opere. Scritti dispersi} 485-92: “Despair arises as a consequence of the disappearance of models. It’s beginning now. It’s begun. The despair that literary ambition calls \textit{angst}. It is in our time, and specifically in our century that the condition of freedom imposes itself to man for the first time. Up to now freedom was talked about, but the condition necessary for the acquisition and practice of freedom was missing. Even the physically freest man was, metaphysically, slave to another in some way […]. With the end of}} and the nostalgia for the
Absolute produced by that disappearance. Thus, for this Palazzeschi, repetition is a regressive device that serves as a defense mechanism: together with the paralysis of time (of which it is both cause and effect), it produces the absolute fixity which has the purpose of making the ‘second reality’ generated by the art form impervious to any emerging difference that might be caused by hermeneutic/interpretive activity. But the paradise of archetypes (to use an expression of Mircea Eliade) has already inevitably crumbled. A world built on the absence of a referent, a world that is handed back to the reader in an apparently accomplished form but having no purpose, is immediately revealed as a simulacrum, a simulation that, by displaying the absence of an order that precedes it, by manifesting the oblivion of the historical process by which it is constituted, exposes itself as a simulation: “The real world – we have done away with it: what world was left? the apparent one, perhaps?... But no! with the real world we have also done away with the apparent one!” (Nietzsche: *Twilight of the idols* 20). When there is no longer an absolute level of reality, that is, when there is no longer a referent that justifies the presence of reality, the simulation that derives from that reality loses all meaning. To put it another way, when “God is dead,” things become the copies of a model that is now irreparably dissolved: they become representation, and simulation becomes the arena of a meaning that is desired but remains elusive.

It will be precisely through the hermeneutic option that involves replacing ‘silence’ with the irrepressible movement of opinions that Palazzeschi will be able to proceed to an accomplished modernist perspective.

Already in the collection *Lanterna* (1907) there appear certain aspects that destabilize the seemingly unassailable solemnity of *I cavalli bianchi*. The triadic rhythm is maintained, as is the mechanism of intratextual references and the insistent repetition of lexemes and entire lines. The distinctive thematic traits of this Palazzeschi are still there: characters stuck in an incongruous ceremonial having no semantic referent (*La veglia delle tristi*), the loss of

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233 De Robertis, discussing the change in the poetics of Palazzeschi, had already observed that “Two things reign in his magical world: absolute fixedness or absolute motion” (in *Scrittori del novecento* 22).
234 Cf. *Il mito dell’eterno ritorno* and “Il simbolismo del «Centros” in *Immagini e simboli*.
235 Guido Guglielmi spoke of an “impotence of meaning” (*L’udienza del poeta* 95).
the perspective of (historical) becoming that would allow to decipher the figures’ gestures, the obsessive repetition of those gestures, the presence of an unreachable center. But the settings are more populated, the rarefied atmospheres are gone, the aura of fairy-tale unalterability gives way to a ‘realism’ that, thanks to the use of rhyming and the inclusion “of nursery rhymes in the form of lists” (Savoca: Eco e Narciso 49), acquires traits that verge on the grotesque. The strengthening of the narrative element leads to the introduction of dialogues that occasionally transform the silence of the characters into a crossfire of insults. The closed world of I cavalli bianchi appears contaminated from the outside; its structure has been penetrated and upset by a series of new elements. In this regard Torre burla [Mocking Tower] provides a fitting example:

It's right in the middle of the valley, / not tall, round, very black, / it has a flat top: / no door or opening makes light. / The valley, a great valley, / is flush with mud, / the flowers, very few, / grow fat there and faded, / the nettles grow tall. / In the middle, not tall, round, / like a shadow, proud mistress of the plain / stands the Tower. / In the evening, every evening, at sunset, / people come near and listen to its sound, / a sound that they all know by now: / the turning of a page, / the gentle turning of a page. / They all listen, / in the evening, to the sound, and look at each other. / – They’re reading in there! / – They’re reading one page every day! / – Who’s reading? / – What book? / – It’s an old man who reads, / an old man with a very white beard! / The book tells a story… / – The story must be long, / the pages have been turning for ages! / – It’s a youngster instead who is reading / a child with golden wings! / The story is short, / but it’s written one word every page! / – It’s the Sun that is reading! / It’s the book of the Sun! / The evening at sunset is the turning page! / The evening when the last ray gently expires! / But the writing is small and quite close, / not even strong lenses can make it clear! / – Oh! The story is long, very long! / In the evening everyone listens to the turning of the page (Tutte le poesie 35-6).

The starting point is reminiscent of I cavalli bianchi: we are situated in a center (the Tower standing “right in the middle of the valley”) that is hermetically sealed (“no door or opening makes light”). As expected, the inaccessibility presupposes the impossibility of revealing the true essence that the center contains, that the center is. Another echo of previous works is the crowding of the people around the center. The characters, however, soon come out of their implacable silence: using words, they try to fill that center with a meaning. The introduction of these theatrical dialogues weakens the air of mystery, as words introduce in fact a
proliferation of meanings: the sounds that come from the tower are identified as the turning of the pages of a book (the book of time), which elicit in turn a number of interpretations (the nature of the reader, the format of the writing, etc). It is the mystery itself that is contaminated by ‘words.’ The various opinions are of course absolutely unable to approach the ultimate meaning of the enigma concealed in the Tower, and each attempt is no more than guesswork: while in the earlier collection there was a helpless silence, here we have a number of assumptions which, being in contradiction with one another, again force the reader to a suspension of judgment. Yet, while in the previous book the inability to find a meaning was given by defect, the same inability is now given by excess: the lack of meaning turns into a multiplicity of meanings. The flourishing of conjectures highlights a more explicit entry into the humoristic function (which is why the Tower is a “burla” [hoax]). The failure of the closed System, the attempt to evoke a universe governed by the principle of non-contradiction, now reveals its defeat: the impure, the anomalous, presses against the borders of the temple. This upheaval is expressed at every level of the text: in the introduction of narrative structures (Palazzo Mirena, La storia di frate Puccio), in the theatrical elements, in the use of rhyme, and so on. On the thematic level the contaminations are even more evident: the Tempio serrato [sealed temple] in which the “Kinik” is confined will remain shut until the exhaustion of the light (this being, significantly, a symbol of purity), after which the people standing outside, at the edges, will be free to move in. The verbal contamination that assumes humorous tones in Torre burla can become physical contamination and give way to the grotesque. The breakdown of the unity represented by time – sacred place par excellence – presupposes, given the imminent contamination, a catastrophe. The mixing of inside and outside, of which there was no trace in I cavalli bianchi, points to the specter of contagion, that is, the specter of disorder: that which destroys the model, that which destabilizes pre-established categories. The dynamic function claimed by the people is itself a contaminating

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236 The tendency of the ‘voices’ to give the Other (whether a fact or a person) a stable form runs through all of Palazzeschi’s early works. Think of the second part of riflessi, but especially of Perelà’s arrival in the city.
237 Mary Douglas’s Purity and Danger can be very helpful in understanding the work of Palazzeschi.
operation: its coming into play allows the introduction of recitative nuclei that tend to put into relative terms what was previously given as absolute; it also allows the incursion of a language that was hitherto absent (everyday language), and, finally, by censuring dangerous – i.e. ambiguous, anticonformist – behaviors, it paradoxically reveals its fear of whatever lies outside the myth of order. Here, conforming becomes a barrier against contamination. But one anomaly leads to another: by trying to punish what exceeds the norm, the ‘people’ break their silence, and their very words create ambiguity.

_Lanterna_ displays the hermeneutic opening of _I cavalli bianchi_, and this could be possible only by not changing the starting postulates of that world: if the setting were entirely different, Palazzeschi would not have been able to ‘reflect’ (in the Pirandellian sense) on what was pressing at the borders of that hieratic cosmos. Any anomalies could be brought to light only by remaining in the previous situation of order.

In this regard, “La storia di frate Puccio” [The Story of Brother Puccio] is emblematic: the old friar brings an element of diversity into the monastery. Palazzeschi describes his smile “qual fiore scarlatto nel mazzo bianchissimo” [like a scarlet flower in a very white bunch] (_Tutte le poesie_ 61). The narrative is divided into three parts; in the first and the last the old friar is described in opposite terms:

> With a cheerful smile on his face, / his eyes alight, / the old man came and went with light steps / in the great monastery of the Whites. / With strong arms the little friar / carried jugs. / He came and went smilingly, merry, / sometimes he stopped at his cell for a moment, / setting the jugs on the threshold, / he stopped for a moment with his cheerful smile, / quicker he went, leaner / his arms held the jugs / [...].
> With taut face and tight mouth, / drooping eyes, / in the great monastery of the Whites / the old man trudges along tiredly. / The bent little friar / drags the jugs with his spindly arms. / Never stopping for a moment, / with tired, worn-out motions, / he drags the heavy jugs (_Tutte le poesie_ 61-4).

All the cheerful traits of the first description are reversed in the second (note in particular the antithetic pair light/heavy which will be important in the later Palazzeschi). Between the two

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238 Starting with _Poemi_ the color red will become the symbol of a process of contamination.
descriptions we are presented with the story of the friar, who, having being found in possession of a doll (“figura profana di femmina” [profane female figure], Tutte le poesie 62), is made to expiate his guilt, his macchia [stain], by burning the object of sin at the center of the court, under the eyes of his brothers and other onlookers. What the ‘Whites’ of the monastery want to censure is the subversion of inhibited desires, but above all the context in which those desires can develop: the context of contamination (which in turn arises from the rigid normative order to which the monastery is subjected). We have already referred to the contrast between scarlet and white, and further on we are told that the discovery of the “dummy” is made possible thanks to a “spiro di luce” [breath of light] that passes over the friar’s cell, and that the dummy is found among the books of Psalms, further proof that the basic sin is one of contamination. By order of the Prior, a “gran fuoco” [great fire] (not a destructive element, but a symbol of purity and homogeneity)\(^239\) is lit at the ‘centre’ of the courtyard (once again the center acquires its ‘unifying’ function, but only as a purifying element: an element of repression). The purpose is not only to punish the guilty friar, but also to restore the monastery to its integrity, to its ‘order’ soiled by Puccio’s deed, which is justly called a “stain” (order means first of all cleanliness),\(^240\) obviously a red one: “the scarlet rags / stood out from the very white cloak / just like a blood stain” (Tutte le poesie 63).\(^241\) Thus the ritual of punishment restores a shattered symbolic model.

In Lanterna, the contamination goes so far as to involve the specific nature of language itself. This can be seen in Rosario [Rosary]. Here we have a “suite of twenty-one little compositions in verse” (Savoca: Eco e Narciso 64) in which a variety of characters, including two parrots, appear on the scene and, maintaining a modulative theatrical recitative revolving on the desiderative “vorrei” [I would like], are presented to the public at the culminating moment of an aspiration, a prophecy, or a condition. The language is now totally distanced from its subject. It may develop along phonetic similarities (of Leopardian

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\(^{239}\) Cf. Bachelard: *La psicanalisi del fuoco.*

\(^{240}\) And cleansing will be one of targets of *Il controdolore.*

\(^{241}\) No need to refer to René Girard to realize that we are dealing with a typical “scapegoat” mechanism.
derivation) as in the case of Erak, stregone [Erak, sorcerer]: “Non vale / per male uguale / salire con ale” [There’s no point / before equal evils / in rising on wings] (51), it may settle on rigmaroles: “Avvolto, rattorto / su fuso di torto / ogni filo è corto” [Rolled up, twisted / on a spindle of guilt / each thread is short] (53), it may resort to onomatopoeia: “Chi vuole Cucù? / Cucù non c’è più! / Cucurucucù” [Who wants Cucù? / Cucù is no more! / Cucurucucù] (52).

Having reached a separation between sound and meaning, venturing, as never before, on the road of nonsense, Palazzeschi now aims at turning words themselves into simulacra having no semantic referents. Unable to grasp an essence, the words now underline the impossibility of any essence:

a necessity that might be called physiological […], it seemed to me that words were prisoners of a formula from which they should be freed, that they had been drained of all power of expression, I saw them fallen on the ground like larvas, and it seemed to me, when looking at an object, that I could not see it in its true essence, I would have wanted to see it as it was seen by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. And I remember that one morning I went to see a villa that I liked very much, of which I knew the owners and had a precise knowledge of every detail. I went like a painter with his box of oils, taking a pencil and a notebook to portray it with words. As soon as I finished and read what I had written, while looking at the object before me, I felt a sense of dizziness: The villa on my notebook had not the slightest relation with the one I has used as a model, nothing matched with its aesthetic appearance or with the life that went on inside it. The dizziness was replaced by a feeling of exhilaration that led me to walk on endlessly, aimlessly, in the unreal world of fantasy and happiness (Palazzeschi: in Accrocca 312-4).

The separation between reality and language is given a clear definition in this youthful memory: the Pascolian, essentialist starting condition, the Adamic condition of primitive (and therefore true!) knowledge through contact with reality, is turned by experience into the realization of its impossibility. Literature, the territory of language and accordingly a second-level entity, declares itself separate from life. But note how the passage quoted above presents a clear path from a context of discomfort to one of happiness: the initial state of frustration dictated by the desire for Truth is turned, by the acknowledgement of a hermeneutic condition, into a “state of exhilaration” with humorous undertones (the wandering among

242 The interview can be found in Giorgina Colli: Ritratti nel tempo 161-162.
forms’ of truth). Language, separated from reality, reveals its nature of simulacrum, but the lack of a referent, the lack of a being-value to which it can refer, now causes joy. The absence of a point of reference (a model) is what allows not to betray the fluidity of life. Only with this premise will it be possible for a symbol having no archetype (the simulacrum) to cease to be a painful reflection on the loss of meaning and become an ironical monument to a life that does not freeze into forms. Only then will appearance (representation!) no longer be deception, but the opening of the eyes on a world whose only referent is precisely the contingency of the materials that compose it. It is along this road that Palazzeschi prepares to become the “saltimbanque”:

The problem of the actor has troubled me for the longest time. I felt unsure (and sometimes still do) whether it is not only from this angle that one can get at the dangerous concept of the “artist” – a concept that has so far been treated with unpardonable generosity. Falseness with a good conscience; the delight in simulation exploding as a power that pushes aside one’s so-called “character,” flooding it and at times extinguishing it; the inner craving for a role and mask, for appearance; […] until eventually this capacity, accumulated from generation to generation […] generates the actor, the “artist” (the zany, the teller of lies, the buffoon, fool, clown (Nietzsche: The Gay Science 316-7).

The passage is reminisced by Palazzeschi in an initiation novel243 (riflessi, 1908) narrating the story of Prince Valentino Kore: a journey of self-understanding at the end of which, the protagonist hopes, is self-consciousness.244 What is apparently a Bildungsroman, is such only if we combine the idea of Bildung with that of ‘return.’ Valentino’s journey toward himself is a retracing of steps left by someone else: but in order for it to be truly ‘formative,’ his route must be opposite and specular, moving from the ‘reflection’ towards that which, having

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243 Cf. Palazzeschi: letter to Marinetti of May 1909, in Carteggio 5: “I’m sending you a little book, the abortion of a novel that I published a year ago, I may have sent it to you then, I may have forgotten, in any case I would like you to examine me there almost more than in my poetry.”

244 These, in short, are the facts: after leading a life of pleasure for fifteen years, Prince Valentino Kore, the protagonist, makes his return to Villa Bemualda, where his young mother had committed suicide during a feast. There he spends thirty days at the end of which, having decided to restore the temporality of the place by resuming the feast from the point where it had been interrupted, he vanishes into thin air. The thirty restless days that he passes at the Villa and its immediate surroundings are made known to the reader through the letters that Valentino sends daily to his former lover, a young Englishman called John Mare. The troubled days are described following the thematic and stylistic tradition of decadentismo and late Symbolism (critics have rightfully mentioned the names of Wilde, Rodenbach, Gide, and, of course, D’Annunzio). After the epistolary part of the book, the reader is thrown in the midst of a jumble of voices making groundless conjectures on the Prince’s fate.
produced the reflection, can fill it with meaning, being its cause and explanation. The reflection facing its Origin (the derivation from Plato is evident)\(^{245}\) is a simulacrum trying to cease being one. A fruitful tradition in the critique of Palazzeschi, starting with Edoardo Sanguineti (but with important forerunners in Borgese and Gargiulo), has seen in the disharmony between the two parts of the novel the moment of transition from a first to a second phase in the author’s poetics:

One fine day […] he discovers that those poems […] become tolerable, if they are not to appear unintentionally grotesque, simply through an intentionally, explicitly grotesque reading […] accepting the inevitable fall into clownishness or irony as if it were directly desired and deliberate. […] at a certain point in the story, the sublime is no longer tolerable in any way, if not in its reversed dimension (*Tra liberty e crepuscolarismo* 84-5).

In fact, this assumption fits very well with what Palazzeschi wrote about himself, referring specifically to *riflessi* (and note how the emphasis is placed on the idea of a ‘deeper understanding’) in the Foreword to the collection of his *Opere giovanili*:

in some way affected by the taste of the time, and which after all was not the true expression of my personality, faithfully reflects a troubled and almost desperate youth. And such was mine, until the day that despair and trouble, as if by a miracle, by virtue of a magic spell that I myself cannot explain (a deeper understanding of life, of others, and of myself?), turned into cheerfulness. And while remaining a loner, faithful to and jealous of my solitude, I was quite cheerful ever since. Few people in this world have laughed as much as I have, and I’ve managed to stay that way into my old age (2-3).

Yet the transition from the “sublime to the clownish”\(^{246}\) pointed out by Sanguineti does not exemplify only the passage from the intolerability of ‘high’ literature to its necessary caricatural reversal, but even more the transition from an art capable of “dominating the proliferation of multiplicity in a laconic unity of meaning” (Magris: *Anello di Clarisse* 4) to

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\(^{245}\) And even more evident to the extent that Modernism begins as an anti-Platonic standpoint: there are no more external referents capable of giving meaning to the phenomenal world.

\(^{246}\) Cf. Palazzeschi: letter to Marinetti of May 1909, in *Carteggio* 5: “thinking about those Lauras, those Beatrices, really filled me with indignation! Those poor women must be as withered as old prostitutes by now.”
an art ready to show that the period placed after it is only a convention. 247 The second part of riflessi is not merely the ironic reversal of the first, but the point where ‘form’ (which now constitutes a binomial with Life) goes on to assume the role of a humorous convention (simulacrum). 248

“You know, everything will stay in place, and the dust of fifteen years will remain undisturbed” (riflessi, in Tutti i romanzi, I, 7). Palazzeschi’s first novel also opens under the mark of immobility and frozen time. His letter of November 1 already contains the (closely related) themes of stasis, desire of completeness, and will to reduce to zero the possibility of external influences, of death. The first adjectives which the protagonist uses to refer to himself are “assassinated” and “stiffened” (and in the letter of November 4, speaking of himself and his relationship with the old custodians Imperia and Cammilla, he says: “Do they see it then as the shadow of death in here?”). The whole first part of the novel revolves around these four themes, of which the first letter provides an effective synthesis:

I am afraid of every movement I make, of every thought I have
It’s beautiful, it’s sublime what we have created, and needs no change […] you will observe me in the immobility of my stance
and be like that forever
All the windows of the villa are closed, and will remain so […] nothing human, I hope, will disturb me
And is it not for death that we live? (7-10)

The desire to be buried is one of the hallmarks of Palazzeschi’s epistolary novel (immediately after entering the house, Valentino lies down on the big ‘white’ bed where he remains motionless for hours). The desire for death/immobilization is what caused the end of the love with his correspondent: “I wondered why our attitude was incomplete” (9). Irresistibly drawn

247 Cf. Musil: Diari 43: “As long as you think in sentences with a period at the end, certain things cannot be said; the whole, reflected in the conclusive totality of the sentence, prevents the plurality of reality from emerging in all its inexhaustible fragmentation.”
248 Maria Carla Papini has brilliantly examined the debt that riflessi owes to Une nuit au Luxembourg by Remy De Gourmont, the putative father of the skeptical/relativist version of Modernism (as we have seen in the sections on Papini and Soffici). Cf. Aldo Palazzeschi, Remy De Gourmont: un gioco di… riflessi. Cf. De Gourmont: Le Probleme du Style 29: “forme générale de la sensibilité qui s’impose à tous les hommes d’une meme période.” Cf. also Livi: “La poésie de Palazzeschi et les avant-gardes francaises,” in Aldo Palazzeschi et les avant-gardes, 11-37.
to anything that shows a hint of immutability, Valentino gave his love to a man who appeared to him “divinely cold like the finest marble” (8), but a much greater desire for immutability now drives him to abandon that necessarily incomplete (i.e. necessarily ‘becoming’) relationship\textsuperscript{249} and attempt a reconciliation of the traumatic event that marked his psyche: his mother’s suicide. The relationship with Johnny (a relationship between living people) could not be released from the disruptive action of time,\textsuperscript{250} but the relationship with his mother will take place, in the protagonist’s intentions, in a declared “time beyond life” (9). This point being cleared, his entire ‘journey’ should take the form of an imitative return to the maternal universe: a return in which the protagonist puts into play his own ability to constitute himself as Subject, to say “I.” As mentioned earlier, this is a Platonic operation: the return from the copy to the original, a pilgrimage from the ‘reflection’ to the authentic. In the first part of the novel everything works in parallel, and the figure of repetition, in thematic or stylistic form (gemination, anaphora, epistrophe), is still as important as it was in the poems. But the transition from the tyrannical objectivity of the poems to the hyper-subjectivism of the novel reveals immobile time (now that it is no longer given but must be attained) as the time of neurosis, and of the pain related to it. The perspective of ‘contamination’ (which we have seen at work in \textit{Lanterna}) is part of the picture as well: Valentino is obsessed by the need to preserve the integrity of his seclusion (he leaves the house only at night; he is terrorized by the chance of coming across the drunken patrons of the shop near the post office; even Imperia and Cammilla are kept at a distance for long periods of time). The Platonic constant is hypostatized, of course, in the theme of identity: Valentino feels that his ego is incomplete, halved, and that his individuality is unable to give the surrounding world a stable meaning and form. This is why every part of his journey must be defined as the attempt to restore a measure of fusion with the maternal identity. Considering oneself a second-degree element

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{249}Cf. Savoca: \textit{Eco e Narciso} 93: “the encounter with John was only a step toward the encounter with the ghost of his mother.”

\textsuperscript{250}Cf. Palazzeschi: “riflessi,” in \textit{Tutti i romanzi}, I, 27: “the watch, my watch had fallen to the ground! […] The idea of that ticking horrified me, perhaps even smashed it might irregularly resume its course! I clawed a gash with my nails in the damask of the chair and I pushed, pushed the watch in, making its grave in the thick of the padding, so that if it should start working again I would never hear it, buried as it was in there.”
\end{footnotesize}
(the reflection of an archetype) is a defensive strategy: it’s the strategy of the twentieth-century subject who, discovering himself as a function and not an essence, has lost the capacity to give uniformity, in a higher synthesis (a Totality), to the particularity of the data that come from the world. But the point is that these data appear disintegrated to him because he feels that he himself is shattered: the world can no longer be made into a totality because the very element that would have to perform this task finds that it is divided. The story of Prince Valentino is thus played out on this decline of a subject who senses that he is dangerously dissolving: the metaphysical/Platonic option is the screen behind which the possibility of discovering oneself to be a mere appearance appears, ‘formed’ from time to time by the external flow of interpretations. The various stages of Valentino’s journey, then, are the moments of a progressive approach to an Origin which, in the final merging of duplicate and model, should produce the catharsis and the consequent creation of a definitive, immobile identity.  

In fact, everything about Prince Valentino is constructed so as to be a reproduction of his mother’s story: for example, in some of the scenes regarding the mirror, Valentino discovers that new features have appeared on his face: “I looked at myself and it seemed that there was something new in me, and new was the faint, uncertain, invisible, weak smile that flickered across my lips, perhaps cautiously reliving a burst of laughter that had been suddenly interrupted fifteen years ago” (13). Here we are witnessing the elements of a transfiguration that is taking place.  

In his progression toward the maternal imago (for example, in finding that some rooms and objects are suddenly familiar to him), Valentino also rediscovers characteristics which, as said above, are necessary for his ‘journey’ to succeed:

and I looked unblinkingly into the dusty mirror as if at the nice oval portrait of a youth who is about to die (34).

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251 Cf. Savoca: *Eco e Narciso* 37: “absolutized in its tending toward the past, to the point of canceling all movement in the never changing stillness of death.”

252 Cf. Palazzeschi: “riflessi,” in *Tutti i romanzi*, I, 32: “I feel as if I am living another life, and that my own is increasingly burdened with the weight of a step that is unknown to me.”
When I got up I immediately looked in the oval mirror, and I wondered if my paleness, which today was more intense, was not something divine, and without smiling I was greatly pleased with the immobility of my face (62).

Far from having a negative significance, the increased sensation of death and immobility is what brings Valentino closer to the model of his mother. Only in death can the Prince’s resolution be realized, only by dying will Valentino be able to retrace his mother’s path and remove his existence from the flow of time, finally achieving a stable Identity.

The novel’s obvious psychoanalytic features are brought to bear on an epistemological issue, the crisis of a subject who discovers himself bereft of any foundation (any point of reference), and therefore plunged into an identity neurosis. The absence of a foundation of knowledge (of himself and consequently of the world) is what drives Valentino into a regression towards the ghost of the lost essence that is the principium individuationis. The return to his deceased mother becomes for Valentino the chance to achieve a ‘true’ identity, and for him this is the only guarantee connected with the possible formation of a Truth. If the ‘copy,’ being immersed in contingency, is exposed to the perils of contamination that make it impossible to attain certainty, then it is necessary to go back to an Original located outside of time (this is why when Valentino sees the body of his mother on the bed he is careful not to contaminate it). In the last of his thirty letters, Valentino, finally serene, informs Johnny that the party of fifteen years earlier, the feast that had been interrupted by his mother’s suicide, is about to start again: here ends the first part of the novel.

From this point on, we are thrown into a swirl of journalistic rumors which, starting with the peremptory news of the Prince’s suicide, proceed through a tangle of conjectures.

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253 The contiguity between the concepts of ‘truth’ and ‘death’ is always present: to Valentino the knocking on his bedroom door sounds like knocking on his coffin, and when, significantly, he has the first impression that Johnny and he have drawn apart (when his voyage towards the Origin can begin), he refers to himself as “deceased.” This is already a reference to Nietzsche. Cf. The Gay Science 201: “‘Will to truth’ – that could be a hidden will to death.”

254 Cf. “riflessi,” in Tutti i romanzi, I, 88-9: “Any word, though she would not be able to hear it, would contaminate her pure beauty. […] I will no longer lie down on the bed, how could I lie at her side without staining her?” (The ‘stain’ had already appeared as a topical element in La storia di frate Puccio.) Valentino even avoids the room where his mother died, when inspecting the villa day after day. This reading can also be applied to the episode of the burning haystacks: on the one hand we have the elimination of an element relating to the coarseness of reality, but on the other, since, as noted by Savoca, haystacks have large, repulsive bellies, there is the elimination of an element that reminds the protagonist of the inevitable ‘contamination’ of the maternal object.
This is a hermeneutic transition from the singular to the plural: while in the first part of the novel the single perspective presented to/by Valentino granted him an essentialist leeway in the construction of his identity, the switch to a multiplicity of external voices now shows us the construction of that identity in fieri. The absence of a Subject allows the humorous arising of conflicting hypotheses (this will be a constant and decisive feature in all of Palazzeschi’s work, as it is always the absence of a ‘real’ element that produces the whirl of ‘possibilities’): the addition of new perspectives to the protagonist’s own inevitably weakens the latter: each particularistic vision ‘forms’ an identity for Valentino.

The absence of a subject, far from causing an aphasic silence, now causes the irruption of ‘diversity.’ But the theme of identity construction is still at work: Valentino is still appearance (reflection), however the original it derives from is no longer identified by what Valentino had presupposed as Being (his mother’s identity) but is connected, from time to time, to a whole series of ‘originals’ (the rumors put forth by the people). These rumors/voices, however, being many and in conflict with each other, are immediately revealed as the absence of being, that is, as an interpretive production subordinate to ‘becoming.’ The subject discovers that his vanishing is a multiplication. But the plurality of voices, all directed – it should be noted – at attempting to ‘enclose’ the Prince’s identity in a single characteristic, humorously invest the entire mechanism of identity construction that took place in the first part of the novel. If the procedure of identity construction entails excluding a number of ‘possibilities’ in relation to the chosen model, then these voices, which in their terseness highlight individual aspects, scoff a posteriori (declaring it arbitrary) at the whole quête recounted in the epistolary part of the novel. And in fact time recovers its ability to produce change; the desire for completeness is entirely forsaken by the open (and potentially infinite) system offered by the conjecturing voices; death becomes one possibility among...

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255 Consider, of course, “the man of smoke” Perelà (who has no identity and can therefore be used from the outside to form any identity at all), but also Gedeone e la sua stella, Mario e Maria, L’amico Galletti, the first part of La piramide, the voices making idle conjectures about the Doge, etc. Cf. Tellini: “Introduction” to Palazzeschi: Tutti i romanzi, II, LXX-LXXI.

256 Cf. Klossowski: 128: “God is dead does not mean that along with God vanishes an explanation of existence, but that the absolute guarantor of the identity of the responsible self disappears from the horizon of consciousness.”
many, and is linked to the mobile flow of interpretations: it too ceases to be a fixed point capable of ensuring the truth.

Valentino recovers a self that is disengaged from the pathos of authenticity, a self that is broken and pulverized, emerging from the multi-perspective situation of a subject exposed to the opinions of the world. Although the single voices circulating on the event of the Prince’s demise are all peremptorily affirmative, their paratactic juxtaposition causes their mutual weakening and reveals their purely speculative nature; this coincides with the ‘novel’ as the dramatization of the disappearance of a legislating subject.

And so, by employing the figure of antithesis Palazzeschi inaugurates his own personal path towards ‘lightness.’ Each fragment presents itself as complete and independent, and it is in this sense that each of them becomes a parody of the essentialist attempt that takes place in the first part of the novel. Each fragment is a parody of the myth of the Philosophical System:

Prince Valentino Kore took his life last night in his villa at Bemualda, Tuscany. The news spread quickly through the town causing great shock (111). Prince Valentino always pursued a solitary, extravagant life, was highly cultured, and kept company with a selected group of intellectuals. He was an expert violin player (112).

When the voices are subjected to the effects of becoming (which alters the basic data and hence the conjectures) and of their reciprocal inconsistency, the reader, having no way to choose one side over the other, begins to take the voices for what they really are: ideological constructions, each based on its specific cultural background or on a stereotype thereof, as comically demonstrated by the last three fragments:

Paris papers are discussing the event at length and with keen interest, with no lack of

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257 Cf. Nietzsche: Zarathustra 158: “I once again found my old devil and arch-enemy, the spirit of gravity, and everything he created: compulsion, statute, necessity and consequence and purpose and will and good and evil.”
Cf. Nietzsche: Zarathustra 238: “Get out of the way of all such unconditional ones! They have heavy feet and sultry hearts – they do not know how to dance. How could the earth be light to them?” By ‘lightness’ Palazzeschi does not mean what Calvino will mean by the same term, but rather what Calvino calls “multiplicity.”
wit and «chic» references.
American papers are also dealing with the matter, speaking of heraldic bearings and people of other times, but with great competence and some accuracy. Finally, it is certain that an elegant Japanese sheet has mentioned the event, with somewhat abstruse but very meaningful words (130).

The individual voices thus highlight the inevitability of a “stylized interpretation implicit in any understanding of reality” (Valesio: 397), and the leveling of the values of the forms produced brings to the forefront the principle of a dialogic contradiction of ‘rhetorical’ nature. The realization that reality cannot be expressed if not through ‘selection’ sets any cognitive approach as a perspective solution, a partisan viewpoint, valid but biased, and therefore susceptible of being joined by any other viewpoint (equally valid and equally biased) giving the opposite interpretation of the same fact:

The latest news is that Prince Valentino Kore has not died but is in critical conditions. It also appears that there has been a fire at the villa in Bemualda. Did the Prince get caught up in the fire?
Inaccurate reports are still coming out; there’s talk about suicide by asphyxiation.
The suicide of Prince Valentino Kore has apparently been totally denied! (114).

The coincidentia oppositorum escapes the possibility of judgment: the whole story is suspected to be the result of the derangement of one of the two guardians, people talk about a “hoax” (122) rigged by Valentino himself, and so forth. In their caricatural attempts to arrive at a single version, the many voices emphasize the absence of an exclusive meaning, thereby revealing themselves to be all ‘reflections’: the search for an essence in the specular relationship between copy and original, which had occupied the first part of the novel, now branches into a “centrifugal multiperspectivism” (Saccone: L’occhio narrante 66) in which the only reflections possible are the ones between ‘copies.’ ‘Signs’ do not refer to meanings, but only to other signs. In the absence of a Code, semiosis becomes unlimited. The Palazzeschan Krisis comes to a humorous resolution: the search for an essence is replaced by

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258 With this term we are of course referring not to classical ‘rhetoric’ but to the so-called “new rhetoric” theorized by Chaim Perelman and closely related to Pirandello’s L’umorismo. Cf. Vattimo: The End of Modernity 135: “Hermeneutic truth, which is the experience of truth to which hermeneutics refers […] is essentially rhetorical.”
the “will to adhere to the contingent rhythm of life” (Tellini: “Introduzione,” in Tutti i romanzi, I, LXXXV). From here on, for Palazzeschi every utterance of the word “I” will have an ironical value and be characterized as a ‘mask’: the plurality connected with the proliferation of masks will reveal the ingenuousness of the attempt to find an ‘identity.’ In other words, the second-level operation (the mask) will reveal what for Palazzeschi becomes the deception concatenated with the first-level operation (the identity). Any conclusion that arrives at a Being other than the awareness of an unamendable contingency is a conclusion that arrives at a ‘form.’ The epistemological crisis is thus resolved by hypostatizing its very presuppositions.

This can be clearly seen in Palazzeschi’s next volume of poems — Poemi, 1909. The change of perspective, as identified in riflessi, is here materialized in chromatic form with the transition from white to red:

The Prince sends you these roses, / See? / This vividly colored bundle of roses, / blood and ruby, see? / Do you want me to lay them at your feet? Your white feet are divine. / – Tell him that my feet didn’t want them, / they were struck with horror at them, as if stepping / in a pool of blood. […] – Does he not know that my lips / are as cold as the lips / of death? […] – How can he not know / that to a Princess of marble / it is not given to love? (in Tutte le poesie 120-1).

In La principessa bianca [The White Princess], the absence of color, which is dichotomous with the erotic red of the roses sent by the Prince, refers to the usual semantic series of immobility, endless repetition, death.\(^\text{259}\) By refusing Eros, the Princess (a marble Princess) refuses movement, excludes the possibility of change, and hypostatizes her divinity (another element of the semantic chain) refusing contamination (as underlined by the horror she feels at the juxtaposition of the white of her feet and the red of the roses).\(^\text{260}\) But the opposite

\(^\text{259}\) Cf. Savoca: Eco e Narciso 179: “To take the repetition of the identical as a way of life means to make a choice of death.”

\(^\text{260}\) A brief history of the relationship of the West with ‘white’ (and therefore with the color) was traced by David Batchelor in Cromofobia. According to Batchelor, ‘white’ is associated with a number of ideas involving the rejection of the unstable, the partial, the relative. White is defined “a glimpse of death-in-life” (16). In white all is order and therefore all is exclusion/repression. The supporters of white regard color as the property of a foreign body (female, Oriental, infantile, etc.) to be relegated to the domain of the inessential, the superficial: “Color is
metonymic sequence entailed by the appearance of the color red radically changes the poetics of Palazzeschi. If ‘white’ represents the function of normalizing the plurality of life, color expresses that which, previously excluded, now returns to claim equal rights, precisely by connecting to the outside an ordered world (a System) which had presumed to dominate the outside. Color makes the System ‘problematic,’ undermining the very function that Art has towards Life:

Am I perhaps a poet? / Certainly not. / A single word only, and strange, / writes the pen of my soul: / "madness." / Am I then a painter? / Neither. / There is only one color / in the palette of my soul: / "melancholy." / A musician, then? / Neither. / There is one note alone / in the keyboard of my soul: / "nostalgia." / Then I am… what? / I put a lens / in front of my heart / to show it to people. / Who am I? / The saltimbanque of my soul (71).

Starting the book with a mechanism of reification (“Then I am… what?”) invalidates with self-irony the identity value of the Ego, and inevitably alters the code with which to read the poems that follow. A clown so understood, definitely separated from his ‘mortuary’ component, goes beyond the clowns of Baudelaire and the Symbolist Pierrots, personifying a ‘negativity’ which is the humorous weapon of the multivalence of meaning.

As in riflessi, the shift towards humor regards the same material previously assumed as decisive. An example is the prominent function of both the ‘centre’ and the diaphragm that

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dangerous, or it is trivial, or it is both” (23). It belongs to the sphere of the corporal, of the secondary (and is dangerous precisely because it is secondary!). Color challenges the validity of the code (remember La storia di frate Puccio), forcing the metonymic chain of white to deal with the aspects of existence that it considers dangerous or superficial.

261 It is well known that even in Bakhtin ‘red’ is attributed to the carnivalesque character of regeneration, whereas ‘white’ represents authority and law: L’opera di Rabelais 350: “a body that is perfectly given, formed, rigorously defined, closed, shown from the outside, uniform and expressive in its individuality. Anything that emerges, that sticks out of the body, any protuberance, outgrowth, or branching, that is, anything with which the body comes out of its boundaries and begins to form another body, breaks off, is eliminated, is shut down, withers away. And in the same manner all the orifices that allow access to the body are closed.”

262 It is inevitable here to quote Starobinski: Ritratto dell’artista come saltimbanco 38-9: “Starting with Romanticism (but certainly not without prior indications) the jester, the saltimbanque, the clown became the hyperbolic and intentionally distorting images that artists liked to give of themselves and of the condition of art. In short, it is a self-portrait in disguise, the scope of which is not limited to sarcastic or painful caricature. […] it is a derisory epiphany of art and of the artist. In this game, the critique of bourgeois respectability doubles as self-criticism directed against the aesthetic vocation as such.”

Marta Barbaro (I poeti-saltimbanchi 34), recalling Laforgue’s remark on missing his calling as a clown, has rightly pointed out that the appearance of the saltimbanque coincides with the parodic ousting of the symbolist perspective.
separates it from the ‘people’: “Extremely long, deep, / you can’t go round it all, / on one side only, on a / very comfortable balustrade, / people can stop / as long as they want and look, on their knees. / Right at the end of the lawn, / hung out with the greatest care, / there’s a freshly-laundered white shirt” (83).

The metonymic chains of ‘white’ and ‘red’ acquire an explicit significance in the text the opens the section Marine:

It’s not a very large sea, / its boundaries and contours can clearly be seen, / the shape that it has, it is shaped like a heart. / The water is very dark red, but shimmering alive. […] Master of the sea, / is a young Prince, / a handsome blond man. […] Absolute master, he tours / crosses and coasts irregularly / in every direction. / The very sharp tip / of that terrible launch / pierces, runs through, drills across / the ruddy masses of water, / the sprays fly up high, / the water bursts in whirls and spurts at the passing / of that terrible launch. / The Prince, standing impassive, / not for a moment / slows down his course, / not even a spray wets him, / his white robe / shows nary a spot / of the red of the water. […] A moaning, a shiver, / like the panting of endless unchanging pain, / come up from that sea / which is shaped like a heart (93-4).

Here we have the usual closed geometric construction, this time invaded by a color that inspires fear (“dark”) but yet is “shimmering alive.” The familiar princely figure (white and frozen in an endlessly repeating action) is master of the waters but at the same time totally separated from them: contamination, it is clearly stated, does not take place. The authoritarian attribute (indicated three times by the noun “master”) ensures the hermetic differentiation of the two worlds, the separation of the two metonymic chains. At the cost of the “pain” mentioned in the end, the Prince contains the subversive significance of the waters. As previously in :riflessi, Palazzeschi now unveils the neurotic mechanism underlying the ‘laborious’ (truly in the Freudian sense) preservation of a universe meant to be hierarchically ordered.

Then it is no surprise that in the last three poems of the book Palazzeschi decides to bring to the scene – also through a change of colors – the separation from his former self (from his former Weltanschauung), and that he does so metaphorically, resorting to the image
of a *Mirror* displaying a *doppelgänger*: “‘Why are you staring at me, you impudent mirror? / Why are you staring at me? What do you think? / That I am afraid of you?” (165).

The opening presents the typical disturbing mechanism of the appearance of the double (a mechanism that undermines the monolithic identity of the Ego, projecting outwards all that is repressed). However, the condition of love/hate, of desire/fear, is continually reversed: the positive significance of the metonymic chain that was previously linked to the color white (homogeneity, death, etc.) is carried to the edge of a clearly negative judgment:

I hate you! And sometimes, alas, I love you, / with all my hate! / And I come close, winning / the sickening revulsion / of the obscene presence / that you want to keep in my room. […] Say, are you reflecting me or repelling me? / You show me a man / that I pity! / That white face! / His visage all the same! / If I close my eyes / that man there / looks dead (165-6).

But the condition of equality between the protagonist and the reflected image is suddenly subverted: the whiteness of the face is revealed to be make-up. The emerging of traits foreign to the Ego qualifies the second-level figure as an *other* figure, linked, not surprisingly, to the metonymic chain of the color red (movement, irregularity, etc.): “Beneath the left eye / can be seen the throbbing / of a red star, / that is so vivid / it seems to be always moving. […] That red hair, / red and curly! / The hairline on the forehead / could not be more beautiful, / every lock falls down / in its own capricious way / and ends with a ring / or a curl” (166). The divergence with the requirements of immobility and uniformity that characterize the protagonist could not be more evident. Here, then, given the identity bond that unites the two figures, explodes the crisis relating to the vision of the repressed content: “That great red / cloak that dazzles the eyes, / I’m afraid, I hate you, vile mirror, / what are you showing me? / A man that / scares me, a man / who’s all red, the horror!” (166-7).

The subsequent passing of the discomfort leads to a reconciliation that suggests a ‘reflection’ related to the discovery of an otherness inside the self:
No, look, / I want to make peace with you, / I want to win the horror, […] Why do you show me a man / that scares me? / Why are you doing this? / I do not look at you to see myself, you know, / I look at you to see you. […] Why don’t you tell me then / if the man you are showing me / is really me? (167).

Having to experience the disturbing situation produces a question which for the moment is left unanswered. And yet the juxtaposition of two figures belonging to two opposing metonymic chains carries an implicit condemnation of the ‘white.’ The value attributed to the simulacrum consisting of the pair self/other deconstructs the Platonic condemnation of phenomenal appearance, which is no longer viewed in terms of illusion but of ‘possibility.’ The double is put in connection with a new level of reality which has its strong point in the possible instead of the probable. And this reality is necessarily grounded on the metonymic chain of ‘red,’ since it expresses “all the unlived virtualities of the Ego” (Fusillo: 300). It is exactly this that Palazzeschi will call fantasia.

The two figures that feature in *Lo specchio* [The Mirror] are separated in the last two poems of the volume, *La finestra terrena* [The Earthly Window] and *Il frate rosso* [The Red Friar]. The protagonist of the first poem looks out the window of his palazzo, with evident regret, upon the spectacle of life that takes place outside,密封 himself in a closed circle indissolubly tied to the usual dyad of repetition and death. In *Il frate rosso*, instead, the rules of the game are radically changed. The protagonist is placed outside the scene; as in the second part of :riflessi, everything we know about him comes from the hermeneutic mechanism (a polyphonic chorus!) of external voices. The mechanism is directed at immediately giving the figure of the friar the character of indefinability, of formlessness (Palazzeschi even takes care to ward off any possible suspicions of a political nature): “Some say he is a very handsome friar, / some say he is a very ugly friar. / Some say he is à la mode, /
some say he is not à la mode at all. [...] Now listen to me, do not contradict me, don’t come and tell me later that this is the friar of the future; the one of the future is of a different color” (173-4). The new character is even unnamed, hence extraneous to the fixed identity related to the use of names. The impossibility of ‘classifying’ the “very strange friar” emphasizes his subversive, i.e. contaminative, significance: “How strange it is to see between the white columns of a temple moving slowly, on the marble steps of an altar, go down on his knees a red friar” (174). The presence of red in the middle of the white is a ‘crack’ in the model. The principle of disorder introduced by the friar, the transgression that it represents, attract upon him the barbs of the vox populi. “Upon contact with the extremes of repression and conformism” (Dei: “Il serio gioco”, in L’opera di Aldo Palazzeschi 46) – a friar, a church, etc. – the seeds of contamination cause the closed System to explode. The fire that burns the altar (this time a liberating fire, not a cleansing one as in La storia di frate Puccio) definitely separates the protagonist from his function: the constrictions of a ‘real’ role are replaced by the opportunities of ‘possible’ roles: “Where will the Red Friar go now? Where? Among the people dressed in uncertain colors, he, all in red, with that strange face of his… What if they put in him in prison?” (178). In the poem that opens the next collection we will actually find him in jail. But this collection will also introduce us to the relationship between the Avant-Garde and the author who (together with Pirandello) best embodied the ‘vital’ part of Modernism.

**VIII. Proteus’ Game**

In his description of a paradoxical graveyard appearing in La fiera dei morti [The Fair of the Dead], Palazzeschi lands, in the final part of the text, on a metaphorical representation that involves the semantic field of theatre: “What little space the dead occupy, far less than seems natural. [...] Those high walls with all those heads packed in tightly, no room to budge, /
seem the walls of a loggia / for an exceptional emissary” [the Italian word is actually “representation”] (The Arsonist 47). The exemplary stillness that characterizes the dead is contrasted with the indefinability of the living, i.e. of those who take part in the representation, as in theatre. While the world as theatre265 is narrated in its component of unknowability (i.e. of possibility), the universe of those who have died can instead be easily defined (enclosed) by a single specific quality: “On the marbled skin of their faces, / far better than on those of the living, / their character’s features / are clearly revealed. / “Here lies / a man of rare virtue: Telemaco Pessuto, / fifty-three years of age, / exemplary husband and father.” / If we’d encountered you alive, / who’d have known?” (43-5). In parallel with the impossibility of the identity construction that forces the living into ambiguity (as opposed to the essentialist frankness of the dead), Palazzeschi introduces a further specific difference: only the dead are granted an ‘effective’ linguistic/communicative function. Being untouched by uncertainty/ambiguity, only the dead possess a capacity for discourse (the inscriptions on the tombstones, the marble stoniness of the faces) that goes beyond the interpretive mayhem that characterizes the equivocalness of the condition of ‘life.’266 This hermeneutic equivocalness gives a ‘mortuary’ value to the attempts to categorize (immobilize) meanings. Palazzeschi thus reaffirms the operative intent of the saltimbanque invoked at the beginning of the poem: “The usual saltimbanques’ shacks / stand outside the gate – / the social class that has the goal, / more so even the astronomers, / of making men aware / that the world turns.” (39).267

The vocation for clownishness, which is primarily a humorous attitude for debate, will be coherently joined by an egalitarian view of the aspects of life and by the crisis of the hierarchical/referential value of language (interpreted, as is known, in E lasciatemi

265 Magris: L’anello di Clarisse 125: “The theatre is the place that authorizes the fiction and inauthenticity that characterize the modern individual and infuse his life with the anguish of inexistence. […] In the theatre the divided man, doubled and uncertain of himself, transforms the attacks on his identity into its constituent elements: he bases his identity on his radical diversity.”
266 Cf. Palazzeschi: The Arsonist 47: “The living have such faces, / so expressive, yet mute, even a scoundrel’s / can appear sympathetic; / but the faces of the dead / are full of excellent information.”
267 The contrast with the endless, repetitive ‘revolutions’ that had characterized Palazzeschi’s early poetry could not be greater. This attitude will also apply to certain characters of L’incendiario, but there it will be blatantly ridiculed, and only applied to characters who are trapped in the Pirandellian mechanism of the ‘fixity of judgment.’
divertire!). The infringement of the classifying logos which, by imposing a fictitious order, develops a meaning that mortifies life, in fact aims at denouncing the impossibility of a connection between reality and the system of signs related to it: the possibility of a compulsorily synthetic foundation is rejected for wanting to preserve a world order based on pre-defined fictitious units, and not only linguistic.

With this in mind, Palazzeschi’s approach to Marinetti’s Futurism cannot avoid coming under the same stamp of ambiguity. The place of exclusion/difference which the poet attributes to his ink-made simulacrum reverberates exemplarily on the author himself, who, swaying between the desire to participate and claims of diversity, finds himself playing at… being a Futurist: he makes contact with Marinetti’s movement and, by introducing in it a conflict between different codes, stimulates a hitherto unexpressed potentiality: the one based on misinterpretation. Venturing so far as to risk ambiguousness, as he does in the eponymous poem that opens the collection *L’incendiario* [The Arsonist] (1910), Palazzeschi establishes a connection with the poetics of Futurism destined to explode its contradictions, and also his own, which for Palazzeschi, however, constitute the biological (hence inevitable) substrate of life. Palazzeschi sets up a dialogical exchange with the truth which the Avant-Garde brings to the scene as the self-criticism of Art; he uses the relationship between art and society as a

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268 Cf. Palazzeschi: *The Arsonist* 125: “Twee twee twee, / froo froo froo, / eehu eehu eehu / uhee uhee uhee! / The poet’s having fun, / he’s insane, / he’s out of control! / Don’t insult him / let him have his fun / poor guy, / these little pranks, / are his only pleasure. […] Know what this is? / It’s very advanced stuff, / nothing silly – / it’s the chaff / of other poems.” Cf. Palazzeschi: letter to Soffici dated June 20, 1916 in *Carteggio* 88: “I really hope you’ll want to come to Naples, after me in Naples and even further down, much further down to some place where you only hear syllables here and there and no longer have the power to put them together in any way.”

The point is, of course, that there is no longer a subject capable of ‘grasping’ the world in the totality expressed by the sentence.’ Faith in the Self and faith in the Word are the same faith.

269 Cf. Nietzsche: *Human, All Too Human*, II, 183: “Every word is a prejudice.” A systematization that stifles the bustle of life. Cf. Nietzsche: *Dawn* 38: “Wherever primitive humans set forth a word, they thought they had made a discovery. But in truth, how different the situation was! – they had hit on a problem and, in presuming to have solved it, they had created an impediment to its solution. – These days, with every act of knowing one has to stumble over perpetually petrified words, and in the process one is more likely to fracture a leg than a word.”

Cf. Mancinelli: *Il messaggio razionale dell’avanguardia* 23-4: “we cannot fail to see in the order of a language the reflection of the order by which we organize our experiences The structure of a language is the structure of a people’s culture.”

270 Cf. Palazzeschi: letter to Marinetti of July 1910, in *Carteggio* 19: “I’m really hoping in you! And that your futurism gets into the marrow of my bones as well as in my brain.”

principle of social criticism (cancellation of the Autonomy of art),\textsuperscript{271} while, at the same time, rejecting (modernistically)\textsuperscript{272} the perspective of ‘praxis’ as the expression of a latent revolutionary truth that the Avant-Garde would want to disclose. The poetics of Palazzeschi is thus a historicizing poetics, a reversed ‘exposure’ of actual social dynamics; at the same time, since the entire social structure is analyzed in the negative terms of a propensity for ‘forms,’ it is also the exposure of anthropological issues. The art of Palazzeschi refuses the reconciliation of objectified social dynamics, but only to clear the way to nihilism (as the way ‘to health’),\textsuperscript{273} which is seen as the negation of those dynamics. The crisis of classical ontology, the crisis of the idea of System, is not the shock of the allegorical dissonance that indicates the loss of the Truth of the ‘thing’ (its transformation into false consciousness), but becomes the crisis of the ontological principle per se,\textsuperscript{274} with the ontological principle taken as a cornerstone not only of metaphysics but also of dialectics. The anti-Platonic option is considered the same as the anti-dialectic option, because metaphysics and dialectics are considered equivalent. In other words, the \textit{Krisis} ceases to be seen as a historical phenomenon (a cultural aspect of an objective social situation), and this allows Palazzeschi to bring his modernist nihilism at the heart of the Avant-Garde program.\textsuperscript{275} This is where the poet goes to see the arsonist: “In the center / of the town’s main square / they placed the iron cage, / the arsonist within. / For three days he’ll stay in there / so that everyone can see him. / Everyone circles around and around / the enormous cage, / all day long, / hundreds in the crowd” (15). Starting with the usual mechanism in which a center is opposed to the circle of people around it, Palazzeschi reverses his previous terms of exposition: the center is in fact accessible, and the people are no longer affected by the communicative catatonia of his earlier poems: “– I’d tear him to pieces myself. / – Chuck him in the sewer!” (17). The ‘exclamatory’ language of the people is doubled by the words of the

\textsuperscript{271} Because this autonomy, while assuming the awareness of a separation between Art and Life, also hypostatized this historically determined fact as the essence of art itself.

\textsuperscript{272} This point marks a division between Modernism and Avant-Garde, two concepts that can not always be associated. Indeed, the Avant-Garde could be said to be a ‘moment’ of Modernism.

\textsuperscript{273} The morality of ‘healing’: the great way to Health discussed in \textit{The Gay Science}.

\textsuperscript{274} The ‘ruins’ (as well as language itself, after its disintegration) are habitable: indeed, they are the reality of a ‘healthy’ world.

\textsuperscript{275} This is recognized in the intellectual Palazzeschi being a point of union between Milanese and Florentine Futurism.
poet, who raises a hymn to the caged arsonist, making him into a christomorphic figure and proceeding to his liberation (but only, as we shall see, after distancing himself as much as necessary): “Go ahead, brother, take flight, give heat / to the frozen carcass / of this old world!” (29).

Palazzeschi’s cult for the anti-sublime is incompatible with the technological sublime supported by Futurism, but for Palazzeschi what matters now is the possibility of establishing a dialog between himself and Marinetti, a dialog which, to be truly such, must be taken to the point of risking unification. The whole book inevitably revolves around this relationship (preceded by the 57 pages of the *Rapporto sulla vittoria del Futurismo a Trieste* [Report on the Victory of Futurism in Trieste] and a collection of critical reviews on various Futurists; the title itself was suggested by Marinetti). This volume marks a seminal moment in the general framework of Palazzeschi’s progress, outlining the programmatic opportunity of establishing a dialogic relationship with any position (aesthetic or ideological), a relationship later destined (hermeneutically!) to bring to the surface the contradictions that exist on both sides.

The poet receives the arsonist’s allegations and returns them reversed: the relationship that forms between the two upsets Palazzeschi’s nihilistic creed and, at the same time, presents the reader with a diluted version of the ‘incendiary’ ideology. If the approach to Futurism shows us a strangely (and socially) aggressive poet, an Ego that forcefully asserts his identity “through a recitative clearly affected, on the lexical and syntactic level, by the imperative,

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276 Cf. Palazzeschi: *The Arsonist* 19: “On your knees, all of you! / I am the priest, / this cage the altar, / that man the Lord!”

277 Cf. Palazzeschi: letter to Marinetti of December 1910: “My great Futurist, I hope that futurism triumphs the world over!”

278 Cf. Palazzeschi: letter to Marinetti of April 1911, in *Carteggio* 47: “in Florence […] true supporter of Futurism, they call me Saint Paul, perhaps not wrongly.”

279 Marinetti would even tell Palazzeschi what formulas to use for the many inscribed copies.

280 Marinetti: letter to Palazzeschi of July, 1910: “You should also lay down some kind of futurist foreword, in which you explain to ignorant readers and critics your concept of Futurism and, better yet, your impressions on our two great battles of Turin and Naples.”


The futurist appeal to “incendiary poets” is found in the manifesto *Uccidiamo il chiaro di luna*.

282 Cf. Palazzeschi: letter to Marinetti of March 1911, in *Carteggio* 39-40: “Why don’t you use the picture of some wrestler or some wonderful specimen of mankind? This is Palazzeschi. It would be a hit! Futurists should be handsome and strong, and the ones who aren’t should stay indoors. Think what it would be like to see the futurist ranks made up of a bunch of chumps!”

Cf. “Palazzeschi piromane,” in *Ritratti nel tempo* 354: “When I joined futurism I had to come out with something like that, didn’t I? Incendiary in a manner of speaking, as it were.”
declamatory tones of Futurist speech” (Saccone: *Futurismo e modernità* 74), it also gives us a vision that is entirely ‘other’ than the hypostatization of Futurist Action: “I too am an arsonist, you should know, / an impoverished arsonist with nothing to burn, […] There above my desk where it was born, / I burn the first copy of my book, / like an offering, / and intently watch the flame” (25). By bringing Futurism into a multi-perspective ideology (the Modernist one), Palazzeschi destabilizes its monologic structure: even the poet in the short poem will later have to be related to all the other masks that the author wears in the book, and this will necessarily invalidate the identity-making possibilities that are taken into account in the dialogues of the opening text.\(^{282}\) The fire invoked in the poem will in fact be comically reversed in the last composition that appears in the book: the poet’s exclamatory and ‘superomistic’ identity issue referred to a distant American relative will then revert, in the form of ‘reflection’ (again in the Pirandellian sense), against the poet himself: “I was still hungry / and thought I’d gotten worked up in vain” (223) [a more literary translation could be: “I was still confused, / and thought I’d gotten warmed up in vain”]. The ironical transposition of the arsonist’s fire into being “warmed up in vain” underlines Palazzeschi’s need to constantly change the rules of his game to adapt to a poetics that wants to set in motion within Futurism what had been surreptitiously removed, i.e. the equivocal, the possible. And in the book, this strategy goes well beyond the relationship with Futurism, touching – through the already-seen interpretive/hermeneutic motions – on the relationship with ‘reality’:

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\(^{282}\) Also note, with reference to the poems *Lo specchio* and *Il frate rosso*, that while the arsonist is “all red,” the poet looks at himself in the mirror dressed in red. Cf. Tellini: “La poetica dello «scazzabubolo»,” in *L’arte del saltimbanco* 14-5: “He adopts […] a point of view open to the dialectic of the deviant, of the outcast and the outsider, following a «code» that is not monocentric but flexible and relativistic.”

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I no longer dream of broken-down castles, / decaying abandoned villas, / with cracking walls / through which the sunlight passes. / No more provincial *palazzi* / deserted, / with dust-covered doors, […] I dream of a little house made of glass / right in the middle of town, / in the thick of the township. / A plain, simple house, / just a small thing, / three small rooms and a kitchen. / A little house / like one that any mortal / could own, / with nothing special, / but completely transparent, / made of glass (316-7).
If in the first part of this poem (*Una casina di cristallo* [A Little Glass House]) Palazzeschi presents his rejection of the *topoi* of the *liberty* style (as Art Nouveau, or the Modern Style, was known in Italy), in the second part the usual mechanism invoking the search for solitude (a mechanism that was abundantly present in the collection *Poemi*) is subjected to a process of estrangement that gives it a paradoxical character. While, on the one hand, the *casina* preserves all the elements of a petit-bourgeois interior, on the other, through the instauration of an order that is ‘other’ than the order of reality (the house is transparent), it performs the function of activating a different code employed for the purpose of destabilizing the dominant one. By leading to misunderstandings, the dialogical contact that is established between the real world and the *casina* intends to demonstrate to reality the possibility that it has decided to suspend but which it nonetheless contains in itself. The proximity between the world created by the poet and the ‘real’ world introduces a plurality that was hitherto absent, and this triggers disorder and subversion in the assumed unidimensionality. The result is the collapse of the hierarchy that determines the supremacy of the real world over the possible one. If before *L’incendiario* the poet’s distancing himself from the world could be seen as a defensive strategy, it now becomes a strategy of attack: with his withdrawal, the poet creates a different reality (a simulacrum of reality) that is put in communication with the first, thereby disrupting its operating rules and revealing it too (this is the point!) as a simulacrum. This constitutes a doubling of the world *sub species theatris*\(^\text{283}\): the irruption of a plurality of worlds/codes shakes the foundations of the hierarchical structures\(^\text{284}\) to the point of transfiguring – in the decisive shift towards a carnival culture – even semantic concretions:

> What sun could shine, / if not a beacon for beetles, / in the sky of my dreams? / You

\(^{283}\) Cf. Palazzeschi: “Lazzi, frizzi,” in *Tutti i romanzi*, I, 1371: “The world is a theatre where everyone wants to play a part.”

\(^{284}\) In a work such as *L’assolto* [The Acquitted] even the ‘exclusion’ principle will become action directed against the public.

In the extraordinary “Pizzicheria” [Grocery Store] the gastronomic sphere is equated to the idealistic, historical, and geographic sphere. Cf. Palazzeschi 334: “And the anchovies and herrings / with their shiny armor, / all lined up in their barrels, / on your knees! / They are warriors of the Crusades! / The rows of cheese / one piled over the over, / to me they look like villages, / hamlets in the sun, / with slate roofs, / the dark oily rinds, / like mountain villages.”
protest: this sun is too bizarre! / But I can hold it in my arms; / play with it on my table / as though it were a cabbage. / Make love to it / anytime I wish; / tell it: you’re a fool! / Tell it a thousands insults, / a thousand nasty words, / as though it weren’t the sun at all. / Have you understood? (105).

Palazzeschi’s words now tend to become exotopic, as Todorov might say, as they desemanticize, through ‘familiarization,’ the semantic stability that the word/thing relationship should guarantee. If language itself is the projection of a stable sense of reality, then the sun being unexpectedly reduced to a “cabbage” by virtue of the ‘possibilistic’ structure of reality is the exemplification of an unlimited semiosis, in which the word is necessarily uttered “with reservations” (Bakhtin: Author and hero 349): it is not entirely identifiable with its own contents, but is the expression of its otherness to itself, and therefore the expression of the author’s otherness to himself. The world becomes a Subject with which the Ego enters into a relationship. This relationship is part of a bidirectional progression destined to change, from time to time, the parameters of both: this is where Palazzeschi’s humor comes in.

The regret which the poet expresses after cutting off with a long, violent outburst his chat with a distant American cousin (in La visita di Mr. Chaff [Mr. Chaff’s Visit], the poem that concludes L’incendiario) is, then, the seal of Palazzeschi’s modernness: “I should just have let / that poor American say / all his foolish things, / who knows how much fun I would’ve had!” (223). The interruption of the ambivalence, of the dialogue (after the poet’s outburst, Mr. Chaff goes off “without a word”), constitutes the interruption of the ‘fun.’

‘Fun,’ far from being mere play, is the strategy of the individual who, having recognized the Protean nature of reality, changes himself in order to follow its movements. He adjusts his actions to counteract the attempt (here we are very close to Pirandello) to lock him inside a cell of identity. The many masks that he uses represent the glorification of his endless possibilities. The hermeneutics which in riflessi was activated by the social community now

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285 And Sole mio was the title that Palazzeschi had initially chosen for the volume.
286 Cf. Palazzeschi: “L’incendiario,” in Tutte le poesie 246: “However we do not get along / the sea and I, / it often bothers me / that constant grumbling of his, / he says that I am a big grumbler.”
287 In fact, when Palazzeschi, after abandoning Marinettism, had the book reprinted in 1913, he left out both L’incendiario and the last poem (La visita di Mr. Chaff), which shows the joint function of the two texts.
becomes a process inherent to the subject itself, who internalizes it as the deepest cipher of his being, i.e. his becoming. The I, having become a ‘wanderer,’ exalts its own fictional nature\textsuperscript{288}. it throws itself into an abyss of groundlessness, celebrating the parts of itself, of reality, and of language that are made of smoke as the space of infinite possibilities: “All the rays, all the possibilities will be before us” (Palazzeschi: “Equilibrio,” in \textit{Tutti i romanzi}, I, 1277). This is where Perelà comes from, philosophically, and narratively: from the modernist intent of indissolubly binding – by criticizing it – the equation of death and narration.

Right after Perelà disappears, and just before the subjects of King Torlindao raise their eyes to the sky desperately trying to get one last glimpse of him, Palazzeschi in a few short lines tells about the sudden madness and death of Marchesa Oliva di Bellonda. The last cryptic words uttered by the woman (who up to that moment has no idea of the true nature of Perelà) constitute an out-and-out denunciation of literature: “– Follow me… follow me… come… let us go… let us go to tell… to tell so as to kill… we must tell… we must ki… Aah!” (\textit{Man of Smoke} 231).\textsuperscript{289} The equalization of death and narration is here at its peak: the tribute which narration demands of life (the elimination of all possible alternatives) is transmitted to the reader in the terms of a homicidal will that constitutes the essence of Palazzeschi’s masterpiece, a work that is the narration of a ‘code’ and also, being a narrative construction, the code itself. If it is true that there are countless attempts throughout the novel to attribute a shape to the man of smoke, it is also true that none of them can compete with what contains them all: the novel itself. \textit{Il codice di Perelà} [translated as \textit{Man of Smoke}, but literally \textit{The Code of Perelà}] is not only the code that the people invoke from the protagonist, but also the title of a novel that Palazzeschi understood to be the attempt to dominate the proliferance of life, of its possibilities, to arrive at a univocal meaning. The principal nemesis of Perelà is the novel narrating him, a novel whose dialogic exclusiveness (suggestive of a reality being created by the inevitably contrasting words that the people say about it) is redoubled by the

\textsuperscript{288} Cf. Nietzsche: \textit{Twilight of the Idols} 28: “And as for the I! It has become a fable, a fiction, a play on words.”

\textsuperscript{289} The quotations are taken from the translation done by Perella and Stefanini on the 1958 edition. Riccio’s translation (which was based on the book’s first version) is unfortunately unusable owing to the many misinterpretations and omissions.
Perelà does not have a name: he is extraneous to any identity-fixing calcification that can define him. His name is one of the many attempts at defining him which the people resort to upon his appearance: an attitude of Western rationalism which, when it fails to fit the insatiable multiplicity of reality into a higher unit of values, reacts by condemning itself, through a definition, to the illusory possession of ‘things’ by mortifying them.

Even his age is uncertain, but to the ears of the people it come out as “thirty-three,” because this allows them a reference to the ‘model’ of Christ, which ensures, being pre-packaged, a definition (so Perelà is welcomed as a messiah): “– In fact, thirty-three years of sin require thirty-three years of penance […] – You, Signor Perelà, are a man purified of all human dross. This will render you highly welcome in our eyes, an exceptional and privileged being – sublime” (17). In their eagerness to determine a ‘form,’ the kingdom’s inhabitants condemn themselves to a systematic misunderstanding that causes them to view Perelà’s lack of form in terms of ‘purification’ (thus distancing themselves from the ambiguous territories of the body\(^{291}\)): “Was this a thorough purification of the flesh accomplished by fire? –

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\(^{290}\) Cf. Pieri: *Ritratto del saltimbancão da giovane* 120: “dissolution of the “subject” who objectifies his historical exhaustion through the biological reduction to smoke.”

\(^{291}\) Here the word “Body,” Nietzscheanly, stands for Life: cf. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality* 128: “this hatred of the human, and even more of the animalistic, even more of the material, this horror of the senses, of reason itself, this fear of happiness and beauty, this longing to get away from appearance […] wishing, longing itself – all that means, let us dare to grasp it, a will to nothingness, an aversion to life.”

On the significance of the ‘body’ Palazzeschi would base his novel *Interrogatorio della contessa Maria*, in part modeled as a parodic dialogue with the futurist manifestos of Valentine de Saint-Point and Italo Tavolato. Particularly interesting, for the purposes of our general discussion, is the position of Tavolato (later to become an agent of the OVRA, the Fascist secret police), who initially shared Weininger-style ethical-Christian conceptions but then moved on, through the analysis of sexuality, to Nietzschean territories of Life as refusal of all ethics/morals. Cf. *Elogio della prostituzione*, in *Lacerba*, May 1, 1913: “I believe: brothels are worth more than
Purification! – Purification! – Purification! – Just so, quite so! – Yes, yes, that’s so! – True purification” (15). With their exclamatory agitation (Man of Smoke is probably the novel with the most exclamation points in all Italian literature), the characters exhibit their desire to purify (precisely) existence of any unexpected variation: when Perelà, simulacrum of a man, comes out of the blue to point out the irreversible crisis of the subject, the only remaining resource is a pathological lifestyle devoted to negating otherness and codifying it in the rigor mortis of the already-known. However, if Perelà is now exalted because everyone sees in him whatever they most want to see, the interpretive/hermeneutic spiral which the man of smoke, inasmuch as he represents an absence, has already triggered, will inevitably end up undermining the form-making capacity of the people, who, faced with the impossibility of defining the indefinable, will be compelled to view him as a ‘demon,’ as he who ‘divides’.292

After being introduced to a number of important personalities, Perelà finds himself engaged in dialogues played out on the theme of ‘misunderstanding,’ as his ‘words’ seem to always throw off the objectifying intentions of each linguistic instance. The impossibility of reaching an agreement, given the negative connotation introduced by Perelà in the phenomenological/linguistic model of others, marks the first irruption of an interpretive Babel (of a systematic estrangement). The activation of an “other” possibility (for example in the discussion with the painter Gastone Speranza about a certain painting), then, is the sign of the gradual breakdown of a sense hitherto believed unassailable:

The painting is appropriately called Le Chevalier sans Rose. – What is that lady saying? – Take it, the flower is yours. – No, no. – How’s no? – That’s not what she says, rather she says: “Leave, sir.” – Oh, signor Perelà, whatever are you saying? Do you not see how her eyes sparkle? And how her lips thirst for love and for kisses? – Can’t a lady smile while telling a man to leave? – No, by no means; how could she

churces. [...] That was our torment and affliction: to have placed our faith outside of life. [...] All morals vary, change, decay, disappear; prostitution remains. So if duration is any indication of value, prostitution is greater than ethics. I drop rose petals on the path from which will come the Antichrist who will finally submit ethics to voluptuousness. [...] Guy, a Jew, founder of the Christian religion [...]. Other guy, a German, philosopher, conceited fellow, follower of Christ, inventor of the categorical imperative (= transfiguration of the holy Christian dove), I promise both of you true peace of conscience and genuine humanity; in exchange you will sacrifice on its altar the possibilities of your own lives.”

292 Significantly, in the section Le nonne [Grandmothers] of Stampe dell’800, the color red will be called “satanic” (13).
say such a thing if she is pointing the window? – Can’t one smile while leaving by a window?” (23).

The attempt to use the smoke of Perelà according to the mechanisms of time-tested certainties is of course doomed to failure: the perspective dissonance introduced by the man of smoke, who takes the words of his interlocutors all too seriously, reveals their attitude as one of cognitive monocularity.²⁹³ Fearful of getting lost in the metamorphic lability that Perelà presents them with, they are led to consider the man of smoke as a universal value (which of course is different for everyone), taking him from time to time as a champion of whatever quality they put at the top of their ‘pre-comprehensive’ scale of values (Art, Religion, Love, Profit, Political Power, etc.). If Perelà represents the apparition of a Subject free from the need of an onto-theological foundation of himself, his interlocutors are unable to detach themselves from the need to immobilize him in absolutist ideals. The embalming fury that their words conceal is reflected in the work of the court photographers: “– Be so kind as to turn this way, sir. – Meanwhile I’ll use this opportunity to take a profile. – Would you please be seated? – And pretend to be reading the newspaper? […] – And hold this cigarette between you fingers. In your other hand the match you have just taken from its box. Very good, an excellent pose: marvelous. – Would you be so kind as to cross your legs like this? – And your arms this way” (24). The mise en pose which the photographers require turns out to be the mise en abyme of the entire narrative construction: the medusification underlying the operation of taking a photograph corresponds to the petrifying attitude that guides the characters in the novel. Wrongly recognizing in the mobility of the new subject the realization of their Ideal (which is different for each of them), they entrust him with the compilation of the Code, the normative regularization of society: the man without Foundation must therefore provide a new Foundation to the world.²⁹⁴ However, as underlined by the Queen’s parrot who keeps on

²⁹³ Another reference to Nietzsche: Beyond Good and Evil 52: “Not […] become as a whole the victim of some part of us.”
²⁹⁴ Heidegger: Dell’essenza del fondamento 19: “The “truth,” that is, true judgments, derive their nature from the relationship with something on the grounds of which they can agree […] Accordingly, the truth always entails an
repeating the word “God,” it is an impossible enterprise: “He says only one word, but it is the greatest of all, and he cannot understand its meaning. Poor creature, how can you expect him to know what God is! – But instead you do know. – Of course! Certainly. Who doesn’t know? God! Why God is… God” (205). The tautological reply lays bare the irreversibility of the Krisis: the reduction of the supreme concept of Being to a word disconnected from its term of reference (as had happened with “sun”) indicates, at the same time, the collapse of the referential capacity of language and the vanishing of the Foundation. What is left to govern life is the fictional model that is supposed to lead us to that non-existing goal. The articulation of language that is intended to define, to objectify, a concept, turns out to be that concept’s alienation. The essentialist transference that led the people of Torlindao’s kingdom to entrust the new Code to the man they had welcomed as the embodiment of the Transcendent is necessarily doomed to collapse: “– I don’t know what it is about that man’s eyes, I can’t look straight at him. – He’s disturbing. – It’s true, that’s the word, that’s the exact word – disturbing, disturbing” (102). Despite the appearance of the first signs of the cognitive process that will reverse the fortunes of the man of smoke, he is taken to visit the kingdom’s institutional locations (the prison, the asylum, etc.), i.e. the places where the social (and cultural) material of a State condense into forms.

At the prison Perelà meets the singular figure of Iba: “Now there appears, in the form and color of three baked pears, an enormous, warty nose. The face is covered by a dark, shaggy fleece, and the forehead is hidden by tufts of disheveled hair that form an astonishing bush” (120). The alcoholic beggar locked up in prison, the man who had been king for four days, combines in himself features that are diametrically opposite to Bakhtin’s “classical body.” Iba, a figure symbolizing an egalitarian, anti-verticalist conception of life, had one day

essential link with something as “grounds”. That is why the problem of truth necessarily leads to the problem of the grounds.”

Perlini: 48: “For Nietzsche it is not true that the non-sense arises when the connection with God is broken and man is no longer able to relate with Him. In Human, All Too Human he says that the non-sense lies at the origin: the non-sense is with God and God Himself is the non-sense.”

Cf. Palazzeschi: Man of Smoke/Il Codice di Perelà 95: “Is he not the sublimation of the body and of the human spirit? Does he not come among us to bear palpable testimony of other lives […]?”
shown up at the palace claiming the crown for himself, on the grounds of a law that granted the right to become king to the man who could pay the most money into the State treasury:

there comes Iba approaching the door of the Royal Palace, the very man you see in that dark cell. The city’s most notorious alcoholic and brutish sot whose tongue alcohol had little by little so swollen that he could no longer speak, the butt of street urchins and the companion of all the drunkards of the most disreputable taverns. [...] Up… up… he ascends the great staircase of the Royal Palace, between the rows of braided personages, the glitter of medals and sabers, the flaming color of uniforms and livery. He ascends, pausing on each step to set himself firmly on both feet before attempting the ascent to the next one (121-2).

Contaminating with his very presence a place that was believed safe from the risk of any contamination, Iba introduces an egalitarian, carnival-like aspect that has the purpose of equalizing all ‘proprieties’ by means of their dismissal. The following day, being invited to sit in the State sedan to be presented to the people, he refuses the crown (symbol of the former verticalist, regulative aspirations) and takes his seat with a glass in his hand: “Is his right hand he raises a glass and laughs, revealing the two fangs that prop up his laughing mouth. His eyes flash ominously, and his dirty, hairy face has not been touched for the occasion. His tattered clothes are covered with dust and mire” (124).

The town folk react immediately: “But from a window that is cautiously opened and suddenly closed again there comes down a large bundle which breaks open on the new King’s head […] shit!” (124). Although nothing seems able to perturb Iba’s unabashed cheerfulness,297 the town reacts to the attempt to upset its ordered system. The positive figure of the antinomy inaugurated by the beggar King is taken as a ‘vacation’ of the carnivalesque (Iba will spend the rest of his days drunk in prison, dreaming that he is King), what Bakhtin calls “chamber grotesque.”

Like Iba, even Zarlino (the amateur madman whom Perelà meets in the asylum) – who “not having any particular mania of his own, can involve himself in and identify with all of

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297 Cf. Palazzeschi: Man of Smoke 125: “Only the King smiles impassibly, but his smile is no longer seen because his mouth is full; his whole person drips with it, and the glass, still held high in his hand, continuously overflows with it.”
them: he can feel crazy when and as he pleases” (135) – has chosen the antinomy as the solution, but in an entirely different manner. Despite being one of the wealthiest men in the kingdom, he has rejected the prospect of becoming king (the highest degree of identity), to shut himself away in the asylum in order to be able to exploit, inside the anti-city, the possibility of a plurality of identities: “Then I’m a blacksmith, a spider, a table, a sofa… I am the moon or the sun, whatever I feel like being. One night I was a comet. Above the towers of Villa Rosa could be seen glittering my tail of silvery cloth, two hundred and fifty feet long, illuminated by powerful floodlights” (139). By modulating himself on the constant practice of antitheses, Zarlino introduces in the game an anti-realistic principle intended to transcend, through the subversion of laughter, any intents of an affirmative nature. In Zarlino, the immobilization of the ‘role’ can only take place in a temporal dimension, which underscores the eminently possibilistic, and not prejudicial, character of the role itself. By proclaiming the ‘theatrical’ nature of the world, he overcomes all fictitious normative instances, voiding of meaning any representation. Constantly disappointing the expectations of the ‘sane,’ he eludes their definitional capacity and uses his second-level madness as a picklock to open a crack in the homogeneous tissue of the simulated (but believed real) epistemological certainty. Zarlino tips the balance between the real and the representational in favor of the latter: he puts the ‘negativity’ of which he is bearer at the service of an already-realized experience of the inessential (this is the important difference between him and Perelà). In fact, Zarlino can even imitate Perelà and, unlike the other two imitations of the man of smoke that are made in the course of the novel (by the servant Alloro and by Marchesa Oliva di Bellonda), his attempt does not lead him to death precisely because it occurs strictly inside the space of the asylum. By imitating Perelà only inside the ‘anti’ space of the asylum, Zarlino does not make the mistake of considering Perelà through criteria of a ‘formalistic’ nature. Ready to cast off the

298 Cf. Palazzeschi: Man of Smoke 138: “Do take note, however… I am not crazy in the way others would have it, I am crazy in the way I wish to be […]. The ordinary lunatic never announces what he is going to do […]. But I instead always announce everything I intend to do.”

299 Guglielminetti has pointed out the similarities between Zarlino and Pirandello’s future Henry IV (“Il re scoronato,” in La «difficile musa»).
role of the man of smoke after only two days, he safeguards the latter’s ‘possibilistic’ nature and, by preserving its eminently potential structure, protects himself from the danger of wanting positively to enact the ‘possible.’ If, in fact, Perelà expresses with his presence an eminently critical statute, the idea of transforming it, through imitation, into a utopian message would mean betraying a message which in order to be understood in its fullness must necessarily be betrayed.\textsuperscript{300}

The Marchesa di Bellonda and Alloro, instead, unable to betray the authenticity with which they believe Perelà is bestowed, are condemned to a horrible fate, precisely because they carry out an impossible process of crystallization of the man of smoke.

The Marchesa initiates her downward spiral by dressing in gray for \textit{The Ball}: “– The Marchesa di Bellonda! – Dressed in gray! – Smoky gray!” (98). Later, by declaring during \textit{The Trial} a lightness that is only a formative instance of lightness (a medusification of lightness), she reveals the ‘petrifying’ (and basically Dannunzian) nature of her vision: “Paltry, miserable wretches generated in bloody, viscous wombs by virtue of carnal lust, you who have issued forth like reptiles amidst the writhing of muscles and the frenzy of bowels. He is above all lineage and above all blood!” (209-10).

Similarly, the old servant Alloro, who had admired Perelà’s smoky nature from the very beginning, becomes obsessed\textsuperscript{301} with an imitative urge that he tries to satisfy through ‘realistic’ means. Unable to understand what the body of Perelà implies, he figures that he can become like him by means of a horrific experiment:

Under the large vault of the dungeon, through a dissolving cloud they begin to distinguish something. In the center a wide flattened mound of ashes and embers still burning here and there, and from the ceiling, down to about six feet from the ground, hangs a chain from which dangles a criss-cross of charred trunks slowly swaying and twisting in a horizontal position. It looks like the union of two tree trunks clumsily joined together, but it is only the remains of a human being: Alloro (147).

\textsuperscript{300} Cf. Nietzsche: \textit{Human, All Too Human}, I, 302: “Redeemed from the fire, driven by the spirit, we then stride from opinion to opinion, through the shifting of parties, as noble betrayers of all things that can ever be betrayed – and yet without any feeling of guilt.”

\textsuperscript{301} Cf. Palazzeschi: \textit{Man of Smoke} 146: “He seemed wrapped in a thought that made him laugh like a man possessed.”
Perelà’s aeriform nature is grotesquely mimicked by the remains of the servant’s body dangling from the ceiling. The ‘possible’ connotation of reality, which the ‘lightness’ was intended to establish, is tragically misunderstood in the passage to an affirmatory ideal. At this point Perelà is declared to be “indifferent”: “– We’ll send him back. – To whom? – To whomever. – Where? – To Hell! – You mean to the Devil” (165).

With his ‘instability’ recognized as a cause of crisis (by the very people who had sought in him reassuring certainties), Perelà is taken to court because guilty of “having availed yourself of fiendish arts in order to deceive the King, the Council of Ministers, and public opinion” (195). Charged with being a herald of ‘misunderstandings,’ Perelà is found guilty of “malefic irony,” i.e. of pointing out the realm of language as the place of mystification. The ‘formative’ assumption that had made people see in Perelà a representation of their pre-comprehensive universe is now reversed into a specular, hostile attitude: all the witnesses consider the man of smoke guilty according to the same “bias of reality” which had previously led them to celebrate him (and the punishment imagined by each is devised on the grounds of the same ontological stiffening). The final decision to shut Perelà in a tiny cell clearly marks this last attempt at immobilization: acknowledging the dangerous nature of the man of smoke allows the return of a definition that reproduces ‘form.’ Of course the imprisonment cannot last. Perelà takes off his boots (the only element that bound him to reality) and ascends to the sky:

In this beautiful sunset I leave my last wishes. [...] You called me by the most flattering names and you bowed deeply and reverently to me. You worshipped me [...]. Then you realized that I was not worth much, that I was not worth anything. And so you despised me, crushed me underfoot like some poisonous reptile, covered me with insults [...], and you sent me far from you – banished forever, confined – so that you could forget me. You wanted so much from me – that I prescribe a Code. Well then, here it is. [...] In this beautiful sunset will rise a small gray cloud in the shape of a man – clouds may take all shapes; upward and onward it will cross the sky (229-30).

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302 The cell is also referred to as a “tomb,” reiterating the usual mechanism of ‘mortification.’
303 Curi: “Palazzeschi e Nietzsche,” in Palazzeschi europeo 64: “What is most important though is that Perelà’s ascent towards the sun is not in the least transcendent, religious, mystical.”
The apparent monologism of his final speech is, however, one last hymn to misunderstanding: the prescriptive code that the people had asked for becomes a monument to plurivocity that negates even itself. By denying himself from the vision of others, Perelà forces them to a surplus of interpretation that upsets their epistemological procedures and coerces them into the usual irrepresible hermeneutics. Every explanation of the clouds among which Perelà disappears is immediately replaced by a new one. The proliferation of interpretive ‘possibilities’ empties reality of ‘meaning’, while preparing the grounds, however – as we shall now see – for its formal logic:

– Look at what’s up there in the sky! […] – White eagles, eagles white as swans, gold eagles, silver eagles, black eagles, eagles of all colors are flying up, straight up, with their hooked beaks, up and up into the sky. – They’re going up to God to tear away the veil of His mystery! – Nonsense! – Those flags way up there… they’re going up to slat the blue with the blood of their victory! – Nonsense! – How streaked the sky is today! […] – Those men are going up to deliver their souls to God with their own hands! – Nonsense! – Where are they going? – They’re going to look for Perelà. — Perelà? – Signor Perelà? (232).

IX. The Triumph of Epistemology

On the fifth day God created all the living creatures and on the sixth He created man. He’s a proud one, isn’t he, this blessed man? One whole day all for himself! Couldn’t it be that in the holy scriptures of fleas you would read something like this: On the fifth day God created all the living creatures (man included) and on the sixth He created the flea (it alone). (“Spazzatura,” in Tutti i romanzi, I, 1345).

The rejection of the anthropocentric illusion (and the relativistic corollary that this rejection entails) is one of the arenas preferred by Palazzeschi when, having abandoned Marinetti,

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304 Whèle: “Nel regno dell’intrascendenza,” in Palazzeschi europeo 93: “Basically, he advises them to adopt a new epistemological scheme, the modernist one.”
Cf. Donnarumma: Palazzeschi e Il Codice di Perelà, in Belfagor, July 2004, 451: “The linguistic form of free indirect speech or mental monologue in Perelà is neither the affirmation nor the negation, it’s the question.”
305 Palazzeschi: letter to Prezzolini dated April 23, 1914, in Carteggio 11: “Could you publish the following statement in the next issue of La Voce? As of today I have nothing to do with futurism; should F.T. Marinetti use my name for the benefit of his movement he will be doing so without authorization.” The statement appeared in La Voce on April 28 that same year under the title Nel movimento futurista. Prezzolini, furthermore, in his article Marinetti disorganizzatore, ‘separated’ Palazzeschi and Lucini from the futurist movement and charged Marinetti for the titles of their books. In this period, Marinetti and Prezzolini are fighting for the hegemony over the intellectuals of the current generation.
begins his collaboration with Lacerba, the literary review founded by Papini and Soffici (1913-1915). His writings for the review make up the theoretical framework of Palazzeschi’s poetics — a poetics constantly balanced on the edge of dissolving into humor. For Palazzeschi, in fact, the definitions of a poetics do not resolve the matter, they relaunch it. The subversion of common sense produced by humorous deformation does not settle back in the new worldview that he has come to; rather, Palazzeschi applies this deformation hyperbolically to set in motion a virtually endless program of definition. One passage in L’antidolore reads: “The sun, for example, will be his favorite pastime [...]. The moon a comical mirror, ironic, romantic, sentimental [...]. And if instead it were just the opposite of what I have said, this would not upset our considerations in the least” (in Tutti i romanzi 1235). What Palazzeschi expresses about ‘things’ is not their possession, meaning their delimitation, but rather their ‘possibility’ which, as such, excludes their possible conclusion (think of Pirandello’s non conclude):

Regarding conclusions.

Dear De Robertis, you are making me do something that I’ve never done before: act as a lady’s escort. In the first number of La Voce you complained about a young lady who used up a lot of paper without concluding anything. Are you sure about that? Where is this book? Those pages could become my Bible. I don’t read books any more because of all the conclusions that everyone wants to draw, and I am desperately looking for a way to write one just like this lady’s, without concluding anything. Could it be that you have performed such a miracle on me? (“Spazzatura,” in Tutti i romanzi, I, 1309-10).307

For Palazzeschi, then, making ‘manifestos’ would always mean making anti-manifestos,

Cf. Prezzolini: L’incendiario, in La Voce, May 8, 1913: “The title has nothing to do with the contents of the book, for which a Corazzinian title might be more appropriate.”

306 This was the original title of Il controdolore. As is widely known, the text was later rewritten (more on this below) after the usual intervention by Marinetti. Palazzeschi included the original version of L’antidolore in his volume Scherzi di gioventù, published in 1956. It should be added that there are many other common points with what can be called Marinetti’s most ‘Palazzeschian’ manifesto, meaning of course Teatro di Varietà, which appeared in Lacerba in 1913. Cf. Magherini: “Marinetti e Lacerba,” in Beyond Futurism.

307 In March 1911 Palazzeschi was planning a book in which “The End” would have been replaced by “a little head sticking its tongue out at the reader.”

Cf. Lucini: “Risposta all’Inchiesta sul Verso libero,” in Per una poetica del simbolismo 227-228: “Everything that is said and hoped can only be temporary [...]. The human ideal of art proceeds on an indefinite path. No one can cry out the last word ‘End’: and if you believe there exists a perfect, absolute doctrine or system, you will find it in the absurd, which is a negative way of living.”
normative proposals in which every axiom contributes to ridicule the very idea of axiom. The main theme in his writings for “Lacerba” is experiencing the downfall of both subject and object. *Il controdolore*, *Varietà*, and *Equilibrio* are built from a theoretical perspective that immediately decrees their temporary value by turning any proposition against itself,\(^{308}\). This is why Palazzeschi, right from the start, makes of the immovable principle par excellence, God,\(^{309}\) a symbol of contradiction\(^ {310} \):

If you want to imagine it [the spirit of God] as a man, for your mind’s convenience […] then think of a man like yourself and you’ll be fine. Why wearing a peplum and not in morning dress? […] If I picture it as a man, I figure him no bigger or smaller than myself. A fellow of ever medium height, ever medium age, ever medium proportions, who surprises me for one thing alone: that while I gaze at him timidly and frightened, he looks back at me laughing uproariously (“Il controdolore,” in *Tutti i romanzi*, I, 1221).

Palazzeschi concentrates the universe in a Cause inhabited by laughter\(^ {311} \) that nullifies the traditional images of the world and becomes a principle of contingency. Again, it is the Platonic tradition that is upended, because it is by accepting the incongruous (ambiguous) aspects of existence that man can become Godlike. The God of Palazzeschi is the God of the ‘possible’ (he who likes to see himself reflected in the lumpy light of the moon to “observe himself in the most ridiculous manners”), because he is ready to call up – laughing at human misery – the ‘possible’ character of reality, represented by himself:

So the sense of possibility could be defined outright as the ability to conceive of everything there might be just as well, and to attach no more importance to what is than to what is not. […] Such possibilists are said to inhabit a more delicate medium, a hazy medium of mist, fantasy, daydreams, and the subjunctive mood. (Musil: *The Man Without Qualities* 11).\(^ {312} \)

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\(^{308}\) The prescriptive action imposed by Marinetti on *Il controdolore* can even be said to have increased its ironic charge. The fact that a text like this, based on the supreme value of ‘mobility,’ ends with 12 ‘fixed’ points of action, contributes to warn, with an Ariostesque smile, against the risk of immobility.

\(^{309}\) Here the “death of God” means above all the collapse of the solid structure of Being.

\(^{310}\) Cf. Barilli: “L’antidolore,” in *Palazzeschi oggi* 83: “the first proposition in *Il controdolore* is a negative definition of God (of the truth).”

\(^{311}\) Cf. Palazzeschi: “Il controdolore,” in *Tutti i romanzi*, I, p. 1223: “those few who live in laughter, protected by their lord who at the center of everything laughs more than they do.”

\(^{312}\) Note the reference to ‘smoke.’
The road to becoming Godlike, then, must be the road of continuous ‘de-formation,’ the only way that will make it possible to assume the most ‘real’ traits of reality, the ones of changeability: “We have to learn to laugh at everything of which we normally weep, developing our deepness. Man cannot be taken seriously expect when he laughs” (1224). Modulating itself on the continual emersion of an ‘other’ reality, the controdolore subversion singles out as its target the order which it deems compulsively imposed on reality. The option of preferring ‘low,’ exaggerated, paradoxical images, will signal the appearance of ‘disorder’: “I affirm that in the weeping man, in the dying man, are to be found the greatest sources of human joy” (1226). De-formation, which must never cease (on penalty of becoming a positively-grounded value), will then become the protagonist of a permanent deconstruction that looks to the logic of Witz to avoid any risk of re-construction, and will act as a signal of the possibility of a constant change of sense. Movement, the humorous logic of the world, will make every structure vulnerable, and, by absorbing in itself even the supposed consistency of sense, will change the latter into error: “Hamlet’s soliloquy, Othello’s jealousy, King Lear’s madness, Orestes’ anger, Marguerite Gautier’s end, and Oswald’s moans, seen and heard by an intelligent public, should provoke the most clamorous laughs” (1125). This is the kingdom of Merriment, where the ateleological conception shall be the reward for ‘profound’ men. The new generations will have to be taught to inhabit this ‘lightness’ by insisting on the deformed: “We will give them educational toys, hunchbacked, blind, gangrenous, crippled, ethical, syphilitic puppets, fitted with mechanisms that make them cry, scream, and moan” (1126). Movement and disorganization will of course have to involve places (and

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314 Cf. Palazzeschi: “Spazzatura,” in Tutti i romanzi, I, 1338: “Have you seen the clothes serious people wear? The solemn black clothes they keep for important occasions, for the more serious moments of their lives? With the passing of time, they gradually throw out the red, the green, the blue. Just as certain works of art, certain big dramas or tragedies, little by little throw out the comical, the farcical they hide inside.”

315 The ‘medical’ part of Il controdolore may have partly been inspired by a futurist Medical Bulletin by Carrà and Russolo appearing on August 15, 1913. Cf. Carrà: letter to Soffici of August 1913, in Lettere 1913-1929 32: “I’m sending you enclosed the draft of a new section that we would like to make available to all us futurists. It’s a
concepts) that are well-ordered by definition:

Mock funerals will be held in the schoolyards: after the last blessing of the corpses, the coffins will be opened and found to be full of sweets or figurines for little children, or hundreds of little mice will swarm out, first white, then gray, then black, or the corpses will be made of shortbread for the older children and chocolate for the younger ones, and they will all fight merrily for the limbs. […] Oh! What a revelry with these new funerals! Coming back from the cemeteries, more carnivals, shows in the hospitals, the theatres of the new generations! (1227-8).

De-alformation will lead to the ‘truth’ that is the immanent (and inevitably biological) structure of the world: “Then let us fight false, deceitful education, respect for public opinion, decorum, trimmed figures, beauty, youth, wealth, freedom! If we look deeper into these things we will find their ultimate essence, the truth” (1228).

Thanks to this deeper understanding, the project of life as an “endless series of trip-ups” (1229) asserts the continuous modification of the viewpoint which the deformation had initially activated: to systematically elevate the anomaly (and the anomaly of the anomaly), to make it, through laughter, the privileged course of a way to joy that has gone through pain (“Keep scratching and you will find happiness,” 1224); i.e. that has gone through every Nietzschean “will to truth,” altogether signifying the entire intellectual path of the young Palazzeschi:

To shirk from pain, stopping horrified at its threshold, is cowardly. To go in and get bogged down without having the strength to pull out, is weakly and slothful. To go in and advance resolutely, thrashing one’s soul mercilessly, to let it spill its blood by burning, to find the bright spot, the pearl, in the darkness, is great heroism. To come out charred and healed, wearing this magnificent feather in your cap and a pleasant smile on your face. Sublime filter: irony (Lazzi, in Tutti i romanzi, I, 1351).

medical bulletin that will contain all the countless cases of traditionalist diseases and the vain attempts to heal them.”

But see the letter that Palazzeschi sends to Pancrazi on August 5, 1926, in Tutti i romanzi, I, 1533: “All my trip-ups are really set on the edge of a cliff.”

Cf. Maria Carla Papini: “Bestia, Buffo, Re,” in L’arte del saltimbanco 131: “The disruptive and cathartic function of laughter thus envisages a world which, precisely in its irreducibility to any categorization, proclaims its diversity, its autonomy, and its original otherness to the conventionally prefigured one, of which it intentionally overturns, degrades, or exacerbates the partiality of the image.”
Thus the path towards the ‘multiple’ shows (as in Pirandello) the usual traits of existentialist tragedy. Comedy takes on itself the burden of a transformation (deformation) that triggers a mechanism bound to generate a *surplus* of awareness which, through the Trojan horse of the grotesque, arrives at humor: the abnormality of the upsetting destabilizes the rules and hierarchies of reality. The journey that has produced the possibility of an existence Enlightened in terms of ‘contradiction’ will remain so in the unforgettable memories of the stages that make up the whole journey:

Those who fall to the bottom no longer communicate with those who have fallen to the bottom like them. Those at the surface couldn’t care less, they kick down and care only about staying there, communicating with the others who are still afloat. One must learn to stay afloat and, without anybody noticing, fish ever so slowly down, down, as deep as possible, with the sharp claws of the soul. To bring to the surface, displaying them elegantly between the fingers, the corals of despair (1351-2).\(^{318}\)

Even ‘deeper understanding’ is an approach suggested by the manifesto *Varietà*, in which perfection (understood as completeness) is examined in the social environment under the label ‘conformism,’ the compulsive overcoming of the nature of reality, which for Palazzeschi is, precisely, *varietà* [variety]:

I am more than certain that if they had said to man, “Go and make the world,” he would have come up with a platform so level, so smooth and taut that not even a bobbin of thread could stand up straight on it. Whatever this blessed man, a self-proclaimed creator, puts his hands on, he acts on a principle that is the exact opposite of the principle of creation, of its basic principle (1257).

The *technè* of man (with its fallacious objective of pursuing a natural creation which, in order to satisfy its *pathos* for eternity-immutability-unity, is feigned to be equalizing) tends to

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\(^{318}\) Interestingly, this type of metaphorical construction appears in no less than four occasions in the works of Soffici. This one is from an article on Palazzeschi which appeared in *La Voce* on July 17, 1913 (4 mesi di *Il controdolore*). Cf. Soffici: “Aldo Palazzeschi,” in *Opere I* 525-526: “the morning song of a spirit resurfacing from a leap into despair.”

It is well known that there was a long-lasting friendship between Soffici and Palazzeschi. Cf. Prezzolini: “In giro per l’Italia,” *Nazione*, September 17, 1965: “We talked at length about Soffici […]. It was evident that Palazzeschi held him dear perhaps more than any other of us at *La Voce*.”

subject to equalization something that is always diverse. Equality becomes what allows to satisfy the urge for definition that makes the world ‘systematically’ interpretable (becomes the persistence of a reality which, having being ‘equalized,’ allows the application of repetitive epistemological schemes). So Palazzeschi calls mankind to a Nietzschean intent of “loyalty to the land” as the place of contingency, completely separated from any hyperuranian foundation. The violence inherent in a thought (an action) that is intended to be equalizing is tantamount to a neurosis that wants to change the world according to criteria that are alien to the nature of the world, criteria based on order and regularity that want to give reality a stable form:

I was standing at the gate of the residence of Princess Pantino Zucco del Codè. What a lovely park her villa stands in! And what a lovely villa! Starting from the gate run two long rows of cypress tress placed at an equal distance from each other. The Princess probably intended them to be of the same size and height, but they are so only approximately, their bellies do not have the same diameter and their tips draw two zigzagging lines against the sky. The Princess has corrected this shame with the garden hedges. Using excellent shears the clever gardener makes sure that the cypress trees form a homogeneous whole. Where are the trunks? The bellies? The tops? Who knows? (1257).

But when facing the reality of facts, these models of perfection, regularity, verticality are impossible to pursue: “Later on, when I happened to open a box of matches, I immediately saw that, with the presumptuousness of that number 100 printed on them, they were making this boastful statement: here we are, all one hundred of us, all the same. If I had put those hundred gentlemen under a microscope they would doubtless have had a bad time, I could have ascertained that all one hundred of them were different” (1256). The constant objection that criticism/laughter makes at a manner of acting purported to be ‘natural’ is forced, precisely, under a microscope that reveals its contradiction and, with that, its failure:

The day after, I met along the way a number of men dressed in the same color, wearing the same shoes and hats, with the same number of identical buttons on the same kind of jacket. They were proceeding in close ranks, with a way of taking their steps all at once, as if they were one man. They weren’t entirely successful but it was obvious that this was their intention. Who are they? – I asked a man who like me had stopped to look at them.
They’re soldiers. – He answered confidently.
Ah! Soldiers.
Sure.
If my closest friend were among those men and did not jump out to greet me I would certainly have struggled to identify him (1256-7).

The criticism of the standardizing mechanism is thus also linked to the anti-interventionist position defended by Palazzeschi in _Lacerba_ (on which we shall return). The ideal of “resoluteness and fighting spirit” (1311) required by the interventionist option is in fact directly related to the anti-relativistic approach adopted by man towards reality:

I almost never say anything. My long silences, while everyone else gets heated up over the ideal of resoluteness and fighting spirit, show my coldness very clearly. What am I expected to do? Do I have to prove something I do not feel? Do I have to start shouting in order not to hear this part of me that in this hour is more skeptical, more ironic, more bitter? (1311).

“Diversity” thus appears as the correlative of the “disorder” that was the protagonist of _Il contro dolore_. While disorder threatened the categories created by man (their pre-understanding of reality), diversity decrees the unnaturalness inherent in their creative actions (a consequence of the unnaturalness of their cognitive actions):

You who have traveled round the world, have you ever found a creature that was identical with yourselves? That moved, talked like you, and at the same time? When I put a finger in my nose my friend puts it in his ear, another in his breast pocket, yet another in his shoe. And even if one of my friends did put a finger in his nose just like me, you can be sure that he would do so in a completely different manner. […] Have you ever seen trees growing in a forest all lined up like soldiers? Two identical trees? (1257-8). 319

If the creation results in diversity, as can be clearly seen, then, believe me, it does so on principle; then, you who decide to create – how can you follow the opposite principle? (1259).

So if ‘possibility’ is the philosophical form of existence, for Palazzeschi the Avant-Garde’s task is to work at liberating man from the principle that is the opposite of the creation’s,

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319 Remember the example of the ‘beeches’ in Pirandello’s _L’umorismo_.

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directed at producing – in the absence of Being – classifications and identifications: “If something is beautiful and well done and you like it, what you should do is shun it and make one that is different, if you really had in yourselves the spirit of creation, my dear sirs” (1261).

In *Equilibrio* Palazzeschi’s perspective is finally rounded off; here, the category that is attacked (thereby closing the circle) is the one of Identity:

Having established that the game of creation was nothing more than a game of dice, we can only try to pick ourselves up from the consequent dejection. Oh! No one better than I can understand you, my poor friends. The blow was terrible, I know, but how could I spare you from it, how could I let you go on living such an illusion? Believing in ghosts (1275).

Faced with a reality that has become Protean, the individual must apply a dissimulative strategy aimed at following its elusive movements: “And don’t put me down, saying that it’s in the nature of man, the attitude to become one thing instead of another. The nature of man contains all the possibilities, if man is capable of understanding them; you only have to be agile enough to exploit them all” (1277). The individual, in other words, must activate his own mutability to fight the attempt to subject him (but we could also speak of self-subjection) to a cell of identity. Therefore the various masks (masks that have no face behind them) that he puts on represent the glorification of his endless ‘possibilities’:

You, sir – are you sentimental? Very well. Sentimental in the extreme? Better still! Yours is a highly respectable taste. But if I want an ounce of cynicism, I have to knock at the opposite door, because you would not be useful in any way. Bad, very bad. And you, instead, are… an indifferent man, a cynic even? Splendid! […] I feel like doing something: I’d like to try them both, the amusements of these respectable gentlemen! To be one time one of them and another time the other, to live doubly (1277).

With identity revealed as an artificial construction to which the subject is forced (or forces

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320 The theme of the mask in Palazzeschi may have been influenced to some extent by Gian Pietro Lucini (with whom Palazzeschi also corresponded by letter). Consider especially *Intermezzo dell’Arlecchinata*, in which the mask is explicitly the sign of the modernist disintegration of the identity of the subject. Cf. *I drami delle maschere* 89: “I am a Poet / And I wear all the costumes of every age, / from the golden robe of an emperor / to the Bacchic smock of a drunkard” (the affinities with the theme of the ‘mask’ in Pirandello are obvious).
321 Cf. Palazzeschi: “Equilibrio,” in *Tutti i romanzi*, 1, 1283: “All the rays, all the possibilities will be before us.”
himself) through the reduction of all his alternative possibilities, undertaking the game of the
‘mask’ results in leaving the functional logic of the peculiarity, and gives rise, by exalting the
multiplicity of the character, to a situation of criticism: “Have you a character? I have two,
four, eight, sixteen, all of them, but none as a starting point” (1278). The “category of the
temporary,” invoked by Luigi Baldacci, thus becomes an exercise in temporariness,
meaning an exercise in the self-awareness of the contingent:

I know, sir, that you are an intelligent, brilliant man; we all know it […] and we tell
you several times a day. […] However, you have grown so accustomed to this that,
without realizing it, over the last twenty years you have been answering with the same
kindly smile and the same stopping gesture of the hand. Now a fellow comes up and
says to your face: You are the biggest birdbrain in the world! I see your face contract
in new ways, your mouth open to words that I would have never thought were
contained in your vocabulary […] but tomorrow, send this man a small present, and be
generous about it. You were dead for twenty years and he brought you back to life
 […]. Let us make a daily practice of this and we will find the agility we need to save a
lot of energy and increase our life by a hundredfold. It would be really foolish of us to
remain atheists when we have dozens of religions at our disposal. We must be able to
change religion at least two times a day, to say nothing of political affiliations (1283-5).

The force of humorous contradiction projects the identity outside itself and turns it, as an
integral part of relational reality, into a constant opening, a critical charge capable of upsetting
any ‘meaning’: “Varietà and Equilibrio […] are side by side in the apologia of the anti-
absolute, the relative, the diverse, the dissimilar, the becoming” (Tellini: “L’officina dello
scrittore,” L’opera di Aldo Palazzeschi 35).323

This is where the idea, mentioned above, of life as an endless series of trip-ups
manages to make the world infinite as an infinite structure of interpretations.324 In the novel La

comes under the category of the provisional. […] This is the true seal of his modernity.”
323 Tellini has also observed (“Palazzeschi e l’identità italiana,” in Aldo Palazzeschi a Roma) that Palazzeschi
would refer to this ‘value-based’ binomial as late as 1945: cf. Tre imperi mancati 269: “Nature is variety, and it is
in that variety that you must find your balance.”
324 Cf. Nietzsche: The Gay Science 239-240: “the world has once again become infinite to us: insofar as we cannot
reject the possibility that it includes infinite interpretations.”
The anti-formative solution is finally brought to its logical conclusion through a systematic procedure that, by exalting the ‘possibilistic’ virtues of ‘fantasy,’ leads to the progressive lessening of the univocal sense of reality, i.e. to its hermeneutic multiplication (where the multiplication of meanings is the same as admitting their meaninglessness).

Palazzeschi’s ‘pyramid’ hits right at the center of the crisis of Foundations, and the words of the narrator are constantly denied by the overshadowing threat of the nihilist abyss: “Yearn for that night of love with all your heart, and… don’t overlook the hours of waiting… For that matter, do as you please” (499). The need to have always at hand the possibility of an opposing interpretation, is thematically reflected in the first part of the novel (A tre), in which the protagonist finds himself specularly ensnared in the contrasting statements of two exempla ficta (the Optimist and the Pessimist) to whose talk he listens. Although representing two diametrically opposite worldviews, the two characters approach the matter in the same way: they enclose reality in a predetermined cage, and through this they inform reality with a supposedly totalizing meaning. Modulating themselves on opposing assertions of “Yes” and “No,” they venture along rhetorical courses that refer to specific interpretive universes: the Optimist calls up ideas of purity and ‘elevation,’ the Pessimist evokes images of a decidedly more prosaic world. The two positions are obviously presented as archetypal: both the Optimist and the Pessimist offer the protagonist an absolutizing model which, by eliminating the alternative possibility, fills with meaning what the world expresses as ‘absence of form.’ For Palazzeschi this strategy only emphasizes the need to ‘devote oneself’ to a Meaning; and so we see the protagonist go – in a matter of minutes – from fully subscribing to the views of

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325 The novel, published in 1926, was probably written between 1913 and 1914 and then resumed soon after the war. On this matter see the extensive and well-documented note to the essay by Gino Tellini, in Palazzeschi: Tutti i romanzi, I, 1523-1568.

326 It is important to note than many students of Palazzeschi refer to the philosophy of Gianni Vattimo when discussing this crisis as presented in the author’s work. The emerging of a postmodernist philosophy certainly marked a key point in the interpretation of Palazzeschi. Cf. Whel: “Nel regno dell’intrascendenza,” in Palazzeschi europeo 84: “Once again, Palazzeschi managed to detect a feature of modernity that would be vigorously developed only in “postmodern” times: as a simulacrum. His diagnosis of the problem is contemporary with Nietzsche’s formulation, in The Gay Science, of the aphorism that says that consciousness is only «a consciousness of appearance».”
the Optimist to whole-heartedly accepting those of the Pessimist.\footnote{Cf. Tellini: “Introduzione,” in Tutti i romanzi I, CVIII: “the ego pushes on the double pedal of ironic detachment and involvement. It declares itself an unfinching optimist to the first interlocutor and a full-blown pessimist to the second, but it repeats and reviews in its own way, with a parodic style, the words, now winged and lyricizing, now acrid and sanguine, of the two neighbors.”}

The principle is always a ‘rhetorical’ one: the two monologues, each valid on its own, do not stand up when dialogically interfaced. The characters – now estranged to a common interpretive horizon\footnote{The link between the parables of ‘contingency’ and the parables of atomization is indestructible.} replace it with a fictitious psychological simulacrum, the nature of which, however, is revealed by the paratactic juxtaposition of a plurality of them. This is basically a parable designed to illustrate the decline of the law of excluded middle: according to logic, demonstrating that two propositions which contradict each other are both true is an impossibility that highlights the fact that neither of them is actually saying anything real. Palazzeschi’s plan, however, is not to separate definitions from the possibilistic nature related to their destructuring. At this point the conflict between life and form could not be more clear: even the formative capacity of language\footnote{Cf. Nietzsche: Twilight of the Idols 19: “I am afraid we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar...”} is rejected as being the mirror of a ‘petrifying’ attitude. To contrast the linguistic attitude of the two exempla ficta, the Ego will adopt a strategy consisting in the multiplication of simulacra, the proliferation of identity masks (\textit{A due}), and the increase of the possibilities of judgment towards ‘reality’:

Life no longer has […] a foundation in which to plant its roots and on which to grow, a center that can give unity to its contradictory, chaotic multiplicity, and make it possible to judge, choose, select. […] there is no single hierarchy of values that can reduce the world to its essentials and govern the swarming proliferation of details, subordinating the countless, minimal, momentary impulses to a meaning that transcends them. The anarchy of atoms has swept away all the core values and broken every connection capable of binding the details into a significant whole (Magris: \textit{Anello di Clarisse} 335).

With the upsetting of every symbolic value, the ‘devaluation’ of the world intends to be the salvaging of all the ‘possibilities’ that have been lost and that are identified with life itself,
retranscribed as fantasy.\textsuperscript{330} This is the reason why the game of masks (as we have seen in the manifesto \textit{Equilibrio}) will have to be experimented – in the narrative process – through the multiplication of the simulacra of identity. Reflecting on the saying “He who has a friend has a treasure” (421), Palazzeschi redirects the relational contact to the personality of the writer himself: the longed-for friend is paradoxically discovered in the folds of a multi-perspective individuality. In other words, the presumed psychological unity is broken up into fragments of ‘concretions of identity’ which, however, far from unsettling the subject, provide him with a vital support by configuring a mobile space from which to constantly draw in order to increase his possibilities. The crisis of conscience is avoided by making use of masks that reinforce the subject, highlighting the potential nature of the conscience itself. The appearance of a multitude of phantasmic doubles reactivates the unexpressed possibilities through the continuous dialogic counterpoint. While in the first part of the novel Palazzeschi shows how one-way thinking can prevent man from understanding reality (by enclosing it in a conceptual cage), in the second part he illustrates the risks that arise when the same procedure is applied, through the filter of identity, to the experiences of the subject. The appearance of ‘doubles’ reveals the porosity of the subject.

After the issues of thought and identity, in the last part of the book (\textit{A solo}) Palazzeschi goes on directly to examine the plane of ‘desire,’ the plane interpreted as being synonymous with the countless ‘possibilistic’ variants. The figure of a man who is constantly planning journeys (to Venice, Rome, Naples, Egypt), organizing them in every detail, anticipating the wonderful sensations that await him, and then decides not to leave (and plan instead yet another journey), develops an attitude for \textit{fantasy} that discredits the value of an experience that seems constantly filtered by the activity of an immobilizing ‘reason.’\textsuperscript{331} In so

\textsuperscript{330} Cf. Palazzeschi: “Un colloquio con Aldo Palazzeschi” (1971), in \textit{Ritratti nel tempo} 341: “I was afraid of life. In later years I developed a sense of humor, which gave me balance.”

\textsuperscript{331} Cf. Palazzeschi: \textit{Il piacere della memoria} 529: “Imagination can fly higher than the metaphysical element, whose boundaries are imposed by reason, no one will ever be able to set a boundary to imagination, every flight clears the way for a higher one.”

Cf. Palazzeschi: letter to Marinetti of April 1911, in \textit{Carteggio} 45: “Florence is full of philosophers, it’s revolting. I was not born to reason, but to be unreasonable!”

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doing, fantasy is hypostatized as a new level of reality: in the unrealized dream, experience can remain ‘intact,’ because all the prospective possibilities that it can contain ‘reflect’ all the possible chances that any real journey would be unable to offer. For example, the dream-world Rome allows the appearance of historical figures (“and suddenly, in the shade of an arch, I will have the impression of seeing a company of ghosts at a banquet, and right at the center: Nero,” 464), and also the alienating representation – this is again the plan of Il controdolore – of contemporary characters shown to the reader through the distorted plane of fantasy instead of in their realistic forms: And again in the piazza, before going away, I will look up at the Papal Palace, at the apartments of the Pope, with the vain desire to see him suddenly appear at the window, like a young girl waiting for her fiancé to go by in the evening, I will go and wait at the house of his sisters […]. But perhaps they are all up there, with their big brother, playing omo nero together [a card game similar to Old Maid] (466).

The ironic exaltation of the ‘possible’ is directed at devaluing reality as the arrest of possibilities:

I have been to Venice, Rome, Naples, it’s true, but the real journey I made there is precisely the one that bothers my imagination […], if I had never been to Venice, how much more colorful it would be to me; the canals, the bridges, the fondamentas, the porticos and the under-porticos, how much more charming they would be to my eyes if I didn’t know exactly what they look like — my dream would have no boundaries, nothing would be able to hold back by superb imagination. […] Venice, Rome, Naples would be a hundred times greater and more beautiful (478).

Se even desire needs to be placed in a negative setting: as the procrastination of desire itself. Concreteness, dissociated from its implementation, is comically associated to unreality, and this happens because the form to which the realization of the desire leads would prove to be nothing but ‘form,’ i.e. an experience that is incomplete because deprived of its alternative possibilities. This is the reason for the paradoxical praise of expectation that the novel ends with:
May you never get to Venice! [...] Oh! Were there for everyone a city on earth, [...] like Venice, even funnier, even stranger, even more beautiful, a city like that, that makes one dream, but a real city, where real people breathe and walk and love, with their houses and hotels, whose name appears on maps and in railway timetables, in rate charts, from which people send letters and postcards to friends and relatives, but where the engine’s whistle, upon arriving at the station, would melt one’s last breath in one’s breast (486-7).

In the final step to the analysis of the human relationship with things (after ideas, after mankind, after places: the pyramid keeps getting thinner), the act of buying finally comes to stand as the end of the ‘fantasies’ concerning the object. The ‘thing’ is inhabited by a nothingness that cancels and disintegrates it. What really counts is its shadow, or (and here we are approaching the deeper meaning of the contingency/representation relationship in Palazzeschi) the money with which it can be purchased: “The nice little package of thousand-lire notes tucked away in your mattress [...]. As long as they stay in the package, they are the house, the villa, the farm, the voyages, they are the things you most love and desire, they are everything, they are happiness, but they become «nothing» once you spend them for even one thing” (490).

X. ‘Juices’ and ‘Poisons’

the grotesque symbols of delusions, the definitive paradigms of universal reality [...] an unlimited opening beyond all conventions, all lyrical concerns, all ridiculous didactic, civic, humanistic preconceptions [...]. It also means to implicitly declare the vanity of all the ideals, of all seriousness, of all life, of everything except the painful joy of feeling it and asserting oneself at least by singing it, or by forgetting it while singing. Irony, irony [...] tragedy and consolation of our modern spirit! (Soffici: “Aldo Palazzeschi,” in Opere I, 517-8).

Palazzeschi’s separation from Dannunzianism and, later, from Florentine Modernism, is not a separation between Nietzsche’s “juices” and “poisons,”332 for the simple reason that

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Nietzsche’s juices and poisons cannot be separated. The formal logic of nihilism\textsuperscript{333} that leads to humor as ‘tragedy’ of Life and Forms (and of all the other binomial pairs that branch off therefrom) is the basis of what will later lead – in a second phase of imperialist cultural logic – to hypostatize one or the other form (hence the production of ‘myths,’ including fascist myths) as the \textit{true} expression of Life, its formal expression. This is the point where a form – be it Germanism, Latinity, Authenticity, Duration, etc. – will stand for Life. Palazzeschi remains uninvolved by this transformation at this time, but only because, with his agnostic epistemology that sees all forms as regulative pretences, he transforms reality (which is made of forms) into the mere ‘representation’ of a hyper-subjectivist consciousness that knows that a ‘more deeply understood’ reality means becoming aware of the non-existence of reality itself:\textsuperscript{334} “And how could I hold down what I saw was inevitably destined to escape?” (Palazzeschi: “Vita,” in \textit{Tutti i romanzi}, II, 1245). Palazzeschi does not come to the Bergsonian-style dualism\textsuperscript{335} between phenomenon and essence, but only because he identifies in ‘contradiction’ the only real (true) character of Nature,\textsuperscript{336} which in representation (in ‘possibility’) finds expression as “innocence of becoming,” that is, as a continuous hermeneutic/interpretive ‘exchange’ that reconstructs itself, positively, in the formal abstraction of itself. This ‘becoming,’ which is not the objective form of a particular historical period (the \textit{Belle Époque}, an age that could criticize reality in all innocence because, before the great world war, reality appeared indestructible), is then given the traits of Being, by

\textsuperscript{333} As also expressed by the Bergsonism of the early Prezzolini, with whom Palazzeschi secretly agrees.
\textsuperscript{334} We are still following the trail of subjectivism that goes from Berkeley, through Schopenhauer, to Mach.
\textsuperscript{335} In Palazzeschi, ‘laughter’ is not ‘punitive’ because there is no “pure presence” to defend and preserve: laughter in Palazzeschi is the sign of a ‘contemplation’ of the world that appreciates its fluidity and loves it precisely because it is ‘fluid.’ And Palazzeschi would later repeatedly insist on the necessity to not block any kind of fluidity. ‘Consider, of course, the short story \textit{Tre diversi amici e tre liquidi diversi} (in \textit{Lacerba}, May 1, 1913), in \textit{Tutte le novelle} 329: “They had inside them these fluid substances, why did they insist on not letting them flow freely? Why?”
\textsuperscript{336} Cf. Ferrata: “Prefazione,” in Palazzeschi: \textit{Tutte le novelle} XXI: “It is chiefly Nature that invites us to establish the extent of our rights.”
which I mean the traits of a cosmic and biological nexus: the subject that sees himself ‘becoming’ projects these data into reality, and believes that only by adapting to them will it be possible for him to avoid ‘betraying’ it. In this manner the psychological features of a particular, objective historical period become – through the Trojan horse of an epistemology mixed with psychology – the true (and eternal) reality of the world which Palazzeschi’s art mimics precisely as representation, as hermeneutics, as possibility.337 The dissolution of Art operated by humor, which, as brilliantly observed by Piero Pieri, both Hegel and Leopardi theorize “employing the similar analogies of smoke and vapor,”338 consists in the subjective dissolution of an objectivity considered on the basis of subjectivist grounds. By declaring the vainness of every concrete thing (by declaring, that is to say, all search for truth to be an arbitrary urge for domination directed at repressing the diversities of life), reality itself is reduced to a game of representation (to a metaphysics of pluralism), i.e. to an exchange value (no possibility has greater value than another, and all are convertible: this is identified as the advent of the Dionysian). ‘Possibility’ – not intended as theoretical/cultural objectivity, which is the expression and approximation of specific social relations, but simply as relativism (the reality of the world) in open fight (called ‘tragic’339) against a dehumanizing absolutism – is the criticism of a reality that presents as ‘eternal’ (deeper understanding!) its own historical connections. In the formal logic of such a philosophy of life, it is the bourgeois antinomies

337 The similarities with Pirandello are obvious. Indeed, it’s as if there were a competition between Pirandello and Palazzeschi for the ‘complete’ acceptance of the new epistemological code. It is worth mentioning that Palazzeschi read both Beffe della morte e della vita and Il fu Mattia Pascal when still very young.

And look what Palazzeschi writes to Vallecchi in 1942 about the republication of riflessi: “It’s a detective story ante litteram, and it is Pirandellian ante litteram. Pirandello did not exist in 1907” (by 1907 Palazzeschi had already read Pirandello). The letter, stored in the Archivio Contemporaneo Bonsanti in Florence, can be read in the article, mentioned above, by Maria Carla Papini on Palazzeschi and Remy De Gourmont.

338 Cf. Hegel: Estetica 673: “one metaphor, one witticism, one joke, one simile, kills the other; we see nothing develop, everything just explodes.”

Cf. Leopardi: Zibaldone 44-5: “nowadays by dint of jokes even the ridiculous has been made spiritual, and it has been so thinned down that it is no longer a liquor but an ether, a vapor…”

Cf. also Cortellessa: “I piedi di Leopardi,” in Palazzeschi e i territori del comico.

339 But here the tragedy of civilization is only the phenomenal form of the insurmountable contradictoriness of life. And in fact Palazzeschi would always emphasize – against interpretations of his poetics in terms of pure ‘ludism’ – the element he calls tragic. Cf. Palazzeschi: in Camon: Il mestiere di poeta, now in Ritratti nel tempo 247: “And so they speak of playfulness when instead they should be speaking of a tragicomic element. For that matter, in my opinion humor is the surest scale by which to measure the degree of civilization of a people: a people without humor and without humorists I consider barbaric.”
(obviously elevated to antinomies of existence in general) that offer a reconciliation: the struggle of the humorous perspective, then, is not directed at eliminating those antinomies – which would mean fighting against the mode of being of existence itself (an evident absurdity) – but directed at deducing from the epistemological assumption reality in general as a simulacrum of itself. This simulacrum can arrive at Contingency as the Truth of the world only through the theoretical formalization of humor. The object which the artistic (and not only artistic) representation brings to the stage as a simulacrum of that object (as its ‘ghost,’ as the duplicate of a reality previously deemed immovable), is not, then, as some have said, an instance of Benjamin’s allegory which alludes to the lost use-value by contrast, bringing – in the words of Adorno – “chaos into order,” but the first step of a subjective liberation that determines contradiction itself as its own overcoming: the crystallization of an unresolved conflict in an eternal temporariness meant to put that conflict behind. And this because the object’s simulacral condition really is the (eternal!) reality of the world that in the theatrical justification alters the relationship between subject and object by attributing to the latter the symptoms of the former. And so, in Palazzeschi’s “psychological novel” humor becomes (truly in Freudian terms) the option – entirely spiritual and definable as ‘cosmopolitan’ in Gramscian terms – of a subject that wants to be one step ahead of the world. The unification dictated by the principle of the coincidentia oppositorum (what Palazzeschi realizes in art as an infinite hermeneutics: the endless proliferation of interpretations) is intended to undercut the objectivity of reality in order to theorize another

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341 Freud: Opere X 504-5: “Like jokes and the comical, humor has something liberating about it, but it also has something of grandeur and elevation […]. The grandeur in it clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego’s invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocation of reality […], it insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world.”
Cf. Grazia Livi: Palazzeschi la mia ricetta della felicità, in Epoca, March 17, 1963, in Ritratti nel tempo 203: “if I didn’t have the sense of the tragicomic, I would be dead by now. Basically, one resorts to one’s sense of comedy as a means of defense.”
342 If traditional art drew its motifs from a ‘community,’ the new humorous art denies even the possibility of its existence: if values are simulacra, a ‘community’ is totally inconceivable. And Palazzeschi would end up gathering all his binomial opposites (life/form, code/freedom, etc.) in the endless conflict represented by the different dispositions of Lorenzo the Magnificent and Savonarola. Symptomatically, in many interviews the elder Palazzeschi would remark on the constant changing of the world and the revival of conflicts which he considers always the same!
Pasolini observed: “Palazzeschi is fully involved in the society which he pretends to ignore and make fun of.”
binomial pair (Life vs Form; Humor vs Reality) that is the competitive opposition between those who have seen the Reality of the world (which is eternal fluidity) and those who persist in their essentialist/substantialist blindness.\textsuperscript{343}

But, clearly, is it still reality that decides about the subject: the elaboration of what arises in history as a cultural product is based on the interplay of the objective forces of historical development. The end of the \textit{Belle Époque} and the eruption of the war mark the point for Palazzeschi too, dramatically throwing into crisis even his idea of ‘representation’:

\begin{verbatim}
Fuoco
Fuo
Fu
F (Tutte le poesie 352).\textsuperscript{344}
\end{verbatim}

[\textit{Fuoco} = Fire]

The direct experience of the war unsettles both the cult of the contingent and the hermeneutic representation of the ‘possible’: “the surprise of the war was to disrupt this program, a charm that had begun so nicely” (\textit{Scritti sulle arti} 69).\textsuperscript{345} In Palazzeschi (as in almost all his contemporaries), the opposition between what is ‘alive’ and what is ‘stiffened’ does not get ‘filled’ with new significations (Latinity/Germanism, life=war/peace=death, etc.), but is characterized as the opposition between the ‘formative’ brutality of nationalist aspirations (non without specific references to economic elements)\textsuperscript{346} and the usual praise of Life as a flow: “nations […] live in the stifled aspiration of wanting to conquer the whole world. […]"

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnotesuperscript{343} Behind this procedure too there is the usual modernist equation of Metaphysics and Dialectics: the modernist desire to remain in an immanentist perspective (the Nietzschean resolution of “loyalty to the earth”) becomes the assumption of the impossibility of knowing objective reality because the opposition between Being and Becoming is not seen as a historical/dialectic opposition (the becoming of history and the objectivity of the social relations of a given moment in history which the theory approximates) but as an epistemological opposition.

\footnotesuperscript{344} Cf. Cortellessa: \textit{Controdolore e retroguardia, Aldo Palazzeschi tra «Spazzatura» e «Boccanera»}, in \textit{La Rassegna della Letteratura italiana}, May-December 1996, 103: “the final aphasia of the voice […] has neither a playful nor a dreamlike tone.”

\footnotesuperscript{345} Cf. Palazzeschi: “Alla conquista di noi stessi,” in \textit{Scritti sulle arti figurative} 69-70; “war that was to change a lot of things […], and followed by a period of weakness and stagnation, of uncertainty, of passive expectation, which led to regret and second thoughts that favored the reactionary forces and the return to old, worn-out formulas.”

\footnotesuperscript{346} Cf. Palazzeschi: \textit{Due imperi… mancati} 156-8: “And they also need each other; they hand things over through a window, the goods in one hand and money in the other. […] America came in after all the gold had poured into its coffers, for fear of being smothered in it.”
\end{footnotesize}
obstacle to the natural flow of human life” (Due imperi... mancati 152). But the moment of Truth is no longer situated in the reflection on the contingent; instead, tinged with the creatural element of soldiers sent to the slaughter (and whose sole desire is to keep on living),\(^{347}\) it goes back to offering a representative figuration that rejects all avant-gardistic intentions (the ‘second unrealized empire’ – together with the German one – is the one dreamt by the Avant-Garde) and retrieves the function of a ‘formal’ ideology to stake out the space of the utopia that marks the ends of the ideal of representation based on ambiguity and on hermeneutic misunderstanding:

They were poor women with long rosaries dangling on their bellies and two pearls sticking out of the holes of their eyes, were they headed to a Madonna in the middle of that forest of olive trees? [...] This is the first time I’ve talked like this again, I am like an unearthed creature brought back to light, back to love! [...] need to be myself, to be alone, to be humble, me in the most ascetic sense of the word, and I’ve always walked side by side with megalomaniacs, with rabble-rousers, with apostles (Palazzeschi: letter to Prezzolini dated February 11, 1919, in Carteggio 30-1).

The war thus unsettles Palazzeschi’s old perspective constructed in terms of ‘laughter’: “I could not laugh any more. The powerful weapon that fate had given me as a balance for life had fallen away” (66); “laugh at this humanity if you can still manage to” (117). At the same time, laughter still stands as an accusation against the avant-gardist mission, now passed on to its militarization: “«To arms! To arms». [...] They were the clear-headed men, the men of genius, the refined, the brilliant” (32-3). But the myth of the autonomy of the intellectual remains untouched (“You are aware of what you do, doubly guilty,” 36) with the added feature – and after the war there will be a reconciliation between Palazzeschi and Papini\(^{348}\) – of the contrast between Spirit and Matter, which matches the earlier contrast between Diversity and Uniformity: “The larger the number of people who flock together, the more it all becomes a mass of matter with no form or spirit. And yet every one of those men [...] or going

\(^{347}\) Cf. Palazzeschi: Due imperi... mancati 96: “Oh! If God had granted the wishes of all those who had begged for some disease, some physical defect, what a beautiful humanity we would have suddenly had!”

\(^{348}\) Cf. Prezzolini: letter to Palazzeschi dated December 28, 1920, in Carteggio 46-7: “I realize that you too are full of the Christian spirit that is filling the parched souls of many contemporary writers.”
to bed last night, must have had his own personal thoughts […]. But like this, they were no more than tons of human flesh” (56). The idealistic utopia – also formalized as a critique of capitalism and a defense of evangelical socialism (of course, without revolutions or violence) – is thus made up of a “Rolland-style brotherliness” (Biondi: in Due imperi… mancati XVII) which is the nostalgia for the ‘peaceful’ age represented by the Belle Époque, and of its seemingly unshakeable reality, which, for that very reason, is epistemologically criticizable from every side.

349 And there is a reason for the ‘infantilized’ interpretation of this Palazzeschi given by Soffici: Due imperi… mancati, in Rete mediterranea, September 1920, 257-9: “many will find fault with his political attitude […]; unjustly, in my opinion […]: I’ve already heard that shameful word thrown around: defeatist! […] Palazzeschi expressed his feelings about the war, ingenuous, almost childlike feelings of aversion and horror.”

The issue of the ‘biological’ diversity of all men would be used by the later, fiercely anticommunist Palazzeschi, as a negation of socialism. Cf. Stajano: “Palazzeschi il cardinale,” in Tempo, January 25, 1964, in Ritratti nel tempo 226: “I do not believe that men – as the communists claim – can become equal. It is nature that makes us different.”

350 Cf. Palazzeschi: Due imperi… mancati 134: “Capitalism […] a seven-headed dragon.”

351 Cf. Palazzeschi: Due imperi… mancati 180: “Karl Marx only wants to preach the Gospel of Christ.”

352 Cf. Palazzeschi: Due imperi… mancati 184: “Beware the curse of Cain! […] War should not be waged, but neither should the revolution. Let the revolution be the act that crowns a great ideal movement, an achievement of mankind.”
we want to be a healthy generation. [...]  
Healthy spirit means being aware of what is missing, aspiration to complement the universe  
Piero Jahier 

I fear the Button-Molder more than Peer Gynt  
Giovanni Boine 

I. “Vocian moralism”

“Our age has recognized the unlimited freedom of the particular.” This remark by Giovanni Amendola appeared in the review Prose in 1907, in an article significantly entitled L’impotenza del pensiero [The Impotence of Thought]. In retrospect, Amendola’s observation can be said to mark the beginning of what critics have called “Vocian moralism” (an aspect, as we shall see, of Modernism), meaning a perspective in which the faith in ‘life’ (which we have seen at work in Soffici, Palazzeschi, the early Prezzolini, and, in part, Papini), the faith in a non-dialectic becoming that refuses any rational or moral reconciliation, dissolves and turns into reaction: the need for a solid standpoint against the unyielding flow of time and the protean variety of the phenomenal world. “The need – wrote Umberto Carpi – for a steady point of reference amid the never-ending transformation of things” (“Amendola e Boine” 223). If we consider the great authors of European Modernism (Hofmannsthal, Benn, Rilke, Proust, Mann, etc.) this seems to be the prevailing attitude, almost identifiable as the very foundation of Modernism, with its desperate search for an art being an effort towards the unification (synthesis) of the kaleidoscope of things. Yet (though it may seem a paradox), this is a subordinate position. In reality, as explained in this chapter and the next, it is the opposite camp (though smaller in size) that lays down the rules of comparison during the Belle Époque; that forces the opposition to negotiate on its own ground, which, as seen in the previous chapter, is the ground of the triumph of epistemology and ‘life.’

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Giovanni Boine, an author who initially tried to reconcile the two perspectives within a paradoxical religious horizon, then took a reactionary stance, and finally came to terms – although painfully – with the new cultural horizon, expressed this subordination as follows (and his words reveal the complex bond – remember what we said about Pirandello – between historicism and the emerging new philosophical perspectives):

Without the concept, life almost does not exist for me, it is chaos, a swirling fog, a muddled anguish: but through the concept life itself creates infinity, and constantly breaks, drives in and tears out the bolts of this infinity [...] the concept is endlessly done, undone, and redone because it is penetrated by life. [...] The concept is the affirmation of rationality, rationality is being; but the concreteness of being is life, the inexhaustibility of life. [...] It is the logical consequence of identifying philosophy with history (which is the same as identifying thought with life, because in history the new term, before thought, is life). [...] Between thought and life, history seemed to be some kind of middle term [...], that the relations between thought and life are better revealed by history than by philosophy, that the concept of history clearly shows the limit to which Hegelianism tends with all its might; the identification of thought with life. Thought used to stand before life (and in Croce it still does, or appears to) in the solemn stance of a judge [...]. But if we identify life with thought, thought is rather like the enchanted knight of the legend [...] mounted on a demon-horse that can shake him off whenever it pleases (L’esperienza religiosa 127-8).

Of the generation in question, Boine represents a special case: in his works, the grand themes determined by the Krisis, the momentous questions raised by Modernism – starting with the impossibility of giving rational order to reality (a theme that he will deal with extensively) – are examined from the viewpoint of religious thought. This outlook leads him to consider secular thought as the expression of second-level cultural action: in other words, secular thought is a Sisyphean task that bears right from the onset the stigma of the failure of religious thought. In religious thought the impossibility of ‘containing’ the totality of reality is immediately evident, marked by the trope of an unassimilable Transcendence that stands before the world as the perpetual affirmation of a reality that inevitably transcends it. The problem of secular thought (the problem of Reason) is also present in religious thought, but

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2 Cf. Boine: “La ferita non chiusa,” in Il peccato, Plausi e botte, Frantumi, Altri scritti 388: “But in the history of philosophy [...] thought forgets, its goes straight ahead following its own rules, and it appears to be free and it appears and believes itself victorious in its universality. In the history of religion [...] thought cannot forget, it cannot abstract [...]. In conclusion, religious thought feels and, more clearly than secular thought, admits its original impossibility: in it, God has full dominion and stands as the fortress of a conqueror in a vanquished land.”
secular thought can become aware of this impasse only by examining itself in the ‘mirror’ of religious thought:

In religious thought, that is to say, secular thought can, so to speak, see its truest essence put forth and coarsely exposed, though magnified and almost mythicized: the unhealed wound that (with Being, the fortress of God, replaced by Becoming) manifests itself [...] in the awareness of the incomplete that any serious thinker must admit to. The contradictory positions that idealism distributes dialectically (almost mechanically) throughout the history of thought, are concentrated and made ubiquitous by religious thought (“La ferita non chiusa,” in Il peccato, Altri scritti 389).

Like Amendola, who writes to him that “I aspire to find being in becoming [...] I feel oppressed by the vital problem of my time” (Carteggio, IV, 251), Boine too, faced with the historical problem of a shattered subject unable to reorder reality (the Nietzschean subject rolling away from the Center towards X), takes up the challenge of searching for a Truth that is not just the hypostatization of a moment in apparent phenomenal life, but the redemption of that very phenomenality that it sees falling apart.3

Of course, as almost always happens in the age of imperialism, the real problems (historical and dialectical) that reality presents to the intellectuals who are not willing to fall in line with what Lukács calls “aesthetic culture” (the part of epistemology that glorifies the incorrigibility of the contradictions that reality presents through history, as contradictions of reality tout court) are met with distorted solutions and non-dialectical answers. This is the unsolvable tangle of the binary oppositions of cultural (i.e. non-pragmatic) derivation (Transcendence vs Immanence, Form vs Life, etc.), which is characteristic of this aspect of Modernism and makes of “Vocian moralism” a form of resistance doomed to failure.

II. The Downfall of God

3 Pappalardo: 80: “in order to fill the abyss that separates man from God, Boine stubbornly renews the pointless challenge of searching for the meaning of things, for the return to the ancient house of the father.”
Boine’s personal journey and his initial proximity to what is known as ‘religious modernism’\(^4\) can be seen, on the one hand, as part of the general reaction against scientistic Positivism, which we have examined when discussing Papini (the “idealist revolt,”\(^5\) the “bankruptcy of science” brought up by Brunetière\(^6\)), and, on the other, as an instance of the growing desire of Catholic citizens to take part in the democratic life of the nascent mass society, as the obstacles posed by the Church’s *non expedit* policy were falling away.\(^7\) As a young student in Milan (financially assisted by Prince Alessandro Casati, who would later be one of the major supporters of *La Voce*),\(^8\) Boine came into contact with the group of aristocrats (Gallarati-Scotti, Alfieri, Casati himself) who, congregating around the Barnabite Fathers Gazzola and Semeria, founded the review *Il Rinnovamento*\(^9\) in January 1907. Despite a number of defections, the journal managed to survive until the end of 1909, defying the decree *Lamentabili* (July 3, 1907) and especially the encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis* (September 8, 1907) issued by Pope Pius X, thereby winning a prominent place in the sphere of religious modernism in Italy. *Il Rinnovamento* differed from similar journals in that it brought together the main themes of modernist research\(^10\) and the latest ideas produced by secular philosophy.

\(^4\) For clarity, we will use a lowercase ‘m’ to refer to the religious movement called ‘modernism’ to distinguish it from the more canonical and better-known literary and philosophical movement, Modernism.
\(^5\) Torrini: 367-8: “Only if we accept at face value the reconstruction that idealism makes of positivism as a compact, undifferentiated block destined from its appearance to generate its own opposite, [...] only then, what was a mature, intelligent operation *a posteriori*, directed at choosing, at expunging, at concealing, will appear convincing. [...] is struck more than by the rebirth of idealism, by that of the ideal, of the search for faith.”
\(^6\) Scoppola: 52-3: “In Italy too, at the end of the century, positivism was coming to an end: true, we didn’t have crises as resounding as Taine’s [...] or best-selling novels proclaiming it to the public like Bourget’s, or eye-catching articles on the «bankruptcy of science» like Brunetière’s in the «Revue des Deux Mondes», but the fading of positivism was none the less distinct.”
\(^7\) Cf. Murri: letter to Gallarati-Scotti dated August 29, 1906, in Tranello and Fontana: 81: “I believe that Italian Catholics should win the right to act freely in Italian public life.”
\(^8\) The Vocian circle even considered the idea of publishing a journal of religious studies along with *La Voce*.
\(^9\) Among the authors published were Crespi, Pestalozza, Volpe, Murri, Varisco, Papini, Martinetti, Tilgher, Borgese, Amendola, Tyrrell, Sabatier, Vossler. Cf. Perolino: *Il sacro e l’impuro*.
\(^10\) The propagation of these issues was no doubt aided by the popularizing function (and the conciliatory position towards science, in particular towards the theory of evolution) of Antonio Fogazzaro’s novel *Il santo*. Cf. Bedeschi: *Il modernismo italiano* 114-33.
and literature, coming to represent, as observed by Umberto Carpi, a “Milanese moment of Vocianesimo,” and emphasizing the guiding role of the intellectuals: “And it is comforting, thank God, to see that the spirit is able, for once, to turn into strength and somehow manage to raise a little the heavy mass of humanity!” (Boine: ‘Serveto e Calvino,’ in *Il peccato* 365). The fact that the name of the journal was inspired by Papini, referring to the article “L’Italia non ha un’idea fissa” in which Papini calls for a “Spiritual renewal of the world,” also alluding to the mission of Rome and the primacy of the Italians, indicates the direction – towards research and ‘national pedagogy’ – that the journal planned to take from an elitist position. Even the opening ‘Words of introduction’ offer several points of contact with the themes – secular and ‘idealistic’ – developed by Papini:

> In us, Christianity is Life: it is inexhaustible aspiration, it is hope, it is the whole being’s yearning for whatever in life bears the hue of eternity [...]. It would be vain for us to enclose it in some intellectual system or in expressions defining its development; it is by nature a continuous evolution that breaks the old enclosures to constantly build new ones, that shapes and reshapes the forms through which it communicates with the human mind; in a perpetual motion of renewal (1, 1, January 1907, 4).  

In the new idealistic/spiritualistic climate that is spreading in reaction to the presumed twin concepts of positivism and socialism (and also in reaction to certain religious currents of social or socialist orientation, such as those of Romolo Murri and Ernesto Bonaiuti), the issue of ‘religion’ resumes a central position, moving from the tradition of Scholasticism upheld

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11 Carpi: “Riflessi milanesi del vocianesimo,” in *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana*, XCVI, vol. CLVI, 494, 1979, 274: “the fundamental absence of Milan, the persistence of an umbilical cord with a now obsolete landowner’s world, the resulting sense of separation and isolation, the abstract search for organicity in strenuously and exclusively ideological undertakings (the myth of the journal), this was the face of ‘Milanese Vocianism’ as it was expressed by the group that had belonged to ‘Rinnovamento’.”
12 Boine would have words of praise for Oriani as well as Pareto.
13 Cf. Bonaiuti: *Pellegrino di Roma* 75: “This high-ranking group would do no more than add another mark to the endless series of those unproductive attempts.”
14 Cf. Boine: letter to Gallarati-Scotti dated August 5, 1906, in *Carteggio*, III, I, 21: “Papini is a great soul and a mystic. At this point only a mystic can trace a route and drag the consciences to it.”
15 We even find a statement such as “we are interrogators of souls and want to awaken the ones that are asleep,” which has the unmistakable flavor of Papini. Cf. Papini: “Campagna per il forzato risveglio.”
16 The *Leonardo* contributes largely, especially thanks to Pietro Marrucchi. William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience* was translated by Calderoli in 1904.
by Rome to the ‘primacy of the conscience’ as the basis for understanding reality\(^\text{17}\) (though divided into a number of thematic/conceptual streams – pantheism, ‘symbolism,’ religious pragmatism – to which we shall shortly return): “You are counted among the signs of the so-called «rebirth of idealism» which I too greeted with enthusiasm” (Prezzolini: *Cos’è il Modernismo* 29).

Boine plans to graduate with a thesis on Maurice Blondel and moves to Paris at the beginning of 1908 to follow Bergson’s lectures on Berkeley; here, from the sideline position that his non-important name allows him, he witnesses the fierce reaction of Pius X.\(^\text{18}\) The encyclical *Pascendi* is not an example of theological subtlety,\(^\text{19}\) however it offers a privileged outlook on its time, because in it we find, united in common condemnation, all the social (democracy, socialism) and theoretical (subjectivism, immanentism, historical criticism, psychologism) developments of the period.\(^\text{20}\) The belief in a reality derived from consciousness, reason being restricted to the phenomenal world, the principle of the historical evolution of dogmas, the belief in the symbolic being of the divine representations — everything is thrown together in the progressive (to the Pope’s point of view) social ‘anarchy’ that is proliferating.\(^\text{21}\) Paradoxically, Pope Pius X’s generalizing fury identifies one fundamental theoretical point: religious modernism, which, as is well known, originated from applying the positivist historical-critical method to religious disciplines,\(^\text{22}\) represents the

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\(^{17}\) Cf. Hughes: 71: “the new doctrines were unequivocally subjectivist. [...] It was no longer what actually existed that seemed more important, but what men thought existed.”

\(^{18}\) An atmosphere of suspicion grew around the modernists, and there were even investigators appointed. Letters written by bishops were found to contain suggestions to exploit the indigence of young priests suspected of modernism to obtain information.

\(^{19}\) Cf. Sorel: *La religion d’aujourd’hui*, in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Moral*, March and May 1909, 80-2: “The encyclical *Pascendi* has taken the side of the conservatives [...]. If a philosophical system is deemed fully satisfactory by those who adopt it, this is only marginally due to the persuasive force of the arguments that it brings forth.”

\(^{20}\) Cf. Prezzolini: *Cos’è il Modernismo?* 7-8: “If we examine it point by point it appears weak and illogical, little knowledgeable of what it is fighting [...]. But on the whole it is a fact that could only be produced by all the centuries of history of Catholicism, a finale worthy of its development and its beginning.”

\(^{21}\) Cf. Menozzi: in Botti and Cerrato: 77: “Based on this general approach, «La Correspondance de Rome» conducts its violent battle against every aspect of church life where it thinks it detects the emerging of modernist or modernizing tendencies. It is worth noting that among the cultural means best suited to achieve their defeat the periodical indicates the need to «lire et faire lire les écrivains de la Contre-Révolution, soit les penseurs, soit les historiens»: de Maistre, de Bonald […] appear to be the authors referred to.”

\(^{22}\) Cf. Landucci: in Botti and Cerrato: 86-7: “it was also necessary to update exegesis and theology by introducing the historical-critical method to the interpretation of the Bible, as well as to the studies on the origins of the Roman
theological litmus test for the philosophical speculation that is Modernism tout court: “it comes from the epistemological revolution under way, that is, from replacing the metaphysical or theological categories, which were rationalistic, with psychological and historical ones” (Forni: Il dibattito sul modernismo religioso 67). Prezzolini, who was fully part of the Modernist philosophical experience, is quick to realize this, associating the Modernist Mach to the religious modernist Le Roy (and implicitly showing how historical criticism is turning ever more into psychological-subjectivist criticism):

The materialist hypotheses (involving atoms, energy), the theories that seemed to do away with the need for a creator (evolution) [...]. In view of this vulgar idea of science, a new notion of scientific activity and of its value [...] has been emerging. Arising in Germany with Mach, its most popular and brilliant accounts can be found in the books of Poincaré, its most paradoxical expressions in the articles of Le Roy. From there it emerges that science is an economic convention for action, not the direct knowledge of reality (Il cattolicismo rosso 97-8).

Indeed, at a closer look (and excepting the trope of the Divine), the rift that opens in the field of religious modernism (having on one side, for example, the empiricist historicism of Loisy.
and the ‘Machian’ pragmatism of Le Roy, and on the other the emphasis placed by Blondel on the Pascalian element – ethical and logical – of faith, or Laberthonnière’s insistence on the moral lesson of Kant) mirrors the two moments of Modernism that we are discussing. In Blondel’s attack against Loisy (History and Dogma), the refusal to reduce reality to the phenomenal dimension implies, for example, against “the nascent hermeneutic imperialism” (Ovens: 42), the ‘necessity’ of a supernatural element recalling both the Universal (which is the ‘guarantee’ of the particular) and the “bottom of things” – the “essence of things” – which, although indemonstrable, survives in the movement of history as the yearning for what, being absent, it ultimately determines. The effort of philosophy elevating itself above the field of mere historiography (which explains Gentile’s interest for Blondel) will then be the concept that shows how the missing supernatural is in reality ‘required’ by historical action which from those hidden truths took its nourishment.

Boine builds his perspective using heterogeneous philosophical materials (he is not a Blondelian in the strict sense), but as early as 1907 appears to be fully aware both of this ‘parting of the ways’ and of what side he is taking: “certain tendencies of certain modernist groups. Ultra-pragmatist [...] tendencies: no doubt interesting in themselves but certainly not Catholic.” His rejection – despite his interest – of what he interprets as the common action of Bergsonism, pragmatism, and experimental Machian psychology (Boine calls it “desperate empiricism”), reveals his attention (immediately applied to the study of the Spanish mystics, of Unamuno, and of Kierkegaard) for philosophical-religious efforts directed at overcoming essentially irrational [...] Bergson, on the one hand, develops modern agnosticism in a much more daring and decisive way than James by resolving it into a declared production of myths.”

26 In Le Roy (Dogme et critique) a dogma is no less than a “rule of practical conduct.” Moreover, Le Roy is particularly interesting for the purposes of our discussion because his ‘secular’ models of reference are directly Mach, Bergson, and William James.


28 Cf. Forni: 6-7: “the recovery of philosophy was necessary to provide a language and an appropriate means of conceptualization for doctrine, constantly threatened by: historicism, vitalism, pragmatism.”

29 Boine: letter to Unamuno of 1908, in Foresta: 57-8.

phenomenological immanence, which he considers the space of inauthenticity: “that painful feeling the I often had, even as a boy, and that distressed me, of not being able to penetrate the essence of the things around me. A veil between things and myself. As if they remained outside of me, as if they meant nothing.” In agreement with Hales’s criticism of Loisy, according to which historical hermeneutics had turned religion into a great flux in which nothing stood firm any more, Boine raises the banners of a Steinerian “nostalgia for the absolute” supporting an agonic modernism that rejects the ‘life’ perspective described by a key term of ‘aesthetic culture,’ i.e. dilettantism, explicitly declaring the separation of epistemological research from ethical or ethical-religious research:

Dilettantism [...] is its own confutation, and can be contrasted using the same objections raised by Pascal against libertines in general. [...] Dilettantism has more to do with epistemology than with morality [...] some thinkers (Basaillers, etc.) have already drawn similar teachings from Bergson [...]. This can be legitimate when referring to artists (although every great work of art is a synthesis), and specifically, dilettante, fragmentary artists. As a moral conception it is confused with the various forms of eudaimonism. Now it seems to me that Kant’s criticism of it is conclusive (letter to Casati dated July 19, 1908, in Carteggio, III, 1, 95).

The pursuit of essentialist research (immediately linked – as will happen with European Expressionism – to the pivotal theme of anguish) hinges on the Spanish mystics (in particular, Saint John of the Cross) as the expression of an ascesis that – far from the ecstasy

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32 Significantly, the same reason was at the basis of his refusal to move to Florence. Cf. letter to Gallarati-Scotti of 1906, in Carteggio, III, 1, 6: “I suddenly felt what Florence would mean for me: – A subtle atmosphere of intelligence, that would educate me to the fine arts, somewhat pagan, like all things beautiful, clear, and certain. [...] Then I thought about the religious sentiment that I have so far wanted to be at the center of my soul. There would be no room for that in Florence.”
34 Papini (in Testimonianze 90) would describe Boine’s journey as “the frantic groping of a dying man on the iron wall of the absolute.”
35 As regards Kant being taken as reference by both sides (we will return to this in more detail when discussing Slataper), consider what Giovanni Gentile wrote at the very start of the century, in Il modernismo 102-3: “Eucken [...]. I completely agree with him in recognizing that Kant’s subjectivism, as regards knowledge and morality, is quite different from Protagoras’ individualism. But I beg to ask: was Leo XIII entirely mistaken in considering Kantianism a form of skepticism, if even Eucken, while opposing this idea, places the thing-in-itself so far back as to make it inaccessible?”
36 Cf. Boine: letter to Soffici dated May 10, 1908, in Carteggio, IV 46: “And I have concluded that a true, full life is not possible without the constant awareness of this anxiety that affects not only me; but all men and all things.”
37 Cf. Mercedes Gonzalez de Sande, La cultura espanola en Papini, Prezzolini, Puccini y Boine.
and noluntas of the Middle Ages – reaffirms the irrepressible ‘scandal’ of the transcendence of God and the efforts of man who aspires, through will, to its possession and even identification: “one fundamental character [...] separates them from all previous mystical literature: while the former mostly tends to express the joyous effusion of spiritual life and describe the delights that God grants to the troubled souls who turn to Him, here the feeling of anguish returns continually and insistently, until it alone prevails” (Boine: “San Giovanni della Croce” 240-1).

The ascent towards God becomes “leaping out of the world of sensible things” (249), a tragic aspiration, because (and here we can already see much of the ‘major’ Boine) such an attempt, which man wants to accomplish through his agonistic will, proves impossible without the intervention of something outside of man, which however, though elevating him, leads him back to his passiveness: “When a religious man tries to resolve this dualism [...] his forces are not enough, that there is some external force that aids him, that in view of this force his soul remains passive” (254). It is precisely man as temporality yearning for eternity that Boine presents – addressing the same issue as Unamuno’s Don Quixote – as the predicament of the mystic. In the early 20th century, however, this predicament is also a historical one, since it reflects the cultural problems that are confronting the Modernist generation. With the collapse of the great ‘social’ metaphysical constructions (reflections of

37 On similar grounds Boine rejects Molinos’ ‘quietism’. Cf. “San Giovanni della Croce,” in La ferita non chiusa 244-5: “the devout man should be absolutely indifferent to all things and passively submit to the mysterious, silent action of the Lord. [...] Molinos abandons himself wholeheartedly to the infinite god: John of the Cross instead, wants to possess him: all his renunciation is pervaded by a prodigious need of possession.” Cf. Tuccini: Voci del silenzio 78-9: “in Molinos [...] the solutions proposed are always conciliatory and do not incite to fight [...]. Of the same opinion was our friend Giovanni Amendola, who in Etica e biografia went back to these concepts to dialectically declare that «By distancing himself from the Catholic truth, Molinos moved closer to the error of the Protestants: indeed, surpassing them, he lost himself in the most blatant Alexandrian paganism, and even in the religion of the Brahmins” (the quote from Amendola is on p. 115 of Etica e biografia).

38 Cf. Agamben: “Introduzione” a Juan de la Cruz: Poesie VI: “the final experience is the purely negative one of a presence that is in no way distinguishable from an absence.”


Cf. also Amendola: “Il serio nel Sud,” in Prose, no. 3, April-May 1907, 188-90.
Cf. Amoretti: 6: “They loved Don Quixote; in him they saw not the representative of a satirical, burlesque mentality, but the glorification of madness, in Don Quixote they celebrated true immortality, the poet of dreams and imagination, the knight of the ideal.”

40 Sorel: La religion d’aujourd’hui 9: “In most modern buildings, the excessively geometric shapes destroy all life. The religious man does not understand life if not by referring it to a power greater than the nature with which he can establish a relationship.”
a ‘social pact’) the ‘ought-to-be’ becomes the ‘duty’ of the subjective consciousness of the individual who experiences with anguish and nostalgia the breakdown of the bond between the finite and the infinite, and who is equally distressed – from the point of view of religious thought – by the teleological aspect that indicates a transcendent purpose. In the words of Unamuno (translated by Boine) published in Rinnovamento: “we cannot understand life unless we consider it in the light of a transcendent purpose […], this despair […] I believe we should deal with it by accepting it, not by fleeing it. The remedy to this despair, source of all pain and spiritual disquiet, is in despair itself, is in wrestling with the mystery, wrestling with God, as Jacob wrestled with the angel, until the day of our death” (“Della disperazione religiosa moderna,” in Intelligenza e bontà 21-3). This is a tragic positioning, which, leaving behind any ‘conciliatory’ intent, “presupposes the Either/Or of Denmark’s Frater Taciturnus” (Gioanola: in Contorbia: Giovanni Boine 129-30), recalling the “Kierkegaard function” (so widespread in the cultural milieus of the early 20th century) which views the demonic (the dia-bolic) as giving up the search for a sound presupposition, a meaningful goal to strive after, a romantic journey back ‘home.’ If Unamuno’s quixotic agonism looks to a faith that, feeding on despair, is marked by a sense of immortality that denounces every ‘immanentist’ solution, Boine’s preference for the Spanish mystics already presents (as will be the case in L’esperienza religiosa) the image of a God “without form and without end […], an immense, boundless desert” (232) which is both the value and the absurdity of religious

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41 This, as said, is a fundamental point that is shared by both sides: the appeal to the ‘primacy of conscience.’
42 Cf. Boine: “Miguel de Unamuno, in Il Rinnovamento, 2, 1908, in Il peccato, Plausi e botte, Frantumi, Altri scritti, 345-6: “A strange religion is this, that teaches mad bravery and renunciation while placing in our hearts a thirst for immortality.”
43 The link between Kantian ethics and religious thought, for example, is very clear to Unamuno: ‘Della disperazione religiosa moderna,’ in Intelligenza e bontà 19-20: “To believe in God is first and foremost to want God to exist and to act as if God existed […]. And if from the early Christians we go to the last of the great Christians, Kant, tell me, does the passage from the critique of pure reason to the critique of practical reason recognize any other intimate motive, any other cordial motive, life motive, besides this of consolidating the hope in an immortality of the soul? […] this insatiable what for?”
45 Cf. Unamuno: “Della disperazione religiosa moderna,” in Intelligenza e bontà 24-5: “This uncertainty is the inner mainspring of our life. […] to spend one’s life investigating, with no hope for a solution […]. Faith, real faith, the faith that feeds on doubts, comes from despair.”
thought as compared to concept-making secular thought, but which is also – historically – the point where they meet on the new cultural terrain of the start of the century. Philosophical thought’s condemnation of secular thought46 is the rejection of any form of compromising immanentism (“to fight the unquenchable thirst for delight that burns inside man,” 242) or of any positive result, but is also the “unhealed wound” of one admitting his impotence before the ‘scandal’ of transcendence: “Whoever turns to Saint John of the Cross “as to a spiritual guide in which to find some soul-filling enthusiasm of love, feels an icy breeze against his face” (225).

The dialectic between reason and faith on the historical ground of the new immanentist conception of reality is also the subject of Boine’s analysis in his 1908 essay on Servetus and Calvin: “An important aspect of Servetus’ doctrine is precisely his emphasizing the human reality of Jesus, [...] the modern designation of «historical Jesus»” (“Serveto e Calvino,” in Il peccato 356). Boine’s siding with Calvin against the ‘tolerant’ Servetus denotes a double (philosophical and social) movement that will become a key element of his later speculations: on the one hand – as mentioned above – the unavoidable trope of transcendence requiring a space of its own in the sphere of philosophical thought; on the other, the need (soon to become a “tragic impossibility”) to apply this trope to the actual scope of social life: “A man of that sort could not content himself with writing books [...]”: truly religious men feel that there is something more important to do in the world, that is, to transform mankind. [...] the author of Institutio must have envisioned for quite some time «a city of God» to be built on Earth” (364-5). Calvin’s attack against the Servetian heresy stands as a barrier against rampant “sixteenth-century skepticism”47 (to use Boine’s words) which, in

46 Cf. Boine: “San Giovanni della Croce,” in La ferita non chiusa 221-2: “if you come across a man who quotes Plato or Aristotle [...] you can definitely stick him in Menendez’s classification, but don’t think of putting him next to St. John of the Cross.”
47 Extremely interesting for the purposes of our discussion is that, in 1913, Boine identifies a Modernist conflict in the philosophical clash between Montaigne and Pascal, at first remarking on the appearance of “a new kind of men who no longer believed in either Calvin or the Pope” choosing a “frivolous, skeptical [...] pacification,” and immediately after observing that “Pascal’s adversary [...] is, on the one hand, Cartesian philosophism, but more often and more fundamentally Montaignian libertinism.” In Boine’s view the “Montaigne” side and the “Pascal” side are personifications ante litteram of the culture clash under way in the early twentieth century: skeptical
its attempt to reduce the tradition of faith to mere humanism, uproots the ancient social bonds that are its product and its reflection: “for Calvin, leaving the heretics unpunished meant permitting the disintegration of the community” (366-7). Boine views the lack of a sense of anguish relating to transcendence (the lack of a sense of ‘sin’ attributed to Servetus) as the dawn of a modernity that impedes “through a false spirit of indulgence the progress of truth itself” (361). In other words, Boine places the search for truth in the field of immanence where contradictions can and do arise.

This is where the speculations of the ‘major’ Boine emerge. First appearing in 1910 in his Foreword to the Monologion of St. Anselm, they are given a better systematization (if such a term can be used for an author like Boine) the following year in his essay L’esperienza religiosa: “Faith and Reason. Two opposing poles, two realms in battle. [...] two enemy principalities (the inflexible, mysterious domain of God and the peaceful, mystery-free realm of Man) in which is condensed the history of Christian thought from the Greek Fathers down to ourselves. And I mean the history of all thought” (“La ferita non chiusa,” in Il peccato 385). Boine’s analysis, which he places from the onset under the aegis of the figure of Sisyphus, posits an inexorable hiatus between the two realms: the realm of man, the domain of thought and reason, is ever troubled by the presence of a transcendence which it is unable to account for, while the realm of God – far from representing pacification epistemology on one side, moral rigor on the other. Cf. Boine: “Il vero Montaigne,” in Il peccato e le altre opere 379-80.

This is also what Boine will attribute to modern fideism and modern pantheism in his article “Calvinismo e fideismo.” Cf. Sorel: La religion d’aujourd’hui 17: “One of the serious consequences of pantheistic tendencies is the continuous elimination of the doctrine of sin; [...] it is noteworthy that Protestantism has gone even further than Catholicism, scandalously denying the tradition of the Fathers of the Reformation.”

Boine: “La storia della filosofia italiana di Giovanni Gentile,” in Il Rinnovamento, II, 411-2), in Da Anselmo d’Aosta a Bergson 139: “All very religious men have always strongly felt this intimate principle of evil that torments us, and have therefore placed the divine outside themselves; and all the great religious renewals, among which the Reformation, rose from a suddenly restored sense of sin.”

The essay was published in book form by “Cultura dell’Anima” only in 1912, but appeared in La Voce on March 23, 1910.

This is what Ezio Raimondi also noted about his linguistic strategy. Cf. Prime lezioni 182: “to prevent the reader from abandoning the movement of thought and adapting to a leisurely, unconcerned pace (as acutely observed by Spitzer with regard to the language of Péguy).”

The essay was published in a special number of the review L’Anima directed by Papini and Amendola. Cf. De Guglielmi: Per una storia dell’ “Anima,” in Studi di filologia e letteratura, VI, 1984, 319-341.
– is the domain of a Truth that has no form because it can not (can no longer) take shape in the works of man, although that is where it is intended to appear:

God has placed on every man the mark of his domain: on all men. And they walk the earth like slaves branded with fire: the slaves of God. [...] A violent enslavement of which common man knows nothing and religious man is rarely aware; but those who, because of a greater inner complexity, stand, so to speak, on the border between these worlds, the profane and the sacred, know fully well the anguish of these bonds. [...] How to express the oppression and the agony of religious souls? For them, the world is strictly divided into moral categories that will never change: the truth proceeds solemnly along a single road [...]. Yet, beyond the set boundaries, they sometimes perceive, or think they do, the possibility of other categories, other highways, other multiform ends. They have in them a sort of springtime commotion of desires (“La ferita non chiusa” 386-7).

Boine’s drama is historical (the theoretical-social issues that he deals with are those of his generation). However, unlike religious modernism, Boine does not apply critical thinking to the tradition of Catholic thought, but rather starts from the latter to discuss ‘constructive’ (and in particular idealistic) contemporary thought in an attempt to overcome its aporias, while rejecting the skeptical-epistemological position, which however he acknowledges as the dominant one: his theoretics – born from the sense of frustration of reality and of objective logic (the “imminent ruin” at the beginning of the short story La città) – is a clear sign of this. As Amendola (a key figure for the “Vocian moralists”) in La volontà è il bene directs his speculation to exposing and overcoming the rift that has opened between ethical life and religious life, preserving the logic of idealism as well as the extra-rational element symbolized by the Modernist sense of a divide between the particular and the universal that opens in the subjective consciousness, thereby recognizing in Kant’s moral inhibition the restraint which the subject applies to the “living multiplicity” (Amendola: *Etica e biografia*

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53 Cf. Tilgher: *Ricognizioni* 107: “he records the mystical experience in the terms of the Italian culture of his day.”
54 It seems significant to me that he refers to his greatest work using the Jamesian expression “religious experience.”
55 Cf. Amendola: letter to Boine dated September 3, 1910, in *Carteggio*, IV 194: “to represent an idealistic and religious trend which on the one hand continues the *Critique* in being idealistic, but which surpasses it, denies it, and possibly replaces it in being religious.”
Philosophy *illuminates* history, it becomes history itself, to the point of convincing us that the history of philosophy is the necessary genesis of Hegel’s philosophy [...]. This is colossally, terribly logical. But one would think that it is *too* logical, and that, next to this, a story that were less organic, less ideally abstract than thought, [...] might suggest a closer analysis of the real position of idealism vis-à-vis religious transcendentalism. [...] And it is this imperfect, complex humanity that we should be interested in, actual men, chaotic and contradictory [...], and it is again St. Anselm who says that with his *Monologion* he intended to prove the truth of religion «with absolutely nothing having to be supported by the authority of scripture», with everything asserted «according to the necessities of reason» [...]. This is where idealism was born. – But what St. Anselm then encounters in his free flowing inner development [...] is not the liberation from dogma and the transcendent; but dogma itself, the existence of God [...]. Dogma, faith, are entangled in reason [...], the intelligence of man extends into the breadth of God, and his heart fills with delight. [...] the god that will be Spinoza’s and Hegel’s. – But suddenly, here is the terrible God of Israel [...]. An extra-human God who will be the master of all things in man and who will impose as a conqueror his laws and conditions: dogma and faith. – With one and the other concept both trying to intermix and mingle with the development of reason, without ever succeeding (“La ferita non chiusa” 389-93).

For this Boine, it is the emergence of the Modernist chaos, rather than the death of God, that is an attribute of God: in Boine, the God who has died is only the one who ensured the philosophical-social order, indicating a common *Kultur*, canceling out all empiricist subjectivism and giving meaning to discordant particulars (which idealism now pretends to do, but can not do, or rather can *no longer* do):

religion used to mean something much more complex and solid, something that was decidedly outside the individual: something *objective* [...]. Religious life was not (is not) what I live, what I add of my own [...], but the little of mine and the lot of what others have lived over the centuries [...]. Religious life was tradition, [...] living religiously meant canceling my empirical individuality [...] in favor of what is more real than myself, [...] it was thus the logical life [...] ; it was the repudiation of the

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56 Cf. Amendola: letter to Boine dated May 9, 1911, in *Carteggio*, IV 232-3: “The will, or the ethical category, is the form of the concrete personality [...], if I feel that I am a *form* (an ethical man) [...] if I want to act ethically, I must look not to spontaneity, but to inhibition, which is the inflexible law that cannot be avoided.” The fact that Amendola defines ethical man as a “form” says a lot about the Italian participation in the contemporary issues being debated throughout Europe, once again supporting the conclusions put forth by Garin in *Cronache di filosofia*.

57 Cf. Gioanola: “Il mistico senza estasi,” in Contorbia: 1981, 132: “it is the perfection-God guardian of perfect order, it is the reason-God guardian of inexorable logic, it is the just-God guardian of the law, it is the goodness-God guardian of morality.”
empirical [...] the repudiation of vague, sentimental subjectivity in favor of the objectiveness of tradition (“L’esperienza religiosa,” in L’esperienza religiosa e altri scritti 101).

What still resists (for the time being), however, as an “unhealed wound,” is the god that marks the fracture (the contradiction!) between himself and the order created by mankind and Reason. Boine points out the historical breakdown of the civilization/culture of logos while keeping his eyes fixed on what is being lost, for the scandal of transcendence that marks the irruption of the chaos of values in no way diminishes his admiration for the constructions of Reason, for the ‘ordered’ works of mankind (which he will call “the Code”) which, inasmuch as they are a barrier against chaos, are also ‘religion’: “honest, sincere effort of those who did not play with reality” (“La ferita non chiusa” 394). Boine’s constant wavering “between order and chance, between law and revolution” (Tilgher: Ricognizioni 109), which Fausto Curi, recalling Lucien Goldmann, called “a tragic dialectic,” is the sign of a fracture between Logic and Tradition at a time when (with the eruption of an irreconcilable subjectivism) the past social cohesion – in the eyes, of course, of an author who looks with nostalgia at the writers of the reactionary right, such as De Maistre and De Bonald – falls apart, leaving behind an atomized social fabric in which the ‘particular’ element (the human element) is no longer able to relate to what should give it meaning and truth, letting itself be reduced (as in William James’ notable essay) to a psychological experience:

Logic and Tradition [...] are, or tend to be, one and the same thing (the steadfastness, the solid compactness of reality, that which does not change in the illusion, in the error that shifts and changes [...]. In other words, the one tends to become perfect and fulfill itself in the other [...] they have this in common [...] that they are not individual [...]. Authority is as objective as reason [...] it tests the truth of this or that

58 Cf. Boine: letter to Casati dated January 1, 1912, in Carteggio, III, 2, 666: “Connestabile writes me asking «Why shouldn’t there be a luminous transcendence as well as the chaotic one? Why... Why...?». He hasn’t understood a thing and he is a fool.”

59 Cf. Curi: “Sul discrimine dei mondi,” in L’esperienza religiosa e altri scritti 13: “Between “world” and “spirit”, between “positive religion” and “religious experience”, between “tradition” and “god”, between “concept” and “feeling” [...] Boine does not choose, although he would like to, so that, if one understands correctly his arguments and the quality of his style, one would be almost tempted to believe that only a hermeneutics (or a semiotics) of perplexity could be of avail.”

60 And this also explains Boine’s interest for a writer like Mistral, with whom he also corresponded in 1905. Cf. Scritti inediti 25: “In Mistral there is a great calm.”
particular experience against the tradition of the church. [...] That is why in the past the stronghold of experience (of faith) was reason, was, openly and honestly, syllogism and philosophy. [...] Now, instead, the stronghold of religion is experience [...]. Debating on the truth of religion has become a matter for psychologists (“L’esperienza religiosa” 102-3).

However, the fact that the effort towards universality must now be made by an atomized subject (a subject who, lacking any common social Kultur, can only focus on the relationship between consciousness and transcendence)\(^{61}\) does not mean that Boine starts (as some critics have argued) from philosophical principles derived from Nietzsche and Bergson (the inexhaustibility of life, life as an unamendable flux, etc.)\(^{62}\): for Boine, those principles represent the theoretical acknowledgement of a historical situation that at this time he intends to oppose. And it is for this purpose that, overstepping the ‘conciliatory’ options of Modernism (pragmatism, Mach’s empiricism, etc.),\(^{63}\) he turns to Hegelian idealism as the secularized instance of one who has sought being in becoming:

Reason is filled, reason is packed with all the multiform, dark, deep reality: throughout reason circulates life. [...] Nothing that lives in the soul of man gets left out or lost; the reduction of religion [...] to the composed clarity of philosophy [...] in Hegel is not diminution, rarefaction. The concept is extended to all [...] of life [...] it comprehends and harmonizes life, it does not constrict or reduce it: the concept is tangible universality. [...] such intimate religious vigor [...]. Here is the infinite in the finite, eternity in time, and finally reality, all of it present in every single moment. And here is man feeling like one who had been driven away and then called back, confidently taking back all his possessions. [...] All of my acts are complete, everything around me is secure [...]. And so I sing with full voice the song of reality, the tangible reality that surrounds me; [...] because now it is inside everything, inside meaning, the spirit [...], the fundamental value; [...] I do not seek a outside Law with which to harness them, for they are laws unto themselves (“L’esperienza religiosa” 115-8).\(^{64}\)

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\(^{61}\) Giovanni Gentile: *Il modernismo* 61: “The scholastic knows God; the modernist recreates him in himself [...]. That’s why intellectual constructions are provisional interpretations originating from the general system of intellectual culture.”

\(^{62}\) Cf. Tuccini: *Foci del silenzio* 64: “Boine’s was a religious disquiet that was rooted in Bergson.”

\(^{63}\) Cf. Boine: “L’esperienza religiosa,” in *L’esperienza religiosa e altri scritti* 107: “The semi-religious man, the modernist of all religions [...] the philosophizing believer [...] nowadays comfortably settles down in these semi-philosophies [...], a balance between Mach and Peirce.”

\(^{64}\) Cf. Boine: letter to Casati dated August 22, 1910, in *Carteggio*, III, 1, 454: “a sentimentally religious man can even nourish himself with Hegel.”

Cf. Boine: “L’esperienza religiosa” 122: “The fluid renewing of the world enters, wants to enter like a fever, [...] into the fixity of logic: Hegel drinks deeply of the flowing life and fights against the rigidity of the abstract, wants to set it in motion, to make it liquid and warm.”
But: “And somehow, anguish has risen in me again! [...] Things [...] throw shadows again, [...] reality draws back [...]! I feel a thirst inside me, deep inside, and outside the incompleteness of all things” (“L’esperienza religiosa” 119). Life rebels against the dialectic, the historical concreteness of the individual subject accuses the generalizing arbitrariness of philosophical concepts: “But the individual is like a messenger, like an outpost, the herald of a barbarous people, of a new people making its way forward, of a law that is not ours being imposed on us. [...] Against the infinity (the universality) of the concept, stands the inexhaustibility of life, the mysterious, inexhaustible surge of life.” (“L’esperienza religiosa” 126-7) Being (in regards to which Boine maintains the identification with God) retrocedes to pure Transcendence, and becomes inept (which it was not in St. Anselm) to ‘save’ man from becoming aware of the inconsistency of reality. Boine says that it is the “religious sentiment” that rebels against the ordering capacity of the ‘concept’: “here, in this anarchic torrentiality of life, lies the bottom of religion. [...] I am, outside of morality, I am, outside of reason, outside of all that is order and system, contact, monstrous love of wraiths for chaos, love for that which is not. I call religious everything that goes against the current through feelings, towards the inexhaustible” (“L’esperienza religiosa” 134-5). In Boine, as said, God does not die: he remains to point out the rift that has opened between Himself and reality (He is called “absence of mode”), the painful goad of Being in the human history of Forms and Codes: “like the source of a river, it lies far behind, it is hostilely at the back (not ahead like a coveted goal, like a well-defined border) [...] we flee before God, and God frighteningly pursues us” (“L’esperienza religiosa” 137). And this is of course the origin (also in Boine) of the Modernist topos of the impossibility of naming, i.e. the inability of language, once it has lost the referent that gave it meaning and justification (the great Kierkegaardian

65 Cf. Boine: “L’esperienza religiosa” 124-5: “Both life and dialectics introduce motion in the body of philosophizing, but life is in the infinity of the particular [...]! I’m not saying there is a contradiction here, but life, in conclusion, is then something that can’t be grasped.”

66 Cf. Boine: “L’esperienza religiosa” 129-30: “The nature of thought is that of being infinite, total, universal, of bringing us to take hold of being altogether; but the nature of being is that of amazing us with the unlimited inexhaustibility of being [...]! God is boundless power with no limits.”

67 Cf. Boine: Scritti inediti 153: “that now shakes me, that now, out of the dark I am suddenly overcome by the horrible anguish of God.”
theme of “chatter”), to “grasp” (dominate) reality: “My anguish consists precisely in this (in this, precisely, is its ceaseless spouting), that I have no name, I am unable to name. Inside me, all through me, bellows an immense chaos that I must inform and know not how: all throughout me quivers the titanic effort of concrete definition” (“L’esperienza religiosa” 131).

But now things get complicated. They get complicated because in Boine the evident pre-existentialist anti-Hegelian themes (noticed by the majority of his critics) combine with an essentially historical-social fracture between Hegelianism itself and the everyday ‘doing’ of religious people: the ‘doing’ of the people who act according to the tradition that gives meaning to their own ‘particular’ activities:

what seems necessary to me is to look at the influence of Catholicism on our character, to look at how the moral and religious content of our Catholic tradition intimately and effectively permeates our broader Italian tradition. [...] Because of an ineradicable atavistic fear, our history has been centered on the pagan Renaissance, and this has been lazily and passively accepted by us. (Carteggio, IV, 35-3).

In fact, a response to the theoretical, pre-existentialist anguish was already contained in Gentile’s idealism (more than in Croce’s): “to think means to establish a concept. Without the universal, the very substance of the particular evaporates and vanishes before our eyes:

Cf. Boine: “L’esperienza religiosa,” 120-1: “Admitting the universality of the concept means implicitly admitting that the unclear, the unknown X [...] will fall below, however new and unexpected it may be, will be subjected to it, to the concept: will be permeated by the concept, will be rational. [...] the concept is like a down payment [...] on all the possible unknown.”

Letter from Boine to Prezzolini dated August 10, 1910. The letter would be published in La Voce of August 25, 1910, under the title Che fare? [What is to be done?].

Boine starts contrasting Hegel with Croce from a very young age. In fact, one gets the impression that some aporias of idealism are resolved for him in the passage from Hegel to Croce. Cf. “Taccuino 1909-1911,” in Scritti inediti 88: “It is not very clear to me whether in Croce logical knowledge is a truer and deeper form of knowledge than aesthetic knowledge. In that case, true reality would be the reality of concepts: individual things would disappear together with all the accidental things. This is basically the Platonic tendency. [...] Here too the particular in the universal. – But then it is true that the Platonists [...] buried the particular in the general. For them, man exists but not men.”

Cf. “L’esperienza religiosa” 123-4: “The wave of motion, still uncompleted in Hegel, settles here then [...] against well-placed dams? [...] Life, in conclusion, is perpetually renewed before us, within us, every day, but the forms of the spirit have been [...] fixed forever. [...] Croce, who somehow anticipated the flow, set a limit and an end to the uncertain progression of being: he sacrificed the incompleteness of becoming [...] to the concretely completed.”

This is what Renato Serra wrote in Le lettere 354: “a certain facility and scholasticism of formulas and resolutions, which cancels out almost every problem into one alone, and which denies and suppresses new difficulties at the very moment they arise (so that) the object of our impatience or perhaps of our moral distress is not seen by him and has already become, as if by an inescapable, predetermined arrangement, a game of words and formulas, so clear as to appear empty.”
even of the particular that is directly perceivable through the senses. In short, without thought one cannot think [...]. The truth of a given moment is, for that moment, a truth guaranteed by the same absolute logic that in a subsequent moment will guarantee a truth that denies the first one” (*Il modernismo* 176-7).71 Beyond the existentialist doubts, however, Boine, also identifies a fundamental aporia of Hegelian logic: its inability to elaborate on the praxis of history in a consequential manner to the point of converting it into contemplation, into the owl of Minerva. The action (a key term in Boine) of men is “injustice before the universe” (what he will call “sin”) but “justice before a given code” (*Scritti inediti* 190), i.e. justice that does not contemplate the universal *sub specie aeternitatis* but enters into the morality of tradition to draw from it (even against God) the moral motives of ‘doing’ (of a morality that lies in tradition) that tear pieces of Order out of the ‘confused’ reality:

Now how is it that many men who have been close to God feel the need to lead other men to him? [...] it is a marvelous thing this coming together of the absence of mode with action. [...] In fact, getting close to God, if God is absence of mode, requires tearing out one by one the things that make us different from Him. [...] And if the things that it requires are the ones that take place in time it will identify with the things of time, *determining itself* to the highest degree; hence infinitely distancing itself from God (*Scritti inediti* 50).

History cannot be reduced to a concept that contemplates it in an orderly manner and justifies it (nor, on the other hand, is it mere phenomenality): the history of man, once the bond with Transcendence is broken (and it becomes a demonic Totality that disrupts the everyday life of men)72, is like the effort of adjusting to Being which however negates Being itself73 (“sin”) without ever mediating between the two terms74:

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71 Cf. Gentile: *Il modernismo* 145: “having in mind precisely the unity of the manifold: that is, attaining in himself this higher logic, which is basically the logic of anyone capable of thought, regardless of the concept they may or may not have of it: and which is not at all contradictory; because being is equal to itself, and becoming is the being of becoming.”

Cf. Gentile: *Il modernismo* 62: “subjectivism, which transcends itself [...] does actually lead to the Hegelian absolute: to that absolute of which you, precisely by being the subject, are certainly not the whole reality, but an essential moment.”

72 Cf. Boine: “L’esperienza religiosa” 133: “And I believe that the grounds of true religiousness can be better represented by the image of the devil than by that of a guardian god.”

73 Cf. Boine: *Scritti inediti* 144-7: “Oh you impetuous wave of God that pervade and carry everything away with you. Let me pour you brimmingly unto those who thirst not and live content, and see all things one by one in sharp
I think that that is how it is and that we are condemned between order and disorder, between rest and motion, between fixity and flowing. They are two poles that are never reached: philosophy takes us towards one (towards fixity), religion towards the other. I have come to consider the religious moments of our activity as anarchic moments (of the greatest anarchy). Anarchy and hierarchy are together in reality, inextricably. We are forever condemned between one and other (letter to Amendola dated October 23, 1911, in *Carteggio*, IV 265).

Although acknowledging this irresolvable dualism (the core of his expressionist anguish), although acknowledging – that is to say – a reality Modernistically experienced under the sign of contradiction (acknowledging, Blondel would say, that we are not entirely at home in our own home), Boine tries to make a choice; he tries to lean on the Code, while never forgetting the failure that God represents:

With all my strength I would like to define and systemize [...] because the definite (the sanctity of what man has done) has for me a value infinitely greater than the whole murky sea of things not done, felt. [...] and it is the law that makes me firm and secure, not the fearful, ever-shifting darkness without law. I struggle from the dismay of God towards the certain compactness of reason: [...] bridge, suspended between Reason and God. [...] because the law is to get out of the Chaos, to build, to do, to make the world with our hands [...], to draw the clarity of the world out of fearful mystery [...]. Religiousness is the nascent disquiet, [...] it is the spirit peering over the forms [...]. Between form and form, through the cracks, through the fissures, through every form [...]. But, outside of God, but against God, the logic of the soul is one alone, it tends to be one alone, (tradition tends toward history) and of human activity (“L’esperienza religiosa” 131-7).

At this point we can better understand the powerful anti-modernist accusation (*Di certe pagine mistiche*) published by Boine in *La Voce* in that same year 1911, in the form of a

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74 Cf. Boine: letter to Amendola dated March 13, 1911, in *Carteggio*, IV, 225: “You distinguished between morality and religion but also harmonized them and placed them on the same line of development. Now I tend to believe that even moral and cognitive activity burst and spring one from the other.”

75 Cf. Boine: letter to Amendola dated November 12, 1911, in *Carteggio*, IV, 274: “I’ve made a distinction within myself: God and history are two different things. You can, you must worship history: I say that you can’t worship God. [...] Positive religions are not religious: they are tradition, they are almost entirely history. [...] Searching into religion, looking for a new order in God, is monstrous, absurd. Order is this that men have created: the only order possible, the only order that could, that can come from the abyss of God, is the one we are creating.”
review of a volume by Gallarati-Scotti, *Storie dell’amor sacro e dell’amor profano*. Boine’s criticism of sensualistic decadence (the real target is Huysmans rather than Gallarati-Scotti) is above all a criticism of the attempts at immanentist religious thought, meaning the attempts directed at mediating, by means of “a sweet, agreeable philosophy” (in *La ferita non chiusa* 29), between the trope of transcendence and human activity: “and with them we wanted to challenge the transcendence of God and the authority of the Pope. [...] we were immoral men. [...] we were a tumultuous, confused desire for life, blind life, and freedom [...]. We were not men, because to be a man means above all to possess a strong intellect capable of dominating the world and ourselves, of carrying it and ourselves forward along the paths defined by a full and real *Definition*” (in *La ferita non chiusa* 30). In his agonic approach, Boine begins to lay out the opposing pairs (starting with the basic one between “ambiguity” and “code”) that will soon inform his poetics, as well as his literary position (fundamental, as regards the bipartition of Italian Modernism that we are discussing, is his siding with Claudel at the time of the Soffici-Jahier polemic) and, especially, his political one: “We were following the worn-out road of revolutionary chaos, we were more or less unknowingly on the side of Rousseau [...], of colorless democratism” (in *La ferita non chiusa* 30). And so the words of Pius X seem to resurface as Boine, in the name of the Code, is poised to become (albeit for a few years only) the most important Italian representative of the anti-Modernist reaction.

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77 Cf. Boine: “Di certe pagine mistiche,” in *La ferita non chiusa* 26-7: “all around me religion was being thinned out, botched up, to bring it closer to the spirit of the world, to make it one with the world, [...] and I said: behold the mystics who are the opposite of you. [...] I tell you the mystics do not justify the immanentist trade-offs of your half-baked philosophies. The mystics believe in transcendence. [...] the mystics put God at a good distance from us, [...] they are witnesses of the blindness of the darkness of God [...], crying [...] that God exists, that reality exists, and that it is terribly adverse, terribly remote.”
78 Cf. Boine: “Di certe pagine mistiche,” in *La ferita non chiusa* 36-7: “behind the honesty, back there, concealed by the plain, frank honesty of our intentions, what an ambiguity of feeble consciences, what a disorderly, confused turmoil of ambiguous men and even more ambiguous thinking.”
79 Cf. Boine: “Di certe pagine mistiche,” in *La ferita non chiusa* 50-1: “That grants time and opportunity to pace phrases and sentences, to give musical lustre to sentences and phrases. (How fluent your phrasing is, how the sentences flow by, how they glide along smoothly! But can’t you see how turbulent and harsh life is, how it screeches and jolts, while you expect to enclose it in this fatuous, voiceless, colorless rhythm of yours! [...] nothing sharp or circuitous jumps out [...]. I want [...] to seize the tumultuous, the pithy, the definitely real rhythm with which to express life. Iron-hard mountain ranges, let the rhythm come from you!).”
80 Cf. Boine: “*L’immolé*,” in *Il peccato, Plausi e botte, Frantumi, Altri scritti* 452: “Péguy is too much alive and Christian to feel the tragedy of present-day Catholicism, Claudel... yes, Claudel is the most tragically, intricately lyrical spirit that Catholicism has had in centuries.”
III. “Stone by stone”

Although, as already said, scholars have rightly made clear that Boine’s cultural attitude can hardly be traced to a single unitary position,\(^1\) pointing out his continuous swaying between ‘regulatory’ and ‘rebellious’ stances, it can be noted how, from time to time during his life (Boine died in 1917 when still very young), one of the attitudes becomes predominant over the other. In particular, the “pole of order” appears to prevail from late 1910 to early 1914: from when Boine decides to go back to his birthplace, Porto Maurizio, to organize the town library with the help of a few local friends,\(^2\) to the time of writing his notorious *Discorsi militari*. Boine’s withdrawal from his modernist adventure in Milan is related to his decision to settle down in a provincial location and take up the role of an intellectual engaged in practical activities.\(^3\) This is also the time when his articles for *La Voce* become more numerous, underscoring his effort to become a ‘technician’ of culture, i.e. an ideologist: “here I have thrown out all the metaphysical and mystical remains that were still inside me and have become a *homo practicus*. [...] The golden castle I thought we had built together has fallen down, so I am trying to build myself a small house, humble and solid” (letter to Jacini dated February 11, 1910, in *Carteggio*, III, I, 354-5).

The philosophical speculations, far from disappearing, can found in the folds of Boine’s cultural production of political-administrative nature, that look at the religious experience as an eminently historical-communitarian phenomenon – parallel to what the

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\(^1\) Cf. Pappalardo: 86-7: “The Boinian subject is basically schizophrenic: on the one hand there is his «demonic» nature, his desire «for that which is not», his inexhaustible destructive spirit; on the other, his «being a man», the safety that comes from the actual reality of what exists, the strength that comes from «what is certain and clear», and it is the *law*. [...] continuous oscillation between anarchy and order, utopia and history, empty autonomy and sense of duty.”

Cf. Perolino: 79: “the two sides of Boine’s dialectics: the fall, corporeity, evil, the subconscious, on one side; and order, law, tradition, the community of one’s ancestors, on the other, are destined to subsist in an omnipresent antithesis.”


\(^3\) Cf. Boine: letter to Casati dated February 3, 1910, in *Carteggio*, III, I, 344: “I want to throw myself forward candidly, and seriously take up the minute practice of this little life: I want to be a provincial for real.”
“concept” expresses in philosophy, on which the tradition of a given place (and a given “people”) is built. Also by returning to ‘his’ Mistral (and it is worth remembering that 1910 was the year when the Associazione Nazionalista Italiana was created), Boine contrasts to the abyss of God the sense of a continuity with his people ensured by the persistence of a solid family structure (a patriarchal organization) as expressed in the relationship with the ‘land’ and with the local traditions: “Because you have to realize the anxiety and the anguish of a man who at some point has felt the need to fully understand the tradition of his country and place himself at the heart of it, so that it may not be lost, replacing his own fragile, perishable soul with the great soul of the people that never dies [...]. Yes, the anguish, the profound disquiet of men without history” (Scritti inediti 116-7). What emerges from the articles La crisi degli olivi in Liguria and Decentramento regionale appearing in La Voce is the rediscovery of a social-symbolic bond based on the idea of community as a common, superpersonal heritage (“religion”) that is embodied in the ‘land,’ the symbol that entails the presence of a community that produces it:

Stingy land, insufficient land over sheer rock cliffs [...] built by our fathers stone by stone since who knows when, for who knows how long. Stone by stone, with their bare hands, the hands of our fathers for centuries and centuries [...]! They did not leave us palazzi, our fathers, they did not think of churches [...] they tenaciously, laboriously, religiously built walls, dry stone walls like Cyclopean temples [...] to testify the victory of their battle for order against nature; [...] here each generation sacrificed itself for the next one. [...] and the sons sought to emulate their fathers with works that would last. [...] And the triumphant work of the race, of the whole race [...] it seemed greed of possession and was in the dark, torpid depths of the will, the conscience of a race, the strength of a race, the confident religion of a race. Our cathedral! (“La crisi degli olivi in Liguria,” in Il peccato 397-8).

84 Cf. Boine: letter to Casati dated June 1, 1910, in Carteggio, III, I, 406: “what a fragmented spirit does not have, is this never-changing rhythm, the outward sign of inner harmony; of something that is in the world of feeling what the system is in the world of concepts.”
86 Cf. Bo: “Omaggio a Boine,” in Contorbia: Giovanni Boine 11: “While Péguy’s talks and poetic tirades always find their natural settings, and he could address the world of cathedrals in the heroic days of the church of France, for Boine there was nothing, nothing except the religion of his fathers, the sanctuaries of Liguria, nothing beyond a humble faith tied to fixed dates.”
The religious *travatura* [bracing, truss] provided by tradition (language, customs, practices, faith, etc.) stands as an ideological resistance against the inexorable progress and advance of a capitalist-industrial society\(^87\) (of which Boine evidently sees the gradual atomization) which is contextualized in the semantic chain relating to the images of ‘flux’ and ambiguity. This is the non-dialectical contrast between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*, between organicity and disintegration, between being and appearing.\(^88\) The binary opposition is registered by Boine (a small-town intellectual and the last descendent of an impoverished family of landowners)\(^89\) in terms of a clash between Land and Money, between the solidity of the Land where every change is part of the continuity of tradition, and the unstoppable, rhizomatic movement of Money, significantly expressed through the metaphor of the ever moving sea:

> The mills in the valley are closed and the stores along the coast are wide open. [...] And money and money: [...] the wealth of merchants [...] But the tiny estates periodically die of hardships because the olive groves grow tired, and the city rich, the rich merchants, buy them and take them in. That is the law. [...] And this people of the sea that grows fat, the tribe of merchants that grows steadily richer. [...] this people of the sea, this tribe of traders, [...] take away the custom-houses, take away the barriers, even let the land die: they fear nothing [...]. Free trade, free fighting. [...] The souls of those who call themselves conservatives in Italy, who call themselves the heirs of the conservatives in Italy, are the hybrid souls of slaves to Money, the cunning souls of people who deceive others and themselves. They deceive the nation’s true conservative forces by serving the interests and working for the forces of ambiguity, the forces of dissolution (“La crisi degli olivi in Liguria” 400-5).\(^90\)

Like many authors of his day (Simmel, for one), with Money Boine symbolizes the collapse of epistemological certainties, or rather, the connection between the vanishing of those certainties and the instauration of the exchange value: only Land (the expression of a community governed by the principle of repetition) can assure ethical action ‘braced’ by a

\(^{87}\) Consider his resolute opposition to the refinery that the Olio Sasso company plans to build.

\(^{88}\) The clash between Land and Money described by Boine mirrors the clash between the People and the Bourgeois described by Jahier.

\(^{89}\) Cf. Boine: “La crisi degli olivi in Liguria,” in *Il peccato, Plausi e botte, Frantumi, Altri scritti*, 396: “my grandfather’s house. A house among the olive trees, [...] (oh the afternoons of my childhood when the plump, fleshy black figs and white figs were laid out on the parapet to dry in the sun [...] and I lay quietly in the shade, resting alone, listening; [...] is up for sale [...]. He was an old-fashioned man, a gentleman in his gestures, respected in the valley, a good owner of olive groves. [...] But then he married off his daughters, then the olive trees yielded no more. Afflictions, troubles, agony. And now they’re selling the house.”

\(^{90}\) Cf. Cacciari: *Icone della legge* 51: “The *Gewalt* of free trade releases the *jus publicum* from any positive relationship with the place [...], a universality disembodied from any land and any place.”
meaning that is such because it is communal, shared (not subjectivistic). The ideologization of the economical-social component connected with the Land becomes a unifying cultural center, opposed to the epistemological disintegration that reflects the atomization of society (that reflects the loss of “religion”). Boine understands that the transition from an economy based on immobile estate to one based on mobile estate involves changing the social relations that exist in society, and responds to this — consciously — like a Balzacian “knight of the sad countenance,” i.e. he responds along the lines of the most blatant romantic anti-capitalism, and in so doing undermines his position as a critic by choosing to take sides, on the one hand, with the landowners, and, on the other, with nationalism:

in Italy there is a Confederazione nazionale agraria and there is a Federazione interprovinciale agraria. They are large, vast, solid organizations. [...] in 1906 and 1908 they were hit by strikes that were almost revolutions; they ultimately won, settling widespread strikes to the benefit of all. [...] it is not an instrument of struggle; it is, outside all economic schemes, outside the vocabulary of economic schemes created by the flow and commotion of money, the defense, the organized protection of rights, the national organization of the centuries-old, sacred rights of the Land (“La crisi degli olivi in Liguria” 412-3).

The typical ideological rejection of a historical, class-based positioning (socialists and industrialists, as in Papini’s “Mammon and Caliban,” are thrown together as expressions of the reign of Money) inevitably leads Boine to depict the conflict on a purely abstract cultural level; a cultural level which, however, allows the proletarianized intellectual who has submitted to the circuit of productivity, the canonical illusion — consider the reference to “smart people” — of preserving a role:

91 Cf. Boine: “Taccuino 1909-1911,” in Scritti inediti 94: “In my opinion, the teachers giving themselves a socialist organization means ruin: let’s ignore the fact that the teaching of religion will no longer be possible with the elementary schools being taken over by the State; but it will mean the triumph of democratic anti-nationalism and of the anti-religious spirit.”
92 Cf. Boine: “La crisi degli olivi in Liguria,” in Il peccato, Plausi e botte, Frantumi, Altri scritti 411: “the life of the land is more sacred than us, than me, than you, it’s as sacred as the race, more than the race. [...] that doesn’t change, that doesn’t turn, and that lasts. [...] I say that the socialists, a population of city dwellers [...] should stay out of this.”

The distinction between Land and Money is clearly also a distinction between Matter and Spirit.
93 On this subject Piccone-Stella is still fundamental: Intellettuali e capitale. Cf. 17: “it should be noted that at least seventy percent of them earned their living by teaching [...]; twenty percent lived off private income, and only the remaining ten percent were already practicing a profession related to the emerging culture industry.”
money and land. There are two policies: one concerning money and one concerning the land. [...] Twenty years ago it was still possible to be fooled, it was still possible to believe in the famous struggle between capital and labor, [...] between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie [...] Now all smart people know that it’s about the reign of Money, about the rough play of Money, about the titanic convulsions of impersonal Money [...]. Socialists and industrialists are not foes at all: they are players sitting at the same table. [...] the one of Money, the one of the fluid, mocking, international life of Money; and the one of the Land, of the preservation of the Land, of the slow, secure, conservative, and tenacious life of the land; they are two poles, two fundamental trends (“La crisi degli olivi in Liguria” 403-4).

If, on the one hand, the reference to a block of conservative, pre-capitalist power94 (where, culturally speaking, the totality of things can epically shine in every fragment, where the particular is always justified by a universal) lays out for the people a role prearranged by the intellectual,95 on the other it sets the basis of an ethical-cultural action which, being universal (“religion”), is considered hostile to the bourgeois State but in reality is just a struggle that takes place inside it (industrialists vs landowners); and, finally – but it’s all the same movement – it creates feudal-like divisions in the social context (Boine’s racism is soon to appear) that it considers superior to class-based divisions instead of ideological residues still acting within them.96 Along this same line, the defense of the regionalist, particularistic identity (“in the region [Liguria is one of Italy’s administrative “regioni”] we find the sanity of the race and pure tradition and all those other things that Barrès says in which I firmly believe”) – the defense, on the cultural level, of a community ‘braced’ by tradition – conceals, in the battle between Land and Money, a clear idea of what kind of Nation to build, beyond any epistemological-social disintegration, on this bracing, on the unifying assumption of what Boine calls ‘religion’:

94 Cf. Carpi: «La Voce». Letteratura e primato degli intellettuali 139: “For Boine, the object is to call the conservatives to make a stand for the true pillar supporting the national tradition, the land.”
95 Here we must make reference to what Gramsci called “brescianesimo”: the intellectual perceives his own category, hence his own history, as being immune to the upheavals of history. Judging reality on the grounds of this history perceived as “uninterrupted,” he reduces it de facto to a naturalization.
96 Boine: Scritti inediti 122.
The great men of other nations jump out suddenly and reflect and condense millions of people as if they had been carried and delivered not by their mothers but by the people. [...] In Italy, instead, everyone goes their own way: everyone speaks their own words, sings their own song, does not follow or care about tradition. [...] But some sixty years ago there was a man in Italy who strongly believed in a single Italian tradition. Mazzini could preach the political unity of Italy because he believed in a deep-rooted tradition that could support it: [...] and it spread like an epidemic, proving that building a nation was really possible (Boine: *Scritti inediti* 119-21).

The historical discourse gradually move towards anti-historical solutions. This reflects the fact that the historical moment presents intellectuals with real, decisive problems which, although they experience them directly in their own affairs, they are unwilling to face on the immanent plane of historical dialectic because this would force them, on the one hand, to acknowledge their new functions, and, on the other, to take clear-cut, class-related positions:

their roots are deep in the land that their fathers toiled over, they are like plants rooted in the land of their fathers, [...] I say that it is this blind, stubborn, religious attachment to the land, the strongest beam, the firmest basis of our nation. Because this, I say, is religion, this is steadfastness, this is religious immutability, [...] beyond the mutability of today, beyond the changeable, hapless present is the secret reality of eternity. [...] And I say that without the religion of eternity, our nation will have no life (“La crisi degli olivi in Liguria” 406-7).

The more the canonical role of the intellectual is challenged, the stronger Boine (whose novel will be published in a magazine appearing next to advertisements for Olio Sasso, a brand of olive oil)\(^97\) refuses – and this is also underlined by his decision to become a ‘provincial’ – to give up the idea of culture as contemplation and possible solution of universal issues. Indeed, he believes that universality is what stands against contemporary bourgeois capitalism and the instrument with which it is destroying all universalities: money!

The controversy with the more orthodox among the Vocians (and in particular with the image of the intellectual as a technician proposed by Prezzolini) regularly erupts on several occasions between 1910 and 1914. The conflict regards precisely the tactical

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\(^{97}\) Cf. Boine: letter to Mario Novaro dated January 6, 1912, in *Lettera a Mario Novaro* 23: “All that to justify this somewhat shameful thing of selling as if it were an object made by hand and to be used by the body, which is, or should be, a reflection of myself, of my inner, thinking humanity.” The condition of poverty in which Boine finds himself because of the expenditures made necessary by his illness allows him to attribute to the disease part of the effects relating to the gradual process of commodification of intellectual products.
positioning related to the role of the intellectual: it has nothing to do with the political-cultural models taken as reference (Crispi, Oriani, Pareto, etc.), nor with the overall strategic objectives (the creation of an intellectual elite, its pedagogical function, etc.). While Prezzolini, following the teachings of Croce, advocates a liberal position against both the socialist and Catholic perspectives, outlining an apparently impartial role for the intellectual as a maestro for the technicians (and a technician himself), Boine envisions a connection between the nation-state and Catholicism in which the latter is, on the one hand, the cornerstone of a communitarian principle of aggregation (the Catholic soul of Italy), and, on the other, an ethical-social-political perspective aiming to restore the values shattered by modernity (hence Mistral, Barrès, Péguy). This position allows Boine to summarize the intellectual capacity of the educator, “that is, of he who takes it upon himself to interpret for the people the historical-spiritual institution of Catholicism” (Mangoni: Interventismo 10).

In short, Boine removes himself from the number of ‘declassed’ intellectuals through an ideological perspective which he considers ethically opposed to the one of Prezzolini (non-bourgeois!) but which in fact is a struggle inside the same bourgeois institutions that even in anti-Vatican Italy, with the growing socialist movement, look to the Catholic masses as a fundamental base of consent (these are the years of the Patto Gentiloni): “When you urge young people to occupy themselves minutely with technical matters, to prepare themselves and enter the cultural, administrative, and political life of their country, you are not only appealing to their intellectual capacities, but to their wills, their moral consciences, and more

\[98\] Cf. Boine: letter to Prezzolini dated May 10, 1910, in Carteggio, I 23: “He is the most resolute statesman that Italy has seen from the Seventies on.”


\[100\] Cf. Mangoni: Civiltà della crisi 107-8: “The philosophical debate was no longer at the center of Prezzolini’s interest, indeed, it was precisely because of his newly acquired Crocean position that he began to consider the organization of a cultural instrument of operational, positive, and practical intervention in the life of the country. […] for Prezzolini the ideal public of «La Voce» was no longer the limited intellectual class of the days of the «Leonardo», but a much broader middle class.”

\[101\] And Cardarelli, in that same 1911, wrote in La Voce that Péguy’s action aimed at interpreting himself in continuity with his ancestors and his race.

\[102\] Cf. Guglielminetti: La contestazione del reale 240: “Boine proclaims the need to give Italy an «awareness of its tradition» […] drawing attention to the «moral bracing» […] [taking] the «road», which is dear to all Vocians, «of a strong and lasting national education».”

\[103\] Cf. Boine: “Lettera ad un amico che si occupa di sociologia,” 1909-1910, in Scritti inediti 160: ““To educate.” I believe that I have never felt as I did tonight the greatness, the Christianity of this word.”
deeply, to their religious capacities” (Boine: “Che fare?,” in *Carteggio*, I, 34). For Boine, technical, ‘specialized’ knowledge and skills are not enough to ensure the education of the nation; indeed, they themselves represent the fragmentation of the social fabric. This education must be based on the acknowledgment of a unifying element (Land, Tradition, Race) that can put the community back together again, that is, a shared sensibility: “What really matters is this national unity and a deep, reflected consciousness of it [...]. Have these people never felt the anguish of those who, wanting to do something for the good of Italy, believe that no effort is durable outside of tradition, because nothing lasts unless it can harmonically fit in with all other things past and present” (Boine: “Che fare?,” 32-3). These are the same philosophical issues that were contained in the essay *L’esperienza religiosa*, only now they are seen from the viewpoint of the Code, i.e. the social and ethical presupposition, the moral effort of staying inside the limits of what is already ‘defined’: “I feel affinity for Catholicism that theologizes and dogmatizes [...]: calmly, permanently. [...]

I feel affinity for a jurist who establishes the hierarchical relationships between men and orders the world with a compass. There is something in common in all these things: there is the rigidity of a design imposed upon things and resolutely carried out [...]. It is the definite, the clear, the distinct, winning over the chaos, the fluctuating” (Boine: *Carteggio*, III, 1, 512-3).

Boine, as noted above, does not refrain from presenting the Code-side viewpoint as being the constant antithesis to what, in ‘Un ignoto,’ he calls the “multifarious contemporaneity,” the attempt made by art to give expression – Form – to the disconnect between Code and Life which he sees around himself (and in this line, and this is the true

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104 Letter to Casati dated October 13, 1910.
Cf. Boine: letter to Casati dated March 18, 1910, in *Carteggio*, III, 1, 375: “I have sung the infinite richness of life, but I imagined it as a painted horn of plenty. In truth [...] I need a system to put it in perspective and I need images, as many as necessary, but very clear, to portray it and help me find it. If being really does flow and I don’t have at least an embankment on which to set my gaze then I am lost.”

105 Cf. Boine: “Un ignoto,” in *Il peccato, Plassi e botte, Frantumi, Altri scritti* 151: “I say that this mixture has to have an expression.”
break with European Modernism, it will be the idea of the novel that will pay the price).  

However, he reaffirms, against the accusations made by Croce, the need to present in the field of art a conceptual powerlessness (the inability of thought to enclose life in concepts, the inability of subjective reality to serve as a basis for objective knowledge) which is essentially what should be overcome – (see his letter to Casati dated October 24, 1911): “this conceptual clarity turns into an imaginary verbal statement unless I look for it concretely, hesitatingly, inside myself. [...] It is insufficiency, the sense of insufficiency, that I want to express. [...] But what interests me is history, the universal in which the particular lives, of which the particular is the concreteness, from which it can only be separated in the abstract” (Croce: “Amori con l’onestà,” in L’esperienza religiosa 177-81). The conflict between life and form, and this cannot be stressed enough, passes onto the aesthetic plane also as a conflict between life and representation.

This is set out with particular determination in the short story La città, where the “heroic sense of lawfulness,” the need for “moral rigor,” and the “deep respect for all that is not individual arbitrariness, that is traditional institution” (“La città,” in Il peccato, Altri scritti 422) which characterize the protagonist, constantly contrast with the imminent ruin (““everything falls apart; nothing lasts any more!””) that the protagonist perceives first in the

106 Cf. Boine: “Un ignoto,” in Il peccato, Plausi e botte, Frantumi, Altri scritti 149: “I say that a novel, as inflated as you please, is a story, and a story is a romance; and I say that a novel forces us to represent and see our world in romances. This, precisely, is what I really don’t like: to see piece by piece [...] in little squares [...]. The world is not an orderly succession of things, thoughts, objects, actions with conclusive endings; a succession in space and time along the track of more or less logical syllogism.” In this regard see Benedetti’s essay on Boine in Primo tempo, no. 1, 1923.

If the bond between novel and the triumph of epistemology is indeed indissoluble, as maintained by Bakhtin, we can better understand why the ‘Vocian moralists’ opposed the genre.


Cf. Croce: letter to Casati dated April 12, 1912, in Epistolario, II, 10-1: “certain morbid tendencies that are gaining ground among the young, and that encourage all forms of vanity, in this Italy where there is so much work to be done. And that’s why I protested. [...] the new generation is neurasthenic and expects the impossible, and I am performing my duty which is to get it back on the ground of history and practice.”

108 Cf. Boine: letter to Casati dated October 24, 1911, in Carteggio, III, 2, 643: “You who made me prefer square-cut things where emotions have no role, who gave me a taste for systems and composedness, why did you not take from me this terror, this sense of the sacred, this awe for the new that I want to hide and that so distresses me? [...] I revere men who have put order in their world: even though I can see the cracks in their world, I revere them. Because making order is an enormous effort, [...] to think is to really give shape to this sorrowful chaos of the world [...] Even the feeblest thought is sacred, if concluded. It takes courage to conclude.”

109 It is worth noting that the city/country opposition (another aspect of the Kultur-Zivilisation conflict), which was so frequented by the authors of the early twentieth-century, is modeled on the same binary opposition that we are discussing in this paper. For a historical-dialectic analysis of the two terms we will have to wait for Gramsci.
city’s institutions and then in himself, reducing to shreds (to fragments) both his thought and – and we are back to the great European Sprachkritik – even his language: “a hopeless feeling of ruin deep down in the dark recesses of the souls […]. Thinking in him, the process of thinking in him was thus reduced to a series of jolts and convulsions; aphoristic […]. And they say that his manner of speaking at this point was disconcerting: full of bizarre constructions […]. A desire for moral and logical balance, and intermittent tumultuousness in the activity of his spirit: acute suffering. […] Lack of universality” (“La città” 422).

Reality as pure phenomenality without foundation produces the awareness of a nihilistic anguish in which reality itself – having no ‘bracing’ – acquires purely phantasmic traits which do not open up some vital area of freedom (which was the case for Palazzeschi and, in part, for Soffici) but are only signs – particulars having no link to the universal – that refer to nothing but themselves.\textsuperscript{110}

With no ideals, with no social regulations, with no religious intimacies. […] the Mass was a parade […]. And so it was that one Sunday, during his afternoon stroll, the impression of impending disaster erupted in him with all the intensity of a hallucination. And so it was that for several months he wondered if he had really gone mad or why the town did not collapse […]. Why then is everything holding up, built as it is over a void like a mirage […]: everything was resting on a void, with no foundation […]. Corruption was in the things, in this appearance of things, of institutions, of men who had no reality, who were but appearance (“La città” 424-6).

The last image that comes to the mind of the protagonist (and pardon the lengthy quotation below) is a compendium – one of the most complete to be found in early nineteenth-century European literature – of the themes regarding the epistemological and cultural Krisis experienced by a whole generation: no distinctions between the fundamental and the accidental, the impossibility of making moral judgments, the collapse of all logical hierarchies, the triumph of ambiguity, life without aim or purpose, the impossibility of meaningful experiences, the feeling of flowing endlessly, the decay of all rationality, the loss

of personal identity, the triumph of ‘chatter,’ the triumph of a “living matter” that refuses any kind of recomposition or Form:

And the city lived on; and the city unperturbedly flowed with its placid life of flesh. Then came the catastrophe. Even the last beam of his old spiritual edifice [...] came tumbling down [...]. The robust bracing of his world made of logicality, made of laws, made of skilful voluntary efforts, undermined, upset, and gradually disrupted by evil, [...] by then the image and the accidental had become essential to his thinking [...]. every firm logical connection, every scale of values by which to make judgments, by which to prioritize and order the world around him and inside him [...] collapsed. [...] good and evil were mixed together, the right and the wrong, the true and the untrue. The world blew like a storm in the night, in gusts [...]. There was no more law, there was no more order, there were no more rational explanations [...]. And then, little by little, the city – no longer judged – started to grow again before him, alive and real. The city unaffected by any moral or logical evaluation penetrated him. [...] and the city entered; inside him inertly began the multifarious history of the city as its was. The legitimate, non-moral history of the city as it was. [...] the world, vast and manifold, lived inside him [...]. Barbarically alive. Wild, overflowing plenitude of copious life as in a well-fertilized field, [...] shameful swelling of obese, greenish life, [...] a primordial triumph of turbid sap without form, [...] the world of chaos! [...] Something real, powerful, something like the unrestrained surge of the great springs of a river or [...] a confident force beyond all law, unaware of any law, a force with no orderly tendency for law. [...] a flowing richness, rolling up, down, back, forth through the streets of the city like a huge, swaying tide [...]. The city, without the anxiety of a consciousness looking over it [...]! Full of sunlight and full of the smell and the sound of the sea [...]. City full of chatter [...] empty-sounding life of the world [...]. Immoral, irresponsible, swaying aimlessly (“La città” 428-34)

For the time being Boine holds his ground. He continues to proclaim the ethical necessity of the Code, sometimes referring to the nostalgia of a now-lost ‘unitary’ past (in his article Il purismo), sometimes to the image of his 50-year old self who, having cleared away his doubts, can finally declare an unshakable Conversione al Codice.111 In Il purismo Boine shows once again that he understands the link between linguistic expression and philosophical-social issues, between ideology and language (together with Prezzolini’s Il linguaggio come causa d’errore, Palazzeschi’s poems, and Michelstaedter’s La persuasione e la rettorica, which we will examine later, this is the fourth example of the Italian way to Sprachkritik, a key moment in the emerging of Modernist themes): “behind linguistic purism

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111 Cf. Boine: “Conversione al Codice,” in La Riviera Ligure, September 1912, in Il peccato, Plausi e botte, Frantumi, Altri scritti 479: “I am fifty years old: could I topple the world? [...] I have decided that the Civil Code and the Penal Code will be my Bible [...] and every action of mine will be protected and justified by a clearly sanctioned section or subsection.”
there is a whole concept of life [...], that the *fatherland* is the town where one was born, and the true soul of everything is the religion ordered by Catholicism” (*Carteggio*, III, 2, 693-4). The search for a certain linguistic expression “conceals a philosophical system” (“Il purismo” 461): linguistic purism is the expression of a ‘word’ as the echo of the foundation by which it is determined and substantiated. If linguistic dissociation (remember the protagonist of *La città* speaking in aphorisms) reflects philosophical-social fragmentation/disintegration (i.e. reflects a reality in which ‘signs’ have lost their universal referents), the ‘puristic’ word characterizes instead its attempt to seek out its original etymon where it will find “its character of sacred eternity” (461), that is, the shared sensibility (“religion”) that gives universality to the particular, redeeming the disintegration of reality (this view is still oriented toward the pre-capitalistic world, and in fact one of the models taken as reference is De Maistre): “Ancient soul, ancient language. This is how I should speak because this is how they spoke when everyone felt as I feel. This is how we should speak because this is how we should feel. [...] The crusade for language is the crusade for morality and healthy thinking (or vice versa)” (462).

That same year, in *Conversione al Codice*, Boine finally settles the issue proposing the Code as a “dam” (and where there’s a dam there must be a ‘flow’) and ending, apparently (as said, this is a utopian dream that Boine projects onto his 50-year old self), the debate that had been launched with *L’esperienza religiosa*: “I will give the Lord, master of souls, genuflections and long recitations of psalms: – I will not allow Him to upset my heart. [...] I will defend my earthly individuality against the overwhelming, intrusive power of God. [...] I will be like the ancients [...]. I will be according to nature. [...] I will genuflect regularly, I will scrupulously recite the psalms prescribed in the current code of men, and

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112 Letter to Casati dated May 15, 1912. Cf. therein 690-1: “In any case I first want to rid myself entirely, honestly, completely, of my subjectivity, to sculpture it not as my own, as a concrete moment in the history of humanity. [...] Purism was an honest thing [...]. To be a purist one has to be a Catholic, and of the old style.”

113 Cf. Boine: “Conversione al Codice,” in *Il peccato, Plausi e botte, Frantumi, Altri scritti*, 481: “And therefore he who built the dam to stand safe against the swollen river I call him a man.”

114 Cf. Boine: letter to Casati dated November 7, 1912, in *Carteggio*, III, 2, 724: “My fifty-year old man is vexed and his heart is all in the human sea outside the code. Praising the code is paradoxical: here the reality is a good anarchy, but efforts are made to get out of it: efforts and tugs towards the quietness of law.”
having with me my code, the justification of a code stamped and sealed, I will live in peace”
(“Conversione al Codice” 486-7).

But at the start of 1914, while the war is looming and the various fronts
(Vocianesimo, Lacerbismo, Milanese Futurism) are temporarily coming together, Boine shifts
the terms of his position towards ‘biological’ extremes: he leaves behind – at least
momentarily – the rarefied space of nostalgia and utopia, and experimentally applies his
ethical generalization (the idea of a universal ‘man’ standing beyond and against all
contingencies) on the plane of a particular (the race, the army) which he posits as a universal
tout court. In particular, the racist discourse that he lifts entirely from Gobineau (whose Essay
on the Inequality of the Human Races he plans to translate)\(^{115}\) provides him with the
pseudoscientific basis for a ‘historical’ reading of his philosophical failure, of his inability to
finally settle on a determinate horizon of thought that can redeem and support what on the
phenomenal level appears to be a clash of ‘appearances’ and irreconcilable contradictions:

Once it is accepted that stability, the steadiness of social order, the fecundity of civil
life, depend, are tied to the steadiness, the compact organicity of this, all other hazy
speculations become unnecessary. We will have to come down to it. [...] The history
of the world is explained, is scrutinized through the moving, the fighting, the
overcoming, the intermingling of the various human races. And civilization is kindled
in this immense labor where the race is pure [...] civilization dissolves when upon
meeting the races themselves are dissolved and when different instincts cause
different individuals to fight or they themselves fight inside the same individual
(“Gobineau e la razza,” in Il peccato 520-1).\(^{116}\)

In Gobineau, Boine sees the historical-critical outgrowing of the purely nostalgic and
‘Platonic’ reading of society produced by De Maistre and De Bonald. If in these two authors
the references to the solidity of society (and therefore of thought) that lives in “mystical

\(^{115}\) Boine: letter to Cecchi dated August 9, 1914, in Carteggio, II, 124: “I suggest you read Gobineau [...] for whom
I have an abiding reverence.” Boine also translates a short chapter from Chamberlain’s Arische Weltanschauung.
\(^{116}\) Cf. Boine: “Gobineau e la razza,” in Il peccato, Plausi e botte, Frantumi, Altri scritti 518-9: “the race that is the
cornerstone of the history of the world, according to Gobineau, is the pure Aryan one, the white one, the only
worthy of the name of human, which, due to the large amount of crossbreeding with the black and yellow ones,
has been fouled and deteriorated [...] we have before us the fate (the insubstantiality, the dissolution) of all the
peoples stained by the feverish tabes of impure origins, the fate of Persia, Phoenicia, Greece, and Rome: a
syncretistic mishmash, barbarism, or the end. [...] Gobineau made it clear that the canker went deeper.”
organicity” within the “living soul of nations” (“Gobineau e la razza” 529) have a utopian, anti-historical connotation,\textsuperscript{117} in Gobineau (whom the Catholic Boine reads as a ‘racial’ integration of De Coulanges’ theories on “religion” as the buttress/bracing of society),\textsuperscript{118} the process of decline (clearly anti-Hegelian)\textsuperscript{119} is placed on a historical-scientific level. This, finally, becomes the ‘form’ (albeit defeated: but it is a historical defeat that comes across as a defiant ethical exception that gives its supporters moral superiority over the hegemonic option\textsuperscript{120}) of what Boine and his dissolving ‘organic’ world (the “Land”) are experiencing.

Boine tries to account for his aporias, believing, once again, that he is contrasting the modern bourgeois world – or the disintegration of it that he is witnessing – with a global conception of the world which of that disintegration presumes to be the logic (the form: tracing back all historical crises to the assumption of the race).\textsuperscript{121} However, philosophical generalization (the reduction of historical-dialectic conflicts to ‘natural’ elements) is no longer, at this point, an oppositional phenomenon (albeit of reactionary-feudal origin), but an integral part of an imperialist capitalism that has every interest in presenting all social differentiation in terms of pseudoscientific biological-natural assumptions (substitutes for religion suitable for all times). In other words, the ‘feudal’ criticism of bourgeois society fails to realize that it has now become a functional part of that same society, which ideologically

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[117]{Cf. Boine: “Gobineau e la razza,” in \textit{Il peccato, Plausi e botte, Frantumi, Altri scritti} 529: “In this respect De Bonnald and De Maistre were two unflinching optimists who not even the Revolution could bend. These are people who consider the revolution as not having happened, and who say: «this \textit{is} the truth» while they should be saying «this \textit{was} the truth». In other words, De Bonnald and De Maistre lack a sense of history, the very notion of history: – they are abstract builders of theories. And this is something that cannot be said about Gobineau.”}
\footnotetext[118]{Cf. Boine: letter to Casati dated November 1, 1913, in \textit{Carteggio}, III, 2, 789-90: “The first two have no sense or concept of history. They expose their theory as if they were illustrating a Platonic idea. They say: absolute monarchy is the immutable category of any human society. [...] In Gobineau you do find a sense of history [...] he explains why and how it will nevermore be like that. [...] in any case I went to vote. In the piazza I heard an idiot extolling the \textit{International} and I said to myself: the Giolittians, at least, are not \textit{Internationalists}.”}
\footnotetext[119]{Cf. Boine: “Gobineau e la razza,” in \textit{Il peccato, Plausi e botte, Frantumi, Altri scritti} 534: “the two theses complement each other.”}
\footnotetext[120]{Cf. Boine: “Gobineau e la razza,” 522: “it is certain that the optimists of the spirit, the Hegelians, are as sympathetic as they can be towards Darwinism as the spiritualization, or the approximate de-mechanization, of nature. In other words, philosophers of all kinds of different schools are generally in favor of Darwin and of his wholesale melioristic evolutionism.”}
\footnotetext[121]{Cf. Boine: “Gobineau e la razza,” in \textit{Il peccato, Plausi e botte, Frantumi, Altri scritti} 526: “the tradition of biblical pessimism that we find, for example, in Saint Paul, Calvin, Jansenism, and Pascal.”}
\footnotetext[122]{Cf. Lukács: \textit{The Destruction of Reason} 541: “The more these myths become militant in a reactionary sense and the more they become the direct precursors of the fascist myth, the more they become polarized in opposite positions and the more the whole, mystified history of life serves to illustrate the exclusive vital legitimacy of one «form» and the absolute reprehensibility of the other.”}
\end{footnotes}
leans on this feudal (or semi-feudal) reaction while class struggle is advancing. This is not the case – as Boine believes – of an alternative logic residing in ‘real’ social structures and stratifications, this is merely a formal logic that, although hinging on cultural myths that are fading away (the “Land”), justifies as ‘biological’ the ideological products of historical derivation, starting with the idea of a natural inequality of man: “in natural law, in nature operating almost objectively and unconsciously without ceasing to be history, to be spirit; and which in its recent formation [...] we have come to call nation; and which in its remote formation [...] it is fair to call race” (“Gobineu e la razza” 536). It is the foreign minister Mancini who, in 1885, stresses the “natural” character of colonial expansion; it is the racial subalternity of Italy’s Mezzogiorno that emerges, in this period, in many writings of former positivists; it is the ‘scientific’ animalization of the populace and of woman whose physical elements become the points of engagement of moral minorities; it is the reactionary use of Darwin’s theories; it is the recurring myth of the Semite, universalist and socialist by nature, already denounced by De Maistre himself. And, finally, it is the central topic of Boine’s Discorsi militari (the best-selling of all the books of La Voce), i.e. the grafting of the concept of race into the concept of nation, the concept of a ‘community’ that looks to the combination Code/Tradition/Race in its quest for a ‘logic’ capable of providing a social and spiritual connection, that is, beyond all philosophies, a corporative alternative to a ‘broken’ society: “I try here to set the logical grounds of military life and to use them also as the grounds for civilian life. I establish an agreement between army and nation, seeking out the ideal prerequisites for both; [...] philosophical/moral preconditions for a perfect national life” (“Discorsi militari,” in Il Peccato e le altre Opere 559). Nothing is left out of Boine’s stolid

122 Cf. Burgio: Nel nome della razza.
123 Cf. Urso and Miccoli, in Burgio. Cf. Boine: “Tre giudei,” in Carteggio, II, 359: “to waver, depending on whether they are mystics or politicians, as Péguy would say, between international humanitarianism and radicalistic democratism. From them, with Marx and Lassalle, we get socialism without a fatherland [...], their sympathies must almost naturally go to doctrines of universal brotherhood, of a human embrace between Nations, of coming together, of agreement, of compliance.”
124 Minore: Boine 88: “the editorial advertising for the Discorsi that appears in «La Voce» is very explicit. Boine’s book is described as «a heartfelt book of patriotism, where the Military Regulations are commented and explained, useful for officers, non-commissioned officers, soldiers, volunteers, and for propagandizing an army that is sound and aware of its sacrifices for the country. Military life is presented in its highest aspect and in ethical harmony with the social life of the nation».”
discourse, built on the repetitive pace of a military march\(^\text{125}\): the elimination of all individualities from the army, in order to enhance moral unity and unity of purpose and overcome the horizon of individualism\(^\text{126}\); the army as both a familiar institution and a biological organism; the army as the ‘bracing’ of tradition\(^\text{127}\); the army as the promulgation of the Truth of the State\(^\text{128}\) and as a space for eminently ethical action;\(^\text{129}\) an appeal to the respect for the Law, to the bond between the Fatherland and God,\(^\text{130}\) and to war as a natural necessity; an appeal to spiritual action\(^\text{131}\) and to the role of the intellectuals as custodians and guarantors of this moral unity.\(^\text{132}\) Finally, Boine proceeds to present, on the one hand, the aims of the war (and of the army in it) as allowing to overcome the class divisions that plague the nation,\(^\text{133}\) and, on the other, military life as an improved image of what civilian life should be:

> to show you that your present condition of military men is in no way at odds with what formerly was, and in a few years will be, your regular life [...]. In other words,


\(^{126}\) Cf. Boine: “Discorsi militari,” in Il Peccato e le altre Opere 563: “CONSISTS IN ENSURING THAT EVERYTHING OF YOURS, EVERYTHING YOU DO AND THINK, FULLY CORRESPONDS WITH THE MISSION OF THE ARMY TO WHICH YOU BELONG” (the emphasis is Boine’s).

\(^{127}\) Cf. Boine: “Discorsi militari,” in Il Peccato e le altre Opere 568-9: “the condition of being a soldier [...]. It is a privileged condition in which the detachment from all personal interests, [...] allows you to give yourselves completely to the highest ideal [...]. You have ceased to belong to yourselves [...]. You are men and you understand what greater value a NATION has compared to any INDIVIDUAL.”

\(^{128}\) Cf. Boine: “Discorsi militari,” 584: “Esprit de corps and human sympathy make us feel as though we had personally witnessed the deeds of those who preceded us in wearing the uniform.”

\(^{129}\) Cf. Boine: “Discorsi militari” 590-1: “you know that there are countless opinions but only one truth. [...] The state is like the awareness that a nation, a people, acquires of itself.”

\(^{130}\) Cf. Boine: “Discorsi militari” 595: “In the end, in extreme situations, action becomes COMPLETELY DISINTERESTED [...] MORAL ACTION.”

\(^{131}\) Cf. Boine: “Discorsi military” 598: “ULTIMATELY, WHAT IS COMMANDED BY THE FATHERLAND CAN NEVER CONFLICT WITH WHAT IS COMMANDED BY GOD.”

\(^{132}\) Cf. Boine: “Discorsi military”: “a nation is not basically made up of profits and losses, [...] it is alive, and has spiritual needs as well as material ones.”

\(^{133}\) Cf. Boine: “Discorsi military” 572: “Honest, intelligent people have concluded that freedom consists not in disorder, but in order, not in «doing as we please» but in «doing as we must», in other words that «freedom consists in conforming to and voluntarily accepting laws and regulations».”

And look at what Casati wrote to Amendola in that 1915, in Vita con Giovanni Amendola 231: “How could an army without a renewed prestige deal with an internal revolution?”
our honor is for us what the Fatherland’s is for the citizen” (“Discorsi military” 566-7).

*The army as the Nation’s most important begetter of order.* [...] In any case it is it that gives a masculine tone to the character of a nation. [...] From all sides comes a demand for law and order (“Discorsi military” 631).134

And he ends by quoting Gobineau:

In the words of an illustrious historian, Gobineau, practically unknown in our country [...] «the one and only necessity... does not admit for armies but one manner of organization: a hierarchical classification and obedience. [...] One day, it will be the only healthy part of the nation». [...] we are fully confident in the future of our people, we trust that the trial of this last war has tied it so closely to its army as to not allow that it should remain ITS ONLY HEALTHY, ORDERLY PART (“Discorsi military” 632).

And then, as emerges from many private letters and articles published in *La Voce* at that period,135 the monolith is shattered: the coalition for Life and ‘disorder’ (the nihilist coalition) finally prevails and does away with the dogmatics and hierarchies of values. In other words, Boine comes to recognize in what he had called “inauthenticity” the only persistent ‘natural’ reality of the world. There is, however, a common element that can be identified in Boine’s three moments: in all the positions he takes, what always dominates is both a differentiation between reality as it appears and reality as it really is (with the development of the customary opposing pairs), and the consequent idea that reality can be grasped by thought (i.e. by the intellectual) against a background of logical and, because it is eternalizing, non-dialectical nature (a formal logic): either Transcendence, or the Law-Code (produced by History as tradition – true – but by a History reduced to constant repetition), or the non-sense (nothingness) that underlies reality. In short, the history which the later Boine is about to

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134 On this matter, as we know, Boine borrows some ideas from De Vigny’s *Servitude et Grandeur Militaires*, but – and this seems significant to me – while in De Vigny the army is presented as a victim of civil life (the healthy part of the Nation that is disappearing), in Boine the army becomes that which will save civil life.

135 Cf. Boine: “Congedo,” in *La Voce*, July 13, 1914, in *Carteggio I* 242: “Because you will manage to be ethically universal in every moment of your life, and from now on I will be examining you like a rare creature [...] you will be able to be universally moral, while I can not.”
destroy once and for all (and we will see how) is always subordinated in him to something that was other than it, something that was in itself and for itself.

**IV. Toward the ‘Sea’**

The nuisance is that I won’t have time to find my balance and only my swaying will survive

Giovanni Boine

The collapse of the ‘bracing’ provided by the Code is bluntly announced already in Boine’s *Epistola al tribunale*, in which he defends Papini against Croce, and in *Salmi della vita e della morte*:

I am like a man who has lost everything and hopes no more; like a man who had built a house for himself and his loved ones, only to see it crumble. I am like a man who has put every effort in his construction, and suddenly all the beams come falling down. Now I am tired, who had built a safe house and called it «Order». [...] Like a useless skeleton, stiff, there stands (my labor! my trustworthy hope!) the beam of Order (‘Salmi della vita e della morte,” in *Il peccato* 488).

The novella *L’agonia*, which in my opinion is Boine’s finest narrative work, is where he draws all the consequences of the new nihilistic perspective.

The protagonist, under medical treatment in the Swiss sanatorium of Davos, experiences right from the beginning the canonical Modernist separation between himself and the world of reality, the distance from the object (the autonomy of the object) that reflects the

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136 Cf. Boine: “Epistola al tribunale,” in *Il Peccato e le altre Opere* 373-5: “one who suffocates in your absolute, in the healthy, clear atmosphere of your thought [...] there are people who suffer in the universality of your idealism; I mean in particular this idealism in which you and I are nothing. Right: they pass us for everything, for the concreteness of the universal, but in truth they don’t consider us at all; where you look for generalities but are flooded by categories. [...] He frantically muddles up the relations between things and their meanings, he calls black white, cries no to yes [...] he will make you fear that the crystal in which the chaos of the world is frozen will melt or shatter any day.”

137 Cf. Boine: “Salmi della vita e della morte,” in *Il peccato, Plausi e botte, Frantumi, Altri scritti* 488: “the solid objectivity, (the labored heritage) of my spirit that I thought immortal and fruitful has collapsed, crumbled (it has collapsed inside of me) [...] I too used to walk straight in front of the Law, [...] and now I am gripped by the pains of death and the laces of death.”
subject’s inability to give reality consistency and definition.\textsuperscript{138} This separation produces a nullification of reality, now perceived as an “airy factory of conceptual vanities” (500), and immediately after a nullification of conceptual activity itself, unable to put order in a world that has become protean, unable to give ‘form’ to reality and reduce it to unity of meaning: “The world escaped him through a fine mesh; an unstoppable flood was incessantly flowing over the square-cut dams” (500). In the first part of the story the protagonist’s mind is preserved thanks to the nostalgic bond with his hometown. The absence of his place of origin – the absence of the feeling of community (the Kultur) that it stands for – is seen as the root of his illness: in the mind of the protagonist, the absence of the ‘codified’ points of reference that his hometown expresses is at the basis of the epistemological imbalance that signals the alienation between conceptual activity and life.\textsuperscript{139}

Returning to his native village, the protagonist once again finds a communion with things, that is, he redisCOVERs a universal meaning underlying the multiplicity of particular appearances. However, he soon realizes that “his consciousness had become undone, loosened; there was no longer a fixed thought to occupy his mind, nor an organized effort to guide him towards anything, as it was before. An endless swarming, sprouting, of infinite atoms. [...] it was as if everything around him had been disintegrated, shredded” (503).

Nietzsche’s “anarchy of atoms,”\textsuperscript{140} Amendola’s “unbridled freedom of the particular,” indicate the final passage into the horizon of the Krisis (note the many images referring to reality perceived in its ‘fluidity’), i.e. the loss of all ability to create a hierarchical order and the triumph of absolutized ‘particulars,’ or, in Boine’s words, the “world seen from the side of

\textsuperscript{138} Cf. Boine: “L’agonia,” in \textit{Il peccato, Plausi e botte, Frantumi, Altri scritti} 498: “And now here against me (between me and my freedom) the heterogeneity of the boulder-object [...] He was taken from the experience of evil to the externality of the object. And it seemed to him [...] that in the sliminess of evil, beyond evil, he had touched the heterogeneity of the object.”

\textsuperscript{139} Cf. Boine: “L’agonia” 501: “The tepid ghosts of nostalgia (the elementary images of quietly vegetating in his home town) fused before him with the traits of the nature-object as if they were a kindly aspect of it.”

\textsuperscript{140} Cf. Boine: letter to Cecchi dated May 12, 1913, in \textit{Carteggio}, II, 30: “as for me, now that everyone is bowing to the philosophy of the whole and of Universal Reason, I am tempted to go back to Max Stirner and Nietzsche.”

Cf. Boine: letter to Casati dated April 25, 1913, in \textit{Carteggio III}, 2, 774: “As regards history I am now more on Schopenhauer’s side that on Hegel’s [...]. The spirit must be harmonious and unitary, but everything in me and in life around me is broken and contradictory.”
nothingness,” meaning from the side of an ambiguity, a contradictoriness, that is intrinsic and unresolvable:

And for him reality was now the atom, what was left of the thing, abstracting from its spiritual framework. [...] And this was the world seen from the side of nothingness: the perception of things in their elements, as if from the side of their unreal beginning, as if not yet completed, not yet manipulated by thought and spirit. It was as if he had plunged to a depth where there was no construction or effort; down where there was no good or evil, no yes or no, no true or false, in a drifting non-law. Delightful indifference. [...] inside him, like a voice in the echo, all delight was dying, leaving him in anguish [...]. Anxiety and disquiet beyond the vague rejoicing. As if something escaped him, was slipping from his hands (504).

And if “before however there had been an effort to fight the darkness, he had stood tall and shouted, he had seemed to stare down the instants, to harden them, to recompose them in the (vain?) eternity of ideas” (505), now there remains only a “wandering” that denotes the connection (typical in this kind of cultural positioning) of the concepts of ‘life’ and ‘nothingness’: “was surrounded by nothingness and life” (505). There is no will in this Boine to say “Yes” to this kind of becoming,141 no impressionist outlook in which the cure to the ‘illness’ is in the cracks that are appearing in conceptual constructions, no Panic desire to live a life in which there is no self-awareness: the gaze is fixed on the abyss, on what has been lost. On the contrary, it is the sudden irruption of Life in the identity of the protagonist (who tries to react) that leads him to a death that is the disappearance of the subject, i.e. the loss of the possibility of self-definition:

Eternity, fixity, indissolubility of all the things of the world [...] the reality of life, the reality of thought [...] to fall into a hierarchy and start to build [...]. He fell back. He was twitching tetanically in a violent (muscular) desire to throw himself forward, to collect himself, to fight. To fight, to riot, to build, to fill, over the illness, the fright of

141 This is recounted in the article on Pater and Ruskin, in Da Anselmo d’Aosta a Bergson 91-5: “In his search for what we have called ataraxia, Ruskin shuts himself in a stylized spirituality that despises all sensitivity and therefore negates half the world. [...] Pater, instead, is forced to acknowledge it and is tormented by it [...]. And this is where the conflict emerges: experiencing, touching, and seeing in their uncertain illusory tenuousness [...]. The contrast, in other words, between the immediate life of the senses and the understanding and desire of a greater and more organically real world [...]. A suddenly painful and tragic antagonism between experience, [...] and the mystical rarefaction of geometric abstract thinking [...]. Sebastian van Storeck renounces the joyful particularity of life, the colorful accident, and the fleeting sensation, for the inconceivable universal chasm god, [...] his spiritual wound.”
nothingness. [...] His eyes opened wide, slowly! They stayed that way. And the white noon trickled inside him, inundating him. [...] he vaguely felt that he was becoming empty and light, a quivering, unreal, vanishing, inhuman bubble, hanging barely by the faintest whiff, hanging from the colored hardness of being (506-8).

In the novel *Il peccato* [The Sin], where he tries to bring together in a broader narrative structure all the conceptual considerations hitherto described, Boine makes the final step, as observed by Ugo Perolino, in the conversion from the abyss of Being represented by religious experience to the new “torment of contingency” (“L’anello del ritorno,” in *Il peccato* XXXIV). The protagonist (*signor B*.), returning to his hometown after completing his studies (and wanting to take part in the life of the community), is torn between the opposing poles of Order and Disorder. The whole novel is built on a continuous counterpoint that constantly denies what was just said and then goes back to it again: the “doing” in the community and then the desire for pure contemplation; the Kantian necessity of ‘ought’\(^\text{142}\) and the impression (underlined by the element of music, because the crowding of reason and the senses is another sign of the problem) of the constant change in the “geometric relationships between things” that “plunges you beyond the world of rigid forms and customary tradition into the dank, steaming mystery of Chaos” (18); the sense of tradition, of law, and the constant presence of the sea (“money”) as metaphors for the indomitable movement of reality that undermines the transmissibility of tradition itself, or rather of its ideological legacy\(^\text{143}\); and finally, the very connection between the possibility of a consistent conceptualization of reality and a consistent (organic) narrative.\(^\text{144}\) The sin, i.e. the awareness of the dia-bolical rift that has opened between the Code and reality\(^\text{145}\) (in this sense even Fichte had referred to an “age of

\(^{142}\) Cf. Boine: *Il peccato* 8: “but in which a certain phrase of «ought-to-be» [...] had broken into him and had found in his feelings, if not in his lucid intellect, something open to acceptance. (Ought-to-be. Ought-to-be according to a prototype).”

\(^{143}\) Cf. Barberi Squarotti: *La forma e la vita* 44: “the doubling of the other characters in the novel, and even of the small country town [...] is nothing more, in reality, than the effect of the twofold vision of the doubled protagonist. The situations, the places, the characters are seen two or more times, with different appearances depending on which of the protagonist’s two embodiments is acting.”

\(^{144}\) Cf. Benvenuti: “*Cor meum inquietum est, Domine!*” in *L’esperienza religiosa e altri scritti* 70: “thereby loses even his ability to dominate/order the world.”

\(^{145}\) Cf. Boine: *Scritti inediti* 192-3: “In you, the contradictory rationality of the universe wins over well-ordered, logical rationality. [...] It’s as if the world and life make fun of him, and he is tossed about with his code and his conscience like a man in a windy downpour desperately holding on to his umbrella. In the end he realizes that life,
sinfulness”), renders impossible any form of Bildung and traps the protagonist in a relationship with a nun which, begun under the now merely sublimating hallmark of the mystics, gradually declines first into the gossip and malicious remarks of the townspeople,\textsuperscript{146} then into nasty conjugal doubts that arise in the mind of the protagonist,\textsuperscript{147} and, finally, into the ‘contradictory’ distortion of the moral assumptions that were to guide the protagonist’s actions in the world.\textsuperscript{148} In the end, the space of moral action prescribed by Kant is determined, in the words of the young girl, in an exhortation to participate in society for what it is, i.e. to participate in life: “Then she resumed and said: «You must. It’s not right for you to break up with mankind [...]. I also had broken away. But I got back in line»” (60-1).

What remains is only the space of contradiction (i.e. of Life), because the swaying from one pole to the other (the previous binomial Being/Code now replaced by the binomial Code/Contingency) inevitably ends with the triumph of the pole of Disorder (when “sin” appears there is no going back). The ideological barriers raised by Boine are falling down, and life ‘comes in,’\textsuperscript{149} the old, unsolvable tragic dualism gives way to a non-sense that is an opening to the new world made of interpretations:

with the broken/real hardness of contradictory life [...]. This is reality: this horrible tangle. Not the hierarchies that I establish and the distinctions of sound logic. [...] and below my contemplating self lies the great mass, the inexhaustible conflagration of the particular and its contradictions. [...] without the abstractness of moral law or composed thought to guide them. [...] He fluctuated in this bounteous tragic/joyful conception of the world [...], you have broken loose like that trawler which the wind tore from its berth last night and is now tossing about [...], outside your open windows on the slimy yellow sea (64-5).

\textsuperscript{146} Cf. Boine: \textit{Il peccato} 8: “Now he had fallen beneath them, he who had wanted to be above; he, the moral man.”
\textsuperscript{147} The fact that the ‘nun’ goes from listening to Bach to listening to Carmen says it all.
\textsuperscript{148} Cf. Boine: \textit{Il peccato} 48-9: “You have allowed yourself to break the rules and the customs as if they were unnecessary fetters; but they are the levees on the river, they are wisdom and experience, and if you deny them and suddenly appeal to the law [...] you are denying tradition, you are destroying security, the human faith of all these honest people who toil patiently from day to day, [...] and hold up your world. Your true law [...] which you see and call meanness; law enshrined in codes [...], heroically tear themselves from the muddle. And the stiff, empty mechanicalism of moral appearances, that «save» [...] bears witness to their instinctive good conscience.”
\textsuperscript{149} Cf. Boine: letter to Casati dated December 23, 1913, in \textit{Carteggio}, III, 2, 798: “I have always seen very clearly how through action, through this which Croce called life, there entered into the system of the spirit something that was neither a subject nor a concept.”
His last ethical jolts – the articles on Weininger\textsuperscript{150} and Bergson published in 1914 – only serve to reaffirm that there is no \textit{Ja-sagen} (no hope of freedom in nihilism) in the offing for Boine.\textsuperscript{151}

Weininger, whose opposition between male and female is interpreted by Boine on the grounds of Kant’s opposition between noumenon and phenomenon, is used to once again reject the possibility of a reality experienced merely “as itself,” of the convention that justifies it, i.e. the “naturalistic empiricism and desperate psychologism of Mach and Avenarius” (“Weininger,” in \textit{Da Anselmo d’Aosta a Bergson} 102).\textsuperscript{152} Yet, Boine reasserts the need, which he believes is missing in Weininger, to account for the empirical, the phenomenal, or risk falling back into mere conceptual abstraction.\textsuperscript{153} Boine reiterates the need to build a ‘logic’ capable of accounting for the relationship between concepts and the empirical, just as an insurmountable gap is opening between the two terms.

In his essay on Bergson, instead, Boine distances himself, even as he is coming to terms with the new epistemological approach, from an author whom the Italian intelligentsia of the time had come to see as the very symbol of the new problems and of the possibility of identifying that approach (remember Soffici) with the promise of freedom.\textsuperscript{154} After explaining that Berkeley’s doctrine \textit{esse est percipi}\textsuperscript{155} is much better described (and contrasted to Croce’s

\textsuperscript{150} Cf. Boine: “Weininger,” in \textit{Da Anselmo d’Aosta a Bergson} 100: “The wrongs and the misfortunes of the Jewish people among the Aryan peoples are then for Weininger the same, irreparable ones of any woman in relation to real men; the oscillating in nothingness of matter without form.” We will return in more detail to the role of Weininger in Italian Modernism in the section regarding Scipio Slataper.

\textsuperscript{151} The continuous criticism directed at \textit{Lacerba} can also be considered from this angle.

\textsuperscript{152} Cf. Boine: “Weininger,” in \textit{Da Anselmo d’Aosta a Bergson} 102-3: “He wields Kant like a weapon and he shakes and shoulders his way up towards an affirmation of the spirit that was the natural, spontaneous yearning of his intimate religiosity. […] Weininger rightly criticizes the psychology of Avenarius or of the British associationists, calling it «soulless psychology» […] The psychology of the empiricists is barely adaptable to all that is feminine in man.”

\textsuperscript{153} Cf. Boine: letter to Casati dated April 8, 1913, in \textit{Carteggio}, III, 2, 772: “Thought does make reality, but it does not make the empirical. And we are up to our necks in the empirical.”

\textsuperscript{154} Cf. Boine: letter to Casati dated March 18, 1915, in \textit{Carteggio}, III, 2, 886: “This Weininger was drunk on morality.”

\textsuperscript{155} And the reduction of Kantian epistemology to Berkeleyan epistemology (what Lukács, in \textit{The Destruction of Reason}, would call a distinguishing feature of the philosophy of life) is explicitly noted by Boine. Cf. “La novità di Bergson,” in \textit{Il peccato, Plausi e botte, Frantumi, Altri scritti} 543: “with an idealism more Berkeleyan than Kantian.”
pseudo-concept) in Mach than in Bergson,\textsuperscript{156} Boine points out that in Bergson he sees an attempt to overcome the screen that stands between subject and reality through the intuitive action of the knowing individual who submits to the ‘flow’ of reality (note the recurring metaphor of the sea): “Free is he who acts not as enticed or deterministically compelled by external things but as a result of obeying the musical flow of his innermost life. [...] underneath the numbered crust of our customary corporality, as we gradually descend as if advancing into the sea, we advance toward freedom” (540-1). And he says that the intuitive action suggested by Bergson (contrary to Kant’s moral imperative which Boine opposes to it) is not really ‘universal’ action, but only the “manifestation of empirical individuality [...] arbitrariness, and not freedom” (544). What Bergson proposes is “a psychologistic conception of the spirit” (547); “an escape from determinism rather than the overcoming of it” (548). Reason as an “organ of abstraction” (549) is opposed to an extra-intellectual immediacy that is the immersion into a flow which, for Boine, can never be the totality, because it lacks the necessary mediation of the conscious subject. And in this ‘flow’ Bergson “ingenuously leaves [...] our spirit immersed, and thinks that he has freed it only because he calls it free” (551).

V. In fragments

1914 is also the year in which Boine steps up his contributions (begun the year before) to the literary review \textit{La Riviera ligure}, founded and edited by Mario Novaro.\textsuperscript{157} These writings would later be collected in the volume \textit{Plausi e botte}. Boine engages in a hand-to-hand contest with his contemporaries which he immediately bases (we are referring to his review of \textit{Amori ac Silentio sacrum} by De Bosis) on the topic of the ‘particularity’ represented by the

\textsuperscript{156} Cf. Boine: “La novità di Bergson,” 540.

\textsuperscript{157} Cf. at least Boero; \textit{“La Riviera Ligure” tra industria e letteratura}; Cassinelli: \textit{Il tormento, la poesia, gli ulivi}. The journal (which paid its contributors very well) published writings of almost all the major authors of the time: Pascoli, Pirandello, Deledda, Gozzano, Govoni, Papini, Soffici, Sbarbaro, Rebora, Bernasconi, Jahier, Slataper, Campana, Ungaretti.
judging subject. This particularity (and this is essential for the last Boine) cannot rely on any Code of evaluation, such as the one represented by History or the one represented by Aesthetics (Croce’s aesthetics especially).

Boine’s reviews not only include – as scholars have repeatedly pointed out – the main literary productions coming from the Vocian ‘moralists’ (Boine has words of praise especially for Rebora, Sbarbaro, and Campana,) but also provide, on the one hand, an analysis of the conflict under way in the Italian approach to Modernism, and, on the other, a special focus on the issues that Boine had dealt with during the previous years. For example, the digression that Boine goes into in order to spare himself from discussing a book by Vincenzo Agostini takes us to the center of the conflict between the calm acceptance of the phenomenal plane and the ‘evidence’ of the emergence of anxiety as the impossibility of an idyll, a contrast that runs through all of Boine’s works: “The stars were now in their place up high, all made up in their Ptolemaic constellations. – Three frogs in the gardens below were taking turns in a peaceful game of qua, que, and quo. – But a cricket (one alone), chirped and creaked with a doleful, dying, never-ending gri that seemed to slowly stitch the sadness of my heart to the immense sadness of the DARK” (534).

Similarly, the specularly opposite opinions that Boine gives on Rebora and Soffici take us inside the conflict between epistemological perspectives and ethical perspectives that on the literary level is transposed as a conflict between the distinctive features of what we call, respectively, Impressionism and Expressionism (see again Lukács in The Parting of the

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158 Cf. Boine: letter to Gustavo Botta dated December 1, 1915, in Carteggio, IV, 478: “Now the myth that mythicizes the nature of critical intelligence is the ancient myth of Proteus: however, there are no universal Protei except when they help themselves with quackery: and every Proteus is such only for the beasts of its own kind. So he is critical only of what he feels deep inside, which is basically like saying [...] that everyone is critical only of himself.”

159 Cf. Boine: Plausi e botte 36-7: “if you want to play Minos or Scannabue you do so in your own name, and not, as is customary, in the name of history or of some objective aesthetic; or, that is, history and aesthetics are reduced in these conditions to the living concreteness of he who judges [...]. I have the impudence to say that I judge around me, taking myself as a yardstick.”

160 Giuseppe De Robertis, director of the so-called “Voce bianca” [the white Voce] from the end of 1914 to 1916 (an entirely different journal from the one directed by Prezzolini, exclusively dedicated to literature), would harshly criticize Boine’s position with his articles Striglia and Critici che non leggono, anticipating with his opinions the ‘Rondian’ directives to come.
Ways).\textsuperscript{161} We have already remarked on the position of the young Soffici in the chapter dedicated to him in this work:

this spring/foreword, says more humanely and in the first person: – gentlemen, I, a man who has lived and suffered, a disenchanted man, have racked my brains over the puzzle of philosophy, to try to understand the world, and I’ve understood next to nothing. [...] A cold pit opens beneath you, and systems hang uselessly over it like cobwebs sealing it up. Now look here; there are simple things around me that move me and that I feel are beautiful. I want to content myself with these things. I don’t know why, but if I forget the pit, life ferments inside me like the must in a vat: all of me becomes music and color (73).

In face of the epistemological surrender, which in Boine translates into the acceptance of the multifaceted kaleidoscope of phenomenal life, the figure of Rebora (truly the anti-Soffici for Boine) emerges with its “anguished moral heroism” (48) singing the cultural conflicts that have swept over a whole generation, in search of a \textit{Gestaltung} capable of upsetting reality (by planting in it a ‘fragmented’ subject that distorts it) in the attempt to arrive at the root of things.

The opposition between Soffici and Rebora is only the acme of a theme that runs through the entire volume. Anti-impressionist considerations, for example, can be found in the reviews regarding Basile\textsuperscript{162} or Guido da Verona (this is a masterful piece in which many of the fundamental aspects of Modernism are outlined): “fixes in nimble embroideries, as if in sketches and caricatures, and wanders off ironically without either despairing or concluding. [...] Proteus. [...] does not conclude [...] cannot produce a lyrical tone, a constant sentimental wave to firmly carry off everything in a certain direction” (83-5). In particular, in reviewing another book of literary criticism (Renato Serra’s \textit{Le lettere}), Boine (then engaged in

\textsuperscript{161} As regards Expressionism see at least Mittner: \textit{L’espressionismo}, and Chiarini: \textit{L’espressionismo}. As for an analysis of these themes in relation to the artistic production in Europe in Boine’s days, the reader is once again referred to Thomas Harrison: \textit{1910}.

Highly interesting for the purposes of our discussion is also the volume by Hermann Bahr on Expressionism. Bahr was the greatest theoretician of Impressionism and one of the first to use the label “Modernism” in its current sense.

\textsuperscript{162} Cf. Boine: \textit{Plausi e botte} 80-1: “tragedy does not burst from this book. [...] souls do not clash here, do not get hurt, and do not suffer; they do not thrash about in the dreadfulness of the dark as they should, as it ALWAYS is for those who sink beneath their shallow consciousness [...] being unable to tear themselves out [...] of the immediately felt.”
translating Nietzsche’s second Untimely Meditation) explains the difference between his arrival at nihilism and Serra’s, who he says is pervaded by a “secret irony” (107) which, misreading Nietzsche’s *dura lectio*, reduces the German philosopher within the scope of a mere philosophy of life: “our troubled generation is judged and damned with the judgement of Nietzsche [...] on the insipid historicism of contemporary culture [...]. Yes, gentlemen. It’s true. But Nietzsche said it with passion, not with resentment and irony” (109).

The nihilism of the later Boine, who notwithstanding does not refrain from occasional moral outbursts and combative stances (“It sometimes happens that I catch a glimpse of what I call the *City of God*, so disdainfully opposite to the city of men”), leads him however to a progressive slipping that precisely in the appearance of the phenomenal (which, he reiterates, is no more than appearance) finds an ironic resting point that has all the traits of a capitulation:

It remains understood [...] that the pit is there, but there is no remedy and no one to fill it. Yes, this is something I can agree with! It could be that I’ve become old, that the ardor is gone [...]. Anyway, yes, count me in on this; on this living and painting directly without scaffolds, without prejudices, without systems. [...] a general sense of bitter irony [...], a certain smiling despair [...], has become too much a part of me for me not to love it (*Plausi e botte* 74).

As faith generally declines into a consciousness that can comprise the ‘happening’ of History, the distinctive traits of the contradictions of the empirical world are more and more

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163 Cf. Boine: “Quaderno di appunti 1914,” in *Scritti inediti* 182: “There is a memory that kills [...]. A memory that prevents current activity and spontaneous progress.”

164 Cf. Boine: letter to Casati dated January 9, 1915, in *Carteggio*, III, 2, 876: “Serra [...] these are things on which Nietzsche said the final word in those *untimely meditations* that are the trial and conviction of our entire false civilization.”


166 Consider Boine’s review of *Uomini e altri animali*, by Ugo Bernasconi, in which the analysis of the humorous component, similar to Pirandello’s, immediately turns into a desperate need of authenticity. Cf. Boine: *Plausi e botte* 59-62: “There is no overt laughing or weeping here. [...] shows you the two sides of things [...]. And the result is a somewhat bizarre realism [...] that you could describe as measured annoyance or smiling anger. [...] At a closer look, in the end these minute idylls [...] have the awfulness of sculpted mountains, bearing a truth and an enormity that leave you disconcerted.”

167 Cf. Bo: “Omaggio a Boine,” in Frantumi 86: “These clouds are really a bridge over the sea of nothingness. They are made of nothing, but they are so opulent: mountains of sky, the gates of heaven! And I always try to make the best of this deluded life that is like a veil beneath which there is death.”

168 Cf. Bo: “I miei amici di qui,” in Frantumi 86: “These clouds are really a bridge over the sea of nothingness. They are made of nothing, but they are so opulent: mountains of sky, the gates of heaven! And I always try to make the best of this deluded life that is like a veil beneath which there is death.”

169 Cf. Bo: “Omaggio a Boine,” in Contorbia: *Giovanni Boine* 11: “I am one of those who think that in the Boine of “fragments” there was a capitulation.”
transferred from the old philosophical and social issues onto Nature itself: they become the 
traits of Nature. This is basically the Modern itself (or Modernism), formerly recognized as a 
historical contradiction (therefore in some way ‘resolvable,’ although through the usual 
binary oppositions that belittled History), now presenting itself directly as an unsolvable 
antinomy with which it is necessary to come to terms. This is what emerges from Boine’s 
review of Govoni’s *L’inaugurazione della primavera*, and, especially, form the 
glorification of the ‘phenomenic’ narcotization appearing in his review of Bacchelli’s *Poemi 
lirici*:

Codes and tradition have put us in handcuffs and blinkers [...]. In reality, however, no 
one understands any of it, and honest people, if they care and believe, should here, 
more simply, revert to the Kantian imperative as both an experiential truth and a 
dogma of faith. [...] I do not share Bacchelli’s moralistic disdain for Panic naturalism. 
Imagination grasps me unexpectedly like a sea breeze; it gives me back in clouds and 
blueness the happiness I lost. I somehow have an unavowable tendency to narcotize 
myself with opiates: the countryside, the smell of plowed land, experiencing the city 
[...]. Let’s say that I rest there with irony. [...] when springtime comes (130-3).

Boine reasserts his difference (“One can wallow in sensuality through adherent liquefaction, 
or shackled in chains,” 134), he reasserts – see his letter to Leopolda Casati below – the 
impossibility of settling down in the multicolored universe of non-sense, in the serene 
Olympian calm that hides behind it:

If I should content myself, for instance, with jotting down impressions in Soffici’s 
style, my diary would be full. There are days that I like all things in themselves, one 
by one; I can read people like books, I talk with the dogs and the cows that I come 
upon: as for the trees, the meadows, the rocks, and the clouds, it’s as if we had shaken 
hands. If I should decide to become an impressionist my reputation would be made 
right away; but as soon as I go home or am myself again, when I get home at night, 
the night that is always inside me, those episodes immediately seem futile to me. So 
this delighting in the world as I go along, with an eye caressing here and tasting there, 
is not pacified by my discontent. [...] Later on the green of the grass becomes so dark 
that it’s frightening [...]. Then these soundless hills, this motionless silence, stand

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168 Cf. Boine: *Plausi e botte* 147-9: “All things enchant him one by one so that the poet, like a honeybee, sucks 
away on them [...]. There is nothing that does not turn into grace for him [...]; they are just trifles and can be called 
outdated. But I always love spring coming back each year, April makes we swarm through the fields and gets me 
flustered.”
against me, staring at me. In the night that follows there is only me and the Sphinx 
(Carteggio, III, 2, 1066-7).

But when Boine brilliantly (and in fully Nietzschean terms) links together logic and social 
morality and makes them the expression of an empirics that is forever growing on itself (i.e. 
the Code as an expression of empirics),\(^{169}\) but at the same time is unable to define empirics 
(which Michelstaedter will instead do) as the space of a contrived rationalization specifically 
created by a dominant sector of society that constantly requires empirics (non-sense) in order 
to surreptitiously propose itself as the overcoming of it, he turns the morality (which he 
identifies as History)\(^ {170}\) that grows on empirics into an insurmountable Golem that oppresses 
subjective freedom, though it is no more than appearance. Boine, in keeping with his 
speculation up to this point (given that History – even when it had been viewed in a positive 
light – expressed repetition), considers man (his Vicoan “doing”) subdued by the relentless 
advance of History, instead of the opposite (but this would entail the element of praxis and 
thus the potential revolutionary transformation of society):\(^ {171}\) “Catholics or rationalists, all of 
us, more or less, arrive at history with our marottes all set up; in some it is a system, in others 
an emotion […]. If we look at it this way, humanity is no more than a pitiful puppet show” 
(letter to Leopolda Casati dated May 9, 1916, in Carteggio, III, 2, 1010).

The synthesis that the relation between morality and empirics expresses in the late 
Boine is a ‘bad Totality,’ because what the relation represents is still a basically static truth of 
opposites (and we will have History constantly repeating itself) which can only be expressed 
by paradox, by the truth of juxtapositions (and we will have, with the usual failure of Italian

\(^ {169}\) Cf. Boine: Scritti inediti 187-8; “When the actions of men are thus governed we achieve the order that is 
necessary for common life. And everything that is outside this order, outside the scheme of duties and shames, 
tends to be branded as immoral. On this side the origin of morality is entirely empirical and extrinsic. The 
commandments of social morality are what protect social life in general. […] Logic lends its help to social 
morality. […] Given that things and society are so and so, you must consequently behave in such and such a 
manner […]. Duty is the logic in social action. […] And the origin of logic is therefore perhaps just as empirical as 
that of morality, to which, abstract as it may be, it lends its help. Logic must be the abstract projection of social 
necessities. Society has taken over the individual and created logic inside him.”

\(^ {170}\) Cf. Boine: Scritti inediti 248: “The life buoy of history is ready right there […]. / You can get aboard in two or a 
thousand / carry out a plan […]. For instance, you can set up a system of philosophy / judge the world.”

\(^ {171}\) Boine, like all the “Vocian moralists,” continues to view the ‘fragmentation’ in eminently cultural terms, as 
opposed to social (even when extending these issues to the whole of society, as in La crisi degli olivi in Liguria).
Modernist milieus to understand the possibilities of the novel, *Frantumi*\(^{172}\) [Fragments] and its juxtapositions of different truths. The very decision to use ‘fragments’ intends to express this disconnectedness representing the ‘form’ of contradictoriness. This is of course not the impressionist fragmentism of Soffici\(^{173}\) that exalts the emotions of the moment and places on the same level all the elements of existence (“forgetting oneself in the fragment,” as Boine wrote in his review of Guido da Verona);\(^{174}\) and even if there are ‘fragments’ that go in that direction,\(^{175}\) it is precisely because the poetics of ‘this’ Boine wants to express the contemporary presence of two different horizons of interpretation, i.e. counterpoint as the only possible reality. On the one hand, then, we find the preservation of the ‘name,’ the possibility of ‘naming,’ the link between past and present in the ‘religious’ imprint of tradition, duty, the Code, and the necessity of the Universal:

a fellow I meet calls my name out loud and says: “Good evening!” [...] I am one with my name. [...] Let none of them escape you, that is your office, and let all follow each other in the proper order. Let all fit together, and, together, make up an orderly design. Let none of them escape you, and let there be no gaps. [...] Thus October follows September, and the effect follows the cause. Yesterday holds the reins of today, and calls them duty [...]. A woven texture, you count the threads of your life and none is torn. [...] My name is Giovanni (...). You will not take my name from me; I wear it like a shield. [...] Duty is my right [...]. I defend the duty that yesterday gives me, like an assaulted man his home. [...] I justify my every move according to the rule. In the temple of yesterday I worshipped on my knees the Penate Experience, I portrayed it in the ten commandments and theologized it in the articles of the code. Try to find a shred of action for which I can’t provide a reason! I do everything for a reason and I am a moral man. [...] I have studied the multiple junctions of my yesterday with the yesterdays of everyone and have recognized the necessary Society. I have carefully traced the map of society on the globe of the Universal” (*Frantumi* 47-50).

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\(^{172}\) The book was planned by Mario Novaro, who collected all Boine’s poems published since 1914. Cf. Gatti: *Frantumi. I materiali preparatori*.

\(^{173}\) As regards Boine’s linguistic expressionism, we refer again to the essay by Gianfranco Contini: “Espressionismo letterario,” in *Ultimi esercizi ed elzeviri*, where among other things it is explained – following Spitzer’s reading of Van Gogh – how the expressionist technique is intended to charge impressionist fragmentism with existentialist meanings. Cf. also Contini: “Alcuni fatti della lingua di Giovanni Boine,” in *Varianti e altra linguistica*.

\(^{174}\) Cf. Valli: “I ‘frantumi’ e la tecnica del frammento,” in Contorbia: *Giovanni Boine* 320: “And so was taking shape the rift, that in time would grow wider and wider, in the fragmentary genre, between those for whom the fragment was the expression of strong moral commitment and those for whom it expressed a refined impressionistic [...] sensitivity.”

\(^{175}\) Cf. Boine: “Deriva,” in *Frantumi* 79: “Sighs of liquidity slosh about, hours of eternity spurt away, softly, slowly, everything comes undone, and in smooth silences of impassivity is the going not going.” Cf. Boine: “Fuga,” in *Frantumi* 82-3: “All the world is in revolution, the universe is disenthralled, all the slaves unchained [...] all the woods sway in the breeze, it’s the land of freedom.”
But on the other hand, immediately after (and in Frantumi Boine is also going over his entire philosophical journey), the triumph of an eternal present with no anchorage to the past, the collapse of codes and morals, the breakdown of the bond with his community (therefore the triumph of the ‘sea’\textsuperscript{176} and the victory of the ‘moment’ as the loss of the ‘name,’ i.e. of the system of ‘rules’ that by connecting tradition to the present provided the possibility of a conceptual reading of it:

But alas! Today overcomes me and I am left shipwrecked without a raft. Alas, the errant yesterday is rapidly drifting away, a dead leaf in the wind! I am all in today and my name is \textit{moment}. [...] The past does not exist. [...] I can’t find the section for my action in the code, nor the commandment for my morality. No milestones marking the right path [...]. I’ve forgotten my name: I lost my passport in an enemy country. [...] My name is \textit{today}, and my life is called \textit{lost}. There are no signs at the crossroads of my journey and I’m not sure I took the right road. [...] against the memory of yesterday I have measured the disparity of today and the impossibility of a bond. I will not reduce my today to the ghost of yesterday and I won’t put up pretenses to make my life appear ordered to you. [...] A leaf in the wind, a boat in the waves [...]. I say that there is no rudder. [...] There is no eternity but the moment (50-2).

But this totality, which Boine expresses, as said, as the coexistence of opposites, this totality that a work of art can only express as a sign of its inadequate representational capacity, is in reality a ‘form’ hypostatized as an anthropological entity and, as such, a ‘form’ – removing the happening of history – that comes to signify life, the ‘natural’ truth of life.

As we know, what loses out in Boine’s new perspective is the war, i.e. the element which had been attributed a palingenetic capacity in Discorsi militari (a recurring theme among the intellectuals of the time).\textsuperscript{177} Even war, I mean, the element (military life) that Boine had envisioned as a potential ‘unifying’ phenomenon (“religion”) to solve the epistemological/social disconnection, turns out to be a space of contradiction and interpretation:

\textbf{176} Cf. Boine: “Delirii,” in Frantumi 68: “now the sea covers the whole earth with a terrible blue. [...] under repeated blows the structures of centuries collapse in enormous landslides. [...] all the truths are set free.”

\textbf{177} Cf. Boine: letter to Casati dated December 22, 1915, in Carteggio, III, 2, 927: “It is rather disconcerting, indeed, even distracting, especially is you were asking with the hope of detecting the signs of that inner unique consciousness that this cataclysm should have given us.”
People do not change even when cannons roar; there are scoundrels who think of their careers in the midst of the dying, conceited heads preparing their seats for future congresses, mediocre men who are mediocre and make everything mediocre and dull. [...] if you ask whether the soldiers are fighting you get twenty different answers, twenty impressions and three hundred contradicting facts. They’re fighting, they’re getting slaughtered here, further down they’re fleeing: a guy who gets a medal today is a coward tomorrow. [...] the conclusion is that there is no conclusion, that we lack a unified consciousness (letter to Cecchi dated November 30, 1915, in Carteggio, II, 183-5).

But only a critic looking for “democratic conversions” can find in such a change of perspective the sign of an incipient progressivism in Boine. The failure of the ethical/religious perspective which had found expression even in the hopes elicited by the war, in reality leads Boine to emphasize the “vital roots” of the war, that is, to put war (together with everything else) in an endless loop of repetitiveness of “human nature” where agnosticism (which some critics have called a Leopardian ‘apocalyptic’ becoming in Boine) is actually a mystical indifference. The sense of cosmic indifference and of the impossibility of ‘meaning’ that transpires from a text like Varsavia (so close to many of the writings in Frantumi), can only mean reducing History to Nature, i.e. making History into an apparent movement: “History, dear Cecchi, is a barrel of shit that the devil rolls down the slope of death: upside down, over and under, it’s always the same shit” (letter dated July 4, 1915, in Carteggio, II, 159-60). The direct apologia pervaded by ‘feudal’ temptations of rebellion is now replaced by an indirect apologia that consists in the absolutization of the ‘negative,’ of negative thought.

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178 Cf. Boine: letter to Cecchi dated July 4, 1915, in Carteggio, II, 159: “this European pandemonium is preparing nothing more than those convulsions triggered by empty stomachs that we call social revolutions.”

179 Cf. Boine: “Varsavia,” in Scritti inediti 222-4: “– You idiot, I’m talking about these Russians! Do you care about ants now? [...] Right now, my friend, they can go in and come out for all eternity; what do we care about Russians or Germans? Or about the ants that are there: for pity or for fun, according to taste [...]. But here is History... Look at those poor things running around over there!”

Chapter 5: Ethics and Ideology: Scipio Slataper and Carlo Michelstaedter

I. In the Folds of Zivilisation

classicism, at which one must necessarily arrive, if one finally does exist
Scipio Slataper

Rejoice, brothers, for we are headed towards a sure destination even though the movement is behind us. Joy and labor
Scipio Slataper

In August 1906, one year before the article titled The Impotence of Thought, Giovanni Amendola published another article in Leonardo, an article entitled Né ideale né reale.¹ This essay represents, albeit in an embryonic form, an initial acknowledgment of the Krisis that befell Western thought following the gradual liberation from Metaphysics brought on by the Enlightenment and the Romantic movement.² In the metaphor of Prometheus, who ceases to exist at the moment of his liberation (thought which, freed from its own tradition, turns against itself), Amendola, from his neo-Kantian horizon.³ detects an epistemological

¹ As remarked by numerous critics (see especially Carpi, Campailla, and Coda), Slataper was strongly influenced by Amendola’s works. References can be found especially when dealing with issues relating to neo-Kantianism, for example the necessity to submit to moral standards, the trust in Values immanent to human individuality, the ethical-affirmative meaning of action; but also in both Slataper’s and Amendola’s gradual approach to historical-political activity around 1913-14, urged by their common view of the privileged role of the intellectual in national life.
² Cf. Slataper: letter to Ella dated February 24, 1913, in Epistolario 328-9: “And I also remember what I was told by that Russian fortune-teller who read my hand in Florence: «If you do not disperse, you will do». Dispersion – Amendola is right – means lack of will. Organization and will are one and the same thing. You have to abandon yourself and receive (which is to love) in order to really do (which is to will).”
³ Once again, we must reiterate the indissoluble link between Romanticism and Modernism. Slataper’s interest for the Romantic movement is now commonplace among critics. We should of course mention the close relationship with the Germanist Arturo Farinelli, who, in addition to holding lectures on the Sturm und Drang in Florence, wrote for La Voce on authors such as Novalis, Tieck, and Wackenroder, and, in 1912, published Il Romanticismo in Germania. La Voce published a bibliography of Farinelli’s writings compiled by another Triestine – Ferdinando Pasini. Also worthy of mention are some significant judgments given on Slataper by his friend Giani Stuparich: Cf. Giani Stuparich: Slataper 92: “He carried Romanticism on his face and in his gestures with a naturalness unknown among the decrepit masks of the decadents”; Cf. Giani Stuparich: Slataper 155: “We all felt bonded, and all, some more, some less, were still immersed in German Romanticism.” We might also remember Pancrazi’s opinion, in Scrittori d’oggi, on the intellectuals of Friuli, which he called “romantics for life.”

³ In December that same year, having just returned from Germany, Slataper promises Vannicola an article entitled In difesa di Kant to be published in the journal Prose.
degeneration which he places in the context of contingentism (Le Roy, Bergson, Schiller, James, Mach). The degeneration Amendola singles out is that of the Ego, which, having become the creator and arbiter of its own law, renounces now that very law and declares the arbitrariness of its own beliefs.\(^4\) In other words, Amendola perceives the risk of a skeptical/subjectivist distortion connected with the new need for philosophy to situate its activity within immanence, the point at which the figure of Prometheus gives way to the figure of Proteus. But now Proteus is no longer, as for the first Romantics,\(^5\) an instrument of liberation of the Particular from conceptual schemes, but the dominant hegemonic figure, an evil deity (precisely because it is dominant) projected towards building an indissoluble bridge between immanence and contingency (insofar as nihilism is the consciousness of immanentism).\(^6\) This bridge breaks, in the name of the ‘right of the Particular,’ the link between life and Value, between existence and Judgement. The subjectivist distortion of the Romantic themes undergoes an unprecedented expansion between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Philosophy, in its dominant ideological forms, becomes increasingly intent on analyzing and segmenting reality in terms of “empirical exigencies with no objective validity” (Pagetti: in Cianci: Modernismo/modernismi 54).\(^7\) A new episteme (Modernist, precisely) based, as Weininger\(^8\) will explain thinking of Mach, on an empiristic epistemology aimed at describing any unity as a metaphysical hypostatization, aimed, that is,

\(^4\) The young Slataper, in the footsteps of Nietzsche, also reflects on the figure of Prometheus (Prometeo eschiliano), of which he exalts, compared to Christ, the inner necessity of building a “law of the future” in the field of immanence, in the material world.

\(^5\) Cf. Scuderi 257: “In short, it appears evident, when we examine the presence of myths in Romantic poetry, that Proteus is one of the prevailing symbols […] the keystone of a new relationship with the world, from Hume to Herder, from Novalis to Schopenhauer.” In fact, Scuderi remarks that Proteus is also present in Vico, and that the metaphor of Proteus gives rise to the dialectic of the one and the many that is at the basis of all subsequent Western thought.

\(^6\) On March 13, 1913, in Parole di un uomo moderno, Prezzolini writes: “modern man lives without the faith of the past and without a present faith, and often even without faith in a future faith. […] Hence the dismay, the darkness, the nihilism of so many souls […] a civilization of immanence.”

\(^7\) In The Dawn, Nietzsche says that all historians speak about things that exist only in their representations.

\(^8\) The first Italians to be ‘attracted’ to Weininger were the pragmatists Vailati and Calderoni. They met him at the International Congress on Psychology held in Paris in 1900, drawn to him as a student of Mach. They could not know, of course, that the young Austrian’s research would take a direction diametrically opposite to his teacher’s, and that he would start precisely from the theory of “functional relationships” and of “substances” (scientific theory directed by the scientist’s “pre-comprehension”) to demonstrate the skepticism connected with the new scientific epistemology and, from there, with an entire cultural horizon. But more on Weininger later.
following the argument of Cohen\(^9\) and Natorp, at basing knowledge on psychological
grounds,\(^{10}\) avoiding the task of creating an objectivity that is other than the inevitably
skeptical-destrouctive one of a subject who looks at the world in the light of Proteus, who
abandons reality to an inevitable relativism under the umbrella of temporality: the “lie of
time” (Ibsen 68) that Slataper will discuss in his analysis of Ibsen’s Love’s Comedy.

The psychological turn directed at reducing the world to our representation of it will
later result in the rebellion symbolized by Simmel, internal to neo-Kantianism itself.\(^{11}\) This
psychological turn itself will be crystallized eventually, following the analysis of Lukács, in
the image of “aesthetic culture,” in the impressionist function (as seen with Soffici) where life
expresses its polyphonic protest against rigid ‘forms,’ unconsciously preparing a new
classicism aimed at perpetuating the value of life. The gradual progression of Simmell’s
position towards the dualism between life and forms, towards the rejection (it also
psychology-based) of the timeless validity of Values, is part of the subordinate condition in
which neo-Kantianism finds itself with regard to the new Modernist horizon: Simmell’s
attempt to reinterpret Kantian ethics relativistically\(^{12}\) indicates the existence of a position, in a
hegemonic perspective, which is certainly not that of Marburg or Heidelberg, of Cohen or
Windelband,\(^{13}\) of the transcendental value of forms or of the Philosophy of Values, but is,

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\(^{9}\) In Italy, Cohen was extensively studied by Giovanni Cesca in *Storia e dottrina del criticismo*, Verona-Padua,
Drucker e Tedeschi, 1884. Among others, we can mention the three-volume treatise on Kant published by Cantoni
between 1879 and 1884; the work done by Felice Tocco in Florence (which will be very important for
Michelstaedter); the studies carried out by Alfredo Poggi.

\(^{10}\) Amendola himself, rejecting contingentism and pragmatism, pointed out to Papini that the connection between
epistemology and psychological empiricism inevitably leads philosophy towards skepticism. And in 1910
Windelband reiterated to Heidelberg the need to take Kantian criticism in connection with history, not psychology.
Not coincidentally it was Nietzsche who had stressed to the highest degree, on the philosophical level, the
importance of psychological research on unconscious motivations as a method of demystification, but Nietzsche
also knew that this demystification was a double-edged sword, as shown by the development of “aesthetic
culture.”

\(^{11}\) Precisely this underlines its hegemonic capacity.

\(^{12}\) The relativistic degeneration is seen as a dramatic problem even in the context where it originated, i.e. historicist
culture. Not surprisingly, Rickert warns of the risk of an incipient identification between Historicism and Nihilism,
where the absence of any principle is itself elevated to the status of principle. This definition traces to the letter the
later one expressed by Lukács on “aesthetic culture,” in which “There was thus a unity to culture. The very
absence of unity.” A few years later, Rickert himself, following the idea of a historical knowledge capable of
relating to universal values, would extend his accusation to Simmel and Bergson.

\(^{13}\) Cf. Ferrari: 75: “a connection – central to all of Windelband’s thought – between the plane of that which is or
otherwise qualifies as belonging to the sphere of the factual, the empirical, the contingent, and the historical, and
that which in the normative sense must be, that which acts as purpose or value, functioning – both in logics and in
rather, a culture projected towards expressing the evanescence of the symbolic statute-value of phenomena — a culture of ‘fragmentation’ tending to emphasize, on the horizon of the Theory of Knowledge, the necessarily falsifying character of our symbolic constructions, exalting, by contrast, the domain of momentary impressions and, consequently, the equivalence of values and signs, of judgments and syntheses. A transitory mood, subject to time, aligns interchangeable impressions, that have no center, recognizing in reality the mirror of its own non-recomposable inner fragmentation, unable to rise to the solidity of unity, of certainty, and, therefore, unable to redeem the world, which is left abandoned to its multicolor senselessness: what then is called Life.

But it is not life! It is what Michelstaedter calls the incapacity for coherent vision of disintegrated man (the inhabitant of the Metropolis); it is the progressive loss, wrote Tönnies already in 1889, of the sense of Gemeinschaft [community] in the process of rationalization/specialization of Capitalism in its imperialist stage (the horizon of Zivilisation); it is the collapse of any possibility of making a synthesis, connected with the forms of Kultur, in the equipollence of money resolved in the endless circularity of the

economics — not as a law «in the sense of the laws of nature», but as a normative prescription or «imperative legislation», if the pursuit of truth is to be understood as an end and an ethical commitment."

Not surprisingly, this culture will be chiefly interested in the recovery of Kantian theoretical reason (theoretical reason, of course, in which there is no ‘duty’ to search for Fundamentals), leaving Practical Reason in a subordinate position. Conversely, Windelband will point out that at the core of Kant’s system is that very Practical Reason, the unification of morality and knowledge that allows the creation of rules that are ‘valid’ outside the sphere of pure epistemology.

Cf. Lukács: Diary 53 and 67: “And I feel that the situation on the whole is only an attempt to remain in the non-essential [...]. So now there is only a sad vegetating (and mulling over the theory of knowledge); “I have taken refuge in the theory of knowledge and in frivolity.” The concept of Frivolità is ubiquitous in neo-Kantian culture (for example in Weininger himself); for Lukács it is embodied in the eyes of the esthete who sees everything as equal. The concept appears frequently in Slataper as well.

Cf. Cacciari: “Metafisica della gioventù,” in Lukács: Diary 94-5: “In aesthetic culture (which has its ideal types in the esthete and the specialist) the symbolic dimension that is typical of every Culture, by which we mean in the theory of knowledge and in frivolity.” The concept of Frivolità is ubiquitous in neo-Kantian culture (for example in Weininger himself); for Lukács it is embodied in the eyes of the esthete who sees everything as equal. The concept appears frequently in Slataper as well.

Cf. Manfreda: 3: “For the young Lukács all this is anti-culture: a disruptive force of multiplicity, of scattered order against shape-giving unity.”

Cf. Amendola: “Carlo Michelstaedter” (1912), in Ética 163: “Carlo Michelstaedter does not belong to the countless legion of those who are whirled around by the storm of life following the mirages of becoming. To live means to pause, to consist.”
exchange value, where the equivalence of signs\(^{17}\) (and therefore of interpretations) is redoubled by the equivalence of commodities: an internalized economic process that determines the individuality of the ‘citizen,’ ideologizing the new sensitivity in a spectacularization of phenomena existing in themselves in an irreducible ‘difference,’ phenomena that no longer belong to the dialectics of Being and Value. The esthete, the specialist, and the Simmelian blasé, become the great symbols of this new condition, because they express its internal structure: in them, the differentiation of values is abolished by the new equivalence that reduces existence to the “art of living.” Refusing the ‘concentration’ of a symbol, this art of living resolves existence in the Olympus of difference, cherishes an alienation that becomes the standard of an apparent rationality eluding any confrontation with signs. The possible defense that the Baudelairean flâneur, preserving his individuality, still managed to express towards the city crowds, becomes (once the new production process is internalized) the preservation of a vital core, already alienated, that the new subject, also alienated, calls Erlebnis: psychological compensation, “powerless but ‘autonomous’ interiority” (in Cianci: 482), assumed and ideologized as a ‘form of Time,’’ that is, as an absence of form which is, all at once, life, epistemology, neurasthenia (being able to see the many side’ of things: the \textit{mal du siècle}),\(^{18}\) and the crisis of representation: the inability to put together the universal and the particular. What Thomas Harrison rightly called the “qualitative individualism” of Simmel’s thought, emphasizing its connection with Romanticism, is the opening to personal freedom, which is voluntarily qualified in an effort to acquire an implementational (though purely theoretical-epistemological) statute, as impotence, then linking this condition to a presumed mode of being of life itself which the individual has the ‘duty’ (think of Pirandello) to comply with. Thus the new existential situation, i.e. life in the metropolis, becomes the space of personal freedom of a subject who,

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^{17}\text{Cf. Cacciari: \textit{Metropolis} 54: “The universal statute of the sign is the same as that of universal alienation, as prerequisite and foundational of the process of production and circulation of capital.”}
^{18}\text{Consider what Carlo Stuparich, a fellow student of Slataper’s, writes in: \textit{Cose e ombre di uno} (1919) 138-9: “All this hair-splitting introspection is dangerous for us, it destroys us like a fine dust that enters the lungs and suffocates. […] before taking to the road, we want to find out what it will be like, what kind of road it is […]. Every act of ours is a dualization; it’s like setting ourselves up against what we ourselves do.”}
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rejecting the alleged ‘cage’ of Being, turns alienation into independence and misrepresents the dominating structure (the one created by capitalist society) as the domain of metaphysical Concept.

In contrast, neo-Kantianism (of which Amendola and Slataper\(^{19}\) are two important representatives in Italy), while operating within the same, now fundamental, immanentist perspective,\(^{20}\) still maintained, in the words of Weininger, the possibility of cognitive objectivity of ideal character related to the revised relationship between \textit{Sein} and \textit{Sollen}; related, that is, to the horizon of an Ethics that realizes Value in the form of a moral imperative, which, though extraneous to any theoretical certainty, could give the world a glimpse of the fundamental unity of being and subject in order to “establish on unwavering grounds the relationship between life and the value of life” (Amendola: \textit{Etica} 44). Here, the absence of value does not lead, as on the subjectivist front, to the hypostatization of contingency, but to an aspiration for value destined to orient (in Kant’s words) the world in the unity of \textit{Kultur}. The old romantic theme of the journey inward in search of the ‘authentic’\(^{21}\) is thrown back on the table as a matter concerning the “essence of things,” and this is viewed against the backdrop of the relation between will-duty\(^{22}\) and form: “moral sense of the unity of the entire universe, of \textit{expression} (form); […] As in the moral field, form is will” (Slataper: \textit{Appunti} 206). In short, with Amendola and Slataper, neo-Kantianism

\(^{19}\) Cf. Slataper: “Imparaticci di sintesi analitica” (March 1908), in \textit{Appunti} 78: “Kant gave to man what man gave to God […]. What our life is missing is the conclusion: the gesture that gives value.”

\(^{20}\) Cf. Amendola: “Etica e biografia,” in \textit{Etica} 41: “Critical philosophy, which according to Heine and Carducci decapitated God, actually only drew God out of the inaccessible solitudes of absolute abstraction into everyday reality, building him a sanctuary in the heart of man […]. But the Kantian God lives in the conscience of man under the form of ethical law.”

\(^{21}\) Cf. Cacciari, “Metafisica della gioventù,” in Lukács: \textit{Diary}: “The Romanticism that Lukács (and, later, Benjamin) is interested in, is the one […] of the great philosophies of art, that look for timelessness in time […], that do not conceive eternity as an immobile, rigid present, but as the perfecting of \textit{every} temporal dimension.”

\(^{22}\) It was precisely Amendola, on the basis of Maine De Biran (whose ideas he presented in a few lessons at the Biblioteca Filosofica in Florence in 1911), who set the concept of ‘will’ as an affirmation of the ethical I. Cf. Amendola: “La Volontà è il Bene,” in \textit{Etica} 9-12: “where there is will there is ethical value; there is good; where there is no ethical value, no good, there is also no will. Will can be neither good or bad, because it is itself the criterion by which good is distinguished from evil […] ethical value resides entirely in the volitional principle […]. Taking a stand means taking action. […] the will is not the beginning of action, but all of action.” The small volume, along with the one on De Biran, was in Slataper’s library, repeatedly annotated with the word “Brand.” The same word appears repeatedly annotated in Kant’s \textit{Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals}. 298
represents, precisely in its referring, from the sphere of immanence, to archetypal values\(^\text{23}\) (to the possibility of a *Heimat*),\(^\text{24}\) one of the highest points of bourgeois criticism of the gradual expansion of modernist ideology. And yet, its very faith in culture – a culture centered on the traditional dominion of Thought over Being (reflected, in the field of praxis, in the work of the intellectual who regains through knowledge dominion over events, thereby turning theory into practice)\(^\text{25}\) – will ultimately keep it constrained within the horizon it wanted to oppose, confirming its subordinate role to the nascent hegemony. The impossibility of achieving the ‘authentic reconciliation’ that the desire for *Kultur* expresses (the ethical task of remembering the existence that preceded the fall into time) will then spill over, as we shall see following the story of Slataper, into a model of reconciliation which the intellectual-persuader builds on the ruins of the ‘community’: the mystification of Totality in the folds of *Zivilisation*, where form itself, while it accepts the existing and calls it ‘whole,’ finds itself alienated.

**II. Trieste’s Symbolic Form**

Trieste! Pearl of the *Küstenland*, main port of the Habsburg Empire and crossroads for trade\(^\text{26}\) between West and East. “Bourgeois city”\(^\text{27}\) par excellence, where the “writer is a stowaway, a trader dealing in a solitary, despised vice” (Ara and Magris: 32-35). With a middle class characterized by Slavic surnames and pro-Italian sentiments, with its commerce and nascent industry supported by foreign capital, Trieste had not been directly involved in the

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\(^{23}\) Cf. Manfreda 109: “Weininger’s response to the crisis of Kultur and the consolidation of ‘aesthetic culture’ seems a return to the realm of archetypes.” Putting values that are *really* eternal before the surrogate of Totality behind which Capitalism mystifies itself.

\(^{24}\) “Always homeward,” the phrase that resounded more than a hundred years earlier in Novalis’s *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, the model that the *Sturmer und Dranger* opposed to Goethe’s *Meister*, to his participation in the social mechanism, is a severe warning for the whole neo-Kantian perspective. ‘Home’ is the opposite of Metropolis.

\(^{25}\) A sort of sublimation of practice in theory: the original sin of an entire culture and, in particular in Italy, of the Vocian movement. Also note how Turati’s Socialist Party would move in the exact opposite direction, gradually deflating theory on the horizon of action, toning down Marxism by virtue of direct praxis, the same that intellectuals would then read (and reject) in terms of ‘empirical politics.’ This is another aspect of the fracture between the Party and the new generation of intellectuals.

\(^{26}\) Cf. Slataper: *Il mio Carso* (1912) 61-2: “I like movement, noise, bustling, work. Nobody wastes time, because everyone has to get somewhere in a hurry, and they all have a concern. […] I’m happy […], I laugh at the carts that rattle by, at the grey bags of coffee, the quivering crates packed with fat oranges wrapped in paper lace, the sacks of rice leaking from the punchings made by customs officers […] the raw wool, the barrels sludgy with oil, […] the good commodities.”

\(^{27}\) Cf. Ara and Magris: 32-3: “a city […] that lives its being bourgeois as destiny, as being *tout court*.”
Risorgimento, and, with the creation of the Triple Alliance (1882), had adapted to the ambiguity of its role. A city locked – Slataper will write – between the hard-working skepticism of Domenico Rossetti and the sacrifice of Oberdan; the lyric of the Risorgimento; Garibaldi and Mazzinianism, but also, contempt and fear of the Slovenians who were pressing at the border:

Trieste, which is the obstacle but can be the symbol of victory. [...] It contains, worried, the elements that worry us moderns: we must really find a balance in all this [...]. Also, until I can engulf all the complexities of human life, taking part in its seemingly contradictory forms, commerce and literature, salon and old town, Karst and stone pavements, Slovenes and Italians, I am not a poet. [...] Man is also this: one who sees the tragic opposites, and gives a cry of joy (Alle tre amiche 424-5).

A cosmopolitan city composed of foreigners, Trieste not only expressed the contradiction, discussed by Slataper in Lettere triestine, between commerce and ideality, or “Scipio’s helm and Mercury’s hat” (Slataper: “L’avvenire nazionale e politico di Trieste,” in Scritti politici 133), between the economic necessity of close links with Vienna and the call of Rome, but,

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28 Cf. Slataper: “Un po’ di storia,” in La Voce, December 8, 1910, in Scritti politici 82-5: “there is one thing only that it needs in order not to be forgotten by Italy: martyrdom. [...] A whole history without bloodshed weighs on Trieste. Balance, prudence, [...] is the Triestine soul. Fifty years of sacrifices for the country have not shaken anti-utopian Trieste. [...] And the remorse is embodied in Guglielmo Oberdan. [...] Mazzini drew him from his environment and made him live among his companions: the Bandiera brothers [...]. The moral value of life required a sacrifice in Trieste to establish itself amid the everyday, cut off from any sense of eternity, and a sacrifice – the most unpractical – in the most practical of cities.”

29 Cf. Senardi: “Una giornata speciale: Trieste, 4 luglio 1907,” in Senardi: 69: “During the second half of the nineteenth century, Mazzinianism and Garibaldinism represented, on the plane of ideology and ideals, a constant and essential component of the varied pro-Italian front of Trieste’s political world and civil society.”

30 Alberto Spaini, in the double issue of La Voce dedicated to irredentism, would deal precisely with the Mazzinians of Trieste, the ones belonging to the Pro-Cultura association.

31 Cf. Ara: “Trieste e la mediazione tra le culture: lo sfondo storico,” in Pertici: Triestini 15-7: “the first Slovenian generations, which were almost keen to make the leap of civilization and social condition and disperse in the fabric of the city, are replaced by a Slovenian immigration that has no intention of repudiating itself. [...] the Slovenes do not cut the umbilical cord that ties them to their land of origin, but remain firmly in contact with it, they have always been present in the countryside of Trieste, which is situated in a predominantly Slavic hinterland [...]. In other words, Trieste [...] is the largest city of Slovenia [...]. The proclaimed need to stem [...] the Slavic ascent thus becomes a factor of political aggregation for the city’s Italian majority.”

32 Letter to Gigetta Carniel dated February 8, 1912.

33 Cf. Slataper: “La vita dello spirito,” in La Voce, March 25, 1909, in Lettere triestine, 38: “It’s a dispute between two natures that fight to cancel each other out: the commercial one and the Italian one. And Trieste cannot strangle either one: it is its twofold soul: it would be suicide. Everything that is necessary to business is a violation of the Italian spirit; what improves the former damages the latter. It senses the importance of Germany and must fight it; it fears the Slavic banks and becomes their client. [...] It is Italian: but for a superior culture it must look to Graz or Vienna.”

34 Cf. Slataper: “L’avvenire nazionale e politico di Trieste,” in Scritti politici 142: “the flourishing of the port of Trieste is not at all natural, but created by the State to which Trieste has given itself out of commercial necessity [...]. Tomorrow we will get the dull, grey city back.”
as exemplified by the relationship with the Slavs,\textsuperscript{35} also the point at which the ideas of 1848 on the principle of nationality, as exemplified by Otto Bauer,\textsuperscript{36} come into collision with the new economy of Trusts and big banks. Garibaldi and Mazzini had praised the Risorgimento of their “Slavic brothers,” but Garibaldi and Mazzini are also the symbols around which coalesced, in an anti-Slavic perspective, the new Irredentism\textsuperscript{37} of Trento and Trieste, of the newspaper \textit{Il Piccolo}, and of the National Liberal Party (the people Slataper would expose to ridicule, in his \textit{Caratteri}\textsuperscript{38} in \textit{La Voce}, for their windbag rhetoric and evident contradictions between political and economic interests).

Trieste was also home to a very active Socialist Party (Lanza, Pittoni, Susmel, Vivante) looked at with sympathy, from the ubiquitous Mazzinian position, by the young Slataper\textsuperscript{39}; the party converged around the daily paper \textit{Il Lavoratore} [The Worker] and the \textit{Circolo di Studi Sociali}, which organized conferences, called to Trieste the socialists Gaetano Salvemini, Enrico Ferri, Arturo Labriola, professed internationalism, prepared binational lists of candidates (Italians and Slavs), and looked with interest at the model represented by

\textsuperscript{35} Cf. Vivante: \textit{Irredentismo} (published in 1912 in “Quaderni della Voce”) 135-6: “The only ethnic conflict in Giulia is the one between the Italians and the Slavs. […] perhaps all direct descendants of Rome or Venice: on the other, the Slavs, the foreigners, the arrivals of yesterday, all regimented by the Austrian government […] unreal. The Italians, especially in Trieste, are in very small measure descendants of the Roman world […]; the Slavs are not at all the arrivals of yesterday and their nationalist movement is a historical phenomenon”

\textsuperscript{36} Theoretical studies on Austromarxism were more widespread in Italy than is generally believed. Not only were the writings of Adler, Natorp, Cohen, Vorlander, and Renner in circulation, but the link between neo-Kantianism and Austromarxism (Bernstein would frequently cite Lange; Vorlander’s \textit{Marx und Kant} was published in 1911), including the Fichtean function of the intellectual as a guide, would have an important role in the discussion on the “crisis of socialism” conducted on \textit{Critica sociale}. Here it will be sufficient to recall the position advocated by Tullio Colucci, centered on reformism with an ethical perspective.

In Trieste Austromarxism had an important supporter in Valentino Pittoni, but in the cultural sphere the highest result is represented by Vivante’s \textit{Irredentismo adriatico}, a work that was much appreciated by Slataper. Cf. Slataper: “A proposito del dottor Vivante,” in \textit{La Tribuna}, July 19, 1915. One wonders why Stuparich left this out of the edition of \textit{Scritti politici} that was printed in the 1950s. His decision may have been influenced by Slataper’s statement, contained therein, according to which he had never been a socialist.

\textsuperscript{37} The word was coined by Matteo Imbriani. For Slataper’s generation, irredentism largely coalesced because of the problem regarding the need to found an Italian university in the Empire (precisely in Trieste). This problem was one of the causes of the scuffles that continually broke out, in Graz and Vienna, between Italian and German students (in one of these Marcello Loewy was wounded). Pasini dedicated one of the “Quaderni della Voce” to this matter, Slataper an important article in \textit{La Voce Trentina} in which, from a typically Vocian perspective, he discussed the importance of the cultural institution for the establishment of a national consciousness. Cf. Slataper: “L’Università,” in \textit{La Voce Trentina}, December 1, 1911, in \textit{Scritti politici} 120-121: “We need a university […] to create a sufficient number of lawyers, doctors, and professors to fill all government offices with Italian employees. […] Only when we can study in our own language will we become a nation, will we become aware of ourselves. […] Now we shout and do business.”

\textsuperscript{38} Cf. Slataper: “L’irredentista “fighi e zibibbe”,” in \textit{La Voce}, May 6, 1909, in \textit{Scritti letterari} 13: “although it would be nice that Rome was our capital and our university was in Rome: – he says; and meanwhile he stuffs his hand in his pocket to jingle the money that he earned representing the firm \textit{Oesterreich und Ungarn}.”

\textsuperscript{39} Cf. Slataper: “Diario per Maria” (1905), in \textit{Appunti} 20-21: “In my opinion, scientific socialism is the true contemporary critic”
“L’Austria dei popoli” [Austria of peoples]. The socialists were promptly accused of ‘austriacantismo’ [pro-Austrian sentiments] and ‘Slavophilism’ by the irredentist Vidossich, but not by Slataper, who, like his director Prezzolini, recognized the glaring contradiction that lay in the need of Italian capital for Slavic labor, so that while “the Italians decry the threat of a Slovenian influx to Trieste, which they believe is encouraged by the Austrian government in order to alter the balance of nationalities along the Adriatic coast and make it ‘less Italian,’ Italian employers are inviting Slovenian workers, who often settle for lower wages” (Ara: “Trieste e la mediazione tra le culture: lo sfondo storico,” in Pertici: 18); “intellectual and ethnic cheating” (Slataper: Epistolario 243) which La Voce, firm in its democratic positions (the years of Salvemini’s hegemony), looked at from the perspective that Slataper calls “cultural irredentism,” the need for intellectual preparation and realpolitik beyond the various rhetorics: the liberal one, unable to resolve the contradiction between the legacy of the Risorgimento and the new economic structure; the nationalist-imperialist one, which solves that contradiction as “completely anti-Italian mockery of Pan-Germanism” (Slataper: Lettere triestine 101); but also the socialist one, which, with its internationalist bias, fails to take into account the national sentiment that “is undeniably inside

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40 The progressive ethnicization of the socialist parties in view of the First World War would be challenged by Angelo Vivante, who reiterated the need for an anti-bourgeois front in the last pamphlet he wrote before his suicide, significantly entitled Dal covo dei traditori [From the Den of Traitors]. It was rejected by both La Voce and Salvemini’s Unità (at that time tempted by free-trade as an economic solution to separate Trieste from its Slavic hinterland), and, by tragic irony, was published by Mussolini’s Avanti. During his time at La Voce, Slataper was severely ostracized by the city’s cultural and political milieu, to the point that, when he began his collaboration with Vamba’s Giornalino della Domenica, many readers threatened to cancel their subscriptions.

41 Croce recommended him to Prezzolini to hold a column in La Voce on the situation in Trieste. Prezzolini chose the younger Slataper.

42 Cf. Prezzolini: “Lettere triestine,” in La Voce, July 22, 1909, in Lettere triestine 71-2: “the Italian ruling class, which controls the capital, is in need of manpower; and that comes mainly from the countryside […]. Now the countryside is all Slavic […] the nationalists […] chitter about an economic battle against Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism, as if money and the currents of emigration went along with sentimental and literary fancies!”

43 Cf. Vivante: Irredentismo 155 and 203: “Even those who do not consider the economic factor particularly important cannot deny, I think, that the phenomenon of Slavic awakening is, at least in its basic mechanism, the result of capitalistic evolution” – “if anything, […] Slavification should be attributed […] to capitalism. Instead, the charge is leveled against organized proletarians […] because the proletariat’s «anti-national» attitudes can be easily seen by all, while those of the other classes, often much more conclusive, escape from sight and criticism.”

44 Cf. Slataper, “Oggi,” in La Voce, December 10, 1915, in Lettere triestine 104: “the Italians must know; and first of all because it is immoral to excite a nation with a non-existent reality, and drive it towards unknown effects […]. First, and the most preached, is to be prepared.”

45 Cf. Slataper: “Lettere triestine,” in La Voce, September 9, 1909, in Lettere triestine 96: “if we keep on magnifying the legendary Trieste that soars among the skies of Italy, we will always get screams and cheers; but understanding, genuine interest, money – no.”
our souls” (Slataper: *Lettere triestine* 60), \(^{46}\) a contention in line with the traditional rejection, shared by all at *La Voce*, of class struggle being the motor of history. \(^{47}\)

Yet it is difficult not to note that the declared independence of the intellectual, proclaimed by *La Voce* and apparently confirmed by the unorthodox stance taken by the paper’s technicians on the issue of Trieste, actually reflects the necessities of the Italian ruling class (and now, in particular, the industrial class), no doubt eager to make its first experiences abroad (protectionism had paid off and production capacity now exceeded domestic requirements, \(^{48}\) especially in the mechanical/motor sector), but still lacking a financial environment comparable to that of the great powers, \(^{49}\) and therefore obligated, on the one hand, to keep its place in the Triple Alliance, but also interested, on the other, to use the anachronistic principle of nationality to attract into its orbit countries like Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, which would facilitate, in the future, industrial penetration in the Balkans in competition with Austria. \(^{50}\)

It is with this in mind, i.e. the progressive economic and political detachment from the Triple Alliance, that we should view the gradual falling back of *La Voce* (and Slataper) from democratic positions to nationalist ones, and also the continuing subordination of democratic ideology, unable to subsume its own activity in a clear, class-defined context, and likewise incapable of taking a firm stand on the issue of ‘national sentiment’ (Prezzolini agreeing with the ideas on the moral value of war as a process of rebirth of nations) and, therefore, inevitably attracted to the *modus pensandi* of the


\(^{47}\) No doubt the close bond that had developed between Prezzolini and Slataper in those years contributed to distance the latter from socialism. We recall in passing that in February 1911 *La Voce* published the fundamental article on *La morte del socialismo* [The Death of Socialism] by Falea di Calcedonia (aka Benedetto Croce).

\(^{48}\) The only criticism on that matter, as rightly observed by Luca Zorzenon (“Le «Lettere triestine»,” in Guagnini: *Scipio Slataper: l’inquietudine dei moderni*), is found in *Altre istituzioni di cultura*, where Slataper realizes that the founding of a Popular University was to be intended as the bourgeois countermove to the education of the people that was being implemented by the Circolo di Studi Sociali. The article dates back to the very beginning of Slataper’s collaboration with *La Voce*; this attention for the need to convince/control the masses will later fade away, only to return – in a nationalist key – at the dawn of the world war.

\(^{49}\) In addition, friction was developing with the Central Powers over trade issues in the Adriatic and the Levant.

\(^{50}\) Cf. Webster 487: “Italy was separating from its allies in the Triple Alliance because its economic interests, especially in heavy industry and public utilities, were incompatible with the interests of Germany and Austria-Hungary. […] situation of the iron and steel industry, and of the struggle it waged against the dumping tactics adopted by Germany, and in the analysis of the development of Italian war industries.”
more stable nationalist perspective. The contradictions of the democratic project are obvious, and Slataper himself (so adept at exposing the faults of the liberals) describes them at their height:

the only solution is Slavophilism […]. But to achieve such an alliance it is necessary for Italy to entirely give up on Trieste, Istria, and any aims in the Balkans. Its strength would consist in stimulating and supporting Slavic consciousness. Hold back Austria’s eastward advance with independent nation-states. And annex the Trentino, and Friuli as far as the Isonzo. This way it might in any case receive the sympathies of the Slavic Austria that is shortly to rule the empire (Slataper: Lettere triestine 109-10).

irredentism does not mean spending more money to ensure a new little piece of Africa or sharing the disgrace in China or setting the conditions for guns to be raised against Italians and sabers against students, but to ideally (indeed, really) bring together life on both shores of the Iudrio. Made one by reality, the Italian people (without them, nothing!) will be able to impose its power on Europe (Slataper: Epistolario 42).

In short, if we examine Trieste’s condition against the structural backdrop of the bourgeoisie’s increasing reactionarization (with the legacy of 1848 alternatively taken as an ideological crowbar or as useless baggage), at a time when industrialism, according to Hilferding and Lenin’s view, is tearing down the still revolutionary model of the nation-state, we can explain all those apparently contradictory positions that revolve, to stay with the Italian example, around the figures of Garibaldi and Mazzini (and that will last until Fascism); it becomes clear why Mazzini can be invoked both as the champion of oppressed peoples and as the defender of the need “to impose a so-called superior civilization to people who lived in a centuries-long slumber caused by precise historical and geographical reasons” (Valauri: in Rüesch and Somalvico 91) (an issue which had previously been an integral part of Oriani’s Mazzinian speculations). When, in fact, Slataper ultimately abandons his

51 Cf. Strappini: “Cultura e nazione. Analisi di un mito,” in Strappini, Micocci, and Abruzzese: La classe dei colti 31: “While Gentile places Mazzini and Gioberti at the foundations of the Fascist doctrine, Mazzini is also referred to by Salvemini, Gobetti, and a large part of the antifascist front.” It should also be noted that Mussolini, in 1915, declared Garibaldinism to be identical with interventionism.
52 Slataper’s interest for the works of Oriani never fades. In 1906 (at the age 18) he read Memorie inutili. He then read at least La disfatta e Vortice and, between 1913 and 1914, showed great interest for the reprint of Lotta politica in the editions of La Voce. Certain remarks in his better known articles seem to be lifted straight from
previous opinions and settles for nationalism (during the pro-interventionist campaign), he solves his ideological contradictions by taking a reactionary stance, falling in line with the new, and stronger, interests of the ruling classes, and even abandoning, as we shall see below, the neo-Kantian stance that he had taken, on the philosophical level, during his collaboration with La Voce, now centering his beliefs on a mystique of Werk, history, and action among men that will prove to be ‘reconciliation’ and mystification. In this way, nationalism’s capture of the democratic ideology – exemplified by the reconcilement, in view of the war, between Slataper and the hiper-nationalistic Timeus – also solves the ‘moral’ problem (the need to ‘balance’ the ‘tragic opposites’ that we read in the letter to Gigetta), which Slataper, as a Vocian intellectual, had put at the basis of his own existential adventure and, more importantly, of Trieste itself, so that the city becomes for him the symbol of a spiritual condition regarding all European civilization (“Trieste has little of that abstractive

Oriani, Cf. Slataper: “L’avvenire nazionale e politico di Trieste,” in Scritti politici 148: “The irredentist frame of mind can be so much more acceptable as an ideology in Italy now that the capture of Tripoli seems to obey the right of national oppression (while it is just an episode of the perpetual war that European civilization, more intense, more hardworking, has always waged necessarily against less active civilizations.” Oriani’s myth of the ‘failed’ Risorgimento, the roots of which could be found in Mazzini himself, was also shared by the democrats and the nationalists. It should also be added that, after siding with the interventionists, Slataper found employment, in September 1914, with the “Resto del Carlino” run by Mario Missiroli, one of the main propagators of Oriani’s writings.

53 Nationalism, Carocci reminds us, aimed at becoming the ideology of Italian monopolistic capital up against the more powerful foreign capital.

54 Timeus represents the link between the tradition of the Risorgimento and nationalism, the point at which, to use his words, bourgeois idealism passes from the myth of freedom to the myth of the empire. He was responsible for claiming, of course with all due pride, the myth of “Trieste bourgeois city.” Slataper introduced him to La Voce on the occasion of the double issue of December 1910 dedicated to irredentism (to which he contributed along with Vivante, Borgese, Mussolini, Papini, Spaini). Timeus complained of having his name appearing together with that of the ‘traitor’ Vivante. In 1912 he even risked fighting a duel with Slataper. The reconciliation took place in Rome in the days prior to the event.

To illustrate the difficult position of the democratically-oriented Vocian intellectual we can also mention that singular economist that was Alberto Caroncini, a collaborator of and an exponent of the democratic-liberal wing of the nationalist front (Slataper refers to him as a representative of “moral irredentism”). Both Prezzolini and Slataper shared a good deal of his nationalist views, which were based not on “romaneggiante” [Romanizing] rhetoric but on an anti-protectionist, inter-class economic discourse focusing on the role of the country’s ‘really’ productive forces. Prezzolini, we learn from a letter to Slataper, even considered using him to promote an opposition of nationalist-Vocian orientation at the Nationalist Congress of 1910. In short, the respective positions, as Caroncini realized, were not irreconcilable, but it is easy to see which of the two was the driving one. At the outbreak of war, furthermore, Caroncini, like Slataper, assumed a strictly ‘pro-war’ attitude, combining, in his writings, industrial expansion and territorial conquest.

To further exemplify the degree of inconsistency of the democratic front we can quote a passage by Giani Stuparich, in which Vivante and Timeus are brought together in a position that is ingenuously Risorgimental, inter-class, and tendentially nationalism. Cf. Stuparich: Slataper 254-6.

55 Only Prezzolini and Soffici wrote more articles for La Voce than Slataper, but they had worked at the journal for a much longer time. Prezzolini would repeatedly offer Slataper the appointment to director of the journal. Between December 1911 and March 1912, although appearing as editor-in-chief, Slataper was unofficially the journal’s interim director.
something that generalizes in the mind what the senses perceive moment to moment,”

Slataper: *Lettere triestine* 32), the crisis of the ‘symbolic’ activity that organizes knowledge into ‘forms,’ a symbol itself, in its many contrasts, of the condition of *Krisis* understood as the absence of certainties and foundations in which the intellectual must work.

Trieste, write Ara and Magris, as a “concentrate of the empire” (Ara and Magris: 7), where, on a small scale, the signs of a Krausian apocalypse coalesce; but also, with its young intellectuals, Trieste as a bridge between Vienna and Florence56; a wealth of readings57 and themes that spill over into the Kingdom, at the same time finding an audience already prepared in that sense by professors – young58 and not so young – educated in Germany, and by militant intellectuals who had spent years studying Romantic thought and authors such as Bergson,59 Schiller, and James.60 Thanks to the space granted them by *La Voce*61 (Prezzolini had inaugurated the journal calling attention to those peripheral realities that were an integral part of the “*paese reale*”), these authors bring to Florence some of the fundamental themes of Mitteleuropean literature, not so much by directly dealing with those authors as by referring to their common Romantic and late-Romantic background62:

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56 In addition to Slataper, a number of important figures leave Venezia-Giulia to study in Florence, including the Stuparich brothers, Michelstaedter, Marin, Spaini, Burich, Devescovi, Tavolato, Battisti.
57 Giani and Carlo Stuparich work on von Kleist’s *Epistolario* for Papini’s publisher Carabba; Spaini, in addition to publishing *La modernità di Goethe* in 1914, offers Prezzolini a profile of Thomas Mann and begins the first studies on German Expressionism; Slataper reads Hamsun, Jacobsen, Rilke, Hofmannsthal; Spaini would later become the translator of Kafka. A Triestine of the previous generation, Benco, translates *Wilhelm Meister* into Italian. The case is different for Weininger (published in the Italian translation in 1912 by Fratelli Bocca and immediately “adopted” by the Florentines). For a study on the extraordinary fortune met by Weininger in Italy, see the little classic by Alberto Cavaglion, *La filosofia del pressappoco*.
58 Consider the work of Borgese on “Romantic criticism”; his essay on Hebbel’s *Judith* in *La vita e il libro*, his 1909 volume *La nuova Germania* in which Hebbel is directly related to Ibsen and Nietzsche (Slataper would do the same).
59 In his article *La riforma della scuola media*, Prezzolini would write that Romanticism lived on in the philosophy of Bergson.
60 It cannot be argued, as Angelo Romano does in his “Introduction” to *La cultura italiana attraverso le riviste*, that it is thanks to Slataper that European “irrationalist” culture begins to make headway in Italy: that culture (in studies on early Romanticism, contingency, pragmatism, the philosophy of Simmel, etc.) was already present in Florence some years before the arrival of Slataper.
61 Cf. Slataper: letter to Giuseppe Prezzolini of January 1909, in Prezzolini–Slataper: *Carteggio* 3: “I come from Trieste: […] Maybe you could use a little propaganda […] And perhaps you wouldn’t mind an exposition of our particular situation on the subjects of art and science.” The same applies to the studies of Gemma Harasim on the city of Fiume and those of Benito Mussolini (then employed as an editor at the “Popolo” directed by Cesare Battisti) on Trentino.
62 Cf. Magris: *Clarisse* 66: “Through their encounter with Ibsen, Slataper and especially Michelstaedter perceived and explored the alienation of Western thought, the dominion of knowledge – of rhetoric, that is, of intellectual organization – over all experienced knowledge, and the conflict between life and its meaning.” Among these authors (besides Novalis, von Kleist, Hebbel, Goethe, etc.) we may certainly add, especially for his *ante litteram*
to cleave ourselves into multiple planes: the plane of pure art, the plane of practical social life, the plane of artistic morality, the plane of utilitarian morality (social morality). Those who are untrammeled by knots accept this cleaving, adapt to it, and thus resolve their lives [...]. Those who must deal with a central knot painfully resist the tendency to cleave, and with an agonizing effort try to concentrate, to neutralize the forces of disintegration, to precipitate all the molecular tensions in its center. The tragedy of modern society. The centripetal force that organizes the chaotic elements, which used to be faith, has dissolved. – The effort must come from the individual (Carlo Stuparich: 67).

But the relationship has a double derivation: not only in Trieste are bookshops starting to showcase “the sober volumes of Carabba, the varied ones of Formiggini, the aristocratic ones of Laterza […] Quattrini of Florence, Ricciardi of Naples, Puccini of Ancona […] La Critica […] La Voce” (Stuparich: Slataper 24); Triestine literates are also internalizing the model of an intellectual that, in positioning and methodology, is inevitably the one modulated by Prezzolini’s perspective (“Now, instead, I live with you who see much more than I. […] And I bless “La Voce,” Slataper: Epistolario 246), that is to say, the one modulated on the concepts of ‘honesty,’ ‘sincerity,’ and ‘morality,’ and committed – in a movement towards concrete reality that includes the rejection of “empty literature” – to “determining a tide of opinion capable of making a change” (Prezzolini: Al lettori, in La Voce, March 11, 1909, in Romanò: 209).

criticism of “aesthetic culture,” Soren Kierkegaard, who was known in Italy chiefly thanks to the work of the ‘Leonardians’ and through the fundamental mediation of Knud Ferlov (The Seducer’s Diary was translated in 1910 by L. Redaelli). The Danish philosopher had also been indirectly cited by Slataper in his monograph on Ibsen.

63 With typical Vocian commitment Slataper gathers information for his Lettere triestine. Cf. Volpato 32-3: “Lettere triestine shows his having acquired the Vocian methodology: a serious, methodical knowledge of primary bibliographic documentation.”

64 Slataper’s gradual abandonment of D’Annunzio after his adolescent fervor should also be seen in this perspective. All aestheticism (in which Slataper will also include Futurism) is rejected as individualistic literature, incapable, according to the double movement of Slataper that we are analyzing, of becoming ‘moral’ and ‘comprising’ others in itself. Cf. Slataper: “Diario per Marcello,” March 30, 1907, in Appunti 53-4: “When I say to people: I can enjoy myself, I can enjoy everything, am I not horribly selfish? I don’t think so. I hope and dream to communicate this contentment of contentability to others too […]. But a doubt assails me. Isn’t this also a maxim of D’Annunzio’s? And was he able to improve our spirit with the virtue of joy? […] He can’t, because it is not love that drives him: it is love of self, love of the superman. […] it pushes others way from him instead of bringing them closer. If I could, I would say: Come to me.” Amendola, in the journal Prose, had already thundered against D’Annunzio, the “falsifier of values,” countering him with Carducci.
Theory as praxis: the new figure of intellectual, which will be later categorized by Gramsci under “cultural Messianism” and which, according to Prezzolini, should proceed with “ideals in the heart; reality in the will,” continues to operate in the regressive perspective connected with the loss of the social mandate of the intellectuals, and, while understanding that the changing of capitalist development towards a mass society includes a necessary “democratization of culture” (Luperini: Slataper 16) – and therefore new duties for its representatives duties which he identifies in the need for a closer bond between culture and politics – as propounded by Anzillotti in 1909) – continues to act, thereby safeguarding his role, in an eminently cultural horizon where the intellectual, ‘prepared’ and willing to enter the arena of practical life, but armed with a greater moral conscience (recalling the constant invitation of La Voce “to shed light inside ourselves”), declares himself as the possessor of certain values that are decisive for the proper functioning of the State:

We write: but to clarify things inside ourselves. […] we do practical work. I just used the word “practical” and already I hear a collective moaning […] It’s funny: it would seem that young Italy is a generation of cloud-mongers and packers of vacuity! […] our sort of half-baked literati, that is, of people living in a special world of ideas, which – it must be said – is beginning to smell […] we should throw open some windows. […] And let’s start going outside into life (Slataper: “Ai giovani intelligenti d’Italia,” in Scritti letterari 186-7).

The link between morality and politics (“Moral Action, La Voce,” Slataper: Epistolario 258), between preparation and action, continues to lean noticeably towards the first term, because in this way the intellectual can maintain his capacity to assume an elitist and prospectively managerial position; a position that, in order to be such, must necessarily refer to a type of

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65 Including, of course, participatory-propagandistic duties.
66 Anzillotti would represent one of the more typical crossings from inter-class democratism to nationalism. Cf. Prezzolini: Tempo della Voce 185: “The evolution of his thought coincided with a change in the public opinion of the youth of the time, which being revolutionary and impatient felt increasingly satisfied with the country’s progress and ultimately convinced of the possibility to take part with the Triple Entente in the competition of the first world war.”
67 Cf. Slataper: letter to Marcello Loewy of February 1910, in Epistolario 68: “And La Voce is not something artistic: it’s fights and fisticuffs; it’s a stormy sea, but not viewed from above.”
68 The references in this regard are countless: the internationalism of intelligence (Slataper); the “guiding core of 20 men to set up a revolutionary Cabinet” (Salvemini); the “party of the brilliant” (Papini); the exhortation, made in the middle of the war, to establish an “unbiased and impartial intellectual community” (Croce). As we can see, Prezzolini’s “società degli apoti” is just the culmination of a long tradition.
action in which ‘thought,’ or theory, preserves a function of greater prestige than political-journalistic work, in fact interpreted, just when daily newspapers are becoming “practically the only means of information for the middle classes and the urban popular classes” (Briganti: 65), in terms of “intellectual dishonesty” (Slataper: Epistolario 56) and ephemeral empiricism. In other words, the Vocian intellectual links his own prestige to his responsibility as a man of greater culture (no longer only literary/artistic, but moral/operational); of a man, that is, capable of indicating the ethical perspective that society should pursue (Amendola had written that “in Italy every particular problem is less than nothing unless it is nourished by the sole, total, ideal problem,” Amendola: Tempo della Voce 455). This ethical perspective is at one with the call for ‘clarity,’ and clarity is what will overcome the contradictions. Then we can fully appreciate the bridge that Slataper builds between his own existential destiny and that of Trieste (“Trieste, which is the obstacle but can be the symbol of victory”): Trieste must be freed from the rhetorical falsifications of the liberals and from the reveries of literature, but it must also be brought to Expression (an important word in Slataper), to form, where the contradictions are overcome and resolved in the progress towards a self-regenerating ‘clarity’ which is the same that the Vocian intellectual has placed at the basis of the moral inquiry/regeneration – seen as the responsibility of a duty – that preludes political and cultural renewal.

In fact, in his “Foreword” to Torquato Tasso’s Epistolario, which he edited in 1912, Slataper puts together the cultural (but anti-literary) perspective of La Voce with the need to overcome the moral conflict which is admittedly existential but also closely related to the intellectual’s ability to ‘bring clarity,’ through himself, to an entire era. Tasso, “soaked in letteratismo” and therefore unable to take an interest in “all the great contemporary social and spiritual movements” (Slataper: Scritti letterari 120-1), is “the Hamletic creation of mankind”

69 In a letter of May 1907, Amendola would talk to Prezzolini about a “group of young men arisen to cleanse Italy,” in Prezzolini: Amendola e «La Voce» 48.
70 Cf. Slataper: “Futuro,” in Inediti, in La città. Rivista bimestrale di lettere e arti a cura di Marcello Pirro 51: “active beings work (see pref. Tasso). We realized that in work, in the concrete expression of ourselves, there was a sort of happiness.”
in other words, he represents the inability to bring conflicts to form, to organize them in the quiet of ‘expression,’ of synthesis, and, continues Amendola in his review of the book, where “the spirit is powerless, practice and rules prevail” (Amendola: “Le lettere al Tasso,” in *Ética* 104): the ‘poet’ unable to elevate history to its ‘meaning’ will be replaced by the political empiricism of Carafa.

Slataper links the special condition of Trieste, its contradictions, to the cultural crisis affecting intellectuals throughout Europe, and introduces in the project of *La Voce* (in its weaving of morality and politics) the beginnings of the overcoming of both: “Our preparation is one of serious moral content. […] before those who […] lack the strength to establish definite boundaries in their life, and join in with opposite worlds, blending in by dint of irony and doubt” (Slataper: *Carteggio* 72-3).

The idea was not to shut one’s eyes to contradictions, but to try and resolve them (“The function of *La Voce*, I believe, is to unify the spirit,” Slataper: *Carteggio* 199).71 This was not an easy task (Slataper is proof of that) because the position of *La Voce* was contradictory in itself,72 trapped as it was, internally, between the need for political activism expressed by Salvemini and the moral action of civilization demanded by Amendola, Casati,73 and Slataper74; and, externally, in all the problems arising from trying to assume a political

71 As a matter of fact, when he sees that the journal is moving more towards politics, abdicating the need for a ‘spiritual communion’ between its collaborators, and becoming, in his opinion, a mere fact sheet, Slataper will leave the editorial staff.

72 These contradictions would definitely explode with the outbreak of the war in Libya, when the journal, following the positions taken by Salvemini, first declared its contrariety and then, on the advice of Amendola (never alien to palingenetic positions, as we will see during the first world war), remained silent to respect the ‘national interest’ (and Salvemini would leave the editorial staff). Later, in an article entitled *Dopo un anno* appearing on October 3, 1912, Prezzolini would acknowledge certain benefits for the country brought by the war. Here too we can see the subordination of democratism to nationalist doctrines.

73 After Prezzolini and Salvemini declared themselves in favor of universal suffrage, Casati (who was also one of the journal’s main financial supporters) left *La Voce*.

74 Cf. Slataper: letter to Giuseppe Prezzolini dated April 21, 1911, in Prezzolini–Slataper: *Carteggio* 198-9: “This last year *La Voce* has covered politics more and more: I don’t think this is very good […] cultural, moral activity […]. Salvemini. You know that I completely agree with his ideas, although I don’t share some of his political illusions (parliamentarism, universal suffrage, etc.: all good things, but incapable of leading to renewal). Only it seems to me that sometimes you do not sufficiently control what Salv.[emini] tells you. […] In general, all of us, as a reaction to rhetoric, let ourselves be too easily influenced by the “fact. […] “La Voce” should not become political.”
position at the same time popular/democratic and interclassist, thoughtful of material matters but, deep inside, profoundly idealistic.

The nation is a complex, compact, unbroken tradition of civilization [...] of needs, instincts [...] of life [...]. It is not true that the fatherland phenomenon is a transitory one [...] The fatherland is spirit in action [...] it is natural, it is necessary that it be embodied in us [...]. To break it down is to break down ourselves (Slataper: “L’avvenire nazionale e politico di Trieste,” in *Scritti politici* 149-50).

“To break it down is to break down ourselves”: the double movement aimed at contrasting fragmentation (existential and political) already presupposes the subsequent evolution of Slataper, which we will now examine in his major works. The two stages of this double movement are, first, the attempt to harmonize the contradictions in the context of democratic ideology and, philosophically, in a form of Kantianism directed towards the tragic task of giving meaning to the manifold; and then, the elimination of those contradictions in taking a nationalist stance and, philosophically, in a mystical degeneration of Kantianism where the enthusiastic acceptance of the “spirit of the age,” understood as the horizon shared with the community in which one operates, with the men who ‘work’ at our side, immediately becomes reconciliation, joy, classicism, meaning.

III. Between Ethics and Work

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75 Cf. Slataper: “L’avvenire nazionale e politico di Trieste,” in *Scritti politici* 136: “in history, once achieving the right to a life of well-being appropriate for the requirements of one’s class, what is important is no longer the strictly economic factor, but the subsequent passionate [...] irredentist instincts.”

Cf. Slataper: “L’avvenire nazionale e politico di Trieste” 149: “The socialist viewpoint, while admitting and accepting and sanctifying class struggle, the struggle for economic needs, the further struggle, that is, of radical, material, necessary instincts, is unable to explain the national struggle, i.e. the struggle for civilization, for the domination of cultural forms.”

Consider instead with what insight Angelo Vivante, discussing the same issues, was able to grasp the dialectic between structure and ideology (Gramsci’s appreciation is understandable), in *Irredentismo* 194: “the so-called Slavic «importation» is actually the commonplace demographic phenomenon of our time, rural folk moving to the city [...]. This is not to say that the factors of the conflict are purely economic [...]. Other ideologies intermingle with the more material elements and upset them, and are upset by them.”

76 Cf. Slataper: letter to Gigetta Carniel dated February 4, 1912, in *Alle tre amiche* 421: “Of the Slavic blood I have inside me strange longings, a yearning for something new, for abandoned forests; a sentimentality needful of caresses [...]. Of the German blood I have the pig-headed stubbornness, the dictatorial tone and urges, the certainty of my plans [...]. These elements are blended in my Italian blood, which seeks to harmonize them, to balance them, to make me “classical”.”
Form and man: to work together on a moral/implementational project capable of overcoming disaggregation and bringing it to clarity, i.e. capable of bringing “the particular to the symbolic, or, as we say today, passion to expression” (Slataper: “«L’Urmeister» di Goethe,” in Scritti letterari 258). What Amendola views, on the practical level, against the all-encompassing movement of the Will (as the ability to bring life to its ‘religious’ element: “unity permanently imprinted on the manifold” (Etica 31), is resolved by Slataper (who thereby preserves the function of the poet) in the univocal relation of moral action arising from a movement which to him is only apparently dual (poetry and action), because art (moral art of course, not ‘empty literature’) makes it possible to join practical action with spiritual life, bringing the ethical aspiration that it expresses out of the intellectual world and into the world of man:

Evil (disorganization) pre-existent to good, as a state, as a passion, not as will. […] To extract the cosmogony from the moral idea that is expressed (poetry) or implemented (action). Religion as a vision of the universe, because it individually anticipates is final necessity. It can be attained by acting morally, that is, by submitting and collaborating with order (Slataper: Appunti 204).

The need for ‘order,’ not the order of Croce’s ‘distinction,’ which “lacks that religious sense of life by which man cannot be conceived except as an indivisible whole” (Slataper: Epistolario 269), but the ethical ability to not content oneself with the mere representation

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77 Cf. Amendola: “La Volontà è il Bene,” in Etica 14-5: “the outward manifestations, the so-called bad actions, are the result of impotence, or of the lack of volitional unity […]. Therefore they cannot be called our actions: they should instead be called our passions. Actions yes, but not ours: actions of the world that surrounds and involves us […] they are the passivity of the world opposing the activity of our will.”

78 The rejection of Croce’s system involves both Slataper and Amendola in what they consider a “lifeless” philosophy, a philosophy that, in the privileged place given to Reason, has come to shatter the moral core of existence, which is indivisible. Amendola, in particular, criticizes Croce for failing to recognize the new “freedom of the particular,” which entails the impossibility of general philosophical principles from which to derive the real, and for dividing the action of the Will into two realms, that of universal volition (ethical sphere) and that of individual volition (economical sphere), while the two realms are indivisible because individual volition has in itself the task of becoming universal. Slataper, instead (but the point is basically the same), especially insists on the impossibility of not conceiving man as a whole, and refers to De Sanctis (on whom he would like to do a study) and to the indissoluble unity that form and content express in the living being. This attention for De Sanctis will also be reflected in Slataper’s notion of literary criticism, in the idea that it is necessity to refer to a writer’s entire human and spiritual experience: significantly, the introductory epigraph to Slataper’s work on Ibsen will be the following statement made by the Norwegian dramatist: “Everything I have written has the closest possible relationship with what I have lived through […]. To write: is to sit in judgment on oneself.” Cf. Weininger: Last
of the world, from which only fragmentation can result (the “realm of the subjunctive” that seeks no redemption, the “aesthetic culture”); the ability to bring out the Value contained in that representation and thereby ‘redeem’ the world (to bring, through an ethical effort, the image to symbol) to force the “constant imbalance of possibilities […] into the precise boundaries of reality, winning over the diabolical forces of the vain and the hostile” (Slataper: “Partage de Midi,” in Scritti letterari 265): this is the heroic action that the poet, “a man among men” (Slataper: Carso 107) must perform. If nothing can guarantee a center from which life can be brought to Judgment; if the world can no longer exist in the evidence of God or Thought, but only in constant, conflicting change – then artistic intuition (filtered through the knowledge of man) must be entrusted with the task (obviously of Romantic derivation) of asserting the meaning that stands above the coalescing contradictions, the tragic task of creating law out of instability:

_Things_ 20: “Great people are generally not considered independently of their works. We believe that their life is production, and is exhausted in production.”

This is the charge that Slataper brings against Saba and the Crepuscolari. Cf. Slataper: “Perplessità crepuscolare (a proposito di Guido Gozzano),” in La Voce, November 16, 1911, in Scritti letterari 247: “work of the “perplexed”. Our life, perplexity. A word of the democratic age, that has rebelled against tradition and order, and is incapable of being reborn into a faith showing the purpose and means of personal sacrifice. But these are perplexed with no drama.”

Cf. Slataper: “Partage de Midi,” in La Voce, September 12, 1912, in Scritti letterari 271: “The image is like a faithful chorus that fraternally comments on the joy of the particular having become expression. […] The uncertain gives no image, just as doubt has no friends.”

The theme of the _hero_ is constantly present in Slataper’s writing during his period at _La Voce_, from an unpublished fragment entitled, precisely, _L’eroe_ [The Hero], to _Il mio Carso_, where heroism is still identified with the tragic will to give ‘order’ to the world, to the constant flow of life with which the hero’s actions collide. In this sense it is probably a theme that Slataper borrowed from Hebbel, Cf. Szondi: _Tragic_ (1961) 38-9: “the tragic hero […] contradicts the idea of a flowing life and therefore must perish. […] According to Hebbel, man necessarily turns against the totality of life by obeying its law of individuation.” The ability to achieve one’s individuation is, at any rate, closely linked to the ability to give order to the world: both Weininger and Amendola would establish a binary relation between _moral_ action and the finding of one’s individuality (a point on which we will return). We cannot, however, entirely exclude that Slataper’s position may have been influenced by the theory of tragedy of Oriani, who, in _Dogali_ 307-10, wrote: “But if in that epic moment the people had risen en masse, rushing towards the ideal at hand on the wave of a common sentiment […] in real tragedy the people look on in grim silence as their more intrepid heroes repeat the effort alone […]. Human progress demands in that hour the sacrifice of the best, because only their death can make intelligible to all the secret of the law that history is about to reveal […]. If in the epic the hero represents the people, in tragedy he summarizes it, because he consummates the life of his generation initiating it in the life of the unborn one.” Cf. Slataper: letter to Giuseppe Prezzolini of September 1914, in Prezzolini-Slataper: _Carteggio_ 273: “Only: what do you mean by modern? Palazzeschi and Mallarmé? Yes, but next to Oriani and Claudel […] I too believed that we were extremely backward in art: but when I discovered O. I changed my mind.”

The quotation is obviously from Goethe’s _Faust_.

Cf. Slataper: letter to Elody Oblath dated August 31, 1911, in _Alle tre amiche_ 204: “I believe that the roots of all, or almost all, modern thought are to be found in _German Romanticism_ and in _Goethe_.”

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Art [...] is organization canceling out multiple possibilities, it is the conquest of the cosmos in chaos [...]; it is the blissful exaltation of that which can be expressed. [...] Man is replaced (but it’s the same) by man who communicates, in the only way possible, with men; and only the false account of morality as preceptive truth [...] has made us banish art from the realm of ethics (Slataper: “Partage de Midi,” in Scritti letterari 266).

What the younger Slataper still classified under the realm of aesthetics (the ability to eternalize life through beauty), in a vitalistic model of youth that was undoubtedly reminiscent of D’Annunzio’s Nietzsche (the model that characterizes the first part of Il mio Carso), becomes, after his move to Florence at the end of 1908, the will to establish a moral law that can bring the individual and the world to be considered in the form of eternity; to be considered, that is, beyond the grids of empirical life, where the contradictions of the manifold (the Krisis) are redeemed, in the representation that the poet makes of them, as forms of unity: as one’s ‘home’ and ‘homeland.’

It is first of all through Hebbel (“an artist who seeks truth, not beauty,” Slataper: “Introduction” to Hebbel: Diary 16), whom he reads during the second half of 1909, that Slataper is introduced to the Krisis; it is through Hebbel that Slataper brings into focus the

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84 Cf. Slataper: Carso 46-9: “Ah! If a barbarian were to come among us, my companions, how easily he would take us in! [...] It was then that I discovered for the first time my Karst. [...] I raced with the wind, swelling as I ran downhill, [...] I threw open my arms to possess the whole earth [...]. All was fraternal to me. [...] Pennadoro, newcomer, if you don’t fall asleep yours is the land of the sun.”

85 Slataper: letter to Eloyd Oblath dated August 31, 1911, in Alle tre amiche 204: “And we will read Hebbel: [...] This is fundamental. From him: Nietzsche and Ibsen”. Cf. Slataper: letter to Giuseppe Prezzolini dated July 20, 1910, in Prezzolini–Slataper: Carteggio 152: “You can’t explain Ibsen without Hebbel.”

86 In Italy, Hebbel had already been discussed by Friedmann, Gargiulo, and Borgese. In 1912 Farinelli would publish Hebbel e i suoi drammi. In particular, Borgese had discussed him at length in La nuova Germania 176, but in terms opposite to Slataper’s, that is, viewing Hebbel as the representative of a desperate nihilism: “Hebbel’s greatness consists precisely in his ability to see the yes and the no, and to extend almost to absurdity the analysis of the various trends of a human soul without trying to make them converge in an artificial unity. In this sense his Judith is a masterpiece. [...] unsolvable pluralism of inner life. [...] a series of antitheses that never seek a synthesis.” Highly significant is the reference to “pluralism” associated with the phrase “inner life”, which was the title of Prezzolini’s first book, dedicated to Bergson. In Un ignoto, Boine would speak of Judith in terms by then fully incorporated in the relationship between life and forms, in Boine–Prezzolini: Carteggio, I, 155: “Judith [...]. I say that life does not present itself in me [...] as a short game played by people who are living symbols, a changeable and concluded game as of symbolic notes in a musical combination placed before me. And I say that it is puerile to transpose what is inside me, real and alive, into the awkwardly conventional form of a symbolic material.”

If we broaden our scope to all of Europe, we find that Hebbel meets with a fortune that is symptomatic of the neo-romantic climate. For the purposes of our discussion it is important to note that Hebbel is mentioned by Weininger, as well as by Ibsen, among the Kantians; Lukács too would show interest for the Diary of the author of Moloch,
contrast between the particular and the universal, which will remain in the background, at different times and in different ways, for the duration of his entire artistic experience.

Slataper focuses his attention on the tragic conception, pointing out how drama expresses the contradiction of an individual (a hero) bound to manifest, in his achieved freedom, a dualism with respect to the ‘necessity’ of the natural world that appears before him — a necessity of which the hero himself, although released from the irresponsibility of the original bond, is aware of being a part. To ‘save’ the hero’s deadlocked position intervenes the poet, as the “conscience of mankind” (Slataper: “Introduction” to Hebbel: *Diary* 16):

The hero, the individual secret attempting to discover the cosmic secret, is swallowed up by nature; but the artist, grasping this break in history, restores to the species the balance upset by the individual. Now, since it performs the task of dissolving the dualism between freedom (man) and necessity (nature), art is the conscience of mankind. Therefore, art is the integral element in the constitution of the universe (Slataper: “Introduction” to Hebbel: *Diary* 14).

Thus the poet is the one who can bring life — “the attempt of the part to detach itself from the whole and exist by itself” (Hebbel: *Diary* 73) — back to its ‘ought to be,’ to the universal which, after necessarily experiencing the particular, can redeem the world:

man [...] rarely understands what is stable but always what is unstable in life. And then he complains — and rightly so — about the fleeting moment; […] there is no firm stand in this constant progression. This is the curse of all becoming [...]. If at all possible, man should refer all his actions and aspirations to the inner Holy Sacrament to which alone he feels he belongs, and which for that reason must remain eternal and unchanging […] We should not complain that everything is changeable. The changeable, if it really touches us, awakens us as unchangeable (Hebbel: *Diary* 41).

The poet, like the priest, drinks of the sacred Blood, and the whole world feels the presence of God (Hebbel: *Diary* 62).

Szondi described the dialectic movement that links, in post-idealism philosophers, Hebbel’s conception of the tragic with the rejection of systematic thought and the concept of life: “Life confirming the concordance of reading interests (Goethe, Hebbel, De Biran, Ibsen, to name a few) between Italian and Mitteleuropean neo-Kantian circles.
can be grasped in a form in which it is not longer grasped as life” (Szondi: Tragic 48). But for Slataper, of course, that dialectic, although perfectly understood (as evidenced by La nostra epica), should be considered only as a spiritual starting condition of a whole generation (the same condition ‘experienced’ by Trieste on the political level), a situation that is entirely to be rejected in the moral ‘leap’ that must turn “the chaos into a cosmos”:

Jesus said: through God, eternal life. We no longer believe in an afterlife. And so? [...] life is a mysterious condition of which we do not know the reason. [...] I live because I listen to the moral law that compels me to improve myself. [...] When a child is born, it is not a man: it is the possibility of a man. The man begins when you start helping him, that is, when you educate him. [...] from that, good may come. [...] Life is like passion: the condition (Slataper: Alle tre amiche 364-5).

“Passion” is precisely the concept that Amendola opposes to the concept of “will,” which is instead the capacity of the Subjective, the capacity of the individual that explicates himself in his entirety, to become objective and give the world a meaning beyond the domain of the particular. If the pain of life, as Hebbel says, is “the particular feeling of the part” (Diary 80); if the “world is the great wound of God” (Diary 83); then, the poet’s task is to reactivate the symbolic capacity of the world, a task that once belonged to religion (Amendola had opened La Volontà è il Bene asserting that in order to discover the essence of ethical life it should be viewed in relation to religious life): “Why do we seek the vastness of religion in art? Faust, Dante [...] Art: organization: in Faust is organized a greater conflict. [...] contains a universal. [...] Individuality incorporating universality: God” (Slataper: Appunti 217).

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88 Slataper: La nostra epica (1909), in La Città. Rivista bimestrale di lettere e arti edited by Marcello Pirro 71-2: “All things being individual, every moment of every thing being individual, our art must necessarily be impressionistic. Everything is on the same level. [...] We recognize no center [...] No sooner does one hint at an idea than we feel the need to oppose it [...] That’s because we do not believe in our collective work, we have no faith, and therefore no sacrifice.”

89 Letter to Gigetta Carniel dated August 23, 1911.

90 See note 104.

91 Cf. Hebbel: Diary 105: “What ever is a man who lacks form! A bucket full of water without the bucket.”

92 Not coincidentally, Spaini, in the December 3, 1916 number of Il Resto del Carlino, describes Slataper “the most religious temperament thus far in this century.” Cf. Marin: “Umanità di Scipio Slataper,” in I delfini di Scipio Slataper 71: “A deeply religious soul was Slataper.”

93 The original title of the text that would later become the pamphlet in question was precisely Etica e Religione.
The new poet (not the writer),\textsuperscript{94} “a poet living in his age, whose poetry really was a lyrical victory over our philosophical, social, political anxieties” (Slataper: “Del teatro,” in \textit{Scritti letterari} 166),\textsuperscript{95} has, therefore, the precise duty of reaching out to mankind, because only by experiencing the empirical, by meeting what Hebbel exalts as a ‘barrier,’\textsuperscript{96} will it be possible to make the illuminating and intelligible experience of art: the experience of Expression which, sweeping away all skepticism, will allow a life in the light of meaning. Only by living an empirical life (the painful exercise of ‘work’) will it be possible “to be immediately ready, body and soul, for the religious calling of the poet” (Slataper: “Del teatro,” in \textit{Scritti letterari} 165). And such a life, through morality, tends to a religious condition, because the concept of Good must materialize ‘in action,’ that is, in individual lives, because they (and not concepts) are what gives ethics its \textit{raison d’être}. Then it must be a biographical art to stage such a reality, that is, to treat life ethically (but without resorting to metaphysics).

It’s obvious: the goal that Kultur represents continues to be embodied, in the tension between the ‘duty’ of form and the stage of life that denies any persistence of forms, as the space of art (“Art is universal and necessary because it fixes that which is constantly being created inside of us. Art is the most important social function,” Slataper: \textit{Appunti} 86), and even the dialectic that Slataper is developing, through the bridge (represented by ethical action) between Art and Work, asserts the need for social participation (“The activity of the self consists in feeling oneself in others, it is a collaboration of spirits […] social collaboration,” Slataper: \textit{Epistolario} 118) identified as the realm of the particular, pain and necessity together, in which one must now act. Art becomes (as in many Modernist writers)

\textsuperscript{94} Slataper draws a distinction between poet and artist perhaps taking it from De Sanctis, but sometimes it seems closer to the distinction made by Carlyle (well-known in Italy at that time) who used, like Slataper does, the term ‘writer’ where De Sanctis used ‘artist.’ To Carlyle a “poet” is he who, thanks to his ‘genius’, creates a ‘style’ capable of mythicizing experience, the ultimate resistance against ‘dispersion,’ against dissolving into insubstantiality. Cf. Slataper: letter to Elody Oblath of late 1909, in \textit{Alle tre amiche} 154: “I promise that I will be, that I will try to be, more and more \textit{a poet} and less a writer.”
\textsuperscript{95} Article published in \textit{La Voce}, December 28, 1911.
\textsuperscript{96} Cf. Slataper: “Introduction” to Hebbel: \textit{Diary} 6: “The obstacle is the lord of the life of Hebbel. […] He never experiences the spontaneous boldness of leaping onto a fact without first tormenting it to determine its universal wherefore and the degree of necessity that it might have in that particular case.”
the activity that can reach a universality (even a social universality that, in art itself, should find a representation and a redemption), overcoming that social division that ‘work’ (in Taylorist times) represents. In other words, the poet, if he really wants to be such, must immerse himself in the horizon of Zivilisation, in the horizon of the metropolis, in “the place where the triumph of time, of the transient, and of the fortuitous, is celebrated at an ever-accelerating pace; […] a disjointed combination of heterogeneous elements with no unifying core value” (Magris: *Itaca* 234), to save it from negation. These are the same issues that in those years, but with greater consciousness, were being discussed by authors such as Lukács and Michelstaedter. They are the fundamental issues of the crisis of values being experienced by the bourgeois class; and the same that had been analyzed by Weininger between 1902 and 1903.

Slataper reads Weininger between late 1909 and early 1910. He considers writing an article for *La Voce* but is anticipated by Giulio Augusto Levi\(^{97}\), he discusses Weininger with his friends in Trieste and with Sibilla Aleramo; he plans the translation of *On Last Things*; he says, as he begins to work on his dissertation on Ibsen, that without Weininger he would never have grasped many aspects of the Norwegian playwright. He is not alone in those years to reflect on Weininger: other intellectuals were doing the same, without necessarily taking sides: Kraus, Zweig, Strindberg, Leo Popper, Wittgenstein. What do all these people see in the young man who had traveled north in the footsteps of Hamsun, who spoke of the need to fight the *Peer Gynt* that is inside all of us, and who then, with a kitsch decision, chose to end his days in the house where Beethoven died? For one, the following:

While the earth that we inhabit continually revolves, the human being remains untouched by the cosmic dance. His mind is not mechanically coupled to the whole system: he looks out freely, and gives the spectacle its value, or takes it away (Weininger: *Last Things* 94).

\(^{97}\) On February 10, 1910, *La Voce* published a special number on “the sex issue” and, in November that year, organized a conference on the same subject in Florence, coordinated by Mario Nesi, during which Weininger was repeatedly cited. Cf. G. A. Levi, *Ottone Weininger*, in *La Voce*, February 10, 1910. In particular Levi, explaining the refusal of Weininger of the empirio-criticism, insisted on the relation Weininger-Kant through the fundamental topic of Memory.
In the opposing pair Time/Memory, Weininger described, before any other, the relationship between finiteness as the reign of the inauthentic and the need to overcome it in the timeless horizon determined by Value (he was one of the first to relate a neo-Kantian moral position to the new cultural horizon brought by the *Krisis*). He attributed an ethical framework to the tragic task that the subject must carry out in order to ‘consist’ as individuality, as unity of the self capable of expressing in the act (in the particular) ‘the peak’ — the peak as in Ibsen’s short poem of 1860 (where *Brand* is already present in embryo), the Duty which is the peak, because man, writes Slataper, “is already aware that in his everyday duties he must reach the peak” (*Ibsen* 65). In other words, Weininger conceived memory, being the basis of the ability to conciliate/conceptualize, to give form, as the “place that keeps the subject from dispersion” (Manfreda 33) and saves him from time, bringing to redemption what *really* has value, where all ‘empiric psychology’ (which says that all our representations, in time, are inauthentic) is banned in the perspective of a center (the strong identity that the subject has conquered) that brings the world to its qualitative value and expresses it significantly. The clash between Time and Memory (which Weininger reiterates, consuming his failure, in instinct/ethics, in chaos/order, in the contrast between Woman and Man) is nothing but the

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98 Cf. Weininger: *Last Things* 42: “The highest expression of all morality is: Be! […] A person must act in such a way that the whole of his individuality lies in each moment.”

99 Cf. Lukács: “Diary,” in *The Lukács Reader* 29: “ethics commands us to live (if only potentially) in the highest moral sphere, that is, in the infinitely intensified sphere, irrespective of our ‘momentary moods’ […]. The moment when I am I is truly life.”

100 “You cannot live on mountain tops,” echoes Lukács in *Soul and Form*. Cf. Slataper: letter to Alessandro Casati dated November 25, 1909, in Baroni: *Undici lettere* 13: “It is the violent absolute that reigns inside us, as a spark of reaction to tolerance – the asphodel of the meadows of death, of skepticism. […] The middle must be destroyed precisely because it is conciliatory: […] smash the other thought that lives on the plain.”

101 Weininger does not consummate his failure only in the terms of misogyny or anti-Semitism, but in the act of choosing targets. In these two categories, women and Jews, Weininger sees the spirit of *Zivilisation*, but fails to realize that in so doing, is not attacking the System as a whole, he is merely following its dictates, the ones embodied in fragmented vision, in specialization. Choosing women and Jews as the ones to blame is in itself breaking down *Kultur*, he is creating another surrogate of *Totality*, he is preserving a partial, disjointed vision. The defense of Weininger cannot resort to the ridiculous stratagem stating that M. and W. are not actually Man and Woman: Weininger’s work, precisely in Kantian terms, is saved by the accuracy with which he analyzes, between 1902 and 1903, the terms of Aesthetic Culture in their relating to the world’s ‘technicalization’; but neither can the criticism of Weininger resort to the mere psychological analysis of the misogynist and the self-hating Jew, because his failure is much deeper, and, in his Choice of targets, consists in yielding to what he would oppose: the horizon of Specialization that shatters the common fate of Human Beings. Furthermore, it is significant that next to capitalism, as having a technicalizing role in economy, Weininger also places Marxism.
clash between a Subject that claims to be and the metropolis as the realm of contingency: Simmel’s space of money, of universal exchange – the exchange value – which works everything out in equivalences. The Metropolis, writes Cacciari, as a “general form that assumes the process of rationalization of social relations. […] the rationalization of comprehensive social relations, which follows the process of rationalization of productive relations” (Metropolis 9), the negation of the sacred that abolishes even the nostalgia of the ‘authentic’; an aimless becoming that re-establishes the subjective in ‘impression,’ eluding any significant experience in the perfect exchangeability of its ‘signs,’ that avoids any qualitative relationship that might establish the possibility of being: of being home.102 The ‘form’ that opposes it is then the barrier, the Kierkegaardian necessity to choose that re-establishes hierarchies between things and brings life, the inexorable flow that presupposes everything to be accidental,103 back to meaning, to affirmation. And Slataper: “peace, happiness, is given by knowledge, that is, by form, by expression” (Epistolario 133).

I see art as the affirmation of myself over lived and conquered life […] It is taking possession, not fleeing (Slataper: Alle tre amiche 176).

The Italian critique generally argues that Slataper elaborates Weininger’s theory (based, as we shall now see, on the opposing pairs pain/work/particular and joy/expression/universal104: the same ones at the core of Il mio Carso) following the suicide of Anna Pulitzer (Gioietta) in May 1910. This is not entirely true. The first trace of his ri-elaboration of Weininger appears

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102 Before Il mio Carso, Slataper had dealt with the ‘city’ in a short story entitled Il professor Ausserleben e la sua anima (fiaba contemporanea), published in La Riviera Ligure in March 1911. The story, which has an ambiguous ending (probably ironic towards the professor’s sudden desire for life), contains some extraordinary passages in which the characteristics of the protagonist, his attempt to create a space in which life cannot penetrate, anticipate with remarkable precision those of another professor terrified by modernity: Elias Canetti’s Peter Kien.

103 Cf. Slataper: letter to Elody Oblath dated July 9, 1911, in Alle tre amiche 194: “Now you are at the mercy of contingencies like a leaf or an animal. This must absolutely not be.”

Cf. Slataper: letter to Elody Oblath dated November 16, 1911, in Alle tre amiche 216: “You wrote to me some time ago in a dark moment that everything is relative. But the absolute is stronger inside us.”

104 Cf. Slataper: “Diario per Gigetta,” June 1910, in Appunti 120-1: “So joy does exist. […] I feel that it is inside me even now for I can talk to you. […] I think that pain is nothing but joy that grows, that expands into the universal.”
in a letter to Prezzolini of September 1909, which is indeed the ri-elaboration of some ideas of Prezzolini\textsuperscript{105}:

If man really loved mankind he would change all existing evil into good, because evil is nothing more than potential good. […] The turmoil of the world is caused precisely by the process of this development. In order to \textit{live}, we constantly need to fix something as stable. […] the endless crystallizations (science, religion, ethical philosophy) […]. To me, art is the most necessary of social functions because, by its very nature, it immediately changes – by expressing it – evil into good, pain into joy […]. And, believe me, this letter is like the blooming of a soul in the sunshine after a storm. Pain has made me see this. I needed to express something: now I am almost well. […] my life is work […]. I am a poet (Slataper: in \textit{Carteggio} 49-50).

The death of Gioietta allows Slataper to better clarify (through the apparent non-sense of Anna’s suicide, which is allegorized as a ‘mystery” hovering over life)\textsuperscript{106} the indissoluble circle of particular and universal, of pain and joy,\textsuperscript{107} work and expression, irrelevance and meaning, that determines the life of man; and also to define the task of the poet, which is, again, to take part in life (in the condition of \textit{work} that alienates man from his \textit{meaning}) and offer his ‘brothers’\textsuperscript{108} the key to its overcoming:

our happiness is driven out of the nest it had been building over the years and we are left to wander among men, and mankind becomes our homeland. It is not among the happy that the new religion is born: and, in dying, Gioietta saw what would make her death bear fruit. […] I know that life with all its beauty reaches out and gathers around those who, overcoming their pain, work for it, because what the world loves is faith, work, a fixed point: Faust, not Hamlet. And this necessity is the reward of those who understand, and this is happiness, indisputable (Slataper: \textit{Alle tre amiche} 174-5).

\textsuperscript{105} Cf. Prezzolini: letter to Scipio Slataper dated September 16, 1909, in Prezzolini–Slataper: \textit{Carteggio} 48: “But work can do a lot: it’s really the only help one has in these cases: what for others is religion, for us is work – not useless work, of course.”

\textsuperscript{106} Cf. Slataper: letter to Marcello Loewy dated September 14, 1910, in \textit{Epistolario} 85: “everyone carries a mystery inside. Which is – simply – the mystery of the world.”

\textsuperscript{107} Cf. Slataper: letter to Marcello Loewy dated December 24, 1910, in \textit{Epistolario} 90: “pain is precisely the personal sign that humanity has advanced one step forward. […] A person only has to feel this, to feel that they have advanced, and then the pain turns into religious joy. That is why pain is, after all, the same as joy.”

\textsuperscript{108} Cf. Slataper: letter to Gigetta Carniel dated June 9, 1910, in \textit{Alle tre amiche} 324-5: “The drop of joy that I have tasted is almost poison. Now, if not for me, at least for yourself and your brothers it must go back to being joy. This is my only task.”
The rejection of Hamlet’s predicament therefore implies, once more, the necessity of ‘expression’ as a barrier against chaos\textsuperscript{109} — the affirmation of universal life against all negations (which however must be experienced\textsuperscript{110} by going among men), against all unhappiness:

Once there was religion. People basked in endlessly happy love, because it was beyond the reach of their pain. The gloomy moment was won by a calm eternity. […]. There can be no solution to any particular life unless every particular is accomplished in working for life. I’m not saying that we have to forget ourselves; on the contrary, we must also be present to ourselves, but in a universal task. I ask that we give up our happiness, affirm our pain, and work for others. Because only through this disinterest will we find our own happiness (Slataper: Alle tre amiche 343-4).

Gioietta’s suicide has often been associated with those of Irma Seidler (Lukács) and Nadia Baraden (Michelstaedter), but Slataper’s express desire to take part in the social mechanism underlines (as we shall see below) the radical difference of his position. While Michelstaedter and Lukács were led by the suicide of their loved ones to focus on the vanity of the world, on the firm rejection of life\textsuperscript{111} as a place that denies the possibility of persuasion, Slataper instead turned towards a conciliatory movement (in fact he would also abandon Weininger) aimed at re-founding society – inevitably, bourgeois society – in terms of ‘optimism’,\textsuperscript{112} i.e. according to his conceptions of social structure and art as seen above, in terms of accord and action,\textsuperscript{113}

\textsuperscript{109} Cf. Slataper: letter to Marcello Loewy dated May 28, 1910, in Epistolario 79: “I know that I will not go mad. Because even in the most terrible chaos of tragic elements inside me, I’ve always felt that I had the power to express it.”

\textsuperscript{110} Cf. Slataper: letter to Elody Oblath dated February 19, 1911, in Alle tre amiche 184-5: “life has its reason to exist, and hence its happiness, in conflict. And precisely for that reason, those who disinterestedly understand this, and love their unhappiness, will receive the kiss of life – joy. […] and evil does not exist because it dissolves in the good that it produces.”

\textsuperscript{111} Cf. Lukács: Diary 43-4: “the only thing that I register as immediate sensation, among the constant rejections, is that today’s society is impossible. […] These abominable, repulsive petty-bourgeois […] You are expelled from society not in a sentimental sense, but in the sense that society wears out with brutal indifference whose who dare to live differently, who do not conform to a ‘comfortable and cordial’ life. – How I detest ‘life’ in these moments!”

\textsuperscript{112} Cf. Slataper: letter to Giuseppe Prezzolini dated June 11, 1910, in Prezzolini–Slataper: Carteggio 130: “I have a desire to suffer intensely – because I still have faith in myself and I hope that even pain will be good to me. […] my optimism has its very roots in pain.”

\textsuperscript{113} Cf. Slataper: letter to Elody Oblath dated June 12, 1910, in Alle tre amiche 162: “Motherhood is eternity, it is life creating its joy in a form that will outlive it. This form is the child and the creation. […] If we delighted in ourselves, life would stop. Because we suffer, we create. The bad in every individual wastes and dies, to create the good.”
where eternity and everyday reality are rebuilt, thanks to the work of the poet, as harmonization; however that harmonization contains the risk of the gradual abandonment of the tragic perspective, shifting the complex bond existing between morality and religion towards the second term, as we shall see with his Ibsen:

Little words cannot explain your death. But every good act of ours comes from you, and you continue to live in hard-working love […] You do not know mystery, but even the pain that halted your eyes on nothingness is a part of it; and if you express it honestly, part of the mystery is revealed. […] pain and joy are the shapeless nothingness from which you have to extract a new world. If you act, your pain has prepared for men a deeper eternity. […] Now you can love them, because you have suffered and despaired. You bless your suffering and descend among them, serene and severe […] Here is order and work. […] We too shall obey our law. […] Whence did we come? Far is our home and the nest is undone. But moved by love we shall return to our home, Trieste, and there start anew (Slataper: Carso 107-10).

As is known, in Il mio Carso,¹¹⁵ the work he dedicated to Gioietta, Slataper allegorizes, in the relationship between the Carso and Trieste,¹¹⁶ the changes in his poetics, linking them to his gradual achievement of a stable identity. In the first part¹¹⁷ Slataper re-elaborates, using a style similar to Soffici’s impressionist sketches,¹¹⁸ the vitalistic myth of the fusion of subject and nature (“a Pandean atmosphere […] of Dannunzian inspiration,” Luzi: 20). He rejects the

¹¹⁴ Cf. Slataper: letter to Ardengo Soffici dated April 11, 1911, in Epistolario 268-9: “And it’s the universal of the particular. […] Now, when an artist creates a leaf he actually penetrates into this universal reality. That’s why art offers the same moral consolation as philosophy. […] It is faith in the moment, because in every moment there is eternity.”

¹¹⁵ The book came out in 1912, but its oldest parts had been composed during the first months of 1910. A story entitled Sul Secchieta c’è la neve had appeared in the March 3, 1910 number of La Voce and was later transposed into the book, with some changes. Reprints would be published by La Voce in 1916, 1918, and 1920. Vallercchi then published it in 1933 and 1943.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Marin: “Il mio Carso,” in I delfini 43: “It may seem, at first glance, that Il mio Carso is an autobiography: but the more you read the more you realize that it is a «myth», the myth of the new soul of Trieste.”

¹¹⁷ Cf. Slataper: letter to Marcello Loewy dated January 5, 1911, in Epistolario 91: “Three parts: Child, Adolescent, Youth. Two interludes; La Calata [The Descent]; La Salita [The Ascent]; and an ending: Tra gli uomini [Among Men]: more or less like that. The poem of strong youth.”

¹¹⁸ Cf. Slataper: Carso 38: “It was the hour of heat and rest. The earth grew larger under the expanse of the sun. […] The wasps and the bumblebees were silent. A fruit fell to the ground with a thud.” Emilio Cecchi probably had the first part of the book in mind when he wrote his ruthless review entitled Sigfrido dilettante [Amateur Siegfried], appearing on the October 26, 1912 issue of La Tribuna. Clelia Martignonni has found an unsent letter that Slataper wrote to Cecchi after the review; the following excerpt is particularly enlightening, in Una lettera di Scipio Slataper 103: “I have had the pleasure (in truth somewhat scorching) of having applied to my flesh that moral criticism which I believe is the only criticism possible. […] I had already formed inside of me a rather severe judgment of myself. In fact you hit the target so close that your criticism to my moral person is nothing new to me. But this also shows your error, and a serious one at that: identifying the protagonist-hero Scipio Slataper with the poet Slataper.” Bacchelli, instead, immediately emphasized the book’s moral substrate.
myth as extraneous to the progressive moral advancement required to help man find his identity, the obligatory discovery of the horizon of the particular, an acquisition propaedeutic to the poet’s descent among men and to his work devoted to redeeming his “brothers” through his ability to give form to the new diminished condition:

I wanted to go […]. My home is over there. I want to be a brother to those other creatures […] who live there together […]. I’m going […]. A poet is born who loves the beautiful creatures of the earth because he must bring clarity to their muddled thoughts (Slataper: Carso 50-3)

The condition of Krisis is the starting condition of an entire generation. Slataper realizes that the impotence of philosophical thought, its inability to bring the world to unity, cannot be overcome by replacing thought with ‘feeling,’ because impotence of thought is already impotence of feeling, as it reveals the lack of an epic relationship with reality/truth. This unity can no longer be given to man in the nostalgic space of “Nature as Life” (the desolate space of the Carso inhabited by the Slavs), but must be conquered in the same horizon that destroyed it: the social space of the City.\(^{119}\)

The first attempt, the supremely aesthetic one, will be made with the will to revitalize the city element through the karstic one.\(^{120}\) After the ascent to Mount Kâl, the purifying principle of the ‘obstacle’ that irreparably separates the individual from the myth of unspoiled Nature while at the same time preserving him, that is, preserving his identification from being ‘dispersed’ in it. The protagonist comes to a city, Trieste, where the process of disaggregation is so advanced that it can easily incorporate in itself the vitalism of the Carso (which in the urban environment is experienced as useless bouts of anarchist revolt),\(^{121}\) leading the hero to

\(^{119}\) Cf. Slataper: letter to Marcello Loewy dated July 14, 1908, in Epistolario 32: “The countryside is not for me. To every act of mine must correspond the acts of other men. I want the city.”

\(^{120}\) Cf. Coda: 54: “he interprets himself as the bearer of a vitalistic principle capable of restoring power and strength to a sick and corrupt urban environment.”

\(^{121}\) Cf. Slataper: Carso 56-7: “I want to go to the filthiest tavern in the old part of town. Smoke and stench. It’s suffocating. […] Nothing here is strange, and everything is hard and clear-cut like the rock edges in the karst. If I punch that stevedore in the face, he’ll give me two punches in return. […] I am among thieves and murderers: but if I jumped on a table and the Lord gave me the gift of speech, with them I could tear down the world and build it up again. This is my city. This is where I feel good.”

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the threshold of a perfectly bourgeois life (including enrollment in irredentist circles, the ones ridiculed in *Lettere triestine*):

From the café where I drank *petess* on the evening of my descent erupts a group of bearded men dressed as women: big-bellied women and other uncouthness, shouting, jumping around with lanterns and sticks. I draw aside. I’m glad that I have a nice clean bed at home, with no bugs in it […]. I went to the Credit to ask for a job (Slataper: *Carso* 71).

The second ascent, on Mount Secchieta, reformulates the actuating principle from an ethical point of view, focusing the action of the poet no longer in terms of vitalistic redemption, but within the confines of moral duty: “even though the whole city and its tiredness is always in you and you cannot escape it, it doesn’t matter: you go up: only this is true; you must” (Slataper: *Carso* 78). Only when the individual becomes conscious of ethics will he be able to understand the ‘pain’ of the particular (work\(^\text{122}\)) which is at the root of ethical necessity: the unbreakable circle of Ethics and Work, their tragic opposition, will make apparent a common experience which ‘expression,’ as explained above, has the task of redeeming:

> This is the humanity I believed in. Work is seeking in vain to restore something lost. Everyone is trying to find themselves, hypocritically, savagely, in the body of a woman, in the hands of a friend, in the faith in God. And all in vain. I alone, up here, by myself, am sincere; but even solitude and sincerity are not enough. […] This alone is indispensable: being. But how is it possible for a person to be, when he has reached his solitude and there are no more obstacles before him? (Slataper: *Carso* 88-9).

Yet the last question already hints at the possibility of reconciling the tragic dualism, which the protagonist, visiting the Carso one last time, formulates as the destiny of re-entering urban society. As we shall see better when discussing Ibsen, Slataper identifies that reconciliation, here in terms of humbleness, as ‘quiet,’ ‘calmness,’\(^\text{123}\) ‘grace,’ finally recomposing the

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\(^{122}\) Cf. Slataper: *Carso* 89: “The earth works. All the earth works in a frenzy of pain that does not want to forget itself.”

\(^{123}\) Hence Slataper’s rejection of Hebbel. Cf. Slataper: “Introduction” to Hebbel: *Diary* 5: “He’s one of those men who force life to become harsh and full of countless hurdles, so that every step forward has to be an achievement against themselves and against the whole world. As soon as a place of rest enters their field of vision […]. They are seized by a sense of despair that clenches their lips shut and chokes their cries for breath.”
identity in the ability of the subject to accept the ‘community’ (and work) as the only horizon for common action. Once in contact with the Metropolis (and with its hegemonizing power) Slataper’s Brandism collapses: he invokes a common destiny, a significance in immanence.

While the subjectivist side sees fragmentation as having meaning, restoring to Capitalism the necessary appearance of Totality, Slataper offers the totality of the collective experience of ‘pain’ and sees it as Kultur; in other words, what he determines as meaning is no longer the circle between ethics and work (contradiction and the need to resolve it), but ‘work’ itself, as a timeless horizon, and accordingly its mystification: in short, recalling Tönnies once again, for Slataper ‘society’ becomes a ‘community.’

And in Trieste I’ll make my start. […] I want to be useful to my country, to my homeland, to my mankind. One must be a man in full. […] I want Brand’s “volition” to be inscribed on my grave. But I want some wheat to grow in the wake of my life (Slataper: Epistolario 142-3).

But wheat does not grow in the Metropolis: “There is not real living in a false life” (Adorno: 29). So we must find out what that wheat is.

IV. Slataper’s Ibsen

More and more I am understanding the state, the code, the police. […]. I defend wheat. I defend bread and work. I am the armed fortress of work. All of society is a magnificent work of defensive organization. […] The funny thing is that everybody enjoys civilization, but few agree to willingly bear its weight. They cry out. These people should be put outside of the law for a day […]. Then we’ll see what these heroes of desperate anarchy are worth (Slataper: Alle tre amiche 266-7).

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124 Some critics have seen in the third moment of Carso a rejection of the ethical component as a stance radically separate from life: the will to suppress the multiplicity that is inherent in life. No doubt neo-Kantianism, by continuing to view reality in theoretical terms (we are, however, still in the context of bourgeois thought), constantly risks becoming a falsification of reality, but in our opinion and, again, within the context of bourgeois thought, the neo-Kantian position taken by certain authors really allowed them to formulate a strong criticism of capitalism and advancing technicalization. Secondly, linking Brandism to a ‘negative’ scheme which Slataper purportedly rejects, does not help explain the nationalist, pro-war, rigidly ‘idealistic’ sphere in which Slataper will later descend.
The later Slataper,\textsuperscript{125} having left La Voce (“La Voce’s mistake was its attempt to schematize life, to order life under moral forms, while ignoring all the good that can be found in many simple things,” Slataper: Alle tre amiche 403), having moved to Hamburg after receiving his degree\textsuperscript{126} to work as an Italian-language lecturer at the Kolonial-Institut, and having married Gigetta Carniel,\textsuperscript{127} is firmly convinced of the necessity of finding in history,\textsuperscript{128} and in the humanity that makes history, the religious element, the universal signifying value (the fusion between particular and universal) that he previously sought in moral effort:

History is not the victory of morality, but of sociality, humanity, God. Morality is only in the individual. That is to say, social morality is called humanity; and this is never in contrast with morality (Slataper Appunti 219).

I’m studying history […]. Little by little, then, you live in a real country. What is the homeland, or another country, for us ignorant folk? Nothing. But this way, little by little you discover the reason for the shape of that house, for the clothes that person is wearing, for the news you read in the paper. […] Life becomes larger, because everything acquires a meaning (Alle tre amiche 417).

\textsuperscript{125} Cf. Slataper: “Diario per Gigetta,” June 1910, in Appunti 124-5: “You know that I’ve read many lives of saints, and that many times I’ve dreamed of becoming a teacher and apostle; an apostle of life. […] I would like to create a hero, the hero of today! Not Siegfried and not Brand. […] Not the man of duty (like Brand), but the man of natural necessity. One who does not wake up as a child who knows nothing, like Perceval. But one who has seen death, and proclaims life […]. One who has traveled to the end where everything is nothing; and then jumps up crying out a tremendous yes.”

\textsuperscript{126} After considering Hebbel and von Kleist, Slataper takes his degree with a thesis on Ibsen, on December 18, 1912. During his stay in Germany he was busy rewriting his thesis for publication (his analysis originally arrived only up to Ghosts).

\textsuperscript{127} Cf. Slataper: Appunti 235: “I want to marry as soon as possible, to take upon myself the serene weight of life. I love Gigetta. I never really loved Anna.”

Cf. Slataper: letter to Elody Oblath dated November 18, 1911, in Alle tre amiche 217: “Now I enjoy (geniessen, in the Goethean sense: I am learning, concretely, fully, in life) […]. Gigetta is the homeland where thoughts put out flowers. Gigetta is the sweet creature of steadiness and faith.”

Cf. Elody Oblath: Confessioni 22-3: “after marrying Gigetta […] he felt the need for a more concrete reality, closer to things […]; he told me he was ashamed of some pages of his Carso; he was thinking of working, after the war, on something with definite boundaries and limits, perhaps related to history […] even art, great art, must necessarily be the result of balance, of patient study […] he would talk to me about God. It was the severe God of Brand, but also the God of Faust; it was the God of the martyrs and heroes, but also of the poor folk who need protection and shelter after a hard, thankless day of work.” The work Slataper had in mind was probably to be entitled L’Adriatico, as we learn from a letter to Prezzolini.

\textsuperscript{128} Cf. Slataper: letter to Guido Devescovi of January/February 1912, in Epistolario 140-1: “I’m working hard. I’m also studying politics and history. That’s the inadequate part of my education […], then, thank God, I’m getting married. I was born for family and children, as well as for books.” Cf. Slataper: letter to Giani Stuparich dated December 1, 1913, in Epistolario 166: “there’s no doubt that everything goes into history.” On this there are countless quotations.
Following a path similar to the one taken by Amendola, Slataper approaches history (the space of ‘work’) as a guarantee of objectivity that allows to re-found action (now daily action) reconciling life and its value, i.e. reconciling the moral imperative with its empirical nature no longer in the light of their tragic distance, but in the religious consciousness promoting the peaceful fusion of personal reality and objective reality, which now, after the ‘pain,’ finally emerges as balance, clarity, and calmness, where “one can understand oneself, his position, and his function in the world” (Slataper: Appunti 218). Although built on the horizon of immanence, we are clearly dealing with a thought in which what is absorbed in humanity, resolving its contradictions, is a Christian principle connected with the vision of Grace that begets the religious passage:

moral life was not enough […] despite all its efforts, my spirit failed to grasp the fullness of the reality contained in it. The day I spoke to you about calmness was when – in one way or another – I was drawing nearer to God. In fact, strife and bleakness come from us, but peace is a gift of God (Slataper: Alle tre amiche 277).

Along this path Slataper encounters Goethe. Or rather: Goethe had always been present in his thought, but until then Goethe’s ‘harmony’ had coexisted with the ethical effort that Slataper had found in the early Romantics and then in von Kleist, Hebbel, and Ibsen, contemporizing that philosophical position as the ‘root’ of the condition of crisis of modernity. Then, between late 1912 and early 1913, Goethe comes to represent the overcoming of the Romantic position, the point at which Meister rejects the rigorism of Heinrich von Ofterdingen, and chooses to ‘limit himself’ to empirical life, to ‘work’

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129 Cf. Slataper: letter to Guido Devescovi of January/February 1912, in Epistolario 141: “I spend more and more time with Amendola, a powerful man.”
130 Slataper: “Per il centenario di Hebbel,” in La Voce, Bibliographic Bulletin, November 28, 1912, in Scritti letterari 279: “The post-Faustian Stürmer und Dränger: Kleist and Hebbel […]. They struggled against Goethe’s nightmare all their life.”
131 Cf. Slataper: letter to Giuseppe Prezzolini of March 1910, in Prezzolini–Slataper, Carteggio 93: “You have to seriously study German Rom.”
Cf. Slataper: letter to Guido Devescovi dated October 26, 1910, in Epistolario 124: “Do your article on the Sturm u. Drang, the more I think about it the more it seems important.”
132 See what another Triestine translator of Wilhelm Meister (after Benco) wrote about this: Alberto Spaini, in Autoritratto triestino 156: “I discovered that life could be better lived in a modern, prosaic framework, than in wasting time after inconclusive dreams.”
work (i.e. an empirical space) conceived as the only possible horizon of action but also illuminated by the Erlebnis represented by the higher religious meaning (Slataper calls it “love”), thereby elevating social life to meaning:

German literature that begins with the Stürmer und Dränger. [...] it is precisely in Goethe that that muddy passion is clarified, finding expression through the complex process of Goethe’s personality. Goethe alone manages to delineate a radical solution to the unrest of his century134 (Slataper: “Per il centenario di Hebbel,” in Scritti letterari 278).

This does not regard only Goethe: Slataper builds an empyrean of “founders of religions” (Slataper: Appunti 220) among which he includes Aeschylus, Dante, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, and Beethoven:

Dante, Faust, Michelangelo, Beethoven, Aeschylus [...] religious works. Because in them the individual and the world are reorganized, just as in ourselves when religion orders all of us, our wills and desires, under a law and a universal purpose: and we attend this re-creation with faith. How religion embraces and sanctifies moral life (Slataper: “Partage de Midi,” in Scritti letterari 267).

Yet, among them Goethe has a position of priority in Slataper’s consideration, as directly related, because of his life and his place in history,135 to the question of Sehnsucht understood as the search for the timeless, which the Vocian Slataper had posited, in the tragic dialectic between the universal and the particular, between form and life, as a duty of the moral imperative. Goethe goes beyond the abstract notion of the imperative and fuses form and life together, beyond duty, incorporating duty in life. He sets the boundaries of reconciliation, cutting out tragedy and justifying life as Nature (which is also Reason) where Jehovah is always present in every single, seemingly insignificant, moment: “a Divine Comedy, a Faust,

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133 Slataper: letter to Gigetta Carniel, can be found in Ivan Calliaro: 68: “Gigia […]. I love you because in you I find the unity of love and work, such that the one cannot be distinguished from the other.”
134 Note again the use of the term “passion”, a word particularly liked by Amendola: to clarify passion also means to bring it to expression, to elevate the empirical to meaning, but this is less and less the task of ethics. Cf. Slataper: “Agenda 1913, “April 1913, in Appunti 241: “The decline of Romanticism coincides with their change of opinion on Goethe.”
135 Going back to Goethe means going back to a bourgeois function that is much less contradictory and, between revolutionary and reactionary urges, much more reconciled than the one expressed by Ibsen.
if they stand on their ethical center, can exist only because that center, in the image of God, radiates into every aspect of life” (Slataper: *Ibsen* 120).

The objective is to overcome the harshness of “ought to be,” not by abrogating morality but by putting it back in life, which, wrote Amendola, is much larger than morality.

*Ibsen* is the story of this defeat of Kantianism, not in the name of life as a destroyer of forms (Soffici’s version), but in the name of life illuminated by the meaning of form, of unity, of reality. This is where Kant and Goethe definitely separate, marking, for Slataper, the failure of the Norwegian playwright: “He never questions the sense and the essence of Being […]. Only ethical reality seems to exist. It’s not that the world dies leaving only man, but man dies and nothing worthwhile remains” (*Ibsen* 243).

Slataper opens his masterpiece outlining a family situation and a historical context that are modeled on his own. The Ibsen family goes bankrupt, just like Slataper’s father; like Slataper, Ibsen harbors socialist ideals in his youth; even Christiania, with its political and moral conflicts (on the one had, city and country, ethnic strife; on the other, civilizations as erosion of life), reflects the situation of Trieste:

Around 1850 the atmosphere in Christiania was that of a city growing stronger with the arrival of a younger population […]. The middle-class Danishized «employee» was about to be overwhelmed by peasants who had become city-dwellers. […] And amidst all that were young people, students, a new life: the air was full of hopes and aspirations […]. The current Norway, in the eyes of the fervent new arrivals, was false, Danishized. […] weak in the plain of Hamlet (Slataper: *Ibsen* 24-6).

Like Slataper, the young Ibsen sees himself invested with the tragic task of bringing these conflicts to harmony through art. To do so, he cannot employ epic poetry (the *epos* is lost in the past, in the ancient Scandinavian poems that can now serve only as a storehouse of themes), but he must introduce that epic into the “daily life of errors” (Slataper: *Ibsen* 49),

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136 As already in Pirandello and Papini, Hamlet is a ‘function’ representing the impossibility of settling a doubt: Hamlet is the destructive horizon of skepticism that finds no reconciliation. Cf. Slataper: *Ibsen* 64-5: “next to him his sad, pale brother, come from the south (Hamlet’s country is south), whose sneer says: he’s as cold as doubt.”

137 Cf. Slataper: *Ibsen* 57-8: “For us Latins it is almost strange that a struggle for national culture can be started and developed on the boards of a stage; but among all the Nordic peoples theatre remains a sort of sacred institution where the nation communicates with the spirit.”
where harmony does not shine like a gift from above but, now that all is immanence, becomes the painful task of the individual who must enter “in the midst of chronicles, of men, of life” (Slataper: *Ibsen* 51):

the conflict between the ideal, necessary, indeed essential for life, and daily life, which is the corruption and rotting of that idea. The conflict from which, in the real world and in the artistic world, all heroes are born […]. It’s like someone who comes down from the mountains to the stuffy air of the city. His vision of things is towering and uncompromising. He demands everything unreservedly. And […] in social life all is compromise (51)

It is the ideal of Brand, which, following Amendola, Slataper delineates as he introduces the first contrast between Ibsen and Goethe (and between Kant and Goethe):

To Brand […] acting is willing. In Faust, a Greek, passion is in harmony with the will; in Brand, a Scandinavian Lutheran […] the will is the incompatible opposite of passion. There the word is: – Accept! – here it is: – Renounce! – Take in *everything*; throw out *everything*. Both Goethe and Ibsen preach fullness, but to Goethe fullness means seizing the universe; to Ibsen, your own spirit. They have a different understanding of moral law. Kant is involved here, […] *Brand* is the poem of the *Critique of Practical Reason* […] because after Kant, the moral truth that every man finds in himself is Kantian. […] every man who is not content with being also moral, but wants all his life, all of life, to become ethical reality, ethical fact; to become the complete realization of the categorical imperative (*Ibsen* 91-2).

As he outlines Brand’s project Slataper is already distancing himself from him, because now will without love means the rejection of humanity, the point at which moral life is no longer a part of life but is embodied against it, destroying its ‘fullness’ in dualism and turning it into a desert:

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138 The July-August 1906 number of the *Revue du Nord*, pp. 1-3, carried an article by Amendola, *Le rocher submergé*, in which he spoke of Ibsen as the poet of superior human individuality, in whose plays human action was transformed “en une action symbolique.” More generally, the very language used in *Ibsen* (insisting on the notions of Will and Passion) reveals its Amendolian legacy. Amendola is also widely cited or paraphrased in the *Note per la prefazione*, which were never put in order and now constitute the book’s appendix.

Cf. Slataper: *Ibsen. Note per la prefazione* 340: “actions are always good (because to act is good and only not to act is bad) and so art, that is, everything that is given expression, is always beautiful (catharsis), whatever its content (so even a murder is moral). – Art is action, i.e. will.”

139 Cf. Amendola: “La Volontà è il Bene,” in *Etica* 5: “The rigid moralism of certain philanthropically-oriented Protestant Churches seems to be unconsciously tending towards the austere formula of Kantian ethics.”

140 It’s this possibility of fullness ‘in’ empirical life, in life as it is (not in nostalgia or utopia) that radically divides the later Slataper from authors like Lukács or Michelstaedter, in which that fullness is now lost forever, but its very
his God is the pure imperative, it is his belief raised to the status of a divinity […]. Brand tries to be a prophet, to introduce the new law among men. […] he tries to be the new Christ administering pure moral law as a precept. He promises only pain; […] he unlocks no kingdom of heaven. […] he wants everyone to be heroes without hope. […] the rocky glacier he has unknowingly arrived at is none other than the glacial Church. It is where all life is dead. Beyond humanity, beyond any human possibility is the terrible consequence of his law (Slataper: Ibsen 96-101).

Brand is the defeat of the individual as imagined by Ibsen, where ethics, destroying all empirics around it (the death of Agnes), rejecting the horizon of ‘work,’ fails to lead to religion. For Slataper, instead, “our age must unwillingly return to a religious value (love) greater than the ethical one (will)” (Slataper: Ibsen 104). In Slataper’s view, however, in his chronic inability to set the revolt against the historically specific contradictions of the bourgeois world, the world of ‘work’ remains necessarily the bourgeois world, the only world possible. This poses a new problem for Slataper, since the bourgeoisie is “lacking any impulse of ideality, chained to the craving for gain” (Zorzenon: in Guagnini: Scipio Slataper: l’inquietudine dei moderni 177). A qualitative and redemptive difference must then be necessarily found on the moral level. The empirical, ‘work’ of a specific class, must be elevated onto a religious sense: to an ideal meaning where we find not the “bourgeoisie understood as a social class; but as the part that is among the people, among us, among the aristocracy” (Slataper: “Del teatro,” in Scritti letterari 169):

and if what you desire is ordinary bourgeois tranquility, what of it? So do I. Ordinary bourgeois tranquility? What we want is the untroubled fulfillment of our life. […] as for myself, I would never want to be as dry as Brand; but I do want my will to be like Brand. In the world, along with Brand there is also Agnes (Slataper: Alle tre amiche 248).

loss can serve as a spur, an incentive to fight. It is no coincidence that Michelstaedter always remained faithful to Ibsen (he read almost all his works in 1908), seeing in his heroes the will to fight against the organizations of their social class, against the ideology of their class, even at a time when the revolutionary capacity of the bourgeoisie can exist only as ‘farce.’

141 Cf. Slataper: Ibsen 95: “A desert all the more dreadfully arid because no God sends a breath of fecundity over it.”
142 Cf. Slataper: Ibsen 105: “ethics and religion. It is now a state of mind that is reflected in every act of evaluation and representation; and Ibsen is so much «our» poet that in almost all his works we look for this basic contradiction of ours.”
I am quite the bourgeois, but a bourgeois who knows that every good thing is love, and that love makes any thing good. [...] But my law is not as harsh as it seems: it is joyful and harmonious. I know that a true act is one that reconciles yourself with others, that does not suppress the person who makes it, but makes him live in harmony with other renewed persons. I really love my neighbor as myself (Alle tre amiche 351).

Brand’s attempt, his appeal for an authentic, archetypal reality, is doomed to fail because the *epos* must be re-founded precisely on what for him is pure inauthenticity: the bourgeois age and its industriousness. Industriousness (pain), however, is now illuminated by the ‘love’ that redeems it,¹⁴³ that reconstructs a meaning believed to be lost. Slataper so outlines a ‘reconciliation’ within the same bourgeois horizon that had created the contradiction; to the technicized society, he offers his poetry and his ‘truth.’

Slataper’s severance from Brand inevitably leads to his severance from Weininger. If, in his analysis of *Peer Gynt*, Slataper says that he is in part following Weininger,¹⁴⁴ it is obvious that they can travel the same route only as long as they both aim their attention at the common target of “aesthetic culture”; in other words, as long as the analysis focuses on the ‘errors’ of Gynt¹⁴⁵ (on his inability to ‘consist’) and on the deceptions of the Boyg (the skeptical erosion of any attempted affirmation, the very function of time), then their work can proceed side by side:

like a snake that winds itself around its prey and, little by little, disjoints and crushes it, he refuses open battle and shows no assailable front; but he knows that in the end

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¹⁴³ Cf. Slataper: letter to Gigetta Carniel dated January 6, 1912, in Alle tre amiche 409-11: “To make a prisoner of pain you have to try to comprehend something greater than what you thought was lost. Then you realize that nothing is lost, because the greater thing contains the smaller one [...]. You know what justice means: it means sincerity, humanity, kindness, love [...]. And this is not about heroism, mind you, it’s simply about normal, straightforward humanity.”

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Slataper: *Ibsen* 112n: “My interpretation is mostly the same as his, and I think that to understand Ibsen you’ll always have to refer to him, a brilliantly Kantian spirit [...] I lean on him, but I stand on my own legs.”

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Weininger’s essay, «Peer Gynt» and *Ibsen (Remarks on the erotic, hate and love, crime, and the ideas of father and son)*, was written in February 1902 and later included in *On Last Things.*
you will be his. […] The great Boyg […] simply invites you to walk around, to accept the compromise […] as opposed to the straight line of will, of dignity, of good (Slataper: *Ibsen* 117-8).

The “great Boyg” is the whole force of the empirical ego, with which it raises itself again and again against the intelligible ego […] and at the same time it is the voice with which it advises the others, after constantly repeated relapses, to give up the hopeless, senseless struggle. Hence the self-confident irony with which the Boyg meets Peer Gynt’s boisterous assaults, tells him to walk around him, urges him to put up with him […]. *The Boyg is the redemption-negating principle in general* (Weininger: *Last Things* 30).

Yet, when Gynt finds Solveig again (and, through her, salvation), Weininger and Slataper fatally diverge. For Weininger, Solveig saves Gynt through ‘the experiencing of the frontier,’ through the recognition that death affords (she appears before him with the features of death): she does not save him ‘on earth,’ she saves him from the space – the perspective of death – that allows to see what the earth (the realm of the insignificant) really is. She saves him through her “love,” but this, to Weininger, means the ability to bring the other back to the ethical core that is related to his true being. For Slataper, instead, Solveig is the “angel-like woman” (Slataper: *Ibsen* 118), the religious principle that expresses pain while turning it into joy, because

there is a capacity for good that almost escapes our moral law, but that we must always know in religious form. […] Through it, we aching, inadequate souls are reunited with the origin, where fact and truth, nature and soul, are identical (*Ibsen* 119-20).

Then we can understand the criticism to Weininger that appears in a footnote at the beginning of his analysis of *Peer Gynt*:

146 Fending off the assaults of the Boyg, Solveig says to Gynt: “You have been with me all my life”. In other words: through me, you consisted, you gained meaning, you were not trapped in wandering and insubstantiality. You had a center, you were not just fleeting sensations.”
147 Cf. Weininger: *Last Things* 31: “A full view of truth is possible in the other life, but in this life it can only be aspired to; the Boyg can only be conquered in death.”
148 Cf. Slataper: *Ibsen* 14: “Ibsen knows […] that the only thing that gives a man value is the possession of an “I” (an “intelligible” I), “personality”.”
Yet he too, and he especially, is guilty of philosophical exclusivism. [...] He did not see what it is or whether it is done artistically, because he lacked artistic control, just as his entire person lacks full humanity. He is a hero, a victim of ethical dualism (Ibsen 112n).

The issue is not simply, as some have said, the lack of artistic sense in Weininger. The issue is precisely the point at which Kant and Goethe (or Ibsen and Goethe) take two different roads: “we will see that the true Ibsen is not a poet for Goethean epics. In them he affirms, but does not conclude his thought. [...] he understands the main truth: but his intellect fails to grasp the truth in all its multicolored forms” (Ibsen 120).

Slataper’s Goethe has to save the empirical world by transfiguring it in ‘equilibrium,’ while, not surprisingly, for Weininger, Goethe continues along the same line of Kant (“The ethical for Goethe, as for Kant, lies only in continued striving,” Last Things 84), and the accusations brought by Slataper (“lack of humanity,” “philosophical exclusivism”) had already been taken into account by Weininger when setting up, in the shadow of Brand, the pair Kant-Ibsen:

No one else, only Kant and Ibsen, took truth and the lie to be the deepest problem of ethics [...] truth can only flow having an ego in the higher sense, having individuality. This, however, is the lesson of Ibsen’s Peer Gynt no less than of the Critique of Practical Reason [...]. «All or nothing» is just as much Kant’s motto as it is that of Ibsen’s Brand. Their fates are the same, too, even to the label “rigorist”, which all those of incomplete and insincere nature have used in replying to them (Weininger: Last Things 7).149

Brand and Gynt: the pair runs through the entire work of Slataper and becomes the point of reference for the analysis of all of Ibsen’s works,150 analyzed by Slataper as a gradual descent into the empirical, the everyday, into bourgeois ‘prose’ and society.151 And Slataper sides with society (“It’s not society that ruins, but serving it falsely with an impure heart,” Ibsen

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149 Cf. Weininger: Last Things 24: “There are no great men who have not in the end affirmed […] he is not able to affirm anything except the eternal.”
150 Cf. Slataper: Ibsen 233: “Stockman is in line with Brand as to what he wants, and in line with Gynt as to how he wants it.”
151 Cf. Slataper: Ibsen 152-3: “His hero could finally come down from the hills, enter our homes and wear bourgeois clothes. His verse […] was becoming the new prose.”
not with the hero, who is defeated precisely because of his inability to elevate that life, that everyday, to meaning, disrupting (mystifying) the prosaicness of bourgeois life.\textsuperscript{152} It is at this point that Slataper, picking up his De Sanctis, re-elaborates his condemnation of Ibsen’s position and brings into focus the necessary shift from the ethical perspective to the religious one:

\begin{quote}
verism is a new moral conviction, «a degree of ideality» that sees the world in a different way. […] those poor, everyday words […] rise in a severe song when the inner personality of the person and of the drama is unveiled in the act of judgment […]. His judgment is so harsh and fierce that it turns into song, and the core of man reaches the point of transcending human nature. One has the impression of witnessing a miracle, the birth of life under the duress of law […]. This is lyrical Kantianism. – But right here […] lies the origin of the defectiveness of his art […]. He must express a judgment, and his inflexible judging will saves him from evil – but he should have loved, and the love of God saves him in good (Ibsen 214-6).
\end{quote}

Love versus Judgment. The capacity of love to reabsorb the judgment in itself, saving, at the same time, sense and empirics, truth and work, Carso and Trieste, where the ‘city’ is saved by that which sanctifies it (therefore: Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe):

\begin{quote}
Ibsen would give himself to life, […] yet he cannot love it, cannot let himself be imbued in it […] to win it back it and clutch it in his hands, following Goethe’s canon, and force it to become limpid and eternal. […] And his life is not life; and his art is not rich. […] there is a smell of death. […] Lutheran dryness and not Catholic understanding.\textsuperscript{153} Reading and rereading Ibsen over and over again you are suddenly
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{152} Cf. Slataper: Ibsen 194: “moral law. […] Helmer is also far from it: only he is cold, mean, all taken up with the paragraphs of the code […]. In Nora there is love, therefore the possibility of true life.” Even his analysis of A Doll’s House is in fact very far from Weininger’s, in which Nora is “the first female individuality”, the first woman of duty.

\textsuperscript{153} Cf. Slataper: Ibsen 220-1: “His fate is that of Luther, of Calvin, of all the great, desperate champions of faith. […] Catholic Church and Protestant Church […]. It is the fear of anarchy of the German policeman; the fear of disappearing, […] In the Protestant books books Jesus is again a Jewish prophet.” Slataper, continuing to identify theory with practice, then draws a connection between the ethical perspective, the Kantian perspective, and the German spirit, the German spirit’s will to make itself a ‘garrison’ to resist its breakaway forces.

Cf. Slataper: “Del teatro,” in Scritti letterari 172-3: “Germany […]. Mystical spirit, living on spasmodic universals that break up its harmonious wholeness, critical spirit, having to educate itself to a philosophy of absolutes, unquestionable, embracing every human state or manifestation; to a practical, governmental, policed organism, in which everything, even before its possibility of being, is presupposed, pre-established, pigeon-holed in a judgment and a sentence. […] He had to create as aid and command to men called: Hermann, Luther, Hegel, Bismarck, tortured men themselves, but who realize themselves in a precise, indisputable order. […] I can’t: therefore I must. I don’t believe: therefore I must have a religion […]. We are not afraid of disjointed elements because we are able to blend them into our lives and laws. In Germany Heine has to be hated for reasons of defense.” This too shows how the prevailing horizon in which Slataper moves, the cultural horizon that he must necessarily confront (the one described in La nostra epica) is the disaggregating horizon of modernism.
seized by an inexpressible anxiety: air! Blood! You go back to Shakespeare [...]. Be the masters of your lives, my brothers! Get back to your affairs, to your loves [...]. Walk out into the world wherever you please. The poet loves you just as you are. [...] Who cares for «unities» when there is the unity of love? [...] How «catholic» this love of his is, how warm with grace! This unknown man has the arms of a god. [...] Life, all of it, is truly holy. Ibsen aspires to a holy life, but cannot enjoy it: he has to judge it. [...] And pity is dead [...]. But see how Dante [...] throbs with humanity in front of the creatures he must execute, suffering himself [...]. Because he loves, he has the right to redeem from the necessary damnation [...]. And for that reason, because he has judged but loved, judged but suffered for his judging, he rises up to heaven, where love-judgment are one and the same (Slataper: *Ibsen* 217-9).

“And here Brand dies” (*Ibsen* 223); and here, too, the “symbol” is born.  

It is no longer the symbol of the tragic duty achieved by reaching the ‘peak,’ but the Goethean symbol that supports “the succulent fruits of every day: eternal reality of the drama, chorus, universal breath,” where “evil is only in the passing episode, on the surface, not at the bottom” (Slataper: *Ibsen* 246). Life (society: life now coinciding with society) contains its own meaning; that which brings to the verge of the ridiculous (and no longer of the heroic) the purely ethical action of *The enemy of the people*, classifying it, and this is fundamental, as unreality:

the symbol is the true union, it is the communion, the uniting of strength with appearance. It is the fact of every man and every time in which the purposes of the universal are born. It is the individual and his consciousness reborn in something superhuman, intangible, immutable. It is the truth expressed in the act; the intellect and the imagination reabsorbed in the human moral center, concretely recreated. […] necessarily real (Slataper: *Ibsen* 247).

Yet, “in Ibsen there is no reconciliation between morality and happiness” (*Ibsen* 270), because his morality is incapable of becoming a part of life (it is exacerbated into a form of pure transcendence); it remains uninvolved by it and judges it: the poet stands outside of it, his ethics rejects life. Slataper then abandons the figure of the poet to replace it with that of

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154 Cf. Campailla: *L’agnizione tragica* 146: “the center of radiation of a symbol, which, with its dense, multisemantic interrelating, is that very reality altogether. [...] the very life of the particular, identified in its transparent, universal truth.”

155 Cf. Luperini: “Simbolo e allegoria nel mio Carso,” in Elvio Guagnini: *Scipito Slataper* 81: “His theorization of the symbol – which we find in a well-known page of *Ibsen* – reveals a clearly Goethean imprint [...]. Goethean is the belief in the possibility of converging into a symbol lyrical imagery and faith, imagination and intellect, image and truth, combining the particular and the universal in a superior organic unity.”
the ‘teacher,’ which comes to represent morality descended into the empirical and, all philosophy aside, the ability of the intellect to act from inside society and its laws to gain a definite actuating role: “his work will never be joy, for he negates life […]. Whether architect or sculptor, the poet will never be a teacher, because he is a poet” (Slataper: Ibsen 312-3).\footnote{156}

If the Master Builder represents the ultimate attempt to do without God, the point at which the ‘human,’ reduced to itself (not vivified by the light of a higher sense), consummates its failure, Rubek, the protagonist of When We Dead Awaken, is identified through the recognition, by Ibsen himself, of his own defeat, a recognition that still tragically refuses grace and life (a pair that for Slataper is increasingly tight):

*When We Dead Awaken* is the highest point that can be attained by the greatness of man, when faith is dead and love dried up. The fault is this: to have been chaste towards art and cold towards young life, for the purpose of obeying the pride of his so-called mission. […] To have stolen the soul of woman […], the spirit of reality, not in order to have her bear fruit and lead her to the promised kingdom, but to create a masterpiece. […] Dante and Goethe, in opposite tones, overcome the contradiction: Ibsen dies crushed under its weight. […] This great poet of moral life was wanting in love (Ibsen 330-1).\footnote{157}

Love suppresses the contradictions. Slataper’s ‘classicist’\footnote{158} trajectory is about to be fulfilled: life (empirics, work), ontologized by the religious principle, by ‘love,’ can peacefully accept unto itself morality again, the form by which it is organized (the morality of a bourgeoisie no

\footnote{156} Cf. Slataper: letter to Gigetta Carniel dated September 4, 1911, in *Alle tre amiche* 370-1: “If my son wasn’t intelligent, I’d have him become a blacksmith or a bricklayer or a carpenter, because he would then know that all trades are the same […]; if my son was intelligent and good, I’d like him to be a teacher.” Cf. Slataper: letter to Sibilla Aleramo dated September 16, 1912, in *Epistolario* 312: “I will be a regular, faithful man, a good father and a good teacher.”

As further proof that the prevailing ideological horizon in which both neo-Kantianism and the later Slataper find themselves involved is the modernist horizon of the “crisis of Foundations,” we can quote another passage from *La nostra epica* where the figure of the ‘teacher’ is directly related to the issue at hand. Cf. Slataper: *La nostra epica*, in *La Città. Rivista bimestrale di lettere e arti* 70-1: “We are outside our tradition. We lack the faith to be the founders of a new tradition. Without tradition and without faith. […] they are the real creatures of our time. Their personality is spineless, structureless. They disperse in all directions […]. No resistance. Out of the family and then at school. Our generation has had no teacher. We have rejected school, […] grammar and metrics, phrasebooks and models, but we can’t provide a teacher. We have destroyed academy but cannot find tradition. […] Our great men of the past […]. Under the law, not formal but accepted, which they imposed on themselves, they found the eternal remedy.”

\footnote{157} Totally different is Weininger, where, once again, the condition of ‘death’ provides the possibility of recognizing the *insubstantiality* and *insignificance* of life. To awaken” here means to enter life armed with the perspective of death that life reveals for what it is.

\footnote{158} Cf. Slataper: letter to Elody Oblath dated December 9, 1912, in *Alle tre amiche* 269-70: “This here is my classicism: the calm center of the disarray. […] If we’ve come to this point, not only do we no longer feel *resentment* for our pain, but, on the contrary, we *love* it […]. Only when the effort is over does God begin.”
longer devoted only to the ‘material,’ but vivified by the ideal). Yet, that morality, now that it is no longer the tragic possibility of a transcendent Judgment but fully inscribed in an existence which is also essence, in this History-as-Nature, is identified as the ‘daily duty’ (again: *work*), thereby signifying its own alienation, because that duty is not posited in a negative sense as an abstraction from the totality of man, from his ‘real’ life, but again as an affirmatory unity of the Soul: the surrogate of Totality, now that this is missing. All this is still connected, as we shall now see, to the usual ideal of theory as practice, because not only does this ontological conclusion resolve the antinomy that existed between Life and Morality, but it also contains in itself, according to Slataper, the solution to the aporias relating to the work of the intellectual, who regains a role as one who ‘orders’ the contradictions, that is, one who mystifies the lack of synthesis, who gives back to the city the spirit of *Gemeinschaft*. The teacher, after all, is a persuader.

V. Home at Last

The democratic position, enmeshed, as we have seen, in numerous contradictions, is not the ideal point from which to commence this undertaking. Slataper, having returned to Trieste upon Austria’s declaration of war against Serbia (and having handed over his *Ibsen* to Farinelli\(^ {159} \) to devote himself to journalism full time), gradually begins to assume a more reactionary political stance. In this progression, even the contradictions surrounding Trieste find a ‘solution,’ with Rome in the background\(^ {160} \):

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we Italians of Trieste, we Italians, are more cultured than the Slovenes. […] our culture […] is of greater value, because we are at a higher level than them. If they

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\(^ {159} \) Arturo Farinelli would have this to say about the later Slataper: “Introduction” to *Ibsen* XX: “The individual had to intimately connect with the nation and form an indivisible whole. Supreme aspiration: the homeland. Absolute necessity: war.”

\(^ {160} \) Cf. Slataper: “L’Adriatico orientale e l’Italia,” notes for an article intended for *Il Resto del Carlino*, April 1915, in *Scritti politici* 281-2: “when Trieste becomes part of Italy, won’t its trade and prosperity be ruined? […] this doubt, even if it really was well-founded, could no longer be decisive today. […] the fact is that we have to defend ourselves […] Trieste is important, but more so is Italy.”

Cf. Slataper: letter to Giuseppe Prezzolini of September 1914, in *Epistolario* 237: “Italy will rise from Rome […]. In Rome […] but Trento and Trieste will also be there.”
want to live at our level, let them reach us; if they want to win over us, let them surpass us. […] but at present they are not better than us, we are in the world a richer humanity than theirs […]. This is where, in history, the notion of strength becomes the same as the notion of justice (Slataper: “L’avvenire nazionale e politico di Trieste,” in Scritti politici 153-4).

Also in that fateful 1912, the year when the Balkan Wars broke out\(^{161}\) (the unification of the southern Slavs would no doubt make industrial colonialism in that macro-region more difficult), Slataper had already begun to resolve the impasse of his Mazzinian-style democratism,\(^{162}\) abandoning the model of “Austria of peoples” and gradually shifting towards the polarization of the positions between the Slavs and the unredeemed territories, a movement that, by transferring the center of gravity to Trieste, would ultimately disrupt even the dialectic between city and country (therefore between Italians and Slavs) outlined in Il mio Carso:

Our great civilization is often so false, so corrupt, that it is afraid of itself, and would turn barbaric in order to sanitize itself. It has the urge to be like the pseudo-young nations, in which it sees only the beneficial effects […]. It does not realize that its salvation is in itself […]. It sees the effects of the cudgel but forgets what sort of life is necessary to grow muscles capable of wielding it: it also forgets that we have guns (Slataper: “L’avvenire nazionale e politico di Trieste,” in Scritti politici 157).

At the same time, having moved to Hamburg and verified the possibility for the intellectual to act also in the new cultural horizon, even outside the narrow circle of the humanities,\(^{163}\)

\(^{161}\) Cf. Slataper: letter to Elody Oblath dated November 3, 1912, in Alle tre amiche 256-7: “Western Christian civilization, only active truth ultimately has the right to live […]. 1848 gave us the illusion of “right”, but it was so confident in itself that it become lazy and stopped working (France); 1870 gave us the illusion of “force”, but it was so confident in itself that it ceased to be force (Germany); 1911-12 gives us the right that knows it must be force, a force that is such only because it is right.”

\(^{162}\) Cf. Slataper: “L’avvenire nazionale e politico di Trieste,” in Scritti politici 152: “There are differences in history. And it’s not true that every historical moment, having everything it needed, is the best possible reality for its time. […] to act resolutely to make this history better. I think that a truly worthy man should feel anguished at the thought that what he deems good does not prevail in the world. As for individuals […], so for nations. It is not true that all nations have the same value. […] the romantic persuasion, of the French Revolution, of Herder, that all peoples are equal in history […] is not true.”

\(^{163}\) Cf. Slataper: letter to Elody Oblath dated July 1, 1913, in Alle tre amiche 294-5: “I have made up my mind to understand from the first to the last word a stock exchange list and a company balance-sheet: without that you can never understand anything about Hamburg. And I’m studying: political economy in the morning, Ibsen in the afternoon. […] you have to feed the whole man; if he resists he’s a poet, otherwise he croaks, but at least he’s done something. […] You have to actively participate in life, in every way you can.”

Cf. Slataper: “Per l’università commerciale «Revolta»,” an article intended, in 1914, for Voce degli Insegnanti, in Scritti politici 127: “We need a generation of young learned people who are less interested in, say, Foscolo,
Slataper is gradually shifting towards History and ‘humanity,’ both in an elitist educational perspective à la Papini (the project of founding the journal *Europa*,\(^{164}\) where *Kultur* is identified in the mystique of a *group* of friends) and, once back in Italy,\(^{165}\) in the direct, immediate action of persuasion and control that journalism seems to ensure.

Slataper is back in Trieste, because, in that process, Trieste still remains the place where contradictions must be brought to harmony; Trieste, that is, is still the symbol of the state of ‘uncertainty’ and crisis affecting Slataper’s generation. For Slataper, who despite everything continues to read the world as a philosophical framework (*theory*), Trieste is one of the symptoms of the modernist crisis to be resolved by bringing it ‘to clarity’ through ideological-cultural mediation. It is precisely this clarity (this theoretical-practical certainty that redoubles what the concept of ‘religion’ taken from his *Ibsen* has produced in philosophy) that Slataper finds by assuming a more reactionary position in terms of *realpolitik*, i.e. in terms of an intellectual who, continuing to think himself autonomous (and precisely because he does think himself autonomous), subordinates himself to the decisions of the ruling class\(^{166}\) (to its solidity) and finds objectivity (the same that gives ‘love’) in submitting to factuality (accepting Life and History), implicitly contributing to tighten the

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\(^{164}\) Cf. Slataper: letter to Elody Oblath dated June 25, 1913, in *Alle tre amiche* 292-3: “Trieste still keeps me awake for long hours at night, during which I go over every detail of our work plan, I see a place for all our friends, I feel the work that unites us. [...] participating and following a more serious life, an aristocratic, amiable life. [...] I meet my ultra-aristocratic temperament.”

\(^{165}\) Cf. Webster: 442: “the essential reason why in 1913 and 1914 Italian industrial interests took an active participation in their country’s imperialist adventures, in sharp contrast with their previous reluctance. The failure of the 1908 project to build an Danube-Adriatic railway had shown that the territorial rights of Italy required the support of genuine political and industrial backing if the country was to compete on equal terms with the rest of the European powers operating in the East.” Leaving the Triple Alliance had now become a necessary condition to aspire to industrial success internationally: the places in Europe where heavy industry could find room for expansion were the Balkans and the Levant, i.e. the very places (think of the Baghdad Railway) on which Austria and Germany were pinning their efforts and attention.
ranks of the class he belongs to, and, explicitly, providing it with an improved ideology (work as meaning, beyond the rigid quantitative logic of money), that is, with a model of reconciliation, with a form, within the disaggregation and within Zivilisation.

Trieste was suffocating under the Slavs. […] it could see that the tremendous amount of work that had gradually Italianized trade, established a century ago almost entirely, we might say, by cosmopolites, was little by little being destroyed; that a new city, […] a Slavic one, not cosmopolitan, […] was being created inside it: with Czech money, Dalmatian-Croatian sailors, Slovenian labor and bourgeoisie (Slataper: “Com’è sentita la guerra a Trieste,” in Scritti politici 187).

Slataper’s interventionist position, between September 1914 and Italy’s entry into the war (May 24, 1915), built on the recovered pedagogical function of the man of letters (“it is up to us […] to more seriously undertake the sole preparation to which the government can only indirectly contribute: moral preparation,” Slataper: “La preparazione del paese,” in Scritti politici 1914-15 118), has completely left behind the contradictions of democratism, entrenching itself in a perfectly steadfast and consequential para-nationalist position.167

Slataper links the need to exit the Triple Alliance and take part in the war on the side of the Triple Entente to an endless string of reasons: from moral arguments against neutrality168 to the historical conquest of a pre-eminent space on the European scene169; from the now standard myth of the unfinished Risorgimento170 to temptations of obvious colonialist content171; from the clash of civilizations172 to the convulsive return of irredentist issues173:

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167 Numerous texts of nationalist propaganda were found in Slataper’s library. Particularly meaningful, for the purposes of our discussion, is an invitation to attend a speech on L’Italia e la guerra [Italy and the War] (held by Enrico Corradini) found between pages 88 and 89 of the ninth volume of the works of Ibsen edited by Theodor Matthias. Cf. Guagnini: I libri di Scipio Slataper 39-40.

168 Cf. Slataper: “L’Adriatico e la Triplice,” in Il Resto del Carlino, September 16, 1914, in Scritti politici 204-5: “a people that has fallen into the ignominy of apathy, of weakness, of stupidity, of cowardice does not rise again without undergoing exhausting decades of suffering. And we do not want our Italy to one day find itself worn out by its indolence, among rightly proud winners and glorious losers seeking retribution.”

169 Cf. Slataper: “Un contrabbandiere di soldati per l’Italia: Giuseppe Rizzatti,” in “Il Resto del Carlino”, January 8, 1915, in Scritti politici 258-9: “We want to go to war not for Trento and Trieste but for Italy. […] the strength that now supports our emigration will tomorrow support our colonies and our expansion over the seas.”

170 Cf. Slataper: “L’Adriatico e la Triplice,” in Scritti politici 205: “to determinedly enter the worldwide competition to ensure itself a place and some breathing room.”

171 Cf. Slataper: “L’Adriatico e la Triplice,” in Scritti politici 205: “1870 was not the completion of the unification of Italy. […] Venice was given us, Custoza made us lose Trentino, Lissa robbed us of Istria and Trieste.”

172 Cf. Slataper: “La regione veneta e le alpi nostre,” in Il Messaggero, April 12, 1915, in Scritti politici 278-9: “While it is true that the Slovenes and Croats of Friuli are a little more civilized than the Albanians, it is also true
Slataper goes so far as to include Malta, Corsica, and the Canton of Ticino among the territories to redeem; he calls for the institution of an Italian protectorate over Albania; he alters the ethnographic data regarding Dalmatia\(^{174}\) for propaganda purposes and goes to the point of transfiguring the current conflict in an imaginary historical perspective:

The history of the Adriatic Sea, in its general meaning, is the continuing struggle for supremacy between the Italian civilization, which because of Rome may be considered autochthonous, and the Danube civilization [...]. In this fundamental sense, our conquest of Trieste will be the return of the Aquileians who had fled before Attila and Alboin, will be the answer of Venice to the letter of 1097 from Koloman Arpad, King of Hungary, [...] questioning the doge’s right to style himself “Duke of Dalmatia” [...]. Everything that is history in the Adriatic, in short, life, is Italian\(^{175}\) (Slataper: “Danubio-Adriatico,” in *Scritti politici* 297-9).

Even the figure of Oberdan, in a renewed comparison with Domenico Rossetti, is identified as an opposition between existence and life that looks at war as the need to really take part in life:

To exist we needed Rossetti; but to live we need Oberdan. [...] He said only one word to Italy: war. [...] We have been silent for thirty-two years. [...] Now we can say his name out loud and repeat what he wanted. We want war against Austria (Slataper: “Il valore di un anniversario: Guglielmo Oberdan,” in *Scritti politici* 251-2).

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that they are less so than the Italians. Prezzolini says that alongside Slavic peasants there are also Slavic lawyers, journalists, students, and artists: this brings a benign smile to the face of anyone who is even slightly acquainted with the Slovenes and Croats of our territories. [...] there is only one civilized culture: the Italian one.”

\(^{174}\) Cf. Slataper: “La regione veneta e le alpi nostre,” in *Scritti politici* 275: “in order to denationalize our territories Austria not only “stirred up” the pre-existing Slavic rural masses against the Italians of the city [...] but it did all it could to promote emigration.”

\(^{175}\) Camillo Pellizzi’s inclusion of Slataper among the “spiriti della vigilia” [spirits of the eve] can only surprise those critics who still persist in saving some aspect of democratic interventionism for the ideological purpose of tracing a continuity of ‘democratic’ thought in our country from the nineteenth century to the present day. And this does not regard Pellizzi alone. After 1922, a host of scholars and politicians have attempted to recover, in the following terms, the ‘function’ of Slataper: Cf. Zannoni 33: “as a writer he showed us a shining path of ascent; as a soldier he bathed it with the sacredest blood to make it more accessible. [...] to his soul thirsting for Italic greatness.”
Similarly, Mazzinianism too must be definitely thrown out as an annoying tie that prevents the full deployment of the new stance:

Then let us not be the only Mazzinian theorists left; let us act, like the others, as practical Mazzinians. Let us make war. […] And these here are reasons that only a politician who knows nothing about politics can call, with an idiot smile, immoral reasons (Slataper: “I diritti nazionali si affermano con la guerra,” in *Scritti politici* 225).

the national principle […] only serves as a basis for rights asserted with weapons in hand. And this of course is more than fair (Slataper: “L’insufficienza del principio nazionale,” in *Scritti politici* 290-2).

More interestingly for our analysis, not only does Slataper appropriate the clichés of nationalism (exemplifying, in the canonical dialectic of interclassism, the inevitable “capture” of democratism in view of the bourgeoisie closing its ranks in the imminence of war), but he also resumes, for obvious reasons of propaganda, certain canonical themes of his poetics – Neo-Kantianism and its subsequent recantation; the criticism of “aesthetic culture” – presenting them as the philosophical-moral-political horizons of action of Germany and Austria respectively, transposing, that is, the theoretical attack on the plane of politics:

what distinguishes the Austrian army from others, what its chief characteristic is, is their mad panic, their throwing themselves towards death in packs, having laid down their arms, […] war transcends their power of resistance. […] There are no citizens, so there are no soldiers. […] an uninterested, blasé resignation, which condescends to

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176 Cf. Slataper: “Italiani e slavi sull’altra sponda. Un accordo italo-serbo per l’equilibrio adriatico,” in *Scritti politici* 1914-15 190: “it is a fairly serious sign of our lack of national consciousness before the tenacious persistence of certain abstract ahistorical ideologies (be they called internationalism or Mazzinianism).”

177 Cf. Marin, “Il pensiero culturale-politico di Scipio Slataper,” in *I delfini* 170: “when the hour came, he was in the ranks.”

This is the function described by Marx in *The German Ideology*. Cf. Luperini: Slataper 10: “Only an explicit political commitment of social and revolutionary orientation could solve this contradiction, connecting subversivism to a collectivistic perspective.”

This ‘capture’ is tragically revealed when Slataper reflects on how to deal with the Slavs who will find themselves on Italian soil, that is, how to avoid the arising of Slavic irredentism: Cf. Slataper: *Confini orientali* (1915) 39-41: “To have faith in us and in our civilization. To promote in every way the economic development of the border towns […]. To leave the national schools untouched […]. Only we will have to […] teach Italian in their schools too […]. And we will allow all Slavic and German cultural events […]. But prevent from the very first day, with firm serenity, every political uprising […] the few Slavic agitators who remain will be easy to watch and keep in check.”

178 Cf. Slataper: “L’Adriatico e la Triplie,” in *Scritti politici* 207-8: “Germany, almost entirely impoverished of spiritual content, threw itself into the fray of the world […] sacrificing the individual.” Remember what he had written about Luther, Hegel, Bismarck, and the German spirit.
a certain criticism (Slataper: “Il cittadino e il soldato austriaco,” in Scritti politici 230-1).

The characteristics that Musil will attribute to Kakanien, the typical features of Mitteleuropean cultural production, are here employed for military purposes. At the same time, what had been the last point of arrival of Slataper’s philosophy, the dialectic between duty and balance (calmness), between morality and religion, with the first term ultimately subsumed in the second, with the ontological vivification of the ‘daily duty’ as ‘work’ (the common horizon of ‘humanity’) that gives meaning by giving form to the world, is now viewed as the main characteristic of the Italian people at the time of its regimentation, at the time (from the point of view of the bourgeois intellectual who organizes it) of the firm compactness of a nation and an army:

It is an illusion to believe that, in a regime of neutrality, you can convince the worker and the bourgeois to want the war, as he drives the plow and goes to bed, […]. War is an imposition and a heroic resignation. War is an order. The order will come. And the nation will become an army (Slataper: “Prepariamoci alla guerra,” in Scritti politici 255).

As the soldier standing in the ranks is no longer the anarchic city dweller, so each of us, so the entire nation must little by little find its body of war (Slataper: “La preparazione del paese,” in Scritti politici 1914-15 119).

And even obedient and calm, as if knowing that they must be ready to entrust their lives to something that is greater than them. […] The Italian people, whatever the ballads may say, are a calm people. Indeed, perhaps that calmness, intimate, profound, almost religious, is its true quality (Slataper: in Alle tre amiche 480).

While Austria is enlisting the Italians of Venezia-Giulia, Slataper ‘runs off’ to Rome with his wife and his Triestine friends; he continues his popularizing/educating work (even believing

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179 Cf. Slataper: “I diritti nazionali s’affermano con la guerra,” in Scritti politici 222: “on the theoretical and sentimental bases of nationality there can be different and even opposite political solutions, and the one that prevails will be the one that is most corroborated by a genuine force and a genuine effort.”

180 Consider what he writes from Avezzano, where he was sent as a special correspondent by Il Resto del Carlino after the earthquake of January 1915. Cf. Slataper: “Il terremoto e la nazione,” in Il Resto del Carlino, January 18, 1915, in Scritti politici 270-1: “We have to think about dying, but in another way. […] a short, tragic pause along our true and impending path. Our soldiers’ rifles have been replaced by coffins and shovels; but as I watch them dig, these fine young men, so delicate and cheerful despite the unexpected hardships and fatigue, I cannot avoid thinking […] that tomorrow with the same heart they will be digging our trenches in front of the Austrian ones.”
that intellectuals can make papers and government change their minds)\(^1\) and, when Italy enters the war, he continues, of course (as many of the democratic front)\(^2\) to extol the value of moral ‘regeneration’ against any economic interpretation, rejecting the analysis based on competition/imperialism put forth by various sectors of the international labor movement:

the general anti-German meaning of the war. We felt that the old and abused word “freedom” rang new, making us stand straighter and bolder. The Europe of the new century, which we thought skeptical and utilitarian, leaped up like at the tolling of the bells in ’48 […]. Nor, in this order of ideas, can we believe the simplistic explanation that at the core of the war in Europe is the trade competition between England and Germany. Both England and Germany were splendidly thriving on their mutual prosperity. […] Not to mention that most serious trade competitions always end up forming a cartel. And you might even say that without the war in Europe we would be heading straight towards a formidable Anglo-German colonial and commercial cartel (Slataper: “Questa guerra di coalizione,” in *Scritti politici 1914-15* 208-11).\(^3\)

In the end, after voluntarily enlisting, Slataper ultimately identifies war (and the ‘duty’ it demands from men) as the meaning-carrying ‘center,’ the composition of the rift between the individual and the world, between the particular and the universal, that had always been an underlying element in his speculation. On the practical level (practical for the intellectual: his work) this finds expression in reaffirming the task duly required from every citizen,\(^4\) a task

\(^1\) Cf. Slataper: letters to Giuseppe Prezzolini dated September 11 and 19, 1914, in Prezzolini-Slataper, *Carteggio* 280-1: “There is no intelligent person here who does not want the war […]. Now we shall see whether intelligent persons count for something […]. As you have seen, Quilici and I (and the situation) have managed to make even the *Carlino* change opinion. Gayda did the same with the *Stampa.*” Of course the government had already started secret negotiations with the Alliance and informed the editors of the main newspapers.

\(^2\) We only have to think of Salvemini, for whom the war should be considered an instrument necessary for a more stable peace; or Jahier, who, recuperating a Risorgimental perspective, looks at the war as a means to reform international political life; and especially Amendola, who, in his review of Norman Angell’s *The Great Illusion*, refuses to see the war from the viewpoint of developing economic relations, considering it an occasion for a higher meaning to cross the boundaries between individuals, connecting man to man, rejoicing in the fact that “thank God people will continue to slaughter one another.” Amendola’s response to Angell is also particularly interesting because he counters the faith expressed by Angell (according to whom war is an anti-economic conflict that has no place in a time of extraordinary financial and scientific progress) towards bourgeois pacifist internationalism with a psychologistic interpretation of war (“men prefer the evils of fighting, the hazards and the suffering, and even death, to a state of peace in which all of life is dominated by economic motives”), which is precisely the recovery of the psychological perspective that the value-based and neo-Kantian position had first induced him to reject. In short, even psychology is better than economy as an instrument of interpretation.

\(^3\) It is well known that the progressive orientalization of Austria and Germany (of which the Baghdad Railway is the most obvious and important element) would allow those countries to gradually free themselves from their dependence on British and American oil companies. That alone could be a good cause for war.

\(^4\) It makes no sense to try to justify Slataper’s position from a leftist point of view by remarking that he never condescended to the *guerra-festa* atmosphere found in the political writings of the Futurists of Milan and Florence: the *guerra-festa*, as perfectly explained by Isnenghi, is on a par with the myth of the peasant-army. They are two different moments and positionings of the pursuit of consent, addressed to the intellectual petit-bourgeois strata.
(duty) vivified in the higher religious-moral meaning now offered by the war. The dialectic between work (empirics), morality/religion (morality contained in religion), work (empirics in the light of Truth) can finally find accomplishment at the concrete level (where theory becomes practice):

But it is the community of men that succeeds, it is the collective effort of mutual assistance, of support, of coordination, that delights and that is the true war. This is the sense of military discipline, in which you proceed as in any human activity but in deeds and conditions that transcend the human. […] On the battlefield you feel that God is close by (Slataper: in Alle tre amiche 496-7).

Slataper is home at last, and that home is the trench,\textsuperscript{185} the place where the ‘common’ fate of men lies in duty, in daily ‘work’ enshrined in a greater meaning; the place where the individual’s subjectivity passes on to a universal signifying the human itself,\textsuperscript{186} and where his actions, outside purely quantitative values (outside the realm of money), are productive of value: not the reification of man (of all man) in work, which would be the sign of his estrangement from himself, but the experience that makes possible the ‘clarification’ of the self and gives meaning to reality, finally bringing it to ‘equilibrium,’ to ‘calm.’ Slataper thus prepares a reconciliation: still considering fragmentation as the fragmentation of thought, he superimposes on it, through the principle he calls ‘religion,’ a tacked-on, substitutive totality, so that through all the horror may appear some ‘wheat,’ and something ‘beyond’ a purely quantitative existence:

War is not what you think it is when you are far from its terrible reality […] but it is […] in that strange place outside your trench, quiet, peaceful, with wheat slowly ripening […]. It’s the sensation of certain death “over there”, although the sun is shining above the centuries-old streets and the farmers’ houses (Slataper: Appunti 277).


\textsuperscript{186} Which is the usual aspiration of the bourgeois subject of identifying himself with the subject tout court.
But the discovery of meaning in work (work vivified by the religious principle that makes it a qualitative value), as long as one remains in ‘theory,’ is only the work of a producer of syntheses on behalf of others; and the meaning found is only what conceals the inauthenticity of existence; it is, as demonstrated by the story of the later Slataper, the participation of the intellectual in the perfecting and maintaining of the hegemony of the bourgeoisie. The ‘community’ that finds its meaning (apparently a Kultur) in work/duty, in the mystique of Werk, is still the’society’ for which the intellectual prepares the authenticity of the inauthentic. We are still in the Zivilisation, because moral duty, brought back to life (to the empirical), but illuminated by a transcendental sense, reveals itself as the acceptance of current opinions, of that thought that in reality ends dominating because it is linked to the praxis of those who culturally hegemonize reality through the work of intellectuals: the ruling classes. It is no longer the tragic order that accused those contradictions because he considered the empirical as a ‘lack,’ but it is the mechanism of posing those contradictions as a merely theoretical problem, that could be resolved culturally, abstractedly. In such a way, the intellectual once more has an active role (theory as praxis) because his will of opposing to fragmentation – of which Trieste is, for Slataper, the symbol – amounts to its ‘ordering,’ that is, to providing contradictions that in reality stay unchanged with a stable meaning. In such sense, the ‘theoretical’ solution of the tragic circle of Ethics and Labour reveals itself, in the nationalism at which Slataper arrives (and which resolves the ‘problem’ of Trieste through war), as the bestowal of absolute value to the Empirical: the bestowal of value of Being to being. But then that value is no longer the dream of Brand that breaks through contradictions, but only that which society itself determines as a value and spreads as consensus.

VI. In the System of Abstractions. Carlo Michelstaedter and the Ideologies of Modernism
During an interview given in October 1936 to Giovanni Cavicchioli for the journal *Termini*, Luigi Pirandello surprisingly associated three names: Nietzsche, Weininger, and Michelstaedter. Pirandello indicates them as men who had been “broken” by attempting to keep “form” and “substance” together. Even more surprising is that Pirandello was not the first to make this association: in 1927, Julius Evola (the student of esoteric texts and future collaborator of the School of Fascist Mysticism) had mentioned the same three names, in the same order and using not dissimilar words: “In Nietzsche, Weininger, and Michelstaedter, we see men who were broken by the unrealized integration of their value in a positive method of power and self-fulfillment [...] positive affirmation of the dominion of the I over reality.”

(18) In the first case, Michelstaedter is placed between the main accuser of Platonism, intended as the creation of the ‘unreal’ world of the *ontos on* (signifying, in opposition to this, the emerging of the hegemonic Modernist space in view of the abandonment of Metaphysics and of the Absolute for the nietzschean “innocence of Becoming”), and the greatest interpreter of the tragic attempt to reactivate that world in the new horizon of temporality: the great interpreter, that is to say, of the neo-Kantian version of the Platonic perspective. 187 For Pirandello, the defender of Life against ‘forms,’ all three authors were basically ‘seekers of the Absolute,’ psychologically dominated by Stirnerian “fixed ideas” and therefore destined to succumb in a reality that allows no ‘reconciliation’ at all, if not in the ‘fiction’ of an operating system of thought that employs those ideas to move across reality and master it through a weakened, cynical rationality. For Evola, instead, their failure consisted in the inability to channel the desire for the Absolute into the pure imperialist/egoarchic myth (which we have already seen in part in Papini) of a type of man who is both atomized and powerful, and capable of resuscitating reality, its disaggregation, in the experiential form of

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187 Cf. Marco Fortunato: *Aporie della decisione* 187: “Weininger is the hero of the attempted great restoration.”
The acceptance of ‘pluralism’ and the attempted reconciliation of a ‘significant’ world from the only place that still seems independent (the interiority of man), are – in their varying degrees – the two roads that we have examined so far. Critics have often associated Michelstaedter to one or the other of these two approaches: for instance, he has been countless times interpreted as a neo-Kantian, and equally numerous (especially during the final years of the cultural prevalence of post-structuralism) are the interpretations of his poetics in the perspective of a relativism/nihilism pioneering ‘difference’ and refuting the unitary myths of ‘bourgeois metaphysics,’ similar, in this, to the analysis contesting the social system allegedly emerging from the Pirandellian ‘negative’ as a critique of classical rationality which – it alone – would represent the bourgeois. But to affirm, as Debenedetti did several years ago, that in Michelstaedter (as in Pirandello) we are witnessing the crisis of the unitary/naturalistic subject, and, above all, to affirm, as Garin and Salinari did, that Pirandello and Michelstaedter were the authors who better understood the epistemological issues of their time, i.e. the authors who more than others introduced Modernist topics in Italy before the consolidation of the idealistic hegemony, does not mean putting them on the same level. Not surprisingly, Garin was the first to bring Lukács into the discussion on Michelstaedter. By positing on the ideological level the break-up of total reality into

188 The bourgeois substratum of this reactionary myth was perfectly grasped by Furio Jesi. Cf. Letteratura e mito 24: “The epiphany of the mythos, [...] to impose the immobile instant, the eternal present of contemplation.” Cf. Lukács: History and Class 194: “mythology is simply the reproduction in imagination of the problem in its insolubility.”

189 Beginning with Giovanni Amendola, “Carlo Michelstaedter,” in Etica e biografia 167-9: “The gold vein has surfaced once again. [...] He has felt and communicated the need to be serious and earnest. [...] [...] An ethical and conscious ego.” In her biography of her husband, Eva Amendola Kühn writes that no other contemporary book had impressed him as much as Persuasion and Rhetoric. Slataper too, when he was distancing himself from Kantianism, interpreted Michelstaedter along the lines of Weininger.

190 In 1942, in Il casualismo critico 40, Adriano Tilgher wrote: “Thought is the passion of identity. It attempts to replace the world’s multiplicity and variety with unity and identity. [...] For Thought, the existence of the manifold is an intolerable scandal [...]. Thought is the enemy of time.”

191 To mention an example that clearly expresses the matter: cf. Intermitte: 113-4: “the real revolution brought on by Michelstaedter and the reason why we can say that he truly succeeded in breaking free from the bourgeois perspective that was tying down almost all his contemporaries (except Pirandello, and perhaps him alone), consist in his overcoming the narrow-mindedness of the political field and his resolving a political problem through a revolution in the field of morality.”


193 Cf. Garin: Intelllettuali italiani 100: “At the bottom of his analysis there could only be the call for a decision, a change of course, a jump. [...] The analysis of rhetoric turns into an exhortation to reverse the situation.”
apparently non-recomposable fragments,\textsuperscript{194} Pirandello’s modernist perspective unknowingly proceeds in unison with the labor/production-based reorganization of the bourgeois world, expressed by the new forms of ‘specialization,’ a phenomenon accompanied by the increasing rationalistic mechanization of the production process and the consequent development of the subject’s contemplative attitude toward it. Pirandello looks at this phenomenon as if (Marx might say) reality had passed from books to history, as if the changes in reality had been caused by the epistemological revolution instead of the contrary, and in that revolution he tries to resolve (to rationalize) the question of the inauthenticity of life, with the results that we know. He tries to resolve the crisis of the Erlebnis, the crisis of the symbolic, as symbolizing its own absence, thereby creating a new form of Erlebnis. In this sense Pirandello’s Modernism becomes the perfect image of reality, because his thought links ‘contemplatively’ with the reality of the world which is expressed ahistorically’ in the activity of the bourgeoisie.\textsuperscript{195} Michelstaedter, instead, negates this organicity (which ultimately means negating the organicity of his own social class) and proceeds to judge the entire social structure in terms of alienation: he rejects (here’s the point) the theoretical/epistemological approach and, seeing this as an integral part of the problem, makes it the object of a thorough evaluation by placing it in a doubly determined relationship with society. La persuasione e la rettorica\textsuperscript{196} has caused so many difficulties to critics because the two variegated sides of the issue – the Scylla and Charybdis of ‘pluralism’ and ‘form’ – are both charged with being

\textsuperscript{194} The same horizon of ‘specialization’ which the intellectual class experiences in the opposite but complementary phenomena of the technicalization of professions and journalism.

\textsuperscript{195} Cf. Jameson: Marxism and Form 185-6: “Their [the bourgeois’] relationship to the objects that they produce […] is a contemplative one, in that they are not aware of capitalism as a historical phenomenon, as being itself the result of historical forces, as having within itself also the possibility of change or of radical transformation. They can understand everything about their social environment […] except the sheer historical existence of that environment itself: their rationalism can assimilate everything but the ultimate questions of purpose and origin.”

\textsuperscript{196} Written between 1909 and 1910, the text was to serve as Michelstaedter’s doctoral dissertation. It was published in 1913 thanks to the efforts of Vladimiro Arangio-Ruiz, who the year before had printed some of Michelstaedter’s poems and his Dialogo della salute. In 1922, thanks to the work of Emilio Michelstaedter (Carlo’s cousin), Appendici critiche and Il prediletto punto d’appoggio della dialettica socratica were published by Vallecchi. In 1958 Gaetano Chiavacci brought to light Scritti vari, which would be regularly enlarged over time, especially thanks to the commendable work of Sergio Campailla. During his lifetime Michelstaedter published only three articles: Reminiscenze del funerale di Carducci, published by his family without his knowledge in Il Corriere friulano on February 22, 1907; «Più che l’amore» di Gabriele D’Annunzio al Teatro di Società, also in “Il Corriere friulano” on September 18, 1908; Ancora lo «Stabat Mater» di Pergolesi in “Gazzettino popolare” on April 29, 1910.
abstractions, mystifying forms of Erlebnis tending to conceal and perpetuate the theoretical approach which, in both cases, is a ‘second Nature’ of reality, overlapping it and determining in thought (in theory) the space of disalienation:

It is the redetermination of the Subject in the face of his own determination: it is a reliving of oneself: «a reflection», a knowing. Reality is justly said combined: «subordinate», because in the reality of the Subject there are now «things» and thought which, with its many connections, dominates them (Michelstaedter: “Appendice I,” in Persuasion 138).

Michelstaedter is neither on the side of Form nor on the side of Life because he is the bad conscience of Italian Modernism. Michelstaedter is the point where that epistemological revolution acts against itself and, not forgetting the results achieved (or that the response to its age must be given in that age itself), is acknowledged as the cultural logic of a time in history, both in the ideologies of becoming and in the ideologies of being. By that I mean that Michelstaedter, like his contemporaries, is part of Modernism because that was the hegemonic culture of his time, a time of crisis of the established certainties of reality, thought, self, language (crisis of the possibility of assuming reality in the symbolisms of the I), but is also its negative conscience, the moment when not only the course of accepting the ‘flow’ (Werdelust, the delight of Heraclitean innocence beyond all forms) is recognized as an ideological construct, but even the opposing factors, the various attempts of bourgeois thought to rebuild a stable foundation that we have seen in Boine, Jahier, Slataper, are revealed to be part of the same cultural operation, i.e. part of the same abstractive structure reflecting, in the ‘theory’ that the disaggregation ‘restabilizes,’ the forms of domination.

Michelstaedter realizes that the crisis of classical rationality (its inability to posit itself as Nature: what the nihilist horizon now actually reveals) is reflected as the capacity for concealment of nature-based thought, both in the ideologies willing to leave behind the fetish of Being (Impressionism, Pragmatism, Relativism, Contingentism, etc.) and in religion-based or ethics-based ideologies that, as we shall see, end up being part of a structure in which
Being is relativized and experienced as ‘social being,’ reified in ‘theory’ as the Truth of the ideological moment that society expresses and enacts as consent. The binomial pairs of bourgeois thought (Life/Form; *Kultur/Zivilisation*; Universal/Particular) are here broken apart: Michelstaedter sees them working in unison for the preservation of the social status quo; that is, he sees them as if they were directed by the social environment in which they originate. He realizes, as we shall see, that the horizon of specialization (the loss of the vision of totality that leaves reality in pieces, making it impossible to put together the different viewpoints of increasingly atomized human beings) and the horizon of rationalization (the systemic need to recompose these viewpoints in an increasingly predictable and computable mechanized abstraction) work together. In other words, what was once established as a social foundation in the form of a law of nature, now aims to preserve both its character of a Law and its temporal character; the nature of Becoming (from which it arose against the immobile Nature of feudal reality: its historical nature that continually allows it to restructure itself in times of crisis), and the ‘immobile’ nature that now defends it against the transformative capacity of history itself, and that thus aims at positing it again as Nature. Confronted by the transformation of Substance into function/fiction (Modernist decadence of the concept of Truth), Michelstaedter not only refuses to consider that function a Substance, not only rejects the cynical opportunity to use that function ‘as if’ it were a Substance, but also identifies, in the thinking aimed at reconstructing, in theory, the old idea of Substance, a mechanism designed to introduce, against the shifting and uncertain backdrop of temporality, Becoming as abstraction, the cement of a social cohesion that only in this alienated perspective can be expressed and perpetuated as such, imprinting itself in the hearts of men:

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197 It was no coincidence that a ‘conservative’ genius like Thomas Mann would be compelled to speak, in *Germany and the Germans*, about the vampirization of *Kultur* carried out by *Zivilisation*.  
198 With the social environment, in turn, re-orientated by these ideological perspectives.  
199 This is Marx’s ‘betrayal of the bourgeoisie.’ Reason turning into ‘instrumental reason’; Science presenting itself as the horizon of Truth susceptible to change; the principle of “competition” which continues to be affirmed in theory while monopolies are being formed everywhere; etc.
abstracted from necessity, the laws will make their proclamations through calculation; men, from their own necessities, will conform by calculation to the organized system of necessities [...]. In [...] the diminished life determined by abstraction lies the condition for the existence of the system of abstractions [...]. Without this, the system could never work right – but once it does work right, it too will be right – and right will be the systemized. Because in each of them will be reproduced the right image of the system in a little system of parts (Michelstaedter: “Appendice II” 157-9).

To maintain, as some do, that this sort of reasoning can be made on a plane that Michelstaedter considered ahistorical, is quite misleading. Outside the cultural (and structural) directives of his time, outside the Krisis of European consciousness, of the season of tragic thought and Lebensphilosophie, of the age of Mach, Simmel and also Kraus, outside this complex of ideas, writes Stuart-Hughes, so intertwined as to appear a “cultural revolution,” Michelstaedter’s speculation becomes meaningless. The historical moment of the reaction to Hegelianism expressed in the many ramifications of negative thought was his natural background. The European scene of the ‘crisis of Foundations’; the transposing of the achievements of thought into fictional models for the construction of the Real (forms, ideologies, linguistic concretions); the conventional unity imposed on the multiple, which now, coincidentally, just when individuals appear increasingly isolated, is seen as a psychological phenomenon (inevitable or useful/utilitarian); the collapse of the traditional philosophical space which the Florence-based intellectuals experience through the mediation of Bergson and William James, the evaluation of logical/systematic thought as violence against what exists in ‘time’: all this is the action space of a cultural hegemony reverberating

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200 Cf. Pieri: “Per una dialettica storica del silenzio,” in Cumpeta and Michelis: Eredità di Carlo Michelstaedter 235: “History is not destroyed at its roots when a text appeals to readers whose epochal codes have already been oriented by certain readings of Schopenhauer (the inauthentic character of phenomena) and Nietzsche (the crisis of foundations and the metaphysics of the will).”

201 We should reiterate that this phenomenon cannot be understood without referring to the ongoing conflict between Psychology and Philosophy, that is, to the inevitable condemnation of philosophy that Nietzsche puts forth when he considers every standpoint to be dictated by the obscure pre-understanding of the world that guides the thoughts of every philosopher. It is no coincidence that Mach comes from medical studies of psychophysiology, nor that starting in 1879 laboratories of psychology are set up one after another, nor that Brentano gives the title of “Psychology” to works of a philosophical nature (while Wundt does the opposite). Similarly, in Italy, it is no coincidence that Croce attacks psychology as a non-philosophy, nor that the neo-Kantian Amendola considers psychology the road to skepticism, nor that Papini and Vailati’s pragmatist front shows a keen interest in psychology. Cf. Melandri: “Karl Buhler: la crisi della psicologia come introduzione a una nuova teoria linguistica,” in Anima ed esattezza, published by Riccardo Morello.

202 The Florence milieu would undoubtedly help Michelstaedter to better focus the terms of the matter.
Examining the matter from a Machian point of view offers a dual tactical advantage: not only does Mach, by analyzing every conceptual concretion (God, Law, I, Word, Thing) in terms of a bundle of sensations pre-directed by the subjectivity of an individual who is likewise pre-directed, interpret in full awareness a level of “aesthetic culture” (the level of psychology-based relativism complacent about its non-recomposability), but he also determines, as the foundation of scientific action, the instrumental use of these symbolic crystallizations as an economic function that synthetically organizes the material of experience, making those abstractions independent and methodologically necessary, and reconstructing a stable model based on a ‘convention’ that is both anti-metaphysical and instrumentally rational, subject to constantly changing interpretative paradigms but always necessarily experienced in them as substance: in other words, empirical appearances (directed by interests and by chance) are established through mathematical methods as subsisting units which Mach calls “elements.”

Abstracting these elements out of the flow for practical/pragmatist purposes is the space of a cultural hegemony that spreads with surprising speed (The Analysis of Sensations alone had three new editions during the first four years of the century) because it is directly related – organic – to the new modes of technical progress which, in turn, are rooted in the restructured production system (in the combined action of specialization and rationalization). In Mach’s perspective (Knowledge and Error), but also in that of Avenarius and Poincaré, the epistemological-scientific model becomes a theory of knowledge that takes shape from the way common thought, common sense, works (and has ahistorically always worked). The randomness of the elements is methodically structured (for instance through the language that

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203 It should be understood that this is not simply about Nietzsche, but mainly about the manner in which Nietzsche is perceived.

204 If Bazarov could declare that machismo represented Marxist epistemology, it is easy to understand the level achieved by that hegemony, and also what Lenin wrote about empirio-criticism, a philosophy perceived, along the line of Hume-Berkeley-Condillac, precisely as relativistic pragmatism (Papini, Prezzolini, and Vailati had all shown interest towards Berkeley). Furthermore, Lenin perfectly understood that these speculations were directed towards a vision of Science as a form of knowledge unrelated to the ideological struggle.

I believe that on this basis we can also understand what Lukács meant by considering History and Class Consciousness an attempt to provide Marxism with a theory of knowledge.

205 The same occurs, passing from artistic speculation to everyday ‘life,’ with Pirandello’s On Humor.
organizes them) and abstractly prepared for instrumental exploitation (so William James can argue at the same time that life goes beyond logic and that theories are not answers but instruments). It does not matter at this point that Bahr, understanding the Nietzschean derivation of Mach’s reduction of the self, considers this approach a “philosophy of Impressionism,” where the only truth is provided by the immediate sensation of the moment before it is crystallized by the work of the mind; that Schomberg says that the thing has been replaced by the impression of the thing; that Vailati proceeds to ‘weaken’ scientific knowledge inasmuch as directed by a pre-understanding of sentimental nature, or that Hofmannsthal (who followed Mach’s lessons at university), instead, looks at the romantic/regressive dream of Kultur as the opportunity to rebuild an organic, disalienated space in which Erfahrung can resume a central role. In any case, experience, being acquirable only epistemologically, will continue to follow the mechanized rules of its abstraction, that is, it will continue to leave untouched the structural elements by which it is determined as ‘form,’ as the categorial systemization of knowledge in which ‘value’ (even the neo-Kantian dream of it) represents the instrumental aspects of the ideological level achieved by society: the moment when the subject regains, speculatively, the forces that he perceives to have been estranged from himself (Erlebnis). This theoretical realization of the universal in the particular (e.g. juridical-political equality abstracted from the actual personal conditions of living) is the necessary ideological expression of bourgeois society experienced as apperception of the world: its breakdown in the givenness of a definite phenomenal form expressed in increasingly abstract and rationalizing partial systems. What Musil would call

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206 It should be clear that this is not to say that they are the same thing, and in fact we have examined them as two separate moments of Modernism. A philosophy of values clearly offers a greater capacity for criticism than the biological insurmountability allowed by the relativistic perspective. The point is that both directions (and the various ramifications within them), failing to be seen as historically determined, failing to establish disalienation as a dialectical perspective capable of setting ‘Truth’ as a constantly evolving historical figure, remain subjugated to the cultural hegemony that the current social moment expresses, in that Truth, as Nature.

Cf. Lukács: History and Class 187-8: “The absolute is nothing but the fixation of thought, it is the projection into myth of the intellectual failure to understand reality concretely as a historical process. […] Every ‘biological’ relativism, etc., that turns its limits into ‘eternal’ limits thereby involuntarily reintroduces the absolute, the ‘timeless’ principle of thought. […] So that here both logically and methodologically Socrates must be in the right as against the sophists, and logic and value theory must be in the right as against pragmatism and relativism. What these relativists are doing is to take the present philosophy of man with its social and historical limits and to allow these to ossify into an ‘eternal’ limit of a biological or pragmatic sort.”
the development of the “sense of possibilities” (of which he saw a historical equivalent in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, under which Michelstaedter too was born), the bundle of conceptualizing alternatives (interpretations) radiated by the subject about reality, is precisely the outline of a social structure that, on the ideological level, is abstracted, at the same time, into the multiplicity of the contingent and into the “ghostly objectivity” of a mechanized Being that is constantly reproposing the value of that structure. If a Kantian philosopher such as Vaihinger can assert, at the same time, that “the ‘world’ is merely an instrument of thought,” (73) that its truth is only the most expedient error through which science helps to better adapt to reality, and that the mind “fulfils this requirement to the highest degree when it is regarded from the point of view of a finalistic […] machine” (105); if in Italy, the former Leonardian Adolfo Levi can likewise assert, in a work entitled Sceptica, that when “you pass from the sphere of knowledge to the sphere of action, theoretical skepticism must give way to ethical dogmatism” (197) — it is clear that the matter is finally moving beyond the opposing pairs (Being/Becoming; Absolute/Relative; Scepsis/Ethics) that make up the theoretical approach to ‘accusing,’ as a whole, the very separation between theory and practice. 207 This separation implies the possibility of a theoretical reconciliation that thought – in the various forms that we have examined so far – can still bring about by replicating the reifying facilities of the social structure: by giving the abstract form of an objectivity determinable through quantified measures to a reality multiplied in entities (not unified by a higher principle) — specialized, sectorized, unstable, and temporal. This reification, which is interpreted by the ‘pluralist’ front as the persistence of symbolic-metaphysical thought 208 (and which still reifies, think of Pirandello, in the form of a relativism absolutized in the guise of a Becoming that is no longer historical but biological), is actually the cancellation, on the level of thought, of the

207 The pressure of the proletarian movement finally brings into play the question of ‘praxis,’ given the newly acquired consciousness of a social class that, due to its ‘real’ living conditions, cannot take part in the ‘contemplative’ structure of abstract speculation. The emerging of the ‘praxis’ issue forces bourgeois ideologists to take it into account, giving rise, among the more naive (for instance Vaihinger and Levi), to lines of thought that are clearly in contradiction with themselves but which in any case bring to light the problem of the separation between theory and practice.

208 Cf. Gargani: Il sapere senza fondamenti 20: “they limit themselves to projecting scientific knowledge on the screen of a metaphysical background. The problem of explaining the categories of science is replaced by the search for the metaphysical grounds allegedly underlying the praxis of science.”
mechanism from which the objectivity originates, that is to say, as we shall see with Michelstaedter, of the mechanism which the social structure expresses, at the ideological level achieved, as theory; as knowledge, which, in order to be accepted, must become the knowledge of current beliefs, of common sense made traitorously abstract by the conditions of material reality. This is how men begin to depend on an objectivity that they themselves have created, that they themselves have objectified (hence the strange independence from external reality that is found in many Modernist works). The time of the “death of God,” Michelstaedter realizes, is the time of an inhuman objectivity, not because God is not yet completely dead in the hearts of men, but because the rationality of the new ‘technological’ horizon (and what it determines) takes its place as an abstraction, enclosing in itself the characteristics of Becoming and Being, and radiating them as an ideology, assigning its own features to everything, to every thing that wanting to ‘live’ takes part in this mimetic nightmare: “that which in every case and every manner is called life—is the infinitely various conjoining of potency finitely localized in infinitely various aspects—as consciousness, according to which in every case its correlate is stable amid the instability.” (Persuasion 16)

The horizon of technology assumes, we might say, both the features of ought-to-be and the features of ought-to-become, because in the space of ‘knowledge’ both are perceived as the place of a conciliatory substantialization, which, however, is no more than the point where society projects itself as the place of Being beyond its contradictions, beyond relativistic accidentality, which, as we shall see, is the very foundation of that abstract Being (specialization and rationalization).

It is in this sense that Persuasion and Rhetoric “is undoubtedly the most anomalous and outstanding in the canon of the great works of Italian literature,” (Asor Rosa: Letteratura 265) because in it, for the first time, bourgeois thought (a thought still unable to address its analysis

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209 Which on the work level is the cancellation of the tracks, of the route that leads to the production of the object.
210 Cf. Lukács, History and Class 88-9: “rationalization is unthinkable without specialization. The finished article ceases to be the object of the work-process. The latter turns into the objective synthesis of rationalized special systems whose unity is determined by pure calculation and which must therefore seem to be arbitrarily connected with each other. […] The unity of a product as a commodity no longer coincides with its unity as a use-value.”
to the mechanisms of labor) confronts the structure of its own alienation recognizing itself
abstract (“using words, a war on words”), recognizing itself part of a social mechanism
directed at distinguishing reality from the image of reality:

*The world, life, becomes a theory.* Things are no longer or are not as they even are, but
for the sake of this theoretical life: […] things are handled like data stripped of any
interest, with no reference to life […]. To reason this way of *current reality* no longer
means to live the necessary relations of reality […] but to transpose one’s life into the
joining and separating of impersonal data, which now in the present of our discourse
may stand one way, and in the future of our discourse may stand in another, if now in
the present we assume this hypothesis instead of another. Life has fled the discourse
[…]. Thus the events of this diminished life now usurp the words that have meaning in
life […] he can each time specify, for the sake of the discourse, in which abstract regard
he takes a given thing (Michelstaedter: “Appendice II” 196-7).

This is not nihilism. In Michelstaedter nihilism is played against itself: nihilism is the
historical experience of an alienated, atomized world that, in order to conceal its alienation,
must turn life into ‘knowledge about life,’ precariousness into value (including the value of
nihilism itself); nor are we dealing with ethics, the ethics of *Sollen*, because this is the
abstraction that the isolated subject makes of himself in order to give stability, but only in the
form of social stability, to his own precariousness: recognizing the values expressed by
society as the most suitable for bridging the hiatus produced between himself and society,
transfiguring a real need into an abstract ‘duty,’ the same duty that, as his father makes clear
when Carlo leaves for Florence (October 1905), should inform his whole life: “Remember
that any infringement to honor you may make, even if gilded over by mitigating
circumstances, would be a death sentence for your father, who allows no excuse for such
transgressions, who has made honor the foundation of his life, honest work his supreme law,
and duty his religion” (Alberto Michelstaedter: in Campailla: *Dialoghi* 13).211

**VII. The System of Relativism**

211 Cf. Michelstaedter: letter to Alberto dated November 11, 1905, in *Epistolario* 63: “Through your example you
instilled in us the love of activity and rectitude and the horror of dishonesty.”
The Michelstaedter home stands in the central square of Gorizia, a small town of pro-Italian sentiments in the Austro-Hungarian Empire\textsuperscript{212} inhabited by a well-to-do bourgeoisie with liberal values, fairly appreciative of progress\textsuperscript{213} (in 1906 a new Transalpine line would provide a connection to the great cities of Central Europe), still somewhat gathered around the anachronistic mirage of the patriarchal farming ‘community,’\textsuperscript{214} around the mirage of the “world of yesterday.” Carlo was the fourth son of a Jewish family moving towards assimilation. His father Alberto, who cultivated literary interests in his spare time and was well introduced in the town’s cultural circles, worked as a money-changer and later as agent for the Trieste-based insurance company Assicurazioni Generali, an integral part of that world of affluence and ‘preventive security’ where, as Bobi Bazlen recalls, “everything was insured” (248).\textsuperscript{215} He and Carlo offer a typical representation of the generational clash that Kafka will make emblematic, a clash that, even as it opens to the individualism of modern consciousness\textsuperscript{216} (to a reality perceived in the form of disaggregation), contains in embryo a whole era of transition much more than a psychological conflict; a conflict that in the Habsburg society was expressed, as is well known, with particular intensity:

\textsuperscript{212} Cf. Cacciari: “Interpretazione di Michelstaedter,” in Rivista di estetica 21: “Carlo Michelstaedter’s work represents [… ] one of the highest points reached by Mitteleuropean culture at the start of the century.”

\textsuperscript{213} To keep irredentism under control, Vienna granted towns like Gorizia many economic concessions favoring the development of trade and industry.

\textsuperscript{214} Cf. Astori: 8-9: “Before the war, Gorizia presented a quiet, domestic lifestyle that had a scent of salons and churches, a lifestyle that was a little withdrawn and a little showy, a little indulgent and a little bigot, that brought to mind both the age of Goldoni and of Maria Theresa, with bombastic preachers and the bleating of that decrepit «Accademia dei Sonziaci» [sonziaci = speakers of sonziaco, the language of Gorizia] that had been a distinguished coterie in Gorizia among eighteenth-century Arcadians.”

\textsuperscript{215} Forms of mutualism and collective self-protection were already in place years before the introduction of the Austrian welfare state. These forms of mutual protection were particularly developed (and supported) by the members of the liberal bourgeoisie of Italian origin, both in contrast to the provisions of the Vienna government and to weaken, a few years later, the direct action of the Socialist and Social Democrat trade unions. Significantly, as we learn from Meroi (Persuasione ed esistenza: 141), Alberto would take action to remove from the printed version of Persuasion and Rhetoric the reference to the profession of a character, the “important gentleman,” who comes to represent the world of ‘rhetoric’: an insurer.

\textsuperscript{216} Cf. Pieri: La differenza ebraica 97-9: “The optimistic ideals that had characterized nineteenth-century secular-progressive consciousness are unable to address the many problems posed by contemporary reality – a further sign of a widespread clash between generations […]. Michelstaedter maintains that «consciousness is individual», while his father, in conformity with the rationalist creed, believes that «consciousness is generalized», thus the expression of a socially communal cultural reality.”

Cf. Michelstaedter, letter to Alberto dated June 27, 1907, in Epistolario 234-6: “you’re telling me the worst things I can be told. That I try to reassure myself with casuistic caviling for having unconsciously sucked up modern ideas, that the differences between my viewpoint and yours are irremediable […], but that was silly, foggy, lucubrating self-analysis (your words) [… ] all of you keep saying that I have been morally spoiled by modern-day principles. And just because I’m saying that consciousness is individual.”
I see that I have no control over things and people, as I have no control over the ideas that cross my mind, vague, confused [...]; that I lack moral balance, and therefore that powerful impulse that makes one go through life proudly and confidently, that I lack the intellectual balance that makes one’s thoughts go straight to the point; because I find that I am living as if in a dream where everything is incomplete and obscure, and when I try to understand, to focus on something that floats around me, it all slips through my fingers, [...] and it seems to me that there is always a heavy veil between myself and reality; and I become more and more convinced that I am a degenerate [...]. Part of this is personal, and part is the disease of the time as far as moral balance is concerned, because we are living in a period of transition of society in which all bonds are coming loose [...] and the roads of life are no longer clearly drawn all leading to a certain climax, but they are all mixed up and unclear (Michelstaedter: Epistolario 157-8).

But Alberto was not Monaldo Leopardi, he was not an old fogey: he had caused some stir in town with a conference on ‘falsehood’ in which he argued that this is actually one of the foundations of social life; he maintained that the world “sways between a relative truth and a relative falsehood” and it is only by hiding this, by separating theory from practice, that social life and the foundation of its mechanisms (the institutions that regulate it) are possible. Alberto had chosen to live the bourgeois contradiction, “theory is one thing, practice another!” (Michelstaedter: Persuasion 105). The moral principles that he offers his departing son, which would seem to admit no division in the relationship between value/duty and society, are no longer the principles of an ‘organic,’ community world (that world now exists only as an abstract ideological residue), but are based on the ‘fiction’ that holds at bay the critical framework of the ‘specializing’ perspective of the epistemology that Alberto himself is living, as we have seen above; and are therefore based on educating towards an objectivity that is justified only insofar as useful for taking part, mimetically, in the social mechanism that must now configure itself in an abstract organicity and draw its ‘value’ from that. Carlo writes:

Individual professionals can perfectly handle their trades but do not know life; because they accept it however it is in order to go on, yet they do not know whether

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217 Letter to his sister Paula dated December 9, 1906. The point that Michelstaedter probably grasps, note the reference to “degeneration,” through Nordau’s book (although the reference to the ‘disease of the time’ can also suggest Bourget), is the place of a psychological situation about which almost all the intellectuals of the time, in Italy and elsewhere, have something to say.
what they are doing is good, they do not know why and wherefore they live – they do not know themselves: they live without persuasion. […] a dull, patchy life […] farmers, cobblers, blacksmiths, merchants, bankers, soldiers, politicians, all carrying out the functions necessary for the individual needs of the city, so that it may go on. […] that everyone adapt themselves to the sufficiency of that abstraction of life […] imitating […], learning to repeat the obscure actions they see performed by others: the future blacksmith how to handle iron, how to use the hammer, the hero-like attitudes of the blacksmith; the future cobbler how to make tight stitches (“Appendice II” 150-2).

These reflections are still five years to come; right now Carlo, on the train heading to Florence, feels a strange uneasiness,²¹⁸ the first signs of a rebellion that will find expression in a vaguely Dannunzian individualism,²¹⁹ an all-encompassing communion with the world aspiring to the reconciliation of I and Nature, that will initially involve the hero of his youth: Carducci. There’s a point that should never be forgotten: Michelstaedter is a provincial, and the scope of his intellectual education (at least at this point in time) is far from the innovative peaks of the Florentine milieu, but rather follows the prevailing curriculum of the upper middle class of the time, in which Carducci and D’Annunzio occupy prominent positions. And so it is through the Dannunzian/Wagnerian model (therefore, the model of a very misunderstood Nietzsche)²²⁰ that Michelstaedter begins to develop the will to resist the standardizing structures of society as a means to forge himself a ‘heroic’ personality. Personal initiative is contextualized within the model of an energetic ‘life,’ a life that responds to the “loss of the center,” to psychological and social disintegration, with a surplus of individualism loaded with late-romantic suggestions directed at the aesthetic transfiguration

²¹⁸ Michelstaedter first experiences ‘modernity’ in Venice: cf. Michelstaedter, letter dated October 27, 1905, in Epistolario 31: “All the things I’ve seen this week pass before my eyes as in a dream, and I can barely focus on one; I have the impression of becoming another person every moment, I must have lost the sense of continuity of my «I».”
²¹⁹ And which is existentially reflected in the decision not to move to Vienna to study mathematics but to Florence for “an immersion in art and culture.” Cf. Michelstaedter: Sfuggi la vita 8: “In moments like that we partake of the objective and unique truth, but without being aware of it. […] the unattainable image of the truth trembles in the soul, and the lips sing and the brush flows.”
²²⁰ Cf. Carlo Michelstaedter, letter to his sister Paula dated December 12, 1907, in Epistolario 167: “This evening I went to see Piu che l’amore. – The concept is typically Dannunzian, or rather Nietzschean: The superior man, in his immediate conjunction of love, of enthusiasm, with nature, with the living forces of life, outside of society, thus outside all its moral concepts, has the right to crush, without regard for these concepts, every barrier raised by society between his love and the achievement of his ideal.”
of reality. This perspective will accompany him at least until 1907, and will be given a sort of systematization in the unfinished *Stelio Effrena (Dialogo della morale e dell’estetica eroica)* of 1908, in which the new model of intellectual that Michelstaedter is developing will recognize in the esthete its own aspiration, experienced however in the form of contemplative alienation offered by the artistic model (“As your lips unknowingly speak the truth while they can only speak falsehoods”) (in Cerruti: *Michelstaedter* 244), in the form of a desire for liberation which however can only be expressed as resistance enacted in the farce of a sublimation in the style of *kitsch*, according to a model that in the final years will take the features of the dialectic (compared to Socrates) figure of Callicles:

«The superior, stronger spirit» – says Plato’s Gorgias through the mouth of Callicles – «has the right to assert his personality completely, to *dominate* […], to crush the inferior will, and the laws instituted by inferior wills for their mutual defense». This is the first enunciation of the individualistic principle opposing the social principle, the principle of all ethics, of every criterion for distinguishing between good and evil. […] In the concept of *man* is contained the potential and the necessity of the social environment – and its progress is a *becoming* directed towards the ideal of *good* – of what is good for everyone […]. This is the philosophical antithesis at the basis of the problem in *Più che l’amore*. […] what a poor thing Gabriele D’Annunzio had done. […] that in the long dialogs only the individualistic thesis is expounded […] gave us neither the handsome hero of a transcendental will […] nor the environment […] strong in his meanness established as law, – mean, no doubt, but steady and confident in his principles, endowed with the characteristics of moral finiteness (in *La melodia del giovane* 195-7).

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221 On the persistence of Dannunzian themes in Michelstaedter, see Pieri: *Il pensiero della poesia*.
222 Cf. Michelstaedter, letter to Iolanda De Blasi dated May 1-2, 1907, in *Epistolario* 206: “Everything appears to me not as crude matter, but as artistic essence, as part of a universal artistic organism. […] Because of you, Iolanda, I feel I am no longer dreaming outside my life, but holding it in a close embrace and grasping its innermost essence.”
223 Michelstaedter: ““*Più che l’amore*” di Gabriele D’Annunzio al Teatro di Società.”

Consider the difference with another review of *Più che l’amore* written the year before, in which the aesthetic perspective still retains a positive meaning: ““*Più che l’amore*” di Gabriele D’Annunzio,” in *La melodia del giovane* 180: “It is the triumph of individualism. In such a moment, conscience and moral principles are idle words. […] Corrado Brando […] hardened by the wild solitudes of Africa, where he came close to the sources of life above and beyond any social body, is the real type of this individual […]. He is a hero because of the strength of his character, because of his intellectual value, because of his energy.”

Earlier still, in a 1906 review of *Il piacere*, we can even notice the positive significance, the reviewer’s ambivalent wavering between the aesthetic and the moral perspective (both rejected in 1908), ““*Il piacere*” di Gabriele D’Annunzio,” in *La melodia* 172-3: “Andrea Sp[erelli] is the poet and the artist of form; of music […] the harmonious voluptuousness […]. But if we look beyond the outward magnificence […] from the moral and social point of view, when *Il piacere* proclaims the absolute dream of personal egoism […], and preaches the religion of satisfying any unbridled instinct, it is a despicable work.”
It is precisely the need for a dialectical confrontation between the individual and society that breaks down the aesthetic perspective, contextualizing it in terms of an illusionistic, and abstract, evasion, which can only be sustained by eliminating the tragic juxtaposition with the environment in which the individual is determined. It is understandable how “experiencing D’Annunzio” like this was radically different from how this was being done by the intellectuals in Florence (i.e. in terms of the philosophical insufficiency of aestheticism compared to the new European trends being introduced in Italy), because in this manner the Dannunzian perspective, precisely because it was sublimating, was ultimately viewed against the backdrop of a concealed ideological relationship with the social structure, both because of its (organic) connection with the new commercial spirit attested by the nascent industrialism, and because it gave the petite bourgeoisie, whether or not intellectual, a compensatory, aesthetics-based model for rebuilding, in the new horizon of the Metropolis, the space of a Nature uncontrolled by the social conventions of the city, a space where the individual could continue to be ‘freely’ determined. Even more interesting is that through this dialectical relationship with the Dannunzian perspective, Michelstaedter, rejecting ‘his’ Nietzsche along with D’Annunzio, could distance himself from the features of a Nietzschean model that was far more dangerous than the superman model which “fails to make a clear choice between civilization and nature,” (Pieri: Scienza del tragico 71) the model relating to the ‘philosophy of life’ and exalting the importance of the ‘detail’ as the pulsating, becoming, center of meaning:

Out there life is clamoring. […] I ask, with the anguish of one who sees the ground he stands on being destroyed, why can I too not abandon myself to the wild impetus of life […]. Thus, I believe, spoke one day a Germanic Zarathustra, who was also beastly tawny. And from him come all the more or less tawny beasts that since then began to infest the world. […] and in these acts saw the meaning not only of that primal life, but also of the universal intuition which according to the master was

\[^{224}\text{Cf. Michelstaedter: “Stelio Effrena,” in Cerruti: Michelstaedter 246: “So you live age by age, day by day, moment by moment, unworried about what first you loved and now must hate, about what first you vowed and now must forget, for the artistic work of your soul integrates the elements of every single aspect, with a work of art complete in all its parts.”}\]
inherent in it. So that their every act became pregnant with meaning (in *Dialogo della salute e altri scritti* 185-7).²²⁵

The “understanding of the perpetual flow of things that teaches us to enjoy things in the moment that never returns,” (48) which the interlocutor Nino will express in the future *Dialogo della salute*, will be for Michelstaedter the point where life, always lacking of itself in ‘need,’ will be forced to ask to consist in the reification of an alienated social ‘foundation’ which, from single individuals, will seek its objectivity in the *Gestell*, thereby continuing to support the rationality of the sad regime of ‘time’ that it conceals in that objectivity, in the from of an immobility immortalized – wrote one of Michelstaedter’s teachers (De Sarlo) referring to Bergson – in the image of movement.

But we are still in 1906. Michelstaedter has enrolled at the *Istituto per gli Studi Superiori* and is living a student’s life. He did not have Slataper’s fortune of being introduced into the world of militant culture led by the Dioscuri Papini and Prezzolini. Attending the lessons of the Kantian Tocco, of De Sarlo, Vitelli (on Sophocles’ *Antigone*), Mazzoni, he would approach that world only marginally when making the acquaintance of the musicologist Bastianelli at the end of 1907.²²⁶ He also makes friends with two budding philosophers, Gaetano Chiavacci and Vladimiro Arangio-Ruiz, and writes his first organic text, a term paper on *Lessing e Baretti*, in which, while admitting a certain historicism in artistic techniques (“Technique is therefore subject to historical development, to the circumstances of time and place,” *Scritti scolastici* 3), he continues to maintain the purely organic and unitary (non-temporal) nature of the concepts of art and philosophy.²²⁷ Yet precisely thanks to Lessing (who had been one of the first to realize the historical failure of the great Enlightenment/Kantian project for natural religion/reason), he takes a step that will

²²⁵ Michelstaedter: “Di fuori la vita rumoreggia” (November 27, 1908).
²²⁶ In 1922, Bastianelli, who would commit suicide in Tunis in 1927, wrote an article entitled “Rievocazione di Carlo Michelstaedter,” published in *Il Resto del Carlino*, in which he pointed out that Michelstaedter’s attention was directed at the realm of human alienation, and later chose as the title for his unfinished book (*Il nuovo dio della musica*) the phrase that Michelstaedter had used as the opening quotation for his *Appendici critiche*: “Using words, a war on words.”
²²⁷ Cf. *Scritti scolastici* 19: “the philosophical spirit that coordinates and connects all ideas […], makes them into a complete, harmonious whole, which extracts from every single case the law, and by adding this to all its preconceived system manages to give those brilliant explanations that seem so miraculous.”
prove decisive: “The argument that settles the matter once and for all and that was first put forth by Lessing is that unity [is] a natural consequence of the Greek spirit” (Scritti scolastici 8). In other words, Greece (in particular the Greece of Sophocles and Socrates) begins to be seen as a world alien to the reified structure of consciousness, a natural-structured society that can be referred to, ideologically, as an experience of “uniformity between thought and life”\(^{228}\) (in La melodia 209) that can be opposed to a society experienced in the form of abstract thought reifying into theory, into a ‘second nature,’ the individual consciousness oppressed by the rationalized contingency of the need/will:

In order for my eyes to see […] it is necessary that they be not the eyes of hunger, of sleep, of lust, the eyes of whatever mocks my will, but of a consciousness greater than my will and directed at what can sate me more lastingly (that plants my hopes on solid ground) (Scritti vari 719).

Michelstaedter expands his analysis in two directions. On the one hand he proposes the reactivation of the forms of artistic tragedy along a romantic line which in the following year – having abandoned the Dannunzian model – will be given contemporary form by the works of Tolstoy and Ibsen:

Ibsen wants man to learn how to break the circle of lies that surrounds him, to learn to want the truth […]; he must fight the falsehood inside him and teach his will to fight. […] Tolstoy does not want fight from man, but devotion – man must learn to resist the enticements of society, which he considers based on falseness and arrogance; man must pull out and abandon the whole system of life (in La melodia 211).\(^{229}\)

On the other hand, and just as he is shaping this idea of tragedy as an antagonistic/moral instance (following a path not unlike Lukács’ in The Metaphysics of Tragedy: the representation of the essentiality of Conflict as the sole form of Totality), he begins to develop, clearly following Schopenhauer’s idea of “will” – which becomes the keyword of

\(^{228}\) Michelstaedter: “Tolstoi” [sic] (September 18, 1908).
\(^{229}\) Carlo Michelstaedter, “Tolstoi.”

It seems clear that Michelstaedter would find, especially in Ibsen, the antithesis between society as a ‘system of falsehood’ and the individual projected toward the principle of authenticity.

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Michelstaedter’s reflections – his analysis of the ideological structures of the social mechanism that relate to the will. This is the point where Michelstaedter, through Schopenhauer’s analysis of the concepts of ‘time’ and ‘will,’ experiences the Krise (after experiencing the dialectical confrontation with society) as the ontological break-out of the Grund in the perspective of temporality expressed as the inane repetition of the mechanism of ‘willing’ that excludes the self-sufficiency of Being: a condition of ontological precariousness that on the ideological level is expressed as reference to the inauthenticity of the social structure and its contradictions, therefore as a contrast between Kultur and Zivilisation, which becomes the conceptual expression of time. Michelstaedter’s response, at this time, follows the romantic scheme of the symbolic value (the lost image of unity) that tragedy expresses as the form of Conflict; his response, already going beyond Schopenhauer, comes in the form of an ‘aesthetic principle’ that, while romantically acknowledging the disintegration of the ‘full’ sense of life in the social mechanism (Ibsen and Tolstoy […] faced up to this society drowning in lies shouting: truth! truth!, in La melodia 212), activates an artistic experience that ‘recreates’ the world, again, as a device of thought in which the lost organicity finds a new voice, thus reiterating the objectivity of its limitations. But the time has come for intellectuals to acknowledge the betrayal of their class as regards the qualitative values which it had hoped to express as humanism, defining those values (this will be a key point) in terms of ‘utility:

Let us look around: – on every side we see the multitude of «those who made it», who are on the «high road that leads – as Tolstoy says – to certain profit», […] of which the purpose in life is life itself […] we live in a world of corpses; corpses that eat, drink, sleep, and talk, but that nonetheless are still corpses […]. All of Leo Tolstoy’s life is a slow, laborious evolution of man crowded by class principles,

230 Michelstaedter was likely introduced to Schopenhauer by his friend Enrico Mreule during the last year of school. Particularly significant is that, right at the end of 1907, Michelstaedter wrote to Croce offering to do German-Italian translations for the publisher Laterza (the Italian translation of The World as Will and Representation, by Paolo Savj-Lopez and Giovanni De Lorenzo, would be published between 1914 and 1916). To indicate the persisting interest for Schopenhauer among the group of Florentine friends we can mention the publication, edited by Arangio-Ruiz (1915), of Nietzsche’s third Untimely Meditation, which deals specifically with Schopenhauer.

231 Cf. Michelstaedter: “La catarsi tragica,” in La melodia 51: “any essential definition of tragedy is a definition of art itself.”
surrounded by mundane temptations and attractions of all kinds (in La melodia 208-9).

What Michelstaedter outlines for Professor Vitelli (October 1907) in Il coro nella teoria e in alcune sue forme originali in Italia is therefore the attempted historicization of the tragic emergency which, contemplating the plenum of the Sophoclean moment, describes its ‘fall,’ both in the symbolic microcosm of the classical world (Sophocles-Euripides-Horace) and in the broader context of the romantic and Modernist cultural structure, with respect to which Sophocles (and then Ibsen) expresses the lost moment of the reactivation of Kultur beyond the “anarchy of light and dark” that makes of the ‘social’ the figure of ambiguity: the moment when the heroic experience told by tragedy comes into contrast with the negative pole of society from which it has separated. The transition from a real social organicity – the one experienced in the ‘form of Conflict’ between the chorus and the Sophoclean hero – to the psychological disaggregation of the Euripidean context, in which it is psychology itself that expresses the disaggregation and “every man is his own chorus” (Scritti scolastici 56) (atomization), brings to light the emerging of individualistic consciousness as the moment of social destructuring, a moment that, in the form of a hero whose ‘reflection’ surpasses action (‘humor’), in the form, that is, of reference to a past and future time (memory and

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232 Michelstaedter: “Tolstoi.”
233 Michelstaedter: letter to his sister Emma dated April 8, 1908, in Epistolario 308: “In those days I read almost all Ibsen. That was a man, by God! He made me think hard, and still does. Apart from Sophocles, he is the artist that has grasped and engrossed me the most.”
234 Cf. Michelstaedter: “Il coro nella teoria e in alcune sue forme originali in Italia,” in Scritti scolastici 124: “Perhaps that is what Sophocles meant when he said he considered men as they should be, […] drawn out of dull, real life, where things are all overlapping one another […], provided with all the features that contribute to give universal, ideal truth to the sentiment that drives them, without any overlapping.”
235 Cf. Michelstaedter: “Il coro nella teoria e in alcune sue forme originali in Italia,” in Scritti scolastici 122-3: “Sophoclean tragedy. Then harmony becomes moral harmony, equilibrium, balance of principles, of passions. And the knowledge of these becomes the factor of fear and compassion. […] removes them from the contingency of the moment to speak generally, to tell of their value and absolute power […]. The voice of the chorus, rising from the depths of all social forces thunders of menace and speaks of compassion, giving the justification of every passion, the sense of its power […] into which passions must revert, hence the necessity of a catastrophe. It does not soothe, it does not mitigate the impression of the action, but rather intensifies its hues and makes more evident the tragic clash between the need for a single passion and the need for moral balance, which must be rebuilt through the catastrophe.”
236 Cf. Michelstaedter: “Il coro nella teoria e in alcune sue forme originali in Italia,” in Scritti scolastici 128-9: “Euripides’ tragedies deal with individual organisms that carry within themselves the contrast of differing urges, the agony of doubt, that bear tragic conflict and catastrophe; harmony is no longer to be found in the environment, but in the heart […] psychological tragedy […]. Because in everyday life men do not have an ultimate goal that cannot be surrendered at the cost of life, but if they do have an exaggerated passion there are other effects by which it is neutralized.”

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anticipation) that muddles up the present, shatters the ‘will’ in the countless streams of contingency (of ‘possibility’) that ‘reflection’ is able to express,\(^{237}\) in a dispersion that is the triumph of the ‘particular’ and of the multiple. At this point Michelstaedter could still come under a ‘formalist’ perspective placing the utopia in an ethical framework in which the tragic conclusion appears as the reconciliation of meaning and life. Yet, it’s the next step that gives us an idea of how his perspective would develop in the future. In fact, contingency is not directly followed by ‘dispersion,’ but by morality; this, however, was not the ‘community’ morality of the Sophoclean chorus now expressed by the ‘form of Conflict,’ but the morality of single isolated individuals who justify their material wills as an adaptation to that which on the ethical level is expressed by a chorus become society (the \textit{Krisis} is linked to what ‘rationalizes’ it, and related to the social structure):

They stand before the chorus […] but in it they find not the infinite contingency of reality, but rather the ideal form of consciousness that comes from the people, and from which they repeat their origin. […] The material interest of the people considered as an entity is none other than moral interest, its selfishness is love of justice, whatever is good for it is good, whatever is bad for it is evil. […] A multitude of people becomes a society precisely by associating the interests of individuals, assuming as a canon of social defense that which formerly was a criterion of individual defense: thus personal selfishness become justice, what was bad for the individual becomes evil in general. […] every infringement to its moral laws is personal damage to this collective entity […], while for the aggregate it is a material condition of existence, for the individual mind it is a moral principle [… the chorus […] only invokes the triumph of laws for the laws, only the good of the city (\textit{Scritti scolastici} 124-6).

In Euripides’ mechanism (which is clearly the time of modernity) even will, and this is the point, is individualized – “\textit{the will is at every point a will for determinate things}” (\textit{Persuasion} 15), it cannot be expressed as a noumenal structure of reality, it cannot be assumed as the metaphysical principle of the \textit{Wille}, if not as an abstraction of that “determinate will;” it can appear only as ‘power,’ which the isolated subject expresses as a temporal relationship with an object, as a momentary (hence fictitious) attribution of value which in the act of \textit{willing}

\(^{237}\) Cf. \textit{Scritti scolastici} 51: “When man pauses in his action there sets in «reflection»: his position with regard to the past, his position with regard to the future […]. All of life is exhausted in these two elements. From their infinite combinations come the infinite sides of life.”
believes he can be definitely determined (what Michelstaedter calls “direct mode”). The will express the theoretical point of view of specialization:

And as it is deprived by time of consisting at every point […]. There is no possession of any thing—only changing with regard to a thing, entering into a relation to a thing. Each thing has inasmuch as it is had. Determinacy is an attribution of value: consciousness. Each thing at every point does not possess but is the will for determinate possession: that is, a determinate attribution of value: a determinate consciousness. At that point of the present when it enters into a relation with a given thing, it believes it is in the act of possession, but it is only a finite potenza, ‘power,’ ‘potency’ […]. We isolate a single determination of the will, for example, the stomach of a body, as if it lived for its own self: the stomach is all hunger, the attribution of value to food, the consciousness of the world insofar as it is edible. […] when two substances combine chemically, each satisfying the determinacy of the other, each departs from its nature, altered in reciprocal absorption. (Persuasion 15-7).

This is the system that Michelstaedter will define as ‘correlativity:’ a multiplicity of wills that mutually determine each other in an infinite system of relationships where what appears as ‘possession,’ as determination of value, is only the momentary (temporal) relationship established by the will itself.238 Then reality will be “the sum of willed things” (Scritti vari 759), which tirelessly redetermine themselves as ‘value’ since the willed object becomes, for the subject and for the duration of his willing, the whole of his reality.239

But Michelstaedter realizes that explaining the problem in its logical terms and then stopping at that is an integral part of the problem itself, because it corresponds to the determination of ‘sufficiency’ that purports to subsume reality in a theoretical space (e.g. the metaphysical principle of the Wille) that presents the same reified structure of the mechanism of the “determinate will.” In other words, it is not a matter of rejecting Schopenhauer240 because of the metaphysics implicit in his system (this is the ‘pluralist’ point of view: the

238 Cf. Michelstaedter: Parmenide ed Eraclito, Empedocle 40: “Men attribute essence to things as they see them and insofar as they are in relationship with them, insofar as they need them.”
239 Cf. Michelstaedter: Parmenide ed Eraclito 52: “The illusory reality, the shape of individual things changes appearance in the same manner as when mixing incense. Each time it is called according to individual necessities.”
Cf. Michelstaedter: letter to his sister Paula dated May 5, 1909, in Epistolario 368: “A flask lives only in its desire for wine.” This is exactly the same metaphor that in his main work will be, more elegantly, attributed to a weight’s desire to drop.
240 Highly significant, in this sense, is the fact that Schopenhauer is not included among the great ‘persuaded men’ mentioned at the beginning of Persuasion.
view that Papini adheres to in *Il crepuscolo dei filosofi*), since using the will as an
epiphenomenological picklock for a cognitive analysis which in that ‘form’ re-presents a reconciled
(albeit pessimistically) reality means providing a theoretical justification to the motif of
‘deficiency’ (the constant willing in time) that the “determinate will” continually reiterates:

Life is will to live, will is deficiency, deficiency is pain, every life is pain. But every
creature that lives believes it is alive and that it has life; and for every creature pain is
always mute and continuous so that it does not call it pain – but it calls pain the
revelations of non existence of its believed possession, the loss of what it thought it
possessed. So even its pain is called according to its own illusion […] It laments the
loss of the thing, not its losability: the unreality of possession. And in order to live it
turns to new things […] But whoever really wants life refuses to live in relation to
those things […] he wants true possession, so in him takes shape and unfolds the
mute, obscure suffering of all things. His life is refusal and fight against all the
temptations of illusory satisfactions (in *La melodia* 115-6).²⁴¹

The experience of ‘quiet’ which in Schopenhauer is expressed as *noluntas* [non-will], as a
space alien to the lacerations of empirical life, is characterized in Michelstaedter not simply
as a consolatory myth, but as the reiteration of the precondition for separating life and thought
(the subject’s will in ‘time’ is rationalized in the forms that the ‘chorus’ expresses as value),
attributing to the former the ‘stable’ features of the latter that allow its stabilization: the
reification of the abstract structure. In Euripides’ world there is no place for “a healthy
individual who is one thing, not two” (*Scritti scolastici* 55) – his life and his thought –
because the epistemological destructuring (the end of the organic community) requires
doubling the empirical instance in the abstract ‘form’ of *theorein*, a form that the new
‘chorus’ (society) can convey (and we will see how) both in the aspects of Becoming (the
vanity of the world, the delight of the ‘flow,’ etc.) and in the ethical aspects of *ought-to-be,*
which become the forms in which society itself is expressed (science, art, philosophy, etc.)
inasmuch as separation of theory and practice, inasmuch as abstract determination, in the
sphere of knowledge, of a determinate will therein ‘usefully’ acknowledged as stable:

²⁴¹ Michelstaedter: “Pessimista è l’imperfetto pessimista.”
But wherein lies the reason for the beauty of a gesture? Evidently within a stronger beam in which the personality is better revealed. At the bottom of this work of art is the criterion of the value of the personality – the moral criterion … whenever an individual envisages a moral perfection or senses an artistic harmony he gives shape – to the extent allowed by his personal capacities – to the aspiration for truth found in every man: his interest is a universal interest … it is a good act … But you might object: if we examine this man’s moral view we will find that it has the form made necessary and defined by the place he occupies in life: it is the result of his particular interests … so the interest is the interest of utilitarianistically coordinating the various elements of his nature (in La melodia 48-9). 242

Even if the way of ethics proves to be an illusion (ethics being merely the morality best ‘instrumentally’ suited to find the fictitious point of stability that society, ‘correlativized’ with reality, offers under the form of knowledge ), then the structure of tragedy will have to be experienced in the much more material flame of ideologies. Thus the road to theoretical reconciliation is barred, because any theoretical reconciliation would reproduce the fictitious conjunction between universal and particular, the rationalization of the determinate will:

…

to establish as the imperative for modern man the freedom of man in nature: that is your heroic philosophy and morality. […] Freedom? What is the freedom of man in nature? It is the freedom that all parts of the universe have, because they live in accordance with their own law without realizing it. […] Then where is the freedom of man? It’s in his thought, by God! […] going through every degree of humanity up to universality, it achieves the contemplation of eternity. […] To know: to know oneself and in oneself the universe: to reason out the universe and give it a name. […] They say: in moments of grace one communicates with things, one perceives them in their true being […]. Not so. This communication and this interest is another fiction of man’s spirit of self-preservation that one can never get rid of. […] So then, what does this contemplation and domination of the infinite come down to? To «reasoning». And this was perfectly pointed out by Kant, that proletarian of philosophy […]. This should be freedom? or is freedom in the pictures that the arts make of you, complacent of these powers of yours? […] The flood of sounds that symphonies pour over you titillate the ear and the soul, […] for this final fiction of our egoism? (in La melodia 187-8). 243

It’s not a matter of choosing between Stirner or Kant, Nietzsche or Weininger: Michelstaedter realizes that both perspectives can work only if put together. The world of social disruption, the system of correlativity that atomizes individuals into desiring mechanisms and keeps them

242 Michelstaedter: “Il coraggio” (autumn of 1908).
243 Michelstaedter: “Di fuori la vita rumoreggia” (November 27, 1908).
Cf. Michelstaedter: “L’individualità illusoria,” in Scritti vari 745: “Nature gives us pleasure because it is there immobile, existing outside of us; and through it we pretend our own existence. […] Art lends us an individuality.”
in constant conditions of accidentality, is the Euripidean cosmos of disintegration and violence (the will that has to satisfy a need – what for a man is temporarily all of reality – can obviously clash with the will of another), yet the unrealized ‘organic’ connection of individual consciousness with collective consciousness cannot lead to the absence of social ‘systematicity,’ but only to an instrumental systematicity that calls to itself that individuality as the ‘sum’ of partial mechanisms, which are directed, through theory (through the separation of life and knowledge) to a forced unification that at the same time mystifies social morality as individual morality and in contrast presents the relativity of individuals as an abstract form of quiet, i.e. as a ‘categorization’ of Being, categorized being. The freedom of the individual is merely the constantly relative form of his need, but his ethical perspective is the manner in which he adapts the satisfaction of that need to a pre-existing social system:

is not being but becoming, […] in every moment in time there is the predetermination of future existing relations […], the concatenation of causes over time – has no goal […]. But the aggregate seems free only because we see each element contribute organically to the continuation of the whole (whereby we accord it an individual essence) the whole […] is the sum of their necessities […]. He predicts, calculates, and subordinates his needs to a rule of life so that his actions do not appear to be driven by these needs but by his free will towards an absolute goal. […] But when this realization is replaced by the particular realization of individual goals, then the concept of goal is pure abstraction, because we are not talking about a goal but of an each-time goal, and the form is nothing more than the sum of the material itself, the sum of the necessities (Sfugge la vita 168-71).

So it is the System itself (the System that relativism attacks as separate from reality) that becomes the expression of relativism, the relativism of individual necessities that are abstracted, socially, in the ‘words’ with which society elevates them to universal values (morality, progress, freedom, art, and so on): crystallizing them not as forms of metaphysical thought, which must be destroyed by life, but as reified thought drawing its forms from that same relativized life – life alienated by the pattern of will/need of individuals that are both

244 Cf. Michelstaedter: letter to Iolanda De Blasi dated April 25, 1907, in Epistolario 202: “Stirner – the sad philosopher of anarchy, […] and he cannot imagine that man bows to those fixed ideas not because constrained by anything outside of him, but because he loves them. […] perpetual reason for life, perpetual necessity that finds expression in ourselves.”
isolated and interrelated as one another’s instruments. That model of reality, however, will still be the reality created by need expressed through correlativity, but now, abstracted in the forms of thought (fictitiously separated from the contingency of life), it will be experienced as value. So this is not about Becoming overwhelming the Machian “conceptual monsters” of objectivity: objectivity is monstrous because it contains the becoming within itself, because it is the abstraction of becoming.

VIII. Need and Form

We are now in 1908, and in April Michelstaedter attends a conference on education held by Sighele, from which he draws a series of reflections that will form one of the cores of his future work:

>a child [...]. His fantastic power is closely related to this isolating capacity that makes of every act and every moment a little world in itself [...]; in the satisfaction of his every momentary desire the child sees the absolutely necessary postulate of his happiness and wellbeing [...]. The transition from child to man is but the development of his «capacity» for desire [...]. As a child grows into a man, so grows his ability to understand the value of things that are far to come as if they were actually present, and to appreciate their «ideal» value. [...] every act acquires a certain meaning which is its moral value. [...] thus the ideal value of every act is essentially its «moral» value. This is of course the extreme limit; it is the conceptual man, the homunculus of ethics (Scritti vari 638-9).

At the same time, while Florence begins to seem to him a place of ‘inauthentic’ life (hence certain ‘regressive’ reflections on a lost pre-industrial civilization), Michelstaedter begins to develop a Kierkegaardian-style theory of melancholy that,

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246 Michelstaedter: “Sull’educazione del fanciullo (a proposito di una conferenza tenuta da Scipio Sighele a Firenze l’8 aprile 1908).”
247 Cf. Michelstaedter: letter to his family dated February 29, 1908, in Epistolario 292-3: “tram drivers’ strike. [...] certain old stagecoaches [...] the horses [...]. Besides, the city is more uniform this way [...]. I like it much more like this.” But these reflections by no means constitute the conclusions of Michelstaedter’s philosophy.
248 It is unlikely that Michelstaedter had read Kierkegaard, but he may have been introduced to him indirectly through Ibsen. More generally, however, we can say that the Danish philosopher’s speculation on melancholy represents one of the cornerstones of modernity.
analyzed a year later in the empirical mechanism of the will, will become one of the pivots of his major work under the less abstract term of “deficiency:”

the lack of purpose of things […] they represented a purpose, they were the content of an illusion. Over these things time has passed; it took pleasure at spoiling them, to show that they were just an illusion. […] accumulators of activities and illusions that are all the products of human work (inasmuch as they are the purposes feigned by illusion, or have served to that end). Drawn out of their vital point – the point where they were connected to a man’s illusion or to a larger network of illusions – they reveal their vanity. […] they reveal with uncommon effectiveness the vanity of all forms of human activity, it’s a small tear on the «veil of Maya» – then life resumes its course (in La melodia 77-8).

Melancholy is the ability to see the world as ruin, not simply the inability to aim at a goal, but the place of an ontological groundlessness which, by revealing the illusory nature of the relationship expressed by the subject on the object, reveals the insubstantiality of the subject himself – a subject that in that relationship expressed in the form of will (direct mode), had placed in the object his own ontological subsistence fictitiously outside the temporality of the relationship:

Melancholy and boredom, which men localize in things as if there were melancholic or boring things, are the same terror of the infinite, when the weave of illusion is in some manner interrupted […]. Pain of loss, of a determinate injury […], is rather terror at the revelation of the impotency of one’s own illusion […]. And once the voice of pleasure, which tells it you are, is interrupted, it senses only the dull, painful murmur, now made distinct, which says: you are not (Persuasion 29-32).

Melancholy is the broadest analogical symptom that reverberates from the ‘pain’ expressed in the particular relationship if the latter is not perceived as sufficiency, if it

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249 Michelstaedter: “La malinconia.”
250 Cf. Michelstaedter: letter to Gaetano Chiavacci dated August 4, 1908, in Epistolario 330-1: “If I had to write a diary for this month you would read something curious: – A story of vague, diverse impressions, of disconnected feelings, of faraway thoughts, of observation and study of the most distant things: the result is that I’m feeling… I mean I’m not feeling […]. My mind is like a rolling sea that reflects every light […] but the bottom remains torpid and dark and ignores the strength and the form of its life. […] the consciousness of my insignificance in this world that lives of actions and thoughts, as well as art; of my life dissolving in the expectation of what? in the illusion of a gradual process of formation that does not exist.”
reveals its evolving nature, placing the subject, who had felt ‘stable’ in that relationship, once again at the mercy of chance, exposed to the accidents of life that cancel the ontological illusion because unable to bring to fruition the desiring mechanism of the will. Society, which functions not as an organic whole but as an aggregate of partial desiring systems, is clearly unable to shield these systems from the unceasing blows of accidentality, so they are constantly undergoing a violation of the ontological form of their existence – a form which they experience, on each occasion, in the partial view illuminated by their will: “Just as every individual existence means the negation of all the rest, so every thought of the individual exists only insofar as it negates the thoughts of others […], killing for its own benefit the life of other centers (inasmuch as they are centers, in Dialogo della salute e altri scritti 197). The violence that can be produced by these relative systems in contrast with one another must then be subsumed in a perfectible cultural code (rhetoric, in its various forms) in which the will can always be found as an abstract, ‘socialized’ form of itself (and this is called “connective mode”). This line of thought had already appeared in embryo in a letter of 1907, and Michelstaedter further develops it in his final term paper (June 1908), from the “crack” in the mechanisms of linguistic eloquence expressed by the semantic nuclei “persuasion” and “rhetoric”:

requires taking into account the contingent (practical, historical) interest of the matter: the interest it has for the subject being addressed by the speaker. […] it does not ask that accidental subject the profound universal essence of the matter but wants

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251 Michelstaedter: “Delle particelle avversative.”
252 Cf. Michelstaedter: letter to his family dated June 14, 1907, in Epistolario 230: “When this absoluteness of things is inside him, he can project it as universal over everybody else. And then, again, this alone is his law, and not instead an abstract good outside of him, which, having no abstract existence since it is an empirical given, would have him refer the control of his actions to the opinions of others, or to written law. And then he would not do good because he would feel that he could do nothing but good, but he would do so in obeisance to the opinions of others, and for fear of the law.”
253 Cf. Michelstaedter: letter to Gaetano Chiavacci dated February 1, 1909, in Epistolario 350: “Through the crack of rhetoric I have contemplated much more interesting things – bitterly interesting.”
to put the issue in a favorable light before whatever moral or material criterion is prevalent in the subject. […] it is the science of ordering the representation of the state of things so to be able to apply to them the terms of a formula that already exists in the code (or mentality, or system of interests) to which the speaker is appealing – […] a result having undisputed value for the subject and achieving the outcome desired by the speaker […]. That science […] is the certain knowledge of the conditions of the moment, the perfect knowledge of the subject and of what has value for him (Scritti scolastici 189-91).

As Giorgio Colli wrote: “in dialectics the struggle was for knowledge; in rhetoric the struggle is for knowledge aimed at power” (102): the capacity of rhetoric becomes the ability to penetrate into the rift that has opened in the relationship between truth and subject (Modernism), and to tie down the contingency that the subject expresses as will and lives as a “rational resolution,” in Scritti vari 689)254 – as value that lets the will appear as meaning (that same value that simulates for the subject, in his relation with the object, an absolute self) to what the speaker finds in his ‘code,’ a code that has already categorized the truth in abstract entities, in the abstract orders of knowledge, i.e. in the characteristic modes of relativity expressed as abstraction.

Rhetoric has the task of organizing that will in the environment so that the subject may identify in the modes of rhetoric, in its categorization of reality, the form most suitable for his subsistence, for his ‘continuation’ (the most ‘secure’ stabilization of the constantly unstable “direct mode”). Rhetoric organizes becoming and calls it Being: through knowledge (language, science, philosophy) an individual who lives the correlativity of contingency places himself outside himself as a ‘well-grounded’ subject, and is ‘reflected’ in the security allowed by the categorization of contingency, which he interprets as objectivity: “[Common man] finds all he needs in an established form, he believes that he knows life when he has learned the norms of this form and obtains without danger what he needs. – He is a slave of contingencies […].

254 Michelstaedter: “La trascendenza in Platone e Aristotele.”
all he knows is that he wants this and this, and that his security depends on this form” (Sfugge la vita 158).

The ontological fragmentation of a Being that, according to the well-known definition of Aristotelian Metaphysics, is expressed in a manifold way, becomes the fulcrum whence Michelstaedter (who by now has decided to write his dissertation on the concepts of “persuasion” and “rhetoric” in Plato and Aristotle) proceeds to analyze the modernist assumption of temporality in the framework of a will\textsuperscript{255} that, always expressing itself as ‘power,’\textsuperscript{256} determines in a ‘deficient’ manner the ontological consistency of a subject\textsuperscript{257} which, on the one hand, is himself the object of other subjects (a thing among things: hence the accidentality of neikos to which we shall shortly return) and, on the other, in that relationship with the object, pretends to be an absolute subject by splitting in two, i.e. recognizing himself stable not at the present moment of the relationship but in the terms of past and future (memory and foresight) that stabilize that relationship ‘outside life,’ thereby reducing the possibility (the ‘risk’) of recognizing himself as ‘deficient’:

He finds this sweet taste in each thing, which he feels as his own because it is useful for his continuation, and in each affirming himself with its potency, he draws from it the flattery “You are.” So that, time after time, in the presentness of his affirmation, he feels superior to the present moment and to the relation belonging to it; […] he always feels the same amid diverse times and things: he says, “I am.” And at the same time his things, which surround him and await his future, are the only reality, absolute and indisputable […]. He does not say, “This is for me” but “This is”; he does not say, “I like this” but “It’s good,” because in fact the I for whom the thing is or is good is his consciousness, his pleasure, his presentness, which for him is fixed, absolute, outside time. […] his presentness in pleasure (or displeasure) has organized

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\item \textsuperscript{255} Cf. Michelstaedter: Persuasion 14-5: “Life would be if time did not constantly distance its being into the next instant. […] so that it transforms itself without respite in varied desiring.”
\item \textsuperscript{256} Cf. Michelstaedter: “La filosofia domanda il valore delle cose,” in La melodia 97: “if this power that wanting-to-be is could really be, experience should have an absolute value outside time and space, outside will and life […]. And if it were absolute it would have no need for experience to become so. That is, the I should not be a power but a being.”
\item \textsuperscript{257} Cf. De Sarlo: Il concetto dell’anima 8-9: “The I always appears as a compound, a node of relationships, changing with the many circumstances by which it is conditioned, susceptible to alteration, to splitting […]. The subject conceived as a substance should imply something more than single mental facts, it should be permanent.”
\end{enumerate}
the foresight of what is suitable to the organism’s continuation, which creates from afar the future proximity necessary to the future affirmation. For this reason things are not indifferent but subject to judgment with regard to an end. This end, which is in his consciousness, is indisputable to him, fixed [...]. What he does is not random but certain and reasonably subordinate to the end. Just as he says, “I am,” so he says, “I know what I do because I do it; I don’t act by chance but with full consciousness and persuasion.” Thus does what lives persuade itself that whatever life it lives is life (Persuasion 22-3).

The consciousness of the subject so determined is only the ‘limited’ satisfaction of the deficiency that the will expresses, it is “the inadequate affirmation of individuality” (Sfugge la life 134) (“illusion of persuasion”) that crystallizes the contingency of the relationship (which is expressed as the will for ‘pleasure’ and self-preservation) feigning an absolute subject in what, by satisfying the subject’s ‘needs,’ appears to him as absolute reality, containing in itself (as supratemporal meaning) his whole persona.258 The world will then be represented according to the will, subject to time, of each single individual, and consciousness will be no more than the expression of the subject’s state of need:

The world of each is the world; and that world’s value is the correlative of its valency […]. His certain end, his reason for being, the sense that each act has for him, again are nothing but his self-continuation. […] is non other than the will of himself in the future […]. But while lacking himself in the present he wills himself in the future—which he cannot do but along the way of singular determinations organized so as to make him continue wanting in such a manner in the future. He circles around the way of singular needs and escapes himself always. He cannot possess himself, have reason for himself, inasmuch as it is necessary for him to attribute value to his own persona, which is determined in things, and to the things he needs in order to continue. For by such things he is distracted in time along the way. […] And man, all while rejoicing in the affirmation, senses that this persona is not his, that he does not possess it. […] he senses other infinite wills, in the contingency of which the things inside his consciousness still find themselves and inside which his future is contained. […] he senses the flow of what is outside his power […]. The known (finite) weave of illusory individuality, where pleasure casts its light, is not so tight that the obscurity

258 Cf. Michelstaedter: “Dialogo della salute” (1910), in Dialogo della salute e altri dialoghi 44: “The organism is gradually determined in relation to different things – but in each determination is inherent the sense that it does not occur for itself but inasmuch as it is necessary for the continuation of the organism. This is the sweet taste that everything in life has […]. Inasmuch as something is pleasant, the whole person is therein involved. – And as it converges on that thing as its own, so it draws therefrom the illusion of individuality. What I like, what is useful to me: that is my conscience: that is my reality.”
of the (infinite) unknown does not penetrate. And his pleasure is contaminated by a
dull and continuous pain (Persuasion 23-5).

What the will expresses in the ‘inauthentic’ structures of ‘time’ and of the
‘relationship’ becomes for the subject what is ‘just,’ because that is all the subject
sees and the source of his illusory consisting (specialization): he considers as a whole
the limited space that his will illuminates. A different subject, equally prey to this
specializing vision, will do the same: for all of them, reality (which of course contains
all other men), considered under this form, becomes a set of usable ‘things,’ a set of
objects (means) to ‘attach’ to their perception in order to satisfy their ‘need’ and
thereby ontologically consist. “But the others want to talk and not listen, – and so they
all slaughter and contradict each other” (in Dialogo della salute e altri dialoghi 55)²⁵⁹:
the system of correlative flowing is not the expression of a relational eros,²⁶⁰ but the
neikos of a continuous attempted transgression driven by need/will, whereby
everyone, wanting to ‘continue’ (necessitating what to each is ‘useful’), affirms
himself with violence, reifying reality:

The flower sees the propagation of its pollen in the bee, while the bee sees sweet food
for its larvae in the flower. In the embrace of the two organisms each sees “itself as if
in a mirror” […]. Neither knows whether its affirmation coincides with the other’s or
whether conversely its affirmation deprives the other of the future—killing it; each
knows only that this is good for it and uses the other as a means to its own end,
material for its own life, while it is itself material for the other’s life. […] And when
coincidence does not provide for the continuation of both, when the cog of one large
or small gear does not fit into the cavities of another or vice versa, inimical violence
manifests itself. For where one affirms itself the other cannot, and if both do not
perish in the struggle, one must concede or succumb […] in the other’s eye he senses
the obscurity of a power that transcends him (Persuasion 32-3).

²⁵⁹ Michelstaedter: “Dialogo della salute.”
²⁶⁰ Cf. Marin: Gorizia 103: “Although he realized that it could be beautiful, Carlo did not love life. He did not love
it for its constant changing, for its continuous flowing without end. We flowed along with it, blissfully unaware,
and had no thought of pausing, of resisting, of reflecting.”
The movement which the *neikos* expresses as ‘need’ is determined as the epistemological willingness to use whatever is abstractly contained in reality (ability to exploit what reality makes available, including other men): a system of alienation and ‘exchange’ that Michelstaedter conceives in the (non-progressive) terms of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic understood as organization, as the law of the system of ‘accidental events’ that ensures the system’s continuation. Men, writes Michelstaedter, “contend for the security of being able to violate nature and make use of the accumulation of past labor,” (Persuasion 113) whoever wins the battle affirms his individuality, and forces the other, if he still wants to continue, to implant his own ontological consistency in the ‘duty’ (also abstract) serving the ‘needs’ of the master. In this sense, unlike in Hegel, master and slave integrate each other in a double mechanism of abstraction that ultimately coincides with the social structure itself, i.e. with the mechanism that is constantly redetermining, through rhetoric-knowledge, the modes in which individuals give satisfaction to their will. The condition of accidentality (violence) between men persists in its ‘inconsistency,’ in the ‘utilitarian’ mechanism that reifies everything through “the concern of pleasure” (thing among things), but this is disguised (to prevent the explosion of

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261 Cf. Persuasion 127-8: “I believe, the man who glanced into the mind of the average man would find there a truly strange and deformed image of the world and of men and himself […]. He would see there, for example, the taste of food and the odor and impression of taking in food, and the maker and seller of food, mixed all in a single complex of obscure dispositions; and in connection with this—if one were dealing with a clerk—another complex with paper façades, rows of calculations, tabulation surfaces […] while in the middle would be shadows of men, some without heads, others without legs (marks of recognition: legs, noses), some marked by a “yes,” others by a “no,” and the impression of a kiss or gnashing of teeth […] along with an infernal jumble of names, information, words, numbers […] But through the whole tangle he would see the pangs of insatiable hunger.”

262 As is known, Michelstaedter had read Hegel and also Marx, particularly focusing on the latter’s concepts of use value and exchange value. Campailla has suggested that his approach to Marx was probably initiated by the Russian revolutionary, Nadia Baraden. Cf. Il segreto di Nadia B.

263 Even the analysis of the “past labor” follows the Marxian interpretation of the phenomenon that leads to capitalist accumulation.

264 Cf. Michelstaedter: “Dialogo della salute,” in Dialogo della salute e altri dialoghi 38: “yours is what you hold dear, and you hold dear what in the future can satisfy a need of yours […]. Yours is what you can’t do without. But if you can’t do without certain things, you do not have them in your power: they have you, and you depend on them.”
uncontrolled violence/suffering that could lead to its destruction \(^\text{265}\) in the device of abstractions, which becomes the Law of that inconsistency and satisfies the needs through their constant redetermination aimed at producing increasingly similar needs:

Can you hear the voice of society? It’s like a tremendous buzzing – but if you set your ear to listen to individual sounds, you will hear voices of impatience, of excitement, voices of revelers without joy, of command without form […]. And if you look into their eyes, you will see […] the fear and anguish of the hunted beast […]. Can you hear the machine creaking at the seams? – But don’t worry – it won’t break down – that’s the way it works (in Dialogo della salute e altri dialghi 72-3). \(^\text{266}\)

In the other-than-oneself the subject presumes a false totality which he believes created by himself and reflecting himself, but which is only the abstraction of himself in a reified relationship with reality. Because that subject, which as we have seen is anything but a totality (it is the fictitiously ‘sufficient’ form of itself created by the will in its unstable relationship with things\(^\text{267}\)), always needs to give stability to this ‘possession,’ this relationship: because the experience by which the subject establishes himself is always precarious in the correlativity (in the neikos), always susceptible to the irruption of ‘pain,’ of the ontological insubstantiality that eludes the illusion of being persuaded. That is how Memory and Foresight (the fundaments of knowledge) come into play leading to the separation between the subject and his life and establishing a second nature: through memory the subject acknowledges the regularity of the system of relations and proclaims those relations as theory (through

\(^\text{265}\) A continuing rupture in the ontological illusion.
\(^\text{266}\) Michelstaedter: “Dialogo della salute.”
\(^\text{267}\) Cf. Michelstaedter: Parmenide ed Eraclito 47: “So does life seize man with all the strength of its whirlpools and drag him into the [.current:].”
Cf. Michelstaedter: “Dialogo tra l’adolescente e l’uomo,” in Dialogo della salute e altri dialghi 119: “the «I» that wants pleasure does not always want the same thing, but now one thing and now another […]. Then why call it the I and not the «I’s» if every time it is different?”
Memory he builds tools for grasping reality; through foresight, instead, the unstable will that the relationship with the object expresses – a will that can never fully satisfy the subject (but that lends him real ontological consistency), is eternalized (made secure) in the future as the eternal return of that will, as the analogical foresight of the re-occurring of the same need (and thus of the conditions necessary for its satisfaction, which must be preserved). Thus begins the conceptualization of reality: for the sake of ‘security’ men place themselves no longer in the self-deceiving self-affirmation of the object (“direct mode”), but in broader structures that, while still built based on the ‘deficiency’ that needs express, stand as ‘strictly’ alien to the subject and take, precisely, the form of ‘law,’ of ‘code’ (“connective mode”):

But how does this knowing affirm itself alongside the life […]? When man says, “this is,” he directly affirms his own persona, his own reality […]. When man says, “I know this is,” he affirms himself in the face of his own reality […] he places a real thing outside himself, he expresses the flavor that things have for him, his consciousness, his knowing—whichever it may be. […] When man says, “I know this is,” he “wants himself wanting”; he again affirms his persona in the face of an element of reality that is nothing but the affirmation of his very persona. He places his persona as real outside of himself in any affirmation (Persuasion 66-7).

IX. Second Nature

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268 Here we are poles apart from Weininger’s neo-Kantianism where memory is the ability of the individuality to rediscover itself beyond the ‘meaningless’ flow of relationships. The difference is that, in Michelstaedter, that individuality is dominated by need, and reacts to this by a wanting-to-be which means wanting-to-know (wanting to categorize reality). Individuality in Michelstaedter is expressed as ‘lacking’.

269 Cf. Michelstaedter: Persuasion 21-2: “for the self-affirmation of another determination: each contains the foresight of the others. The will feeds on the future in each empty present […]. An ox […]. The promised sweetness of the future, the determinations of other things, the foresight of the given future, all live in the present taste of the hay […]. Thus, as he moves in the turning of things that give him pleasure, man pivots on the fulcrum given […] and attends to his own continuation without troubling about it, because pleasure troubles the future for him.”

Cf. Michelstaedter: “Dialogo della salute,” in Dialogo della salute e altri dialoghi 39: “we are never in possession of our life, we expect it from the future, we look for it in the things we hold dear because they contain for us the future, and in the future we are again empty in every present time, and turn again avidly to our dear things to satisfy our insatiable hunger and still be wanting of everything.”
Among these nets that the subject casts on reality in order to consolidate it (thereby consolidating himself) a special place is obviously assigned to language. By speaking, the subject affirms his illusory individuality as absolute, beyond his will: “The limits of a speaker’s power are the limits of reality; this is not given as reality which exists for the speaker because he wants it so, but as absolute reality. […] every concept arbitrarily concluded. Because in what he says the subject feigns himself an absolute Subject. Everything that is said has a Subject who feigns himself absolute” (Appendice I 135). But take note: this does not mean that the limits of language are the limits of knowledge (as in Prezzolini).²⁷⁰ The limit inheres, on the one hand (direct mode), to the specializing presupposition that is enacted by the subject’s will (the world is what my will gives me as ‘useful’ to the satisfaction of my momentary need), and on the other (“connective mode”: the sphere of knowledge), to what increasingly directs the ‘needs’ of all society, in the rhetorical structures, towards the domestication and the ‘natural’ uniformity of those needs. The linguistic limitation is inherent in the structures of alienation.

“To persuade others I have to make my reality «reasonable» […]. And it happens that people blame the means of communication and the circumstances of isolation instead of the irrationality of their reality” (Scritti vari 742): it is not language that structures the world – it’s the world, the world that men have objectified against themselves, that structures a language that then gives form to reality. Michelstaedter’s linguistic analysis can then only tangentially be considered an episode of the great Viennese sprachkritik (having behind it the Nietzschean substrate of “words as hard as stones”). We are not dealing with the critique of language as a challenge to the rational/metaphysical structures that limit the capacity of language to express life; neither are we dealing with life “escaping” beyond the words of Törless, or with the impossibility, detected by Hofmannsthal, for language to contain a reality now expressed in a multiple and contradictory manner. The question is not to call attention to the crystallization of language pointing out its foundationalist/nihilist assumption, as does Prezzolini, nor, of

course, to analytically refute (like Vailati) the nominalistic confusions of language. Although
the starting point is similar (nihilism being the historical background), and consists in the
epistemological crisis of the instrument expressing the I-World relationship (of which a
material equivalent can be found, as Kraus, Kafka, and Benjamin would realize, in the
parallel development of the mechanical automatisms of the administrative-bureaucratic and
propagandistic structures: the press), the two roads that can derive from that linguistic
criticism (the acceptance of language as a convention/artifice or the search for a language
“beyond words”) are both barred to Michelstaedter, since both correspond to the usual
mechanism of perpetuating a form of societal security that is both created by man and
directed against him. They are, that is to say, the words spoken by ‘need’ implicitly
signifying the insufficiency of the relationship with the object; the words spoken by need both
in the direct mode and the connective mode:

It is a question of being satisfied. If one is sufficient to himself in the modes of life
offered by society, he can be satisfied by signifying conventional things for his
everyday use, in conventional modes, and abandoning himself to repeating without
understanding what others in such circumstances say as long as we have established the following: because linguistic perspective consists entirely in the depth
of present vision, the organic life of language that pulsates equally in every word and
combination of words dull and disintegrates—as a function of the individual human
life—when man’s organized foresight (individual security) is reduced by societal
security to a single point (Persuasion 134-5).

Language actually lends an appearance of substantiality to what is expressed in a relationship
in which the subject feigns himself absolute (i.e. he rationalizes the ‘specializing’ vision of

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271 Cf. Cacciari: Posthumous people 22-3: “Isn’t it possible to feel at home in this procedure? Precisely in this
interminable building up of certainty? What could be less paradoxical and more domestic than convention? […]
But why do we believe that this one, far from representing the fulfillment of liberation of language from
metaphysics, as its apologists claim, cheats with its own limits? […] does not lead to a happy and unstoppable
progress toward conquest and comprehension of the world […]. Nothing changes if we call the “search without
end” the solution, if we establish that it answers all possible or anticipated questions […], since its practice is
understood to be effective and it is the very idea of effect, of solution, that displaces that of substance: either the
particular substance of fact or the substance of the subject that comprises it. […] When operating thus in the
building process, the process is in reality a solution, a domestication of the verum-bonum.”
272 Cf. Michelstaedter: Parmenide ed Eraclito 31-2: “Then if the truth […] regarding bread were exhausted by his
relationship with his stomach, the proposition would have never been made because as for the stomach he would
have been persuaded with bread and would have asked for […] nothing more […] This sentence is uttered to
correspond with the need to satiate my will more enduringly than […] bread does with […] my stomach.”
the will), but that relationship subjugated by need is now what the subject interprets as value, first in the always unsatisfactory immediate satisfaction, and then in the reifying structures of society in which that value (insecure in the direct mode) is reified as ‘shared’ knowledge through “the socio-ideological codifications that convey dialogue” (Benussi: 111). “Since no one can make his world be the world of others, everyone feigns words that contain the absolute world” (in Il prediletto punto 194):

for everyday use everyone says “table,” “chair,” “square,” “sky,” “hill,” and so on, or “Marco,” “Filippo,” “Gregorio,” […] but if they want to say what they are, the image of them dissolves into received bits of information and coordinated data corresponding to diverse sense impressions and to the given thing’s use, being reduced—if it means anything at all—to inexplicable sympathy or antipathy […] and referring to them with words, people do not communicate or express them but signify them to others in a manner satisfactory for life’s everyday uses. Just as a man turns a lever or presses a button of a machine to have certain reactions, […] though he does not know whence they proceed and he does not know how to create them—so he relates to them only by means of the conventional sign. Thus does the man in society act: he finds the conventional sign on the keyboard prepared like a note on a piano. And conventional signs join together in conventional ways, in made-up complexes. He plays not his own melody but phrases prescribed by others. (Persuasion 129-30).

Gramsci wrote that every time “that, in one way or another, the question of the language comes up, it means that a number of other problems are being imposed” (Quaderni 2346): linguistic transformation is the construction of a homogeneous result directed at creating a political confirmation in which the actions and reactions of speakers are gradually (and historically) adjusted to the stabilization of rules and “judgments of correctness or incorrectness” (Quaderni 2342). In this sense, the modernist crisis of language experienced by Michelstaedter, which presents itself as a crisis of hierarchically-structured reality only by linguistic convention, is actually one of the ways in which Modernism assumes the role of cultural hegemony of imperialist capitalism in its desire to subtract, so to say, reality from the real, in its desire to conceive the crisis as something that develops and resolves in the pure sphere of epistemology and not, instead, in the problem of separating the latter from praxis or,

273 Michelstaedter: “Il dolce e il fiore dell’acerbo.”
in more Michelstaedterian terms, from the ‘deficient’ life of the subject. It’s not that language is born ontologically separated from life: language is manipulated (this is part of the master-slave relationship) in order to transform it into a more and more perfect abstraction in which men can find satisfaction, reified as knowledge, to their needs. In this sense, the whole sphere of theory [274] becomes the way men sublimate “the natural condition of the struggle for survival” (Franchi: 27) – the clash of ‘wills’ – in a context in which society, completely disarticulated and polarized, is rearticulated as abstraction: “And so men give names to the secure manifestations of life, they aspire to their forms to derive their personas and joys; concerned about this life that slips from their hands, they enslave themselves to it” (in Dialogo della salute e altri dialoghi 63-4). [275] In this abstraction, reality, observed ‘contemplatively,’ once again appears the place of Being, but is actually, foreshadowing Heidegger, a “gossip” that spreading in ever widening and increasingly abstract circles (therefore seemingly more and more suited to the needs of all) draws from them authority. It is still an analysis of Zivilisation, but now Zivilisation is seen not as a disruptive mechanism (contingency is followed by morality!), but as a structure capable of creating “elements” that are more solid, more rigid, with which the subject, in the ‘conversation,’ confirms himself:

What is necessary is to signify. […] The conjunction of names makes it possible to signify – and names are the signs of things and the voice of the elements of knowledge […]. Abstract relations can predicate one another to constitute knowledge which the philosopher elaborates by reasoning […]. What I predicate of something is a mutation […]: it is still the manifestation of the correlativity in which my consciousness turns into what is conscious of it […]. But now the mutating in the eternal deficiency from one state to another is not a non-being, but a being in relation to other things […] and this again a being […]. I have given substance […] to the indication of a relationship: I have given substance to the mutation, to the infinite correlativity, to non-being (“Appendice II” 182-3).

[274] Cf. Michelstaedter: “Appendice II” 186-7: “The application of these names, the closing of the circle of definitions is the sufficient life of the wise man […]. And the arrangements and qualities and regularities: the changes recognized in a given regard, so placed in position and provided with names […], are the world […]. But he who calls this deficiency life and in the any recognition of those causes and determinations and changes presumes to find the reason of things may rightfully call the world of δύναμις his absolute world: and this is the evidence making clear to everyone that in his world there lacks the presence, the act of life, but by means of the names there is carried there the αβιοσ βιοσ of the circle of powers.”

When, in the connective mode, language is expressed in the forms of theory, it is the ‘hinge’ which, as an abstraction, holds this society in place, functioning, through ‘conversation,’ as ‘exchange,’ as the value of things separated from the things themselves. The isolated units that individuals represent, being prey to pleasure which they see as value, prey to what drives them to interpret the world as the element ‘useful’\(^{276}\) to them and to which the will directs them (the mechanism that Michelstaedter calls *jilopsucia*)\(^{277}\) and exposes them, as we have seen, to the risk of conflict with other individualities, only through the exchange of ideologies in the form of ‘commodities’ (the ‘objective’ configuration of their need) are rearticulated in a cohesive system expressed as the rationalization of contingency in an increasingly crystallized, subject-independent knowledge. Michelstaedter, who had read the first volume of *Das Kapital*, conceives the disengaging of the exchange value from the use value as the circulation of goods\(^{278}\) in the form of objectified knowledge which, separated from life (from ‘deficiency’), tends to progressively perfect itself as abstraction in the forms of a societal life (the security system) that domesticates individual wills “in his adaptation to a code of rights and duties” (*Persuasion* 110) before which men, in order to find in it what is ‘useful’ for them (ontological consistency), are reduced to mechanisms:

But here we find individuals reduced to mechanisms, foresight actuated in the organism, not however, as we might expect, as victims of their weakness, in the grip of chance, but as “sufficient” and as certain as divinity. Their degeneration is called

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\(^{276}\) A contemporary essay by Soffici (appearing in *La Voce* of September 22, 1910) contains a quotation from Bergson that is impressive for being the “negative” of Michelstaedter’s whole discourse: “You have to live, and life demands that we grasp things in their relations to our own needs” (quoted in Soffici: *Opere I* 318).

\(^{277}\) Cf. Michelstaedter: *Persuasion* 20: “In the indifferent haze of things the god makes the one thing the organism needs shine; and the organism struggles toward it as if to satiate all its hunger, as if that thing could provide all its life: absolute persuasion. But the knowing god extinguishes the light when its abuse would remove its usefulness, and the animal, satiated only with regard to that thing, turns toward another light, which the benevolent god has shown it. […] than the light reappears without respite like lightning on a summer night. And in that light the animal’s entire future gleams […]”. This benevolent and prudent god is the god of philopsychia and the light is pleasure.”

\(^{278}\) Cf. Michelstaedter: “La via della salute e la voce della ϕιλοπσυχία,” in *Dialogo della salute e altri scritti* 193-4: “mysticism, spiritualism, pragmatism, individualism, rationalism, solipsism; every system, every school, are all, in the name of absolute truth, the voice of ϕιλοπσυχία, […] that by putting a poultice on the pain to alleviate it and lessen its sensitivity grants in exchange a divine or philosophical coloring to the any life. […] «The spirit is in all things, beneath my apparent activity there is the spirit, my hands work and exist in time but my spirit communicates with what is outside of all time and space» […] This is the god of ϕιλοπσυχία advertising himself, like a modern-day merchant, granting the «absolute persona», all his finest qualities to whoever buys his goods.”
civil education, their hunger is the activity of progress, their fear is morality, their violence and egoistic hatred—the sword of justice […]. They have made themselves a force from their weakness, for by speculating on this common weakness they have created a security out of reciprocal convention (Persuasion 110-1).²⁷⁹

In other words, what the illusion of ‘sufficiency’ theoretically expresses as the overcoming of the contingency in which the subject’s need ‘wants’ to live is reflected in society by the administrative structures (insurance, welfare, pensions, etc.)²⁸⁰ that harness the subject to the (large-scale) generalization of his need, but rationalized so as to minimize the possibility of ‘accidents’ that might reveal to the individual his deficiency and that at the same time reduce the individual to a ‘machine’ able only to follow the directions of the system that he himself has created and that becomes increasingly alienated from itself.²⁸¹ This criticism is unequivocally expressed as the historical rejection of the social structures and policies put in place by the bourgeois (not without specific references to class conflict²⁸²): structures aimed

²⁷⁹ As observed by Piero Pieri, this is where the huge difference between Michelstaedter and Stirner becomes most apparent. The individual does not perceive ‘social’ ideas as limitations to his freedom, but turns to them because they structure his being in the world. Cf. Michelstaedter: “Da un notes” (April 2, 1907), in Scritti vari: “And men believe in free will inasmuch as they have settled into their state of servitude so as to declare the one truth, the one love, the chain that ties their wrists and their jailer […] but here precisely lies the ultimate mockery of inexorable necessity. He cannot untie what he did not tie himself.” This is also a further difference with respect to the cynical Machian discourse, in which the individual does find an accomplished worldview before him, but has the possibility to actively intervene in it.


²⁸¹ This is obviously the case of the “important gentleman” described in Persuasion. Cf. Michelstaedter: Persuasion 103-5: “One must take advantage of this marvelous comfort of living, and select from the increased variety of pleasure […]. I have a good heart, full of kind feelings. I make every situation poetic. I make life beautiful for myself, create my own pleasures… […] One must allow the body something and the spirit something. […] In any case, I do believe the way things are going today, every man who wants to keep up with progress has to possess a varied and select humanistic culture. Nor should one be entirely ignorant of the exact sciences, in which we’re the true masters of creation. No mystery escapes us any longer! […] one must be conscious of doing one’s duty. […] It’s one thing to get satisfaction from literature, science, art, and philosophy in pleasant conversations—but serious life is something else. […] And I enter the temple of civilization to accomplish my work with a heart tempered by objectivity! […] And the holy institutions speak through me. […] There’s a pension: the State doesn’t abandon its faithful […] I belong to a welfare fund […] I am insured against theft […] against fire […] I’m insured in case of death […] I’m secure in a locked vault.”

²⁸² This is chiefly, but not exclusively, the case of “Discorso al popolo” (autumn of 1909), in which the author addresses a crowd of protesting workers after witnessing their appreciation for an airplane, in La melodia 85-8: “If tomorrow you were to reassemble […] to triumphantly assert your will to go all the way, […] against the authorities established by law, against the authorities established by money, against the government and the bourgeois – that ideal by which today you are moved, my brothers, the admirable instrument that you are applauding would measure its strength against you […] As long as these hopes are vague and distant, as long as you suffer in silence your material and social misery, you will remain a harmless multitude of unfortunates to be exploited; and the bourgeois society does exploit you in peace and quiet, – and since it holds you under the yoke of your needs and weakness, it has no need to demonstrate upon you the deadly strength of its weapons. But in peace and quiet it prepares its weapons, and masks them under the shining cloak of humanity and progress, and you – you applaud them!… – But the day you acquire full awareness of your rights and your strength […] that day, brothers, the humanity and progress of the bourgeois will reveal their true colors, and will surround you in a ring of fire and steel, showing no pity for the rebellious slaves […] You will remain slaves forever unless you manage
at reducing the ‘foresight’ which consciousness expresses as the necessity to satisfy its future needs, based on a ‘calculistic’ conjecture of the functioning of the social machine and its institutions, placed in which the subject may become more and more contemplatively atrophied, before the ‘security’ offered by the system, like a wheel in the mechanism (the subject will recognize the calculated relationship with the social institutions as the most ‘secure’ way to obtain what is useful to him, evading the ‘risk’ of contingency; as a consequence his actions will no longer transcend these institutions):

Indeed, to the degree that each man is limited to the moment, society extends its foresight in space and time [...] ‘to be attached to file’ in a socially useful manner, to think—each in his own little place—about his own little life. But this is only possible in such a determinate manner that every other in turn might do as much, rotating on his own pivot and tasting a little at a time through his teeth the teeth of the interconnected wheels, [...] inasmuch as through their life lives the great organism, with its complex and exquisite foresight, crystallized in the delicate and powerful minds who eliminate from the field of life every contingency. [...] likewise, in exchange for the determinate labor a man performs for society, which is familiar and instinctive to him in manner but obscure in reason and in end, societylavishes on him sine cura all that is necessary for him (Persuasion 111-2).284

The world based on divided labor, embodied, as is written in The German Ideology, in the particular sphere of activity in which every man must remain if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood, thus becomes the place of a social illusion that expresses servitude in forms of security; that expresses, on an epistemological level separated from the real conditions of life, the transposition of ontological recognition – what the individual was to unmask the miserable hypocrisy of bourgeois power that covers its defenses with flowers [...]. The bourgeois society [...] needs science to encode the shame of its bullying, it needs science to supply weapons of immeasurable capacity [...], it needs government to take from your own ranks the men required to keep enslaved yourselves, guards, policemen, and soldiers. Brothers, you have applauded the symbol of the power that crushes you– But you shall rouse yourselves from your inaction [...] and then you will be invincible, then this hollow construction of bourgeois power [...] will collapse together with all its laws, its institutions, its vain science, its hypocritical morality [...] scientists, functionaries, soldiers will be extinct races, in the new world. And there will come a world where reigns man, man of work, man healthy in body and mind, man who has no need for unjust laws [...], but his faith, and common work, and a community united by brotherly love – will be his government and his law [...]. Farewell brothers – long live work and justice – death to the bourgeoisie.”

283 On the ability to resist this atrophization Michelstaedter points out a class difference: cf. Scritti vari 749: “With regard to security against the cold compare the woodcutter who does not suffer working in the cold and the bourgeois who warms himself with the firewood he buys.”

284 Cf. Persuasion 124n: “An inkling of this process—at the very least, clearly an invention of society—may be found in the diseases of the limbs, the muscular diseases that arise generally form inertia and atrophy, and the diseases of the internal organs that result from their working alone without the measure that the vitality of the limbs used to give their activity [...]. The signs that life is out of focus are nervous disorders.”
looking for in the object signifying his ‘need’ (direct mode) – in the abstract code of the needs (and duties) that society grants, bringing to fruition Michelstaedter’s particular reading of the master-slave dialectic:

Society takes me, teaches me how to move my hands according to established rules and, for this miserable labor of my miserable machine, flatters me, saying I am a person […]. Men have found in society a better master than individual masters because it does not demand of them a variety of labor, a potency sufficient to the security before nature, but only a small, simple bit of labor, familiar and obscure, provided one performs it in the necessary manner […]. The concern for [this] security enslaves man in every act. From the moment he wants to say, “This is legally mine,” he has by means of his own future made himself a slave to the future of all the others: he is matter (personal [mobile] property). But in exchange, society does what no master would: it makes its slaves participants in its own authority by transforming their labor into money and giving money the force of law […]. In this manner, everyone in organized society violates everyone else by means of the omnipotence of the organization. Everyone is matter and form, slave and master at one and the same time (Persuasion 116-8.)

The subject’s willingness to continue and the impossibility of eliminating the extreme contingency of every relation that is expressed as the desire for preservation leads him to codify ideological superstructures that become the ‘forms’ in which the subject unconsciously orders his life and his consciousness. The creation of objectified structures around him allows him to limit his capacity for ‘foresight’ to the increasingly defined (calculistic) schemes that those structures require as adaptation. The subject’s behavior is reduced to calculating the occasions offered by those structures in the gradual elimination of ‘accidental elements’ (the very same behavior that Michelstaedter will shortly attribute to science/technology). What Michelstaedter calls the “loss of vitality” is precisely the transition of man, faced with a system by which he is dominated, into a contemplative dimension:

The more an individual adapts to circumstantial contingencies, that much less is his sufficiency, […] much narrower is the sphere of foresight and limited the sufficiency of the individual who, for his own security, has entrusted himself to social foresight. Within the social individual, absolute social security corresponds to a foresight that is reduced to the instant and point such that, at every new insufficient contingency, the individual would perish wretchedly if he were removed from the bosom of society (Persuasion 120-1).
In exchange for his ‘bit of labor,’ everything society has developed as forms of security will be at his disposal, but only, of course, in the binary useful/harmful form of knowing, in a perspective that becomes increasingly alien to the needs of his fellow men. Thus Property becomes – Michelstaedter is very clear about this – the manner in which the subject (the subject-master) exercises his right to apply an increasingly stable foresight on reality, a foresight to which others adapt in form of duty recognized as value; in addition, money (and by now this should not come as a surprise) is the means of communication of social violence, the abstract instrument (a symbol of the loss of vitality) with which the subject expresses his right to interpret/use reality (also against others). Money is the parallel of the progressive abstraction (what allows exchanges without involving the immediate use value) which is expressed as infinite possibilities of relations/exchanges that are apparently less and less conflicting – the various ideological positions are in fact increasingly comparable – because more and more prey to that abstraction that fictitiously unites, from top to bottom, the social fabric: “Money, the actual means of communication the societal violence by which each is the master of the work of others: […] the drive belt turning the machine’s wheels—it shall be like a divinity raised up to heaven, becoming perfectly nominal, an abstraction, when the wheels are so well adjusted that the wheels of each shall enter into the wheels of the other without the need of transmission” (Persuasion 137).

285 Cf. Persuasion 126: “What does he know about the things he brushes in passing, the things on which he supports himself in order to go forward? What does he know about how they live or what they want or what they are? This alone he knows—whether they are hard or soft for him, difficult or easy, favorable or hostile. He ignores what is just to others, making use of things and people […] insofar as they are useful to his going.”

286 Cf. Michelstaedter: “Dialogo della salute,” in Dialogo della salute e altri dialoghi 37-8: “The field represents the security of having these fruits in the future […] rights do not determine property except as regards security towards other men.”

287 Cf. Michelstaedter: in Scritti vari 872: “With money one has everything that human ingenuity, accumulated by society and corresponding to an extraordinary individuality, can give – whether things that one must otherwise take with bodily force, or things that are otherwise acquired […] through «persuasions».”

288 Cf. Löwith: 276: “Money […] substitutes for and confuses all natural relationships by setting a fixed monetary value upon them. […] As the alienated wealth of mankind, it is the most universal means of binding together and separating a world alienated from itself.”

289 Meaning that the exchange of goods is increasingly mediated by the abstraction constituted by money.
The creation of ideological products (knowledge expressed in linguistic form), conceived on the grounds of selfish need (what is useful for me), is accompanied by an abstract counterpart (more and more perfect, more and more homogeneous) that finds expression as a ‘being’ that is extraneous to them and categorized, to which individuals refer in order to conceal their contingental condition. Men relate harmoniously to one another (while in fact remaining polarized: they remain within the system of violence that correlativity represents) only by reference to this abstraction established by the knowledge of those who rule society, through property and money, while forcing others to adapt. Moreover, the individual instance to which the ‘need’ refers is increasingly able to conceive itself only in terms of the adaptation to what it is presented by knowledge as Being, thereby losing, on the one hand, the ability to understand the irrationality of its own determinate will (direct mode), and, on the other, the ability to understand the mechanism that ties that will to the whole system which ‘deficiency’ resolves in abstract forms, thus concealing the subject’s ‘inadequate’ life. Michelstaedter then, critical of this progressive social ‘integration,’ goes back to Greece and counters it with the category of totality, understood as the necessity not to conceal (to always refer to) the deficiency of the ‘need’ which the subject lives, in his personal experience, against what he abstractly conceives, thereby returning to perceive the system of abstractions as something, to put it in Vico’s language, created by men from what, in their own material condition, is more common. Something that mere theory cannot solve, but only disguise:

this knowledge is the arbitrarily finite enumeration of the infinite ways in which men feign happiness, good, evil, and so on, and the manifestations of their passions, virtues, characters, as they distinctly appear and are called in present life (not defined according to what they mean for the individual) […]. Rhetoric is thus the register of what men mostly say they want, […] and then of the declarations that are most repeated, the artifices most resorted to, etc.: all the fragments of life, the materiality of relationships, progressively ordered according to this or that word (good, evil, virtue, etc.) like the colored pieces of glass in a kaleidoscope. But in reality they are the remains of the wreckage of philosophy (“Appendice VI” 298-9).
Michelstaedter, who is writing a dissertation,\textsuperscript{290} goes back to Greece, but his Greece is both the space of a totality that includes life and thought (the pre-Socratics, Socrates himself) and the place where, through Plato and then Aristotle (the ones who above all do the bourgeois ‘thing’: the ones who say that truth is the very life we lead), a path is opened to rationalization, to abstraction, which, in the forms of Philosophy and Science (technology),\textsuperscript{291} is taken to its highest degree. Michelstaedter’s Greece then, in its decadence, has the same structure of contemporary industrial society, because what he calls “rhetoric” is precisely the forming of a second nature on which men must depend, the ideological composition of capital which, in the ‘laws’ determined by knowledge (and in them alone), grants men the contemplative space in which to satisfy a need that is actually only what that ideological composition, abstracting the life process in itself, constantly determines as necessity and its unsatisfiable satisfaction:

Their power pretends to be finite, and finite the possession they wanted, their will being persuaded in whatever repeated present moment. Facing whatsoever limited, finite relation, they do not live it as a simple correlation but pretend to be men with persuasion; […] they need to attribute value to things in the very act of seeking them and at the same time need to say their life is not in those things but is free in persuasion and outside such needs. Thus do they not confess that the value of these things lies in regard to their finite need; but there, deep down, is the absolute value in which they affirm themselves as absolute. They are still things among things, slaves of this and that […], in the sway of their needs, fearful of the future, enemies of every other will, unjust toward any other’s demand. They still affirm at every point their inadequate persona. But this is all appearance; it is not their persona. Deep down their absolute persona remains, affirming itself absolutely in absolute value […]. The man stops and says, I know. […] And through his knowing he is outside time, space, continual necessity; he is free, absolute. He lives on what is given him, of which he does not have reason in himself, but in his absolute knowledge he has Reason; […] in his Absolute he has the End; […] Freedom, Possession, Justice. Thus does he carry the Absolute with him on the streets of the city. He is no longer one but two: a body […] and a soul (Persuasion 63-5).

Michelstaedter understands, modernistically, the Nietzschean argument of the theoretical doubling of reality (the real world and the apparent world), but he rejects both the Erlebnis of

\textsuperscript{290} Cf. Michelstaedter: letter to his sister Paula dated May 5, 1909, in Epistolario 367: “starting tomorrow I’ll go back to writing rubbish, regularly, and that then I’ll be a student writing his thesis, a wheel in the mechanism, a decent person, and that nobody will look at me with wonder and irony, and I’ll have nothing to be ashamed of.”

\textsuperscript{291} Philosophy and Science, says Michelstaedter, work just the same as money.
the eternal flow of things (amor fati) and the narrowing down of the concept of value in the horizon of subjectivity. To Michelstaedter, both are connected, on the one hand, to the subject’s material life which in the correlativity is expressed as a constant lack of self and, on the other, to the subject’s will to ‘continue’ to feign in that ontological consistency the road that leads him to alienate himself in objectified structures. “Persuasion”, then, bases everything on the fact that the ‘wheels’ of those structures are squeaking, because behind them cries the ‘pain’ of the subject who knows he cannot Be (that he exists only as an instrumental reconciliation in abstract forms) and that reminds the subject of his ‘deficiency,” preventing him from continuing down the road of his alienation:

For as long as man lives, he is here, and the world is there. For as long as he lives he wants to possess it. For a long as he lives he affirms himself in some manner. He gives and demands. He enters the ring of relations—and it is always he here and there the world, different from him. […] Thus must he give in order to have the reason of self and have it in himself in order to give it […] and, making his own life always richer in negations, create himself and the world. […] This is what the Oracle of Delphi said when it said: Gnosi Seauton [know thyself] (Persuasion 50-3).

X. “What is given”

Persuasion is the dialectic point by which thought recognizes the ideology that structures it, and negates it; and at the same time it negates itself if it proves unable to place itself in the material reality that in this complex connotes the subject’s deficient, irrational life. It is the negation of the determinate forms of the will that cover the depths of contingency, the ‘melancholy’ negation of any instrumental relationship with what is contained in reality, either in the forms of being or of becoming:

when the weave of illusion thins, disintegrates, tears asunder, then men, made impotent, feel themselves in the sway of what is outside their power, of what they do

292 Cf. Michelstaedter: “Appendice II” 164: “If we say it is one, it must contain all things in itself […]. If it does not contain all things in itself, it lacks something; – it will have this thing in the future: – its future is in this thing: in the present it is no more in itself than it is in this thing: it is no longer one; if it lacks one thing it lacks everything, because it lacks itself. […] in its place there are relations: the irrational indifferent fog of correlativity – because this is the lack of life (or fear of death, as you please) […] The man who lacks everything, who in order to be changes in time.”
not know […]. They find themselves wanting to flee death, having lost their usual way, which feigns finite things from which to flee all while seeking finite things. […] when the edge of the weave is lifted […] they too know frightful moments. […] They awake, open their eyes wide in the dark, […]—man finds himself once more without first name and last, wife or loved ones, things to do, clothes. […] in anguish you seek a plank with which to save yourself, a solid point; everything decomposes, everything yields, flees, draws away; and the sarcastic sneer dominates all: “Oooooooooohh… nothing, nothing, nothing, I know you’re nothing; […] I know you can do nothing, nothing, nothing…” […]. You feel long dead and yet live and fear death. […] and you suffer each moment the pain of death. This pain is common to all things that live and do not have life in themselves, living without persuasion, fearing death in living (Persuasion 26-9).

In the Esemplio storico [example taken from history] that appears in the central part of La persuasione e la rettorica, Plato builds a steel air balloon filled with Absolute and takes his disciples up in the sky to see how ‘things’ are in their universal forms, far from the correlativity that dominates the earth. “But Aristotle takes just one step” (Scrivi vari 866), he notices that his teacher keeps looking down, i.e. he realizes that Socrates is no longer there to remind Plato that there is no Good connected with that which, lacking Being, only wants to continue in the forms of the empiricity that are the forms of violence.293 Aristotle reflects on the matter and asks Plato why not take some of that absolute down to the ground, put it in the things of the earth and call them, in theory, absolute. Plato dies during the descent, Aristotle returns to earth to preach the absolute in the forms of relativity:

All the people ran to take from him the goods that came from the absolute. He was a practical spirit and took the goods that were most in fashion, and which lent themselves to the eye, needs, and taste of the public, and placed on them a brand name with the logo “lightness.” And the public was happy to be able to say the goods came from the sky and to use them just as if they’d been goods of this earth (Persuasion 83-4).

This is the process that leads man to separate life from himself, classifying the external world (in which he recognizes an ontological self) in the forms of foresight and organization: in the forms of “instrumental reason.” Greek philosophy becomes the battleground for a very

293 Cf. Michelstaedter: Persuasion 84n: “the last dialogues and especially the Parmenides are pervade by an Aristotelian spirit and seem a prelude to the Categories and the Metaphysics of Aristotle. Of the Platonic they have no more than clichés. […] The dissolving of the world of ideas in the infinite weave of forms.”
contemporary ideological clash played out on the ability to resist the forms of abstraction in which the “system of names covers the room of individual misery with mirrors” (*Persuasion* 70). Through Socrates, Michelstaedter emphasizes the authentic side of existence, not the dream of the *Kultur* that comes before disintegration, but the ability, in recognizing one’s deficiency, to recognize the origin of the injustice that the individual will expresses as need (specialization) and organizes in abstract forms (rationalization) – the forms created by those who dominate society – perpetuating that injustice in the name of value:

I tell you: tomorrow you will certainly be dead. It doesn’t matter? Are you thinking about fame? About your family? But your memory dies with you, with you your family is dead. Are you thinking about your ideals? You want to make a will? You want a headstone? But tomorrow those too are dead, dead. All men die with you. […] Do you turn to god? There is no god, god dies with you. The kingdom of heaven crumbles with you [...]. Tomorrow *everything* is finished [...]. Well, then the god of today is no longer yesterday’s, no longer the country, the good, the bad, friends [...]. You want to eat? No, you cannot. The taste of food is no longer the same; honey is bitter, milk is sour, […] and the odor […] it reeks of the dead. You want a woman to comfort you in your last moments? No, worse, *it is dead flesh*. You want to enjoy the sun, air, light, sky? Enjoy?! The sun is a rotten orange, […] you cannot move a finger, cannot remain standing. The god who kept you standing, made your day clear and your food sweet […] he betrays you now and abandons you because the thread of your philopsychia is broken (*Persuasion* 37-8).

Socrates asks for justice, not for rights (which are the abstract concept of the former, adapted to the “modes of relativity:” a fictitious union between universal and particular), he expresses the need to persist on the road of deficiency that negates the possibility of persuasion to those who are distracted by the fog of correlativeity294 from which emerges – a falsely rational abstraction of irrationality – the knowledge that joins together individual determinate wills.295

Socrates knows that this requires breaking down the specializing vision that makes the subject

294 Cf. Michelstaedter: “I figli del mare,” in *Poesie* 81: “«This is death, Senia» – he said – / «this sad dark fog / where moans the murky light / of distress, of fears.”

295 Cf. Michelstaedter, “Il prediletto punto d’appoggio della dialettica socratica,” in *La melodia* 102-3: “But Socrates, who experiences this deficiency in a deeper, stronger manner; who is not satisfied with what may satisfy others; who sees it clearly not only in the adversities of chance but in the very flow of life, in human happiness […] Socrates can speak to me closely and clearly with the distant voice of the pain I feel myself. He can guide me to take back all the cursing I’ve done in my life, to recollect all the moments of helplessness, in what my illusion, in its modes and its names that presume certain happiness – brings to the contingencies where it will show itself insufficient. And all the things that with their irresistible attractiveness make me slave to the blind circle of my delusion, he can show me to be vain and fragile […] and therefore break, using parts of my own life, the limited circle of my foresight.”
view the world in the forms expressed by his ‘need’ (direct mode), which are also the same forms of contingency that, in exposing the subject to ‘pain,’ need to be ‘ensured’ by rationalization. Because (as realized by Aristotle, who adapts his “goods” to whatever is most in vogue) “the criterion is consent,” in *Dialogo della salute e altri scritti* 199, it is the consent of society that forces the subject to adapt to it (to stabilize them out of contingency) the irrational forms of his will in which he institutes himself as an ontological subject:

Men talk to affirm themselves, but because they talk they depend on whoever is listening, and the listener can grant them the joy of their affirmation by approving, or take it away by disapproving. […] to delude themselves that their individuality remains intact in contingency, for their need to exist (in the approbation of others) […] and so are formed the «intellectual» koinoniai and in general every coming together of conversants, […] insofar as individuality is illusory, affirmation is inadequate (in *Dialogo della salute e altri scritti* 204-5).

Michelstaedter’s Socrates asks (along the now historically and socially defeated line of Parmenides) to draw “near what is remote,” to break through the mechanisms of Memory and Foresight where the pain of instability pretends to be stable, because only by completely acknowledging this (which doesn’t mean accepting it) will it be possible to take the road that leads to its overcoming. What Michelstaedter calls “swimming against the current” (*Scritti vari* 735) is the rejection of any theoretical settlement, the task of rationality which, heeding the voice of its deficiency, returns to its duty: “forge a path when there is no road” (*Persuasion* 43), i.e. recognize being a cog in the mechanism that takes part in the violence of the system (in the abstraction of the violence), and thereby exposing, in immanence, the system’s negative truth. This is an incessant journey that can never take place but only

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296 Michelstaedter: “I professionisti della filosofia.”
297 Michelstaedter: “Il bisogno della comunicazione.”
298 As remarked by Emanuele Severino, this is a considerable deviation that Michelstaedter makes from Parmenides. In Michelstaedter the eternity of Being is not immutable with regard to the delusion of the becoming world. That becoming is absolutely real, because it is the ideological form of a social expression: that Being, therefore, is really ‘lost,’ and only through the praxis that drives the subject to the recognition of his ‘deficiency’ (hence in negative forms) will it be possible to get it back.
299 Cf. Michelstaedter: letter to Enrico Mreule dated June 13, 1909, in *Epistolario* 396: “Can you imagine anything more comical than this man who speaks of a peaceful happiness to be found after climbing the Calvary; […] then, once you get back from the trip you’re entitled to the *paix du ciel*. One who climbs the Calvary does not come back down.”
exist as the voice of an ‘imbalance’ that denies society a fulcrum (it mystifies sublimation by upholding Justice) because it sees in it the violence of contingency expressed as Being: “in the negation of relativity […] and at that point justice was justice because there was nothing unjust any more” (*Scritti vari* 864). But there is no “harbor”301 (and here Michelstaedter really anticipates the views of the Frankfurt School on negative dialectics), only an endless indictment that assails every haven (every “illusion of persuasion”), while bearing, like Sophocles’ Electra, all the ‘pain’ of its deficiency. No *Erlebnis* and no voice of myth resonates for him, only the endless activity that preserves the truth as ‘absence’ against the historical-ideological moment that society expresses in ‘time.’ The activity of the ‘persuaded’ man is far from out of History if his task is to continually identify what history tries to express, in an absolute manner, as the absence of history. There can be no settlement because that is the negative remedy of the utopia, the never-ending dissolution of the fetishistic structures with which, in the form of knowledge, society expresses itself: it cannot make an object, a commodity, out of persuasion.

But men grow tired along this road (they are afflicted by the same pain that forced Plato to look down from the balloon), men want to establish a positive relationship between being and the world in order to continue in the alleged sufficiency, and since that relationship, in the direct mode, is always subject to the irrationality of the *neikos* that can show it as an illusion, it must now be predicated (said/told/spoken) in the world of *doxa*, and the more it will be protected against the risk of unmasking, the more it is generalized and in tune with

300 No stoicism, no mysticism, no asceticism. These roads all fall prey to *φιλοσυχια*. Cf. Michelstaedter: in De Leo, *Michelstaedter filosofo del “frammento”* 69: “The stoic wants to be like he who needs no contingencies […] he lives to say that he needs nothing to live. – In relation to all “indifferent” things he says, “I am, even without this thing”. […] But if these things were not, he could no longer say that they are indifferent to him, and would draw no enjoyment from a life free of them. Let us put the Stoic alone on a mountaintop to live on roots, and let us take away not only the presence but even the memory of everything that life does to others, and then we will see […]. The things of the world, even by being denied, are necessary for his life, and what is necessary is not indifferent.”

Cf. Michelstaedter: *Sfugge la vita* 120: “And just as the philosophical delusion is vain, so is the apostolic delusion, the theory of the sacrifice […], vain is ascesis, fakirism, vain are all the optimistic games of this impotent humanity that is attached to its need to live.”

301 Cf. Michelstaedter: “I figli del mare,” in *Poesie* 82: “the harbor is the fury of the sea.”
current beliefs and common sense. The task of ‘knowledge’ then, as for Aristotle when he gets off the balloon, will be to elevate this common sense to itself:

They no longer hear the voice of things telling them, “You are,” and amidst the obscurity they do not have the courage to endure, but each seeks his companion’s hand and says, “I am, you are, we are,” so that the other might act the mirror and tell him, “you are, I am, we are”; and together they repeat, “we are, we are, because we know, because we can tell each other the words of knowledge, of free and absolute consciousness.” Thus do they stupefy one another. […] and with words they nourish their boredom, making for themselves a poultice for the pain; with words they show what they do not know and what they need in order to soothe the pain or make themselves numb to it […]. Thus rhetoric flourishes alongside life. Men put themselves into a cognitive attitude and make knowledge (Persuasion 68-9).

No longer is there the voice of ‘deficiency’ (the utopia projected towards what not yet ‘is’), because this way, through theory, value enters into the forms of the “any life”: it covers “the depths of unfathomed relativity” (Scritti vari 690) proclaiming True whatever is more common, because whatever is more common, being believed by the majority, is what best protects all of society from the erupting of contingency that would undermine its structure. It is no longer interested in removing contingency from life, but shrouds it with the categories of being, to which it adds the ‘finite.’ This is still the voice of need expressed as will and foresight, but foresight is now in unison, through knowledge, with the foresight of society as a whole, because the ‘common’ reaction to the reality expressed by the will is separated from the vital interest of the subject and, based on the common historical result of the senses and of morality (convention, adaptation), is called truth:

The just man […] always feels his infinite debt to justice, his distance from the point of his true life […]. Plato […] pauses as if he had found it, and from here he starts building reality facing backwards towards the relativity from which he came […] he needs […] the positive signs to build his positive system of relativity, as a norm of values (in Il prediletto punto 152-3).

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302 Michelstaedter: “La trascendenza di Platone e quella di Aristotele.”
303 Cf. Michelstaedter: Sfuggi la vita 161-2: “When a man drowns […] the others […] feel fear and compassion, and protest against fate as if that man had every right to be confident, and had won his place in the sun through his personal value […] the disaster is a rent in their delusion; […] an event only for those who had done nothing to eliminate contingency from their life […]. They should have compassion for all people, always, even when they think themselves happy.”
Michelstaedter’s Plato is therefore at the midpoint between Socrates and Aristotle, the point where the combined reference to the *agathon* and to the subject’s ‘deficient’ life is fictitiously recomposed in the theoretical path (separated from deficient life) that pretends to “install the relative in the temples of the absolute.”

The separation is not remedied in the endless activity that speaks to men about the lack of Being in opposing the prevailing ideological moment, but in the systematic overlapping of Universal and Particular which the manifold brings to unity in the modes of categories, i.e. by theorizing (by ‘saying/telling/speaking’) about reality. In the pain of contingency Plato is unable to resist and attributes sufficiency to what is irrational; he attributes to non-being the names of being and is overcome by *jilopsucia*: “he cannot draw near what is remote, but he says the things that are near and calls them remote – so they may be accepted by short-sighted men while preserving the name of remote things: of absolute knowledge” (“Appendice II” 176).

The fragments of irrational life are ‘abstracted’ and, through reasoning, combined with ideas: thus entity implies non-entity, the immobility of wisdom conserves in itself the movement of the ‘will,’ and thought, now far from the horror of ‘flowing’ that the life of the individual determines in the *neikos*, surreptitiously appropriates being.

Plato does not ask for justice, he asks himself what it is, he separates life from knowledge and thinks he can know without being in that moment persuaded (without having directly experienced persuasion as a deficiency): “Plato renounces his life and, feigning it sufficient in its ‘any’ content, puts himself in a cognitive attitude and in relation to his illusory reality, with his illusory persona he reaffirms himself as an individual sufficient for absolute

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305 Cf. “Appendice II” 190: “If the sophists were petty thieves, but Plato […] is a gentleman thief, who has his own method for stealing, not this or that, as those others did, telling everyone: «I am a thief; but with method and earnestness, *in order to steal everything*, and telling people: «I am the one who saves you from robbers once and for all», […] Indeed, by legitimating the trade-offs of human weakness, he takes […] from men any possibility of feeling insufficient in it, any need to free themselves from it.”

306 Cf. Michelstaedter: *L’anima ignuda* 61: “In this mirror of relativity he contemplates his motionless figure. […] the escape from the relativity of life, which, because it is, is unjust and irrational.”

307 In this sense Michelstaedter attributes to Plato the features that Nietzsche antedates to Socrates, but there is no Dionysian moment for the ‘persuaded,’ no “loyalty to the earth,” only the infinite debt to Justice having the purpose of releasing men from their contingent conditions.
life who possesses persuasion, as an individual who knows or has the way to know”

(“Appendice II” 144). Thus any irrational ‘will,’ any ‘need,’ can be ‘sufficient’ when it is able to adapt to the established categories that organize it into a social consortium (the system of relativity), that organize it into a City being the crystallization of those needs (into a Republic having all the traits of the bourgeois state):

under the power of the city everyone is bound by the harsh necessities of life, and keeps to his place not for the present good but out of concern for the future […]. His raison d’être are his material needs, and it is only out of self-interest that he satisfies them in the life imposed by the city. […] Accepting as free life what revolves around basic needs, we establish in the city the freedom of being slaves; once the principle of violence affirming the need to continue is accepted as just, every affirmation is just for every need. […] he shall be wise and just and free […], because he will be ‘said’ by a free and just and wise city […]. The city isolates individual needs […]. And so it constitutes the production of elementary life: agriculture, arts, crafts […]; it constitutes means of exchange […]; it constitutes the need for war; and to defend the justice of those needs with violence […]. Since this is necessary for the continuation of the city, everyone must take their ‘any’ dark and unchanging duty as sufficient life; adapt to being a material part of the organism […]. Thrown out the door, violence comes in through the window and spreads everywhere, […] everyone, at their places, must be taught through violence […] and this is done using the state’s weapon: education. […] the teaching that has a determinate sufficient purpose in life, that aims at forging of every man a certain tool that may be applied for certain uses […]. The word of Platonic education in the Republic is mimesis (“Appendice II” 144-9).

Thus socialized, men stop relating their needs to the ontological recognition of the direct mode and reverberate them within the values of the social body (the system of relativity); they wear them like a second skin and, forgetting their insufficiency, are able to ‘say’ about anything – «At this point anything is worthy of being said; every acknowledged relationship is an idea, because good is inherent in everything” (“Appendice II” 155), because their words will refer to the ‘categories’ that the City establishes as absolute for its continuation, for its ‘good.’ But “life has fled the discourse,” because the discourse no longer ‘says,’ as in Socrates, the affirmation of the insufficiency of he who is a thing among things, but only the reification of the abstract structure in which the subject wants to remain in order to feign sufficiency, to which the subject, through theory, wants to relate in order to ‘be’ in it, in order to be ‘for’ it. The unlimited concepts, the unlimited ‘symbolic forms’ that men produce, will
then gradually fall in line with the “finite science of the infinite relations between things”
(Appendice II 174): with the knowledge that individuals, in order to continue in their
‘illusion,’ call absolute. The criterion is consent!

So Aristotle takes just one step: he puts the ‘ideas’ in the ‘forms’ of life giving an
equality to all that exists only to ‘continue:’ “everything that has a cause for being has in that,
for Aristotle, its reason for being” (in Il prediletto punto 153). Everything, driven by its
respective ‘need,’ finds in that need a telos that determines the violent action of the will as a
just action: “Everything has its cause: everything has its reason: everyone is just” (in Il
prediletto punto 153) (and hence the ‘feeling’ – a topic of Modernism – of discerning the
different reasons of everyone). That is why Michelstaedter, in a letter to Enrico Mreule of
April 1909, says that Aristotle is “empirical and dogmatic at the same time,” (Epistolario
359) because his reasoning is aimed at creating ‘norms’ that have to regulate “the plurality of
goods as correlative to the many illusions of happiness of mankind” (“Appendice II” 215),
hiding behind “they say” whereby the ‘just’ that Aristotle predicates in categories is presented
as what is given “from the pre-made theory of the public voice,” (“Appendice II” 218).

The voice of deficiency having been silenced, value is affirmed by the thing’s mere ‘being there,’
so that “the any contingency becomes worthy of being said and argued and cataloged in a
theory” (Fratta: 56). In response to sophistic skepticism, Aristotle says that in practice no one
would have any doubt about what threatens him (no one would have any doubt about what is
useful or harmful for his continuation), and so “he again sets as absolute term of comparison
the relative measure of the determinations of man” (Scritti vari 689), therefore ‘good’
becomes for him the most ‘useful’ way of being in life, that is, precisely, the predication of

ever-changing, contingent things as substantial, because useful. Based on these principles

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308 Michelstaedter: “Giusto è chi giudica sempre ogni cosa trasferendosi nella necessità causale di questa.”
309 Cf. Michelstaedter: Scritti vari 740-1: “Everyone is right, no one has a reason. […] no one can give “the
reason” why he is what he is: since he would not exist as he is if there were no cause or need for it, and he could
not exist if he did not exist as he is […]. (A reason = right; the «reason» = justice). A reason is any conceptual
connection between cause and need, the reason is the concept abstracted from any cause and need.”
310 As observed by Giorgio Brianese (L’arco e il destino 176) we are very close to what Roland Barthes, in Ancient
Rhetoric, says about the relationship between Aristotle and public beliefs.
(virtues) made concrete in the “they say” (in the voice of the majority), Aristotle begins to predicate Being and gives new meaning to the concept of philosophy. Through the work of theory he silences his insufficiency and places the ‘norm’ not in himself (direct mode) but in the many theories of life that attach an end to the rule which is a ‘sum’ of ends, a “catalog of different constituted ends” (“Appendice II” 215), but which is really only the catalog of necessities, of needs. This catalog (science) allows to ‘file’ Good as something attainable (but that Good is just common sense) and opens the door to the ‘method’ for achieving it: knowledge and morality (epistemology and ethics are playing the same game, as we will shortly see). But the things in the catalog are still deficient, still the irrational reality of needs that is expressed in the correlative flow that runs through time. The way to arrive at what is most true (useful!) will then be the method of ‘power’ which considers real the more common beliefs and classifies them according to principles (virtues) which however are the beliefs themselves: “Aristotle […] considers a rational substance the schemes of causality” ([Scritti vari] 861). That’s why the generalization of these ‘particular’ telos (specializations) can never be a “convincing” [convincere] but only a “winning” [vincere], because it will be the way to address the knowledge and the actions of others (if they are not willing to break the thread of their ontological illusion) towards the prevailing model which to them is objectified as theory that requires individuals to act calculistically to adapt to it, according to the model explained above. This gives rise to the system of ‘security’ which, having its foundations in the insecure place of a rationalized ‘temporality,’ operates and evolves in time (which is the reason why Michelstaedter cannot stop with Greece but must follow rhetoric up to the present), progressing, as Science and Ethics do, through the structures of theorizations whose constant task is (thereby silencing the voice of deficiency) to say true what is useful, i.e. what better confirms in itself the ideological level achieved, at that time!, by society.312 “man finds

311 Cf. La Rocca: 101: “his attention to the general becomes subordination to the «mostly», […] doxa becomes both the source and the object of knowledge.”

312 In this sense Michelstaedter also perfectly grasps the distinction that bourgeois culture makes between the “healthy” and the “sick”. Cf. Persuasion 145-6n: “the phrase “He’s mad” is the most common form of vengeance taken by the deluded man against someone whose actions disturb his illusion and force him—terrifying thing—
all he needs in an established form and believes that he knows life when he has learned the norms of this form and obtains without danger what he needs. This form, this straitjacket or rhetorical coat, is woven from all the things of societal life” (*Persuasion* 138).

Michelstaedter identifies the connection between the development of ideologies (epistemology, ethics, etc.) and the form achieved by the social system, and determines how that system reintegrates (reconciles), epistemologically and socially, the development of those ideological determinations by adapting them to itself. The function of society is to be “the workshop of absolute values” (*Persuasion* 144), it elaborates into theories the objectivity outside the deficient totality that the subject represents, and places his values (i.e. his needs) in a system of statistics the most common of which (the most useful) will be from time to time labeled the ultimate values of absolute wisdom, to which men, in order to continue, will be required to refer in the manners of a relationship subordinate to a hegemonic knowledge. Because it is hegemonic, that knowledge forces the other ideological forms to adapt to it. In our time, that knowledge is represented (as Tönnies had already noted) by scientific-mathematical knowledge, which is set as the ultimate result of rationalist systems and of their constant restructuring aimed at eliminating, in relation to an increasingly ‘perfected’ objectivity, an ‘irrational’ content (being the ‘necessity’ of the individual – not his ‘difference’ – that fails to adapt to the necessity of the system). Through technology, science attains this hegemonic condition because it brings into play the possibility of the ‘practical’ (useful) modification of the world. Through technology, science assumes the features of pure rationality as the gradual elimination of the contingencies (the ‘accidents’) of reality (which becomes ‘organic’ so that men may enact, relating to reality, their ontological illusion, referring to what is useful in it for them), and as the gradual conforming of the relational system to the needs of man:

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into bewilderment (which proves his own insufficiency). [...] But the service of consecrating a phrase of frightened mediocrity, “Than man is mad,” by means of absolute scientific authority, which translates it into a dogma, “When ‘objective’ experience is insufficient to ‘make sense’ of an individual, that individual is crazy”—this service could not be rendered to society by any other than the most enslaved to it, namely, the modern man of science.”
they [scientists] can feign the regularity of a correlation disturbed in nature by other elements, *eliminating the contingency and procuring the proximity* so that the relation *occurs* regularly. […] they give modern man medicine for his ills and the foresight that, without his power, draws near what he may need, a more secure satisfaction of his needs. This is clear in the machines that transform, bind, and eliminate the contingency from a certain circle of relations […] scientists can *violate nature* better than others, to the greater comfort of the man wanting to go on (*Persuasion* 99-100).

This mathematical spirit, being connected to the new social structure and being therefore the most suitable for the satisfaction of human needs (organic to its time), reverberates from the field of science into all the ideological manifestations of life (philosophical knowledge included) reorganizing them according to the principle of usefulness (extraneous to the question of the lack of truth) that science itself represents even in its ability to adapt to the modernist crisis of the concept of Truth (think of Mach), thereby ‘binding itself’ to its time in history (the knowledge then hegemonic):

Science, with its inexhaustible matter and its method made of the proximity of small, finite goals […] with its need of specialization, has taken root in the depth of man’s weakness […] from the simultaneity or succession of a given series of relations a presumption of causality: a modest hypothesis, which should become theory or law. *Law of what?* Law that in the given coincidence of given relations, the given thing happens at the given point. […] “But it does not presume to be finite; on the contrary, it professes its infinite way […] What’s the use? The premise of the work is dishonest at every point, even if it proceeds along a path professed as infinite […]. True, science no longer makes dogmatic affirmations. […] But this perpetual confession of insufficiency is nothing but the ultimate artifice for making itself more certain of its future. […] It gets rid of its own *persona* in order for the method to remain intact (*Persuasion* 96-9).

For Michelstaedter, the fact that scientific concepts are only centers of relations does not open the door to the possibility of their ‘cynical’ use (this would be, for him, thought adapting to thought, not to facts), but to the analysis of their qualitative (abstract) distribution in society, before which the subject can now only trust in the competence of the ‘specialist’ and assume,

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313 Cf. *Persuasion* 86: “ ‘Whereas philosophy has raved through metaphysical exaltation, we have placed it once more on positive ground; and here, maintaining our contact with reality, we have a secure means of conquering truth.” In this manner, more or less […] that which gradually supplants the old mother speaks: *modern science.*”
towards those concepts, the attitude of a ‘believer.’ This is not simply a rejection of Positivism (Positivism, as also, in another sense, Futurism, merely expresses the frenetic apex of the matter), nor is it the rejection of rationality tout court in favor of forms of knowledge more directly connected to ‘life,’ rather it is a criticism of the manner in which life, the irrationality of the needs that ‘this’ life expresses, chooses to take shape in abstract forms, mechanizing the subject before them:

Life is an inadequate thing (an implicit error of logic because it is insofar as it is not). But rational science is twice as inadequate (because as it exists insofar as it is not, it affirms to be insofar as it exists: the error of logic is clear: cogito ergo sum). – Every life is a core of relations, its form is no more than this materiality; living [is no more] than affirming these relations before the others’ […] affirmation of inadequate individuality. Language as a means (direct mode) for life is no more than this affirmation […]. But when man pauses and says «my form is absolute», he begins to draw the lines of these relations presuming a rationality towards a point established as absolute (combined mode): «inadequate» affirmation of inadequate individuality (Scritti vari 730-1).

Modern science, which does not speculate on the reason of life (the wherefore of life), renouncing the idea of Truth (of an individual outside the irrational scheme of ‘needs’), looks at the world from the viewpoint of ‘probability,’ and structures this in regular, quantified elements to be used instrumentally (consider Pragmatism). Although the way in which the scientist sees the world is always the way determined by his need which gives form to the world (specialization), the scientist calls the result of this objective, isolating the empirical data and establishing in time the givenness of the categories that it produces:

“But we do not look at things with the eye of hunger or thirst,” the scientists protests. “We look at them objectively.” “Objectivity” too is a pretty word. To see things as they are, not because one needs them, but in themselves: […] too see objectively either has no sense because it must have a subject or it is the extreme consciousness of the man who is one with things, has all things in himself (Persuasion 89).

314 In this sense Michelstaedter captures the connection between the depositaries of ‘knowledge,’ the ‘technicians,’ the intellectuals who present science as an non-ideological support for progress, and those who direct society in these epistemological forms.

315 Cf. Michelstaedter: Persuasion 88-9: “What is the taste of bread? That of the first piece I eat when I am hungry or the one I eat after, when I am full? […] What is the experience of reality? If I am hungry, reality is nothing more to me than an ensemble of more or less edible things. If I am thirsty, reality is more or less liquid, and more or less potable.”
Man does become one with things, yet not in the sense of the ‘persuaded’ individual who acknowledges in himself the world’s insufficiency, but in the sense of connecting his life to the fictitious sufficiency that knowledge expresses in the ideological forms achieved by society: as the adaptation, therefore, of Being to thought. Following this road it was inevitable that Michelstaedter should focus his criticism as an attack on the Cartesian *cogito*, exposing it as an intellectual construct through which man ‘ensures,’ in an abstract system, his non-being as a down payment on the absolute deriving from relativity. It is not, therefore, a demystification based on skeptical/relativist grounds: the scientific discourse is ‘fictitious’ precisely because it wants to exclude, by not referring to the totality which the subject expresses as deficiency, the possibility of overcoming the historical horizon of nihilism expressed in the “correlativity” of individual needs. It is a connection between Science/Contingency/Common Sense that is being established here: science is characterized as the accumulation of likely truths (it’s the same mechanism regarding the beliefs of subjects) that excludes the ‘deficiency’ of the ontological (which is therefore a cognitive deficiency) giving, in place of that, schemes of abstract ‘signs’ (including language) that feign (more and more perfectly) the regularity of the correlative system, more and more perfectly orienting toward the same purpose the beliefs (the needs) of men, who will thus have the impression of a decline in social frictions because they will calculistically adapt to

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316 Cf. Cacciari: *Interpretazione di Michelstaedter* 26: “The “foundation” of the *cogito* (on which we expect to build a “rigorous” philosophy) actually looks like the same process that distracts at the time of succession, where everything oscillates between being and non-being, where nothing is really present. […] Any intentional conception of truth – in which, that is, truth is reduced to the order of interpretation, to the form of the discourse – is rhetorical […]: the systematic classification of idiomatic expressions is feigned to be a classification of the thing itself.”

317 Cf. Michelstaedter: *Persuasion* 70-1: “If hunger remains unsatisfied, if time removes every good from every present, if pain continues, mute, ungraspable, if the darkness outside presses ever more—what does it matter? We are reflecting: we are in the freedom of thought when we apply its forms of things: *cogitamus ergo sumus*, […] in the system of knowledge lives the absolute freedom of the spirit. Oh the vanity, fenced in by dense oak! But *cogito* does not mean “I know”; *cogito* means I seek to know: that is, I lack knowledge: I do not know.”

318 Cf. Michelstaedter: *Persuasion* 100: “Above all, however, by means of the activity of scientists certain words infiltrate life as signs of given relations, given words on which men unknowingly prop themselves for their daily needs, and without knowing them they pass them on as they were received. Technical terms give men a certain uniformity of language. […] The international language will be the language of technical terms.”
those abstractions for the sake of their ‘necessities,’ which however will more and more become the necessities of all of society (Good and Evil).

That is the reason why ethics is playing the same game, and why a thought which is no longer ‘practical’ (consubstantial with the real life of the subject, as it was in the Socratic dialectic), will have to develop a branch of itself devoted to praxis, in order to provide a theoretical basis to what expresses its need to adapt to the social structure. But if it is theory it is not praxis. In ‘morality’ the survival instinct\textsuperscript{319} itself is involved (the attention for the useful), i.e. the search for a norm abstractly (statistically) derived from the plurality of ends; a ‘duty’ that will be expressed as directed at avoiding any fracture in the ontological illusion (any emerging of pain), in other words, as directed at preserving the ‘second nature’ of the society that protects man from that pain. In such a society, this for Michelstaedter is the \textit{ought}:

\begin{quote}
you are all crucified on the timber of your insufficiency [...] it suits you to say you carry the cross like a sacred duty, whereas you are heavy with the inert weight of your necessity. [...] duties necessary to obtain your lives in peace. When you conform to the ways of the body, family, city, religion, you say, “I perform my duties as a man, son, citizen, Christian,” and against these duties you measure your rights (\textit{Persuasion} 43-4).
\end{quote}

It cannot be left to human consciousness to determine the being of man, because that consciousness is determined by the social process in which it is alienated from itself. There is no \textit{ought} capable of regulating all of society, because that \textit{ought} is the expression of an individual ‘need’ that is already socialized as value, through the subject’s calculistic reaction to what is more true because more useful: “Needs are matched by the promises of \textit{reality} as \textit{values}. [...] As long as one is alive: he desires happiness, postulating a \textit{value} that makes life worth living. He wants the \textit{values of life} to be subordinated to a \textit{greater value}: i.e. the \textit{confirmation of his values}” (in \textit{Dialogo della salute e altri dialoghi} 74-5)\textsuperscript{320} That is why what

\textsuperscript{319} Cf. Michelstaedter: \textit{Parmenide ed Eraclito} 71: “morality is pure survival instinct.”
\textsuperscript{320} Michelstaedter: “Dialogo della salute.”
is mostly perceived as being moral (think of the Vocians) are the social norms in force (Slataper’s ‘work,’ Boine’s army, Rebora’s religion, etc.), in other words, the corroboration of an already hegemonic doxa: the criterion is consent! The spirit of Michelstaedter’s ‘duty’ is therefore not that of German Platonic neo-Kantianism (nor of its Italian offshoots); the spirit of duty converges on the action that is ‘necessary’ (useful!) in relation to the social order that determines the subject himself, and from which, if he wants to be ‘sufficient,’ the subject cannot break free. Like science, morality is the abstract rationalization of the contingent (of needs) as useful to mankind; it is the jilopsucia of the individual augmented by the jilopsucia of society: “in the possibilities of the lives of all men. My will, my inclinations, my interest are transmitted to all mankind […]. My interest is the highest moral human interest. […] The entire and absolute Kant is therefore simply the jilopsucia of mankind” (Parmenide ed Eraclito 71). It is still a second nature (of epistemology as well as of ethics), because what is called Good is still what is ‘convenient’ for the subject (and for the society to which the subject adapts in order to ‘continue’). Since the subject is not independent from society he cannot stand before it autonomously; indeed, the more he believes his theorizations to be autonomous the more he is dominated by it (because he looks upon reality as a means for the satisfaction of his need and adapts to its ‘sufficient’ forms); only by negating himself at every ‘pause,’ only in the raw perception of his insufficiency will he be able to understand how society determines him and recognize that deficiency as the basis of society’s second nature. This, for Michelstaedter, is the way of the Socratic dialectic that resists the “rhetoric” and unveils the presumptions of absolute value, because it demands from them a value which, consisting of ‘relativity,’ they are unable to provide. The dialectic way unveils them as irrational, meaningless (as meaningless is every construction that is derived from them,

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321 Cf. Michelstaedter: “Il prediletto punto d’appoggio della dialettica socratica,” in La melodia 100: “I indicate a good. Socrates makes me agree that good can do no evil – and puts me and my good in a contingency where it is evil. – I no longer care whether it is good, but only whether it is useful to me.”
language included), because meaning is only in man, who, by recognizing his insufficiency, recuperates himself before a fictitiously sufficient (reified) world that he himself has created.

**XI. Social Being and History**

In the Socratic dialectic, the concept required is freed of its finite contents that are expressed in the modes of relativity (which are the modes of the *neikos*), because the subject does not want to affirm his *persona* before others through the modes allowed by society, and thus does not consider the material of the world (other subjects included) as means to attain that self-affirmation, thereby replicating the diffusion of the forms of social being. The dialectic is the dialogue that exposes insufficient life; not the ‘saying’ which the discussion “wins” (heuristics) because more ‘suited’ to the ‘finite’ contents of the historical moment expressed by society, but the “convincing” that shows the common deficiency from above. And indeed isolated persuaded individuals do not exist: an individual is *persuaded* only when he can persuade others, leading them out of the abstractive logic of the exchange value that determines their relations. “Rhetoric” teaches the art of verbal triumph, but this art, Michelstaedter realizes, is only the ‘technique’ through which the speaker ‘mimetically’ adapts (remember Plato’s *Republic*) to what the audience is more willing to hear. The heuristic individual, by connecting to pre-existing social ‘forms,’ seeks to put the other before the absence of alternatives, and to negate the other’s ‘will’ if it strays from the modes expressed by social being. That is why, with the progress of the rhetorical system, the speaker’s work becomes easier as his intents and those of his listeners tend to converge. The heuristic individual is a ‘technician’; he is acquainted with the categorizations of data applied

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322 Cf. Michelstaedter: *Scritti vari* 691: “When they want to communicate, men find that they don’t know how, that they «have not seen», and feel alone: because we cannot say that which is not.” If the concept is not outside of *neikos* it is not even worthy of being said.

323 Cf. Michelstaedter: *Persuasion* 43: “Man must make himself a way to succeed in life […], to bring others with him.”

324 Cf. Michelstaedter: “Questione centrale,” in *L’anima ignuda* 38-41: “Rhetorics in general have reduced the infinite variety of individuals that a speaker can address to a single scheme for which they have determined the laws of motion of passions, etc. […]. When a man wants from another, or from a group of other men, an act, for whatever reason – whether for good or evil ends – he will immediately employ the means that the nature of the audience and of its connection with the thing in question [offer him], and completely neglect to examine the real nature of the thing.”
by society, he knows the “science of signs” (“Appendice VI” 288)\(^{325}\) and can therefore create (operating on contingency) “the theory of expressed beliefs” (“Appendice VI” 297), the classification of what has already happened and will happen again in the same manner, showing others that what is ‘useful’ to them (“illusion of persuasion”) is what is useful to the whole social body, which the individual therefore internalizes. The criterion is consent: rhetoric is a technique of violence (and of power) that overcomes disagreements by dissolving them with reference to the apparent logic of the ‘second nature’ which, defined as Truth (a truth which, as we have seen, is only non-being disguised as Being), preventively determines the directions of knowledge and action. As remarked by Brianese, it’s not the technique that cancels out violence through dialogue (Perelman’s “new rhetoric,” akin to the ‘humorous’ discourse of Pirandello), that promotes agreement without suppressing pluralism (and it’s hard to read Michelstaedter without taking into account the postmodernist drift), because rhetoric preserves a power situation but it conceals it by referring to what is already ‘irrationally’ given: “drawing the lines close to the appearance of facts” (“Appendice VI” 288). Since the conditions for the prevailing of one discourse over another always depend on external factors, common sense becomes the point of truth itself. Recalling an illuminating statement by Jameson on the transformation of rhetoric into style as an element of the atomization of society in the contemporary middle-class world,\(^ {326}\) we may say that the style that has branched off from rhetoric (remember that On Humor arises precisely in opposition to the concept of imitation represented by rhetoric) wants to go back, surreptitiously, to being rhetoric, even as it continues to consider itself ‘style’; we may say that the subject who expresses his ‘will,’ determined by need, must, in order to ensure it, situate it within the broader structures of a society which, however, is no longer the organic community of

\(^{325}\) Cf. Michelstaedter: “Appendice VI” 288: “Rhetoric is also psychology, Rhetoric understands passions and characters.”

\(^{326}\) Cf. Jameson: Marxism and Form 333-4: “in reality what we call style is a relatively recent phenomenon and comes into being along with the middle-class world itself. It may be thought of as a consequence of the abandonment of that classical system of education which was built around Latin and Greek texts; for style is essentially that which in modern middle-class culture replaces the rhetoric of the classical period. […] for rhetoric is in this sense that ensemble of techniques through which a writer or orator may achieve expressiveness or high style, conceived of as a relatively fixed class standard, as an institution in which the most diverse temperaments are able to participate. Style, on the other hand, is the very element of individuality.”
classical rhetoric, but merely the ideological illusion that it feigns as a ‘second nature’ (surrogate of Totality), reiterating the fictitious union between Universal and Particular (truth and relativity; instrumental cohesion and atomization) which is the point on which bourgeois society ideologically stands.

At this point Michelstaedter takes the only step allowed to a thought that refuses to take part in this mechanism: while continuing to analyze the functioning of Rhetoric, he defines Being as absence, and links it to the ‘practice’ of a subject who refers to himself, beyond any theorein, in the continuing praxis of his deficiency, in the concrete totality expressed by that praxis, in relation to social knowledge, as deficere (the impossibility of finding ‘satisfaction’ in the relative):

The absolute—I’ve never known it, but I know it in the way the man suffering from insomnia knows sleep, or the man watching the darkness knows light. What I know is that my consciousness, whether corporeal or soulful, is made of deficiency, that I do not have the Absolute until I am absolute, that I do not have Justice until I am just (Persuasion 65-6).

The fear of ‘death’ (of not continuing, of not being able to continue to ‘use’ the things of the world as required by the ontological illusion) is seen as the last element produced by the ideological aberration by which that ‘fear’ is deceptively, continually, suppressed, resulting (exactly as with the interlacing of absolute and relative!) in an existence that is dominated by death precisely because of the unceasing attempts to conceal it by dissimulating the ‘temporal’ element (which is the element of death) that destroys the presumptions of ends and values (death lies hidden in every life that feigns the modes of Being). For the subject to be released from this commixture of life and death, death must be accepted (‘endured’) like the abyss of insufficiency which determines the subject, not through the categorizations of the

327 Cf. Campailla: *Ai ferri corti con la vita* 87: “those men are dominated by the fear of death and their whole life is directed at obtaining the beneficial stupor; they are people doomed to die whose faces already carry the signs of the exorcised Death.”

328 Far from the “innocence of becoming.”
flow of things that conceal death in the mechanism of *jilopsucia*, but in the ‘absence’ of knowledge (Socrates) which is also the absence of Being:

Not giving men support against their fear of death but taking this fear away, […] this is the activity that eradicates the violence. “That is impossible.” Certainly: impossible! For the *possible* is what is given. The possible are the needs, the necessities of continuing, what is within the limited power directed to continuation, in fear of death, what is death in life, the indifferent fog of things that are and are not. The courage of the impossible is the light that cuts the fog (*Persuasion* 50).

To accept death (to expose the world ‘melancholically’) will then be the task of he who is on the way to persuasion, he who accepts his deficiency and opposes the objectified structure placed before him by the ideological level achieved by society (historically). And for this reason the way to persuasion allows no pause – “When you ask to «continue» in peace, you are asking for an illusion” (*Scritti vari* 784)- this negates ‘time’ as it asks for Being, but since it asks for the true Being (not the categorizations of the relative) it knows that it is missing, and so it continues in time, it continues to oppose – thereby showing the absence of Being – that which is feigned by Being. The totality which the ‘deficiency’ evokes as a union of thought and life is not the regressive dream of an intact past (*Kultur*), but the consciousness which in the present (in every present, in the each-time present) refers to the absent totality as it denounces the each-time ‘second nature.’ And that is why man’s approach to Justice is said asymptotic: it exists only as ‘absence’ (it cannot be, as we know, an ethical element), it exists as a struggle in time for its ‘real’ presence. In this way, the image of totality that each time, in time, the subject makes real in his deficiency against the second nature (the dialectic between these two poles is in fact ‘real,’ social, and continuing in time) so coordinates the forms of utopia. That is why Christ, for Michelstaedter, saves himself alone, that is why “to follow does not mean imitating” (*Persuasion* 72), ‘persuasion’ cannot be a ‘method’ because it itself is in time, although it wants to be the negation of time: because ‘persuasion’ (and Michelstaedter is very clear about this) can be understood (can appear to the subject) only in

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329 Michelstaedter: “Della vita contemplativa.”
relation to the forms of sufficiency that one sees before himself – “do not adapt yourself to the sufficiency of what is given to you” (Persuasion 73) – and because the forms of society move through time (they are not of course nature, but only the expression of the ideological level achieved by society):

General histories and philosophies of history are the self-praising of mankind as it affirms itself […] not in the sense that man basically never changes and is always in the same position in the face of life – but in the sense that they are always attributed the degree of social individuality that the writer contingently knows because it is his own (Sfugge la vita 152-3).330

Then the ability of Christ to perceive the deficiency expresses the historical form of ‘his’ resistance, of his ‘redemption’ (it shows the ‘fractures’ of ‘his’ world). The attitude of the man on the way to persuasion is the same, but the forms of sufficiency he encounters are different, as different are the ‘weapons’ at his disposal for the fight, because these too (‘vitality,’ Greece, tragic thought, etc.) will depend, as perfectly understood by Fausto Curi who refers to the Karl Marx of The Eighteenth Brumaire,331 on what one has to face on the way to persuasion.

And this is of course a practical problem, something to be dealt with in practice. And at this point, how could it be something to be solved in theory? Something that, resolved in that manner, could let you go back to living your life like before… Obviously not – in Michelstaedter’s view if you are not able to live it you haven’t even understood it332: you are only reiterating the dominion of abstraction, of sufficiency over deficiency:

_The world is not something you say, but something you live._ – But if I am here, and ‘say’ more things than I live, every time in each of these the basic illusion of my being repeats itself […]; and as the world is to me, so now any thing upon which I

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330 Michelstaedter is not critiquing history: he is critiquing a mechanism of doing history that re-presents the same features of the epistemological mechanism and the ethical mechanism: presenting the majority view of society as your own.
332 Cf. Michelstaedter: “Dialogo della salute,” in Dialogo della salute e altri dialoghi 83: “and then I would give a profound and philosophical slap on the head to my brother whenever he dared upset the quiet of my sanctuary where I was manufacturing wisdom.”
direct my lifeless gaze, that thing will not only be true for me at that point in space and time in whatever way is necessary for my life; but it will be a world in itself: not something to be lived but something to be said. [...] necessary is the theoretical point, because there remains in me the deficiency of life and necessary to this is the fiction of the knowing person, and necessary to this person is the sufficiency of knowledge (“Appendice” II 207-8).

Persuasion is a practical problem: the “research [...] is not ONE cold analysis but the life of this point of contingency towards universality” (Sfugge la vita 119). It is that because its center is the real life of the individual in which the “rhetoric” erupts. Persuasion is the point at which words turn into deeds and Being coincides with doing (knowledge with action): it coincides, that is to say, with the actions through which the subject persuades others revealing their common deficiency (thus exposing the structures of rationalization as its very concealment) and, by delivering them from the fear of death, from the diminished life of jilopsucia, opens up the space of courage. By communicating the need for persuasion, the only rational end available to individuals, he redeems the violence of the neikos because he throws into crisis the system of relativity and need not in the forms of the ‘second nature’ (which are the separation of theory and action), nor in the behavioral models of correlative uniformity (language, ethics, theory of knowledge, etc.), but in indicating the deficiency common to all things, i.e. in the Being (again as a lacking) that is estranged from thought, thus revealing this ‘estrangement.’ This action is symbolically placed by Michelstaedter under the structures of ‘giving’ – “To give everything and ask nothing – that is the way” (Epistolario 419) because ‘giving’ is opposed to the principle of ‘exchange’ which presupposed the bare giving-to-take (usefulness), the illusionistic concession by which the other, driven by ‘need,’ acquired ontological consistency by ‘continuing’ in the forms of the

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333 Cf. Michelstaedter: letter to Enrico Mreule dated June 29, 1910, in Epistolario 442: “how your words have turned into action! instead, I still feed on words and I’m ashamed of it.”

334 Cf. Michelstaedter: Persuasion 74: “what is certain is that at the point where one turns to look at one’s profile in the shadow, one destroys it. Thus, by turning toward knowing, which is the persona, the actual consciousness of the honest will of persuasion, man destroys it forever.”

335 Michelstaedter: letter to Gaetano Chiavacci dated November 28, 1909.
simulated social ‘stability.’ Giving therefore means revealing the deficiency through which man ‘sacrifices’ the stable forms of his being-in-society: it is not fictitious Reason demanding ‘obedience’ in the structures of the modes of correlativity expressed in rationalization, but the reference to a totality (because the subject’s deficient life is contained in it) that resists each-time. In a sense, then, Chiavacci was right in arguing, contrary to Gentile, that persuasion is dealt with in all Michelstaedter’s works, because it is not the pars construens that follows the pars destruens, but the only possible way to make rhetoric appear historically (in the each-time present) to the consciousness of the individual that is in the activity of persuasion: in the demonstration of the lack of Being that opens up to the alternative. So much for the absence of a dialectical relationship between Persuasion and Rhetoric! The point between the two modes is still a dialectic one (precisely because it is each-time dialectic), but this dialectic is activated only by virtue of the very desire to suppress it (Being-as-absence), because without this desire, without the presupposition of a Being which is not given in these social structures, Rhetoric would not even appear as such to the eyes of the subject, it would be perfectly concealed. “But men say, “That’s fine, but in the meantime, in the meantime you’ve got to live.” “In the meantime […] every instant of rest is the way back; no rest for the man who carries a weight upward, for when he puts it down he will have to return and pick it up again where it will have sunk” (Persuasion 41-2).

336 Cf. Michelstaedter: Scritti vari 734: “Giving is not so that the other may keep or be helped to continue […]. That would not be you giving, but the other taking and you letting him take. – Giving is so the other may have […] The will to give is the same as the will to possess […]. And the resulting act will not be […] giving another what he believes he is missing, but taking away his fear, giving him courage.”

337 Cf. Michelstaedter: “Dialogo della salute,” in Dialogo della salute e altri dialoghi 84-6: “and through his own firmness makes others firm. – He has nothing to defend from others and nothing to ask of them, because for him there is no future, nothing to expect. (…) the evil of the common deficiency speaks to him with one voice and he strives to resist it with all his life and in every point. – He looks death in the face and gives life to the dead bodies around him (…). And death, like life, is unarmed before him, who does not ask for life and does not fear death.”

338 Gentile penned a review for the new edition of the book (1922) in La Critica, XX, fasc. IV, pp. 332-6, in which he says he finds interesting the parts dealing with “rhetoric” but unconvincing, on the philosophical level, the parts dealing with “persuasion.”

339 Cf. Michelstaedter: Persuasion 54: “He will suffer at one and the same point of his deficiency and theirs: speaking the voice of his own pain, he will speak to them the distant voice of their own pain. […] so he will place near them a life by which they will see the weave of what presses and distracts them gradually unravel […] Freed from what they believe indispensable, from cares, from the weight of the myriad little things in which their life always dissipates and around which it always turns.”
The is no stopping: rhetoric changes over time assigning the criterion of objectivity to the each-time givenness of the hegemonic cultural values, each time confirming as Being the relation existing between real history and the theoretical production that continually accretes on it, adapting to itself (mystifying) the deficient life of the subject who can no longer express himself in his praxis:

Always, in every way, the world is shouting at him with its fury and the blows of its infinite wheels: “Find yourself a hub”! And on he goes in his desperate search for this hub […]. With no more illusions and no more ideals he all too soon comes to a harsh understanding; the hub you are looking for is no more than a sum of contingencies, of necessities outside yourself, where you can swirl away at the required speed, so to engage with the cogs of the wheels next to you in the illusion of being someone and be recognized as such by others (in Il prediletto punto 124).  

The process of rationalization and mechanization that finds accomplishment in theory, thereby granting ontological illusion – in the adaptation to this process – to the individual ‘needs,’ is always a socially real process that calls in as actor (which Michelstaedter calls the “ganging up of meanies”) he who in this second nature no longer sees the terms of his alienation, living in peace – at least as long as he can mimetically submit others to the same ‘system’ – in this irrational union of Universality and Contingency:

But because “knowledge” is needed in this manner, it is also necessary that there be demand. […] But the sick are created. When youngsters beat their wings to rise above ordinary life, […] this is none other than “thirst for knowledge,” one says, and with the water of knowledge their flame is extinguished. The certain end, the reason for being, freedom, justice, possession, everything is given them in finite words applied to diverse things and then extracted [the Italian word is “astratte”: “abstracted”] from those things (Persuasion 69).

The sick are so because “life in every form wants life” (Persuasion 141), and they want to continue even through the neikos as long as it shows the appearance of accord. Society presents in theory a criterion for adaptation that feigns, from time to time, in the forms of eternity (of Nature), a reified world that grants consistency to the consciousness subjected to

340 Michelstaedter: “Quando dorme lo spirito.”
the relativity of needs. Thus mankind is induced to do without the false, unstable consistency of the direct mode, provided this renunciation is expressed for the ‘sake’ of something greater that grants them a more perfect illusion: “The desert becomes a cloister, […] the toil of the rites takes on the name of sanctity; the wielding of concepts assumes the name of knowledge; imitative technique assumes the name of art; any virtuosity assumes the name of a virtue […]. And the brutish, obscure toil of the minimal life has the same name and right to exist as the postulate of the maximal life” (Persuasion 96). Thus even education takes the form of a social psychagogy based on the themes of sufficiency and ‘calculation,’ of ought-to-be and of separation between theory and praxis as constant adaptation to the social good (usefulness):

> The worst violence is exercised on children under the guise of affection and civil education. For with the promise of rewards and the threat of punishment […] they adhere to the forms necessary to a polite family, those which, being hostile to their nature, must be forced on them by violence or corruption. […] The great expectation of a value is gradually flattered by means of the fiction of value in the social persona, always displayed before him as that which he should cultivate in himself by imitation. “You’ll be a good boy like the ones you see going to school, you’ll be like a grown-up.” […] Everyone takes advantage of this temporary anima, which dreams of “when it will be a grown-up,” in order to violate it, “straitjacket” […] From the very first duty allotted to him, all effort tends to render him indifferent to what he does, so that he should perform it according to the rules with complete objectivity. “on one hand duty, on the other pleasure.” If you study well, I’ll give you a candy. Otherwise I won’t let you play.” […] “You studied—now you can go play!” And the child grows accustomed to considering study a labor necessary in order to live content, even if, in itself, it is completely unrelated to his life, to candies and playing and so on. […] sufficiency and calculation (Persuasion 149-50).

These children will be the future wheels of the mechanism and, with play replaced by profit, will do their ‘bit of labor’ (having found their “hubs”), something that gives them the means to go on living in the forms required by society, reiterating those very forms. They will be the judge who limits himself to mimetically applying the ‘code’ of laws, the intellectual who mimetically teaches and reproduces the ideological level achieved by society, the executioner who performs his duty, the scientist who produces objectivity.341 They might even ask themselves ‘philosophical’ questions about the meaning of life, but they will do so knowing

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that research is one thing, play is another – “Theory is one thing, practice another”

(*Persuasion* 151), and value (stability) will be the convention that societal ‘security’ offers as adaptation to its objectivity:

And when behind those words the smallest needs will impose their exact wills as if they were a tariff, the god’s dream will be accomplished: and the science of life will be in the hands of everyone, because everyone will be in the hands of a life reduced to science (“Appendice VI” 299). 342

Michelstaedter, with a Marcusian perspective, imagines the possibility (another historical ‘weapon’ of persuasion) of the cyclic institutionalization of this ‘form,’ the complete elimination of the antagonistic moment expressed by persuasion. This is the point at which all the ‘relations’ of correlativeity will settle into the repetition of exchange, realizing the Enlightenment mirage of action (also linguistic) continually and perfectly replicating the structures ‘foreseen’ by society:

*Language* shall attain the limit of absolute persuasiveness […]. It shall arrive at silence when each act has its absolute efficiency. And if one of these poor remnants of humanity should one sunny day sense a spark of life, almost a reminiscence across the ages in his sluggish brain, and tarry in thought over the handle of his machine, and distance himself from labor, his companion will have a little difficulty in making him see reason: “Come,” he’ll say. “It’s your moral duty!” The other will understand at once, “It is bread,” and he will go to his labor with a bowed head. […] Before gaining the reign of silence each word shall be kallopisma orjnes [ornament of the darkness]: an absolute appearance, the immediate efficacy of a word that no longer has but the most minimal, obscure instinct of life. All words shall be technical terms when the obscurity is veiled in the same way for everyone, and [because] everyone shall be equally domesticated. Words shall refer to relations in the same determinate manner for all. […] one shall say: virtue, morals, duty, religion, people, god, kindness, justice, sentiment, good, evil, useful, useless, and so on, and the given relations of life shall be rigorously understood343 […] Men shall play one another like as many keyboards. Then will the writer of rhetoric manuals have it easy. For the life of man shall truly have become the divine *mesotis* that from the night of future ages shone forth to Aristotle’s societal soul. Men shall speak but ouden lexousin [say nothing] (*Persuasion* 137-8). 344

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342 This is a variant: this is where this Appendix originally ended.
343 Every word will always refer to a fixed relation of life.
344 This should have explained why persuasion cannot be identified with silence, as well as with ‘duty’: silence is the accomplishment of rhetoric as a language that is forever reproducing the same reifications.
Here no more contradictions are perceived: everything exists, in the full ‘stability’ of theory, as contradiction called being, as darkness called light. And from this point on, the doors are closed both to the ‘delight of the earth’ and to the hope of value, because one and the other (‘life’ and ‘form’ work together) have contributed to build the security of the unstable, the ‘system of relativity,’ through the ‘consent’ that makes everything, at this point, into Erlebnis (both the delight of ‘flowing’ and the hope of consisting will be able to adapt to the modes of rhetoric that changes in time following the induced oscillations of ‘common sense’). The moment Michelstaedter realizes that modernity is characterized by the real (not subjective, not ‘idealistic’) use of the powers of abstraction (which are powers very different from those of Metaphysics), it is no longer even a matter of choosing between the way of the Universal and the way of the Particular, between the One and the manifold, because all that is henceforth produced is the abstraction of the particular modes that separates men from themselves. So then, in both the directions that we have examined in this paper, we discover with Michelstaedter that it was the issue of alienation itself that had been set aside, in the very way (the Krisis and the intellectuals’ reaction to it) it had been presented, because both in the epistemological approach and the ethical approach the phenomenon was reduced to the mental picture of the phenomenon itself. While Michelstaedter is certainly far from the epistemological perspectives of the young Prezzolini or Soffici (persuasion grants no rights to the relative, nor to the liberation from the cages of Being that this would imply), neither does he take sides with the so-called Vocian moralists (as we have seen, putting morality back into life only means making life the duty that this life requires). Michelstaedter knows that the crisis is a historical one, and his position “is the most advanced and the most penetrating as regards critical consciousness” (Muzzioli: in Eredità 88) precisely because it expresses a capacity for historical resistance against the system of abstractions of ‘his’ time,

345 Cf. Rella: “Il discredito della ragione,” in Crisi della ragione 172: “you cannot oppose, against the attractiveness of strong unitary reason, the auratic fascination of otherness, of the rhizome, of dispersion and error, because each inexorably refers to the other: they are mirror images.”
346 This dissertation was structured in the same manner, presenting these problems following the thinking of the individual authors. In a sense, Michelstaedter grants ‘consciousness’ even to this modest work.
while at the same time outlining the possibility of each-time resistance,\textsuperscript{347} i.e. the possibility of opposing, against any historical moment that wants to transpire as nature, the possibility of reactivating history by referring to the lack of Being:

To those who despair of every fixed point, of every straight path, every destination, for they have seen that the ways of society are twisting and vain, you shall point out the essence of their demands, «the need for a straight path». […] you shall draw your sword against the «institutions» that give them their name and sufficiency, you shall destroy the «manger» at which they feed, you shall fight in every way the principle of cowardice […] ensconced in society (\textit{Scritti vari} 704).

By equating Being to the deficiency imposed by the modes of existence of society (the search for that kind of being, which is also the recognition of the practical, deficient side of the subject’s life, is precisely what the mechanism of “rhetoric” aims at preventing, feigning being in relativity), Michelstaedter effectively demolishes the myth of autonomy of thought, which he reconducts to the forms of its social behavior, the forms to which thought born out of ‘need’ adapts. Therefore persuasion cannot be a ‘theory’ among others, because it subjects to criticism, once this is separated from the totality (i.e. from the real life of the subject), all cultural activity and its actors.

Of course Michelstaedter could not redeem his age all by himself (who can redeem one’s age by oneself?). He could only, by exposing its ideologies, bring awareness to a whole generation: «He who does not live with \textit{persuasion}» – he who fails to oppose against the finite forms of abstraction the totality that they are unable to contain, but forsakes it and feigns it in those forms, relating to them his own discourse which he still believes autonomous – well, that man can do many things, but he \textit{cannot fail to obey, for he has already obeyed}’ (\textit{Persuasion} 35).

\textsuperscript{347} Perhaps that is why, as Garin observed, the writings of Michelstaedter find their way to us in the most dramatic moments in the history of Italy.
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Biography

Mimmo Cangiano received a doctorate from the University of Florence with a dissertation on the young Aldo Palazzeschi.

He has published essays on Luigi Pirandello, Carlo Michelstaedter, Scipio Slataper, György Lukács, Hugo von Hoffmannsthal, Giovanni Boine, Giuseppe Prezzolini, Edoardo Sanguineti, on journals such as «Studi Italiani», «Rivista di Letterature Moderne e comparate», «Poetiche», and «Annali d'Italianistica».

In 2011 he published his first book, titled *L’Uno e il molteplice nel giovane Palazzeschi (1905-1915)*, Florence, SEF.