The Pact of Geryon: An Italian Theory of Ethics and Representation

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The Pact of Geryon:

An Italian Theory of Ethics and Representation

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Abstract:

The Pact of Geryon: An Italian Theory of Ethics and Representation

A word or an image is not a gentle breeze that plays lightly across the surface of things and leaves them unaltered. Whether an artist tells a story, makes a film, writes a poem, or puts on a play, he or she is acting in the world via the act of representation. Prior to the ethical implications of what is said—the myriad ideologies and agendas that a work might pursue—there is the (un)ethical step at the heart of all semiotics: words and images are never quite what they wish to be.

Merely by coming into being, all artistic texts participate in a certain kind of transgression. Dante Alighieri expressed his uneasiness with the dialectics of truth and falsehood in a memorable image: his pilgrim protagonist descended into the depths of the inferno on the back of a monster named Geryon, who was—simultaneously—an extremely useful vehicle and an embodiment of the darkest and most deeply human sin, fraud. To narrate a "true" story, Dante was paradoxically forced to corral a blatant untruth, a creature with the very face of a lie. Such is the Pact of Geryon: the acceptance of transgression as a path towards productive speech.

"The Pact of Geryon: An Italian Theory of Ethics and Representation" examines ethical and structural questions about representation in selected works from the past two hundred years of artistic production in Italy, including poetry, prose, theater, and film. The goal of this sustained argument is, in part, to reposition metaliterariness and self-reflexivity as a valuable source of ethical content. In thinking about themselves, works of art contemplate the nature of the relationship between language and reality, a relationship which has crucial implications for ethics and praxis in the real world.

Chapter One, "The Idea of the Impetus," works with the early poetry of Giuseppe Ungaretti and Eugenio Montale in order to explore how the two poets conceptualize the relationship between poetry and the "what" it seeks to communicate—which I call the *impetus*. I also examine how each poet re-stages and re-writes Giacomo Leopardi's classic lyric poem "L'Infinito" as a way to express the structure of inspiration. Ungaretti portrays the impetus as a penetration that enters the poet's silence and writes itself within subjectivity. Accordingly, there is a concrete relationship between the impetus and its expression. Montale, on the other hand, depicts the impetus as always retreating and inexpressible. Through imagery reminiscent of negative theology, Montale's early poetry articulates the impetus by means of giving form to what it is not and cannot be.

Chapter Two, "Ethics, Identity, and the Republic," positions Plato's *Republic* as a foundational text for addressing ethics and representation in the Western tradition. After foregrounding the issue of identity as an underlying rationale for Plato's expulsion of certain kinds of mimetic art from the ideal republic, I discuss the 2016 unmasking of the famously anonymous Italian author Elena Ferrante. Crucially, I address the thorny issue of whether and when artists are allowed to tell stories about people who are very different. I argue that acceptance of the artist's right to anonymity is incompatible with a purely identity-based censorship of art on the basis of cultural appropriation.

Chapter Three, "The Ethics of Imagining," dwells at length on Italo Calvino's highly expressionistic, metaliterary, and non-mimetic novel *Le città invisibili*. Despite its apparent distance from artistic engagement and the traditional subject matters of ethics, Calvino's novel encapsulates and interrogates the most important issues of ethics and representation, which range from the problems of imagining Otherness to the metonymic violence of representation as a communicative structure. A non-violent (or less violent) strategy of representation is an essential feature of the Utopian ambition of Calvino's text: to create and do no harm is perhaps ideal, but it is also

impossible. Ultimately, the final passage of Calvino's novel recommends a Gramscian model of value creation that involves using bricolage to assemble a system of discernment within the semiotic glut of contemporary existence.

Chapter Four, "Do No Harm?" investigates to what extent a *primum non nocere* principle can or should be adopted as a guideline for the ethics of representation. At least for artists, avoiding harm cannot be treated as the primary goal. The most ethical works of art are those that embrace and recognize their nature as potentially transgressive partisans. The chapter ends by revisiting the relationship between language and power in the linguistic education of Renzo in Alessandro Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*. Through Renzo's semiotic journey, Manzoni's novel explores how powerful individuals—those with great economic, physical, cultural capital—can exploit the ambiguity of language in self-serving ways. Rather than challenging these structures, however, Manzoni's novel concludes with a different lesson for Renzo: carefully chosen reticence can be better than reckless speech.

Chapter Five, "Of Hospitality in *Paisà*," explores many of the same questions introduced in Chapter Four by adopting Jacques Derrida's theorization of absolute hospitality as an emblem for nonviolence and postulating Carl Schmitt's politics of naming as an opposing pragmatic extreme. Using the Derrida-Schmitt pairing as an interpretive key, I analyze two sequences of *Paisà*—the story of Carmela and Joe from Jersey in Part I and the visit of the three foreign military chaplains to an Italian monastery in Part V—in order to call attention to the inevitable co-presence of friendship and enmity in the hospitality that passed between allies in the World War II era. I conclude by offering a somewhat unsettling interpretation of the film's ambiguous fifth episode which concludes with a gesture of rejection: the Italian monks refuse to break bread with American visitors of a different religion. Despite the troubling ethical implications of the scene, I argue that the viewer must grant primacy to the semiotics of the scene which unambiguously portray the monks' action in

a positive light. If war demands new alliances, perhaps the post-war period demands a renaissance for rejection and return of older value distinctions.

Chapter Six, "On Mixed Compositions," fixes its eyes on the ethical consequences of portraying history through art—particulary when claims for historical truth are mixed with fiction, fantasy, and other products of the imagination. Using *Roma città aperta*, especially the film's treatment of the historically inspired characters Don Pietro and Pina, I ponder the ethical obligations that attach to any true story and examine how works of art position themselves to shoulder or avoid such obligations. I follow with a critique of Manzoni's essay *Del romanzo storico* before moving on to an assessment of the creative transgressions inherent in Elsa Morante's *La storia*, ostensibly a novel written for those who cannot read and on behalf of those who cannot write. I conclude by taking a look at Morante's restaging of the language-centered osteria scene from *I promessi sposi* which places the young idealist Davide Segre in the place of Renzo. If Renzo learns to keep his mouth shut, Davide Segre suffers from the realization that cultural difference can form an uncrossable bridge between a speaker and his audience.

Chapter Seven, "In Search of an Ethics," explores Luigi Pirandello's ambiguous fascism alongside the Sicilian playwright's overriding concerns with the relationship between language and power. Although Pirandello too might be said to have abandoned the political sphere in his theater, his Nobel prize-winning *ouvre* nevertheless frequently explores dynamic questions related to ethics and representation. Specifically, I argue that the Pirandello's conception of language is animated by the co-presence of lightness and weight. The existential lightness of language—the fact that a given word has no constant intrinsic meaning—is always countered by the great heaviness of meaning within the communally constructed language game of power.

Chapter Eight, "The Reticence of Empty Space," closes my sustained argument about ethics and language with a reading of the language of visual space in Pier Paolo Pasolini's film

fable *Uccellacci e uccellini*. In this film, Pasolini creates a deliberate contrast between the written spaces of the neocapitalist present and the open, unwritten horizon which serves as a figuration for the unknown and unknowable future. Taking place in a time of transition for the Left, Pasolini's film fable visualizes the future as crucially important but unrepresented and/or unrepresentable. As such, *Uccellacci* participates in a kind of ethically motivated reticence. The film says less about the future in order to minimize its potential for harm: the blank space of the sky functions as a bulwark against inaccuracy, distortion, misrepresentation, and misunderstanding of the sacred, which in this case is the future itself.

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A NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

Although "The Pact of Geryon" primarily examples drawn from the literature and film of 20ᵗʰ century Italy, I have endeavored to provide English-language translations of all cited materials so as to make the collection accessible to readers with a less-than-perfect command of Italian.

In order to facilitate close reading by Italianists, all citations originally written in Italian will be given in the footnotes. For the sake of space, I have made an exception for footnotes: quotations here will give only English or Italian, not both. With one exception, all quotations originally written in any language other than English or Italian—e.g., French, German, Greek, etc.—will be cited only in English translation.

In most cases—and whenever I draw substantially from a given work—I will rely on a previously published English translation (which will be identified parenthetically for the first citation only). When this is the case, the parenthetical in-text citation will refer to the page number *in the translated version*; page numbers cited after original language in the footnotes refer to the page numbers of the Italian version. Both versions appear in the works cited.

In certain cases—either when no translation is easily accessible or when I feel that my argument rests on a particular understanding of the original Italian—I will translate the citation myself. Whenever I am using my own translation, I will indicate "my translation" in the citation placed in the body of the text. The parenthetical citation will refer to the original language edition.

There is also a third scenario, one which occurs only a handful of times, in which I have started with a previously published translation and made a few meaningful adjustments—in such cases I will write "translation altered" and indicate the translation I have used as a starting point.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us
realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand.
The artist must know the manner whereby to convince
others of the truthfulness of his lies.[1]
– Pablo Picasso, Statement to Marius de Zayas (1923)

The Pact of Geryon: Towards an Ethics of Representation in Italian Poesis

In the words of Jean-Paul Sartre, it is a serious error to believe that any artistic

representation is merely "a gentle breeze which plays lightly over the surface of things, which grazes

them without altering them" (*What Is Literature?* Trans. Bernard Frechtman, p. 22). Representation is

a choice with meaningful consequences, and that choice is therefore subject to the realm of ethical

judgment, discernment, and decision-making. What we choose to represent, how we choose to

represent it, even the fact that we opt for speech instead of silence: these choices say something

about our vision of a good life. But prior to and beyond whatever is transmitted, the primary focus

of "The Pact of Geryon" will be on the *process* of communication itself. This involves the encoding

of content into communicable form.

Quite often, especially in the 20th century, the impetus of a work of art—the very "what"

that it strives to communicate—is the sheer difficulty of saying anything at all. According to

pioneering information theorist Claude Shannon, this is the fundamental problem of

communication: "reproducing at one point either exactly or approximately a message selected at

another point" (31). According to James Gleick, there are two crucial words in Shannon's definition:

"point" and "selected." These words draw attention to the spatial and temporal aspect of

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[1] Cited in Barr, Alfred. *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1946. p. 270. The statement
was originally made in Spanish to Marius de Zayas in 1923. Picasso approved the translation, which was published in *The
Arts*, New York: May 1923. pp. 315-26.

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communication, as well as to the fact that messages involve a selection among choices rather than a

kind of *ex nihilo* creation of content:

> "Point" was a carefully chosen word: the origin and destination of a message
> could be separated in space or time. […] Meanwhile, the message is not
> created; it is selected. It is a choice. It might be a card dealt from a deck, or
> three decimal digits chosen from the thousand possibilities, or a combination
> of words from a fixed code book. (Gleick 222)

Art too, then, is a choice. Because it is a choice that potentially has meaningful consequences in the

real world, creating a work of art is an *ethical* act.

Perhaps it is uncomfortable to think of art in this way: as a choice among a limited number

of alternatives rather than a completely unbounded act of free creation. But to the extent that it

participates in a shared language, even a work of art must be seen as a choice among possibilities.

There is always the possibility that it could have been otherwise, that it might have assumed a

different form, used different words or images, or perhaps been composed in a different language or

genre. The finished work is just one of many possible works. Many, many, many possible works.

The number of such possibilities is certainly astronomically large, but it is—nevertheless—finite.

Even the most "open" work is an act of selection. In order to be comprehensible (that is, to convey

any meaningful message at all) it must participate in shared systems of meaning.

The pragmatic purpose of art—the fact that it is created *in order to* achieve the transmission

of meaning—is what imposes a limit on its possibilities. Let's return to Shannon:

> Frequently the messages have *meaning*; that is, they refer to or are correlated
> according to some system with certain physical or conceptual entities. These
> semantic aspects of communication are irrelevant to the engineering
> problem. (31)

Although irrelevant to the "engineering problem" of communication, meaning is crucial to the

communication problem of the work of art. The famous Italian novelist and literary theorist

Umberto Eco associated meaning with the concept of redundancy: the extent to which a work

participates in shared and pre-established semantic codes. In contrast to meaning, Eco's sense of

information was linked to creativity, innovation, and openness:

> In its mathematical formulations […] information theory makes a radical distinction between "meaning" and "information." The meaning of a message […] is a function of the order, the conventions, and the redundancy of its structure. The more one respects the laws of probability (the pre-established principles that guide the organization of a message and are reiterated via the repetition of foreseeable elements), the clearer and less ambiguous its meaning will be. Conversely, the more improbable, ambiguous, unpredictable, and disordered the structure, the greater the information— here understood as potential, as the inception of possible orders.[2] (Trans. Anna Cancogeni 93)

For Eco, the problem of the *opera aperta* or "open work" is to strike a balance between openness and

closure, between what makes a work unique and what makes it comprehensible. No meaningful

work could be written as a pure act of *parole* unbounded by any possible *langue*.[3] In order to be

understood, it must participate in communally established system of meanings and structures. "A

work of art can be open only insofar as it remains a work," wrote Eco, "beyond a certain boundary,

it becomes mere noise" (100).[4]

We might think of works of art as existing along a continuum between openness and

closure. On one extreme, there are the information-rich, ambiguous enigmas that invite a seemingly

endless variety of interpretations. In contrast, at the closed end of the spectrum, we begin to

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[2] "La teoria dell'informazione, nelle sue formulazioni a livello matematico […] ci parla di una differenza radicale tra 'significato' e 'informazione.' Il *significato* di un messaggio […] si stabilisce in proporzione all'ordine, alla convenzionalità e quindi alla 'ridondanza' della struttura. Tanto più il significato è chiaro e inequivocabile quanto più mi attengo a regole di probabilità, a leggi organizzative prefissate – e reiterate attraverso la ripetizione degli elementi prevedibili. Di converso, quanto più la struttura si fa improbabile, ambigua, imprevedibile, disordinata, tanto più aumenta l'*informazione*. Informazione intesa quindi come possibilità informativa, incoatività di ordini possibili." (Eco 168)

[3] At various points in this sustained argument, I will refer to the concepts of *langue* and *parole* from Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*. These two words are useful in terms of distinguishing between two distinct concepts in language. To put it simply, the *langue* refers to the shared, pre-established systems of meaning creation within a language: the rules, definitions, assumptions, and grammar that permits a given utterance to be understood. The *langue* in other words, is linguistic context. *Parole* is an act of individual utterance. If I say "I think it is going to rain today," that sentence is an instance of *parole*; the *langue* is everything that allows such an utterance to be understood.

[4] "Un'*opera* è *aperta* sinché rimane *opera*, oltre questo limite si ha l'apertura come *rumore*."(Eco 177)

approach something resembling propaganda. The former leaves a maximum of agency to the reader; the latter seeks to make its message as unambiguous as possible. Where, along this spectrum, does the ethical work lie? Is the most ethical work open enough to exert the lightest possible influence on its readers? Or is it closed enough to eliminate the greatest possible amount of distortion or misunderstanding? What kind of work does justice to what it seeks to convey?

There is clearly moral ambiguity on both sides. There is the *lassez-faire* ambiguity of a too-open work, which suggests a kind of indifference to the message gleaned by its users or readers. On the other hand, there is the dictatorial, domineering control of the too-closed work. Such a closed work might seem close-minded, evincing a lack of respect for other opinions, perspectives, and viewpoints. A maximally open work might seek to approximate an impossibly gentle breeze that plays lightly over the surface of things without altering them. In contrast, altering things—in other words, participating in real-world praxis—might be considered the primary goal of a maximally closed work, one that would seek to break through the surface with the force of a sledgehammer. Prior to anything he or she might say or believe, the way an artist chooses to position himself or herself along this spectrum is itself an ethical choice. This is the crux of ethics and representation.

The wedding of art to ethics is, of course, nothing new. In fact, it is the opposite of new: questioning the moral status of fiction and literature is perhaps the oldest form of literary criticism. There have been many different approaches to the question, but I hope that mine will offer something unique—particularly within the context of Italian literature. The closest analogue to my approach is the second prong of Adam Zachary Newton's three-pronged "narrative ethics." I will cite all three branches of Newton's formulation for the purposes of contrast:

> The triad comprises: (1) narration ethics (in this case, signifying the exigent conditions and consequences of the narrative act itself); **(2) a representational ethics (the costs incurred in fictionalizing oneself or others by exchanging "person" for "character");** and (3) a hermeneutic ethics (the ethico-critical accountability which acts of reading hold their readers to). (18, my emphasis)

Newton's formulation of representational ethics cites a particularly relevant example—exchanging "person" for "character"—of what I see as a larger phenomenon: there is a cost incurred in the transition from a nameless noumenal "something" to a sign/symbol/image capable of preservation and communication.

I could tell you about the people I most love. I could recount the events of the past. I could describe the sensations of beautiful music or the taste of a delicious meal. But I cannot convey them as they are to me (or as they singularly *are* prior to perception, before the question of what they are *to* someone). In trying to communicate such things, I create a message: I offer something akin to a "character" rather than a person, a representation rather than a taste or a rhythm. At its best, art is a bridge between minds, but whatever departs from one side is never quite the same as what arrives. Luigi Pirandello put the matter in heartbreaking clarity in a famous soliloquy from *Enrico IV*. The horrible truth that, if contemplated, would drive mankind insane is the impossible transmission of stable meaning between two human minds:

> Pray God you don't find out the thing that'll drive anyone crazy: that when you see yourself reflected in someone's eyes […] you see a beggar standing at a gate he can never enter. The one who goes in can never be you, in your closed-off, self-created world […]. It's someone you don't know, the one who is seen by the person who looks into your eyes, and his world is closed off from yours.[5] (Trans. Tom Stoppard, 51-52)

"The fundamental problem of communication," to quote Shannon again, "is that of reproducing at one point either exactly or approximately a message selected at another point" (31). We might identify these two points with two different human minds. Thus understood, communication becomes a question of how to reproduce in your mind the contents from my own mind. Already,

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[5] "Questa cosa orribile, che fa veramente impazzire: che se siete accanto a un altro, e gli guardate gli occhi […] potete figurarvi come un mendico davanti ad una porta in cui non potrà mai entrare: chi vi entra, non sarete mai voi, col vostro mondo dentro, come lo vedete e lo toccate; ma uno ignoto a voi, come quell'altro nel suo mondo impenetrabile vi vede e vi tocca." (Pirandello, *Teatro* 452)

the question of ethics is introduced: how and when and why is it ethical to colonize another person's mind with the contents of my own?

The task of the present work is demonstrate that our awareness of the "fundamental problem of communication"—the gap between the writer and reader, between speaker and listener, between the self and the other, or even between the self and its own memory or perception—generates a meaningful ethical duty. Moreover, artistic texts are quite aware of this duty and frequently express the paradoxical and contradictory ethical imperatives of communication. One early example of this kind of moment of textual awareness lends this text a name: "The Pact of Geryon."

Figure 0.1: The Monster Geryon, illustration by William Blake

In one of the foundational moments of Italian literature, Dante Alighieri offers a model of representation in the form of the monster Geryon, a vibrant visual metaphor that expresses the uncomfortable link between artistic creativity and the sin of fraud. In this scene, Geryon's symbolic functions point in opposite and quite contradictory directions. Within the symbolic structure of the work, this monster with a human face and the body of a beast clearly must be understood as a personification of fraud, which Dante classifies as the blackest and most human form of sin. Simultaneously, however, the presentation of Geryon appears to force an interpretation of the beast

as a metaphor for artistic invention itself. The winged monster is the *Comedy*'s most outrageous

alteration of inherited literary tradition and also serves as an occasion for Dante to name his poem

and commend its truth-value to the reader:

> To a truth that bears the face of falsehood
> a man should seal his lips if he is able,
> for it might shame him, through no fault of his,
>
> but here I can't be silent. And by the strains
> of this my Comedy—so may they soon succeed
> in finding favor—I swear to you, reader
>
> that I saw come swimming up
> through that dense and murky air a shape
> to cause amazement in the stoutest heart,[6]
> (Inf: XVI, 124-132. Trans. Robert Hollander)

This monstrosity, which Dante calls a "filthy image of fraud" is quite literally the vehicle that enables

the poem's protagonist to continue his journey into the depths of the eighth circle. To all

appearances, Geryon is clearly an unworthy instrument for such a sacred task. Indeed, Virgil

introduces Geryon as *colei che tutto 'l mondo appuzza!* (Inf: XVI, 3), responsible for "stinking up" the

entire world.

Does Geryon strike you as "a gentle breeze" which plays lightly over the surface of things,

which grazes them without altering them? Of course not. At best, Geryon appears to be a kind of

necessary evil, an embodiment of the inescapable fraud at the heart of all representation: the

inadequacy of language to the express the fullness of its impetus as well as the uncomfortable

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[6] *Sempre a quell ver c'ha faccia di menzogna*
de' l'uom chiuder le labra fin ch'el puote;
però che sanza colpa fa vergogna;

ma qui tacer nol posso; e per le note
di questa comedìa, lettor, ti giuro,
s'elle non sien di lunga grazia vòte,

ch'i' vidi per quell'aere grosso e scuro
venir notando una figura in suso,
maravigliosa ad ogne cor sicuro, (Inf: XVI, 124-132)

affinity between the artist and the liar. The Geryon moment thus constitutes an ethical moment of decision. It is a crossroads at which Dante must choose between two seemingly undesirable paths: he must either strike a pact with Geryon or conclude his tale and travel no further. In order to tell us of the horrors that lie in the eighth circle—and communicating these atrocities must surely be understood as a commendable goal, akin to the laudable denunciation of evils—Dante must instrumentalize an evil and turn it toward his own ends.

Ultimately, it is an argument that a truth with the appearance of falsehood is something quite different than a falsehood with the appearance of truth. This tradeoff—the necessary evils, the small and large betrayals that an artist accepts in order for his or her work to *do* something outside itself—is the Pact of Geryon. In order to compose on a non-solipsistic level, the artist agrees to communicate the impetus through an imperfect vehicle. Whosoever would tell an ethical story—one designed not only to make statements about the external world but perhaps even to enact change there—must accept a ride on the wings of a monster. Such a transgression is typically carried out with the best intentions, driven by a desire—for example, the desire to say something about what lies beyond subjectivity—which can only be born bracketed by its own relativism and subjectivity. The pact is thus an ethical calculus, an act of discernment that chooses between different kinds and levels of loss. To express the impetus is to wound it by reducing it to less than what it is, but the alternative is to see it fade out of view and die without a name.

Speaking concretely, "The Pact of Geryon: An Italian Theory of Ethics and Representation" examines ethical and structural questions about representation in selected works from the past two hundred years of artistic production in Italy, including poetry, prose, theater, and film. The goal of this sustained argument is, in part, to reposition metaliterariness and self-reflexivity as a valuable source of ethical content. In thinking about themselves, works of art contemplate the nature of the

relationship between language and reality, a relationship that has crucial implications for ethics and praxis in the real world.

But why Italy? What makes this an "Italian" theory of ethics and representation? Why should the artistic works of this country rather than another serve as the backdrop for such a theory? To put it bluntly, the main reason is quite simple. It is because "The Pact of Geryon" was written by an Italianist, drawing largely on primary texts taken from contemporary Italy. Upon closer inspection, however, this matter-of-fact answer is potentially quite revealing. The themes and questions I explore were developed as a result of the author's immersion and training within the Italian tradition. In other words, it was through immersion in the Italian cultural tradition that I developed an interest in ethics and representation. And so that initial question—why should these ideas be applied to Italy?—can be thus reframed as a more productive one: why would the study of Italian literature and film lead an American critic and reader to ask these kinds of questions? What is it about the Italian artistic tradition that prompts a reflection about the ethics at the level of representation?

One of my earliest readings as an Italianist was Francesco De Sanctis' *Storia della letteratura italiana*, a work with its own unique definition of what *impegno* or engagement should mean in the Italian case. Published in 1870 during final years of Italian unification, the *Storia* certainly subscribes to the commonly held opinion that Italy, having been made, still lacked Italians. Much more so than England, France, or even the United States, this supposed lack of a distinctly "Italian" populace can be traced to linguistic differences. Literally and figuratively, the various city-states and principalities that had shared the peninsula for centuries had never spoken quite the same language. Venice, Florence, Milan, Rome, and Sicily shared neither a common tongue nor, De Sanctis and others argued, anything truly resembling a common culture. Like Gramsci after him, De Sanctis placed the blame for the lack of an Italian national-popular consciousness squarely on the shoulders of the

nation's intellectual classes. In part, he blamed Italy's artists, its poets. Italian literature and art had fed too exclusively on a kind of *contenuto* which was either empty in content or foreign in origin. For De Sanctis, national consciousness cannot be found in, or created by a purely intellectual culture: it must find its source in the life of the people.

As such, De Sanctis crafts his *Storia della letteratura italiana* as a kind of moral parable. In fact, this massive volume can be seen as an attempt to present Italian literary history as a continuous, coherent narrative—what Benedict Anderson would later call a "narrative of identity." Literary history is depicted as a struggle between good and evil that witnesses a cycle of fusions and separations of Italian intellectual life and the life of the common people. After Dante—perhaps the first and most significant fusion—De Sanctis divides literary history into two distinct threads.

On the one hand, there is the ethical branch, which draws from content connected to the everyday life of the Italian people. On the other side, De Sanctis proposes a literature dedicated to the "cult of form," which figures as a kind of villain or scapegoat in the plot of the *Storia*. The cult of form, he argues, was nurtured at the expense of what Italy really needed: an artistic tradition that would connect intellectual life to the life of the people and thus nurture the development of a distinctly Italian national-popular consciousness.

De Sanctis' charge, in other words, was that artistic formalism or metaliterariness was incompatible with real-world engagement: it constituted a kind of retreat from the moral-ethical duty of the artist. In a certain way, then, my project can be imagined as a kind of corrective to De Sanctis, or at least to the line of thinking that he represents. "The Pact of Geryon" argues that the work of art can provide edification through its form. More specifically, I argue that valuable ethical content can be located in the way that works of art engage with and interpret their own form, their own coming-into-being as language.

Although not unique to the Italian tradition, there is something striking about the degree to which so many of Italy's greatest artistic masterpieces treat the concept of *impegno* as inseparable from language—particularly the choice of "which" language. Throughout Italian literary history, choosing and constructing a particular language was a form of societal engagement on a moral and practical level. This was certainly the case for Dante, whose use of the vernacular was undeniably both an aesthetic and a political act. The moral-ethical impact of the *Comedy* would be entirely different had it been written in Latin, for a great deal of the message of Dante's work is embedded within its structural and linguistic choices. The *terza rima*, the hundred cantos, the mixing of high and low registers: these are all formal choices that communicate meaningful ethical content. They are choices that communicate something about the pursuit of *eudaemonia* and what it means to live a good life. Choosing a certain kind of language rather than another must be understood not only as a question of form but as a question of content. Indeed, if the Latin Petrarch—who De Sanctis criticized so heavily for the choice to write in a "dead" language—had proved triumphant (e.g., if Italian literature had ultimately chosen Latin as its lingua franca) then his choice of language would be easier to interpret as an ethical act. In other words, De Sanctis has it wrong: the Latin Petrarch may have been *immoral* (by choosing the wrong language), he was not *amoral*. The choice of Latin was a means of acting within the world.

The choice of style and language is always both a question of form and a question of content. This was certainly well understood by Alessandro Manzoni. *I promessi sposi* is a transparently didactic piece of literature on every level. Manzoni's wholescale linguistic revision of the novel prior to the publication of the *edizione quarantana* in 1840—the Milanese author's much-celebrated efforts to *sciacquare i panni in Arno* (for non-Italian readers, this amounts to doing laundry in a certain Florentine river)—reflected an understanding of the importance of *impegno* on a wholly linguisitic plane. Manzoni too forms a part of a long succession of practical interventions centered around the

questione della lingua that had engaged many of the greatest intellectuals in the history of the peninsula, from Machiavelli to Pietro Bembo, Leon Battista Alberti and countless others stretching back to Dante and beyond.

Along with perhaps Italy's greatest poet and its greatest novelist, we should consider its greatest filmmakers. Neorealism, almost inarguably Italy's most significant international contribution to narrative art in the 20th century, is best understood as a marriage between a particular ethical vision and a particular visual language. Rather than sharing a universally held set of common characteristics or genres, films typically recognized as neorealist share a conception that, over and above "what" a film depicts, it is the film's visual language itself that signals and constitutes a means of acting in the world. As with Dante, the choice of a language was, for neorealist filmmakers, as much a political choice as an ethical one.

Although there are many more examples, these few touchstones alone should suffice to suggest that questions of ethics and representation have never been too far removed from the Italian tradition. Accordingly, "The Pact of Geryon" takes an eclectic path through the past two centuries, tracing bits and pieces of a theory and a theme rather than following a strict chronological progression. In order to facilitate reading by non-specialists, the artists selected are quite well-known, even if the individual works treated may not be. To a certain extent, I have also endeavored to select authors with somewhat dissimilar identities. Despite the fact that all of these authors are ultimately quite "Italian," they come from different centuries and different parts of the peninsula. They do not all share the same genre, gender, or political perspective.

Chapter One, "The Idea of the Impetus," works with the early poetry of Giuseppe Ungaretti and Eugenio Montale in order to explore how the two poets conceptualize the relationship between poetry and the "what" it seeks to communicate—which I call the *impetus*. I also examine how each poet re-stages and re-writes Giacomo Leopardi's classic lyric poem "L'Infinito" as a way to express

the structure of inspiration. Ungaretti portrays the impetus as a penetration that enters the poet's silence and writes itself within subjectivity. Accordingly, there is a concrete relationship between the impetus and its expression. Montale, on the other hand, depicts the impetus as always retreating and inexpressible. Through imagery reminiscent of negative theology, Montale's early poetry articulates the impetus by means of giving form to what it is not and cannot be.

Chapter Two, "Ethics, Identity, and the Republic," positions Plato's *Republic* as a foundational text for addressing ethics and representation in the Western tradition. After foregrounding the issue of identity as an underlying rationale for Plato's expulsion of certain kinds of mimetic art from the ideal republic, I discuss the 2016 unmasking of the famously anonymous Italian author Elena Ferrante. Crucially, I address the thorny issue of whether and when artists are allowed to tell stories about people who are very different. I argue that acceptance of the artist's right to anonymity is incompatible with a purely identity-based censorship of art on the basis of cultural appropriation.

Chapter Three, "The Ethics of Imagining," dwells at length on Italo Calvino's highly expressionistic, metaliterary, and non-mimetic novel *Le città invisibili*. Despite its apparent distance from artistic engagement and the traditional subject matters of ethics, Calvino's novel encapsulates and interrogates the most important issues of ethics and representation, which range from the problems of imagining Otherness to the metonymic violence of representation as a communicative structure. A non-violent (or less violent) strategy of representation is an essential feature of the Utopian ambition of Calvino's text: to create and do no harm is perhaps ideal, but it is also impossible. Ultimately, the final passage of Calvino's novel recommends a Gramscian model of value creation that involves using bricolage to assemble a system of discernment within the semiotic glut of contemporary existence.

Chapter Four, "Do No Harm?" investigates to what extent a *primum non nocere* principle can or should be adopted as a guideline for the ethics of representation. At least for artists, avoiding harm cannot be treated as the primary goal. The most ethical works of art are those that embrace and recognize their nature as potentially transgressive partisans. The chapter ends by revisiting the relationship between language and power in the linguistic education of Renzo in Alessandro Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*. Through Renzo's semiotic journey, Manzoni's novel explores how powerful individuals—those with great economic, physical, cultural capital—can exploit the ambiguity of language in self-serving ways. Rather than challenging these structures, however, Manzoni's novel concludes with a different lesson for Renzo: carefully chosen reticence can be better than reckless speech.

Chapter Five, "Of Hospitality in *Paisà*," explores many of the same questions introduced in Chapter Four by adopting Jacques Derrida's theorization of absolute hospitality as an emblem for nonviolence and postulating Carl Schmitt's politics of naming as an opposing pragmatic extreme. Using the Derrida-Schmitt pairing as an interpretive key, I analyze two sequences of *Paisà*—the story of Carmela and Joe from Jersey in Part I and the visit of the three foreign military chaplains to an Italian monastery in Part V—in order to call attention to the inevitable co-presence of friendship and enmity in the hospitality that passed between allies in the World War II era. I conclude by offering a somewhat unsettling interpretation of the film's ambiguous fifth episode which concludes with a gesture of rejection: the Italian monks refuse to break bread with American visitors of a different religion. Despite the troubling ethical implications of the scene, I argue that the viewer must grant primacy to the semiotics of the scene which unambiguously portray the monks' action in a positive light. If war demands new alliances, perhaps the post-war period demands a renaissance for rejection and return of older value distinctions.

Chapter Six, "On Mixed Compositions," fixes its eyes on the ethical consequences of portraying history through art—particularly when claims for historical truth are mixed with fiction, fantasy, and other products of the imagination. Using *Roma città aperta*, especially the film's treatment of the historically inspired characters Don Pietro and Pina, I ponder the ethical obligations that attach to any true story and examine how works of art position themselves to shoulder or avoid such obligations. I follow with a critique of Manzoni's essay *Del romanzo storico* before moving on to an assessment of the creative transgressions inherent in Elsa Morante's *La storia*, ostensibly a novel written for those who cannot read and on behalf of those who cannot write. I conclude by taking a look at Morante's restaging of the language-centered osteria scene from *I promessi sposi* which places the young idealist Davide Segre in the place of Renzo. If Renzo learns to keep his mouth shut, Davide Segre suffers from the realization that cultural difference can form an uncrossable bridge between a speaker and his audience.

Chapter Seven, "In Search of an Ethics," explores Luigi Pirandello's ambiguous fascism alongside the Sicilian playwright's overriding concerns with the relationship between language and power. Although Pirandello too might be said to have abandoned the political sphere in his theater, his Nobel prize-winning *ouvre* nevertheless frequently explores dynamic questions related to ethics and representation. Specifically, I argue that the Pirandello's conception of language is animated by the co-presence of lightness and weight. The existential lightness of language—the fact that a given word has no constant intrinsic meaning—is always countered by the great heaviness of meaning within the communally constructed language game of power.

Chapter Eight, "The Reticence of Empty Space," closes my sustained argument about ethics and language with a reading of the language of visual space in Pier Paolo Pasolini's film fable *Uccellacci e uccellini*. In this film, Pasolini creates a deliberate contrast between the written spaces of the neocapitalist present and the open, unwritten horizon which serves as a figuration for the

unknown and unknowable future. Taking place in a time of transition for the Left, Pasolini's film

fable visualizes the future as crucially important but unrepresented and/or unrepresentable. As such,

Uccellacci participates in a kind of ethically motivated reticence. The film says less about the future in

order to minimize its potential for harm: the blank space of the sky functions as a bulwark against

inaccuracy, distortion, misrepresentation, and misunderstanding of the sacred, which in this case is

the future itself.

<p align="center">***</p>

The first and primary ethical effect of representation is, returning to Sartre's language again,

how words—or gestures or images or the signs—can and do alter the things with which they collide.

But what, precisely, are these "things"? Where do they exist? What are they made of? These are not

particularly easy questions to answer. Indeed, from Plato to Descartes to Berkeley to Kant, a great

deal of the history of philosophy has aimed to answer similar kinds of questions.

In "The Pact of Geryon," I will speak about these potentially alterable things as the *impetus*.

By using this term, I wish to imply that the impetus has a structural rather than a concrete meaning.

To put it simply if not elegantly, the impetus is the "what" that a work of art seeks to convey

through representations. It is the something outside the work that causes it to come into being *as art*.

In other words, the impetus is whatever it is that makes the work matter—whether to the artist or to

the reader. Although it is not possible to fully know the impetus (e.g., I do not claim to know the

artists inner minds nor their intent) it is possible, I believe, to know *that* the impetus exists.

Ultimately, ethics as it will be understood here relies on a simple criterion: the possibility of

doing harm. In order for the ethics of representation to activate, it is sufficient to believe that

representation is less than (or simply other than) what it attempts to communicate. This difference

engenders the possibility/inevitability of doing harm to what the artist wishes to express. For the

sake of convenience, I call this "what" by a name: the impetus. The impetus need not be linked to

<p align="center">16</p>

any conception of noumenal truth or to the thing-in-itself; it may be merely a question of the artist's own beliefs, perceptions, emotions, values, or desires. In order for the impetus to generate a kind of ethical duty, it is sufficient that it simply *matter*. I must be perceived as important and as harmable, or subject to degradation, on at least one side of the artistic transaction, either by the artist or by his or her readers/viewers.

But what about art that has no impetus? Such a thing may exist, but it is difficult to imagine. As I intend the term, even wholly non-representational art has an impetus. Think, for example, of something quite far removed from a kind of traditional, mimetic art: Jackson Pollack dripping, pouring, or throwing paint at a canvas; the chance-controlled music of John Cage's 4'33"; Italo Calvino experimenting with extreme mathematical constraints in collaboration with the Oulipo; the nonsense poetry of Toti Scialoja. Each of these involves a certain compositional or structural process that offers a commentary on the nature of art itself. This self-reflexivity is their impetus. What makes these practices "art" is the fact that they are created (or are perceived to have been created) in order to "do" something. They are created to say something, to communicate.

At times, the impetus only emerges through the act of a reader or interpreter, or in the communication between an artist and his or her public. We might imagine a work of art that was created for purely self-serving ends, as a mere *acte gratuit*, an embodiment of pure play. Likewise, we might imagine a work of art that is created purely by physical reflex, chance, or non-human intentionality. But, as I see it, perceiving and labeling such a thing as art causes it to enter into the realm of communication. None of this need be intended or interpreted as didactic in nature. It is not necessary to aspire to teach in order to aspire to communicate. What is transmitted might be pure emotion, pleasure, or even disgust.

The impetus, in other words, is not always the same or even necessarily similar in terms of its composition. It is similar in terms of how it functions within the *structure* of artistic

communication. Speaking of ethics—or imagining how ethics is a meaningful component of artistic representation—is certainly easier in certain contexts. The relevance of the ethical dimension is immediately apparent, for example, in a historical film like *Paisà* or *Roma città aperta*. The impetus in such a case is the desire to say something about the truth of history, about what did or did not happen in the past.

I will call this special case the *historical* impetus. My vision of representational ethics, particularly in the case of the historical impetus, depends on a particular conception of the relationship between reality, perception, and language. With respect to reality, it is necessary to posit that objects—physical things—exist independently of human perception. Accordingly, certain parts of the past are true or untrue: atoms and subatomic particles did or did not interact with each other. In this respect, this work positions itself with Quentin Meillassoux and other proponents of speculative realism or object-oriented ontology (OOO).

In his influential volume *After Finitude*, Meillassoux positions himself against Kant and other proponents of what he calls the "correlationist" worldview, a perspective which treats being as a product of the correlation between the world and the human mind.[7] "By 'correlation' we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other," Meillassoux explains. "We will henceforth call *correlationism* any current of thought which maintains the unsurpassable character of correlation so

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[7] Francesco Erspamer, whose work interrogating the value, nature, and sustainability of culture-as-such was invaluable to certain aspects of this project, has suggested to me that—after more fully considering Kant's third critique—I will want to modify my position to agree with Kant rather than distinguish myself from him. This may yet prove to be the case. And so this footnote is intended to serve as something of a place-holder, although perhaps it would be better to call it a kind of "escape route" in case the future of this project moves in a very different philosophical direction.

defined. Consequentially, it becomes possible to say that every philosophy which disavows naïve

realism has become a variant of correlationism" (Trans. Ray Brassier, 5).[8]

For Meillassoux, virtually all philosophy in the past three centuries has been correlationist in

nature. In *Alien Phenomenology*, Ian Bogost offers a selected history of some of the major thought

streams within correlationism:

> Being, this position holds, exists only for subjects. In George Berkeley's
> subjective idealism, objects are just bundles of sense data in the minds of
> those who perceive them. In G.W.F. Hegel's absolute idealism, the world is
> best characterized by the way it appears to the self-conscious mind. For
> Martin Heidegger, objects *are* outside human consciousness, but their *being*
> exists only in human understanding. For Jacques Derrida, things are never
> fully present to us, but only differ and defer their access to individuals in
> particular contexts, interminably. […] All such moves consider being a
> problem of access, and human access at that. […] If things exist they do so
> only *for us.* (Bogost 3-4)

As I see it, moving beyond correlationism, particularly with respect to disciplines such as history or

science, is particularly valuable from an ethical point of view. Of course, however, there is an

unbridgeable impasse that prevents us from doing so: the tremendous distance that separates the

world-without-us from the world-as-knowable.

Part of what I find so appealing in Meillassoux's line of thought is that it acknowledges the

impossibility of overcoming the correlationist critique (and the poststructuralist critique in

particular), but nevertheless attempts to move beyond it. Meillassoux states his thesis most directly

in the early pages of *After Finitude*:

> [W]e shall therefore maintain the following: *all those aspects of the object that can
> be formulated in mathematical terms can be meaningfully conceived as properties of the
> object in itself.* All those aspects of the object that can give rise to a
> mathematical thought (to a formula or to digitalization) rather than to a
> perception or sensation can be meaningfully turned into properties of the

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[8] Naïve realism, in brief, is the belief that things actually are just as we see them. I see snow as white not because of anything to do with the nature of vision or perception but because snow really is white—and would be white regardless of whether or not I was looking at it.

thing not only as it is with me, but also as it is without me. The thesis we are defending is therefore twofold: on the one hand, we acknowledge that the sensible only exists as a subject's relation to the world; but on the other hand, we maintain that the mathematizable properties of the object are exempt from the constraint of such a relation, and that they are effectively in the object in the way in which I conceive them, whether I am in relation with this object or not. (3)

Immediately after stating his case, Meillassoux anticipates and confronts the critique, acknowledging why his system is likely to seem "absurd" to a contemporary philosopher:

[W]e all know that such a thesis has become indefensible, and this not only since Kant, but even since Berkeley. It is an indefensible thesis because thought cannot get outside itself in order to compare the world as it is 'in itself' to the world as it is 'for us', and thereby distinguish what is a function of our relation to the world from what belongs to the world alone. […] We cannot represent the 'in itself' without it becoming 'for us,' or as Hegel amusingly put it, we cannot 'creep up on' the object 'from behind' so as to find out what it is in itself—which means that we cannot know anything that would be beyond our relation to the world. (3-4)

What I share with correlationism (or poststructuralism) is precisely this: an acknowledgment that thought cannot get outside itself in order to compare the world as it is 'in itself' to the world as it is 'for us.' Indeed, our inability to know the world as it is 'in itself'—our inability to distinguish such a 'true' world from the world as it is 'for us'—is a primary source that generates the ethics of representation. As an artist, how can I communicate ethically (e.g., without distortion, partiality, or self-interest) if I can only perceive things as they are 'for me'?

After Kant, Meillassoux explains, the criteria for scientific discourse (as opposed to say moral or aesthetic discourse) became the possibility of universalized subjective representations, so that intersubjectivity—the agreement between members of a community—became the standard for "objective" thought. "Scientific truth is no longer what conforms to an in-itself supposedly indifferent to the way in which it is given to the subject, but rather what is susceptible of being given as shared by a scientific community," Meillassoux explains. Still, however, such a consensus-based approach to science remains deeply entrenched in a correlationist world-view: rather than the

perception of a single subject, science is founded on the relationship between being and "many minds."

And yet, Meillassoux points toward a problem which, although intersubjectively agreed upon, cannot be explained by any correlationist worldview: the ability of scientific and mathematical discourse to describe an "ancestral" world before human beings (10). If we believe that there was such a world, then we must believe in the existence of matter (and indeed of being) that is independent of human thought and perspective. Lending belief to these things—the arche-fossil or the ancestral world—is incompatible with a correlationist worldview, Meillassoux argues.[9] The two are mutually exclusive:

> Confronted with the arche-fossil, *every variety of idealism converges and becomes equally extraordinary*—every variety of correlationism is exposed as an extreme idealism, one that is incapable of admitting that what science tells us about these occurrences of matter independent of humanity effectively occurred as described by science. And our correlationist then finds himself dangerously close to contemporary creationists: those quaint believers who assert today, in accordance with a 'literal' reading of the Bible, that the earth is no more than 6,000 years old […]. Similarly, might not the meaning of the arche-fossil be to test the philosopher's faith in correlation, even when confronted with data which seem to point to an abyssal divide between what exists and what appears? (18. Emphasis original)

Although I share much with the correlationist worldview, I also share something much more fundamental with Meillassoux (and Hamlet for that matter): "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (*Hamlet* 1.5.167-8). I believe there are a great many things that exist but do not appear to human beings, things which are not dreamt of in our philosophy. In other words, "The Pact of Geryon" is built on a trust that the material world exists,

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[9] "I will call 'ancestral' any reality anterior to the emergence of the human species—or even anterior to every recognized form of life on earth. I will call 'arche-fossil' or 'fossil-matter' not just materials indicating the traces of past life, according to the familiar sense of the term 'fossil', but materials indicating the existence of an ancestral reality or event; one that is anterior to terrestrial life. An arche-fossil thus designates the material support on the basis of which the experiments that yield estimates of ancestral phenomena proceed—for example, an isotope whose rate of radioactive decay we know, or the luminous emission of a star that informs us as to the date of its formation." (Meillasoux 10)

has existed, and will continue to exist independently of human perceptions. Belief in the existence of such a world is a necessary prerequisite for certain arguments that I will make about ethics, particularly as it relates to the representation of a historical or real-world impetus.

Now, in terms of everyday practice, such an assertion—that the material world exists—is hardly a deeply controversial statement. According to Bogost, however, the legacy of correlationism (and of Kant in particular) is so deeply embedded in contemporary modes of thought so as to have become nearly invisible. For example, the correlationist worldview is deeply embedded in what Bogost calls the two dominant "system operations" that compete to explain the present-day world (13). The first system operation is called scientific naturalism:

> The scientific naturalist holds that some fundamental material firmament sustains and thereby explains all that is. The particulars of this ground don't particularly matter—particle physics, genetics, brain chemistry, whatever. Never mind the *sort* of stuff, for the scientific naturalist there is always *some* stuff out of which all others can be explained. Furthermore, the nature of these fundamental objects and their role in founding the world can always be discovered, documented, and solidified through the scientific process. (13)

The second system operation, social relativism, seeks to explain everything through culture—by means of the humanistic and social scientific traditions.

> For the social relativist, nothing exists that cannot be explained through the machinations of human society—particularly the complex, evolutionary forms of culture and language. The social relativist argues that all things exist through conceptualization; they are really just structures within the temple of human cultural production. For the social relativist, the certainty of the scientific naturalist is always compromised by the fact that science itself is situated within culture […]. (13)

Both perspectives, for Bogost, amount to different flavors of correlationism. "For the scientific naturalist, the world exists for human discovery and exploitation. And for the cultural relativist, humans create and refashion the world […]," he argues. "The scientific process cares less for reality itself than it does for the discoverability of reality through human ingenuity. Likewise, the humanist doesn't believe in the world *except* as a structure erected in the interest of human culture" (14).

Strawmen though they may be, Bogost's opposed pairing of scientific naturalism and social relativism is useful framework in which to explain my own perspective, which will be somewhat akin to the attempt to reconcile these two systems with the existence of mind-independent matter. The scientific naturalist worldview is in many respects quite compelling, but with one notable exception: I believe there are limitations to the scientific process. Even if the material world is entirely comprised of atoms or quarks or what have you, there is far more that is true about the world than can ever be known about it. As explained eloquently by the Italian physicist Carlo Rovelli, many things occur quite independently of human thought and on a scale or level that is well beyond our understanding. Likewise, I agree with much of social relativism. The world—at least as it exists for human beings—is best explained and understood through the "complex, evolutionary forms of culture and language" (Bogost 13). Accordingly, there is much to value in the contributions of contemporary philosophy and post-structuralism: they offer valuable explanations of the world *as it exists for human beings*. None of this means, however, that there is no world beyond human perception.

The perhaps radical claim at the heart of "The Pact of Geryon" is that the existence of a "world without us" generates a meaningful ethical duty for the world we inhabit. I believe that the ethics of representation is, at times, linked to the duty we bear to the mind-independent world. Even if such a world is unknowable, there is ethical value in trying to know it and communicate it as closely as possible. Conversely, acting as though a mind-independent world is non-existent—as though we can say nothing misleading or inaccurate about it because it does not really exist—is potentially harmful. In this sense a neat distinction can be made which might serve as a kind of aphorism for this argument. Art can be—and frequently is—untrue; it should not be post-true. Our approach to writing and interpreting art in the 21ˢᵗ century and beyond should not adopt a nihilist

23

position to the truth-as-such. Saving the humanities may paradoxically rest on restoring our faith in mind-independent reality.

As usual, it will help to speak a bit more concretely. Let's start with the historical impetus. Although the past may not be fully knowable, it is real.[10] At least on a physical, chemical level, there is a truth to history. Independent of human thought or knowledge, certain things did or did not happen. This is what I mean by the scientific truth of the past: atoms did or did not interact with each other. But the past in this sense takes place on a level that is far smaller and far more infinite and intricate than human beings can possibly know. Accordingly, there is far more that is true about the past than could ever be learned or said about it. Events take place in a different form and on a different level than they are known. Further, what can be communicated about the past exists on a different level than the past as it is known or experienced by any individual.

Roughly, then, we might say that the past exists on three different epistemological levels. On Level 1, there is the "world without us," the past as it occurs scientifically—e.g., the interaction of atoms that constitute the physical and chemical nature of what has been. On Level 2, there is the concept of the past as it can be known—e.g., as it is accessible to and mediated by human understanding and perceptions. And finally, on Level 3, there is the message of the past. This is the past as it can be transmitted, communicated, or preserved through a linguistic or semiotic system. Level 3 is the location of the work of art.

We might say that Level 1 is made of atoms or quarks, Level 2 is made of subjectivity, and Level 3 is made of language. Although there are certainly levels within levels, this is more or less a basic picture: not everything that is true of the past can be known, and not everything that is known

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[10] Following Meillasaux, I would contend that the same is true science and mathematics, which would have their own kinds of impetus: the *scientific* impetus or the *mathematical* impetus. These, however, are a bit more difficult to conceptualize, although we do encounter a kind of scientific impetus in Pirandello with the idea of true madness as opposed to insanity as a socially-constructed illness.

of the past can be communicated with perfect fidelity. But none of this means that the past is not

the past, that the past is whatever we say it is, or that there is no true version of the past that can be

distorted by representations.

Figure 0.2: Levels, Gaps, and Loss Between Reality and Communicability
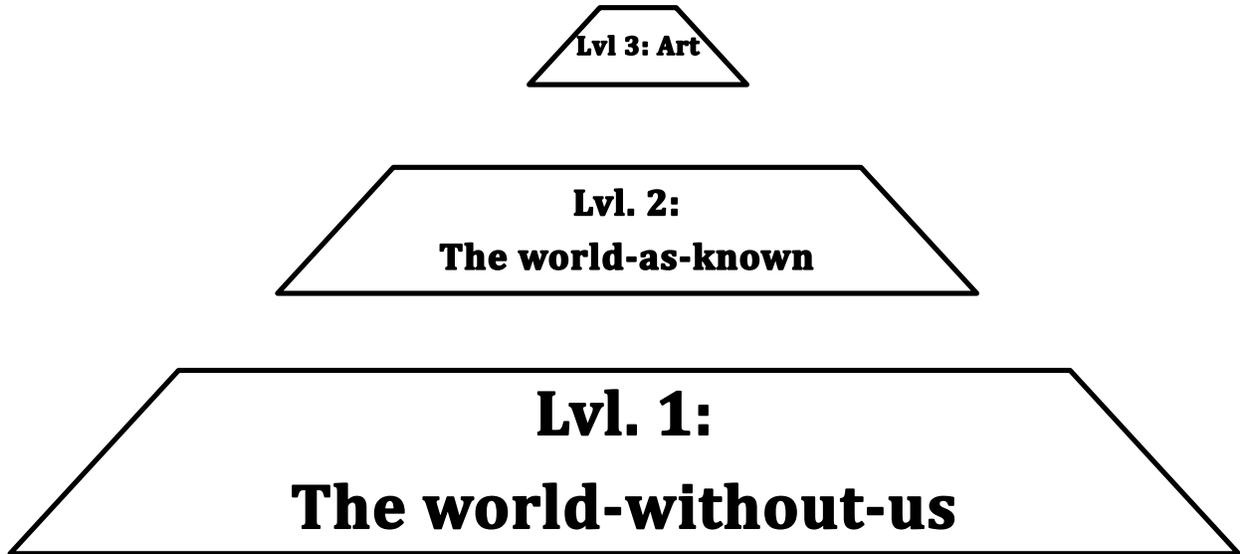
But here is the impasse: the past has no other way of being known, spoken about, or

remembered. It must become representation. Accordingly, the question of ethics enters into the

equation in terms of the jump between levels. In the jump from Level 1 to Level 2, a portion of

what is true about the past is inevitably lost so that individual human beings can know *something*. This

process can only be controlled to a certain extent. A human being can do the necessary research,

preparation, and experimentation to try to access as much of the Level 1 past as possible. But such

an individual cannot fully eliminate all impediments that prevent unmediated access to Level 1.

For example, there is the problem of availability. Our artist/historian cannot change the

nature of what is researchable about the past. Evidence cannot be created where none exists, and

lack of evidence must not be mistaken for evidence of lack. There is also the problem of identity. A

male artist cannot see Level 1 as a female would (or view it from a genderless perspective); a rich man cannot see it as a poor man; an African cannot see it as a European; and so on and ad infinitum. Level 2, because it is made by the human mind, is subject to the limitations and the systematic biases of human thought and perception. Level 3, because it is made by language, is subject to the weakness and imperfection of all semiotic systems. But so long as the impetus is considered to be important—so long as it matters that there is a difference between the way it *is*, the way it is *known*, and the way it is *spoken*—there is an certain ethical obligation to balance and justify any differences or departures.

There will inevitably be change and loss, but what kinds of changes are acceptable? How can loss be minimized? Indeed, we might say that the jump from perception at Level 2 to language at Level 3 is the central focus of "The Pact of Geryon." There is a felt need for art to "do justice" to something, even if it is only known subjectively, e.g., on Level 2. Art exists in relationship to something that is unknowable as itself, the impetus, and that—through representation—art transgresses it. The impetus is reduced, betrayed, transformed, and replaced in order to become communicable.

Art that contemplates its own nature—an inspired but imperfect vehicle for a message—has much to teach us about everyday existence in the contemporary world. It can help us recognize and respond to representational violence, or the necessary transgression that translates truth (or rather, what is perceived or felt to be true) into the realm of knowability, into knowable form. Indeed, the ethics of representation consists of the awareness, management, and justification of this special form of violence. As we shall see, however, the felt ethical duty to do justice to the impetus does not necessarily lead to an attempt to represent it directly or realistically. In fact, at times the ethical push of the impetus may drive the artist away from more mimetic forms of representation—as if, perhaps by not speaking the sacred directly, it could be spared the distortions and transgressions of language.

For a concrete example, let us turn to the self-reflexivity embedded in a work whose status as an important real-world intervention is beyond a shadow of a doubt: the autobiographical writings of Primo Levi, a Jewish-Italian chemist and Holocaust survivor. Speaking on behalf of his fellow captives at Auschwitz, Levi explicitly acknowledges the limitations of language: "We became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man" (21).[11] Faced with the lack of an adequate language to express his perception of his own experiences—the impetus of all he has seen, heard, and felt—what is the ethical choice? Should the impetus be given form in an inadequate language? Or should Levi—because he lacks the proper language to speak it—simply remain silent? Through the act of writing his book, it is clear that Levi has made a choice. It is an anti-Wittgensteinian choice. Even if language is not quite up to the task, something must nevertheless be said.

Here is where the self-reflexivity of the work of art enters the picture as a valuable source of ethical content. Levi does not simply write his story as if the relationship between language and the impetus was entirely unproblematic. This is made clear not only in the quotation cited above—which suggests that human language lacks the words to express the demolition of man—but also in the work's poetic incipit, which lends the name to the book: *Se questo è un uomo* (*If This Is a Man*). In its two central sections, Levi's introductory poem encapsulates and enacts the movement from acknowledging the limitations of language towards demanding the necessity that certain things be remembered.

Levi's poem is therefore not only an ethical intervention on the level of history (e.g., a declaration that his story must be told), it is also—in the tradition of Dante, Machiavelli, and Manzoni—a demonstration of ethical engagement at the level of language itself. In addition to being

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[11] "Allora per la prima volta, ci siamo accorti che la nostra lingua manca di parole per esprimere quest'offesa, la demolizione di un uomo." (Levi 28)

about real, historical individuals, it considers the potential inadequacy of old words to confront horrifying new realities as well as the violence that history inflicts on language itself. It is centered around the words "man" and "woman"—*uomo e donna*—which are among the most significance-laden words in any language. These are words that do not sit still, words that are continually in flux. Moreover, because any language articulates meaning through difference, "man" and "woman" are hugely important words. Not only do they constantly interact with and bounce off of each other ("man" is understood, in part, as not-woman and "woman" is understood, in part, as not-man) but the two words combine to define the nature of what is human.[12]

In short, "man" and "woman" are words that matter a great deal. If the meaning of such words were to be thrown into turmoil, the repercussions would echo throughout the entirety of the language. Here is a central part of the poem, which we will consider in some detail. The translation, for the purposes of exactitude, is my own:

> Consider if **this** is a man
> Who works in the mud,
> Who knows no peace,
> Who fights for bread,
> Who dies for a yes or no.
> Consider if **this** is a woman
> With no hair and no name,
> And no more strength to remember,
> Her eyes empty, her womb cold
> Like a frog in winter.[13]

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[12] This is not to imply that human beings do or should identify with one of these two terms. I merely mean to suggest that—in the context of Levi's poem—the man-woman pairing functions metonymically for the whole of humanity.

[13] *Considerate se **questo** è un uomo*
Che lavora nel fango
Che non conosce pace
Che lotta per mezzo pane
Che muore per un sì o per un no.
*Considerate se **questa** è una donna*
Senza capelli e senza nome
Senza più forza di ricordare
Vuoti gli occhi e freddo il grembo
Come una rana d'inverno. (11)

(My translation and emphasis)

Consider if *this* is a man. Imagine a hand pointing at a visual object. The referent is not another word or idea but a material thing, or at the very least an image drawn from memory: *this*. Consider if *this*—whatever it is, this thing that works in the mud and knows no peace—consider if *this* is something we could communicate through the word "man." Could anyone really interpret those three letters, m-a-n, to mean… *this*? Imagine again that the outstretched hand points at a piece of matter: a touchable, killable, material thing. Consider if a hairless, nameless, empty *this* is what could be called or recognized through the signifier "woman."

In the next section, Levi redeploys "this" as a command to remember in an extraordinary compression of significance into the single word:

> Meditate that **this** existed:
> I commend these words to you.
> Carve them into your heart.[14]
> (My translation and emphasis)

Okay, I will remember: *this* existed. But wait a second, what was it? *This*?!? Did we even decide whether we could (still) call it a man or a woman? How can I meditate upon its having-existed without the proper words? How will I know what to carve into my heart?

Levi's poem thus masterfully capitalizes on the extreme potential for ambiguity that dwells in an isolated demonstrative pronoun (this/*questo*) in order to underline the need for memory while also drawing attention to the difficulty, if not impossibility, of articulating precisely what needs to be remembered.[15] Should we meditate on the having-existed of the things related in Levi's relatively

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[14] *Meditate che* **questo** *è stato*
Vi commando queste parole.
Scolpitele nel vostro cuore. (11)

[15] The referent of the demonstrative pronoun in the phrase "che *questo* è stato" ("that *this* has existed") is extremely unclear. It embodies multiple possibilities simultaneously. The only aforementioned *questo* is found in the title phase: consider if *this* is a man. It is certainly possible that we are commanded to meditate on the having-existed of the very same *questo* who seemed not quite or no longer quite suited to the signifier "man." Given that Primo Levi is a male

realistic autobiographical account? Are those the words—the text of book itself—which we are asked to carve into our hearts? The reader would thus presumably be commanded to remember something that is fundamentally other than the words he or she is carving. Such an inscription would thus become a kind of shorthand for ineffability itself, a reminder that language cannot express *what* this has been, only that *this* has been. It must be remembered, at all costs, that *this* has existed—especially if there are no words for it. And yet the existence of the book itself is the proof of a contract with Geryon: *Se questo è un uomo* constitutes a rejection of ineffability as an true, practical impasse in the face of an ethical necessity. Despite the lack of a proper language, certain things must still be spoken.

The deeply problematic function of literature as memorialization—which is one of the central themes of "The Pact of Geryon"— is expressed with tremendous efficacy in Giuseppe Ungaretti's moving poem "In Memoria":

> His name was
> Mohammed Sceab
>
> Descendant
> of emirs of nomads
> a suicide
> because he had no more
> Homeland
>
> […]
>
> And he didn't know how
> to free
> the song
> of his desolation

Auschwitz survivor, *questo* might also be read to encompass the author. Consider that *I* have existed, and that I have existed as man/not-man, that I have existed as, well, *this*.

The most common reading, however, is to interpret *questo* as an event or set of events. The translator Stuart Woolf, for example, translates *che questo è stato* as "that this came about," thus precluding the possibility of a human referent. I have, for the reasons just expressed, departed from Wolf's translation in order to include the possible reference to Levi himself as man/not-man. Even under this interpretation, however, *questo* preserves a tension between finiteness and infinity: between the finite set of words Levi has left behind and the totality of the *impetus*.

> […]
>
> and perhaps I alone
> still know
> that he lived[16]
> (translation altered from Andrew Frisardi, 15)

If the assertion contained in the final lines is accurate—that is, if the poet is the only human left

alive who knows that Sceab has lived—then we are forced to conclude that *this* is all that remains of

Mohamed Sceab: a paltry, hundred-word poem. It hardly seems to fully compensate for the lost

song of Mohamed Sceab, the one he never learned how to sing. Look again at the poem "In

Memoria" again and consider Primo Levi's question: is *this* a "man"? Does this poem do enough to

convey Mohammed Sceab? Wasn't he so much more than the poem has conveyed? So much more

than what any poem could ever convey?

      With that final phrase, Ungaretti's poem also activates another of the primary ethical

concerns explored in "The Pact of Geryon." How—and on what authority—can literature speak for

or about others? What ethical obligations are acquired in moving beyond the realm of memoir, in

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[16] *Si chiamava*
Moammed Sceab

Discendente
di emiri di nomadi
suicida
perché non aveva più
Patria

[…]

E non sapeva
sciogliere
il canto
del suo abbandono

[…]

e forse io solo
so ancora
che visse. (Ungaretti 59-60)

telling a story that is not yours to tell? The reduction of Mohamed Sceab passes through several

levels. First, there is the inadequacy of language, the frailty of signifiers to capture the continual

motion and infinite complexity of a life. Second, there is what might be called the problem of other

minds. Ungaretti, who speaks of Sceab, did not know him fully; or rather we might say the Sceab

that Ungaretti knew is quite different than the man Sceab considered himself to be. Ungaretti's song

is a different than the one Sceab would have sung of himself—except Sceab could not (and certainly

can no longer) sing his own song.

We are talking here about an entire human life, which is as infinite and uncircumscribable as

any possible manifestation of what I call the impetus. There once was a life, and now *this* is what

remains. Ungaretti's poem serves as little more than an abbreviated invitation to meditate *che questo è*

stato: to reflect *that* Sceab has been, without fully knowing *what* it is so crucial to know or remember

about him. Georg Lukács wrote eloquently on a similar point:

> There are experiences, then, which cannot be expressed by any gesture and
> which yet long for expression. […] intellectuality, conceptuality as sensed
> experience, as immediate reality, as spontaneous principle of existence; the
> world-view in its undisguised purity as the motive force of life. The question
> is posed immediately: What is life, what is man, what is destiny? […] **Any
> gesture with which such a man might wish to express something of his
> experience would falsify that experience**, unless it ironically emphasized
> its own inadequacy and thus cancelled itself out. A man who experiences
> such things cannot be characterized by any outward feature—how then can
> he be given form in a work of literature? (22-23. My emphasis)

He cannot. Mohammed Sceab as he himself truly was—a being comprised both of the interactions

of atoms on Level 1 and the totality of feelings and perceptions on Level 2—cannot be given form

in a work of literature, Level 3. The fullness of his life cannot hope to enter Ungaretti's poem

unharmed.

So what good is "In Memoria" as an act of memorialization? Could Sceab even recognize

himself in such a poem? The poet is left with a terrible choice: should he give duration and

testimony to a Sceab who is manifestly not the "true" Sceab? Or should he simply allow him to

perish unremembered? Without Ungaretti's poem, there is absolutely no question that Sceab would have been forgotten. Now, the man will live forever; or rather Mohamed Sceab is dead but *this* will live forever. If, that is, *this* is a "man."

Perhaps the most eloquent and compelling expression of the Lukács-style critique to be found in the Italian tradition comes in Calvino's belated preface to his first novel, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*:

> The first book immediately becomes a partition between you and experience, it cuts the threads that link you to facts, it burns the treasure of memory— the memory which would have become a treasure if you had possessed the patience to take care of it, if you had not been in such a rush to spend it, to waste it, to impose an arbitrary hierarchy amongst the images that you imagined, to separate certain images—presumed depositories of a poetic emotion—from all other images, those that seemed too personal or not personal enough to be represented, in other words to arrogantly institute another memory, a transfigured memory in the place of the global memory with its hazy borders, with its infinite possibility of returns. [17] (23. My translation)

By giving words or images to the impetus, the artist collapses the infinite into a finite set of words. Calvino's nuanced memory becomes nothing more than *this*: his first novel. The words chosen as the vehicle for communication thus paradoxically function as a barrier, becoming a screen that prevents unmediated access to the previously infinite potential of the impetus. The infinite life of Mohamed Sceab is forgotten. We remember a hundred-word poem, which is to say we *do* remember Mohamed Sceab—but not as himself.

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[17] "Il primo libro diventa subito un diaframma tra te e l'esperienza, taglia i fili che ti legano ai fatti, brucia il tesoro della memoria—quello che sarebbe diventato un tesoro se avessi avuto la pazienza di custodirlo, se non avessi avuto tanta fretta di spenderlo, di scialacquarlo, d'imporre una gerarchia arbitraria tra le immagini che avevi immagazzinato, di separare le privilegiate, presunte depositarie d'una emozione poetica, dalle altre, quelle che sembravano riguardarti troppo o troppo poco per poterle rappresentare, insomma d'istituire di prepotenza un'altra memoria, una memoria trasfigurata al posto della memoria globale coi suoi confini sfumati, con la sua infinita possibilità di recuperi." (Calvino, *Il sentiero* 23)

To use the language of Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky,[18] we might say that Calvino's memory of the past—after he has written his first novel—becomes subject to an "availability bias" (also known, tellingly, as the "vividness bias"). In thinking of the past, there is now a certain portion of it—the part that has been painstaking translated and transformed into a novel—which has become significantly more available to memory, overshadowing and distorting other parts of the past. Moreover, Calvino can only return to these events though the mediation of the form he has given them. These signifiers—more solid, more communicable, but less faithful—point towards a non-infinite universe of signifieds that may or may not bear any relationship to the original. Such a danger applies not only to a memoirist, but also to a reader or viewer. What happens to the mind after witnessing a vivid, moving portrayal of history? The scenes from a film like *Paisà* or *La vita è bella* become, for many of us, so much more present—so available to the mind—that they become like a filter or shadow through which that past is brought to mind.

In much the same vein as Lukács, what Calvino articulates is what might be called the "Copenhagen Interpretation" of representation. According to the Copenhagen Interpretation of quantum mechanics, the same kind of closure and reduction occurs—albeit on a microscopic level—in the observation of phenomena in the physical world. Measurement or observation can, on a quantum mechanical level, function to assign a single knowable and observable value to what previously existed as a spectrum of possible value. John Hawley and Katherine Holcomb explain:

> [U]ntil a measurement is performed, [a] variable literally has no value, but the wave function represents a superposition of states, the combination of all possible outcomes for a measurement of that variable. Only when an interaction occurs that demands a particular value for some quantity—for

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[18] The work of Kahneman and Tversky is an interdisciplinary marvel and is usually classified under the umbrella of "behavioral economics," which is the shorthand I will use to refer to the work they have done and inspired. As should be apparent, their work—which utilizes experimentation to examine the "how" of thought (and irrational thought in particular)—is illustrative and useful far beyond the realm of economics. Indeed, I think Kahneman and Tversky are uniquely underutilized in the field of literary studies, particularly in terms of their ability to offer experimentally-grounded manifestations of certain insights of post-structuralist critique.

example, a measurement is performed—does the observed variable take on a specific value, that which is measured. This rather odd phenomenon is called collapse of the wavefunction. The act of observing causes the wavefunction to assume a state that was previously only a potentiality. (444)

The wavefunction—existing prior to observation as the superposition of all possible states, as a combination of all possible outcomes—might be meaningfully compared to the impetus. In Calvino's case, the wavefunction is the totality of the past (what he calls the "global memory") with its "hazy borders" and its "infinite possibility of returns."

But before lamenting the collapse of the wavefunction, we should recognize that there is a paradox here. Moreover, it is the same paradox that lies at the heart of representation. It is true that the actions of the observer reduce a set of possibilities, but—precisely by doing so—observation causes a value to become knowable, observable, concrete, and transmissible. This was the nature of the "betrayal" committed by Primo Levi: he transformed his experience into something *other* than what it was but—in so doing—allowed it to be communicated to another mind. Representation is the only means a story has of becoming real. Speaking about electrons, the Italian physicist Carlo Rovelli explains:

[E]lectrons do not *always* exist. They exist only when someone or something watches them […]. The "quantum leaps" from one orbit to another are the only means they have of being "real": an electron is a set of jumps from one interaction to another. When nothing disturbs it, it is not in any precise place. It is not in a "place" at all.[19] (Trans. Simon Carnell and Erica Segre, 17)

If a tree falls in an empty forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? Well, that might depend if you ask Quentin Meillassoux of George Berkeley. For Meillassoux (and for me as well), the answer is simple: of course it does. The sound of a tree falling in an empty forest is a truth

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[19] "Heisenberg immaginava che gli elettroni non esistano sempre. Esistano solo quando qualcuno li guarda, o meglio, quando interagiscono con qualcosa d'altro. Si materializzano in un luogo, con una probabilità calcolabile, quando sbattono contro qualcosa d'altro. I «salti quantici» da un'orbita all'altra sono il loro solo modo di essere reali: un elettrone è un insieme di salti da un'interazione all'altra. Quando nessuno lo disturba, non è in alcun luogo preciso. Non è in un luogo." (Rovelli 26)

of history. That sound is part of the world without us. Irrespective of whether any human being was present to hear the sound of a falling tree, certain atoms did or did not interact with each other. Without human observation, however, that sound cannot be known. Indeed, the sound made by a falling tree in an empty forest is *not knowable* to the methodology of history. Human historians could imagine or conjecture that a sound was made, but could not prove it through observation or documentation. It is at this point that we return to that meaningful distinction. There is a certain past that is true (Level 1) and another past that is *knowable* (Level 2)—although it may not be knowable in its true form, it may be known only as a representation (Level 3).

Rovelli explains the gap between truth and knowability in physics with regard to two amusing real-world examples. The first involves a teaspoon; the second involves a balloon. Imagine a cold teaspoon is dipped into hot tea. What will happen? It is no great mystery: the teaspoon will heat up. A human observer does not need to know anything about the microscopic state of the spoon in order to predict, quite rightly, that placing the spoon in hot tea will increase its temperature. And yet, the minute details of the process—e.g., the exact mathematics of heat transfer—take place on a level far too small to be observed unobtrusively by a human. With respect to the spoon, the unknowability of such details is relatively trivial. We can know with a sufficient level of certainty everything there is to know about what will happen.

Now imagine instead that you are holding an empty balloon. You blow as much air as you can into the balloon and hold the opening closed so that the air stays trapped inside. Then you lift the balloon up above your head and let go! What happens now? The air will escape rapidly and the balloon will shoot through the air and land…well… who knows where? We can predict with absolute certainty that, when we let go of the balloon, it will fly away; but we certainly cannot predict the precise path of its flight, and we have no idea where it might land. Every detail of this flight must be, in some sense, determined and therefore predictable according to probabilities on a quantum

level, but the mathematics of the balloon are—according to Rovelli—unknowable to any kind of human methodology:

> Teaspoon and balloon behave as they must, following the laws of physics in complete independence from what we know or don't know about them. The predictability or unpredictability of their behavior does not pertain to their precise condition; it pertains to the limited set of their properties with which we interact. This set of properties depends on our specific way of interacting with the teaspoon and the balloon. […] Once again, the profoundly relational nature of the concepts we use to organize the world emerges.[20] (56-57)

We are making our way again towards that crucial point that must be emphasized. What is called the "observation effect" does not alter reality (Level 1); it alters reality as it is known (Level 2) and as it is communicated and communicable (Level 3).

At times, humanists can make much too much of these phenomena by claiming that observation determines the shape of reality or that we can change the ultimate nature of things just by looking at them. In truth, it is only knowledge itself—or rather the picture of reality on a knowable scale, Picasso's "truth we are given to understand"—that is influenced by observation. In other words, change occurs on Level 2, not on Level 1. The most celebrated illustration of the observation effect is, of course, Erwin Schrödinger's ill-fated cat-in-a-box. In this thought experiment, a cat is placed into a closed box along with a device that links its fate, whether the cat will live or die, to "a probabilistic quantum effect, specifically the decay of an atom" (Hawley and Holcomb 446). Inside the box, which is to say on the level of physical reality itself, the world-without-us, there is no paradox. If the atom decays, it will emit a particle that, according to the odd design of this diabolical and seemingly pointless contraption, will trip a Geiger counter and unleash a vial full of poisonous gas. If the atom does not decay, nothing happens and the cat survives. Viewed

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[20] "Cucchiaio e palloncino si comportano come devono, seguendo le leggi della fisica, del tutto indipendentemente da quanto noi sappiamo o non sappiamo di loro. La prevedibilità o imprevedibilità del loro comportamento non riguardano il loro stato esatto. Riguardano la limitata classe delle loro proprietà con cui noi interagiamo. Questa classe di proprietà dipende dal nostro specifico modo di interagire con il cucchiaio e il palloncino. […] Ancora una volta, si rivela la natura profondamente relazionale dei concetti che usiamo per mettere in ordine il mondo." (Rovelli 62)

from the outside, however, all possibilities remain in play—but only so long as the box remains closed. So far as we know or can know, the poor zombie cat is therefore neither alive nor dead, or else is both alive and dead. Such a superposition of opposites is possible on a quantum level where life and death can coexist as probabilities (Level 1), but observation forces probabilities to assume a finite, knowable form (Level 2).

Indeed, the observer effect, the collapse of the wavefunction, takes place only because there are distinct levels of knowledge that must be forcefully reconciled the moment the box is opened. This is the passage between Level 1 and Level 2. Opening the box does not determine or change what has happened, is happening, or will happen, but it does give form and limitation to what can be known about the temporally-bounded existence of matter. Observation causes what is previously unknowable to be translated into knowable, observable terms. There is a truth inside the box, but it cannot be known. Or rather, such a truth cannot be known as itself. In order to be known, it must become other than itself.

We are no longer speaking, of course, simply about zombie cats in boxes: this is the paradoxical impasse at the heart of representation. There is, at times, an unbridgeable gap between truth and knowability, between knowability and communicability, and certainly between truth and communicability. On the level of the interaction of atoms (Level 1), the past is the past—regardless of what we in the present do or do not know about it (Level 2). And so it is with representation, and in particular with the representation of history or the past. Primo Levi's account of Auschwitz (or anyone else's account of his or her experiences for that matter) cannot and does not change what happened in the physical world. And yet, Levi's account (Level 3) certainly can influence how events are known, remembered, or understood. Representations do not alter the impetus; they affect the form in which it can be communicated to other minds.

By writing the novel, Levi—like the Calvino of *Il sentiero*—opened the box of memory. He collapsed the wavefunction, transforming a past of potentialities into a single, *actual* emplotment of the past. The process of writing was a shift between levels of knowledge (Level 1 → Level 2 → Level 3) as well as kinds of emplotment. Memory, much like dream, is more permissive and forgiving than language—it is certainly more permissive and forgiving than an artistic form like the novel. Memory permits far more openness, far more complication, contradiction, and ambiguity. And how much more ambiguous, how much more open is the full infinitude of the past itself! During Calvino's lifetime, although he was of course blissfully unaware of the interactions of atoms, it is nevertheless true that certain atoms did or did not interact with each other.

Although reality takes place on a subatomic level, experience does not. Memory takes place on yet another level still. And so does communication. And art takes place on yet another level. So the past that occurs on one scale, is known on another, and communicated on still another. Something is lost with each jump between levels, but the past has no other means of becoming real to us as human beings. It must be emphasized that this process is entirely irreversible: you can't un-open a box. A novel can certainly be re-written, but it cannot be unwritten. The giving of words or images is an irreversible process, and it is not without consequences. It is, after all quite a serious error "to think that the word is a gentle breeze which plays lightly over the surface of things, which grazes them without altering them" (Sartre 22). It is just as Tom Stoppard's Thomasina so memorably put it in *Arcadia*: "You cannot stir things apart" (5).

The ethical importance of telling Primo Levi's story—and of doing so as accurately and truthfully as possible, with the least possible deception or change—is nearly beyond debate. What happens, however, when the impetus is more abstract? What happens when the "what" that art seeks to convey is less firmly rooted in the interactions of atoms and amounts to little more than an individual idea or a subjective view of the world? Let us leave aside Primo Levi and Mohamed Sceab

and consider an impetus of an entirely different nature: Luigi Pirandello's characters in search of an author.

At issue in *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (1921) and the other short stories dedicated to this topic is the translation of formless content into communicable form:

> Well, some years ago, this assistant, this Imagination of mine, had the regrettable inspiration, or it could have been the ill-fated whim, to bring to my door an entire family; where or how she got hold of them I have no idea, but she reckoned that their story would furnish me with a subject for a magnificent novel. […] And they just set about telling me the whole sad series of events, partly in turns, but often speaking all together, cutting in on each other, shouting each other out.[21] ("Introduction" 7, 8)

Il padre and his family are characters—no, they can't yet be called characters, let's say potential characters—led by Fantasy to the author Pirandello's door. Here is how Pirandello puts it in the 1908 short story "Personaggi," the very first elaboration of this topic: "I don't know why all the malcontents, all the betrayed, the duped, the disillusioned, the half mad… why do they all come to me exactly? If I treated them well, I would understand. But I often treat them like dogs" (xxx. My translation).[22] Another short story variation of the *personaggi* theme puts Pirandello into a shouting match with one such mistreated character, Dottor Fileno:

> But look… *Fileno*… you gave me the name *Fileno*… do you seriously think my name is Fileno? You imbecile! You imbecile! You didn't even know how to give me a proper name! Me, Fileno! Psssh![23] ("La tragedia di un personnagio," 994. My translation.)

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[21] "Orbene questa mia servetta Fantasia ebbe, parecchi anni or sono, la cattiva ispirazione o il malaugurato capriccio di condurmi in casa tutta una famiglia, non saprei dire dove né come ripescata, ma da cui […] avrei potuto cavare il soggetto per un magnifico romanzo. […] E or l'uno or l'altro, ma anche spesso l'uno sopraffacendo l'altro, prendevano a narrarmi i loro tristi casi, a gridarmi ciascuno le proprie ragioni, ad avventarmi in faccia le loro scomposte passioni" […]. (337-338)

[22] "Non so perché tutti i malcontenti della vita, tutti i traditi dalla sorte, i gabbati, i disillusi i mezzi matti debbano venire proprio da me. Se li trattassi bene, capirei. Ma li tratto spesso a modo di cani." (Pirandello 339)

[23] "Ma guardi… *Fileno*… mi ha messo nome *Fileno*… Le pare sul serio che io mi possa chiamar Fileno? Imbecille, imbecille! Neppure il nome ha saputo darmi! Io, Fileno!" ("La tragedia di un personaggio" 994).

The author even offers something of an apology: "I'm quite persuaded, dear Doctor, that you deserved to fall into better hands" (993).[24] If we are primed to think of this exchange in terms of the ethics of representation, it becomes a quite interesting statement. Here we have a figuration of the artist speaking directly to an embodiment of the impetus and apologizing—not necessarily for the limitations of language or genre—but for his own personal shortcomings as translator. Pirandello says of the six characters: "Born living, they wanted to live."[25] But, on their own, they are powerless to do so.

These characters—which might be called an example of the *subjective* impetus as opposed to the *historical* impetus—quite clearly have no true existence outside Pirandello's mind. At bottom, it is merely a story: one that is neither historically true or even particularly verisimilar. It is nothing but the story of a family of characters that happened to enter into the author's imagination. So is it still necessary to get it right? To do it justice? In other words, does the ethics of representation matter every time a story is told, or does it only matter for certain kinds of stories? Does the ethical obligation, if there is one, arise from the nature of the content to be communicated or from the act of emplotting and storytelling? And who gets to decide? Must a certain number of people agree that an impetus matters? Or is it sufficient for merely one person—in this case, it would be the author himself, Pirandello—to care about doing justice to such a story?

Without leaving behind the idea of "doing justice," I would like to digress for a moment to introduce another concept: the rhetorical figure of reticence, *reticenza*. It has become—or perhaps it has always been—a relatively uncommon word, so let me be clear about what I mean by "reticence." The Oxford English Dictionary reads as follows: "Reluctance to speak about something or to

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[24] "Sono persuasissimo che lei, caro dottore, meritava di capitare in migliori mani." (993)

[25] "Nati vivi, volevano vivere" ("Prefazione" 338).

express personal thoughts and feelings freely; maintenance of silence; the state or quality of being taciturn or reserved in speech." Now, both reticence and its Italian counterpart *reticenza* derive from a shared Latin root *reticentia*, which is also the name of a specific term of art in rhetoric, known in Greek as *aposiopesis*. Dating all the way back to the *Rhetorica ad Herrenium,* the Treccani encyclopedia lists *reticentia/aposiopesis* as "the rhetorical figure that consists in the sudden interruption of a message with the suppression of part of it or in the direct allusion to something that is not spoken."[26]

The entry dedicated to aposiopesis goes on to list helpful examples from two much-beloved episodes in the *Inferno*. First, there is Francesca da Rimini's *quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante* (Inf. V, 138): from that day on, we read no further. Well, what *did* you do then? I can only imagine! And that is exactly the point. The "what" is unspoken; it is left to the imagination. In English literature, we might think of Shakespeare's *King Lear*:

> I will have such revenges on you both
> That all the world shall—I will do things—
> What they are yet, I know not; but they shall be
> The terrors of the earth! (2.4.276-279)

Any specific threat is probably less threatening then a well-delivered recitation of "I will do things." For Dante again, there is Conte Ugolino's *Poscia, più che il dolor, poté il digiuno* (Inf. XXXIII, 75), and then my hunger overpowered my grief. Well, what does that mean exactly? As a result of Ugolino's ambiguous use of *reticentia* the precise meaning of this phrase is still debated. Just how nasty a guy was this Ugolino? Did he die of hunger or did eat his children? Was he a cannibal or was he just a treacherous bastard? It depends on how you interpret that phrase. Reticence, in this sense, delegates a substantial portion of meaning production to the reader. Like the open work, reticence sidesteps

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[26] "la figura retorica che consiste nell'improvvisa interruzione di un messaggio con la soppressione di una sua parte o nell'allusione diretta a qualcosa che viene taciuto." (Treccani)

any potential violence of representation by forcing the reader to close possibilities, erase memories, and misconstrue reality.

Reticentia as a rhetorical figure takes on an emotional—as well as a potentially ethical component—as early as Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*: "The figure ἀποσιώπησις *(aposiopesis)*, which Cicero calls *reticentia* […] is used in testifying something of passion or anger […] or anxiety and conscientious hesitation" (Book IX, Chapter 2, 54). Scruples, conscientiousness, religious feeling: these, for Quintilian, are what provide the basis and motivation for *reticenza*. On the basis of this connection, we might again theorize an inseparable link between a question of style or rhetoric and a question of ethics. Through *reticentia*, we begin to say something, but—perhaps overcome by "conscientious hesitation" or *una sorta di scrupolo*—we hold back. Consequently both the word and the thought resist completion. The utterance—incomplete, interrupted, or perhaps never begun— thereby acquires moral power or prestige: it acquires the sacredness of the unnamable.

Paradoxically, then, we might expect the incompleteness of *reticentia* might be adopted as a strategy to avoid a different kind of incompleteness, which is the inevitable partiality of a complete, or fully realized representation. It might be preferable to deploy the willful incompleteness of *reticentia* rather than face the inevitable but unwilled incompleteness of metonymy, the falling-short of all language: "we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man" (Levi 21). If I endeavor to tell the whole story, I will inevitably fall short, but if I endeavor to tell only a part of it, well, I will still fall short. But at least I will not imply a false kind of completeness.

A similar impulse drives the representational strategy of *Sei personaggi*. Pirandello states quite emphatically in the 1925 "Prefazione" that, if his intention had been to tell the story of these characters, he has done quite a terrible job:

> Had I searched until kingdom come I could not have found a method which
> was more harum-scarum, more weird, more arbitrary and complex […] than

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the one I have used to present the inner drama of these six characters. All this is true, but I have not in fact presented that drama: I have presented an entirely different one. ("Introduction" 17-18. Translation altered from Felicity Firth)[27]

He has not told their story; he has told a different one. The "story" Pirandello tells of the six characters amounts to a dramatization of their non-representation. It is the story of the author's refusal to allow the *sei personaggi* to come into being as full, complete creations: a dramatic embodiment of *significandus interruptus*, a willfully interrupted and incomplete communication.

> Can it be done? How do you represent a character you have rejected? Obviously you can only give him expression once he has taken shape in your imagination. And this is exactly how the six characters took shape. They were fully realized in my imagination as rejects: in search of another author.[28] ("Introduction…" 12)

Indeed, *Sei personaggi* is fundamentally a play about the impossibility of putting on a play, which is to say it is about the impossibility of transforming the story of a character into a staged production—of fully rendering the impetus on stage.

My favorite embodiment of the non-staging of the characters' story has always been Pirandello's highly idiosyncratic stage directions, which are both deeply funny and quite telling. Stage directions are the "small print" of a theatrical production, most often a space for the practical and sometimes banal extra-diegetic notes about the practical staging of a play. *Sei personaggi* is no different, and yet the supposedly practical guidance goes beyond what one would normally expect. We get directions—which in and of themselves appear quite impossible to fully realize—describing how the play-within-a-play must have the look of a failed translation:

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[27] "Neanche a cercarlo col lumicino avrei potuto trovare un modo più disordinato, più strambo, più arbitrario e complicato […] di rappresentare «il dramma in cui sono involti i sei personaggi». È verissimo, ma io non ho affatto rappresentato quel dramma: ne ho rappresentato un altro." (Pirandello, *Teatro* 347)

[28] "Ma si può rappresentare un personaggio, rifiutandolo? Evidentemente, per rappresentarlo, bisogna invece accoglierlo nella fantasia e quindi esprimerlo. E io difatti ho accolto e realizzato quei sei personaggi: li ho però accolti e realizzati come rifiutati: in cerca d'altro autore." (Pirandello, *Teatro* 342)

> The characters, in fact, should not appear to be unreal figures but rather created reality, the creations of immutable fantasy; therefore, more real and substantial than the changeable naturalness of the actors.[29] (*Six Characters … and Other Plays* 10)

Wait, what?!? Come again? Imagine the task of the director: Okay, you actors who are playing the characters must be more "real" than the actors playing the actors, so you guys over there stop being so real and you all over there, characters, step it up with the reality! Okay! Got that? Let's go!

In addition, the stage directions continue to specify exactly what kind of a representational failure the play-within-a-play must be:

> To stage this play one must take every possible precaution to achieve the effect that these Six Characters are not confused with the company of Actors. […] The way the Actors render the scene will seem from the very first words something quite different, without having, nevertheless, the slightest air of parody. It will seem more like a good copy of the original.[30] (*Six Characters… and Other Plays* 10, 45)

The intention is clear. The failure of the actors to portray the characters should appear all the more tragic because it should not appear to be a willful distortion. It is a sincere attempt that is nevertheless destined to remain a miserable failure. It is something that Father himself articulates:

> **FATHER:** I admire, sir, admire your actors: that gentleman there (*points to the Leading Man*), this young lady here (*points to the Leading Lady*), but certainly… you see, they are not us!
> **DIRECTOR:** Of course they're not! How could they possibly be 'you', if 'they' are the actors?
> **FATHER:** Exactly, they're actors. And both of them act our parts very well. But, believe me, for us it's a different thing—something that would like to be the same, but at the same time is not![31] (*Six Characters… and Other Plays* 47)

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[29] *I Personaggi non dovranno infatti apparire come fantasmi, ma come realtà create, costruzioni della fantasia immutabili: e dunque più reali e consistenti della volubile naturalità degli Attori.* (Pirandello, *Teatro* 355)

[30] *Chi voglia tentare una traduzione scenica di questa commedia bisogna che s'adoperi con ogni mezzo a ottenere tutto l'effetto che questi Sei Personaggi non si confondano con gli Attori della Compagnia. […] La rappresentazione della scena, eseguita dagli Attori, apparirà fin dalle prime battute un'altra cosa, senza che abbia tuttavia, neppur minimamente, l'aria d'una parodia; apparirà piuttosto come rimessa in bello.* (Pirandello, *Teatro* 355, 385)

[31] IL PADRE. Io ammiro, signore, ammiro i suoi attori: il Signore là (*indicherà il Primo Attore*), la Signorina (*indicherà la Prima Attrice*), ma, certamente ecco, non sono noi…
IL CAPOCOMICO. Eh sfido! Come vuole che sieno, «loro», se sono gli attori?

Here, well before Walter Benjamin's "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," we have a certain loss of the aura. What the actors cannot convey of the characters is precisely the aura. It may be a good copy, but it is still a copy, and it lacks an important aspect of the original.

Seeking the cause of this failed translation, we might well turn to one of the play's most famous passages, the Father's explosive diatribe against the limitations of words:

> But can't you see all the trouble lies here! In the words! All of us have a world full of things inside us, each of us his own world of things! And how can we understand one another, sir, if in the words I speak I put the meaning and the value of things as I see them, while the one who listens inevitably takes them according to the meaning and the value which he has in himself of the world he has inside of *himself*. We think we understand each other; we never understand one another.[32] (*Six Characters… and Other Plays* 19)

What this passage says in terms of semiotics is familiar, almost banal: the signifiers—the words themselves—bear no objective, unchanging link to signifieds. Still less do words have anything to with the "internal world of things" they are meant to communicate, convey, or externalize. What makes these words so compelling in this case is their relationship to the speaker. In the case of the Father of the *sei personaggi*, we have a character who is tortured by the need to tell a story which, given the limitations of words, is untellable. At the very least, it cannot be communicated or understood in the same way he understands it. What it is to him is something incompatible with translation or communication.

What Pirandello has to say about the impossibility of staging these characters matters not merely aesthetically or artistically, but ethically. We may not be convinced that, like a matter of historical fact such as the events narrated by Primo Levi, the story of these characters is something

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IL PADRE. Appunto, gli attori! E fanno bene, tutti e due, le nostre parti. Ma creda che a noi pare un'altra cosa, che vorrebbe esser la stessa, e intanto non è! (Pirandello, *Teatro* 388)

[32] IL PADRE. Ma se è tutto qui il male! Nelle parole! Abbiamo tutti dentro un mondo di cose; ciascuno un suo mondo di cose! E come possiamo intenderci, signore, se nelle parole ch'io dico metto il senso e il valore delle cose come sono dentro di me; mentre chi le ascolta, inevitabilmente le assume col senso e col valore che hanno per sé, del mondo com'egli l'ha dentro? Crediamo d'intenderci; non c'intendiamo mai! (Pirandello, *Teatro* 364)

that matters. Indeed, it certainly cannot be said to matter nearly as much. From a structural perspective, however, their story still functions as the impetus that demands and forbids expression. Like Levi's Auschwitz, the father's past is incompatible with any set of words that might represent it. And yet the character feels the need to communicate as a real, pressing obligation. Indeed, he is nothing but a pure manifestation of the desire to have a story remembered. The story is all he has, all he has ever had, and all he will ever have. He is only a character. No, he is less than a character, he not yet a character. He is a would-be character: he is certainly not a man. The father, in his status as a potential, non-actualized character, is nothing—absolutely nothing—except a desire, the need to tell a story.

To use the terminology of "The Pact of Geryon," what Pirandello gives us is a dramatization—realized anew with each performance—of the impossibility of truly conveying the impetus. What's more, by personifying this outside in the body of the individual characters, the play embodies the feelings of guilt and failure that are brought about by the inevitable distance between what a play intends to express and what it ultimately does communicate. This is a message—dare I say a didactic message—that applies with equal validity in situations when the "what" to be communicated is something that matters a great deal more than these characters.

Of course, there is a natural objection. It is clear that, from a materialist/scientific perspective, the characters are clearly nothing but projections of the author himself, and thus seemingly more inside than outside. But Pirandello himself does not conceive of them or treat them this way. He sees them as something other than himself rather than as a projection of himself. They are viewed almost like an object or an event—part of an objective reality—something that it would be possible to get right or get wrong. Despite their pure existence on Level 2, there is a felt need to do justice to the characters which overrides and supersedes concerns about, say, plot structure or aesthetics. At least for Pirandello, the truth of their story is something that potentially *matters*.

In order for a work to come into being as art, I believe there is always something beyond the work that matters. For the sake of convenience, I have called it the impetus. It might also be called simply "intent." I am, of course, veering dangerously close to a critical taboo. Speaking about intent—pretending to be able to access what an artist wanted to say or do in a given text—is quite understandably off-limits for the critic. Ultimately, I recognize that works—if they can be said to intend anything at all—intend something quite different than the men and women who created them.

None of this means, however, that we can ignore the existence of authorial intent as a fundamental ethical component of a text. Consider it this way: I would suggest that authorial intent is akin to the truth of history, the historical impetus, the infinitesimal interactions of atoms. Even if it is unknown and unknowable, this does not mean that it does not exist. And it certainly doesn't mean that it does not *matter*; the inaccessibility of intent does not mean that—in a given work—an original intent is realized more or realized less: that certain works do justice to what was intended and others do not.

Let me return to the case in point, the *sei personaggi*. Pirandello, much like his *capocomico*, intends to tell the story of the six characters. To interpret the text, it doesn't matter what the character's story truly is; but it does matter that a truth of their story exists. It matters that any representation of that story is an arrow shot at a target. It seems clear—at least to me—that it matters to Pirandello. Is that enough? Why should we care about the father? About *Dottor Fileno*? Why does it really matter if the truth of a character is betrayed by his or her representation? Even if we accept that the true story of the characters matters to Pirandello, why should it matter to his audience members or his critics? In what sense is it a relevant ethical problem?

The tragedy of a not-quite-character who is named anything-but-Fileno has very little at stake. But what Dottor Fileno shares with Auschwitz—or the 1934 World Series, or what I ate for

breakfast this morning, or the feeling of joy—is a structure. All of these things share a capacity to become representation, they all belong to the realm of the communicable. After all, Pirandello's characters are the embodiment of the structural point of origin that is the impetus for storytelling—a point that is simultaneously and paradoxically both inside and outside the self. On this point, here is the French philosopher Francis Wolff:

> Everything is inside because in order to think anything whatsoever, it is necessary to "be able to be conscious of it," it is necessary to say it, and so we are locked up in language or in consciousness without being able to get out. In this sense, they have no outside. But in another sense, they are entirely turned towards the outside; they are the world's window: for to be conscious is always to be conscious of something, to speak is necessarily to speak about something. To be conscious of the tree is to be conscious of the tree itself, and not the idea of the tree; to speak about the tree is not just to utter a word but to speak about the thing. Consequently, consciousness and language enclose the world within themselves only insofar as, conversely, they are entirely contained by it. We are in consciousness or language as in a transparent cage. Everything is outside, yet it is impossible to get out. (11)

Pirandello always portrays his characters as autonomous entities, external to the point that they are susceptible to betrayal, inaccuracy, and profanation. And yet, they are also a mirror his own interiority. Consequentially, it matters whether or not he manages to do justice to these characters; it is akin to doing justice to a part of his own soul. If the work matters to us, then the truth of the characters should matter to us because it mattered to Pirandello enough to try to tell their story. In trying to explain what he found of value in the *Sei personaggi* specifically, Pirandello put it this way: "Each one of them […] expresses as his or her live passion and torment all that has—for so many years—been the tribulations of my own spirit" (340. My translation).[33] Accordingly, they are the embodiments of a personal sacred—externalizations of something, the anguish of his spirit, which,

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[33] "[C]iascun d'essi […] esprime come sua viva passione e suo tormento quelli che per tanti anni sono stati i travagli del mio spirito." (Pirandello, *Teatro* 340)

to Pirandello at least, *matters*. It doesn't matter as much to as Primo Levi's story matters, but it does matter *in the same way*.

I repeat: it does not matter to the same degree, but it does matter in the same way. There must be an ethics governing the expression of the personal sacred in the same that we agree there is an ethics at stake in the representations of what we all agree is sacred. If not, we deny the capacity of art to introduce new forms of the sacred into the world and we relegate our understanding of ethical or engaged art—our definition of art that matters on an ethical level—to a space governed by intersubjective consensus. To deny that an ethical obligation originates from the structure of representation rather than the nature of what-is-to-be-said is to deny artists the ability to determine what they consider important enough to betray.

I have dwelled at length on Pirandello, Primo Levi, Mohamed Sceab, Italo Calvino, and quantum mechanics in the hopes of establishing what is at stake in speaking about the ethics of representation. Although it may seem at times as though the level of analysis in "The Pact of Geryon" is excessively abstract and esoteric—perhaps akin to rearranging the office furniture in the ivory tower—I hope to eventually convince the reader that how we understand and conceptualize representation is something that has important ethical repercussions.

But these are not, please understand, the most important ethical repercussions. As the American legal scholar Robert Cover put it, the violence of poetry pales in comparison to violence inflicted on the body: "It will not do to insist on the violence of strong poetry, and strong poets. Even the violence of weak judges is utterly real—a naïve but immediate reality, in need of no interpretation, no critic to reveal it. Every prisoner displays its mark" (298). But one kind of violence—violence in thought and language—can and does lead the other kind, violence inflicted on bodies. The shape of language is a fundamental force in the real world; this is one of the knowable

lessons of history. A key theme of the present work is how power interacts with language, and how linguistic and metonymic violence can become bodily violence and repression.

Although the ideas for this collection began to take shape over a decade ago, the majority of these essays were written and revised from the United States in 2016. In that year, the Oxford Dictionaries chose a particularly relevant phrase as the international word of the year: "post-truth" (Wang). The phrase suggests an unhinging of rhetoric and persuasive language from the obligation—or even the desire—to pursue or reflect the Level 1 (or even Level 2) truth of a given situation. It might be seen as the radical uncoupling of language from the interactions of atoms.

One rationale for arriving at a post-truth perspective is through excessive pragmatism. In other words, only the end results of my actions matter, so my language need bear no relationship to the truth of reality. Another, far scarier, route to post-truth runs through an excess of a certain interpretation of postmodernism (or perhaps post-postmodernism). Because the truth is unknowable, unfathomable, uncommunicable in its purest form, then we might as well act as though it does not exist. If there are no perceptions of truth uncontaminated by personal agendas or points-of-view, then all explanations of the world are equally valid. And so, consequentially, there is nothing that can be damaged; there is nothing beyond language and thought to alter, profane, diminish, or betray. Words are a gentle breeze because there are no things to alter. Because "things" are only knowable through language, they have no existence beyond language: things were only ever made of words to begin with. In my opinion, such a position is fundamentally dangerous. It is perhaps the only approach to representation that could be considered wholly unethical. Ethical art can be—and frequently has been—untrue. It should not be post-true. There should be something that it honors, something of value that it hopes to communicate or convey (or perhaps one that it deliberately seeks not to alter or convey).

In the current millennium, the value of literature, film, poetry, and theater may prove to be fundamentally *ethical* in nature. Works of art can teach discernment, the ability to assign value to things, to create hierarchies, and to place certain goods above other goods, to condemn certain violences more harshly than others. For literary critics, this can mean getting our hands dirty: intolerance—when directed towards the intolerable—is a central value of ethics.

In fact, intolerance is perhaps *the* central value of ethics. The great literary critic and gender theorist Judith Butler once speculated that perhaps "there is no becoming ethical save through a certain violence" (26). This statement expresses a fundamental truth about what ethics must mean in the 21st century and beyond. Remember, "To speak is to act; anything which one names is already no longer quite the same; it has lost its innocence" (Sartre 22). Naming—although it is a violent, innocence-robbing act—is still an ethically *necessary* act. Naming begins in transgression, but it need not end there. Even the most "open" works of art model and enact precisely this kind violent ethics at every moment, bringing an unspoken and unspeakable Otherness to rest within a finite form. Perhaps, as French literature scholar Satoshi Ukai put it, "[t]he fundamental task of the current era is how to evaluate the differences among violences" (240). "If there is to be culture today," Ukai continues, "it should be directed toward the evaluation of different violences" (240).

Returning to the question of artistic creation, we might define the ethics of representation as the choice among different kinds of loss. To tell a story or offer a poetic image is to perform a delicate balancing act between what is lost in the telling and what—without the telling—would otherwise perish in the silence of forgetting. In this respect, I believe that the work of art must embrace a certain inherent transgression: art must be willing to commit the violence of closure, to collapse the wavefunction for the sake of communication. I believe that art can (and at times should) embrace a certain kind of partisanship or militancy, that it can—without becoming immoral— harbor evils within itself.

There is, of course, an unacknowledged problem in speaking this way about the moral-ethical capabilities of art. This is the problem of history, the inextricable association between education and enslavement, between enlightenment and colonialism. One of the best ways to conceptualize this kind of cultural violence is by revisiting Plato's cave:

> [M]ake an image of our nature in its education and want of education, likening it to a condition of the following kind. See human beings as though they were in an underground cavelike dwelling with its entrance, a long one, open to the light across the whole width of the cave. They are in it from childhood with their legs and necks in bonds so that they are fixed, seeing only in front of them, unable because of the bond to turn their heads all the way around. Their light is from a fire burning far above and behind them. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a road above, along which we see a wall, built like the partitions puppet-handlers set in front of the human beings and over which they show the puppets. (Trans. Alan Bloom, *The Republic* 514a-b)

What follows in Plato's allegory is the set-up of a rather elaborate shadowbox in which various "prisoners" are physically constrained and forced to remain in darkness.[34] For those shackled within the cave, there is no access to what is outside the cave; there are only shadows projected on a screen. Instead of things, they see merely shadows of things. They see representations and assume, quite naturally, that the shadows of the objects are the whole truth. "Such men," Socrates explains, "would hold that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of artificial things" (515c).

The next portion of the allegory contemplates what would happen in the event that a prisoner should be liberated from the cave. Socrates imagines, at first, the fate of a single individual who is released from captivity and told that "before he saw silly nothings, while now, because he is somewhat nearer to what *is* and more turned toward beings, he sees more correctly" (515d). Initially, he would react violently against this new kind of vision but eventually—once his eyes adjusted to the light—he would begin to feel sorry for the other prisoners, denigrating what passed for wisdom

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[34] Their passivity and captivity is a crucial point here, one which—in the wake of Frantz Fanon and others—all but demands the allegory be read in a postcolonial context.

among those in the cave. Eventually, he would decide that anything is preferable to a life like theirs, the life he too had lived before such an enlightenment. He would develop an awareness that he is now different, that they are now Other. Along with that realization, he might even develop a desire to help them, to teach them what passes for wisdom outside the cave.

Returning back to the beginning of the allegory, we see that Plato wastes no time in directly articulating what is at stake: nothing less than the nature of the educated and the uneducated, the enlightened and the deceived. Plato's cave is therefore an allegory, at least in part, about the function of human culture. Among other things, the allegory of the cave describes the process of acculturation; it establishes a binary opposition between darkness/ignorance and light/knowledge.[35] The enlightened world outside is presented as inherently superior, nearer to the truth of what is. It would therefore be infinitely preferable (albeit very painful) if all the prisoners were released into the light. The reader is thus urged to consider the potential ethical duty that attaches to the prisoner who returns. Access to the world outside the cave imparts a duty to educate: to unchain the prisoners, lead them out of the darkness, and show them the light.

Surely, it must be better to free prisoners from darkness, no? Wouldn't we even find it morally permissible for the returning philosopher to do just about anything in order to liberate those in darkness? Reflecting for a moment on the multiplicity of communities and belief systems that comprise the contemporary world, we might quickly think of several groups who—at least from our perspective—appear to be dwelling in a cave. It will suffice to imagine broad categories (Republican

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[35] Crucially, however, *The Republic* presents two opposing systems of viewing reality that contradict each other and yet remain internally consistent with themselves. Put another way, both the shackled prisoners and the enlightened escapee have systems that explain the world: there is an inside view and an outside view. Both more or less function as epistemological systems, but the two systems contradict each other. The escaped prisoner must adjust to the logic of the light before he can comprehend the enlightened word, but the same prisoner—if he were to return to the cave—would no longer comprehend the logic that reigns in the darkness. He would no longer understand the epistemological system he had known since birth, which was once all that he knew. Within the cave, there is knowledge and wisdom (or at least something that passes for knowledge and wisdom) which is, again, internally consistent with itself but at odds with the knowledge and wisdom of the enlightened world.

versus Democrat, East versus West, Faith versus Science) to quickly realize that each side would be tempted to identify the other point of view as blind, shackled cave-dwellers.

But the messianic impulse, the desire to convert others to our way of seeing or forcibly drag the cave dwellers into the light, certainly cannot be—or at least, can no longer be—taken for granted as an unproblematically good impulse in the contemporary world. In many instances, loudly proclaiming the superiority of one's own knowledge system to skeptical non-believers can seem downright immoral. I am not bemoaning this fact, mind you—I am merely trying to acknowledge just how true it is. Accordingly, this is perhaps the single most difficult challenge facing the would-be ethical artist. He or she must always *be* somebody, and that identity can feel (and sometimes should feel) like an unshakable burden, an obstacle to any non-partisan creation and communication of value.

In the 2012 Norton Lectures at Harvard University, visual artist William Kentridge—who draws extensively on the motif of shadow-puppetry in his spectacular visual work—argued for the deeply problematic legacy of the Cave Allegory in the post-colonial world:

> The man who has seen the light and apprehended the understanding that follows from it has a duty to return to the cave, to unshackle those in darkness, and to bring them up from the cave into the light. If necessary, this must be done by force. The nexus of enlightenment, emancipation, and violence emerges. (11)

Belief in the superiority of the knowledge to be found outside of the cave gives birth to what he memorably christens "[t]he nexus of enlightenment, emancipation, and violence" (11) which Kentridge—who is, by the way, a white South African—links to the human rights abuses and cultural violence of the colonial project.

The forced exportation of European value systems during colonialism is, unfortunately, precisely what happens if the implications of Plato's cave are carried to their logical extreme:

> For Plato's philosopher who journeys out of the cave there is a moral and political right given through a correct understanding of the relationship of

that which is seen, an internal process, to the world outside, external to us. On the basis of this understanding, the philosopher gains the right and obligation to be king. In other words, the knowledge bestows the right to power, which is always the right to violence […] a certainty of knowledge bestowing a legitimacy of violence. (Kentridge 27)

The problem, of course, dwells in the certainty of knowledge. There are many who are absolutely certain of their beliefs, but there are far fewer who have any right to be so certain.

In the case of a literal cave, it is relatively easy to agree on precisely who is living in darkness. But once the cave allegory is mobilized as "an image of our nature in its education and want of education," (*The Republic* 514a) any agreement about the cultural and epistemological location of inside and outside becomes all but impossible. For Kentridge and others, such an optimistic faith and clear belief in the ethical neutrality (or geographical unsituatedness) of enlightenment is no longer available:

> Not just the individual monsters of history but the calamitous history of colonialism, the primary political manifestation of the Enlightenment, are both object lessons we cannot ignore. […] Every tyrant would describe himself […] as the philosopher in Plato's cave. Using whatever means necessary to drag, pull, the unenlightened into the sunlight to join the electrification of the Soviet Union. To reach the "clear fields" of the peasant life in Pol Pot's Cambodia. To insist on the American way of life in Vietnam. (48)

Plato's allegory falls apart, or at least becomes far less convincing, if the dividing line separating the two systems of knowledge is not a cave but an ocean. What if a certain group is not forced to live in the shadows, but has simply freely chosen to live in a cave?

Upon further analysis, however, there is a crucial piece of information missing from the initial setup of the cave allegory. Or rather, we might say that it is a story that begins too late. Because when the curtain rises the prisoners are already shackled in chains: "with their legs and necks in bonds so that they are fixed, seeing only in front of them, unable because of the bond to turn their heads all the way around" (*The Republic* 514a). The initial act of violence in the cave allegory occurs off-stage, before the allegory begins. Someone or something has bound the

prisoners. A *true, material discrepancy* has been created to separate inside and outside. The shadow-logic of the prisoners develops as a result of an initial, imposed inequality. In Plato's setup, it is the unequal starting point that all but forces any reader to accept the superiority of the outside view. Kentridge makes an understandable leap in equating the light outside the cave with the "civilizing" intentions of a colonizing enlightenment, but it might be argued that—because of the initial, offstage chaining of the prisoners—the topography of the cave differs crucially from the geography of the contemporary world.

Can we not acknowledge a difference between the returning liberator who unshackles the previously shackled and one who simply preaches the superiority of his own culture? The distinction here would be between undoing a previous harm, as opposed to proposing a new set of values to a free people. Of course, it is probably quite easy to make a distinction in the abstract. But in the real world it can be all but impossible to distinguish the liberating philosopher and the messianic salesman of a god across the sea. This is particularly true for artists themselves. Imagine, for a moment, the artist who stops to ask these questions: Which one am I? Am I a liberating philosopher or simply the missionary of a different god?[36] Am I speaking from beyond the cave or simply from a different one? And if the attempt to enlighten is so inextricably tied to a kind of cultural violence, what role is left for culture? So far as it would claim to tell a story, to educate, or change a point of view, how could any work of art avoid the nexus of enlightenment, emancipation, and violence? Does this make speaking about the ethics of representation somewhat oxymoronic? Or perhaps

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[36] The history of great artists would, it seems to me, most likely be burdened by a heavy selection bias in favor of true believers. The motivation and dedication necessary to craft an exquisitely memorable work of art is more likely to be wedded to steadfast belief and conviction. A wishy-washy Dante—an Alighieri not quite convinced of the truth and value of salvation—is inconceivable. There might very well have been an equally talented individual, but he would not have written the *Comedy*. Without the firey passion of certainty, what would fuel the hundred cantos? To return to Kentridge, all tyrants—but also most artists and humanitarians—are tempted to view themselves as liberators, not bearing one system among equals but offering freedom from ignorance and chains to an unfortunate, previously shackled mass of the unenlightened.

simply moronic? If artists are no longer entitled to believe in the superiority of their own beliefs as a kind of "outside" system of knowledge—if artists can no longer believe they possess something inarguably true about reality, virtue, and experience—how can they hope to tell meaningful ethical messages about the world?

In addition to the chained inside versus the unchained outside, Plato's allegory also rests on the assumption of another true disparity: the inferiority of shadows to the things themselves. What if there is a value in shadows that the philosopher is not (or no longer) able to understand? As Junichiro Tanizaki put it, "Were it not for shadows there would be no beauty" (xx). To speak in Saussurian terms, it might be suggested that the prisoners have constructed a system that is exclusively comprised of signifiers, while only those outside the cave have access to the signified. But recasting the cave allegory in these semiotic terms raises a crucial question: where are we? Are we—citizens of the 21st century—shackled prisoners interpreting shadows or enlightened philosophers mainlining the secret truth of the universe? In terms of how human beings conceive of the relationship between reality and language, the answer has changed significantly over the course of the past two hundred years. If we take the insights of post-structuralist critical theory seriously (as I do, despite my trust in mind-independent reality), we must recognize that the situation of the prisoners in the cave—who have constructed a logic based on a system of shadows and symbols—is far more similar to our own than the idyllic communion of enlightened outsiders with the things themselves.

Putting it this way, we are forced to recognize that contemporary systems of knowledge are quite different. They are best characterized not as a binary opposition between an "inside view" of ignorance and an "outside view" of enlightenment, but rather as a labyrinthine system of caves, an inescapable multiplicity of partially blind insides each complete with its own set of shackles. This is not to say that there is no impetus; it is merely to deny any kind binary distinction between those

who can and cannot see it. To touch tangentially on the poststructuralist ethics of Emmanuel

Levinas, this would mean that we could never begin any encounter with the Other by envisioning

the self as free and the Other in chains. Or, conversely, by envisioning the Other as a free and the

self as burdened by shackles.

What if, instead of escaping from the cave into the light, we imagine the philosopher merely

escaping from one cave into another? His eyes would still be forced to adjust, but only to a new set

of shadows. Let us imagine that, following the original allegory, he found these new shadows

preferable to the old ones. Imagine this philosopher believes that—although he is still not in

communion with the things themselves—he is "somewhat nearer to what *is* and more turned toward

beings," that he was seeing "more correctly" (*The Republic* 515d). What becomes of the nexus of

enlightenment, emancipation, and violence? How much violence is he entitled to use in

disseminating a "superior" set of shadows? To communicate a world-view which is acknowledged as

partial and incomplete but which he still believes—truly and deeply believes—has value?

Ay, there's the rub. This is one of the central questions of the ethics of representation. If the

artist cannot show us the things themselves, by what right does he or she come selling a new and

improved set of shadows? This is a difficult problem, particularly if the artist's goal is to achieve a

kind of liberation through shadows—if he or she intends, in other words, to use a set of a

representations to accomplish something in the world beyond the page or screen (or, god forbid,

teach us something about it). Even if, as in my revision of the cave allegory, artists can only offer

liberation into another kind of darkness, they most likely still consider themselves to be liberating

philosophers. Thus authorized, they might permit themselves a certain violence in terms of means—

a certain inaccuracy, distortion, or abbreviation—in pursuit of what is judged to be a valuable end

result.

Such is the Pact of Geryon. It is a dilemma without clear answers, but it is nevertheless a fascinating and meaningful topic. The primary focus of my sustained argument in this dissertation will be to think about the nature of this pact, and how various artists have navigated and interpreted the originary ethical moment of decision that is artistic representation. I am not necessarily interested in the good or evil brought about by a work's interpretation or reception in the world, but I am very much interested in how works of art conceptualize the relationship between means and ends, in the ethical tradeoffs and sacrifices that artists knowingly and deliberately make for the sake of communicating values. For I believe that the creation and communication of values—even if they can no longer be seen as universal—is the essential task of the humanities in the 21st century.

CHAPTER ONE

Nulla s'inventa, è vero, che non abbia una qualche radice, più o men profonda, nella realtà; e anche le cose più strane possono esser vere, anzi nessuna fantasia arriva a concepire certe follie, certe inverosimili avventure che si scatenano e scoppiano dal seno tumultuoso della vita; ma pure, come e quanto appare diversa dalle invenzioni che noi possiamo trarne la realtà viva e spirante![37]
– Luigi Pirandello, *Il fu Mattia Pascal*

The Idea of the Impetus: Ungaretti and Montale Reading "L'infinito"

Poetry occupies a unique place among human actions; it is seemingly self-justifying and yet constantly in need of justification. Although the apology or defense of poetry is as old as literature itself, the early 20th century—witness to unprecedented levels of mortality in the First World War, a technological acceleration of the everyday, and a pervasive destabilization of many long-held beliefs—posed these questions with renewed fervor: why write poetry? Is poetry still up to the job of engaging meaningfully with contemporary realities? Chief among the beliefs called into question at the beginning of the 20th century were those about the structure and efficacy of artistic representation—or, for that matter, the structure and efficacy of all systems of language.

By means of an extended dialogue with Giacomo Leopardi's foundational poem "L'infinito," Giuseppe Ungaretti's *L'Allegria* (1916) and Eugenio Montale's *Ossi di seppia* (1925) convey significantly different structural images of how they conceptualize the relationship between poetry and what I call the impetus.[38] In their first poetic collections, Ungaretti and Montale differ with

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[37] "It's true that nothing can be invented without some kind of roots, deep or shallow, in reality; and even the strangest things can be true, indeed, no one's fantasy is capable of conceiving certain follies, certain improbable adventures which explode in the riotous midst of real life. And yet how different living, breathing reality seems from the inventions we draw from it!" (Pirandello, *The Late Mattia Pascal* 88. Trans. William Weaver.)

[38] As explained in the introduction, the impetus is simply the "what" that any poem or work of art seeks to express: it is its motive force or reason for being. At times, as in the case of history, the *historical* impetus is true and concrete. At other times, as in the case of a personal conception of the infinite, the *subjective* impetus is singular and intangible. In either case, the impetus is treated—whether by artists, readers, or both—as something that *matters*, something that an artistic representation might get right or get wrong. The final representation exists in an imperfect relationship to the

respect to a fundamental question: is the poem itself a way to access the impetus or merely another obstacle to communion with a world beyond language? Both Ungaretti and Montale utilize spatial imagery to assess the capacity of poetic language to engage with and express the impetus. In Ungaretti's *L'Allegria*, the impetus is frequently depicted as a disruption or provocation, a penetration of the poet's interior silence, something that forcibly demands to be expressed. The impetus—which for Ungaretti is more often historical in nature—is portrayed as an agent of inscription; it carves an infinite abyss into the poet's own subjectivity. The infinite abyss gives rise to poetry, but such poetry is always finite: it may draw its form from the infinite abyss carved by experience, but it is not and cannot be identical to the infinite abyss.

In Montale's *Ossi di seppia*, however, the impetus is never inscribed within the self; it remains forever beyond what the self can achieve through language. Nevertheless, it still operates as the Utopian ideal of poetic creation; the poem reaches towards it, but can never achieve true contact. In fact, it is language itself that forms the insuperable barrier that blocks communion between the poet and the unsayable impetus, which is more often subjective in Montale's case. Because the poet perceives the world around him in linguistic terms, he or she cannot establish an unmediated, miraculous contact with the impetus. Although the unsayable is by definition unreachable through the vehicle of words, Montale conceives of poetry as an asymptotic motion towards the unsayable. Such a movement operates via negation, establishing what the impetus is not in order to convey what it is. Put another way, if language is capable of articulating *ciò che non siamo, ciò che non vogliamo* then it can offer enhanced understanding of the impetus by rendering it through negative space. If the poem is conceived as "figure," the impetus thus comes into view as a kind of ground.

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impetus (or at least the idea of the impetus): it is less than, other than, and deferred from what it attempts to communicate.

FIGURE 1.1: *Sky and Water I, 1938,* illustration by M.C. Escher
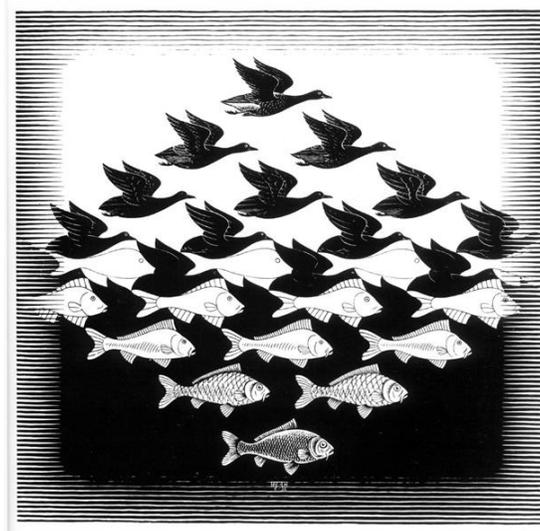
Both Montale and Ungaretti, by writing poetry, choose to replace silence with words. They have both signed the Pact with Geryon, though they understand the structure of the exchange in different ways. For Ungaretti, the act of poetry is testimonial: it gives a name and a voice to what otherwise would have remained shrouded in the silence of forgetting. Through Ungaretti's poem "In Memoria," we remember Mohamed Sceab. The impetus penetrates subjectivity and demands expression. It is thus a source of disruption and disturbance; its impact on subjectivity produces something in the poem which somewhat reflects the shape and the contours of the initial force. For the Montale of *Ossi di seppia*, on the other hand, the force of violence flows primarily in the opposite direction. It is violence committed by the poem against the impetus. Montale's words cut a bas-relief into silence, providing a glimpse of the contours of the ineffable by means of giving voice to what it is not. What we know of Mohamed Sceab is that he was and is meaningfully other than Ungaretti's poem.

If we were to return to the terms of our discussion of Primo Levi, the difference might be articulated as follows. According to the Ungaretti model, we would characterize Levi's real-world experience in Auschwitz as a provocation: it disrupted his interior self and etched an infinite,

wordless poem within his subjectivity. Levi's writings are therefore a Utopian attempt to express this etching—the terrible, unimaginable poem of experience—through human language: "We became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man" (21).[39] Despite its imperfections, however, according to an Ungaretti model, *Se questo è un uomo* draws both its shape and its motive force from the collision of the author's interior categories with the disruptive forces of the impetus. The Montale model, on the other hand, would interpret Levi's writings as important because they point the way beyond themselves towards what they do not and cannot tell: "We became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man" (21). Asking "if" this is a man exposes the limitation and inadequacy of a finite signifier, what is historically, culturally understood as "man," to encapsulate the miraculous and disastrous truth—the infinite truth—of whatever *this* is. According to Montale's vision of inspiration, whatever *this* is, it is certainly not a "man." Whatever a "man" is, it is not *this*. Ergo, the more that can be said of "men"—or indeed, the more that can be said of anything at all—the closer and closer we come to understanding the truth of *this* because we understand everything it is not.

The spatial/mathematical concept of the infinite plays an important structural role in both poetic models. In fact, the epistemological division between Ungaretti and Montale in their early works can be framed as a divergence between the way that each understands the relationship between poetry and the subjective experience of infinity.[40] Both poets explore this idea by revisiting and re-interpreting Giacomo Leopardi's "L'infinito," itself an exploration of the subjective impetus:

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[39] "Allora per la prima volta, ci siamo accorti che la nostra lingua manca di parole per esprimere quest'offesa, la demolizione di un uomo." (Levi 28)

[40] The relevance of "L'infinito" for both authors is territory well-trodden by previous criticism. Indeed, the significance of Leopardi is beyond dispute: the original title of Ungaretti's first collection of poetry, *Allegria di naufraghi*, is a clear echo of the "sweet shipwreck" from the concluding lines of Leopardi's most famous poem. According to Vivienne Hand, Ungaretti—much like Leopardi in "L'infinito"—seems to feel most alive when "in tune with [an] absolute state of *non-being*" (101). In the same vein, Franco Ferrucci asserts that Leopardi serves Montale as a kind of "philosophical muse," *la*

> This lonely hill was always dear to me,
> and this hedgerow, which cuts off the view
> of so much of the last horizon.
> But sitting here and gazing, I can see
> beyond, in my mind's eye, unending spaces,
> and superhuman silences, and depthless calm,
> till what I feel
> is almost fear. And when I hear
> the wind stir in these branches, I begin
> comparing that endless stillness with this noise:
> and the eternal comes to mind,
> and the dead seasons, and the present
> living one, and how it sounds.
> So my mind sinks in this immensity:
> and floundering is sweet in such a sea.[41]
> (Trans. Jonathan Galassi, 107)

The relevant structural details of Leopardi's situation are, briefly, as follows: a solitary poet climbs a "lonesome hill" where a hedgerow obscures his view of the horizon. Because of the presence of an obstacle blocking a portion of his view, the poet's other senses are activated synesthetically and the subsequent contemplation of the horizon results in an interiorization of the eternal/infinite. The hedge-as-obstacle serves as a dividing line that separates—and yet paradoxically unites—the poet

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sua grande musa filosofica (193). Leopardi's famous *siepe* becomes, for Montale, "il muro stesso della prigione esistenziale" (Ferrucci 197). Devoting an entire essay to the parallels between the *siepe* and Montale's *muraglia*, Richard Lansing claims that Montale saw himself as a "failed romantic" who "recreates the Leopardian moment […] in order to subvert the validity of the experience which it encapsulates" (180). Beyond Montale's wall, "a vision of Eden hovers in the distance, beyond reach, […] but unlike Leopardi's *siepe* the poet lacks the power to transform the mundane into the transcendent" (Lansing 184). In fact, as Claire Huffman insightfully observes, Montale's "dialectical and often ironic use of Leopardi constitutes at times a running commentary on the possibilities of poetry itself" (29).

[41] *Sempre caro mi fu quest'ermo colle,*
e questa siepe, che da tanta parte
dell'ultimo orizzonte il guardo esclude.
Ma sedendo e mirando, interminati
spazi di là da quella, e sovrumani
silenzi, e profondissima quïete
io nel pensier mi fingo, ove per poco
il cor non si spaura. E come il vento
odo stormir tra queste piante, io quello
infinito silenzio a questa voce
vo comparando: e mi sovvien l'eterno,
e le morte stagioni, e la presente
e viva, e il suon di lei. Così tra questa
immensità s'annega il pensier mio:
e il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare. (105-106)

from/with the infinite; the lonesome hill is both an idyllic *locus amoenus* and a liminal "space

between" experience and transcendence.[42]

At its core, the encounter with the *infinito* seems relatively easy to identify: it is an experience

of liberation, a moment of transcendence or ecstasy. In a telling quotation, Montale contrasts the *je*

ne sais quoi of transcendence (which he calls here the *quid*) with the "world of representation" that

consistently separates us from the world without us and prevents our ability to access it:

> It seemed as though I was living beneath a glass bell jar, and yet I felt I was close to an essential something. A thin veil, barely a thread separated me from that definitive *something*. An absolute expression would have led to the destruction of that veil, to the end of the falsehood of the world as representation.[43] (*Sulla poesia* 565. My translation).

In its indefinable, boundless nature, the *quid* certainly shares notable affinities with Leopardi's *infinito*:

it is a manifestation of the impetus. Its existence might be felt or conceived but its totality cannot be

mastered, circumscribed, or perhaps even conveyed. To this extent, the *infinito* might be compared to

other, more "concrete" manifestations of the impetus—such as memory, history, experience, joy, or

pain—which are consistently characterized by a lack of linguistic finiteness or circumscribability.

When Ungaretti revisits "L'Infinito" in *L'Allegria*, he is careful to establish that the poet—

despite the mediation of the hedgerow—is still in dialogue with an infinite that cannot be seen or

experienced directly. Although the parallels may not seem readily apparent (the narrator has traded

the solitary hill for the chaos of a battlefield), Ungaretti's most direct re-writing of Leopardi and

clearest articulation the impetus as motive force occurs in "Veglia":

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[42] This Latin phrase, meaning "pleasant place" is invoked as a reference to the typical poetic trope involving a perfectly peaceful, idealized site of contemplation and reflection.

[43] "[M]i pareva di vivere sotto a una campana di vetro, eppure sentivo di essere vicino a qualcosa di essenziale. Un velo sottile, un filo appena mi separava dal *quid* definitivo. L'espressione assoluta sarebbe stata la rottura di quel velo, la fine dell'inganno del mondo come rappresentazione." (Montale *Sulla poesia* 565).
Author's Note: The reference in the final line is, most likely, to Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Representation*.

An entire night
thrown down
beside a companion
massacred
and his mouth
a grimace
turned to the full moon
and the swelling
of his hands
thrust
into my silence
I wrote letters
full of love

I have never been
quite so
attached to life.[44] (My translation)[45]

The poet is no longer alone on a lonesome hill. His experience is neither solitary nor peaceful; it is

communal and precarious. The poet no longer goes in search of the infinite. Instead, infinities—

experience, life, death, memory, violence, *things themselves*—go in search of the poet. They impinge

upon him: they penetrate, rupture and break his silence.

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[44] *Un'intera nottata*
buttato vicino
a un compagno
massacrato
con la sua bocca
digrignata
volta al plenilunio
con la congestione
delle sue mani
penetrata
nel mio silenzio
ho scritto
lettere piene d'amore

Non sono mai stato
tanto
attaccato alla vita. (63)

[45] Although I will typically use Andrew Frisardi's excellent translations the translation of "Veglia" required very specific interpretive choices, so I offer this translation as my own.

The relationship between the poet and the impetus is distilled with exceptional concision into the word *attaccato*. In context, it is an untranslatable gem of a word. Its layers of meaning begin on the level of sound. Like the rest of the poem, *attaccato* participates in the proliferation of harsh, forceful consonant sounds: the severe double-T and double-C followed by yet another T, *attaccato*. The very sound of the word expresses the violence of the attachment in question, a quality that is also enhanced by the potentially latent meanings of the word. In context, *attaccato* certainly corresponds most closely to the English "attached," denoting a connection or link between the poet and life, *la vita*. Lingering within the signifier *attaccato*, however, is an unsheddable connection to its other meanings and uses. It is a past participle of the verb *attaccare*: to attach, yes, but also to attack and perhaps even to contaminate—these are both also potential meanings of *attaccato*. The latent meaning of *attaccato* as "attacked" is unquestionably activated through the poem's battlefield setting; likewise, the presence of the *congestione* earlier in the poem may likewise serve to prime the medical meaning of *attaccare* as a spreading of contamination. Despite the sweetness of the final lines—"I have never been / quite so / attached to life"—the pervasive sense of a violent and disruptive attack is palpable.

Indeed, the violence of the encounter between poet and impetus is Ungaretti's fundamental alteration of Leopardi's experience of the infinite as a sweet shipwreck. Whereas Leopardi might complain that the world was not worthy of his poetry,[46] Ungaretti depicts a world crying out for and demanding expression. The worthiness of the earth for the poet's voice stems from a faith that what the poet is capable of expressing—because it was violently provoked by the impetus, because his silence was penetrated—does correspond to something beyond the self. Although Ungaretti drastically alters the circumstances and the nature of the Leopardian moment, he does not

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[46] As in, for example, "A se stesso": *né di sospiri è degna / la terra*—nor is the earth worthy of my sighs.

68

necessarily alter the structural location of the encounter with the infinite. He is simply more specific: he explicitly locates the infinite both inside and outside the poetic self. By interiorizing the impetus, the poet paradoxically escapes himself; or escapes, at the very least, a solipsistic understanding of the self. His internal experience of the outside is causally related to something "out there" in the world. Consequentially, the interiorized impetus is—at least in some form—communicable.

In "Il porto sepolto," the poet appears to take a more active role; he dives into the buried harbor, returns to the light, and spreads his songs:

> The poet arrives there
> and then resurfaces with his songs
> and scatters them
>
> All that's left me
> of this—this poetry:
> the merest nothing
> of an inexhaustible secret.[47] (Trans. Frisardi, 17)

Of that poetry, he retains *il nulla*—a nothingness which is itself an infinity—of a secret that is inexhaustible. In other words, the poet retains a part of the impetus retrieved from the harbor that he keeps as a secret inside himself. In contrast to the "Copenhagen Interpretation" of representation elaborated via Lukács and Calvino in my introduction, the secret discovered in the buried harbor appears to suffer no reduction when spread in the light. The image of poet as diver resonates with another poem from *L'Allegria*, "Commiato," which reconciles the active poet-as-diver with the more passive "Veglia." Here again, the in poet receives the impetus as a penetration of his silence:

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[47] *Vi arriva il poeta*

e poi torna alla luce con i suoi canti
e li disperde

Di questa poesia
mi resta
quel nulla
di inesauribile segreto. (61)

When I find
a word
in this my silence
it is dug into my life
like an abyss.[48] (53)

"Commiato" combines active and passive voices to articulate a dialectical relationship between the poet and experience or inspiration. The poet actively "finds" (*trovo*) a word before becoming a passive recipient as it "is carved" (*scavata è*) into his life like an abyss. Giuseppe Savoca supports the primarily active role of Ungaretti's poet:

> Whether it be a leaf or a flower, the word is not given to the poet for free, it is rather the gift that he acquires with the painful search for something that lives in the depths of his or her being, in the silence of his or her life. The word is thus a sign that, like an abyss, deeply embeds itself between silence and life.[49] (10. My translation)

The word is a gift [*dono*] but also requires a search inside the self. The active verb—*I find* in this my silence—recalls the image of the diver: the poet plunges into the buried harbor of the self, the mind or memory, and finds a word. He does not find something in its infinite form as impetus, he finds it already as expression: *una parola*. *Scavata è*: the word is dug, hollowed, carved, etched, incised in his life like an abyss.

In this context, the poet's lack of agency is significant. When the word is found, it has already been carved. It has been inscribed inside him like a bas-relief or perhaps a photographic negative. The work of the poet, then, is not translation or creation, but removal, retrieval, bringing to light, and spreading in the sun. Although the word is found within the self, it does not originate

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[48] *Quando trovo*
in questo mio silenzio
una parola
scavata è nella mia vita
come un abisso. (96)

[49] "Foglia o fiore che sia, la parola non viene data al poeta gratuitamente, ma è il dono che egli si conquista con la dolorosa ricerca di qualcosa che abita nelle profondità del suo essere, nel silenzio della sua vita. La parola è allora un segno che si incunea profondamente, come una voragine, tra il silenzio e la vita." (Savoca 10)

there; it has been carved by an exterior force. Pause a moment to consider the contrast between such a vision and Calvino's description of the process of writing his first novel. There is a tremendously meaningful difference between imagining one's self as the agent of violence—e.g., Calvino "burning" the treasure of memory by writing his first novel—versus seeing one's self as the recipient of violence, e.g., Ungaretti's diver receiving a word carved into his life.

Such a belief that the poetic word originates from the impetus is what enables Ungaretti to make his most definitive poetic proclamations. In this respect, nothing could be more daring than "I fiumi":

> I hang onto this mangled tree
> abandoned in this sinkhole
> that is listless
> as a circus
> before or after the show
> and watch
> the quiet passage
> of clouds across the moon
>
> This morning I stretched out
> in an urn of water
> and rested
> like a relic
>
> The flowing Isonzo
> smoothed me
> like one of its stones.[50] (35)

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[50] *Mi tengo a quest'albero mutilato*
abbandonato in questa dolina
che ha il languore
di un circo
prima o dopo lo spettacolo
e guardo
il passaggio quieto
delle nuvole sulla luna

Stamani mi sono disteso
in un'urna d'acqua
e come una reliquia
ho riposato.

L'Isonzo scorrendo

The poem begins with a clear echo of "L'infinito," Ungaretti's poet links himself physically to the *albero mutilato*, the mangled tree, just as Leopardi's poet speaks of an emotional connection to the *ermo colle* or lonely hill. The mutilated tree is abandoned in a *dolina* ("sinkhole"), a figural inversion of the *colle* and perhaps a phonic echo of the more standard Italian form *collina*. The poem's atmosphere, described as like a circus before and after the show, recalls the setting of Leopardi's "Quiete dopo la tempesta." Both poets look at the sky, but the vision of Ungaretti's poet is not obscured. Likewise, his *naufragar* does not occur in the sea of the mind, but in the physical world of the poem. It is, once again, as a kind of diver that the poet submerges himself in the waters of the Isonzo. In these stanzas, the dialectical structure characteristic of "Commiato" returns in the form of two first person verbs, *mi sono disteso* and *ho riposato*, set the stage for a sacred inscription to be carved into the body of the poet: *L'Isonzo scorrendo* / **mi levigava** / *come un suo sasso*, "The flowing Isonzo smoothed me like one of its stones." Again, the crucial issue is agency. It is the river and not the poet who is the active agent.

But to say that the Isonzo writes on his body is not accurate. Ungaretti is remarkably consistent here: the operation that the river performs is not addition but subtraction. The poet is polished; part of his self is removed and worn away. He becomes like a stone, smoothed and worn down by the running of the water. Moreover, the poet is no longer his own: the stone belongs to the river, he becomes like one of its stones. The Isonzo—as manifestation of the impetus—carves itself into his body like an inscription: "when I find a word in this my silence, it is carved into my life like an abyss." And the first word carved into the poet's life is *this*, Isonzo:

> This is the Isonzo
> and here I recognized myself

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mi levigava
come un suo sasso (81)

> more clearly
> as a pliant fiber
> of the universe[51] (37)

Read in response to "L'infinito," such a poetic moment is staggering. The location of the shipwreck-as-baptism that leads to the impetus—be it the universe, infinity, history, memory, truth, otherness—is *this*; it is this physical, chemical, touchable "thing" which is right here before me. And so it seems there can no longer be any division between the word and the thing, between signified and signifier, between poetry and the impetus, because language has been stripped down and polished, *levigata come un suo sasso*. Language has been returned to its origins. Just as Adam give names to the animals, Ungaretti declares "*this* is the Isonzo": demonstrative pronoun → name.

Just as the Isonzo baptizes the poet, the poet re-christens the river. Even though the name he gives it—Isonzo—is intersubjective, the same name it has been called, is called, and will be called by others, the river is reborn and supplied with a new, personalized history: this is where I recognized myself as a pliant fiber of the universe. The Isonzo is not only this thing that I touch outside myself; it is also this thing that I feel inside myself. They are the same. In the Isonzo, the personal and the public—the world inside and the world "out there"—intermingle. The name Isonzo not only designates a communicable place, touchable waters, *these* waters, but it also becomes a repository of personal memories. To dive into the Isonzo is not only to be wet with actual water, but to come into contact with other rivers inside the self and to take possession of them. To say "Questo è l'Isonzo" is to affirm that the sense of "river" inside the self—even as it encompasses so many rivers—is also *this*. It is *this* river, this river right here. To say "Questo è l'Isonzo" is to declare that the impetus can be located in the tangible world and is, at least in a certain sense, capable of

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[51] *Questo è l'Isonzo*
e qui meglio
mi sono riconosciuto
una docile fibra
dell'universo (82)

penetrating and making contact with the subjective world of the poet.

The significance of this moment can perhaps best be understood in relationship to Montale. In order to appreciate the significance of Ungaretti's declaration—*This is the Isonzo*—we must understand why Montale would never make such a statement.[52] Even though Montale's *Ossi di seppia* is filled with minute descriptions of the qualities of physical, tangible things, the descriptions of these objects are not coterminous with the impetus. There is a discontinuity that separates the things described from the world of inspiration. The immensity that Montale seeks is somewhere beyond, behind, or between the things as they are perceived or—at the very least—as they are read and written. As Clodagh Brook explains in her excellent monograph *The Expression of the Inexpressible in Eugenio Montale's Poetry*, Montale believes that there is something inexpressible located beyond the reach of language:

> If one believes [like Montale] that the constituents of the mind are in an alternative, non-linguistic form, then their 'translation' into a linguistic form is likely to be perceived as causing a radical change in their composition, tantamount to a betrayal of their original existence. (16)

Unlike Ungaretti, who is eager to proclaim his communion with the impetus, Montale continually denies the possibility of such contact. Recall the Lukács formulation: "Any gesture with which […] a man might wish to express something of his experience would falsify that experience, *unless it ironically emphasized its own inadequacy and thus cancelled itself out*" (23). Montale's poetics spring precisely from that "unless." In order to avoid a falsification of the impetus, Montale writes reticently, as though under erasure.

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[52] It is not that Montale displays a lack of interest in the thing itself. In many ways, as Margaret Brose points out, the imagery of Montale's early poetry is characterized by the tangible experience of a landscape which is highly reminiscent of the stones of "I fiumi": "*Ossi di seppia* is a volume of poetry inspired by Montale's intimate experience of the Ligurian landscape. The sea, the cliffs, the coastline of the area (*Le Cinque Terre*) constitute the harsh scenery of Montale's early lyrics. […] The terrain has been worn clean of softer elements and everything is reduced to essentials: sea, sand, salt brine and wind, ossified remains thrown up by the sea. […] The particular objects that inhabit this landscape have been stripped clean of the "histories" that might have given them individuality." (152)

Or rather, to be more precise, Montale writes *as* erasure.[53] But Montale's incineration is not the creative destruction of a Futurist *incendiario*.[54] The primary difference is that the *incendiario* is interested primarily in what is destroyed; Montale is interested primarily in what remains after destruction. As Brook explains, Montale's *modus operandi* embraces aspects of negative theology: its goal is to arrive at the impetus by burning, cancelling, and erasing everything that it is not. Such is certainly the operation of the celebrated "Non chiederci la parola":

> Don't ask us for the word to square
> our shapeless spirit on all sides,
> and proclaim it in letters of fire, to shine
> like a lost crocus in a dusty field.
>
> […]
>
> Don't ask us for the phrase that can open worlds
> Just a few gnarled syllables, dry like a branch
> This, today, is all that we can tell you:
> What we are *not*, what we do *not* want.[55]
> (Trans. Jonathan Galassi 39. My emphasis.)

At times misinterpreted as an all-encompassing denial of poetry's power and function, what Montale disavows is a very specific kind of poetic word: the word that "squares," *la parola che squadri*. He denies poetry the capacity to give form to or spatialize the impetus. Do not ask poets, then, for a

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[53] See, for example, "Dissipa tu se lo vuoi": *bruciare, / questo, non altro, è il mio significato.* (78)

[54] An *incendiario* is an arsonist; the word functions as a reference to a well-known poem by Aldo Palazzeschi that, in typical Futurist style, sings the productive value of destruction.

[55] *Non chiederci la parola che squadri da ogni lato*
l'animo nostro informe, e a lettere di fuoco
lo dichiari e risplenda come un croco
perduto in mezzo a un polveroso prato.

[…]

Non domandarci la formula che mondi possa aprirti,
sì qualche storta sillaba e secca come un ramo.
Codesto solo oggi possiamo dirti:
*ciò che **non** siamo, ciò che **non** vogliamo.* (Montale, *Tutte le poesie* 47)

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word that reveals. Do not ask for a word that could give form to the infinite or express the impetus, for—in becoming a word—the impetus would cease to be itself and clothe itself in a name.

Even the "lost crocus" is summoned under erasure via the operation of the word *come* ("like") which transforms the *croco* into a simile for the non-existent revelatory word. The "word to square our shapeless spirit" would shine *like* a lost crocus in a dusty field—which is to say it would not *be* a lost crocus in a dusty field.[56] The only thing that poets can tell is what they are not, for what they truly are in a positive sense is something more than (or other than) what can be conveyed through words. It is also perhaps something too precious to be lost in translation. All that poets can tell us is what they do not want, for what they *do* want is beyond language. True, the unwanted— "what we are *not,* what we do *not* want"—is similarly betrayed when given poetic form, but such metonymic losses are far less tragic. If language must betray, reduce, or distort something, then—by all means—it is infinitely preferable that it should damage the things we do *not* want, rather than the things we do. If something must be betrayed, reduced, or distorted, then let it be what we *are not*. Let it be what we reject, what is least proper to the self. What we are not and what we do not want is less sacred (and needs less protection) than what we *do* want, what we *are*. This too, then, can be seen as a form of ethically-motivated reticence.

Montale's *via negativa* is not a nihilistic silence. Instead, it is a form of Utopian motion or exploration.[57] With each act of negation—each time the poet declares what he is not and what he does not want—he or she moves closer and closer to an untransversable line. In conceptualizing the *via negativa*, it is helpful to envision the mathematical relationship between a curve and its asymptote.

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[56] In other words, saying that the word would shine "like" a crocus is not a way of saying *questo è il croco* but a way of saying *questo non è il croco*.

[57] *Via negativa* (Latin for "negative way") is a phrase drawn from Apophatic theology (also known as "Negative Theology"), a branch of theology that shares much with my characterization of Montale in terms of its addition by subtraction approach to articulating the Divine: describing it by means of what it is not.

As it approaches infinity, the curve grows closer and closer to its asymptote; that is, the distance between the two approaches but never reaches zero. By definition, a curve and its asymptote never intersect. They are entirely non-coterminous, and yet the one might well be used to approximate or describe the other. If we locate the impetus on the other side of an asymptotic line, then the *via negativa* can be imagined as a form of movement along such a curve: all movement takes place in the area outside the asymptotic line ("what we are *not,* what we do *not* want") but each negation is also a step closer.

FIGURE 1.2: An Asymptotic Curve, Wikimedia Commons
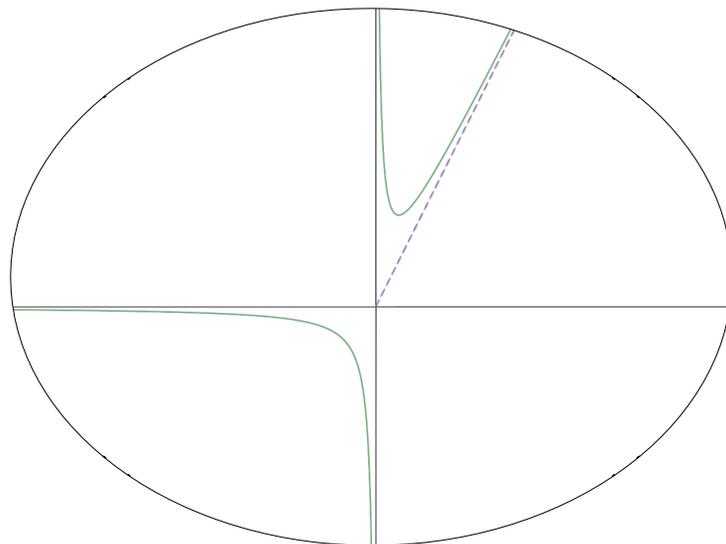
Unlike in Ungaretti's *L'Allegria*, the poet's silence is never penetrated by what lies "beyond the wall" that separates the self from the impetus.[58] According to Margaret Brose, the goal of Montale's poetry is not to show a path across such a boundary, but to describe the experience of liminality itself, to trace the motion along the wall, *questo seguitare una muraglia*:

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[58] The path of negation traces an approach to a boundary line that separates what Brook calls "two postulated realities," which she identifies with "the expressible or known and the inexpressible or irrational and beyond" (31). Likewise, according to Lansing, "the wall, the *muro, muraglia*, or *muretto*, […] divides space into two opposing realms, the finite and the infinite, the mundane and the transcendental, the real and the desired" (179).

[The *muraglia*] is less a boundary to be crossed than a condition to be inhabited. It is a threshold, to be sure, but it is also a situation which provides the occasion for the experience of liminality itself, the experience of being in *varco*, in passage, in movement, […] in Montale's world of cosmic *epoché*, everything happens in the interstices, at boundaries—if anything happens at all. (167)

"Even after language should logically be silenced," Brook explains, "Montale still writes in order to describe the sense of the limit itself, the running up against language" (47).

But what exactly is this wall? What is it made of? Why can't the poet cross over? The suggestion, made by Ferrucci, Lansing, and others, that the *muraglia* is a reincarnation of Leopardi's *siepe* ("hedge") is highly convincing. Like the *siepe*, the *muraglia* functions as an obstacle suggesting the existence of something beyond. Unlike Leopardi's poet, however, Montale's poet never quite reaches a state of sweet shipwreck. He never fully succeeds in participating in the beyond, not even in a form generated by the imagination. In "Non chiederci," Montale identifies words with tree branches, calling the language that poets are capable of providing *qualche storta sillaba e secca come un ramo*: "just a few gnarled syllables, dry like a branch" (38). The association between words and branches is also found in "Quasi una fantasia":

Happily, I'll read the black
signs of branches on the white
like an essential alphabet
all the past will gather
in one point in front of me
No sound will spoil
My solitary joy.[59] (39)

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[59] *Lieto leggerò i neri*
segni dei rami sul bianco
come un essenziale alfabeto.
Tutto il passato in un punto
dinanzi a me sarà comparso.
Non mi turberà suono alcuno
quest'allegrezza solitaria. (20-21)

It is a moment highly reminiscent of "L'infinito." The poet, gazing at the sky, will read the black branches outlined against the white sky as though they were letters of an essential alphabet, as if those the branches themselves formed the contours of a poem. Like Leopardi's *siepe*, these branches must be understood as an *obstruction*: they block out a portion of the sky beyond. It is this obfuscation that leads to the moment of epiphany.[60]

In fact, any experience of the *miracolo* in *Ossi di seppia* is always characterized by two features. First, the miracle is always somehow bracketed within some form of negation. Most often the moment of encounter is bracketed within a hypothetical future, as a kind of Derridian *miracle-to-come*. In "Quasi una fantasia" the epiphany is placed under partial erasure by setting it in the future tense. It will take place on *un giorno d'incantesimo*, a day of carnival a là Bakhtin, in which the standard rules that govern the universe are suspended and reversed.[61] The second characteristic of the miracle is that it occurs in silence.[62] "Quasi una fantasia" declares that, in such an imagined future encounter, *Non mi turberà suono alcuno*, "no sound will spoil my solitary joy." It exists in the infinite chastity of a linguistically unconsummated state: the unopened box of Schrödinger's cat.

Together, these two characteristics—negation and silence—suggest that the miraculous encounter with the impetus cannot take place within language. It must be found in non-language.

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[60] In my opinion, this poem also echoes the famous *Indovinello veronese*—a roundabout description of the act of writing as "black seeds sewn in a white field"—which is among the oldest fragments of literature in Italian and will serve as the epigraph to my final chapter.

[61] I am referring here to the writing of Mikhail Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination*. Bakhtin describes the operation of carnival logic that operates as a temporary inversion in which normal rules or orders are suspended. Such a carnevelesque condition permits unusual creations and discoveries from within what is usually a rigidly codified and structured social order.

[62] The association of silence with the *miracolo* has not gone unnoticed by previous criticism. In an excellent essay on Montale's use of enjambment, Antonio Musumeci points out that: "The silence is not just necessary to Montale's aesthetic vision, but above all it is necessary to his metaphysics. It is part of the ideal disposition of the poet, part of his necessary solitude. It is, above all, the moment of absolute emptiness in which the miracle might verify itself." (506. My translation). With respect to "In limine," C.A. McCormick explains that "the creation of a zone of silence, the stilling of the 'gazzarre degli uccelli' so that only the soft whisper of the wind remains, is the condition for the scent of the lemon trees to work its magic" (633).

Another example is found in perhaps *Ossi di seppia*'s most direct treatment of the *miracolo*, "Forse un mattino":

> Maybe one morning, walking in dry, glassy air
> I'll turn, and see the miracle occur:
> nothing at my back, the void
> behind me, with a drunkard's terror.
>
> Then, as if on a screen, trees houses hills
> will suddenly collect for the usual illusion.
> But it will be too late: and I'll walk on silent
> among the men who don't look back, with my secret.[63] (55)

Montale places the experience of the miracle under erasure through the operation of the word *forse* ("perhaps") which enables him to enter a realm beyond perceived reality. In this case, silence is an attribute of the poet himself who—once the miracle has, perhaps, reached its conclusion—walks on in silence. The final words of the poem brand the encounter as "my secret," suggesting that it has been safeguarded beyond the distorted and distorting grasp of representation. To be communicated, the miracle must be exchanged for a metonymic representation: it must become other than itself.

According to the most common interpretation of the *miracolo* in "Forse un mattino," what the poet sees when he turns is nothing but emptiness. The emptiness subsides when objects appear: trees houses hills. Here, for example, is Brook's reading:

> In privileging the void, Montale illustrates the falsity of empirical knowledge, demonstrating the way in which things perceived by the senses act as a screen, hiding an ultimate, veracious reality from humanity. ["Forse un mattino"] is central to the investigation of the *via negativa* both because it demonstrates the illusory and blinding nature of things and because it shows

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[63] *Forse un mattino andando in un'aria di vetro,*
arida, rivolgendomi, vedrò compirsi il miracolo:
il nulla alle mie spalle, il vuoto dietro
di me, con un terrore di ubriaco.

Poi come s'uno schermo, s'accamperanno di gitto
alberi case colli per l'inganno consueto.
Ma sarà troppo tardi; ed io me n'andrò zitto
tra gli uomini che non si voltano, col mio segreto. (61)

that theoretically—by means of a miracle—things may be almost entirely erased, their erasure leading to a direct apprehension of a deeper reality. (116)

But before the *alberi casi colli* can be thought of as objects, it must be acknowledged that they are words. In this sense, the poet might be seen as turning to catch a world of pure, unadulterated signifieds: an impetus unclothed in signifiers. Before the return of *alberi casi colli*, the miracle is the experience of the thing-in-itself unmediated by language, or at least unmediated by a shared Saussurian *langue*.

In fact, the "disappearance" of the miracle is explicitly marked as a translation into language. The moment when nature's mistake (the famous *sbaglio di natura* found in "I limoni") subsides is marked by a strong asyndeton heightened by a subsequent enjambment, producing a startling effect of acceleration, in which the *nulla* dissolves (or coalesces?) into linguistically determined categories:

> Then, as if on a screen, **trees houses hills**
> will suddenly collect for the usual illusion.[64] (55. My emphasis)

The end of the miracle is marked by the sudden reappearance, as if on a screen, of "trees houses hills" which take the place of the *nulla* or *vuoto*. Instead of the impetus, the poet sees things that he understands linguistically. No longer quite itself, a shape becomes a "house," a "hill," or a "tree." Rather than functioning to suggest something beyond, like Leopardi's *siepe*, however, these trees houses hills simply restore "the usual illusion" of a finite world, where nothing unnamable can survive the opening of a linguistically aware eye. For to open one's eyes is to open Schrödinger's box; it forces an infinity of possibilities to take on a finite set of names. As such, Montale's *muraglia*—the wall that separates the poet from the miracle or the impetus—must be identified as language itself.

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[64] *Poi come s'uno schermo, s'accamperanno di gitto*
alberi case colli *per l'inganno consueto.* (61)

There is a paradox here, however, because this does not make language into something entirely negative. Instead, the *muraglia* of language is like Leopardi's *siepe*: it blocks the poet's view and yet paradoxically allows him to see beyond it. The words themselves block the poet's ability to see what lies beyond without mediation, and yet they point asymptotically beyond, outlining the impetus to allow its contours to come into view. It is the words themselves—inadequate and inaccurate though they may be—which allow the poet to see the shape of the impetus through the contemplation of all that it is not. Language then becomes a kind of "photographic negative" of the transcendent. For it is through language that we dream of the impetus—of all that is potentially beyond the sayable. And we do so full in the knowledge that language can never take us there.

Because if language participates in any kind of historically, logically, or sensorially imposed form of necessity, it cannot be a vehicle of the miracle. By definition, the miracle must be boundless and free of any limitation. The quest is for a truly original, unconstrained utterance or *parole* that could reach outside of the *langue*, a wholly transparent and instantly legible diagram that could transcend the archive of all previous linguistically-bounded thought. The clearest articulation of these ideas occurs in "Potessi almeno costringere," which is unquestionably another restaging of Leopardi:

> If at least I could force
> some small part of your raving
> into this halting rhythm;
> if I could harmonize
> my stammer with your voices: —
> I who dreamed of stealing
> your briny words
> where art and nature fuse,
> the better to shout out the sadness
> of an aging boy who shouldn't have been thinking.
> But all I have are threadbare
> dictionary letters
> and the dark voice love dictates
> goes hoarse, becomes whining writing.
> All I have are these words
> which prostitute themselves

to anyone who asks;
only these tired-out phrases
the student rabble can steal tomorrow
to make real poetry.
And your roaring rises,
the new shadow waxes blue.
My ideas desert me at the test.
I have no senses and no sense. No limit.[65] (77)

Speaking to the sea, Montale expounds his tremendous envy of its *vaneggiamento*.[66] The raving of the

sea, if it exists in a language at all, certainly exists in a realm beyond any limitations imposed by

"senses and sense," which is to say perception and meaning-creation. In contrast, the poet—who

wishes to sing his own melancholy, the sadness that belongs to him and no one else—has only a

finite number of signifiers. Not only are these words inherently limited, but they are also not his

own: the frail, inconstant "dictionary words" of the *langue* will give themselves freely to any writer or

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[65] *Potessi almeno costringere*
in questo mio ritmo stento
qualche poco del tuo vaneggiamento;
dato mi fosse accordare
alle tue voci il mio balbo parlare: —
io che sognava rapirti
le salmastre parole
in cui natura ed arte si confondono,
per gridar meglio la mia malinconia
di fanciullo invecchiato che non doveva pensare.
Ed invece non ho che le lettere fruste
dei dizionari, e l'oscura
voce che amore detta s'affioca,
si fa lamentosa letteratura.
Non ho che queste parole
che come donne pubblicate
s'offrono a chi le richiede;
non ho che queste frasi stancate
che potranno rubarmi anche domani
gli studenti canaglie in versi veri.
Ed il tuo rombo cresce, e si dilata
azzurra l'ombra nuova.
M'abbandonano a prova i miei pensieri.
Sensi non ho; né senso. Non ho limite. (84)

[66] Galassi does quite well to render this in English as "raving" (a speech without sense) although the English translation loses the association of *vaneggiare* with *vano* ("empty, vain"), which activates the idea of emptiness, nothingness—the Leopardian *infinita vanità del tutto* as well as the transcendence of Montale's miraculous *nulla*.

reader and come freighted with the centuries of meaning and associations they have been given by other men and other poems.

But after containing nothing but lamentations about language, "Potessi alemeno costringere" paradoxically concludes with what has been called "the supreme mystical moment of the *Ossi*" (Brook 117). The parallels with Leopardi's sweet shipwreck in "L'Infinito" are unmistakable:

> My ideas desert me at the test.
> I have no senses and no sense. No limit.[67] (77)

Beyond its magnificent rhythmic and rhetorical structure, these final lines should also resonate with the negative theology of "Non chiederci la parola," the moment of transcendence that passes almost entirely undescribed, undocumented. Leaving aside the positive articulation of what he has become or what he *does* want, the poet conveys only a trio of negations: "what we are not" is limited; "what we do not want" is senses or sense. As a result, however, the poet communicates—at best—merely a pathway towards the impetus. There is no real trace of what it might be in a positive sense. To put it another way, we have learned perhaps precisely who Mohamed Sceab *was not*, but who he *truly was* is left to perish without communication. For if the poet reaches the impetus only by transcending sense and senses, how can any meaning found there be re-introduced and communicated within the inconstant words of the public *langue*?

As with Ungaretti, there is undeniably a pessimistic strain present in *Ossi di seppia* that appears to long for the fixity, permanence, and communicability of a name. The clearest manifestation is found in the lovely "Vasca":

> But look, there's more than a streak
> on the mirror that's newly sleek:
> it has no way to break through,
> it wants to live and doesn't know how;

---

[67] *M'abbandonano a prova i miei pensieri.*
Sensi non ho; né senso. Non ho limite. (84)

> it drops if you look, it falls back where it came:
> it lived and died. And never had a name.[68] (97, Translation altered)

The moment, in its namelessness, is a source of both great beauty and great sadness. Whatever the poet has seen has been left quite deliberately unnamed; all we are told is that it is *altro-che-strisica*, "more than a streak." Here is another baptism via negation: we know it is more than a streak perhaps, but all we truly know about it is that it *is not* a streak. Much like Mohammed Sceab, who could not free the song of his desolation (*il canto del suo abbandono*), the *altro-che-striscia* wants to live and doesn't know how. It lacks the power to break through. The next line of the poem can be interpreted as an enactment of the Schrödinger's cat scenario—*se lo guardi si stacca, torna in giù*—if you look at it, it disappears. The collapse and loss is instantaneous; the moment it is truly looked at, the *altro-che-striscia* is no longer present. It dies because it never had a name. Otherwise, it might have endured as a named presence in the poem. Likewise, however, it *lives as itself* precisely because it never had a name. To name it would allow it to live on, but not as itself.

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[68] *Ma ecco, c'è altro che striscia*
a fior della spera rifatta liscia:
di erompere non ha virtù,
vuol vivere e non sa come;
se lo guardi si stacca, torna in giù:
è nato e morto, e non ha avuto un nome. (100)

CHAPTER TWO

Dati biografici: io sono ancora di quelli che credono, con Croce, che di un autore contano solo le opere. […] Perciò dati biografici non ne do, o li do falsi, o comunque cerco sempre di cambiarli da una volta all'altra. Mi chieda pure quel che vuol sapere, e Glielo dirò. Ma non Le dirò mai la verità, di questo può star sicura.[69]
– Italo Calvino, Letter to Germana Pescio Bottino (1964).

Identity, Ethics, and the Republic: From Plato to Elena Ferrante

Despite my focus on the 20th century and beyond, the ethical questions explored in "The Pact of Geryon" are among the oldest in the history of art. They hinge on a constant, long-standing thorn in the side of every artist: the imperfect correspondence of words and images to the things they want to communicate. At stake are questions about where artists draw the line between fidelity and betrayal, persuasion and propaganda, creativity and delusion. What I am talking about is the uncomfortable connection between the creativity of artistic rendering and the immorality of—well, to put it bluntly—lying. Why, precisely, do we take for granted that the creation of art is a good thing? Why is it assumed that art has played a positive role in the development of the human race?

It is not at all my intention to decry the immorality of all literariness (quite the opposite in fact), but rather to shine a light on the continual, uninterrupted presence of the ethical dimension in all works of art. Even within the most seemingly solipsistic formalism, the ethical is always there from the first moment that artists decide to create something rather than nothing. The task in this sustained argument is to uncover the ethical that always and inevitably dwells even within the most seemingly non-ethical representations, to see if there are valuable structural morals to be found in works whose philosophy or ideology we find abhorrent, or perhaps even to uncover the (un)ethical

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[69] "Biographical information: I am still one of those who believe—like Croce—that it is only an author's works that matter. […] Therefore I don't give any biographical information, or I give false information, or at any rate I always try to change everything from one time to the next. But go ahead and ask me whatever you want to know, and I'll tell you. But I will never tell you the truth, of this you can be sure."
– From Italo Calvino's letter to Germana Pescio Bottino, June 9th 1964. My translation.

compromises and ambiguities in the works we might admire. Before continuing our eclectic journey through 20ᵗʰ century Italy and beyond, I would like to pause in this chapter to underscore how some of the oldest questions about ethics and representation are still vital and hotly debated in the present. To do so, I will begin with one of the foundational texts of Western literature, Plato's *Republic*, before leaping forward nearly three thousand years to one of the most heated debates in Italian literature that was unfolding as this collection was written in 2016, the journalistic unmasking or doxxing of the anonymous author Elena Ferrante.

Let's begin with Plato. *The Republic* explicitly situates itself within an ongoing, age-old debate about the moral status of poetry, the "ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry" (*The Republic,* 607b). It is well known that Plato, through Socrates, takes quite a firm position in this quarrel: he sides with philosophy on the basis that it is a surer, more rational foundation for knowledge.[70] Despite this, poetry was understood by many of Plato's contemporaries (including, of course, his protégé Aristotle) as a teacher of virtue; it could show good characters engaged in good actions, and thus implicitly or explicitly offer them as models of behavior to be emulated. It is precisely this conception of poetry—as a teacher of virtue—that *The Republic* wishes to problematize or outright reject. Poetry may be pleasant, says Socrates, but this does not mean that it is useful or even beneficial. Indeed, it is the pleasantness of poetry, as well as its capacity to sway human emotions, that makes it so dangerous. And so Socrates, with a gesture half-reluctant and half-triumphant, all but banishes poetry from the ideal republic:

> Homer is the most poetic and first of the tragic poets; but you must know
> that only so much of poetry as is hymns to gods or celebration of good men
> should be admitted into a city. And if you admit the sweetened muse in lyrics

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[70] In my reading of *The Republic*, I will interpret Socrates as speaking for Plato (or Plato as speaking for Socrates if you prefer). In other words, with respect to this one work, I will not be drawing fine distinctions between the two philosophers: what interests me are the ideas themselves, not the question of their attribution. Similarly, I am less concerned about reconstructing philologically what Plato understood by the word "poetry" than I am in using the ancient philosopher as a kind of strawman or point of original for my later discussion of identity.

or epics, pleasure and pain will jointly be kings in your city instead of law and that argument which in each instance is best in the opinion of the community. (Trans. Alan Bloom. *The Republic,* 607a.)

Plato's gesture is not an all-encompassing rejection of poetry, but a qualified rejection: poetry must be rejected *unless* certain conditions are met.[71]

These conditions, I would argue, are fundamentally structural in nature; they ultimately have more to do with how a work is conceived and composed—how it comes into being—than with what a work "is" in its final state, or with how it is interpreted, used, and received. In her excellent chapter on imitation in Book 10, Jessica Moss examines the interpretative difficulty caused by Plato's move from structure—which she calls "metaphysics"—to ethics:

> Plato's argument against poetry in *Republic* 10 is perplexing. He condemns not all poetry, but only "however much of it is imitative" […]. A metaphysical charge against certain works of poetry—that they are forms of imitation, "at a third remove from the truth"—is thus used to justify an ethical charge: that these works cripple our thought and corrupt our souls. (415)

What I wish to emphasize about this strategy—moving from the structural or metaphysical status of art to a determination of its ethical value—is that it focuses on the nature of poetic *means*, rather than any "end result" brought about by the poem.[72] Poetry is flawed because it leads to bad deeds; poetry leads to bad deeds because it is flawed.[73] But is imitation always and inevitably an immoral means? Perplexingly, *The Republic* offers no clear answer to this question.

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[71] I turn to the noted Italian scholar Giuseppe Mazzotta for a useful summary of his rationale: "Because—so runs the argument—it indulges in lust, madness, and sundry such phantasmatic projections of *amor sui*, poetry warps the intellect, unless its powers be controlled by and subjected to the hegemony of reason" (135).

[72] This is not to suggest, of course, that Plato was unconcerned with ends; indeed, as previously suggested, the educative effect of poetry is precisely what makes it an important object of analysis.

[73] By focusing on the method of imitation, Plato moves from ends back towards means and ultimately suggests a kind of inseparable union between them. Despite his association with the concept that has come to be known as the "noble lie"—a myth that, although not rooted in truth, inspires unity in the public—it seems to me that Plato does not take a utilitarian, "ends justify the means" approach towards assessing the ethical value of poetry. Poetry is not, *ipso facto*, moral whenever it inspires virtue and immoral whenever it inspires vice. His logic is the opposite of something like a *felix culpa*, whereby a good end result can come from a fault or failing. If the logic of a Christian god, per St. Augustine, is to judge

In the vast body of criticism dedicated to Plato's treatment of poetry, quite a bit of ink has been spilled in pursuit of a particular paradox: although Socrates appears to reject imitative poetry across-the-board in Book 10, he explicitly embraces imitations of virtuous men in Book 3. Logically, then, he must be defining "imitative" poetry in such a way that accurate portrayals of the virtuous— which Socrates explicitly endorses—are not truly "imitative" in the same way as the mimetic art he rejects. Moss acknowledges this disconnect and, after extensive contextualization, proposes a convincing solution: the imitation rejected in Book 10 is limited to the imitation of *appearances*. Appearances, for Plato, are ontologically different from realities in that "appearances are varied and contradictory, while realities are stable and uniform" (Moss 421).

Curiously, Socrates chooses to explain this concept in the language of couches. There are, he explains, three forms of couch: there is the singular idea of the couch, presumable created by a god; there are couches that exist in the world, made by couchmakers; and there are paintings of couches, made by painters. Socrates summarizes: "[P]ainter, couchmaker, god—these three preside over three forms of couches" (*The Republic,* 597b.). The painter differs from the other two in that he or she is an imitator, whereas the others are craftsmen. The painter-imitator is thus "a third removed" from the truth; instead of imitating the thing itself—the Platonic form of the couch—the painter imitates the couches made by craftsmen.

But worse than this, Socrates argues, the painter does not imitate the craftsmen's couches as the *really are*, but only as they *appear*:

> **SOCRATES:** Now tell me this about the painter. In your opinion, does he in each case attempt to imitate the thing itself in nature, or the works of the craftsmen?
> **GLAUCON:** The works of the craftsmen.

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it "better to bring good out of evil than not to permit any evil to exist" (*Enchiridion,* Chapter VII), the logic of the *Republic* does not permit a kind of poetry that would begin immorally but lead to a positive ethical result, or derive a moral end from "immoral" means. Good men can perhaps be celebrated, but evil men should not be put on display as objects of contempt.

> **SOCRATES:** Such as they are or such as they look? […] Does a couch, if you observe it from the side, or from the front, or from anywhere else, differ at all from itself? Or does it not differ at all but only look different, and similarly with the rest?
> **GLAUCON:** The latter is so. It looks different, but isn't.
> **SOCRATES:** Now consider this very point. Toward which is painting directed in each case—toward imitation of the being as it is or toward its looking as it looks? Is it imitation of looks or of truth?
> **GLAUCON:** Of looks.
> **SOCRATES:** Therefore, imitation is surely far from the truth; and, as it seems, it is due to this that it produces everything—because it lays hold of a certain small part of each thing, and that part is itself only a phantom. For example, the painter, we say, will paint for us a shoemaker, a carpenter, and the other craftsmen, although he doesn't understand the arts of any one of them. But, nevertheless, if he is a good painter, by painting a carpenter and displaying him from far off, he would deceive children and foolish human beings into thinking that it is truly a carpenter.
> (*The Republic,* 598a.-598c. Translation altered to add speaker names for clarity)

Let us pay particular attention to the final lines of Socrates quoted above. A good painter—despite not understanding the art of a carpenter—can deceive "children and foolish human beings" into believing that he is truly a carpenter. The painter does so by imitating the *appearances* of things, how they look, rather than their reality. Put another way, the painter imitates the appearance of couches as they exist in the world; he does not imitate the "one true couch" presided over by god. In other words, what Plato rejects is art that imitates appearances but—precisely by doing so—misrepresents reality. He rejects art that sacrifices maximum fidelity in order to achieve communicative transparency: imitations that would rather increase their comprehensibility than their value as truth.

What is easy to miss about Plato's rejection of imitation is that—when taken to its logical extreme—it transforms representational ethics into a question about knowledge and identity. Socrates states the issue most directly here: "For it is necessary that the good poet, if he is going to make fair poems about the things his poetry concerns, be in possession of knowledge when he makes his poems or not be able to make them" (*The Republic*, 598e.) Recall that, in Book 3, there was one specific form of poetry admitted into the *Republic*: imitations of virtuous men. So long as imitation is directed towards the proper object, the good and the beautiful, it is a perfectly legitimate

method.[74] But in order to do so, the practitioner of imitation must have knowledge of good and the beautiful, just as—if he is to represent a couch—he must have knowledge of couches that extends beyond appearances toward the reality of the thing itself. Establishing "true knowledge of the reality of a given subject" as a prerequisite for artistic creation transforms a question about morality (e.g., is this imitation misleading or unethical?) into a question about identity: who is the imitator? How much does he or she know about the subject being imitated? This would mean, among other things, that—in order to judge the desirability of a given imitation—it would be necessary to know a good deal about who has created it. Presumably only couchmakers could paint couches, and only virtuous men could imitate virtue.

Consequentially, we might say that the most defining feature of the Platonic model is therefore that *imitation cannot be a path to knowledge about the object that is imitated*: "For it is necessary that the good poet, if he is going to make fair poems about the things his poetry concerns, be in possession of knowledge when he makes his poems or not be able to make them" (*The Republic*, 598e.) This would seem to preclude, or at least brand as morally questionable, a conception of poetry as a voyage of discovery, a kind of ethnographic investigation of other worlds and other minds. Poetry is not, or should not be, a marriage between fantasy and epistemology. The impetus is either fully known (presumably through philosophy) and therefore representable or else the imitator is condemned to touch only lightly on its exterior appearance:

> [I]mitation is surely far from the truth; and, as it seems, it is due to this that it produces everything—because it lays hold of a certain small part of each thing, and that part is itself only a phantom. For example, the painter, we say, will paint for us a shoemaker, a carpenter, and the other craftsmen, although he doesn't understand the arts of any one of them. But, nevertheless, if he is a good painter, by painting a carpenter and displaying him from far off, he

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[74] For example, according to William Chase Greene, "[i]mitation is not, as such, criticized in an unfriendly spirit; on the contrary, the imitation of the good and of the beautiful that is to be discovered everywhere, in bodies and in souls, is expressly encouraged" (38).

would deceive children and foolish human beings into thinking that it is truly a carpenter. (*The Republic* 598c)

Even a good painter—to the extent that he is an imitator without perfect knowledge of the subject—can do nothing but deceive. The Platonic model of imitation demands that we know "where an artist is coming from" in order to determine whether or not they have the requisite knowledge to depict what they are depicting.

Unfortunately, Plato never systematically explains the structural/metaphysical process involved in the kind of art he does sanction. How, exactly, are the "imitations of virtuous men" created in such a way as to avoid the evils of other works of mimesis? We might presume that the sanctioned mimetic process is something like the opposite of the process described above. Unlike the ignorant-of-the-truth painter who deceives, the virtuous philosopher-imitator lays hold of the entirety of the thing itself and transmits the truth of that thing in a form unaltered and untainted by the process of representation: it is an act of *transmission* rather than *translation*. For Plato, this is presumably the only kind of poetry that is beneficial: one that begins with a true knowledge of reality and—without passing through the sweetened muse—transmits it unaltered to those capable of understanding.

I must insist again that Plato's model posits an absolute unity of means and ends. If a particular work of poetry succeeds in imparting a true knowledge of virtue, it is because its means were entirely virtuous: it was written by someone with a true knowledge of virtue in imitation of the reality of virtue rather than its mere appearance. The logical contrapositive is equally important: if the imitation is "impure"—if it lacks knowledge or traffics in appearances—it simply cannot inspire virtue. In other words, the Platonic model is nearly a direct inversion of what I call the Pact of Geryon.

And what about the lessons of the cave? The nexus of enlightenment, emancipation, and violence? How can we distinguish true poets from colonizing false prophets? From the vantage

point of a reader or critic in the 21ˢᵗ Century, it is becoming almost impossible to believe the claims

of anyone who portrays themselves as a liberating philosopher, as a self-proclaimed virtuous man

here to instruct us about virtue. In some cases—particularly when the artist belongs to a historically

"strong" identity group—it is tempting for the reader to feel downright distrustful. Once an artist's

identity or geography is known, it can be weaponized as a disqualifier. Why should we grant any kind

of ethical authority to another white male? Another European? Haven't we been paying attention?

Isn't the future, like the past, likely to see class interest and cultural bias marketed under the banner

of universal values?

It is one of the greatest unescapable burdens of the would-be artist: he or she must always be

someone.[75] The artist must always speak from somewhere. And it is clear from the vantage point of

the 21ˢᵗ Century that there is no longer—and indeed, that there was—a somewhere that is purely

outside. There is no Archimedean point from which to view the impetus from a perspective that is

completely neutral. And there are parts of every artist's identity that simply cannot be chosen or

unchosen. So much of what an individual means or signifies is beyond his or her control. Despite

this, there is an understandable desire on the part of the reader to know where an artist is coming

from. Does she know what she's talking about? Or is she simply imitating the appearance of a

couch? Touching lightly on its surface, using her artistry into deceiving me into believing that she

has something true to say?

In terms of belonging to this or that race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, political

affiliation, or religion, the identity of an artist is inevitably encoded into the meaning-production

system of the work. But does this mean that the revelation of an identity—as a Platonic model

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[75] Of course, many great works of art—if not all of them—are collaborative in nature and created by multiple artists. I use the single word "artist" primarily for the sake of grammatical convenience. Regardless of how many artists contribute to a work's creation, they must each have a tangible knowable identity that affects the ethical calculus of a work's coming-into-being.

would seem to imply—is something that is owed to the reader? Is it ethical to withhold information that is crucially relevant in assessing where a work is coming from? Perhaps it is quite the opposite. Does awareness of an artist's identity irrevocably close certain possibilities for interpretation? Does knowledge of identity serve to make a work more comprehensible—more easily situated and interpreted—at the cost of limiting its potential scope of meaning? I knowledge of an artist's identity an essential prerequisite for interpretation, or does it simply leave the work irreversibly diminished?

Identity-based logic, though its underlying rationale is quite understandable, can quickly become all-consuming. Clearly, there are deep ethical problems that can stem from disparate identity relationships: orientalization, paternalism, cultural appropriation, mansplaining—but how do we avoid returning to a kind of Platonic system which demands to inspect the identity of an artist in order to determine the value of her message? Who is allowed to speak—without identity-based disqualification—and on what subjects? Can a man speak about a woman? Can a woman speak about a man? Can either man or woman speak about those who are neither? Can the rich speak about the poor? Or even for the poor?

And what are we doing reading this collection of essays by John Welsh? This straight, white male? Okay, so he is writing mainly about other straight, white males. Does this make John more or less qualified to speak about them? Is he less qualified because he is potentially too biased and will inevitably portray "his own people" positively? Or is he in a position to know them better because of the qualities that they share? But wait, John is an American writing about Italians! How could he possibly write about works from a foreign culture? It is very easy, in other words, to disqualify me as a qualified author for the present work. The problem is that, in evaluating something like authority to speak on the basis of identity, one quickly falls into logical contradictions. There are extreme, insoluble problems that arise regardless of whether one is writing from a position of similarity or a position of difference. John is too biased to write about white upper-class males because they are

too much like him, but John is also unable to write about Italians—or about the female novelists and gay poet-filmmakers in this collection—because they are too unlike him. But the positionless critic or artist is inconceivable: there is no Archimedean point from which to view reality. So what is to be done? Is the solution to be found in anonymity?

The issue of identity and anonymity emerged with particular significance and poignancy in 2016 with the "unmasking" of the Italian author Elena Ferrante. An internationally acclaimed and highly influential author, she had famously remained anonymous since the beginning of her writing career while publishing under a pen name: "an empty space that for the sake of convention I call Elena Ferrante" (*The Paris Review*).[76] Her rationale for doing so was partially laid out in a letter she sent to her publisher Sandra Ozzola on Sept. 21, 1991, explaining that Ferrante herself would not be participating in any publicity activities for her first novel, *L'amore molesto*:

> I've already done enough for this long story: I wrote it. If the book is worth anything, that should be sufficient. I won't participate in discussions and conferences, if I'm invited. I won't go and accept prizes, if any are awarded to me. I will never promote the book, especially on television, not in Italy or, as the case may be, abroad. I will be interviewed only in writing, but I would prefer to limit even that to the indispensable minimum. […] To explain all the reasons for my decision is, as you know, hard for me. I will only tell you that it's a small wager with myself, with my convictions. I believe that books, once they are written, have no need of their authors. […] Besides, isn't it true that promotion is expensive? I will be the publishing house's least expensive author. I'll spare you even my presence.[77] (Trans. Ann Goldstein. *Frantumaglia* 14-15)

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[76] Though Ferrante's case is unique in certain ways, she is of course far from the first author to write under an assumed name. As Deborah Orr explains, "There is a long tradition of women writing under pseudonyms, precisely because of the expectation of private domesticity that has bounded the lives of women." Violetta Brancatella situates Ferrante in a long line of female writers who have used pseudonyms, including Louisa May Alcott (A.M. Barnard), Charlotte Brontë (Currer Bell), Emily Brontë (Ellis Bell), Anne Brontë (Acton Bell), Agatha Christie (Mary Westmacott), Jane Austen ("A lady"), Amantine Aurore Lucile Dupin (George Sand), and even J.K. Rowling (Robert Galbraith). Brancatella omits many other famous examples like Mary Anne Evans (George Eliot), Karen Von Blixen (Isak Dinesen), and Virginia Woolf (E V Odle). In the Italian tradition, Brancatella points to several notable examples of male authors—such as Alberto Pincherle (Alberto Moravia), Aron Hector Schmitz (Italo Svevo), Umberto Poli (Umberto Saba), Carlo Lorenzini (Carlo Collodi)—who published under a different name than the one they were given at birth.

[77] "Non intendo fare niente per *L'amore molesto*, niente che comporti l'impegno pubblico della mia persona. Ho già fatto abbastanza per questo lungo racconto: l'ho scritto; se il libro vale qualcosa, dovrebbe essere sufficiente. Non parteciperò a dibatti e convegni, se mi inviteranno. Non andrò a ritirare premi, se me ne vorranno dare. Non promuoverò i libri mai,

When Ferrante granted her first ever in-person interview to *The Paris Review* in 2015, she explained

that her rationale for her anonymity has changed over the years. Initially, she said that "timidity

prevailed": writing anonymously was a way to remain in her "shell" and "avoid the rituals of

publication." As her career progressed, however, Ferrante began to develop a certain "hostility

toward the media" which—instead of paying attention to books themselves—valued them according

to the aura and credentials of an author figure.[78]

"It has become natural to think of the author as a particular individual who exists, inevitably,

outside the text—so that if we want to know more about what we're reading we should address that

individual, or find out everything about his more or less banal life," Ferrante explained. She believes

that this myth of the author is an illusion created and sustained by the media environment:

> The media simply can't discuss a work of literature without pointing to some
> writer-hero. And yet there is no work of literature that is not the fruit of
> tradition, of many skills, of a sort of collective intelligence. We wrongfully
> diminish this collective intelligence when we insist on there being a single
> protagonist behind every work of art. (*Paris Review*)

But more so even than her objection to the "solitary genius" model of authorship, Ferrante's

decision to remain anonymous was nurtured and reinforced by the effect that it had on her writing:

> What has never lost importance for me, over these two and a half decades, is
> the creative space that absence opened up for me. Once I knew that the
> completed book would make its way in the world without me, once I knew
> that nothing of the concrete, physical me would ever appear beside the
> volume—as if the book were a little dog and I were its master—it made me

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soprattutto in televisione, né eventualmente all'estero. Interverrò solo attraverso la scrittura, ma tenderei a limitare al
minimo indispensabile anche questo. […] Tutte le ragioni di questa mia decisione mi riesce difficile esporle, lo sai. Ti
voglio solo confidare che la mia è una piccola scommessa con me stessa, con le mie convinzioni. Io credo che i libri non
abbiano alcun bisogno degli autori, una volta che siano stati scritti. […] Del resto, non è vero che le promozioni
costano? Io sarò l'autrice meno costosa della casa editrice. Persino la mia presenza vi sarà risparmiata." (Elena Ferrante,
La frantumaglia 9)

[78] "It's not the book that counts, but the aura of its author. If the aura is already there, and the media reinforces it, the
publishing world is happy to open its doors and the market is very happy to welcome you. If it's not there but the book
miraculously sells, the media *invents* the author, so the writer ends up selling not only his work but also himself, his
image." (Ferrante *The Paris Review*)

see something new about writing. I felt as though I had released the words from myself. (*Paris Review*)

Back in 1991, Ferrante told Ozzola, "I am absolutely committed in this sense to myself and my family. I hope not to be forced to change my mind" (14).[79]

Unfortunately, Ferrante may have been forced to change her mind in October 2016, when an Italian investigative journalist named Claudio Gatti published an article entitled "Ecco la vera identità di Elena Ferrante"[80] offering convincing evidence of the writer's true identity:

> Far from the daughter of a Neapolitan seamstress described in *Frantumaglia*, new revelations from real estate and financial records point to Anita Raja, a Rome-based translator whose German-born mother fled the Holocaust and later married a Neapolitan magistrate.[81]

Whatever else it was, Gatti's argument—which drew on forensic accounting practices that have been compared to a criminal investigation—was quite convincing. It seemed to leave little doubt that there was a concrete link between Anita Raja and Elena Ferrante. Despite the fact that discussion of Ferrante's true identity had been a source of fascination for decades, Gatti's piece was—for the most part—met with a widespread and virulent backlash. According to Adam Kirsch of *The New York Times*, many readers reacted with "anger and disgust"; National Public Radio's Camila Domonoske

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[79] "Spero di non essere costretta a cambiare idea." (Ferrante 9).

[80] A version of the article appeared on the same day in Italy's *Il Sole 24 Ore*, America's *The New York Review of Books*, France's *Mediapart*, and Germany's *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Other publications, such as *Le Monde* and *The New York Times* declined to publish the piece. In the text, I will cite passages from the *New York Review of Books*, with footnotes to corresponding parts of the publication in *Il Sole 24 Ore*. "It is a scoop unquestionably; it is a revelation," commented Stig Abell, the editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*. Nevertheless, he believes that the *Supplement* would have declined to publish the piece. "At no point does one feel that this piece of work was necessary," Abell said, "if he had not done it, there was no reason for anybody else to. […] [T]here is the regrettable, sulphurous whiff of a female artist being 'mansplained' here."

[81] "Anziché su un'immaginaria figlia di una sarta napoletana, come si presenta l'autrice in *La Frantumaglia*, le prove da noi raccolte puntano il dito su Anita Raja, traduttrice residente a Roma la cui madre era un'ebrea di origine polacca prima sfuggita all'Olocausto e poi trasferitasi a Napoli."

similarly claimed that "the overwhelming response to Gatti's piece fell on a spectrum from irritation to anger."[82]

By way of justification, Gatti pointed to the goal of "gaining insight into her novels" as well as to the author's decision to publish *Frantumaglia*, a collection of letters, interviews, and other ostensibly autobiographical material.[83] Despite presenting itself as autobiographical, Gatti objected to the fact that *Frantumaglia* painted a picture of Elena Ferrante that differed substantially from what he had learned about Anita Raja:

> According to [*Frantumaglia*], […] the writer has three sisters and her mother was a Neapolitan seamstress who tended to express herself "in her dialect." Ferrante, in this account, lived in Naples until she "ran away," having found work elsewhere. These crumbs of information seemed designed to satisfy her readers' appetite for a personal story that might relate to the Neapolitan setting of the novels themselves. None of the details corresponds to the life and background of Anita Raja. […] Raja's mother was a teacher, not a seamstress, and she wasn't Neapolitan. She was born in Worms, Germany, into a family of Polish Jews who emigrated from Wadowice, a town west of Krakow. She spoke Italian with a strong German accent. Raja has no sisters, only a younger brother, and although she was born in Naples, she moved to Rome with her family at the age of three and has lived there ever since.

Using a curious piece of logic, Gatti went on to explain that—since Ferrante herself had explicitly declared that she would lie about her biography—she had "in a way relinquished her right to disappear behind her books and let them live and grow while their author remained unknown." He also claimed, perhaps more justifiably, that "she and her publisher seemed to have fed public interest in her true identity."

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[82] "The immediate reaction of many readers to these revelations was, perhaps surprisingly, anger and disgust" said Adam Kirsch of *The New York Times*, who also suggested that "the forensic accounting that led to the revelation of Ms. Raja's identity was more like a criminal investigation than literary criticism." This reaction was echoed by Katherine Angel, who wrote that "This investigation, of a kind that might ordinarily be reserved for corrupt politicians, relies on a conviction that Ferrante has committed a clear wrong by requesting her privacy." A similar sentiment—expressing a sense that, after the unmasking, something had been lost in terms of the way Ferrante established a relationship with her readers—was reiterated by *Slate*'s Katy Waldman. "With the spell of Ferrante's anonymity most likely broken, I am struggling to reconcile my belief in journalism—in fact-finding and investigation and transparency—with a profound sense of loss."

[83] This work was first released in Italy in 2003 and later in English—in an expanded edition—in November 2016, just a few short weeks after Gatti's October surprise.

On the same day that he published his now infamous *exposé* of Ferrante's identity, Gatti also

authored a companion piece, "The Story Behind a Name," that explored Anita Raja's family

history.[84] Gatti's companion piece concentrated in particular on the story of Raja's mother, Golda

Frieda Petzenbaum. German-born and of Jewish origin, Petzenbaum "survived discrimination,

internment, a dangerous escape to Switzerland, and almost two years alone in different refugee

camps" during the anti-Semitic horrors surrounding World War II. But before telling the story of

Anita Raja's mother, Gatti made sure to draw attention to just how different Elena Ferrante's

Neapolitan protagonists were from Raja's own family background:

> There are no traces of Anita Raja's personal history in Elena Ferrante's
> fiction. The stories Ferrante tells are those of the Neapolitan poor, of post-
> war Italy, of social and female oppression. None of Ferrante's books gives
> any indication of the tragedies experienced by Raja's mother and
> grandparents and their extended family—pogroms in Poland, Nazi
> persecution in Germany, anti-Semitic laws in fascist Italy and the Holocaust,
> which took the lives of her great-grandparents and a dozen other members
> of her family.[85]

In other words, Ferrante/Raja did not directly represent her own experience or the experience of

her family; the characters in her novels were quite different from her own experience.

What's more, Gatti believed that the author had lied about this discrepancy in *Frantumaglia*

by portraying "Elena Ferrante" as quite similar to the protagonists of her novels despite the fact that

Anita Raja was not. Similar logic was expressed by Amanda Whiting of *The Washingtonian*. "She's

about to publish an 'autobiographical' book," Whiting declared, "That's inconsistent with preserving

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[84] Gatti's secondary article was published on the same day in *Il Sole 24 Ore* as "La forza di Goldi Petzenbaum."

[85] "Nella narrativa di Elena Ferrante non si vedono tracce della storia personale di Anita Raja. I drammi descritti sono quelli dei bassi napoletani, dell'immediato dopoguerra italiano, degli anni di piombo, sono le prepotenze sociali e le sopraffazioni sulle donne. Nessuno dei suoi libri lascia trapelare segni delle tragedie vissute dalla famiglia materna di Raja – dei pogrom in Polonia, delle persecuzioni naziste in Germania, dei soprusi razziali in Italia o della grande bestia dell'Olocausto che in tre anni ha divorato i bisnonni e una dozzina di altri suoi familiari." (Gatti, "La forza di Goldi Petzenbaum.")

emptiness and anonymity." Whiting went as far as to brand Ferrante's false assumption of a

Neapolitan identity a kind of financially motivated fraud:

> *Frantumaglia*'s discrepancies represent a deliberate attempt to defraud
> Ferrante's readers into thinking she is something other than she is, from a
> place she is not from, grew up in a manner she didn't grow up. What's
> worse? Readers are being asked to pay for this self-portrait ($13.21 on
> Amazon), with no warning that its finer details belong to a person who
> doesn't exist.

Although she disapproved of Gatti's "outing" of Ferrante, Michiko Kakutani of *The New York Times*

had similar feelings about the publication of the English edition of *Frantumaglia*, which she calls "a

hugely misguided endeavor, on the part of both Ms. Ferrante and her publishers." Here is Kakutani:

> [T]he sheer volume of interviews here, the author's often self-dramatizing
> discussions of her life (or that of the character of the so-called Elena
> Ferrante), and the very decision to assemble this book seem to fly in the face
> of her declaration that writing should have "an autonomous space, far from
> the demands of the media and the marketplace." In some of her letters, Ms.
> Ferrante sounds as if she were playing a cat-and-mouse game with the press,
> at once coy and passive-aggressive.

Whiting and, to a lesser extent, Kakutani, found themselves decidedly in the minority in terms of

their willingness to attack Ferrante's handling of her anonymity.

But not all of the negative reactions were the same. About a week after Gatti's revelation,

Rachel Donadio of *The New York Times* looked a bit closer at the negative reactions and suggested

that there was a certain geographical split in the reason that readers found the doxxing of Ferrante

so objectionable:

> In the United States and Britain, the investigation into Ms. Ferrante's true
> identity has been viewed by a vocal contingent through the lens of gender.
> Critics have accused the journalist who conducted it and the publications
> where his findings appeared of sexism. But in continental Europe, the
> criticisms have focused on invasion of privacy issues.

For our purposes, it is the reaction of the English-speaking world—which viewed Gatti's actions as

motivated either by a deliberate or unacknowledged sexism—that is most intriguing, precisely

because it touches on the author's right to withhold a crucial fact about his or her identity.[86] After all, prior to Gatti's investigation (and even, alas, after it), many readers were far from certain about the gender identity of "Elena Ferrante."[87] Some—including, quite possibly, Gatti himself—remain convinced that Ferrante's novels were written in whole or in part by Anita Raja's husband, the author Domenico Starnone. But isn't an author's gender identity an important fact to know? Were the novels written by someone with first-hand knowledge of what it is like to be female, or merely by a "good painter" successfully aping the appearance of femininity? Given that every artist sees the world with a particular set of eyes, isn't it valuable—indeed indispensable—to know whether those eyes are male, female, both, or neither? It might seem so at first, but answering "yes" to this question has certain terrible implications: it would mean demanding that an artist's identity be clearly displayed, like a star of David, at the beginning of any interaction between writers and readers.

According to author and historian Katherine Angel, the answer is clear: Ferrante owes us nothing. "An author owes her readers nothing beyond the work itself," Angel says, "Artists create artwork, which we consume; this does not entitle us to consume their person." Moreover, Angel

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[86] Several reactors to Ferrante's unmasking, including Charlotte Shane and Alexandra Schwartz, took pains to distinguish Elena Ferrante from JT Leroy—a literary persona created by Laura Albert. Here is Schwartz: "[I]t is not, as [Gatti] seems to think, a trick, as the false identity of the writer JT LeRoy was a trick, a performance consciously created to fool readers and to drum up interest in LeRoy's supposedly autobiographical books." The Anita Raja-Elena Ferrante case was—particularly due to the fact that she was revealed to be a translator—quite similar to the 1991 outrage surrounding Araki Yasuada, "a deceased and entirely unknown Japanese poet with a spectacular backstory: he was a lonesome Hiroshima survivor whose absorbingly spare lines about the bombing and his small life in its wake seemed to riff on Roland Barthes, Kenneth Rexroth, Jack Spicer, and other figures of the Western avant-garde" (Hsu). As it turns out, however, there was no "Araki Yasuada"; his entire biography was a fiction crafted by a Japanese translator named Tosa Motokiyu. Unlike in Ferrante's case, the translator "Tosu Motokiyu" was also a fiction: the poems were written by a middle-aged white man from Illinois named Kent Johnson. A similar story of Midwesterner impersonating an Asian occurred in 2005 when a white poet from Indiana, Michael Derrick Hudson, began submitting poems under the pen name Yi-Fen Chou. The same poems, rejected for publication under the name Hudson, were quickly accepted for publication under the name Chou. "Maybe Hudson was right to believe that a Chinese name would distinguish his work in the world of American poetry journals, which are not generally filled with Chinese names," Huang Hsu commented. "But, conservative paranoia of quotas aside, the marketplace spoils for someone named Yi-Fen Chou are fairly meagre. If a Chinese name were all it took, there would be far more authors with names like Yi-Fen Chou at the bookstore."

[87] As Lisa Appignanesi sarcastically put it, "Rumours had long travelled the Italian circuit suggesting that no woman could be both so brilliant and so popular a writer: ergo Elena must be a man." "It is significant," author and historian Katherine Angel agrees, "that Ferrante's 'unmasking' has occurred in the context of tiresome debates about whether she is really a woman or, in fact, a man."

views the desire to situate a given author as an act of violence rather than a question of interpretative

necessity:

> This persistent preoccupation is suggestive of the tendency to measure a writer's literary worth in relation not just to the work, but also to other markers: of gender, race, class. The urge to uncover the 'real' Ferrante enacts an imperative to locate her in these systems […]. The crime that Ferrante has committed, in Gatti's eyes, is that of withholding the signs by which he might read her as a "woman writer."[88]

Among the most passionate and compelling pieces that viewed the Ferrante reveal through the lens

of gender was Charlotte Shane's "Sexist Big Reveal," published in *The New Republic*. Shane is wholly

unconvinced that there is any ethical need to know "where an author is coming from" in order to

know how to assess what he or she has to say. Indeed, she argues that Gatti "cannot claim any

ethical impulse" for his actions.[89] For Shane, forcing an author—and in particular a female one—to

abandon anonymity in favor of a concrete identity constitutes a deliberate act of violence:

> Anonymity allowed Elena Ferrante to make art in a misogynistic world. A male journalist took that away from her. […] Outing her or doxxing her or whatever you might prefer to call it, was so clear and unnecessary a violation that I still can't see it as anything other than an attempt to do her harm.[90]

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[88] Huang Hsu of the *New Yorker* articulated the problem of reading a given author as a *woman* writer or an *Asian* writer: "Proper, canonical, 'serious' literature is built upon this flexibility of perspective, but the privilege of such perspective is rarely extended to those on the margins, whose work is often perceived as ethnographic—and for whom there is typically only one way to be 'authentic.'"

[89] "This is one man deciding his desires are so imperative that they more than negate the wishes of others—they *remake* the will of others to align with his own," Shane argues. "Gatti and his accomplices decided that no matter how widely appreciated or critically lauded a woman's work, it is ultimately expendable," Shane writes. "For them, what's worth more than some of the finest writing the world has known is a moment to remind a successful woman that she still must play by society's misogynist rules."

[90] Along with several other writers, Shane pointed towards a double-standard in the treatment of male authors—she cites J.D. Salinger and Thomas Pynchon—who have been permitted to shun the spotlight (and have even been praised for doing so). "These men's bids for relative anonymity are not taken as coy dares," she explains, "but understood as indications of their sober and pure commitment to art, which accordingly should not be challenged or transgressed." Shane also attacks Gatti for implying that—because the translator Anita Raja is married to the novelist Domenico Starnone—perhaps she is not solely responsible for writing Ferrante's works. "His evidence for raising the possibility of her phony authorship seems to be simply that she happens to know a man," Shane suggests.

Deploying the language of sexual assault, Shane is particularly unforgiving in her attack of Gatti's argument that Ferrante had—through her own actions—relinquished any right to privacy:

> [Gatti] finds her "oddly public" for one who would like to keep her legal name unknown because she occasionally grants interviews and because, at the urging of her publishers, she released a book [*Frantumaglia*] that doesn't accurately depict her personal history. […] By admitting she isn't going to tell us about herself, Gatti reasons—and please hear the heavy air quotes around that word—Ferrante has "relinquished her right to disappear." Instead of finding this admirably self-effacing, her reticence to speak on herself becomes an act of hubris that merits punishment and correction. […] Gatti's defense of his piece continues to echo the most chilling claims of men who physically violate a woman while claiming the resisting woman wanted it and had it coming.

Alexandra Schwartz drew the same parallel, portraying the journalist as a rapist of the author's identity: "Gatti does not explain why he feels so free to interpret Ferrante's 'no' as his 'yes.'"

Writing for *The Guardian*, Deborah Orr explained how—by writing the companion piece documenting the life of Anita Raja's mother—Gatti had not done himself any favors.[91] Instead, Orr interpreted the piece as Gatti's suggestion that Ferrante/Raja should have chosen a different topic: she should have written about her own mother, or perhaps even about her Jewishness, rather than narrating the story of poor Neapolitans who were not "her people." Here is Orr:

> Gatti suggests that […] Raja was dishonouring her own mother, who, as Gatti, judged, was "really unique." No doubt Ferrante didn't actually want men telling her what she should really be writing about, as Gatti presumes to. Why would anyone want to be told that they were doing something bad and disrespectful by failing to write about their mother and her family? The obligation to write about and talk about her own family, and be defined at least in part by a terrible past, seems to me like something else that Ferrante would have wanted to free herself from. Gatti, however, has exercised his own perceived right to put Ferrante back where he can keep an eye on her. It is a terrible and ghastly violation.[92]

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[91] For Orr, the height of absurdity in Gatti's actions is that—even after his extensive investigations—he has still misunderstood who Elena Ferrante really is. "Gatti is an idiot," Orr comments, "Elena Ferrante is really Elena Ferrante." Suzanne Moore expressed the same sentiment this way: "One truth remains: if you want to know who Elena Ferrante, there is a very simple way to find out. Read her books."

[92] In the above statement, Orr—in a sentiment that was echoed by her *Guardian* colleague Suzanne Moore—suggests that Gatti's actions reflected a societal impulse to keep female bodies and minds constantly under surveillance. "Successful women can't 'have it all' […] We must be allowed to inspect this woman, to ensure that she hasn't managed

Orr's widely read piece—entitled "The Unmasking of Elena Ferrante Has Violated My Right Not to Know"[93]—is particularly compelling because it reflects a nuanced understanding of the nature of "Elena Ferrante" as a fiction, as well as the author's own rationale for creating such a fiction. Rather than pointing to the importance of knowing where the author is coming from, Ferrante herself suggests that the authorlessness of a given work functions to expand its potential for meaning and—paradoxically—to reveal an author more intimately:

> Remove that individual from the public eye and, as O'Rourke[94] says, we discover that the text contains more than we imagine. It has taken possession of the person who writes. If we want to find that person, she's right there, revealing a self that even she may not truly know. When one offers oneself to the public purely and simply through an act of writing—which is all that really counts—this anonymity turns into part of the story or the verse, part of the fiction. […] If the author doesn't exist outside the text, inside the text she offers herself, *consciously adds herself* to the story, exerting herself to be truer than she could be in the photos of a Sunday supplement, at a book launch, at a literary festival, in some television broadcast, receiving a literary prize. The passionate reader must be allowed to extract the author's physiognomy from every word or grammatical violation or syntactical knot in the text, just as the reader will extract the sense of a character, a landscape, a feeling, or an action. So the writing becomes intimate both for the one who produces it and for the one who enjoys it. (Ferrante, *The Paris Review*)

Slate's Katy Waldman recounts a similar experience of how Ferrante's anonymity entered into the text and animated it with a special kind of energy. "I liked the way Ferrante's absence electrified her

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it," Orr comments. "With men like Gatti in the world, it's perfectly understandable that a person might want to avoid all that nasty, sinister scrutiny."

[93] The "right not to know"—which was used in the title of Orr's column—was actually expressed most compellingly by Schwartz for the *New Yorker*: "Like many—maybe most—enthusiastic Ferrante readers, I have no interest in knowing who the writer who publishes her novels under the name Elena Ferrante is. I don't care. Actually, I do care: I care about *not* finding out. […] That kind of mystery has a corresponding point in the soul of the receptive reader. To fall in love with a book, in that way that I and so many others have fallen in love with Ferrante's, is to feel a special kinship with its author, a profound sort of mutual receptivity and comprehension. The author knows nothing about you, and yet you feel that your most intimate self has been understood."

[94] Ferrante is referring to a review in *The Guardian* by Meghan O'Rourke. Here is the most relevant excerpt: "How does Ferrante's insistence on total privacy change our reading of the novels? In a sense, she has effaced herself like Lila does so that she might lift a novelist out of, as it were, her self. Our relationship to her is like that which we have with a fictional character. We think we know her, but what we know are her sentences, the patterns of her mind, the path of her imagination. Ferrante feels vivid to us as a character because there is so much continuity of thought from novel to novel, and in her biographical absence we are permitted to focus on that literary continuity."

characters' edges," Waldman commented. "She receded, and they came into being as if by uncanny force of will. The Neapolitan novels possess a remarkable, absorbing vividness that makes them feel almost self-created."

Rhetorically, this is quite powerful, but the truth is that her novels are *not* self-created. Even Ferrante herself admits that, to create a work of art, "The individual person is, of course, necessary…" (*The Paris Review*). The works of Elena Ferrante were written by a person (or persons), and he or she (or they) has had a specific, particular history rather than another. There are certain things that the author has done and experienced, and other things that she has not. There are a great many things that she knows, and a great many things that she does not. There are things she believes, certainties she trusts, and associations she does and does not control. All of this is true of the person (or persons) behind Elena Ferrante, just as it is true of every human being and every would-be artist.

Even if we accept the proposition that she has no duty to disclose her identity or her history, we need not accept the argument that such things are meaningless and inconsequential. If the person who wrote the works of Elena Ferrante has experienced life as a woman, the works she has created are different than they would be if she had not experienced life as a woman. As critics and readers, we need not know anything about Elena Ferrante to interpret and enjoy her work, and we need not interpret or enjoy her work any differently because of anything we know about Elena Ferrante. But I believe an ethical approach to art demands we must acknowledge that there is always a relationship between a work and a life, that fiction always "comes from" somewhere. An artist should not be silenced or imprisoned on the basis of identity, but the critic should remain aware that identity is an ineluctable structure of meaning production and value creation.

And so what are we to make of the fact that the fiction of Elena Ferrante comes from a different place than it ends up? Of the fact that, if she is indeed a Roman translator named Anita Raja,

Elena Ferrante is not a poor woman from Naples? Alexandra Schwartz of the *New Yorker* put it this way:

> The part of Gatti's claim that has unavoidable meaning for readers is that Anita Raja's biography does not at all correspond to that of Elena Ferrante as gleaned from her novels, or as described in "Frantumaglia" […]. If Raja is Elena Ferrante, that would mean, among many other things, that she has no firsthand knowledge of the postwar Naples milieu that she evokes with such fiercely unsentimental strokes, the oppressive *rione* on the city's outskirts that anchors the Neapolitan novels and gives them their extraordinary texture of lived truth.

The author who brought the world such a compelling, intimate portrait of poor Neapolitan women is, herself, not a poor Neapolitan woman. This was the center of my own personal reaction to the revelation of Elena Ferrante. But my initial thought was not to condemn Ferrante/Raja for telling the story of people unlike herself. Instead my mind moved in quite a different direction: towards the myriad of supposed artistic sins that are so often identified and decried solely on the basis of an author's identity. I thought about the ongoing debate surrounding precisely *who* is granted or denied the right to speak about certain topics or certain people, to use this or that cultural form.

I wholeheartedly believe "Elena Ferrante" should be allowed to speak about poor Neapolitan women; the proof is that she has done so with such flair, compassion, and intimacy. But should Anita Raja be allowed to do so? Isn't declaring that Raja cannot or should not write about the Neapolitan poor akin to asking all artists to produce their government-issued papers for inspection? Can the story of post-war Naples be told by someone whose personal biography—whose identity—is quite different? If so, why? What does the granting of such a right imply about ethics and representation? And if not, then shouldn't we welcome the unmasking of Ferrante? Is it possible to have it both ways? To allow Elena Ferrante to have her anonymity while at the same time attacking other authors for telling stories that aren't theirs to tell? If we don't know who Elena Ferrante is, how can we know whose lives she has the right to narrate or imagine? Or does the self-evident absurdity of this last question tell us something about ethics and representation?

I believe that it does. Because, as it turns out, this is the subject I most want to address at the conclusion of this chapter: the relationship between identity, ethics, and the imagination. I have dwelled at length on the case of Elena Ferrante's right to withhold her real-world identity—and the perceived violation committed by Carlo Gatti in unmasking it—primarily in order to address a different set of questions: who has the right to speak? And about whom? On which subjects? I was tremendously grateful to encounter a similar reaction from Adam Kirsch of the *New York Times*, who connected the unmasking of Ferrante to the same conversation it had summoned for me:

> In recent weeks, the literary world has been at war over the idea of cultural appropriation—whether a writer has the right to tell stories about people unlike herself. Lionel Shriver's speech at the Brisbane Writers' Festival said yes; many critics of that speech said no. But now it appears that one of the world's best-loved writers is actually a sterling example of the power of appropriation.

Kirsch argued that the revelation of Ferrante's true identity might be a kind of *pro malo bonum*—a positive result derived from an evil action—precisely because Anita Raja's ability to write the Neapolitan novels functions as a demonstration of what Kirsch provocatively calls "the power of appropriation." Despite not being a carpenter, Raja-Ferrante had learned enough of couches and carpentry to paint a compelling image of one. Despite not being a poor Neapolitan girl, Raja-Ferrante had—through her fiction—created something that could offer some true understanding of what it meant to live in the world as one. Kirsch explains:

> For it turns out that in telling the story of poor Neapolitan girls like Lina and Elena, Ms. Raja was claiming the right to imagine the lives of people quite unlike herself. In doing so, she was able to write books in which millions of people found themselves reflected—books about feminism and patriarchy, poverty and violence, education and ambition. This is the paradox of literature, which is also the glory of humanism: the idea that nothing human is alien to any of us, that we all have the power to imagine our way into one another's lives. If the exposure of Elena Ferrante reminds us of that truth, which today we are too inclined to forget, perhaps it will turn out to be justified.

It may be the case that—although what Gatti has done is a violation—it can be seen as a violation

capable of elucidating something crucial about how we conceive of the relationship between fiction,

identity, and ethics. It might be argued that Raja-Ferrante has also committed a violation by claiming

the right to speak for and about people unlike herself, but—despite or because of this violation—

has produced a valuable result. This is an anti-Platonic, Pact of Geryon-style conception of artistic

representation: it embodies the belief that "ethical" fiction can and often does begin as

transgression, and that fiction/imagination can function as a kind of revelatory epistemological

journey.

I am also grateful to Kirsch for pointing me in the direction of American author Lionel

Shriver's speech, "Fiction and Identity Politics," which addressed the relationship of fiction to the

contemporary controversy surrounding the idea of cultural appropriation. The speech was delivered

as the keynote address at the 2016 Brisbane Writer's Festival in September—about a month before

Gatti published his investigations into Ferrante. As Rod Nordland explains, Shriver's speech was

received about as well as Gatti's article:

> Officials in charge of an Australian writers festival were so upset with the
> address by their keynote speaker […] that they publicly disavowed her
> remarks. […] The event […] also hurriedly organized counterprogramming,
> billed as a "right of reply" for critics of Ms. Shriver, whose speech belittled
> the movement against cultural appropriation. […] In the middle of Ms.
> Shriver's speech on Thursday night, an Australian writer of Sudanese and
> Egyptian origin, Yassmin Abdel-Magied, got up and walked out […].

Shriver's central premise was more or less as follows: charges of "cultural appropriation" and other

similar accusations constitute a policing of authorial identity that has had—and will continue to

have—a chilling effect on the practice of fiction-writing. Here is Shriver:

> Taken to their logical conclusion, ideologies [that have] recently come into
> vogue challenge our right to write fiction at all. Meanwhile, the kind of
> fiction we are "allowed" to write is in danger of becoming so hedged, so
> circumscribed, so tippy-toe, that we'd indeed be better off not writing the
> anodyne drivel to begin with. […] Because the ultimate endpoint of keeping
> our mitts off experience *that doesn't belong to us* is that there is no fiction.

> Someone like me only permits herself to write from the perspective of a straight white female born in North Carolina, closing in on sixty, able-bodied but with bad knees, skint for years but finally able to buy the odd new shirt. All that's left is memoir.[95]

Shriver—who is most famous for *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, a 2003 novel depicting a murderous, psychopathic child—joked about her own status as non-memoirist. "Me? I've depicted a high school killing spree," Shriver says, "and I hate to break it to you: I've never shot fatal arrows through seven kids, a teacher, and a cafeteria worker." Much like this comment, parts of Shriver's speech strike me as somewhat flippant and needlessly provocative, intentionally enacting the kind of "political incorrectness" she was defending in order to prove her point. The speech was, after all, delivered while Shriver was wearing a sombrero, ostensibly as allusion to the incident at Bowdoin College in which undergraduates were threatened with expulsion for wearing sombreros at a "fiesta-themed tequila party" (Nordland). "The moral of the sombrero scandals is clear," Shriver claimed, "you're not supposed to try on other people's hats."

For Shriver, telling people what "hats" they can and cannot wear runs counter to the spirit and function of fiction-writing. It also ignores the fact that many authors—among others she cites Malcolm Lowry, Graham Greene, Dalton Trumbo, and Truman Capote—have achieved powerful results by trying on the hats of others. "When Truman Capote wrote from the perspective of condemned murderers from a lower economic class than his own, he had some gall," Shriver commented, "But writing fiction takes gall." I would put the point a slightly different way. Indeed, I would situate it—as this chapter attempts to do—in conversation with the implications of Plato's

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[95] The word and concept of "memoir" was also a key component in the conversation surrounding the unmasking of Elena Ferrante. According to Suzanne Moore, the largely male-initiated investigation to uncover Ferrante's true identity was driven by the need to prove that she was a memoirist, rather than a fiction-writer: "The search for the author's true identity is also driven by an incredulity that a woman could do that. What if this is not just memoir—the lesser feminised confessional—but the product of imagination and intellect? Is this somehow cheating? This seems to be the implication of this need to investigate her." Katy Waldman sarcastically began her reaction piece by asking, "Ferrante is Jewish? Ferrante is not living in Naples and presumably not packaging her own experiences in a thin veil of fiction?"

Republic: must the fiction-writer, within her biological self, possess all the same knowledge and experience expressed in her fiction? Or can fiction also be virtuous by enacting a voyage of discovery? Can we learn about Otherness by imagining it, or is such a voyage of imagination always—and exclusively—a vehicle of distortion and obfuscation?

Indeed, although Shriver's conception of fiction-writing goes too far (in specific ways that I will discuss later), I believe that she nevertheless touches on some uncomfortable truths about the relationship between ethics, identity, and representation:

> [W]ho is the appropriator par excellence, really? Who assumes other people's voices, accents, patois, and distinctive idioms? Who literally puts words into the mouths of people different from themselves? Who dares to get inside the very heads of strangers, who has the chutzpah to project thoughts and feelings into the minds of others, who steals their very souls? Who is a professional kidnapper? Who swipes every sight, smell, sensation, or overheard conversation like a kid in a candy store, and sometimes *take notes* the better to purloin whole worlds? Who is the premier pickpocket of the arts? The fiction writer, that's who. This is a disrespectful vocation by its nature—prying, voyeuristic, kleptomaniacal, and presumptuous. And that is fiction writing at its best.

For Shriver, fiction begins as a kind of violation, an act of transgression. The French post-structuralist George Bataille proclaimed something similar in the preface to *Literature and Evil*: "Literature is not innocent. It is guilty and should admit itself so" (Trans. Alastair Hamilton, page x). The ability to speak from an objective, unbiased Archimedean point is clearly a Utopian impossibility. *Quando si è qualcuno*—when one is somebody—one always speaks from somewhere, from a position of bias or at least imperfect neutrality. To imagine anyone else (and perhaps even the self) is to construct the Other from a certain perspective and place. The fundamental task of navigating the ethics of representation is to balance the inevitability violent, partisan nature of signification with the tremendous value that can be achieved through artistic creation and communication.

This does not mean, however, that I would advocate an "anything goes" approach to imagining Otherness. Although I agree with the substance of Shriver's point—that fiction is transgressive and must be allowed to be so—she is not quite discerning enough in demanding that any and all violations be justified. At the risk of oversimplifying Shriver's position, I would simply point out that there is a massive difference between defending the right of undergraduates to wear sombreros while they drink tequila and defending the right of an Elena Ferrante or a Truman Capote to write about people unlike themselves. The difference is this: the appropriations, violence, and transgressions of a fiction-writer—or at least a "good" fiction-writer—are committed for the sake of an end product. To demand that artists or fiction writer stop appropriating perspectives and experiences that do not belong to them is to ask them to relinquish something they are driven to create, their sense of engagement, and determination to communicate. In asking undergraduates not to play at dressing up as a group of human beings, we are simply asking them to recognize that—if their conduct hurts people and offers such a superficial return on investment—then it would be more ethical for them to accept certain limitations on their freedom. Though both activities are transgressive, there is a difference between interrogating Otherness for the sake of artistic creation and exploiting Otherness in the name of personal freedom. Ultimately, the proof is in the pudding: it is within the works themselves, rather than an artist's diplomatic paperwork, that we should examine questions of ethics. The process may be transgressive, reductive, or even violent; the end result need not be.

Shriver would, I imagine, agree with me that there is a substantive difference between Ferrante and the sombrero-wearing undergraduates, but the language she uses to describe fiction writing often borders on a kind of pure ethical ambivalence. Although some transgressive fiction writing is justified, I do believe that there is also a way of writing fiction that is an empty a gesture of

appropriation and exploitation and should therefore be condemned. It is unclear if Shriver would

agree with me on this point:

> As for the culture police's obsession with "authenticity," fiction is inherently inauthentic. It's fake. It's self-confessedly fake; that is the nature of the form, which is about people who don't exist and events that didn't happen. The name of the game is not whether your novel honors reality; it's all about what you can get away with.

Now, compare this quotation to the image of Geryon, or to the words of Pablo Picasso that served

as an epigraph for this sustained argument: "We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes

us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner

whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies." On one level, Shriver and Picasso are

articulating the same thing: art is not truth, and the task of the artist is to "get away with" the lie that

is fiction. But Picasso frames all of this in terms of the pursuit of truth (or at least the truth that is

given us to understand); Shriver frames the issue in terms of the freedom and skill of a given artist.

Shortly after the above quotation, Shriver goes on to describe the 2009 novel *Little Bee*—a

first-person narrative from the point of view of a fourteen-year-old Nigerian girl—written by Chris

Cleave, a white adult male from England. Because she hasn't read the novel, Shriver withholds her

judgment about whether Cleave "got away with" such identity acrobatics, but she nevertheless offers

quite a few thoughts about the relationship between an author and his or her characters:

> I admire [Cleave's] courage—if only because he invited this kind of ethical forensics in a review out of San Francisco: "When a white male author writes as a young Nigerian girl, is it an act of empathy, or identity theft?" the reviewer asked. "When an author pretends to be someone he is not […] he [must] be careful that he is representing his characters, not using them for his plot." […] But of course he's using them for his plot! How could he not? They are his characters, to be manipulated at his whim, to fulfill whatever purpose he cares to put them to. […] Of course he's exploiting her. It's his book, and he made her up. The character is his creature, to be exploited up a storm.

112

At least Shriver is consistent on this point: "The name of the game is not whether your novel honors reality." In other words, it doesn't matter if the character is inaccurate or exploited; no one is harmed by it. She is only really made of words anyway.

This is precisely where Shriver and I disagree. I am reminded of my favorite line from Gerald Graff's *Literature Against Itself*: "The critical problem… is to discriminate between anti-realistic works that provide some true understanding of non-reality and those which are merely symptoms of it" (12). Graff was speaking about identifying literary value under the conditions of post-modernity. The critical problem was to determine whether a work of postmodern fiction was simply an addition to the infinite noise and confusion of contemporary life, or whether it had something to say that might elucidate some portion of that life. In this context, I would re-deploy Graff's maxim as a different kind of question: what kinds of transgressions offer some true understanding of identity, and which—like wearing a sombrero to drink your tequila—simply do not rise above the level of transgression?

Ultimately, the implication of this kind of discernment is that there are "good" books and there are "bad" books—a fact once famously denied by Oscar Wilde: "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all." But in speaking of fiction as a kind of identity appropriation, it might amount to the same thing: to be moral is to be well-written, and to be immoral is to be badly written. It is the process of writing well which—though the process itself involves transgression—can ultimately transform the end product into an ethical act. On a similar topic but in the opposite direction, this is how Shriver concluded her speech:

> We do not all do it well. So it's more than possible that we write from the perspective of a one-legged lesbian from Afghanistan and fall flat on our arses. We don't get the dialogue right, and for insertions of expressions in Pashto we depend on Google Translate. Halfway through the novel, suddenly the protagonist has lost the right leg instead of the left one. Our idea of lesbian sex is drawn from wooden internet porn. Efforts to

persuasively enter the lives of others very different from us may fail: that's a given. But maybe rather than having our heads taken off, we should get a few points for trying. After all, most fiction sucks. Most writing sucks. Most things that people make of any sort suck. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't make anything. The answer is that modern cliché: to keep trying to fail better. Anything but be obliged to designate my every character an ageing five-foot-two smartass, and having to set every novel in North Carolina.

As with so much of Shriver's speech, I agree and disagree with equal fervor. When trespassing into the lives of others, I believe you have an obligation not to suck. Or rather, if you suck at imagining Otherness—if you do a shoddy, incomplete, violent job of it—you will be criticized. And you will deserve criticism. It is the same principle that applies to free speech: being free to say whatever you want does not mean you are free to speak without consequences.

A well-written piece of fiction does the research. It thinks slowly, critically, and introspectively about the lives of others so that writing about them or from their perspective is more akin to seeing through different eyes than to putting on a Halloween costume. And no, that doesn't mean we shouldn't make anything; but it does mean that not everything we make is equally good, equally ethical, or equally well-written for that matter. Moreover, it means that not all acts of cultural appropriation are equal. Of course, not everyone will agree on which books are well-written (and therefore constitute ethically acceptable imaginations of Otherness) and which books are poorly written (and therefore constitute ethically unacceptable, unjustified acts of violence). *De gustibus non est disputandum*. In questions of ethics, however, there should always be a space for discernment and debate—one that is not blocked off by predetermined identity taboos. And it is perfectly acceptable that the task of distinguishing good books from bad books might be left to the judgment of different readers with different perspectives.

CHAPTER THREE

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years—
Twenty years largely wasted, the years of *l'entre deux guerres*—
Trying to use words, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate,
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion.
– T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton." *The Four Quartets.*

The Ethics of Imagining: Italo Calvino's Invisible Utopia

It would be fair to say that the idea for "The Pact of Geryon" grew out of a statement about

Italo Calvino by the Italianist Alessia Ricciardi that I read in my early years as a graduate student.

> Sadly, Calvino the mature postmodernist became exactly what he feared as a young
> man […] a solipsistic thinker removed from the exigencies of history […] his
> writings uphold an idea of literature as a formalist game that avoids any costly or
> serious "human" association. (1073-1074)

The statement immediately struck me as deeply unfair, although it took a significant amount of time

and thought to understand why. Ultimately, I believe my disagreement with Ricciardi stems from a

difference in understanding about how literature must function in the late 20th and early 21st century.

It is, after all, quite true that *Invisible Cities*—like many other abstract, philosophical, or metaliterary

efforts—is a work that does not, in any discernible way, offer readers lessons about *what* to think

about the world.

Instead, I believe the work interrogates the *how* of thought, contemplating the ethical impact

of imagination and perception on a structural level. And this is a subject with considerable

implications for ethics in the contemporary world. Indeed, it strikes me that the ethics of

representation—all those necessary evils, trade-offs, and sacrifices I have been discussing in this

work—share meaningful affinities with what might be called the ethics of understanding in an

increasingly global world. How, exactly, are we do navigate encounters with other minds, other people, and other cultures while preserving a sense of our own values? How do we offer hospitality to Otherness without sacrificing our intolerance for the intolerable?

Our relationships with other people—other civilizations, other cultures, other minds—are governed in large part by the same structures that govern imagination and creativity. In order to understand what is Other, we depart from our own categories, we measure Otherness by the standards of the self, we tell stories and craft narratives. Without commonly held fixed points of assumption and reference, understanding is—much like representation—a double-edged sword, a necessary evil and a generous violence. It imprisons as it welcomes, it obstructs thought as it creates discourse. At bottom, probing the ethics of understanding involves developing a way to balance openness to a multiplicity of values and cultures while maintaining a kind of inner harmony of thought that allows for ethical discernment. It involves learning how to stand for something without becoming a close-minded, ethno- or egocentric bully about it.

For me, *Invisible Cities* was always about all of this. Far from a solipsistic removal from the exigencies of history, Calvino's novel contemplated what an ethical *littérature engagée* might look like in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a world seemingly bereft of clear certainties. It was about what ethics means without fixed points of reference, without being able to lean on grand narratives or mobilize itself against a concrete set of enemies. What Ricciardi characterizes as a kind of abandonment of intellectual *impegno* should therefore be recognized as a shift in ethical strategy. Perhaps, towards the end of his career, Calvino recognized that he had become a different man and that was writing from within a different cultural zeitgeist. A different time called for a different form of artistic engagement.

This is one thing that Matthew Arnold got absolutely right in his celebrated 1865 essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time." There is value to be found in works that ostensibly

abandon immediately practical objectives to dwell instead in the "pure intellectual sphere" (44).

Arnold famously identifies the ideal critic with a kind of disinterested curiosity:

> It is noticeable that the word curiosity, which in other languages is used in a good sense, to mean, as a high and fine quality of man's nature, just this disinterested love of a free play of the mind on all subjects […] [C]riticism, real criticism, is essentially the exercise of this very quality; it obeys an instinct prompting it to try to know the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics, and everything of the kind; and to value knowledge and thought as they approach this best, without the intrusion of any other considerations whatever. (35)

Such a declaration may strike the contemporary ear (and I myself am certainly no exception) as rather naïve in terms of its faith in the ability of the critic to reach a state of pure disinterestedness. But even if our present-day understanding of criticism means that the "purely disinterested" ideal of the critic cannot be seen as a practical, obtainable goal, I believe that distinterestedness can be preserved as a kind of Utopian point of (non)arrival. Pure disinterestedness is unreachable, of course, but it is nevertheless a valid and useful aspiration. While I disagree quite vehemently with Arnold that the best criticism must be disinterested, I also disagree with those like Ricciardi who would characterize a drift towards disinterestedness—whether by the artist or the critic—as an abandonment of the ethical sphere. As we shall explore at greater length in Chapter Four, the aspiration to do no harm is not the only or even the primary ethical aspiration of literature, but it remains a perfectly valid one.

The most intriguing piece of Arnold's essay is his temporal mapping of intellectual progress. Progress is not characterized as a continual upward slope but rather as an alternation between what Arnold calls "epochs of concentration" and "epochs of expansion." I would suggest that these could be productively paired with Antonio Gramsci's theorization of the war of position (*guerra di posizione*) and the war of maneuver (*guerra di movimento*). The latter, which are the great explosions of creativity, are rare and require the "slow and obscure work" of the former to create the necessary conditions for rapid change. To put it another way, there are certain epochs within intellectual history in which

it is possible to fight a war of maneuver—to take the battle to the enemy—and win ground for a cause. In such times, one might understandably make recourse to a more relaxed doctrine of representational ethics: let us not mince words, there is work to be done. Let us call a spade a spade, a cat a cat, and let us not hesitate to call the enemy the enemy. This is true particularly in time periods when there is a concrete enemy—whether political or ideological—to rally against, when there is no time to dwell on the smaller violences of thought and representation.

But until such a time, there is the extremely important matter of determining what a spade is, what separates a cat from a dog, and what it means to call someone the enemy. Here is Arnold again:

> This creative power works with elements, with materials; what if it has not those materials, those elements, ready for its use? In that case it must surely wait till they are ready. […] [I]t must have the atmosphere, it must find itself amidst the order of ideas, in order to work freely; and these it is not so easy to command. This is why great creative epochs in literature are so rare […] because for the creation of a master-work of literature two powers must concur, the power of the man and the power of the moment, and the man is not enough without the moment; the creative power has, for its happy exercise, appointed elements, and those elements are not in its own control. (10-13)

Now, it must be acknowledged that what might be called the Arnoldian status of a given epoch is clearly not something that is readily apparent to all parties involved. Is the early 21st Century a period of expansion or concentration? I have my own answer, but it will be hard to know for sure until the 22nd century. In other words, it is never objectively true that the current era is an epoch of expansion, ripe for praxis. Many people will disagree on such a question.

Each individual therefore has the ability, if not the duty, to decide for him or herself whether or not the prevailing zeitgeist calls for the quick work of praxis or the slow and steady work of concentration and repositioning. But this, I believe, is one limitation to the Gramsci/Arnold model: both presume too neat a binary distinction between epochs. In other words, these models conceive of the situation in terms of a dichotomy: it is either the time for praxis, or it isn't. There is also, at

least in Arnold, a certain question of identity: there are those who prepare and those who advance. It is the task of the critic to lay the groundwork and the duty of the artist to make a breakthrough.

I would like to muddy the water a bit, if I may. It would seem that—in the domain of ethics, politics, and other forms of intellectual engagement—the war of position and the war of maneuver are always being fought concurrently by different individuals at the same time, each according to his or her own interpretation of whether now is the time to advance. So be it. As I see it, there is always the potential for value in practicality—with all of its inherent ethical compromises and trade-offs— and there is always the potential for ethical value in striving to lay a disinterested intellectual groundwork. There is both a space for the war of position and the war of maneuver, for enmity and for hospitality.

Moreover, it should not matter which task belongs to the artist and which one is performed by the critic. There is space for a certain sympathy between them, particularly because the critic makes the second move in the conversation, playing the chess game of meaning as black. If the artist bursts forward calling a spade a spade to get things done, then perhaps the critic might hit the breaks to urge a thorough intellectual understanding of the price of such pragmatism. And if the artist would seem busy building beautiful sandcastles of thought—invisible architectures of the imagination—then perhaps the critic might step in to underscore the real world connections and ethical implications of such intricate architecture. In this chapter, I hope to play a bit of the second role by arguing that the ethics of understanding is the central issue of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities.*

Although it may seem unorthodox to proclaim that *Invisible Cities* is perhaps Calvino's most quintessentially ethical work, it is hardly controversial to see it as a kind of Utopia. The Utopia is, of course, always dual in nature: it is both *u-topos* and *eu-topos*. It is a no-place but also a happy one; it lays out a vision for a better, happier world. Doesn't this definition imply that—in order to qualify as a Utopia—a given work must be substantially ethical in nature? Of course, in the post-colonial

world, the ideal aspect of utopia as happy place is problematic. Any description of a Utopia as an ideal space runs the risk of activating what Kentridge calls the "nexus of enlightenment, emancipation, and violence," particularly if it describes the ideal from a partisan point of view. On the other hand, the Utopia's simultaneous self-styled presentation as a no-place makes it a uniquely potent in terms of its ability to offer a defense against allegations of postcolonial paternalism, mansplaining, or Orientalizing. The Utopia, although it very much traffics in the ethical, also explicitly calls itself into question by positioning itself as no-place. As such, the genre enables a kind of ethical discourse under erasure. By writing with a certain Utopian caveat the author can thus present his or her subjective, possibly partisan values (*eu-topos:* happy-place) while simultaneously negating them or at least acknowledging them as problematic (*u-topos:* no-place).

In *Invisible Cities*, Calvino writes as if a literary text were still capable of teaching its readers to assign value and meaning to a world devoid of fixed points of reference for normative, absolute values. He erects a Utopia to demonstrate the impossibility of authorial disinterestedness without abandoning the longing to discern, to classify, and to evaluate. In other words, despite admitting that he himself—as an artist who must have an identity, a man who cannot stand alone—is not and cannot be disinterested, Calvino nevertheless does not abandon the ethical dimension as a central duty of literature.

Gerald Graff explains the moral paradox that must be confronted by the would-be moralist in the 20th century and beyond: "The paradox of the sophisticated modern mind is that it is unable to believe in the objective validity of meanings yet is unable to do without meanings" (37). On the lack of fixed, universal, and objective reference points, Calvino suggests that in the contemporary period, "[a]ll the parameters, categories, and antitheses that we once used to define, plan, and classify

the world have been called into question" (*The Uses of Literature*, Trans. Patrick Creagh, p. 91).[96]

Under contemporary conditions—or really the conditions of any epoch that views itself as modern (and this is more or less all of them, by the way)—there is a sense that human beings must learn to navigate the labyrinth of experience without traditional reference points, which are increasingly inaccurate. But meanings are nevertheless still necessary in order for such an existence to feel, well, meaningful. "We cannot do without interpreting," the famous Italianist Gregory Lucente once wrote, "without asking ourselves what something means, without embarking on an explanation" (250). It is perhaps impossible to live—and it is certainly impossible to write—without to a certain extent operating as if locating and communicating values were still possible.

To place it in Calvino's own terminology, writing under erasure is a way to challenge the labyrinth of existence—life as an endless proliferation of meanings, possibilities, and pathways—without denying the existence of the labyrinth:

> What literature can do is to define the best attitude [*atteggiamento*] that one can take in order to find the way out of the labyrinth, even if escaping the labyrinth will only lead to another labyrinth. It is the defiance of the labyrinth that we want to save, it is a literature of the defiance of the labyrinth that we want to clarify and distinguish from the literature of the surrender to the labyrinth.[97] (*Una pietra sopra* 96. My translation).

The ethical content of the *Invisible Cities* is best understood in the way that it represents a defiance of the labyrinth: the novel proposes an epistemological "way out" of the cacophony of late industrial capitalism, while at the same time acknowledging that any escape from the labyrinth is ultimately a doomed enterprise that will only lead into another labyrinth. It is, however, the very gesture of

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[96] "Tutti i parametri, le categorie, le antitesi che usavamo per definire, classificare, progettare il mondo sono messi in questione." (Calvino, *Una pietra sopra* 287)

[97] "Quel che la letteratura può fare è definire l'atteggiamento migliore per trovare la via d'uscita, anche se questa via d'uscita non sarà altro che il passaggio da un labirinto all'altro. È la sfida al labirinto che vogliamo salvare, è una letteratura della sfida al labirinto che vogliamo enucleare e distinguere dalla letteratura della resa al labirinto." (Calvino, *Una pietra sopra* 96)

defiance itself, the revolt against meaninglessness—a kind of Gramscian intransigence against nondifferentiation—that can become a source of meaning. The role of literature, then, must be the same: to rebel against meaninglessness and unreality rather than participating in it. Art must rebel against meaninglessness and unreality even when such things come closer to what would be an objective description of contemporary experience. Calvino's final words in his 1962 essay "La sfida al labirinto" are, in this way, strikingly similar to those of Graff uses in *Literature Against Itself*: "The critical problem […] is to discriminate between anti-realistic works that provide some true understanding of non-reality and those who are merely symptoms of it" (12).

Perhaps paradoxically, it is the imagination—rather than the rigor of science or philosophy—that offers the only remaining path to beauty and morality.[98] "I quickly understood," remarked Calvino in an interview with Lucente, "that in order to say something, including something that had to do with Italian society, with the history of Italian society, it was necessary to look within oneself or to expose social mechanisms through representations that might very well *not* be realistic in the traditional sense" (247). The most realistic method of writing might, in other words, be a style of writing that dramatizes the failures and shortcomings of realism itself. And so the Utopia is valuable precisely because of its status as unreal—it is therefore the essential genre for the pursuit of meaning within the semiotic glut of contemporary experience. Calvino explains:

> Utopia defies time by setting itself up in a no-place, rejecting relationships with the "other" world, which is of necessity hostile […]. Utopia feels the need for compactness and permanence in opposing the world it rejects, a world that presents an equally refractory front. This is already enough to qualify utopias as a product favored in time periods in which practical action is the loser […]. We have to ask ourselves at once if the same thing holds good for our own time, with all the setbacks it has faced.[99] (*The Uses of Literature* 246)

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[98] We might call the way that they do so the path of *reticentia*, a concept that we will later identify with Pirandello's self-conscious staging of his own failure to communicate the impetus of his inspirations.

[99] "L'utopia sfida il tempo insediandosi in un non-luogo, negando il rapporto col mondo altro e necessariamente nemico […]. L'utopia sente il bisogno d'opporre una sua compattezza e permanenza al mondo ch'essa rifiuta e che si mostra

When Calvino speaks of "time periods in which practical action is the loser," it is impossible not to think of Arnold or Gramsci. There are certain time periods in which it is possible to call a spade a spade, to name a cat a cat, and declare that evil cannot be redeemed. There other time periods, however, in which it would be difficult for a straightforward "practical" *littérature engagée* to seem anything but naïve, self-serving, and relativistic. Again, the non-reality of Utopia becomes a kind of shield, an essential prerequisite for speaking about the impetus: it becomes necessary—perhaps a bit like Montale's *via negativa*—to call spades anything but spades, cats anything but cats, and to never name the enemy as such. What is important is that it is possible to present an exact, visible world, which is always necessarily other than this world.

The Utopia as a genre was, of course, born of the same phenomenon that Calvino describes: non-realistic representation became necessary in order to say something about reality. Originally, for authors like More and Campanella, this was largely due to the threat of direct or indirect censorship. The Utopia was presented as a fanciful place of the imagination in order to protect the author. The genre functioned to shield the author from power, from the very status quo that his or her non-reality called into question. By disguising itself as a fiction of faraway people and places, the Utopia was better able to say things about contemporary society that would have been too dangerous to present as non-fiction. Despite their fanciful nature, however, traditional utopias—like More's *Utopia* or Campanella's *La città del sole*—remain more or less realistic in that their fantasy is ultimately easily interpreted as practical in nature: their status as fundamentally ethical works is unmistakable. In other words, they use the fanciful as an instrument of parody in order to covertly speak about the Real: they often describe governments and customs of imaginary people as way of creating a satire

altrettanto compatto e pervicace. Già questo qualifica l'utopia come produzione favorita d'epoche in cui l'azione pratica è sconfitta… Subito viene da domandarci se ciò vale anche per la nostra epoca, con tutte le batoste che s'è presa […]."(Calvino, *Una pietra sopra* 248).

of or suggesting improvements for the real world, regardless of whether they conceive of these improvements as possible. Put another way, the traditional Utopia was a weapon honed for epochs of expansion—it is a weapon for the war of maneuver.

Through its use of fantasy, *Invisible Cities* is an explorer of uncharted worlds rather than a satirist of existent ones. For Calvino, the traditional Utopian model no longer seemed relevant. "No one any longer thinks of describing a perfect city, or the hour-by-hour daily lives of its inhabitants," Calvino said. "The massive weight and complexity of the world have hardened around us, and they leave no loopholes" (*The Uses of Literature* 246).[100] In Calvino's Utopia, the imagination is not a way to covertly speak about contemporary reality. Instead, the genre is valuable precisely because of its non-reality. Literature is in a sense uniquely capable of moving beyond the real, and it is valuable precisely when it does so. For Calvino, the Utopia is important precisely because it gives form to fantasy; precisely because it moves beyond what is knowable as reality:

> The autonomous logico-fantastic machine is something I like insofar as (and if) it serves some real need: the need to enlarge the sphere of what we can imagine, and to introduce into our limited range of choices "absolute rejection" by means of a world thought out in all its details according to *other* values and *other* relationships. In a word, utopia is not a city that can be founded by us but that can found itself in us, build itself brick by brick in our ability to imagine it, to think it out to the ultimate degree; a city that claims to inhabit us, not to be inhabited, thus making us possible inhabitants of a third city, different from utopia and different from all the habitable or uninhabitable cities of today; a city born of the mutual impact of new conditionings, both inner and outer.[101] (*The Uses of Literature* 252)

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[100] "Comunque, nessuno più pensa di descrivere una città perfetta, né la giornata dei suoi abitanti ora per ora. Lo spessore – e la complessità – del mondo si è saldato intorno a noi senza spiragli." (Calvino, *Una pietra sopra* 249).

[101] "La macchina logico-fantastica autonoma mi sta a cuore in quanto (e se) serve a qualcosa d'insostituibile: ad allargare la sfera di ciò che possiamo rappresentarci, a introdurre nella limitatezza delle nostre scelte lo «scarto assoluto» d'un mondo pensato in tutti i suoi dettagli secondo *altri* valori e *altri* rapporti. Insomma l'utopia come città che non potrà essere fondata da noi ma fondare se stessa dentro di noi, costruirsi pezzo per pezzo nella nostra capacità di immaginarla, di pensarla fino in fondo, città che pretende d'abitare noi, non d'essere abitata, e così fare di noi i possibili abitanti d'una terza città, diversa dall'utopia e diversa da tutte le città bene o male abitabili oggi, nata dall'urto tra nuovi condizionamenti interiori ed esteriori. Il lato dell'utopia che ha più cose da dirci è dunque quello che volta le spalle alla realizzabilità."(Calvino, *Una pietra sopra* 252)

Rather than governments and customs—ways of acting in the world—*Invisible Cities* deals with epistemological and semiotic strategies: ways of knowing, perceiving, interpreting, and communicating the world. Or at least our world, the truth we are given to understand.

By stretching the limits of the imaginable, the Utopia stretches the limits of what can be imagined as possible. Lucia Re explains:

> Only literature, Calvino says, or actually, *poetry*, through its multiple, contradictory work (*lavorio*), can and does shape human sensibility, giving form to the moral impulse (*scatto morale*) and the way one looks around one's self… The value of literature is that of teaching us how to attribute a value to things, it is therefore eminently moral, yet devoid of a specific message. ("Calvino and the Value of Literature" 123)

Although not speaking specifically about *Invisible Cities*, Re's last sentence is ideal for helping us to understand the nature of this work's attempt to defy the labyrinth: "its value is that of teaching us how to attribute a value to things, it is therefore eminently moral, yet devoid of a specific message" (123). Because its value lies in teaching its readers how to attribute value to things, it is essential that literature must not limit itself to dealing with the old, the preexisting, the real. Art must also encounter what is *new*. The text must be an explorer of fantasy and the imagination.

The impossible, Utopian ambition of Calvino's cities is to exist as little as possible—or, to use the terminology of the *Six Memos*, to exist as "lightly" and "exactly" as possible—and thus to aspire towards an existence beyond the self. The *Invisible Cities* are created as if they were universal symbols of the imagination, outside the limits of time and cultural positioning. At the same time, however, the work is blatantly, Utopianly conscious of the deep impossibility of doing so. Calvino's novel goes so far as to have the cities spoken and described by Marco Polo, who is nothing if not the quintessential embodiment of a falsifying Western eye and an emblem of the Orientalist imagination. As such, the result is a text that self-consciously stages the failed erasure of the self and demonstrates our inability to see the world except through our own eyes.

Clearly displayed throughout the text is the generous violence of the imagination, the way the city "outside the self" is reconfigured according to the parameters of the city we all bear inside the self. It describes the way that perception renders the true city—the "city without us"—as permanently inaccessible and invisible. This is not to say such a city does not exist. Indeed, the truth of the city is tied to the text's concept of Utopia. Calvino's happy no-place is located in a space where cities can be seen without mediation, untainted by subjective point of view. "To see a city," Calvino explains, "it is not enough to keep your eyes open. You must first discard everything that prevents you from seeing it—all your inherited ideas and preconceived images" (*Saggi* 346).[102] Of course, perceiving how the world *really is*—that is, to perceive a city unmediated by language, before it passes through the filter of the self—is quite impossible. Paradoxically, this too is the central message of the novel: all cities are always already invisible.

Indeed, *Invisible Cities* is nothing if not a book about the impossibility of seeing a city (or a person, or a culture, or anything for that matter) without mediation. In fact, the work is structured as a kind of catalogue of the obstacles that render cities invisible. Such obstacles prevent us from seeing the city *as it really is*; instead, they force us to perceive an imagined city, a remembered city, a described city. Nearly every city is constructed as a metaphor for the invisibility of experience: the way human beings erase the world around them and replace it with symbols and simulacra, or at the very least with words and linguistic categories. The city of Phyllis is perhaps the best expression of the paradoxical invisibility of experience and the Utopian ideal of unmediated perception. The first paragraph describing Phyllis illustrates the ideal way to perceive the city and is marked especially by its openness:

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[102] "Per vedere una città non basta tenere gli occhi aperti, bisogna per prima cosa scartare tutto ciò che impedisce di vederla, tutte le idee ricevute, le immagini precostituite." (Calvino, *Saggi* 346)

At every point the city offers surprises to your view: a caper bush jutting from the fortress' walls, the statues of three queens on corbels, an onion dome with three smaller onions threaded on the spire. "Happy the man who has Phyllis before his eyes each day and who never ceases seeing the things it contains," you cry, with regret at having to leave the city when you can barely graze it with your glance.[103] (Trans. William Weaver, p. 90-91)

In this first paragraph, Phyllis is seen for the first time: almost through the eyes of a child. Thus, it is to a certain extent unmediated. It is undeniably open in the sense that it is full of possibilities; the city exists as a kind of uncollapsed wavefunction. Another notable characteristic of this first paragraph is its emphasis on physical, highly visual descriptions: the caper bush that juts, the statues of queens, the onion dome.

But the second paragraph describing Phyllis is remarkably different, describing a much more closed city—a city viewed from the perspective of who has lived in the city for a considerable period of time. This is a collapsed Phyllis, a city diminished and written by meaning and memory:

But it so happens that, instead, you must stay in Phyllis and spend the rest of your days there. Soon the city fades before your eyes, the rose windows are expunged, the statues on the corbels, the domes. Like all of Phyllis's inhabitants, you follow zigzag lines from one street to another, you distinguish the patches of sunlight from the patches of shade, a door here, a stairway there, a bench where you can put down your basket, a hole where your foot stumbles if you are not careful. All the rest of the city is invisible. Phyllis is a space in which routes are drawn between points suspended in the void: the shortest way to reach that certain merchant's tent, avoiding that certain creditor's window. Your footsteps follow not what is outside the eyes, but what is within, buried, erased. If, of two arcades, one continues to seem more joyous, it is because thirty years ago a girl went by there, with broad, embroidered sleeves, or else it is only because that arcade catches the light at a certain hour like that other arcade, you cannot recall where.[104] (90-91)

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[103] "In ogni suo punto la città offre sorprese alla vista: un cespo di capperi che sporge dalle mura della fortezza, le statue di tre regine su una mensola, una cupola a cipolla con tre cipolline infilzate sulla guglia. 'Felice chi ha ogni giorno Fillide sotto gli occhi e non finisce mai di vedere le cose che contiene,' esclami, col rimpianto di dover lasciare la città dopo averla solo sfiorata con lo sguardo." (Calvino, *Le città invisibili* 91-92)

[104] "Ti accade invece di fermarti a Fillide e passarvi il resto dei tuoi giorni. Presto la città sbiadisce ai tuoi occhi, si cancellano i rosoni, le statue sulle mensole, le cupole. Come tutti gli abitanti di Fillide, segui linee a zigzag da una via all'altra, distingui zone di sole e zone d'ombra, qua una porta, là una scala, una panca dove puoi posare il cesto, una cunetta dove il piede inciampa se non ci badi. Tutto il resto della città è invisibile. Fillide è uno spazio in cui si tracciano percorsi tra punti sospesi nel vuoto, la via più breve per raggiungere la tenda di quel mercante evitando lo sportello di quel creditore. I tuoi passi rincorrono ciò che non si trova fuori degli occhi ma dentro, sepolto e cancellato: se tra due

The second paragraph narrates the disappearance—the becoming invisible—of the true city of

Phyllis. It is replaced, covered, and erased by an interior, symbolic city: a city of words, signs, stories,

and memories. An unnamed reality of things is covered up by language, just as *alberi case colli* sprang

up to blot out Montale's miraculous perception of an unmediated reality:

> Then, as if on a screen, trees houses hills
> will suddenly collect for the usual illusion. (55)

Rather than describing the physical city, experienced eyes transform the city into a sign of something

absent. Or rather, the city is inevitably covered by absent traces of desire, or history, or expectation.

This is most clearly seen in the example of the arcade that "continues to seem more joyous" because

it is marked by the invisible traces of its history (the absent girl with embroidered sleeves) or the

invisible traces of its similarity to another absent arcade buried deep inside the memory. It is the city

outside the eyes—the city beyond the self—which remains forever invisible. Only the city inside the

self can really be perceived.[105]

In the second paragraph (see above), the city of Phyllis is perceived not visually, but

semiotically. It is seen only as the sign of an absent city located inside the self. The semiotic nature

of this city (and most if not all of Calvino's cities are primarily semiotic rather than architectural in

nature) is rendered explicit in the final paragraph describing Phyllis: "Millions of eyes look up at

windows, bridges, capers, and they might be scanning a blank page. Many are the cities like Phyllis,

portici uno continua a sembrarti più gaio è perché è quello in cui passava trent'anni fa una ragazza dalle larghe maniche ricamate, oppure è solo perché riceve la luce a una cert'ora come quel portico, che non ricordi più dov'era." (Calvino, *Le città invisibili* 91-92.)

[105] Or rather, the sheer fact that a city is perceived means that it is an interior rather than an exterior one. The city-without-us is a lovely idea in theory, but human beings have no concrete evidence of its existence. Calvino suggests as much in his description of the city of Clarice: "…that a first Clarice existed is a widely held belief, but there are no proofs to support it" (Calvino, *Invisible Cities* p. 108).

which elude the gaze of all, except the man who catches them by surprise" (90-91).[106] Here the link

with reading and writing is quite direct. Rather than perceiving the real city outside the self, these

eyes scan its features as though it were a blank page. Its blankness, its *nulla*, combined with the

Hegelian idea of "catching the city by surprise" further heighten a potential conceptual link to

Montale's "Forse un mattino":

> Maybe one morning, walking in dry, glassy air
> I'll turn, and see the miracle occur:
> nothing at my back, the void
> behind me, with a drunkard's terror.[107] (55)

In addition to reading the city linguistically as a sign of things that are absent, the city is also

portrayed as a blank page onto which these eyes project an interior set of values, thus writing the

world to a greater extent than they read it.

Stepping outside abstraction and moving towards the real-world implications of Calvino's

theorization of cities, we could—quite easily—argue that what is being described here is something

akin to what is known in behavioral economics as expectation bias or confirmation bias. Daniel

Kahneman and Amos Tversky are particularly adept at demonstrating how "the city inside the self"

exercises a deep, significant power over all perceptions and decision-making. We are substantially

more likely to see what we expect to see. We are far more likely to see what we have been primed to

see, to notice what we have chosen as a focus for our attention. Likewise, our pre-existing beliefs,

especially our political beliefs, can exercise an extremely powerful influence terms of how we

interpret even the most ostensibly objective pieces of data. We follow not what is outside the eyes,

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[106] "Milioni d'occhi s'alzano su finestre ponti capperi ed è come scorressero su una pagina bianca. Molte sono le città come Fillide che si sottraggono agli sguardi tranne che se le cogli di sorpresa."(Calvino *Le città invisibili* 91-92)

[107] *Forse un mattino andando in un'aria di vetro,*
arida, rivolgendomi, vedrò compirsi il miracolo:
il nulla alle mie spalle, il vuoto dietro
di me, con un terrore di ubriaco. (61)

but what is within, buried, erased. The city outside the self—if we see it at all—is seen only through the one we carry inside the mind. We write the city to a far greater extent than we read it.

Whether addressing the interaction withr reality or the interaction with a text, the reader-as-writer is a complex, difficult figure in late Calvino. Although Calvino constantly advocates for an active and open role for the reader, he does not allow the reader absolute freedom. To a certain extent, the reader is perhaps free to create the text—but only within the paradoxical confines of the *opera aperta*. Linda Hutcheon explains that "Being made to feel that we are actively participating in the generation of meaning is no guarantee of freedom; manipulators who make us feel in control are no less present for all their careful concealment" (92). If we imagine the text as a labyrinth, readers are certainly free to trace any path they wish, but would they be allowed to break down walls with a sledgehammer? To fashion wings and, like Icarus, attempt to flee their captivity? In speaking of the reader-as-writer, it is fundamentally important to make a distinction between what might be called a closed reader-as-writer—a user who would be inclined to use heuristic biases to re-write a text to suit his or her own goals, beliefs, and expectations—and an open reader-as-writer, who is open to collaboration and co-creation of the text.

Those familiar with *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* might recognize this binary as the dichotomy separating the sisters Lotaria and Ludmilla. The latter, Ludmilla, is a very open reader; she is content to lose herself in the text, to be led along by its natural growth while contributing part of herself to the text's realization. Looking back to Phyllis, we can now think of the first-time visitor (first paragraph) as a kind of Ludmilla, a model of the open reader-as-writer. She is a traveler who is ready to explore a city full of surprises and possibilities, leaving it after having barely grazed it by her glance. In contrast, the long-time inhabitants can be said to represent a kind of Lotaria, a closed reader-as-writer who constructs an interpretation without having had an honest, dialectic interaction with the city outside the eyes, following "not what is outside the eyes, but what is within, buried,

erased." The problem for Calvino—and one that he may never fully address—lies in developing a

model of open reading that is not passive; and, likewise, a model of active reading that does not

disregard the original text and treat the work of art merely as a confirmation of all that is already

known and believed in advance.[108]

One possible strategy to reduce the potential for an abusive, Lotaria-style reading is to

minimize the raw material available for such a reader. This is the path of reticence. The reticent

author can strip down the architecture of the text itself, minimizing or obscuring its connections to

the impetus, perhaps by drawing from non-reality rather than reality, where the consequences of

misreading might prove less dire. Or else, the artist might choose not to provide any representation

of what is most precious, or strive to write it as little as possible, presenting it as bracketed or always

already in question. This idea, founded in the necessity to communicate value despite its inaccuracy

of semiotic systems, can be associated—as I suggested earlier—with Derrida's concept of writing

under erasure.[109] Such a technique regards approaching artistic representation via a kind of Cartesian

methodological doubt: treating all statements as provisory and proceeding in terms of simultaneous

affirmations and negations.[110] In this approach, the author struggles with words and meanings, the

inaccurate but necessary "shabby equipment" used to construct the Utopia of a meaningful text.

Due to a preference for lightness, however, Calvino would most likely reject the traditional

typographical embodiment of erasure that achieves negation through the addition of a heavy

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[108] Calvino might perhaps have found something appealing in Michel De Certeau's theorization of the tactics of consumption: the way users can "make a home" within a space that always other, introducing microresistances into the imposed order of the text.

[109] Gayatri Spivak's definition of the concept is quite clear and precise: "This is to write a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion. (Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible)." (xiv)

[110] Derrida explains the process of writing in this way, "At each step I was obliged to proceed by ellipses, corrections and corrections of corrections, letting go of each concept at the very moment that I needed to use it" (Trans. Gayatri Spivak, *Of Grammatology* xviii).

strikethrough: ~~UTOPIA~~. Instead, the entirety of Calvino's masterful *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* can be seen as the development of a lighter stylistic strategy that is similar to the concept of writing under erasure. *Invisible Cities* is the fullest embodiment of this technique.[111] Although Calvino speaks of five separate traits necessary for the future survival and relevancy of literature, these points are in reality quite inseparable. Together, they point towards a cohesive strategy that I will call *enlightening*, one that exists somewhere between silence and erasure.[112]

Speaking about these five traits—which is absolutely crucial for understanding the *Invisible Cities*—is also very difficult because Calvino's individual terms can be very complex and misleading. Each of Calvino's terms, like so many of his cities, deconstructs notions of opposition by paradoxically containing its Other—so that his lightness is heavy, his quickness a digression, his exactitude vague, his visibility invisible, and his multiplicity singular. If I were asked to summarize the entirely of the *Memos* in a single sentence, I would write something like this:

> If we imagine literature as a biological organism involved in an evolutionary "survival of the fittest" with many other emergent forms of media present in the labyrinth of late industrial capitalism, here is how literature must adapt to survive: it must achieve *multiplicity* without sacrificing *lightness*—because lightness is the key to realizing the necessary *quickness* and is the only way to achieve the *visibility* of an imprecision-avoiding *exactitude*.

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[111] Although the *Memos* are written nearly a decade after the *Invisible Cities* in 1985, it is perfectly legitimate to use them as a retrospective lens to view the strategies present in *Invisible Cities* for a number of reasons. First of all, Calvino presents the *Memos* as a summary of values Calvino had pursued during his entire career, values rooted in a literary tradition dating back to Dante. Second, as Lucia Re convincingly argues in her essay on Calvino and Ariosto, the seeds of each of the *Memos* are clearly present in Calvino's translation of the *Orlando Furioso*, which predates the *Invisible Cities* by only a few years. Thirdly, Calvino himself mentions the *Invisible Cities* as the most complete embodiment of the values expressed in the *Six Memos*: "Un simbolo più complesso, che mi ha dato le maggiori possibilità di esprimere la tensione tra razionalità geometrica e groviglio delle esistenze umane è quello della città. Il mio libro in cui credo d'aver detto più cose resta *Le città invisibili*, perché ho potuto concentrare su un unico simbolo tutte le mie riflessioni, le mie esperienze, le mie congetture, e perché ho costruito una struttura sfaccettata in cui ogni breve testo sta vicino agli altri in una successione che non implica una consequenzialità o una gerarchia ma una rete entro la quale si possono tracciare molteplici percorsi e ricavare conclusioni plurime e ramificate. Nelle *Città invisibili* ogni concetto e ogni valore si rivela duplice: anche l'esattezza" (Calvino *Saggi* 689-690).

[112] I have, quite deliberately, added the prefix "en-" in order to establish a link to the concept of enlightenment, a drive that is never fully absent from Calvino's writing. One need look no further than his protagonist, Marco Polo, for evidence that Calvino is, of course, deeply aware of a postcolonial critique of enlightenment.

Whew! That's a mouthful. Calvino does far better in what I have taken to be a thesis statement of sorts for the *Memos*: *sogno immense cosmologie, saghe, ed epopee racchiuse nelle dimensioni d'un epigramma.* (*Saggi* 673). I dream of immense cosmologies, sagas, and epics enclosed in the dimensions of an epigram. It is a phrase that embodies Calvino's values—lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility, and multiplicity—at the same time as it expresses them. The cosmological-epigram approaches silence— and thus theoretically reduces inaccuracy as well as the potential for misreading—by saying as little as possible. By lightening his language asymptotically towards a pure exactitude, Calvino approximates the spirit of reticence involved in writing under erasure. To paraphrase Spivak, the impossible, Utopian ambition of the proposed cosmological-epigram would be to produce what is necessary with as little recourse as possible to the inaccurate.

To return to Calvino's writing on the Utopia, it bears repeating that he saw value in precisely a Utopia's ability to create "a world thought out in all its details according to *other* values and *other* relationships" (Calvino, *The Uses of Literature* 252). What are Calvino's urban sketches if not a collection of cosmological-epigrams of other spaces? In 1973, just after the publication of *Invisible Cities*, Calvino wrote an essay about the French utopist Charles Fourier that contained a section entitled "L'utopia pulviscolare":

> Utopia has no consistency. You may participate in the spirit of it, *believe* in it, but other than on the page it does not come with you into the world, and you yourself do not manage to follow it up. Once I have shut the book, Fourier does not follow me, and I have to go back and browse to find him there, to admire him in all his clarity and obstinacy […]. The utopia I am looking for today is less solid than gaseous: it is a utopia of fine dust, corpuscular, and in suspension.[113] (*The Uses of Literature* 254-255)

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[113] "L'utopia non ha spessore: puoi convidarne lo spirito, *crederci*, ma al di là della pagina non continua nel mondo, non riesci a darle un seguito per tuo conto. Chiuso il libro, Fourier non mi segue, devo tornare a sfogliarne le pagine per ritrovarlo lì, testardo e limpido, e ammirarlo […]. Oggi l'utopia che cerco non è più solida di quanto non sia gassosa: è un'utopia polverizzata, corpuscolare, sospesa." (Calvino, *Una pietra sopra* 254. Italics textual)

The image fits perfectly, it is one of supreme lightness: a gaseous utopia of fine dust. We can imagine a utopia incompletely erased until it has been distilled to its exact essence, until it could float lightly on the breeze.

In addition to the overall structure of the novel, ostensibly a collection of cosmological epigrams, Calvino's technique of enlightening manifests itself in the novel through the creation of absences, openings, gaps, and transparencies. The first enlightening technique involves the paratext, typography, and the material book itself. Virtually all editions of the book contain a remarkable amount of blank space. Because the number of pages increases the cost of printing a book and Calvino was someone with a first-hand knowledge of the inner workings of the publishing industry, the amount of blank space present in the typography of the text should not be overlooked as an aspect of its meaning production. On the contrary, it is a part of the book's attempt to exist lightly—albeit by paradoxically adding the weight of blank pages.

The book's index also contains a couple interesting signs of absence. First, its individual sections do not have names but are represented only by numbers. More significantly, the Marco Polo and Kublai Khan sections are not named or numbered at all. They are simply indicated by ellipses, which function as a sign of both absence and continuation. The cities constitute interruptions in the linear narrative that occurs between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, which can be said to form the plot of the novel. Because these interruptions are marked by ellipses, however, the reader cannot be sure—and should in fact have very little confidence—that he or she possesses the entirety of this linear narration. The reader certainly enters the frame story of Polo and Khan *in medias res*, and he or she cannot be sure whether it is reported in whole or merely in part. Perhaps their story continues each time the reader is engaged with the cosmological epigram of a new city.

The most important and significant technique of enlightening in the text of *Invisible Cities* is the way that Calvino places the novel's historical-cultural-geographical context under erasure. One

would be tempted to say that *Invisible Cities* is a novel without a specific geographical or historical

setting. It is certainly true that it contains few, if any, references to the world of History with a

capital H. At the same time, however, the names of Kublai Khan and Marco Polo invoke the ghostly

presence of a vast intertextual and historical world beyond the novel.[114] The text presents us not

with Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, but with ~~Marco Polo~~ and ~~Kublai Khan~~. The novel places its

context under erasure, leaving it as a ghostly, mythical presence in the text that is never fully erased.

Indeed, the presence of Polo and Khan continues to be among the most important sources

of meaning in the text, calling attention to the fact that *Invisible Cities* is primarily a work about the

affinities between exploration, imagination, and colonization. One of its primary focuses is the

cultural positioning of the subject—as artist, author, or traveler—in relation to his or her ability to

perceive and describe otherness. Cristina Della Coletta argues this point effectively by suggesting

that *Invisible Cities* can be read as a metaphor for the strategies used by the West (represented by

Polo) to invent the East. By choosing Polo as his voice and the *Milione* as his primary subtext,

Calvino emphasizes the cultural positioning behind Polo's cosmologies and the vast communicative

gap that must be crossed between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan. The Italian explorer who travels to

and invents the cities of the Orient forms an important parallel with another Italian explorer—Italo

Calvino himself—who voyages to and invents these cities of the imagination. Just as Marco Polo

invented the East through Western eyes (using Venice as the implicit origin and point of reference

for identifying each new city), so Calvino's empire of the imagination is ineluctably Western.

Polo is written to a certain extent as if he were not a 13th Century Venetian, just as Calvino

attempts to write as if he were not Calvino, even though he is well aware that there is no way for any

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[114] Carol James is helpful in terms of pointing out the lack of historical context that characterizes the novel. "The people of the cities are not characters," she says, "they seem more like decorations in a silent tapestry or figures in a myth; in other words, emblems or allegories of those cities they inhabit" ("Seriality" 149). Teresa De Lauretis puts this well: "In *Invisible Cities* both plot and characterization are missing, as Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, deprived of all naturalistic attributes, are reduced to their mythical names and to the extraordinary resonance that their names evoke" (416-417).

author to fully escape himself. The impossibility of escaping his own colonizing eye as author is signaled in bright lights by making Marco Polo the mouthpiece for a Utopia. First of all, his cities are placed in the elsewhere of the Levant, perhaps the most traditional figuration—at least in the West—of a mysterious and exotic elsewhere. Della Coletta points out that "[i]t is a critical commonplace in the exegesis of Calvino to affirm that the *Invisible Cities* do not evoke the Levant, but rather describe universal cities of the imagination and unreality" (413).[115] But it is precisely as embodiments of imagination and unreality that they truly do resemble the cities of the Levant: not as they truly are, of course, but as they were "invented" by the colonizing eye of the West.

Although it does so incompletely, it is the ambition of the *Cities* to erase its geographical setting and exist no-place. As Calvino states in "L'utopia pulviscolare," one of the great problems that faces the postmodern Utopia is that "[t]he political imagination always needs an elsewhere […] If there is to be imagination […] it must privilege areas in flux, open to interpretations that leave some margin for the creativity of the interpreter, like the China of the years of the cultural revolution" (*The Uses of Literature* 247).[116] The problem in the 20th century and beyond is that the elsewhere—the space "open to interpretations" which Calvino claims is necessary to the structure of the imagination—can no longer be found in the real world.

Or rather, there is no way to locate a Utopian space in the real world without colonizing it, since all geographies already have their own indigenous (and/or imported) value systems. Calvino explains: "It is always the *place* that gives utopia such trouble. Where should one put it? On the borders of an existing society, in order to convert that society by example? […] In a new world, in

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[115] "è luogo comune nell'esegesi calviniana affermare che *Le città invisibili* non evocano il levante, ma descrivono piuttosto universali città dell'immaginazione e dell'irrealtà." (Della Coletta "L'Oriente" 413)

[116] "l'immaginazione politica ha sempre bisogno d'un altrove […] certo, se immaginazione dev'essere […] deve privilegiare territori fluidi, aperti a interpretazione che lasciano margine alla creatività dell'interprete, come la Cina degli anni della rivoluzione culturale." (Calvino, *Una pietra sopra* 249)

virgin territory, on a desert island?" (*The Uses of Literature* 252).[117] There are certainly profoundly

troubling ethical problems associated with treating any true geographic space as an infinitely

malleable elsewhere: "we know that a true no-man's-land does not exist: exporting a civilization is

called colonialism" (Calvino, *The Uses of Literature* 252).[118] In an increasingly global world, we—

whoever we are and wherever it is that we write from—simply know too much about the rest of the

world. And one of the most important things that we know (or should know) about it is how little

we actually know, and consequentially how much real-world damage can be done by projecting our

imaginations onto a real-world space inhabited by real-world individuals. Indeed, where can we

locate the Utopia if all specific locations are colonized or colonizing?

Within non-reality, of course. But even such an unreal space still cannot be reached without

leaving from a real point of departure. Even if Calvino does somewhat sidestep accusations of

Orientalism by describing a non-specific elsewhere, he cannot avoid defining elsewhere in relation to

a specific, Western notion of "here" (defined as a non-elsewhere). For Calvino, "here" is ineluctably

Western, perhaps even ineluctably Italian. For Marco Polo, "here" is specifically Venice.

In addition to the deliberate flattening of historical and geographical context, *Invisible Cities*

also utilizes various enlightening strategies within the description of individual cities in order to

present each one as partially erased and negated. One such strategy is to portray a city as a *mise-en-*

abyme of binary opposites, thus making its true essence impossible to pin down.[119] The most concise

example of such an inversion can be seen in Raissa:

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[117] È sempre il *luogo* che mette in crisi l'utopia. Dove attuarla? In margine alla società esistente, per convertirla con la virtù dell'esempio? […] In un mondo nuovo, in terre vergini, in un'isola deserta? (Calvino, *Una pietra sopra* 253. Italics textual).

[118] "Ma sappiamo che non esiste un mondo di nessuno: l'esportare una civiltà si chiama colonialismo" […].(Calvino, *Una pietra sopra* 253).

[119] In fact, according to Carol James, all of the *Cities* can be said to employ this technique of auto-cancellation: "The reading of each city shows it to contain its other […]. The double images are often on the rhetorical plane…. The

137

Also in Raissa, city of sadness, there runs an invisible thread that binds one living being to another for a moment, then unravels, then is stretched again between moving points as it draws new and rapid patterns so that at every second the unhappy city contains a happy city unaware of its own existence.[120] (149)

The composite picture created by a city like Raissa is ultimately open. Although it is called the "city of sadness," its essence cannot be called wholly sad because it constantly contains happy cities. As such, a unitary, synthesized essence of these cities is impossible to reach. The fullest and most expressive example of erasure through *mise-en-abyme* is the last of Calvino's cosmological epigrams, the city of Berenice:

> In the seed of the city of the just, a malignant seed is hidden. […] This seed ferments in bitterness, rivalry, resentment; and the natural desire of revenge on the unjust is colored by a yearning to be in their place and act as they do. Another unjust city, though different from the first, is digging out its space within the double sheath of the unjust and just Berenices.
>
> Having said this, I do not wish your eyes to catch a distorted image, so I must draw your attention to an intrinsic quality of this unjust city germinating inside the secret just city; and this is the possible awakening—as if in an excited opening of windows—of a later love for justice, not yet subjected to rules, capable of reassembling a city still more just than it was before it became the vessel of injustice. But if you peer deeper into this new germ of justice you can discern a tiny spot that is spreading like the mounting tendency to impose what is just through what is unjust, and perhaps this is the germ of an immense metropolis […]. All the future Berenices are already present in this instant, wrapped one within the other, confined, crammed, inextricable.[121] (161-163)

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doubling within each city denies it as a single origin or essence […]. The cities remain incomplete, forever moving from one state to another" ("Seriality" 149-150).

[120] "Anche a Raissa, città triste, corre un filo invisibile che allaccia un essere vivente a un altro per un attimo e si disfa, poi torna a tendersi tra punti in movimento disegnando nuove rapide figure cosicché a ogni secondo la città infelice contiene una città felice che nemmeno sa d'esistere." (Calvino, *Le città invisibili* 149)

[121] "nel seme della città dei giusti sta nascosta a sua volta una semenza maligna […] fermentano in rancori rivalità ripicchi, e il naturale desiderio di rivalsa sugli ingiusti si tinge della smania d'essere al loro posto a far lo stesso di loro. Un'altra città ingiusta, pur sempre diversa dalla prima, sta dunque scavando il suo spazio dentro il doppio involucro delle Berenici ingiusta e giusta.

Detto questo, se non voglio che il tuo sguardo colga un'immagine deformata, devo attrarre la tua attenzione su una qualità intrinseca di questa città ingiusta che germoglia in segreto nella segreta città giusta: ed è il possibile risveglio – come un concitato aprirsi di finestre – d'un latente amore per il giusto, non ancora sottoposto a regole, capace di ricomporre una città più giusta ancora di quanto non fosse prima di diventare recipiente dell'ingiustizia. Ma se si scruta

Perhaps what is most interesting in the above description is the dialectic relationship between history and possibility, which transforms the city into metaphor of quantum mechanics. Although Berenice reveals itself as a historical succession of just and unjust cities, Calvino is careful to clarify that Berenice is neither just nor unjust in its essence, but exists as a superposition of just and unjust states. Its justness is wholly dependent on its historical observation, which in turn collapses the wavefunction of possible cities and creates a city that is either just or unjust. Thus, Berenice—until labeled as just or unjust by history—exists simultaneously as both: a kind of architectural Schrödinger's cat. In other words, the city is quintessentially an *opera aperta*, whose ultimate meaning absent and supplied only by the reader.

Each of the cities is simultaneously affirmed and negated, existing under erasure, present but invisible. The city most exemplary of its existence as absence is the first of Calvino's "Cities and Signs," Tamara:

> Finally the journey leads to the city of Tamara. You penetrate it along streets thick with signboards jutting from the walls. The eye does not see things but images of things that mean other things: pincers point out the tooth-drawer's house; a tankard, the tavern; halberds, the barracks; scales, the grocer's. Statues and shields depict lions, dolphins, towers, stars: a sign that something—who knows what?—has as its sign a lion or a dolphin or a tower or a star. […] If a building has no signboard or figure, its very form and the position it occupies in the city's order suffice to indicate its function: the palace, the prison, the mint, the Pythagorean school, the brothel. The wares, too, which the vendors display on their stalls are valuable not in themselves but as signs of other things: the embroidered headband stands for elegance; the gilded palanquin, power. […] However the city may really be, beneath this thick coating of signs, whatever it may contain or conceal, you leave Tamara without having discovered it.[122] (13-14)

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ancora nell'interno di questo nuovo germe del giusto vi si scopre una macchiolina che si dilata come la crescente inclinazione a imporre ciò che è giusto attraverso ciò che è ingiusto, e forse è il germe d'un'immensa metropoli […] tutte le Berenici future sono già presenti in questo istante, avvolte l'una dentro l'altra, strette pigiate indistricabili." (Calvino, *Le città invisibili* 160-161)

[122] "Finalmente il viaggio conduce alla città di Tamara. Ci si addentra per vie fitte d'insegne che sporgono dai muri. L'occhio non vede cose ma figure di cose che significano altre cose: la tenaglia indica la casa dei cavadenti, il boccale la taverna, le alabarde il corpo di guardia, la stadera l'erbivendola. Statue e scudi rappresentano leoni delfini torri stelle: segno che qualcosa – chissà cosa – ha per segno un leone o delfino o torre o stella […]. Se un edificio non porta nessuna

In Tamara, travelers have the same experience as the long-time inhabitant of Phyllis, they are unable to see the city outside of their eyes. It may be the case that the semiotic obliteration of the present city is simply an unavoidable structure of human perception. Perhaps, Calvino muses, the world is not an *opera aperta* but a piece of propaganda:

> Your gaze scans the streets as if they were written pages: the city says everything you must think, makes you repeat her discourse, and while you believe you are visiting Tamara you are only recording the names with which she defines herself and all her parts.[123] (13-14)

In this passage, Calvino characterizes the city itself as an active agent in the semiotic obfuscation of its own true essence. It is not the traveler who acts as writer of the city's discourse, but the city itself that authors its own discourse, forcing the traveler to perceive it linguistically as the sign of an absent city.

If the first paragraph of Phyllis contains an optimistic view of the possibility of perceiving the world as an open work, this sense of optimism is absent from Tamara. Calvino constantly acknowledges the possibility that his epistemological utopia is indeed a no-place, that perhaps the falsehood of misperception originates not in individual perceptions, but in the world itself that simply cannot be perceived correctly or objectively. There may well be a city-without-us, but no traveler can visit it. Even the openness of the just/unjust city of Berenice undermines the notion of an original essence that can be seen by stripping away the obfuscating semiotics buried within the self.

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insegna o figura, la sua stessa forma e il posto che occupa nell'ordine della città bastano a indicarne la funzione: la reggia, la prigione, la zecca, la scuola, pitagorica, il bordello. Anche le mercanzie che i venditori mettono in mostra sui banchi valgono non per se stesse ma come segni d'altre cose: la benda ricamata per la fronte vuol dire eleganza, la portantina dorata potere […]. Come veramente sia la città sotto questo fitto involucro di segni, cosa contenga o nasconda, l'uomo esce da Tamara senza averlo saputo" […]. (Calvino, *Le città invisibili* 13-14)

[123] "Lo sguardo percorre le vie come pagine scritte: la città dice tutto quello che devi pensare, ti fa ripetere il suo discorso, e mentre credi di visitare Tamara non fai che registrare i nomi con cui essa definisce se stessa e tutte le sue parti." (Calvino, *Le città invisibili* 13-14)

Another way in which the *Invisible Cities* cancels itself is by alternating open and closed cities, creating a *mise-en-abyme* of open cities and closed cities to form a composite picture that is ultimately neither. My personal favorite example of an open city (which can at any point collapse into a closed city) is the city of Chloe:

> In Chloe, a great city, the people who move through the streets are all strangers. At each encounter, they imagine a thousand things about one another; meetings which could take place between them, conversations, surprises, caresses, bites. But no one greets anyone; eyes lock for a second, then dart away, seeking other eyes, never stopping. A girl comes along, twirling a parasol on her shoulder, and twirling slightly also her rounded hips. A woman in black comes along, showing her full age, her eyes restless beneath her veil, her lips trembling. A tattooed giant comes along; a young man with white hair; a female dwarf; two girls, twins, dressed in coral. Something runs among them, an exchange of glances like lines that connect one figure with another and draw arrows, stars, triangles, until all combinations are used up in a moment, and other characters come on to the scene: a blind man with a cheetah on a leash, a courtesan with an ostrich-plume fan, an ephebe, a Fat Woman. And thus, when some people happen to find themselves together, taking shelter from the rain under an arcade, or crowding beneath an awning of the bazaar, or stopping to listen to the band in the square, meetings, seductions, copulations, orgies are consummated among them without a word exchanged, without a finger touching anything, almost without an eye raised. A voluptuous vibration constantly stirs Chloe, the most chaste of cities.[124] (51-52)

Chloe is a city that is remarkable in its openness. Again, however, the quantum mechanical metaphor seems most appropriate in describing its paradoxical openness. It exists as a superposition of all possible Chloes, but only while the wavefunction remains uncollapsed. In other words, in order to preserve its remarkable openness, Chloe cannot make the jump from the possible to the actual, it

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[124] "A Cloe, grande città, le persone che passano per le vie non si conoscono. Al vedersi immaginano mille cose l'uno dell'altro, gli incontri che potrebbero avvenire tra loro, le conversazioni, le sorprese, le carezze, i morsi. Ma nessuno saluta nessuno, gli sguardi s'incrociano per un secondo e poi si sfuggono, cercano altri sguardi, non si fermano […]. Passa un gigante tatuato; un uomo giovane coi capelli bianchi; una nana; due gemelle vestite di corallo. Qualcosa corre tra loro, uno scambiarsi di sguardi come linee che collegano una figura all'altra e disegnano frecce, stelle, triangoli, finché tutte le combinazioni in un attimo sono esaurite, e altri personaggi entrano in scena: un cieco con un ghepardo alla catena, una cortigiana col ventaglio di piume di struzzo, un efebo, una donna-cannone. Così tra chi per caso si trova insieme a ripararsi dalla pioggia sotto il portico, o si accalca sotto un tendone del bazar, o sosta ad ascoltare la banda in piazza, si consumano incontri, seduzioni, amplessi, orge, senza che ci si scambi una parola, senza che ci si sfiori con un dito, quasi senza alzare gli occhi. Una vibrazione lussuriosa muove continuamente Cloe, la più casta delle città." (Calvino, *Le città invisibili* 51-52)

cannot represent or communicate itself by "exchanging words." If dreams are given any kind of

substance, the wavefunction is collapsed and Chloe becomes a closed city. It is highly significant that

Calvino uses the semantic field of linguistic communication—*una parola* and *una storia*—to describe

the collapse of the possible Chloe into a closed model:

> If men and women began to live their ephemeral dreams, every phantom
> would become a person with whom to begin a story of pursuits, pretenses,
> misunderstandings, clashes, oppressions, and the carousel of fantasies would
> stop.[125] (51-52)

Although something is lost in the transformation of Chloe into a closed city, something is also

gained. Perhaps only this city possesses the solidity that would enable its realization or

communication. So is the loss of the possible Chloe simply an evil or a necessary evil? Another kind

of Pact with Geryon?

For Calvino, there must be a balance between the possible, imaginable Chloe and the Chloe

that is given form and substance. There must be a way to give the possible realm of the imagination

a certain substance and durability.[126] Representation—and especially representation via language—is

a necessary evil because it is a way of giving substance to the insubstantial. This does not mean,

however, that Calvino has a naïve or unproblematic view of representation. To return to the concept

of erasure, the problem is that language is *inaccurate* in the task of describing the real. It is also,

however, necessary to communicate any sense of reality. The first of his "Cities and Names,"

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[125] Se uomini e donne cominciassero a vivere i loro effimeri sogni, ogni fantasma diventerebbe una persona con cui cominciare una storia d'inseguimenti, di finzioni, di malintesi, d'urti, di oppressioni, e la giostra delle fantasie si fermerebbe. (Calvino, *Le città invisibili* 51-52)

[126] In an interview with Rai television, Calvino spoke of the necessity for a balance of imagination with a more grounded sense of routine and *limitatezza*: "L'immaginazione, la fantasia, la creatività – di cui tanto si parla – devono contrapporsi a un elemento di routine, di limitatezza, di prevedibilità, che rende la vita vivibile. Guai se c'è solo il prevedibile, ma se tutto è fantasia non si tocca niente, non si realizza niente." Author's note: Although I distinctly remember watching it in 2007, this interview has become rather difficult to track down as old weblinks are now broken. The best I can do at the moment is this transcript on the RAI website which, at least for the moment, can be accessed through the following URL: https://tinyurl.com/jhjtce9.

Aglaura, is a beautiful exploration of this problem, and perfectly captures Calvino's extremely ambivalent relationship to language:

> In this sense, nothing said of Aglaura is true, and yet these accounts create a solid and compact image of a city, whereas the haphazard opinions which might be inferred from living there have less substance. This is the result: the city that they speak of has much of what is needed to exist, whereas the city that exists on its site, exists less. […] Therefore, the inhabitants still believe they live in an Aglaura which grows only with the name Aglaura and they do not notice the Aglaura that grows on the ground. And even I, who would like to keep the two cities distinct in my memory, can speak only of the one, because the recollection of the other, in the lack of words to fix it, has been lost.[127] (67-68)

Here Calvino draws a strict distinction between the city of Aglaura and its discourse: its discourse—despite its inaccuracy—has substance; it can communicate a solid idea of the city of Aglaura. It is able to endure. The city itself, however, is unsubstantial, incommunicable, and utterly unable to endure: lacking the words to fix it, it has been lost. Again, the long-time inhabitants of Aglaura, like those of Phyllis, perceive only the absent city created through language, remaining wholly ignorant of the present city.

The crux of the matter is this: a city's discourse—although perhaps *necessary* to make a city substantial, communicable, and durable—is also precisely the space that is controlled by those who would "invent" the city, making it a space where seemingly innocent concepts like inaccuracy or imprecision open the gates for ignorance, prejudice, violence, and all forms of colonizing thought. And yet it remains true that only a city's discourse is solid, durable, and communicable. The alternative, the path of total reticence that most fully avoids violence, condemns the city to fate of Montale's *altro-che-striscia*: it will live and die and never have a name. Once again we arrive at the

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[127] "In questo senso nulla è vero di quanto si dice di Aglaura, eppure se ne trae un'immagine solida e compatta di città, mentre minor consistenza raggiungono i giudizi che se ne possono trarre a viverci. Il risultato è questo: la città che dicono ha molto di quel che ci vuole per esistere, mentre la città che esiste al suo posto, esiste meno… Perciò gli abitanti di Aglaura credono sempre di abitare un'Aglaura che cresce solo sul nome Aglaura e non si accorgono dell'Aglaura che cresce in terra. E anche a me che vorrei tener distinte nella memoria le due città, non resta che parlarti dell'una, perchè il ricordo dell'altra, mancando le parole per fissarlo, s'è disperso." (Calvino, *Le città invisibili* 67-68.)

inescapable impasse. Representation is both inaccurate and necessary, and so the author must either

refuse to create a discourse or constantly acknowledge his discourse as provisory and subjective.

There is the Pact of Geryon, or there is silence.

In addition to its inaccuracy, representation can be downright destructive by collapsing the

unfixed forms of memory and the imagination into a finite collection of representations. As seen in

Chloe, a single dream can be given substantial form only by sacrificing all other possible dreams

which are lost, hidden by the solidified into the form of the one dream. The process is irreversible.

A parallel situation is encountered by Calvino in relation to the representation of experience. Not

only are words incapable of fully capturing insubstantial, ineffable experience, but words also

extinguish and replace the open experience of personal history by fixing it into the closed form of

the sign. And so we return to Calvino's introduction to the *Sentiero dei nidi di ragno*:

> The first book immediately becomes a partition between you and experience,
> it cuts the threads that link you to facts, it burns the treasure of memory—
> the memory which would have become a treasure if you had possessed the
> patience to take care of it, if you had not been in such a rush to spend it, to
> waste it, to impose an arbitrary hierarchy amongst the images that you
> imagined, to separate certain images—presumed depositories of a poetic
> emotion—from all other images, those that seemed too personal or not
> personal enough to be represented, in other words to arrogantly institute
> another memory, a transfigured memory in the place of the global memory
> with its hazy borders, with its infinite possibility of returns. [128] (23. My
> translation)

Writing "burns the treasure of memory" by adding an artificial, subjective hierarchy—the hierarchy

of language or even the limitations of genre and style—to the flux of experience. Once fixed,

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[128] "Il primo libro diventa subito un diaframma tra te e l'esperienza, taglia i fili che ti legano ai fatti, brucia il tesoro della memoria – quello che sarebbe diventato un tesoro se avessi avuto la pazienza di custodirlo, se non avessi avuto tanta fretta di spenderlo, di scialacquarlo, d'imporre una gerarchia arbitraria tra le immagini che avevi immagazzinato, di separare le privilegiate, presunte depositarie d'una emozione poetica, dalle altre, quelle che sembravano riguardarti troppo o troppo poco per poterle rappresentare, insomma d'istituire di prepotenza un'altra memoria, una memoria trasfigurata al posto della memoria globale coi suoi confini sfumati, con la sua infinita possibilità di recuperi." (Calvino, *Il Sentiero* 23.)

especially fixed into the culturally created code of meanings represented by the Saussurian *langue*, it is

impossible to recover the reality of individual experience because it has been obliterated and

replaced by discourse. Personal meanings give way to communal ones and whatever formless,

infinite truth there is to memory becomes a finite set of words.

Marco Polo expresses this same phenomenon of semiotic obliteration most exactly when

speaking about his beloved hometown, Venice:

> **MARCO POLO:** Memory's images, once they have been fixed in words, are
> erased. […] Perhaps I am afraid of losing Venice all at once, if I speak of it.
> Or perhaps, speaking of other cities, I have already lost it, little by little.[129]
> (87. Speaker names added for clarity)

When transformed into words, memory's images are erased. Representation, which is necessary to

prevent the disappearance of true cities outside the eyes like the Aglaura-that-grows-on-the-ground,

is also revealed to be a force that erases cities. It gives them substance, yes, but a substance that is

fundamentally other than the city itself, which destroys and replaces its true being. It is ultimately the

same Catch-22 we have encountered again and again. If the city is represented, it is obliterated and

replaced metonymically by its discourse. If it remains unrepresented, it fades away, lacking the words

to fix it. Accordingly, all cities are invisible cities.

In addition to being the center of novel's treatment of linguistic metonymy and loss, the

discussion of Venice is also the final, most complete admission of Marco Polo's inescapable cultural

positioning:

> **MARCO POLO:** Each time I describe a city I am saying something about
> Venice.
> **KUBLAI KHAN:** When I ask you about other cities, I want to hear about
> them. And about Venice, when I ask you about Venice.

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[129] " – Le immagini della memoria, una volta fissate con le parole, si cancellano, – disse Polo. – Forse Venezia ho paura di perderla tutta in una volta, se ne parlo. O forse, parlando di altre città, l'ho già perduta a poco a poco." (Calvino, *Le città invisibili* 88)

> **MARCO POLO:** To distinguish other cities' qualities, I must speak of a first city that remains *implicit*. For me it is Venice.[130]
> (86-87. Speaker names added for clarity)

The great Khan's request is highly significant in its naiveté. What he asks for is an unproblematic language, one not ground on differential meaning creation in which meaning would be determined positively, and the signifier "Venice" refers to a stable, unshifting signified city, *Venezia*, which would thus be identical to its discourse. In pointing out the fundamentally differential nature of meaning production, Polo is also denying the possibility of accessing a positionless, Archimedean point of view from which to articulate—or even perceive—a city.

Such a process not only harbors the potential for loss and distortion with respect to non-Venetian cities, but it also throws Polo's own homeland into harm's way. There is nowhere sacred for Venice to exist within the system, nowhere to preserve it untouchable and untouched by the shifting meanings of all other cities. In order to speak about any city, Marco must depart from a point a reference, a certain point of origin. Marco Polo is unable to see the world, unable to assign value to things except in reference to a concept of home: a first, implicit city. In order for meaning to be determined differentially, there must be some idea of first, "original" term—here embodied by the traveler's hometown—which is emblematic of his own particular culturally and historically created subjectivity. And so as Marco Polo describes the other cities, his conception of Venice changes: what was once merely perhaps home as a default or contourless conception begins to acquire a shape and a substance. Here, reappearing in quite a different form, is Montale's *via negativa* towards transcendence. The true Venice-as-impetus—the one that exists beyond all discourse—is

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[130] "E Polo: – Ogni volta che descrivo una città dico qualcosa di Venezia.
– Quando ti chiedo di altre città voglio sentirti dire di quelle. E di Venezia, quando ti chiedo di Venezia.
– Per distinguere le qualità delle altre, devo partire da una prima città che resta implicita. Per me, è Venezia…" (Calvino, *Le città invisibili* 88).

lost: "Perhaps I am afraid of losing Venice all at once, if I speak of it. Or perhaps, speaking of other cities, I have already lost it, little by little" (87).

After proceeding by ellipses and corrections of negations of corrections, Calvino definitively signs the Pact of Geryon in the novel's final paragraph. Although it may initially seem to mark a departure in style and tone, the novel's final words in reality form a perfect encapsulation of the entirety of the novel as postmodern Utopia. If the value of literature is to be in teaching its readers how to attribute value to the world, then this is precisely the message of the novel's final paragraph, which is its only overtly ethical or didactic passage in the novel. It is perhaps no coincidence that it is articulated in the novel's final words, a rare position of privilege within Calvino's amorphous text:

> The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant attention and continual learning: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.[131] (165)

There is more than a little Gramsci here, which should stand in stark contradiction to those who believe that Calvino's later works—in forsaking a more realistic representation of history—also abandoned all sense of ethical engagement. Let's begin with the first sentence, which not only rejects the contemporary state of the world by characterizing it as an inferno, but places the temporal locus of ethics in the present. Advocating a present act of ethical discernment to separate the inferno from the non-inferno, embodies a Gramscian idea of the work of the artist to precede change through an "intense labour of criticism" and "the spread of ideas" (*Gramsci Reader* 55).

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[131] "L'inferno dei viventi non è qualcosa che sarà; se ce n'è uno, è quello che è già qui, l'inferno che abitiamo tutti i giorni, che formiamo stando insieme. Due modi ci sono per non soffrirne. Il primo riesce facile a molti: accettare l'inferno e diventarne parte fino al punto di non vederlo più. Il secondo è rischioso ed esige attenzione e apprendimento continui: cercare e saper riconoscere chi e che cosa, in mezzo all'inferno, non è inferno, e farlo durare, e dargli spazio." (Calvino, *Le città invisibili* 164)

But what exactly is the inferno of the living? Crucially, *Invisible Cities* does not specify.

Looking outside the novel to Calvino's 1962 essay "Defiance of the Labyrinth," it is somewhat

easier to speculate on what Calvino holds to be inferno. The earlier essay offers a similar choice

between two paths:

> Faced with the scandal of the first industrial revolution—anti-humanistic and impoetic—culture was left with two responses: to accept it in order to restore it to human history, or to refuse it in order to set it in opposition to another world of values.[132] (*Una pietra sopra* 84. My translation)

According to Calvino, the humanities never quite recovered from the crisis represented by the

industrial revolution and the advent of capitalism. The current state of late industrial capitalism—in

which capitalism has, at long last, finally begun to feel old[133]—is nothing but the epigone of the first

industrial revolution. At the beginning of "La sfida al labirinto," Calvino offers a heartbreaking

description of late industrial capitalism as the inferno of the living:

> Since the industrial revolution, philosophy, literature, and art have undergone a trauma from which they have never recovered. After spending centuries establishing the proper relationship of man with himself, with things, with places, with time—suddenly all the relations have changed: there are no more things but only merchandise, products in series, machines have taken the place of the animals, the city is just a dormitory attached to the workplace, time is a work schedule, man is a cog in the machine and the only history is the history of classes. Indeed, a large part of life no longer seems like life because it is anonymous and compulsory; and in the end you notice that this anonymous, compulsory part accounts for 95 percent of life itself.[134] (*Una pietra sopra* 82. My translation)

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[132] "Di fronte allo scandalo della prima rivoluzione industriale, antiumanistica, e impoetica, le risposte della cultura potevano essere due: accettarla per restituirla alla storia umana, o rifiutarla per contrapporre ad essa un altro mondo di valori su di un altro piano." (Calvino, *Una pietra sopra* 84)

[133] "il capitalismo sente finalmente d'essere vecchio" (Calvino, *Una pietra sopra* 83)

[134] "Dalla rivoluzione industriale, filosofia letteratura arte hanno avuto un trauma dal quale non si sono riavute. Dopo secoli passati a stabilire le relazioni dell'uomo con se stesso, le cose, i luoghi, il tempo, ecco che tutte le relazioni cambiano: non più cose ma merci, prodotti in serie, le macchine prendono il posto degli animali, la città è un dormitorio annesso all'officina, il tempo è orario, l'uomo un ingranaggio, solo le classi hanno una storia, una zona della vita non figura come vita davvero perché anonima e coatta e alla fine ci s'accorge che comprende il novantacinque per cento della vita." (Calvino, *Una pietra sopra* 82)

If this is what Calvino felt like in 1962, what must he have felt like when he wrote the *Invisible Cities* a decade later in 1972? And what would he make of 2017, an era characterized by a bombardment of signs, symbols, and information in the form of advertising, television, internet, smartphones, tablets, Like buttons, instagrams, grinders, Twitter, selfie-sticks, podcasts, twenty-four-hour news networks, and emojis. The technological increasingly replaces the human, or at the very least the human becomes increasingly robotic, or at the very least "unpoetic." In the words of the Canadian pop singer Rufus Wainwright, "Pinocchio is now a boy who wants to turn back into a toy."

If the nature of the Utopia is epistemological, then the crisis of late industrial capitalism can also be seen as epistemological in nature: how do I cut through this *bombardamento* of images to find real value? How do I navigate the darkness within the cave so long after the stars have been torn down? If we are now skeptical in the face of the universal and transcendental "grand narratives"— the stars that would help us navigate chaos and attribute meaning and value within Total Noise— how can we continue to live without drowning in the paradox of choice amongst endless possibilities, interpretations, and conflicting opinions about the world?

At the end of *Invisible Cities*, Marco Polo offers a pair of options to avoid suffering from Total Noise. The first option is to accept the inferno, to say that everything really is the same. Everything is relative and undifferentiated and that there are too many obstacles preventing us from assigning it value. Perhaps we are sad about this, and perhaps we take joy in the undifferentiated, in the way it afford the writer a free play of signifiers *à la* Palazzeschi: "The times have changed, men no longer ask for anything from poets, so let me have my fun!"[135] Accepting the inferno is a potentially valid option philosophically, but if the ultimate goal is to preserve an important role and

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[135] i tempi sono cambiati,
gli uomini non domandano più nulla
dai poeti: e lasciatemi divertire! (Aldo Palazzeschi, "Lasciatemi divertire!")

function for art and literature as a source of meaning it is an option that may ultimately prove self-defeating. Calvino certainly sides with his second option, which is to use a system of *bricolage* to redeem chaos through the imposition of an idea of order, even if this idea of order is provisory, relative, and partisan in nature:

> What literature can do is define the best approach to finding the way out of the labyrinth, even if this way out will be nothing but the passage from one labyrinth to another. It is the *defiance of the labyrinth* that we want to save, it is a literature of *defiance of the labyrinth* that we want to individuate and distinguish from the literature of *surrender to the labyrinth*.[136] (*Una pietra sopra* 96. My translation).

So in the end, Calvino does not wish to deny contemporary experience. He does not wish to face backward, but to find a way for literature to move forward and continue to be important. In order to do so, it must be something that helps us to understand chaos, rather than something that merely embodies it. "The critical problem […]" writes Gerald Graff, "is to discriminate between anti-realistic works that provide some true understanding of non-reality and those which are merely symptoms of it" (12). Rather than surrender to the labyrinth, literature must find a way to defy it, even if the labyrinth proves to be inescapable.

How exactly can we challenge the labyrinth? Perhaps the only viable response to this semiotic glut is a practice of *bricolage*: constructing our own hierarchy of value, however subjective and provisory, from the materials offered us by socially constructed reality, which has grown far too large to be adequately managed or understood. Specifically, Calvino offers a proposal that we have spent the entirety of *Invisible Cities* preparing ourselves to fully understand: "seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give

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[136] "Quel che la letteratura può fare è definire l'atteggiamento migliore per trovare la via d'uscita, anche se questa via d'uscita non sarà altro che il passaggio da un labirinto all'altro. È la sfida al labirinto che vogliamo salvare, è una letteratura della sfida al labirinto che vogliamo enucleare e distinguere dalla letteratura della resa al labirinto." (Calvino, *Una pietra sopra* 96).

them space" (165).[137] The first phrase, "Seek and learn to recognize" invokes the idea of the journey undertaken by the reader. The creation of non-infernal space will be a strange amalgam of reading and writing, an epistemological practice in which the reader-as-writer learns to interpret the world around him and to use its materials to construct a worldview that will enable him to avoid suffering from the inferno.

Ideally but impossibly—Utopianly in fact—the reader-as-writer must preserve the self while remaining as open as possible to the world. Following Gramsci again, the beneficial content of the novel is not a piece of encyclopedic knowledge, it is not a bit of pedantry proclaimed "in letters of fire, to shine / like a lost crocus in a dusty field" (Montale 39). No, instead Calvino's finale affirms that—in the words of Gramsci:

> Culture is something quite different. It is organization, discipline of one's inner self, a coming to terms with one's own personality; it is the attainment of a higher awareness, with the aid of which one succeeds in understanding one's own historical value, one's own function in life, one's own rights and obligations.[138] (*Gramsci Reader* 57)

The function of the humanities in the 20th century and beyond might very well be an *ethical* one, to teach us how to discern between different kinds of violence, even if only on the level of language and representation. The key, in this respect, is to avoid viewing the world with a heavy, Lotaria-like confirmation bias, which is to say seeing only what is already known and believed in advance. Instead, the form of reading advocated will involve traveling to new spaces, seeking new values, and learning to discard old values when appropriate.

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[137] "cercare e saper riconoscere chi e che cosa, in mezzo all'inferno, non è inferno, e farlo durare, e dargli spazio" (*Le città invisibili* 164).

[138] "La cultura è una cosa ben diversa. È organizzazione, disciplina del proprio io interiore, è presa di possesso della propria personalità, è conquista di coscienza superiore, per la quale si riesce a comprendere il proprio valore storico, la propria funzione nella vita, i propri diritti e i propri doveri." (24)
– From *Socialismo e cultura* in "Grido del popolo," Jan. 29, 1916. Quoted in *Scritti giovanili*. Torino: Einaudi, 1958.

The second phrase "is not inferno" is a brilliant use of litotes to reiterate the fact that—*à la* "Non chiederci la parola"—meaning will be impossible to find as a positive value, but can perhaps be discovered as difference. If we can no longer say what is the perfect city, perhaps we can at least identify what kind of a city is not hell on earth. Finally, "Make them endure" invokes the notion that communication is necessary. Values must be supported and communicated even if the machinery of representation is shabby and inaccurate. The Pact with Geryon must be signed. Finally, and perhaps most meaningfully, "give them space." Openness thus ends the novel as perhaps the most significant of the values proposed by Calvino. Even if it is ultimately impossible (and perhaps not even desirable) to fully escape one's cultural positioning—to see the world without departing from our own Venice—perhaps it is possible to at least not be closed off by all that you are and all that you have been.

CHAPTER FOUR

Da bambino volevo guarire i ciliegi
quando rossi di frutti li credevo feriti
la salute, per me, li aveva lasciati
coi fiori di neve che avevan perduti.[139]
– Fabrizio De André, "Un medico"

Do No Harm? An Ethics of Language, Naming, and Power

Given all that we have been through as a species and all that we continue to go through on a

daily basis, it might seem that the least we could ask of the work art is that—above and beyond

anything else—it should at the very least endeavor to not make anything worse. In the language of

medical ethics, a similar concept is often expressed in Latin with the phrase *primum non nocere*.[140] First

of all, do no harm. Imperfect mimesis clearly falls at the first hurdle. It fails to transmit the impetus

without loss. Indeed, even on the level of structure, words like *re*-presentation or to *re*-present imply

a kind of inevitable temporal *différance*. To present again is to present on condition of alteration via a

temporal and/or spatial shifting. A similar logic was used to expel imitation from the Republic. "The

fundamental problem of communication," to return to Shannon, "is that of reproducing at one

point either exactly or approximately a message selected at another point" (31). Presenting—that is,

showing for the first time—avoids the step of loss, but at the cost of a certain devaluation of the

content presented. If to *re*-present is to alter, then the hope to "do no harm" is always already a

Utopian aspiration. So long as there is anything external to the work that is susceptible to

profanation, complete avoidance of harm can only be achieved by silence. Any communicated

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[139] As a child I wanted to heal the cherry trees.
Turned red with fruit, I believed they were bleeding.
It seemed to me all health had fled
along with their snow-white blossoms. (My translation)

[140] The Latin phrase, which is borrowed from medical ethics, means: "First of all, do no harm." I invoke it here, and at length in Chapter Four and throughout the remainder of this sustained argument as an embodiment of the principle that avoiding harm should be the primary guiding aspiration for ethics.

message is an act of selection. It omits; it leaves something out. It sets up a hierarchy between the relevant and the irrelevant, it demarcates a foreground and causes a background to recede. It carves out a signal from the noise. All finite communications enact a reduction of the totality of all-that-can-be-said.

The opposite, an infinite work of art, is close to inconceivable, though Pier Paolo Pasolini tried to imagine what it might be like in his celebrated essay "A Cinema of Poetry." Framing his theoretical construct in the language of Saussurian linguistics, Pasolini invents the *infinito piano sequenza*, an endless tracking shot encompassing all of reality itself. For Pasolini, this would be analogous to the Saussurian *langue* of all possible cinema. Such a work would represent the totality of the filmable; it would include everything-that-can-be-filmed. All individual films thereby become analogous to instances of *parole*, speech acts composed from elements drawn from the *langue*.

By virtue of its sheer completeness, we might expect the *infinito piano sequenza* to fulfill a do no harm criteria for ethics, at least with respect to sidestepping the violence of omission or selection. Imagine, however, the way that such a work would be received and interpreted. Ultimately, it would achieve completeness at the cost of sacrificing communication, or at least what might be called point of view. It would minimize the violence of carving out a signal by becoming pure noise.

In crafting the *infinito piano sequenza*, the artist would give up all control over the work's meaning. The *infinito piano sequenza* might contain all the secret truths of reality, but no one would be able to find them. It would become a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury but signifying nothing. Assuming a temporally bounded (e.g., mortal) spectator, he or she could certainly only view a portion of the infinite work. As such, whatever injustice or violence the artist had attempted to bypass by striving towards completeness would simply be postponed until the point of reception. Rather than choosing a necessary evil, the artist delegates the task of violence to the viewer, or perhaps to randomness or chaos itself.

Even prior to its reception, art cannot avoid accusations of immorality founded on its very material existence. Unlike Athena, no work of art simply springs forth instantaneously and fully formed from the skull of its creator. It is born in a context, and therefore must be seen as the product of an entire world. It is as Derrida puts it in his oft-quoted but seldom understood insight, *Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*: there is nothing beyond the text (*Of Grammatology* 158). No work of art can be read in isolation from the external factors (be they historical, political, economic, what-have-you) that caused it to assume a particular form or to be born at a one point in time rather than another. Through the simple fact of its physical coming-into-existence, art is thereby branded with an original sin. It has come from a world so drastically unjust and inequitable on a material basis so as to have created the circumstances necessary for its creation. While others starved, there was time and leisure enough for certain individuals to make art.

To return again to the imagery of Plato's cave, the work of art always enters into a world where certain prisoners are already shackled. Moreover, it is often able to be born because of those shackles. Walter Benjamin put it well: "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (256). Any document of civilization inevitably offers testimony of the violence and injustice that preceded it. Without the existence of such horrors, the work would not have been born in its own precise form. This is true even if such a document has come into being in order to protest the very structures and the very history that have produced it.

Theodor Adorno goes perhaps even further than Benjamin, declaring that "[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (34). Although frequently misquoted or misunderstood as implying that poetry has become impossible—as suggesting, in other words, that poetry cannot or should not be written after Auschwitz—Adorno's statement should not be taken as an injunction of any kind. Rather, it amounts to a labeling or branding. It is closer to the stigmatization of all poetry. There will indeed be poetry after Auschwitz, but it will be barbaric. After Auschwitz, it can neither call itself

innocent nor be interpreted as such. Poetry, and all forms of representational art for that matter, cannot claim to be wholly untouched by the same structures of reason or the same calculus of forces that lead to all the horrors, which have come before. Recall how William Kentridge put it:

> [E]very act of enlightenment, all the missions to save souls, all the best impulses, are so dogged by the weight of what follows them: their shadow, the violence that has accompanied Enlightenment. The colonial projected in its own description of itself bringing light to the Dark Continent is a gruesome working out of the impulses of Plato's cave. (48)

We are entitled to stop well short of believing that poetry is a primary or even a significant cause of such horrors. It will not do, to echo Robert Cover again, to insist on the violence of strong poetry and strong poets in the face of violence inflicted on the body. We should recognize, however, that works of art are created by and create the world in which they exist.

It might be said that, between the world and the work, there is a kind of Wittgensteinian family resemblance. There is no hermetic seal that can isolate poetry from reality. There is nothing truly beyond the text precisely because any textual membrane is so porous and permeable. Art is invariably born of a world and a time that has no claim to innocence. Leaving aside Adorno for a moment, something much closer to an injunction against poetry after Auschwitz might be traced to the famous final words of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (82). To follow such a commandment, we must either keep silent in certain cases or else, by continuing to speak, endorse the proposition that there are no indescribable realities, no unspeakable events.

Given our earlier concern with Primo Levi and Adorno's stigmatization of poetry, Auschwitz provides an interesting test case. If we chose to be guided by the principle of *primum non nocere*, how could poetry hope to express such a thing—the demolition of man—and do no harm? Who is the artist who could write such a story? Surely no one who had not been there could do so. Surely no stranger could appropriate Auschwitz and speak of it with a stranger's eyes and a

stranger's categories. How could he or she do justice to the incomprehensibility and incommunicability—the profound Otherness—of such an experience? But at the same time, how can we believe that those who were present at Auschwitz would be able to tell their own story? What language could they use? And how could we ask them to do such a thing? Who among them would be willing to reduce such an experience to an inadequate, finite set of words and images? Who could be asked to betray his or her own memories, to trade them in for a set of metonymic representations that potentially erase and replace the truth of a past that must so desperately be remembered?

Come to that, there is still Adorno's seeming injunction. Given the supreme interconnectedness of world and text, how can poetry after Auschwitz find a place outside that kind of barbarism and violence? How could it avoid speaking of such an event? How could any text communicate anything of value without touching, in some way, on the horrors of the 20th Century? Only, it seems, by claiming a false innocence and separation from its own material and historical lineage. Within a differential system of meaning creation, Auschwitz—even if we agree to never speak of it directly—cannot remain immune to all reduction or betrayal. In this respect, it is akin to Marco Polo's Venice. There is no world of meanings that it has not impacted, even in imperceptible ways. We have had our specific history rather than another one that might have been, and language has been forever altered by that history.

The example of Auschwitz in particular highlights and draws attention to the most central problems and the responsibilities that constitute the ethics of representation. It is an extreme case, one which allows these issues to come most clearly to the forefront. Auschwitz is an embodiment of a truth that, in order for art to preserve ethical status, must be acknowledged. At the very least, we should all be able to agree that certain atoms did or did not interact with other atoms at a certain point in time in a place that we call Auschwitz. If we cannot agree to this, all questions of ethics and

representation become impossible. The physical, material truth of Auschwitz is an extreme embodiment of what I have and will continue to call the historical impetus, the "world without out us" that exists beyond representation. Even if the word does not and cannot convey such a truth fully, we are understandably and correctly hesitant to deny the existence of the referent, to deny the possibility that a given story or representation might get it right or get it wrong.

Certainly, it would be an extremely ethically valuable act for the philosopher to present Auschwitz—the thing-in-itself—to the prisoners within the cave. This is an ethical necessity, but it is also a logical impossibility. For, in order to be brought to those within the cave (e.g., shown to those who have not experienced it), it must be re-presented. Accordingly, it must be transformed into something other than itself; it must be made a shadow. So often, the artistic impetus is the ineffable that demands expression. It is that thing that provides the motive force for artistic representation while simultaneously condemning it to failure. Speech may participate in some injustice, but silence certainly leaves injustice unexpressed, condemned to perish without the solidity that would permit it to endure.

It must be remembered, however, that silence is not the only way the past is forgotten. In its own way, even representation condemns the impetus to silence, substituting a metonymical trace for its absent Utopian object. Michel de Certeau spoke clearly about this problem in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, a work dedicated to the everyday and to the invisible practices that make up so much of what it means to be human: cooking dinner, walking through the city, or picking out clothes in the morning. Paradoxically, De Certeau's book about these activities contains virtually no trace of everyday practice. His ambition was to analyze such things and to understand them, but he saw no way to do so without transforming them into another form: a verbal description, a statistic, a map, or perhaps a drawing. But, for De Certeau, such fixations ultimately "constitute procedures for forgetting" (97) because they preserve something other than what they intend to convey. Rather

than preserving a practice or forging a path to a deeper understanding of the everyday, the passage from bodily movements to legibile signs simply "causes a way of being in the world to be forgotten" (97). The truth of such practices was so important, so pressing, for De Certeau that he could not speak of them directly. He was unwilling to substitute a trace or an absence. Instead, he chose the path of reticence.

There is, in the last analysis, a strangely problematic relationship between creativity and the sacred. I am reminded of William Blake's judgment of *Paradise Lost*. For Blake, Milton was "at liberty" and a "true poet" only when writing about Devils and Hell, but for God and the angels "Milton wrote in fetters" (xvii). But what, precisely, are these "fetters"? What are they made of, these chains that Blake describes? Why does representation—the giving form to content—become increasingly difficult the more sacred the artist believes the impetus to be? The same might be said of Dante. Despite the fact that, ironically enough, Dante himself would surely have regarded it as the least important, the *Inferno* certainly remains far and away the best-known and best-loved section of the *Comedy*. It was probably the least difficult for him to write; the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* certainly constrained his pen a bit more. Their sacredness functioned as a limit to freedom, or at the very least it imposed a greater degree of ethical duty, a more keenly felt need to do justice to matter at hand. This too is an important aspect of what I mean by the ethics of representation. There is an ethical duty that springs forth from the content itself, a duty that might call for non-expression rather than expression—or which could, at the very least, demand the use of reticence as a rhetorical mode.

For lack of a better term, we might call this duty the "love" that passes between artists and the impetus, or indeed between artists and their creations. In spite of this love (or perhaps because of it) the work of art is sent into the world alone and unprotected with the foreknowledge that its readers can and will distort it, misunderstand it, and transform it into something quite different than what it was originally intended to be. The 13th Century poet Guido Cavalcanti expresses this anxiety

159

memorably in a speech addressed to a personified song or *ballatetta* before it heads off to seek its

readers:

> Because I do not hope to turn again
> to Tuscany,
> my ballatetta, go for me
> straight to my lady, who,
> for all her graciousness
> is sure to welcome you.
>
> You shall take word of me composed in sighs
> which tell of suffering and countless fears;
>   but please be careful to avoid the eyes
> of those who do not hold nobility dear:
>   insensible to my misfortune here
> they would misconstrue
> and falsely censure you,
> then no hope would be sound
> as even in death I found
> my present pain renewed.[141] (Trans. Simon West 66-67)

Cavalcanti holds out hope that there is at least one ideal reader (the *donna mia* named in the text) who

is equipped with the proper *cortesia* to understand the translation of his fear and sighs into poetry.

For better or for worse, most artists—and nearly all those writing after the crisis of representation at

the beginning of the 20th Century—have despaired of finding even one such wholly sympathetic

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[141] *Perch'i' no spero di tornar giammai,*
ballatetta, in Toscana,
va' tu, leggera e piana
dritt' a la donna mia,
che per la sua cortesia
ti farà molto onore.

Tu porterai novelle di sospiri
piene di dogl' e di molta paura;
  ma guarda che persona non ti miri
che sia nemica di gentil natura
  che' certo per la mia disaventura
tu saresti contesa
tanto da lei ripresa
che mi sarebbe angoscia;
dopo la morte, poscia,
pianto e novel dolor. (Cavalcanti 66-67)

interpreter. Contemporary artists surely must recognize that virtually every reading is a kind of misreading. What the reader chooses to make of a given work of is inevitably influenced by a variety of factors, including but not limited to that reader's degree of ignorance, malevolence, or the influence of his or her ideology and beliefs—the various manifestations of the city inside the self.

Even leaving aside, for the moment, the imprecision and distortion inherent in the process of representation, the work of art always undergoes a second and separate process of alteration in its reception, the way it is used by those who read, view, or interpret it.[142] In this sense, a significant portion of the ethical bargain struck by any artist is the foreknowledge that his or her works will be mangled and mutilated by other minds. The more open a given work is, the more subject it is to misunderstanding. And yet, as seen with Marco Polo's Venice, openness or indirectness can also be a paradoxical strategy for preserving what is most precious to the artist. By refusing to represent something directly (or perhaps realistically) part of the sacred can be protected, preserved beyond the mutilating mind of the reader.

A central tenant of *The Practice of Everyday Life* is that reading is fundamentally an act of invention:

> [T]he activity of reading has […] all the characteristics of a silent production: the drift across the page, the metamorphosis of the text effected by the wandering eyes of the reader, the improvisation and expectation of meanings inferred from a few words, leaps over written spaces in an ephemeral dance […]. [The reader] insinuates into another person's text the ruses of pleasure and appropriation: he poaches on it, is transported into it. […] A different world (the reader's) slips into the author's place. This mutation makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment (xxi).

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[142] Of course, the ethical impact of the work certainly includes its reception, which is to say how viewers and readers interpret and understand it as well as what they subsequently do with the piece. Despite my emphasis and insistence on addressing the intentions of artists as a primary moment within the ethics of representation, I should stress that—according to the model of reading in operation within this essay—such intentions do not necessarily determine anything about how a work is read or what it comes to mean for its users.

Indeed, as a creative process of wandering and subversion that takes place within an imposed structure of significance, reading is the central metaphor for his conception of the practice of everyday life. De Certeau, in this sense, goes perhaps a step farther than Eco who suggests that—although the user contributes in part to the making of the *opera aperta*—it remains the same work in the same form created by the artist, who has proposed a finite set of operative possibilities.

The idea that the ultimate meaning of a work (in terms of how it is used) is independent from the intentions of its author need not be disastrous, however. Dante argues this point through the "salvific" relationship between Statius and Virgil. According to the *Comedy*, Statius became who he was, a poet and a Christian, through reading the works of Virgil. Though a great poet, Virgil is condemned to eternity in limbo for a reason: he was not a Christian. He neither knew nor anticipated the redemption offered by Christ. But Statius didn't see it this way. A concise explanation is given by Christian Moevs:

> Statius, reading Vergil's *Aeneid* 3.56-57 and fourth Eclogue (*Pg* 22.37-42,64-73) is saved because he misreads the texts to see in their literal sense (what is there) what is not there: in the case of the *Aeneid*, a condemnation of his own sin of prodigality, and in the case of the Eclogue, the Incarnation itself. The lesson in reading is clear: not to misread the *Comedy* can only be to misread it. To find salvation in this text is to see in what is there (the literal sense) what alone cannot be there, because it is not a thing: it is to see truth, being, *what is*, which is for the intellect to awaken to its own emancipation and transcendence. (12)

The *Comedy* too, for Moevs, operates as a kind of *via negativa*—much like Montale's *Ossi di seppia*. In such a case misreading is a positive outcome. Consequentially, a work that begins in moral imperfection can still ultimately lead to edification, or at least the development of an improved ethical consciousness.

Turning again to medical ethics, we might roughly speak of representational ethics as divided between two opposite poles: non-maleficence and its opposite, beneficence. These poles might be said to correspond to a drive to communicate something beneficial—to pass on a piece of wisdom,

preserve a memory, or expose an evil—while at the same time guarding against the maleficent potential of representation to falsify, distort, or metonymically replace the impetus that it hopes to convey. These poles can also be meaningfully compared to the artistic spectrum between openness (which might be said to mirror non-maleficence through reticence, abstraction, etc.) and closure, which more directly aims at beneficence (or, potentially, maleficence). As suggested by the well-known dictum *primum non nocere*, medical ethics is generally (though not always) governed by the principle that non-maleficence should be granted priority over beneficence, which is to say that in evaluating a course of action its potential to negatively affect the patient's health should be considered prior to and carefully balanced against its potentially beneficial effects. A harm that is certain balanced against an uncertain good would seem to weigh heavily in favor of non-action in a medical context.

But what about an artistic context? What is the duty of the artist? Continuing the parallel with medical ethics, we might then look to excuse the ineluctable maleficence of semiotic representation via the doctrine of double effect, which seeks to distinguish morally between actions resulting in two effects: one positive and one negative. The principle is said to have originated with Thomas Aquinas who introduced the doctrine of double effect with respect to the moral justification of self-defense:

> Nothing hinders one act from having two effects, only one of which is intended, while the other is beside the intention. Now moral acts take their species according to what is intended, and not according to what is beside the intention […]. Accordingly the act of self-defense may have two effects, one is the saving of one's life, the other is the slaying of the aggressor. Therefore this act, since one's intention is to save one's own life, is not unlawful […] And yet, though proceeding from a good intention, an act may be rendered unlawful, if it be out of proportion to the end. (*Summa Theologica* II-II, Qu. 64, Art.7)

The crucial point in Aquinas's formulation is that the moral or ethical character of an action derives from its intention rather than its result. This sentiment is certainly not shared by all moral

philosophers and is directly opposed to utilitarian and consequentialist thought. For Aquinas, it is crucial to distinguish between acts that utilize a morally evil action as a means to achieve a desirable result (which ought to be rejected) and those acts that merely foresee a harm or moral evil as a likely result of a morally good or morally neutral act aimed towards a desirable end. Turning to the issue at hand, Aquinas' double effect logic would authorize artistic representation in cases where the various evils it involves—distortion, inaccuracy, exaggeration, omission, metonymic erasure—are foreseen but not willed. As Joseph Mangan explains:

> A person may licitly perform an action that he foresees will produce a good
> effect and a bad effect provided that four conditions are verified at one and
> the same time:
> 1. that the action in itself from its very object be good or at least indifferent;
> 2. that the good effect and not the evil effect be intended;
> 3. that the good effect be not produced by means of the evil effect;
> 4. that there be a proportionately grave reason for permitting the evil effect. (43)

One possible counter argument presents itself: we might deny that artistic representation participates in any violence or injustice.

During the introduction to "The Pact of Geryon," I asked the reader to agree to a certain stipulation: that there is a physical, chemical truth to history. It may seem as though I am setting up a straw man here, but there are certain individuals who would be unwilling to go so far. Such a position might be identified with a common misinterpretation of Derrida's *Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*, one which interprets that statement as implying that there simply is no reality outside words or perceptions. Reality, or what is perceived as such, does not come into being until after perception. According to such a world-view, ethics inevitably collapses into aesthetics, leaving no room for judgment as a mediator. The artist can only be judged according to the coordinates of a perfectly self-contained world, the world of the text, whether it be the one created by the artist or by the reader. Such reasoning implies that exceptionally well-written anti-Semitic propaganda could compete with Shakespeare and the very best cigarette advertisements could be on a par with Dante.

Despite my obvious skepticism, let us follow the no-outside argument for a few steps. Representation does no harm because there is nothing that it can harm. Nothing exists beyond language that language might alter, reduce, falsify, or betray. Representation betrays nothing because there is nothing to betray. There is a trick at work here similar to Berkeley's theory of immaterialism. What is suggested is that, because we cannot access it except through the mediation of language and perception, there is no reason to believe in the existence of a noumenal reality. Because we are all shackled inside the cave, there is no reason to believe that an outside-the-cave exists. Though I might wish I could defeat such an argument by simply banging a shoe against a table like Nikita Khrushchev at the United Nations, this kind of shoe-banging unfortunately cannot actually prove that tables (or shoes for that matter) exist outside of their sound and fury.

A more convincing argument might perhaps be made by appealing to ethics. It becomes significantly more uncomfortable to defend the no-outside position when speaking concretely. Only the most dedicated epistemological solipsist would dare claim that artistic representations cannot betray Auschwitz because there simply was no Auschwitz to betray. To advance the argument via Berkeley or an extreme linguistic relativism, Auschwitz—even though it did occur—was never really experienced without the mediation language and perception, and so there is ultimately nothing for language to fall short of or falsify. Physical pain, death, evil: these are only semiotic concepts, they are only ever made of words. But be careful, that way madness lies.

And, perhaps more inevitably than madness, that way lies irrelevance, poverty, and unemployment for those of us dedicated to the teaching and study of the humanities. In order for cultural work to remain a viable, useful, or justifiable enterprise, there must be something outside the cave, and there must be some way to bring it back as a positive value rather than as simply another embodiment of cultural or intellectual imperialism. To say nothing of the ethical irresponsibility of denying the impetus, adopting total harmlessness or complete innocence as a self-defense strategy

for the work of art is profoundly self-defeating. By denying the impetus, the hope would seemingly

be to buy complete innocence for the work of art at the cost of relegating artistic creation (and

certainly literary criticism, for that matter) to a state of complete impotence. In the terminology of

double-effect, it would deny both beneficence and maleficence and turn the whole argument into

something of a moot point.

Although he may not realize it, Gerald Graff argues quite convincingly against the

innocence-by-harmlessness position in his masterful *Literature Against Itself*:

> A great deal of our thinking about culture expresses a definitive recoiling
> from the nightmare of modern history—from war, totalitarianism, and
> exploitation. In order to escape complicity, art has to repudiate rationality
> and representation—perhaps even meaning itself […]. It is by these routes
> that humanistic culture has so often deprived itself of the critical perspective
> it might well contribute to the larger society. (101)

Graff's most important point—and one that deserves to be revisited and reiterated as the humanities

continue to fight for funding, relevance, and authority—is that the irrelevance of the humanities, and

our difficulty in justifying ourselves to non-humanists, derives in large part from the way so many

literary intellectuals have begun to talk and think about works of art: as hermetically sealed perfect

little snowflakes that have no relationship to the outside world and have no obligation to do so.

Here is Graff again:

> The loss of belief—or loss of interest—in literature as a means of
> understanding weakens the educational claims of literature and leaves the
> literature teacher without a rationale for what he professes. Students are
> quick to perceive that their teachers no longer hold the naïve view that
> literature can explain anything. (7)

We might add that university donors and administrators (in other words, the people who make

funding decisions) are quick to perceive this loss of conviction as well. It is certainly not the only

reason for the crisis of the humanities, but at least some of the momentum driving the decline in

prestige and importance has been generated by self-imposed attempts to deny the work of art

authority to speak about reality. Or, to put it perhaps more precisely, to deny strategies of

interpretation that view works of art as having something to say about how to navigate the everyday world.

It is a central premise of "The Pact of Geryon" that a work need not be intended as an ethical intervention in order to be interpreted as one, that self-reflexivity and metaliterariness offer value lessons about the way human beings interact with reality. One step towards resolving the crisis of the humanities is to restore the centrality of the ethical dimension to works which we have become accustomed to viewing from other perspectives, as reflections of a theory or movement rather than attempts to communicate something about reality itself. It can be difficult to argue for an ethical refocusing of literary study without being—and perhaps quite rightly—accused of conservativism, of the desire to turn time backwards and stir things apart. But, in endeavoring to restore a focus on value-creation to literary study, one need not be conservative about the kinds of values the arts contain and convey. Restoring to literature its function as teachers of virtue or a repository of universal values would, I believe—and I must state this quite emphatically—be a step in the wrong direction. J. Hillis Miller puts it well:

> Rather than thinking of all those books on shelf as the sure and safe repository of the values of Western culture, the army of unalterable law ranged in rows, it might be better to think of them as so many unexploded bombs that may have who knows what result when they get read by the right (or the person) at the right (or the wrong) place or time. A book is a dangerous object, and perhaps all books should have warning labels. Strange things happen when someone reads a book. (43)

The fact that "strange things" can and do happen when we interact with works of art should continue to point us away from a conception of works as standard-bearers for a stable set of values. Accepting strange consequences also means abandoning the dream of a purely innocent artistic sphere and re-centering our focus on exactly how the creation of aesthetic objects constitutes an act with profound ethical implications for contemporary life.

Rather than focusing on the specific values present in works of art, I would simply like to restore a primacy to the belief that works of art are involved in value-creation. In so doing, they have a fundamental didactic importance that does not stem from their ability to transmit this or that particular human value. Accordingly, the onus must be on the reader rather than the writer: interaction with art can teach us how values are created and conveyed. Moreover, it can teach us about the relationship between ethics and value-creation. Readers can learn to see a world that is not about the battle between good and evil, but about the choices we make between goods and among evils.

First and foremost, we need to believe that things matter. It might be beauty that makes them matter, and it might be something more akin to truth or justice, but it needs to find a way to matter. The most characteristic feature of contemporary experience is, as David Foster Wallace and others have argued, the constant state of informational and semiotic *bombardamento*: the proliferation of messages, images, and statements that all seem to demand our immediate attention. Wallace appropriately christened this phenomenon "Total Noise," defined as "the tsunami of available fact, context, and perspective" (xx). The experience of Total Noise categorically both is and is not something new. Total Noise is part of the fabric of modernity, and this is true whether that term invokes the 1300s, 1800s, or the 21st Century. The present is always—for those that live within it— experienced as an era of unprecedented speed, as the onset of an unprecedented level of information, a never-before-seen quantity of communications. In other words, noise is relative.

Since the beginning of anything that might be called modernity, there has always been a need for the work of art to function as a kind of training ground. It has been asked to teach its users how to navigate the labyrinths of semiotically created value. And so, as Dante's pact with Geryon suggests, ethical battles have always taken place on the level of representation. Art has always struggled with its own capabilities and limitations as vehicle for the preservation and transmission of

values. To survive and be productive within an atmosphere of Total Noise, this skill—the knowledge of how values are created and conveyed by navigating a complicated network of goods and evils—is fundamental. We need it to productively navigate and interpret the noise, as well as to carve out our own signal from within it.

The ability to speak objectively—that is, to see what lies outside the cave from anywhere other than a specific geographical, temporal, and cultural point of view—is indeed a Utopian impossibility. This does not mean, however, that one cannot or should not fight to advance one's own perceptions of value. Indeed, it seems that whosoever would be an ethical writer must be a partisan one, and perhaps must even acknowledge himself or herself as a partisan. The fundamental task of engaging with the ethics of representation consists in teasing out those choices that, though they might seem to belong to the ethically neutral realm of the rhetorical or metaliterary, ultimately constitute the way an artist establishes himself or herself as a partisan fighter in the war of Total Noise. Art creates values, and in doing so commits violence against other values. If we cannot speak and do no harm, then we must leave aside the innocence of art as a concept worth pursuing. Representation begins in violence. It cannot avoid appropriations, violations and transgressions, but perhaps this is not a bad thing in the end. What a work of art accomplishes might offset its original sins, its sins of origin. To affirm that literature is never entirely innocent is not necessarily to say that it cannot be ethical.

In contrast, it might be argued that—to the extent it participates in any form of discernment or evaluation—ethics inevitably involves transgression. Perhaps the primary lesson of the 20th Century—the lesson of all that was destroyed materially, the lesson inscribed in its vanquished bodies and buildings and homes—is not that the artist (or human for that matter) must, first of all, do no harm. On the contrary, the century that gave rise to Hitler, Mussolini, and Pol Pot would seem to demand the recognition that not all violences are created equal, and that artists have not

only the right but indeed the duty to take a stand, even if they realize that there is no *wholly innocent* place left to stand.

In Sartre's *What Is Literature?* (1947), the manifesto of *littérature engagée*, he certainly did not conclude that the primary ethical duty of literature was to do no harm. Instead, it was meant to participate in praxis and perhaps to make certain sacrifices in order to do so. This is not to say, however, that Sartre believed all representational means were justifiable given the proper aims. In fact, Sartre specifically rejects the use of representational strategies—such as Communist propaganda—that would imply the enslavement of readers in order to pursue the goal of greater freedom for all. At the same time, however, Sartre evinces a fundamental distrust of ineffability and is quite intolerant of an all-encompassing moral relativism:

> For our predecessors the rule of the game was to save everybody, because suffering is atoned for, because nobody is bad voluntarily, because man's heart is unfathomable […]. That meant that literature […] tended to establish a sort of moral relativism. […] [T]olerance [became] the primary virtue. Everything would be tolerated, even intolerance. (215-216)

It might seem a small matter to declare, as Sartre suggests, that intolerance should not be tolerated. I need not dwell at any length on how quickly a policy of intolerance towards intolerance soon begins to eat its own tail.

But in reality, Sartre's rejection of intolerance is a subtle *political* chess move—one which was available precisely during the time period in which he wrote. His was an epoch of expansion, a world ripe for the war of maneuver. I use the word "political" here in the specific sense it is given by Carl Schmitt, who argued that all truly political actions and motives can ultimately be attributed to a single binary distinction, the difference between the friend and the enemy (26). It must not be forgotten that Sartre, in articulating his vision engaged literature, was fundamentally expressing a *letteratura partigiana*, a literature of the partisan. To be engaged in Sartre's sense is to write *against*

something. It may even be to write against *someone*. In part, Sartrian engagement involved being partisan in a specific, historical conflict, one in which there were concrete friends and enemies.

In terms of ethics and language, the availability of a concrete political enemy is extremely powerful. The whole ethical calculus of language and violence is altered from the moment that an enemy can be identified politically rather than conceptually. Accordingly, there is the temptation—as evidenced by fascism and other totalitarian or authoritarian regimes—to create enemies where none exist. It is not surprising that what frequently follows such a move is the kind of representational violence that ignores the potential harm caused by language, naming, and categorization. Writing as a prisoner of the moment from the United States in 2017, I am tempted to call this the Trumpification of language:

> When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. […] They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems […]. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people. (Ye He Lee)

Trumpified language represents an extreme sacrifice of accuracy in favor of praxis; communication trumps truth. From the perspective of ethics and representation, it is wildly irresponsible to use language this way but it certainly makes it easier to communicate a memorable message, or to get things done. Just think about how easy it would be to make foreign policy decisions about Mexico if the country is seen as nothing but a funnel for sexually aggressive drug mules. Access to the idea of an Axis of Evil, the dehumanization of an enemy or a scapegoat: these are undeniably extremely powerful tools for praxis.

Language too is quite a different thing when the enemy is no longer a concept like intolerance, injustice, or capitalism but can be identified as *quelli lì*: those people over there. Let us not for get that Sartre had access to just this kind of an enemy. "The war of 1914 precipitated the crisis of language," Sartre explains, "I would readily say that the war of 1940 has revalorized it" (234). Indeed, *What Is Literature?* is written almost as though the literary word had been restored to a

Utopian golden age in which there was an unproblematic relationship between signifiers and signified. I quote Sartre again: "The function of a writer is to call a spade a spade" (284).[143] To complain about the inadequacy of language is to become, in Sartre's words "an accomplice of the enemy" (284). It is the height of vanity to believe that there are any "ineffable beauties which the word is unworthy of expressing" (285). But what about ineffable suffering? Inexpressible (in)humanity? A wordless sacred? What if we declare, as Primo Levi did that, our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man? If we think in terms of Auschwitz, Sartre's statement begins to look highly problematic. It seems to be either a denial of material reality or a supremely anachronistic, naïve faith in the capability of language to transparently describe reality.

And yet Sartre doesn't hesitate. Instead, he doubles-down by turning the proposition on its head: "I distrust the incommunicable; it is the source of all violence" (285). To declare something incommunicable is, in other words, to stand in the way of its actually being communicated. The perfect, as Aquinas or Voltaire would say, is the enemy of the good. Departing from a position of radical ethical responsibility, Sartre explodes the notion that silence might offer a path to blamelessness or a standing-place outside violence. "If you say nothing," Sartre says, "you are necessarily for the continuation of the war; one is always responsible for what one does not try to prevent" (289). One must commit either the violence of representation—the violence of betrayal, profanation, and metonymy—or the violence of silence, which Sartre clearly judges to be the greater of two evils. *Primum non nocere* be damned, engaged artists must speak either speak out against something. They must draw their battle lines and declare their enemies or else, by remaining silent, they must accept responsibility for everything. But what do we do if we find ourselves in an epoch

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[143] In the original French the phrase involved calling a cat a cat: "*d'appeler un chat un chat.*"

of concentration? How must language be used in the war of position? In other words, how can ethics find a still point of reference in the absence of a concrete political enemy?

If partiality and partisanship is inevitable in representation, then there must be some non-zero level of simplification, betrayal, or metonymic violence that is morally permissible. There is quite clearly an ethical distinction that can be drawn between Primo Levi's not-quite-accurate account of his time in Auschwitz and a work of anti-Semitic propaganda like *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. If no act of representation—from Primo Levi to anti-Semitic propagandist—can hope to offer complete access to an outside unfettered by the limitations of perception and representation, then there is always a certain Pact with Geryon: the acceptance of fraud as a vehicle. The first and most important ethical choice that a work of art makes is defining its understanding of representation itself. Somewhere between Levi and the propagandist, the inaccuracy of words and images stops being a necessary evil and starts to be, well, just plain evil.

Evil, there's that word again. "In spite of ourselves," Sartre explained, "we came to this conclusion, which will seem shocking to lofty souls: Evil cannot be redeemed" (162). It is such a shocking word, but an exception is usually carved out for World War II. It is a fine word for Primo Levi perhaps, or for those who, like Sartre and Calvino, actively fought against fascism in World War II. History has passed judgment on that conflict; there is no re-negotiating the terms of surrender. But what about other conflicts? How prepared are we to accept their effect on language? It is hard to imagine the literary canonization of a *littérature engagée* from other, less black-and-white conflicts. Where is the engaged literature of the Cold War? From the Israel-Palestine conflict? How about the *anni di piombo*? The War on Terror? When will "lofty souls" grant these partisan groups unrestricted access to a word like evil? It may sound quite convincing when an anti-fascist like Sartre to proclaim the necessity of calling a spade a spade or an enemy and enemy, but what happens when such a proclamation comes from a different source? What if the word enemy is used to refer to the Jews

and the mentally ill rather than those who would exterminate them? What happens when the enemy

is no longer Nazis but Muslims, immigrants, the Pro-Choice movement, or even Capitalists?

It might be argued, as Terry Eagleton does in his timely 2010 book *On Evil*, that the word

evil is a special case, a way of keeping something outside the sphere of judgment, discernment, or

ethics:

> The word "evil" is generally a way of bringing arguments to an end, like a
> fist in the solar plexus. Like the idea of taste, over which there is supposedly
> no arguing, it is an end-stopping kind of term, one which forbids the raising
> of further questions. Either human actions are explicable, in which case they
> cannot be evil; or they are evil, in which case there is nothing more to be
> said about them. (8)

Although *On Evil* is a valuable summary of the problematic semantic function of the word evil in

contemporary discourse, Eagleton never truly moves beyond the initial impasse he articulates.

Explainability prevents labeling something as evil and, at the same time, labeling something as evil

prevents its explanation. Either human actions are explicable, in which case they cannot be evil, or

else they are simply evil—in which case there is nothing more to be said about them, *de malum non est

disputandum.* Evil is thus a classical embodiment of Wittgenstein's "whereof one cannot speak" (82);

it is a situation that demands silence. Of course, nothing could be further from the communicative

ethics articulated by Sartre, which depends on the courage—and perhaps also on the violence—of

declaring certain kinds of Otherness to be intolerable.

Drawing primarily from its literary embodiments, Eagleton attempts to bypass the

explainable/unspeakable hurdle by defining evil as a kind of ontological opposition to being-as-such.

To be properly called by the word, evil must be so absolutely sovereign—in Bataille's sense of the

term—so as to oppose existence with a Kantian purity, "apart from any concept" (150). Evil must

depend on nothing; it must serve nothing. The potential problem is that this idea of evil borders on

the self-defeatingly narrow. It is so extreme that evil is defined almost completely out of existence.

Eagleton has a hard enough time locating evil in literature. Shakespeare's Iago comes closest, but

even Iago is somewhat motivated by envy and therefore not quite radically evil enough. It is as almost as though the word evil itself was sacred, some magical taboo (somewhat akin, again, to Marco Polo's Venice). So long as we remain silent or reticent—so long as we never resort to calling anything evil—we will not lose evil as an epistemological category. The word evil can remain rooted at the absolute end of a spectrum and be kept forever outside the cycle of difference-based meaning creation, rooted motionless "at the still point of the turning world" (Eliot, "Burnt Norton").

The closest Eagleton comes to identifying a historical instance of evil is the Holocaust. He dwells on just how exceptional the Holocaust is with respect to the other horrors of the 20th century, but ultimately seems to distort these events in order to make them fit his own definition of evil. Indeed, nothing could be more reminiscent of a purely political distinction *a là* Schmitt; Eagleton decides specifically *who* the evil people are and then tailors the concept of evil to fit a certain identity. Just look at the kind of distinction he attempts to draw between Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Mao Tse-Tsung:

> The state butcheries of Stalin and Mao disposed of many more individuals. The Holocaust was unusual because the rationality of modern political states is in general an instrumental one, geared to the achievement of specific ends. It is astonishing, then, to find a kind of monstrous *acte gratuit*, a genocide for the sake of genocide, an orgy of extermination apparently for the hell of it […]. Stalin and Mao massacred for a reason. For the most part, there was a brutal kind of rationality behind their murders. This does not make their actions less heinous or culpable than those of the Nazis. (96-97)

The fact that Stalin and Mao massacred to serve an ideology (and not just any ideology, but one that the Marxist critic Eagleton sees as participating in some form of rationality) prevents them being evil in the purely sovereign sense of the word. It becomes a matter of semantic distinctions without a difference: Stalin and Mao are "heinous" and "culpable," yes, but they are not "evil."

But hasn't Eagleton simply fallen at the first hurdle? By emphasizing its singularity and irrationality, Eagleton pointedly refuses to engage with the explicability of the Holocaust, with its own brutally rational instrumentality. In doing, so he causes the Holocaust to function as the

Wittgensteinian unspeakable: "an end-stopping kind of term, one which forbids the raising of further questions" (8). It is thus kept outside of the domain of discernment. Emphasizing its singularity and irrationality is a way to deny its repeatability, or to deny that something equally demanding of rejection could exist in the present. Accordingly, it functions as a denial of the kind of linguistic practice advocated by Sartre. The existence of the Nazi enemy was, for Eagleton, a singular event. Sartre's linguistic Utopia of the engaged artist was a short-lived phenomenon indeed.

Eagleton, in denying all rationality or instrumentality to the Holocaust in order to call it evil, ignores the fact that so many real historical individuals *were* seduced. As such, he fails to link his concept of rationality to a version of ethics rooted in the intersubjective agreement of a distinct action group. There is a certain communicative concept of reason that allows any form of action, however monstrous or laudable it may be, to galvanize the collaboration of individuals. The idea of a vast number of individuals collaborating in a monstrous *acte gratuit*, a genocide just for the hell of it, is absurd on its face. There was an idea of order behind it, and it was an idea that many people believed in. Hatred is nearly always all-too explicable. Despite this—indeed because of this—it must be possible to reject even ideas that enjoy a kind of rational justification, or even widespread support. The identification of friends and enemies may, at times, be necessary, but it cannot be left to democratic consensus. History has shown time again that large groups of people—or at least significant, meaningful action groups—are quite capable of choosing the wrong enemy. This may be, strictly speaking, a profoundly undemocratic opinion, but I believe there are people who know better.

Indeed, there are people whose job it is to know better: they are called humanists. Certainly humanism has been, historically speaking, far from innocent in this regard. There is no claim of innocence to be found in the present chapter. My position, however, is this: just as exposure to fiction has been shown to develop the skills of empathy (for example, Kidd and Castano 2013), it

might be seen as a training ground for discernment. Reading, discussing, and interpreting art may help people develop an ethical consciousness, one capable of making decisions about who is an enemy, who is a friend, and who is a scapegoat. Moreover, it can teach us to recognize how such arguments are being framed as well as how language does (and is intended to) alter perceptions of reality. At stake here is the function of words, symbols, and images to draw lines, make distinctions, and articulate difference. Eagleton's book—and any discussion of evil for that matter—boils down to base-level questions about the relationship between signifiers and signified, between art and the impetus, between names and the things they name.

Functionally, calling a spade a spade or a cat a cat is no different than calling a fascist a fascist, calling a terrorist a terrorist, or naming evil as such. True, labeling evil requires a greater degree of courage and implies a higher threshold of debatability, but the same structure is always in play. There is a space between the word and the thing, and applying the label is a form of action in the world—one that has tangible ethical consequences. It is a serious error, Sartre reminds us again, "to think that the word is a gentle breeze which plays lightly over the surface of things, which grazes them without altering them" (22). "To speak is to act," Sartre says, "anything which one names is already no longer quite the same; it has lost its innocence" (22). But the fact that naming is transgressive—and potentially quite often harmful—does not mean it is not also *necessary*. Such is the Pact of Geryon.

Naming, since it participates in both welcome and exclusion, is the perfect embodiment of Derrida's *pas d'hospitalité*: a French phrase encompassing two opposite meanings, "step of hospitality" and "no hospitality." The name exists at the border between "conditioned hospitality"—which is generally granted to a named subject on the basis of a rule or obligation deriving from his or her unique identity—and the law of "absolute hospitality," which greets Otherness according to a kind of Levinasian non-violence akin to the medical principle of *primum*

non nocere. Conditioned hospitality, on the other hand, is political in Schmitt's understanding of the term. It demands concrete, practical identity—it demands to know who everyone is—so as to be able to divide them between those to whom hospitality is granted (friends) and those to whom it is refused (enemies). In order for hospitality to be absolute, in order to do no harm, it must break with conditioned hospitality by dispensing with all naming: "Let us say yes to who or what turns up, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any identification" (Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 77, Trans. Rachel Bowlby).

But can the absolutely hospitable host say anything except yes? If naming never leaves a thing unaltered, does absolute hospitality to Otherness lead to inevitable silence? This is precisely the quasi-Levinasian ethical rule that Sartre rejected: the goal of the previous generation was "to save everybody" and they thereby ushered in a world in which "everything would be tolerated, even intolerance" (216). This is nature the critique of Derridean absolute hospitality voiced by the Irish philosopher Richard Kearney:

> The problem with [Derrida's] analysis of hospitality is, I fear, that it undervalues our need to differentiate not just legally but ethically between good and evil aliens. It downgrades—without denying—our legitimate duty to try to distinguish between benign and malign strangers […] by relegating the requirement of ethical judgement to a matter of selective and calculating legislation invariably compromised by injustice and violence. After all, if hospitality were to be absolutely just, all incoming others without exception would be undecidable—and as such worthy of welcome. (70)

To be fair to Derrida—and Kearney, like many others, is frequently quite unfair to Derrida—I should point out that his concept of absolute hospitality is introduced not as an ideal model to be emulated but as a Utopian concept bracketed by its own impossibility and self-contradiction, as a ~~hospitality~~ *sous-rature* or a hospitality which, like true democracy, is perpetually "to come." *Primum non nocere*, absolute hospitality is the only response to Otherness that could be called innocent because it is the only response that is prior to the inhospitality of selecting, grouping, and naming.

It is also, in this sense, prior to ethics. It is therefore unethical at its very core. It lies, in equal measure, outside of violence and outside of ethics.*Primum non nocere*, absolute hospitality demands that the first response to all otherness be "Yes." This leaves little space to communicate the values of the self; absolute hospitality permits no true communication of values. To quote again from Bataille, "communication can only take place on one condition—that we resort to Evil, that is to say to violation of the law" (202). I would hasten to add (and I believe even Derrida would agree with me) that the first law which must be violated in order to communicate anything of ethical value is the law of absolute hospitality. The effective truth of the situation is that everyone speaks from a certain point and time, a certain intellectual *patria*: from the ever-shifting native city of the mind. And such a position is not neutral. It is "prejudiced" in the most literal sense possible. Subjectivity— much like literature—is guilty, and should admit itself so.

But just because subjectivity is guilty does not mean that it should be incapable of rejection; this does not mean that it can or should abstain from ethics. It should be wary of its own categories, and recognize that praxis, getting things done, involves a transgression that must be carefully balanced against its intended goal. The power to call a spade a spade is the same as the power to call the enemy the enemy, to call a terrorist a terrorist, and to name evil as such. And all of this matters. What the work of art can do—and indeed what the function of criticism must be in the 21st Century—is teach us how to use language, and what the implications of language are.

Paradoxically, it is precisely because language is so fragile that it can be so powerful, and so dangerous. Although an increasingly post-factual global politics argues this point every day with exceptional urgency, it is certainly not a new insight. Consider, for example, the way that the relationship between language and power is articulated by Alessandro Manzoni in *I promessi sposi*. The novel is truly polyglot in nature. It is filled with the 17th Century prose found in the manuscript of the *anonimo*, the outdated legalese of the many proclamations or *gride*, as well as the many voices of

179

Manzoni's frequently intrusive narrator and his cast of characters. Language is also a driving force behind plot and character relationships. After all, Renzo and Lucia, the titular "betrothed," are bound together by the language of a promise as they await the most powerful of performative utterances: holy matrimony.

Working more than half a century before Ferdinand de Saussure, it might be argued that Manzoni had quite a modern conception of language as an arbitrary system. Although expressed in more typically Romantic terminology, Manzoni appeared to be well aware, for example, of the distance separating signifier and signified. As Augustus Pallotta puts it, "Words do not embody ideas, they only function as necessary vehicles of ideas." (341). Inherent in this statement there is a certain difficulty. Words must be used to express ideas, but are themselves quite difficult to control. Manzoni himself said that words are, at times, "the most reluctant and intractable of all things" (*La rivoluzione* 76. My translation).[144] According to Mary Ambrose, Manzoni's conception of the divine nature of language is tempered by his awareness of how language is modified through usage. "Language is indeed given by God," she explains, "but the idea though necessarily expressed through the word, is not identical with it. The relationship between sign and concept is arbitrary and the evolution of language depends on that complex of arbitrary, even casual forces called usage" (63). Accordingly, usage is a domain of human practice that is subject to the operations of power. To put it another way, the use of words, in terms of what they mean as well as who they name and control, can be made to serve the interests of powerful people, classes, and institutions. At the risk of belaboring the point, this means that words themselves can become instruments of power: naming can be exclusionary, repressive, or even empowering.

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[144] "le più ritrose e intrattabili delle cose" (Manzoni, *La rivoluzione…* 76)

Manzoni's fundamental linguistic stance in the *Promessi sposi* is words must be clear and precise in order to most effectively express the ideas they contain. Perhaps unwittingly, however, the novel seems to imply a bit more. Whether deliberately or not, Manzoni's novel articulates a conception of language in which meaning is constantly subject to the whims and wishes of those with physical or political power. This is primarily expressed through the character of Renzo, one of the novel's invented lower-class protagonists, who gradually learns how power can manipulate meaning. Consequentially, Renzo discovers when it is appropriate for a peasant like him to speak and when, instead, he is far better off simply keeping his mouth shut.[145]

Renzo learns that, in terms of everyday usage, the meaning of words is relative. As such, words can be controlled and manipulated by those with power—whether this is physical, political, economic power or simply sufficient linguistic power. Accordingly, one of the most important lessons that Renzo learns is the pragmatic importance of reticence. He discovers that, by reducing the ambiguity of language (whether by speaking with great precision or by saying very little at all), speakers can minimize the malleability of their own utterances. In other words, they can attempt to reduce to possibility for deliberate or unwitting misunderstanding. Words do not possess objective, universal meanings and values. Instead, their meaning and effect vary in accordance to the will and power of both speaker and listener.

The non-correspondence between words and ideas in the *Promessi sposi* is perhaps best expressed by Renzo's epigrammatic realization at the very end of the novel, *le parole fanno un effetto in bocca e un altro negli orecchi*:

> [W]ords make one effect when they go out of the mouth, and quite another one when they come in at the ear; and he got a lot more into the habit of

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[145] Several critics—including, notably, Gregory Lucente—have characterized the novel as a kind of linguistic *Bildungsroman* centered around the fictional character of Lorenzo Tramaglino.

listening to the sound of his remarks inside his own head, before he opened his lips.[146] (Manzoni, *IPS* 718. Trans. Bruce Penman)

The almost folksy expression of these words—which is quite well suited for Renzo's character—may belie the full relevance of this realization. Renzo's aphorism is an elegant expression of the relativity of language: the recognition that the intention with which words are spoken need not correspond to how they are understood.[147] His reaction however, is not despair at the fragility of language, but rather the development of certain calculated shrewdness or *furbizia* in his speech. Indeed, what Renzo appears to realize is that it takes great care to speak without misleading the listener or being misunderstood, that if one wishes to be understood correctly it is necessary to take a long hard look at words and to look at them from the perspective of the listener (or reader) rather than the speaker (or writer).

The quintessential embodiment of the shrewd speaker in *I promessi sposi* is, without question, the lawyer Azzeccagarbugli. This "unraveler of knots" (as his name signifies) is a master of the deceitful manipulation of language for practical purposes. Although ostensibly a peripheral character, he is among the most important figures in Renzo's linguistic education, akin to a kind of devil on his left shoulder. In addition to Azzeccagarbugli, the 17th Century legal edicts known as *le gride* similarly express the deeply problematic consequences of ambiguous and arbitrary language, as well as the dangers of excess or non-reticence in language. These proclamations are so voluminous, so excessively wordy and detailed, that they create ambiguities and loopholes within them. As a

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[146] "Allora s'accorse che le parole fanno un effetto in bocca, e un altro negli orecchi; e prese un po' più d'abitudine d'ascoltar di dentro le sue, prima di proferirle." (671)

[147] Indeed, it is reminiscent, in the context of "The Pact of Geryon," of Pirandello's image of the word as a begger waiting at an uncrossable door, or of the Father's famous speech in *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*: "But can't you see all the trouble lies here! In the words! All of us have a world full of things inside us, each of us his own world of things! And how can we understand one another, sir, if in the words I speak I put the meaning and the value of things as I see them, while the one who listens inevitably takes them according to the meaning and the value which he has in himself of the world he has inside of *himself*. We think we understand each other; we never understand one another." (*Six Characters… and Other Plays* 19)

result, the *gride* become instruments utilized by the powerful to serve their own ends and, ironically, only truly restrict the lives of the powerless they were designed to protect:

> For the forces of the law gave no protection to the tranquil, inoffensive type of man, who had no other means of inspiring fear in anyone else. We do not mean that there was any lack of laws with penalties directed against private acts of violence. There was a glut of such laws in point of fact. The various crimes were listed and described and detailed in the most minute and long-winded manner. […] But in spite of all this—indeed largely because of it—those proclamations, repeated in ever stronger terms by each successive government, only serve to provide a pompous demonstration of the impotence of their authors. […] With the appearance of each proclamation designed to repress men of violence, those concerned searched among their practical resources for the most suitable fresh methods of continuing to do what the edicts prohibited. What the proclamations could do was to put stumbling-blocks in the way of simple folk, who had no special power of their own nor protection from others, and harass them at every step they took. For the proclamations were framed with the object of keeping everybody under control, in order to prevent or punish every sort of crime; and so they subjected every action of the private citizen to the arbitrary will of all kinds of officials. But anyone who took steps before committing a crime to provide himself with a refuge in a monastery, or in a palace, where the police would never dare to set foot; anyone who, without other precautions, wore a livery that ensured him the support of the pride and interests of a powerful family, or of a whole class, had a free hand to do what he liked, and to laugh at all the stir created by the edicts.[148] (*IPS* 35-36)

Legal language too has one effect in the mouth and quite another in the ear. The practical effects of the *gride* do not depend on their wording, or even on the intentions of their authors, but on the will of their interpreters. Like any artist, the writer of the *gride* loses control of his words the moment

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[148] "La forza legale non proteggeva in alcun conto l'uomo tranquillo, inoffensivo, e che non avesse altri mezzi di far paura altrui. Non già che mancassero leggi e pene contro le violenze private. Le leggi anzi diluviavano; i delitti erano enumerati, e particolareggiati, con minuta prolissità […]. Con tutto ciò, anzi in gran parte a cagion di ciò, quelle gride, ripubblicate e rinforzate di governo in governo, non servivano ad altro che ad attestare ampollosamente l'impotenza de' loro autori […]. [A] ogni minaccia, e a ogni insulto, adoperar nuovi sforzi e nuove invenzioni, per conservarsi. Così accadeva in effetto; e, all'apparire delle gride dirette a comprimere i violenti, questi cercavano nella loro forza reale i nuovi mezzi più opportuni, per continuare a far ciò che le gride venivano a proibire. Potevan ben esse inceppare a ogni passo, e molestare l'uomo bonario, che fosse senza forza propria e senza protezione; perché, col fine d'aver sotto la mano ogni uomo, per prevenire o per punire ogni delitto, assoggettavano ogni mossa del privato al volere arbitrario d'esecutori d'ogni genere. Ma chi, prima di commettere il delitto, aveva prese le sue misure per ricoverarsi a tempo in un convento, in un palazzo, dove i birri non avrebber mai osato metter piede; chi, senz'altre precauzioni, portava una livrea che impegnasse a difenderlo la vanità e l'interesse d'una famiglia potente, di tutto un ceto, era libero nelle sue operazioni, e poteva ridersi di tutto quel fracasso delle gride." (Manzoni *IPS* 16-17)

they are put on the page. At that point, control transfers to the reader, the interpreter. So that even if intended by their authors to protect the weak, the *gride* become weapons to be used against the powerless. The reason, as Renzo and the reader will learn, is that *la penna hanno loro*, "they're the ones with the pen." Only the powerful have the ability to manipulate and interpret the law.

Indeed, if laws were written, as Renzo had previously imagined, in *sacrosante parole* things would be different. When Renzo first visits Azzeccagarbugli, he still believes in this kind of idealized, transparent language: "While the Doctor was reading, Renzo ran his eye slowly along the words of the text, trying to extract their precise meaning, and taking special heed of those golden phrases [*sacrosante parole*] which seemed to promise him help" (66).[149] Renzo's great naiveté is that he believes in a one-to-one correspondence between wording of the law and the effect of the law. It is the same correspondence that Renzo, in the speech he gives after the bread riot in Milan, insists must be established: *dove dice prigione, prigione; dove dice galera, galera* (243). The *gride* should be followed to the letter, so that where it says prison it has to *mean* prison.[150] It is certainly reminiscent of Sartre's demand that, to restore language in its dignity, one must call a spade a spade. But who determines what a spade is? Presumably, the concrete identity of a spade is determined by the gardener, in other words, by the one who has the power to physically pick it up as a tool.

Renzo's conversation with Azzeccagarbugli explodes any idealized notion the law is written in unchangeable, unbreakable words that exist outside of human history. In reality, the letter of the law and the effect of the law are separated by social and linguistic power. Thus, as Azzeccagarbugli points out, the meaning of the law does not depend on truth, justice, reason nor even words, but power: "If you really know your way around the proclamations […] there's no such thing as guilty,

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[149] "Mentre il dottore leggeva, Renzo gli andava dietro lentamente con l'occhio, cercando di cavar il costrutto chiaro, e di mirar proprio *quelle sacrosante parole*, che gli parevano dover esser il suo aiuto." (Manzoni *IPS* 46)

[150] "Bisogna che […] faccian le cose conforme dicon le gride; e formare un buon processo addosso a tutti quelli che hanno commesso di quelle bricconerie; *e dove dice prigione, prigione; dove dice galera, galera*" […]. (Manzoni *IPS* 243)

and no such thing as innocent" (68).[151] As such, language is certainly not immune from Don

Abbondio's diagnosis of the *seicento*: "It's not a question of right or wrong, it's a question of power"

(53).[152] Much like the *gride* which lost all efficacy by virtue of being so voluminous, Azzeccagarbugli

suggests that creating ambiguity within words can be a source of great power. In other words, the

power to use words often involves a kind of intentional linguistic obfuscation. Azzeccagarbugli

makes this phrase by comparing the priest to a kind of duplicitous confessor:

> Listen, my boy, a man who lies to his lawyer is a fool—a big enough fool to
> tell the truth to the judge. It's your job to tell us the plain facts; it's our job to
> confuse the issue. If you want me to help you, you must tell me the whole
> story, from A to Z, as truthfully as you'd tell it to your confessor.[153] (67)

Even a corrupt lawyer acknowledges the possibility of plain speech. Renzo must first speak clearly; it

will then be the task of the lawyer to confuse things. Unfortunately, the young man's attempts to talk

to Azzeccagarbugli result in a kind of speech that is anything but clear.

Perhaps due to his perceived social and linguistic inferiority, Renzo's speech is unnecessarily

complicated and indirect; he adopts an overly deferential, indirect mode of discourse that only serves

to frustrate the lawyer rather than communicating the necessary information. His hesitation is far

more perceptible in the original language, so I will cite the Italian here in the main text:

> Vorrei dirle una parola […] Vorrei sapere da lei che ha studiato […] Lei m'ha
> da scusare […] vorrei dunque sapere […] Mi scusi, signor dottore. Vorrei
> sapere se, a minacciare un curato, perché non faccia un matrimonio, c'è
> penale. (*IPS* 44)

Renzo's indirectness is perhaps most evident in his final phrase, which is chopped into tiny clauses

creating a garbled, circular effect: "I would like to know if, in threating a priest, so that he doesn't

perform a marriage, there is a penalty." Naturally, the lawyer has no idea what he is talking about.

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[151] "a saper ben maneggiare le gride, nessuno è reo, e nessuno è innocente." (Manzoni *IPS* 48)

[152] "Non si tratta di torto o di ragione; si tratta di forza." (Manzoni *IPS* 34)

[153] "All'avvocato bisogna raccontar le cose chiare: a noi tocca poi a imbrogliarle" […] (Manzoni *IPS* 48).

There is no context. Renzo doesn't say anything about why he is asking the question. It is also theoretical, removed from the facts of Renzo's situation and referring therefore to a pure relationship of words. In confronting this passage, the reader's experience resembles a kind of knot-unraveling as they struggle through the mode of expression in order to arrive at the meaning of the sentence. The listener, Azzeccagarbugli, never arrives at that meaning, and mistakes the situation entirely. He assumes that Renzo is the threatener rather than the threatened, that he is asking how to avoid punishment rather than how to punish someone else.

Renzo's indirectness and hesitation before Azzeccagarbugli becomes even more apparent when compared to an earlier exchange with Don Abbondio. In each situation, Renzo's purpose is to obtain information. With Don Abbondio, however, he does not express this desire as *vorrei dunque sapere* ("So I would like to know") but rather as *dunque parli* ("So speak."). He is direct, forceful, and without affected formality. Moreover, it is not his words alone, but Renzo's menacing physical presence—his own power—that contributes to the effectiveness of his speech-act:

> "So speak."
> The word "so" came out with such violence, and Renzo's expression grew so threatening, that Don Abbondio had to give up all thought of resistance.[154]
> (52, Translation altered).

As Lucente explains, "By his directness and the strength of his will, he has forced the necessary information out of Don Abbondio, cutting through the haze of the timorous priest's obfuscations and 'latinorum' (55). Renzo's body language (or perhaps the sheer fact of his physical, bodily power and the potential for violence it implies) causes the message to be understood, to achieve its desired effect. Unlike his confused speech with Azzeccagarbugli, this clear speech is a felicitous example of a performative speech-act, in the sense described by J.L. Austin. His words fully achieve their desired

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[154] «Dunque parli.»
Quel «dunque» fu proferito con una tale energia, l'aspetto di Renzo divenne così minaccioso, che don Abbondio non poté più nemmen supporre la possibilità di disubbidire. (Manzoni *IPS* 33)

effect. Undoubtedly, Renzo feels more at home—and more able to assert his own power—in conversing with his hometown priest rather than meeting with Azzeccagarbugli in a fancy lawyer's office.

But Renzo must, as Azzeccagarbugli puts it, "learn how to speak" if he is to acquire increased political and cultural capital. According to Lucente, "the passport that permits passage from one level of society toward the next […] is language" (55). Such a lesson is underscored by the presence of economic language in this episode. When Renzo excuses his poor speech, he does so as a symptom of his economic class, "we're poor people who don't know how to talk properly" (63).[155] The economic undertones are also present in Azzeccagarbugli's response: "You can use that sort of language with your own friends, who don't know how to measure their words; but don't come and talk like that to a respectable man, who's knows what they are worth […] Learn how to talk properly! (69, Translation altered).[156] Azzeccagarbugli's choice of verbs—he speaks of knowing how to "measure" words (*misurare*) and knowing how much they are "worth" (*quanto valgono*)—lends them a numeric, economic value. From the lips of Azzeccagarbugli, "learn how to talk properly!" is an economics lesson. Renzo must learn the value of words; he must learn how to measure them. He must, in other other words, learn the potential value of reticence.

But Renzo, judging by his behavior in the bread riots in Milan, Renzo initially reaches very much the wrong conclusion. Instead of reticence, he places his trust in a naïve kind of linguistic populism:

> The things he had seen that day had convinced him that, from that time on,
> all you needed to get any idea put into practice was that it should appeal

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[155] "noi altri poveri non sappiamo parlar bene" (Manzoni *IPS* 44)

[156] "Fate di questi discorsi tra voi altri, che non sapete misurar le parole; e non venite a farli con un galantuomo che sa quanto valgono […]. Imparate a parlare. (Manzoni *IPS* 49-50)

strongly to the crowd in the streets. "Gentlemen! […] shall I give you my humble opinion?"[157] (265)

One thing leads to another, and eventually a drunken Renzo begins ranting about his legal and linguistic Utopia in a local osteria, the *Luna piena*. Central to Renzo's thesis is that language must be separated from power. The proclamations must be enforced as written so that they apply to the weak and the strong in equal measure. Renzo describes a true revolution of the word that would establish the law, perhaps for the first time, as a set of *sacrosante parole*. In such a law, predictable effects flow from its words with the certainty of an ineluctable, almost mathematical logic: *dove dice prigione, prigione; dove dice galera, galera* (243). He even alludes to his experience with Azzeccagarbugli, suggesting that lawyers must be forced to listen to the poor and to speak in defense of reason.[158]

But how exactly will these changes come about? How can this linguistic Utopia be established? Ironically, Renzo's plan rests on invoking the intervention of a powerful man—specifically the Grand Chancellor Antonio Ferrer who had proved so effective the previous day in breaking up the bread riots. In a famous line, the cowardly priest Don Abbondio offers this definition of politics in the 17th century: *non si tratta di torto o di ragione, si tratta di forza*—"It is not a question of right or wrong, it is a question of power." This idea is, presumably, quite anathema to Manzoni's entire worldview. But does Renzo's linguistic education ultimately support Don Abbondio's thesis or call it into question? This is one of the central paradoxes of language and power in *I promessi sposi*: it can be read as suggesting something quite troubling in terms of the democracy of language. Although there is certainly a critique of the extent to which the powerful control language, there is no corresponding critique of the deeply unequal division of power that

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[157] "E persuaso, per tutto ciò che aveva visto in quel giorno, che ormai, per mandare a effetto una cosa, bastasse farla entrare in grazia a quelli che giravano per le strade, signori miei! – gridò, in tono d'esordio: – devo dire anch'io il mio debol parere?" (Manzoni *IPS* 241)

[158] "E ordinare a' dottori che stiano a sentire i poveri e parlino in difesa della ragione" (Manzoni *IPS* 243).

permits such control. Unsurprisingly, Manzoni's novel remains ultimately rather conservative in this regard. It is continually tethered to a kind of Manichean battle between the powerful speakers who are presented as evil (the *gride*, Don Rodrigo, an unreformed Innominato) and powerful speakers who are presented as good (Padre Cristoforo, Federico Borromeo, a reformed Innominato, etc.).

This is never more clear than in the case of the Innominato who—in the terminology of Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folk Tale*—transforms from the powerful "villain" who abducts Lucia at the beginning of the novel to the powerful "helper" who eventually facilitates her wedding to Renzo at the end of the work. But the Innominato's conversion, which amounts to a complete reversal of the message or content of his speech, ultimately has absolutely no effect on his power or impact as a speaker. By turning to the path of righteousness, he has not become more persuasive or more convincing. The moral content of speech does not matter. What matters is the position of power from which he speaks. Consider, for example, how his group of bravoes and thugs reacts when he completely changes his instructions for them:

> "My lads! The road along which we have been travelling up to now leads to the depths of Hell! […] God in his mercy has summoned me to change my life, and I am going to change it—I have changed it already. […] I release all of you from the evil orders that I have given you—you understand me. I forbid you to carry them out. Hold this for certain too, that none of you, from now on, will ever be able to do wrong with my protection, or in my service. […] Tomorrow morning I shall call you before me, one by one, and hear your answers. And then I shall give you fresh orders. […]" Here he finished, and all of them were silent. […] These men were accustomed to accept the Unnamed's voice as the manifestation of a will which could not be gainsaid; and there were no traces of weakening about that voice, as it announced these changes in the objectives to which that will would in future be addressed. It never even occurred to any of them that it might be possible, now that he was converted, to take advantage of the fact and answer him back as if he were an ordinary man. They saw him as a saint, but as one of those saints whom we see depicted with head held high and sword in hand.[159] (456-457)

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[159] «Figliuoli! La strada per la quale siamo andati finora, condudce nel fondo dell'inferno. […] Dio misericordioso m'ha chiamato a mutar vita; e io la muterò, l'ho già mutata […]. Levo a ognun di voi gli ordini scellerati che avete da me; voi m'intendete; anzi vi comando di non far nulla di ciò che v'era comandato. E tenete per fermo ugualmente, che nessuno,

The Innominato presumably now speaks on the side of righteousness, but this has nothing to do with his persuasiveness or the source of his authority, which still comes from his position within the social hierarchy: "now they saw in him the wonder and the idol of the multitude, so that he still towered above everyone else—not in the same way as before, but to no less an extent. He still stood apart from the common herd, was still their chief" (457).[160] The force behind his words is decidedly not his newfound sanctity; it is the sword. It is not enough to be right; one needs to be right with a sword in hand, *con la spada in pugno*. So is Don Abbondio correct after all? Is power more important than righteousness even on the level of performative speech?

Returning to Lucente's image, Manzoni conceives of linguistic power not as a revolutionary bomb, but as a kind of passport between classes. Moreover, it permits passage between levels of society "without destroying either the hierarchical levels themselves or the privileges they protect" (Lucente 55). Renzo's crucial mistake in Milan is that he attacks established political power structures rather than trying to work from within them. This sentiment is well-expressed by the innkeeper at the *Luna piena*: "What an idiot the man must be! He sees a few people going around stirring up a bit of a riot, and he gets it into his head that the whole world is going to be changed overnight" (285).[161] While the merits of Renzo's proposal for a new linguistic order are debatable, it is undeniable that his speech is ineffective. As the wine flows, so do Lorenzo Tramaglino's words.

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da qui avanti, potrà far del male con la mia protezione, al mio servizio.[…] domattina vi chiamerò, a uno a uno, a darmi la risposta; e allora vi darò nuovi ordini.» Qui finì, e tutto rimase in silenzio. Per quanto vari e tumultosi fossero i pensieri che ribollivano in que' cervellacci, non ne apparve di fuori nessun segno. Erano avvezzi a prender la voce del loro signore come la manifestazione d'una volontà con la quale non c'era da ripetere: e quella voce, annunziando che la volontà era mutata, non dava punto indizio che fosse indebolita. A nessuno di loro passò neppur per la mente che, per esser lui convertito, si potesse prendergli il sopravvento, rispondergli come a un altr'uomo. (Manzoni *IPS* 424).

[160] "Di maniera che, nell'uomo che avevan sempre riguardato, per dir così, di basso in alto, anche quando loro medesimi erano in gran parte la sua forza, vedevano ora la maraviglia, l'idolo d'una moltitudine; lo vedevano al di sopra degli altri, ben diversamente di prima, ma non meno; sempre fuori della schiera comune, sempre capo." (Manzoni *IPS* 424)

[161] "E tu, pezzo d'asino, per aver visto un po' di gente in giro a far baccano, ti sei cacciato in testa che il mondo abbia a mutarsi." (Manzoni *IPS* 261).

He fails to measure them and forgets what they are worth. He also forgets something he had learned earlier—*che le parole fanno un effetto in bocca e un altro negli orecchi*—that there is some distance between the words as he intends them (their effect "in the mouth") and the way they are used and understood by others (their effect "in the ear").

Like the flood of words in the *gride*, Renzo's speech creates a deluge of signifiers that can be weaponized by opposing forces and turned against him. He appears to have forgotten that the same problem he is railing against—the fact that the ambiguity of the laws makes it such that they ensnare the poor while the rich are allowed break them with impunity—is one that applies to him personally and in that moment. Renzo explains the situation perfectly while failing to heed his own warning:

> "It's a strange thing," he cried, "that all our masters, who rule the world, want to bring paper, pen and ink into everything! Pens, pens, pens! Those gentlemen must have them on the brain!" […] But now I'll tell you the real reason,' added Renzo. "It's because the pen stays in their hands; and so the words they say fly away and disappear, while if a poor man says anything, they're listening carefully, and they catch it in mid-air with their pen, and stick his words down on paper to be used later on."[162] (274)

This *penna* is a powerful image, indicating that the powerful defend the established social order by manipulating the language of the law—or perhaps by hiding behind an undemocratic language like Latin. Renzo continues:

> "And then they've another trick—when they want to muddle a poor working lad, who's never studied, but has a bit of… of… of… I know what I'm trying to say, now"—and, to make himself clear, he prodded and battered his forehead with the tip of one finger—"if they see that he's beginning to work out what they're up to, why, the next thing is that they start using Latin words, and make him lose the thread, and muddle his ideas. That sort of thing has got to stop!"[163] (274)

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[162] "Ma la ragione giusta la dirò io, – soggiunse Renzo: – è perché la penna la tengon loro: e così, le parole che dicon loro, volan via, e spariscono; le parole che dice un povero figliuolo, stanno attenti bene, e presto presto le infilzan per aria, con quella penna, e te le inchiodano sulla carta, per servirsene, a tempo e luogo." (Manzoni *IPS* 250)

[163] "Hanno poi un'altra malizia; che, Quando vogliono imbrogliare un povero figliuolo, che non abbia studiato, ma che abbia un po' di… so io quell che voglio dire… – e, per farsi intendere, andava picchiando, e come arietando la fronte con la punta dell'indice; – e s'accorgono che comincia a capir l'imbroglioo, taffete, buttan dentro nel discorso qualche

"All the elements of Manzoni's profoundest convictions about the word, written and spoken, are present by implication in this passage," argues Mary Ambrose, "unambiguous language in the furtherance of truth, learning and the mastery of the word for the guidance and illumination of others" (67). But while constructing his linguistic Utopia, Renzo loses control of his own speech and has to resort to tapping himself on the forehead to convey, well, who knows what exactly? There is a tremendous ambiguity in this scene that stems from the disconnect between what Renzo says—which, as Ambrose suggests, is seemingly so consistent with Manzoni's own conception of language—and the context in which the words are said, by a rabble-rousing Renzo naively insisting that the whole world must change. This linguistic Utopia is expressed by a Renzo who rambles semi-incoherently about the need to speak clearly at all times.

When Renzo is captured, however, he frees himself with a piece of speech that is far more measured, although perhaps at the cost of being less honest:

> "Friends!" he cried. "Friends and brothers! They're taking me to prison because I shouted for bread and justice yesterday! I haven't done anything at all! I'm a good citizen [*galantuomo*]. Help me! Don't desert me, brothers!"[164] (297)

Renzo knows very well how much these words are worth. Not a word is wasted here and they are all used to maximum effect. His language is oversimplified and manipulative—almost Trumpified, in fact. His first and last words are identical, *figliuoli*: an affectionate, familial address designed to engage the emotions of the listeners and a proper employment of the populist lesson of the bread riots. With great concision, Renzo identifies his situation in four words: *Mi menano in prigione*. Seven words suffice to tell the reason: *perché ieri ho gridato: pane e giustizia*. This is true, but obviously does not tell

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parola in latino, per fargli perdere il filo, per confondergli la testa. Basta: se ne deve smettere dell'usanze!" (Manzoni *IPS* 250)

[164] "Figliuoli! Mi menano in prigione perché ieri ho gridato: pane e giustizia. Non ho fatto nulla; son galantuomo: aiutatemi, non m'abbandonate, figliuoli!" (Manzoni *IPS* 273)

the whole story. Renzo's summary of the previous day certainly has a couple glaring, strategically motivated omissions. He had in fact played a fairly active and vociferous role in the previous day's uprising, but he Renzo omits these details, leaving out anything that would separate or differentiate himself from his listeners. Yesterday, presumably all of his listeners had also cried *pane e giustizia*.

Renzo's vast speeches from the previous day are thus reduced to just two words, *pane e giustizia*, which are probably the two most persuasive words he could have chosen for this audience. With just six more words Renzo has established his innocence and testified to the strength of his character: *Non ho fatto nulla; son galantuomo*. Given his recent riot-fomenting behavior, at no other point in the novel did these two statements seem more debatable—at least, presumably, from Manzoni's perspective. Finally, his request is similarly phrased with great directness and economy: *aiutatemi, non m'abbandonate*. In twenty-five words, Renzo accomplishes an extraordinary amount. At least in this instance, he has learned how to talk properly. Azzeccagarbugli might have been proud.

But should Renzo be? Is this an example of effective rhetorical reticence or misleading manipulation? This is a central question in terms of Renzo's linguistic education: does learning to speak well inevitably involve a certain amount of deception? Can you be a powerful speaker without exploiting, as Azzeccagarbugli does, the space between words and ideas? Or without—like Don Rodrigo, the Innominato, or Renzo himself when he threateningly confronts Don Abbondio— deploying power as a form of persuasion? The fact that Renzo and Lucia are illiterate at the start of the novel seems to suggest not only their powerlessness, but also their profound innocence. When Azzeccagarbugli advises Renzo to learn to speak properly, he may be giving sound economic advice, but he can hardly be trusted as a moral authority. It is speech that gets Renzo in so much trouble in Milan, but it is also speech that saves him. Renzo should learn to speak, but he must be careful about how he learns to speak.

It seems that, for Renzo, the ideal use of language lies somewhere between speech and silence. Words are the necessary vehicles of ideas, but can also be dangerous. They can become sources of confusion, weapons for antagonistic forces, and perhaps distractions that lead him astray—forcing him to get revolutionary ideas that are above his station. For Renzo, self-silencing ultimately becomes one of the most important lessons in his linguistic education, expressed at the very end of the novel:

> **RENZO:** I've learned not to get mixed up in riots […] I've learned not to preach at street corners; I've learned to watch who I am talking to: I've learned not to raise my elbow too often. I've learned not to hold door knockers in my hand too long when there are people around who jump to conclusions; I've learned not to tie bells on my ankles without thinking what it might lead to.
> **NARRATOR:** And so on and so on.[165]
> (720, Translation altered. Speaker names added for clarity).

Superbly ironic, the narrator's final addition to Renzo's speech—*E cent'altre cose*, "And so on and so on"—implies that Renzo goes on and on and on about how he has learned to keep his mouth shut. But what lessons, ultimately, should the reader glean from Renzo's linguistic education? More than anything else, the reader is overwhelmed by the negativity of what Renzo outlines. He speaks primarily in negatives: *non mettermi ne' tumulti*, *non predicare in piazza*, *non alzar troppo il gomito*, *non tenere in mano il martello delle porte*, *non attaccarmi un campanello al piede*. (672) His only positive phrase, *guardare con chi parlo*, also reveals itself to be a negative idea. Pay attention to who you're talking to—which is to say don't speak to certain people. These are certainly not lessons that are likely to push Renzo towards the development of class consciousness; this is not the way to learn to speak truth to power by calling existing structures into question.

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[165] «Ho imparato», diceva, «a non mettermi ne' tumulti: ho imparato a non predicare in piazza: ho imparato a guardare con chi parlo: ho imparato a non alzar troppo il gomito: ho imparato a non tenere in mano il martello delle porte, quando c'è lì d'intorno gente che ha la testa calda: ho imparato a non attaccarmi un campanello al piede, prima d'aver pensato quel che possa nascere.» E cent'altre cose. (Manzoni *IPS* 672)

Renzo does, however, learn one very important lesson: he has taken the habit of examining his own speech, and thinking about the effects of his words before speaking. A kind of Pirandellian credo *avant la lettre*, this is one of Renzo's (and perhaps Manzoni's) greatest insights: words have one effect for the speaker, and another for the listener. Words can be weapons for the speaker; they can produce actions and prevent them. Speech can hide the truth behind words, or use them to create understanding between human beings. Words can also be weapons for the listener. And this is precisely because words are *not sacrosanct*. The meanings of words—and, quite often, whether certain perfomative utterances truly produce any effect at all—are dependent on preexisting structures of power. Renzo has learned that he must measure words. He must examine his own words very carefully in order to know exactly how much they are worth. He must make sure to speak clearly, minimizing the chance that he can be misunderstood or misrepresented by the listener. Renzo must silence himself, so as to never be silenced. He has learned that language does not operate independently of power. The pen, it seems, is not mightier than the sword, but merely its constant companion.

CHAPTER FIVE

He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbours."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"Why do they make good neighbours? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.
– Robert Frost, "Mending Wall"

Of Hospitality in *Paisà*: An Ethics of Friends, Enemies, and Allies

Released during the immediate aftermath of World War II in 1946, the neorealist classic

Paisà consists of a series of interactions between cultures at a time when questions about cross-

cultural understanding and cooperation had become quite urgent. Learning how to properly navigate

the ethical and epistemological encounter with the Other had seemingly never been a more pressing

or existential concern. Understood in a certain way, one kind of intolerance—rejection of state-

sponsored military aggression and genocide—defeated another more insidious kind of intolerance.

In this sense, World War II was a warning against the unqualified acceptance of all forms of

Otherness, an object lesson in the necessity of clear ethical discernment in the face of the Other.

Accordingly, the post-war era was a time to reflect upon the proper way to interact with various

forms of Otherness such as those belonging to different nations or different religions. With the

memory of World War II in mind, what is the ethical response to the Other? Who should be

welcomed as friends and who must be rejected as enemies? What is this Otherness I find before me?

How and what do I name it? What categories should I use to understand it?

As I see it, these are the questions that form the vital, beating heart of Roberto Rossellini's

Paisà, a film whose engagement with the ethics of naming starts with the title itself.[166] As explained

by film historian Peter Bondanella:

> *Paisà* is the colloquial form of the word *paisano*, which in Italian means 'countryman,' 'neighbor,' 'kinsman,' even 'friend.' It was typically used by Italians and American soldiers as a friendly greeting, and the implications of its deeper human significance provide the basis for [the] entire film. (69)

Bondanella, however, drifts too far in the direction of the ecumenical, inclusive function of the term

paisano. Millicent Marcus comes closer when she suggests that the term means "*countryman* in the

narrowest geographic sense, in which *country* is understood to mean village or district" (18-19). As

such, the term *paisano* must be understood as equal parts inclusion and exclusion. Calling someone a

countryman implies that there is someone else who is not. After all, as Benedict Anderson reminds

us, "[t]he nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them […] has finite, if elastic,

boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself as coterminous with

mankind" (7). In this respect, the moment in which individuals refer to each other as *paesani* is not

the recognition of a shared humanity. It is the acknowledgement of a shared politics, a declaration

that they have both been arranged on the same side of a friend-enemy grouping. In the context of

World War II, the term *paisano* thus effects a political regrouping organized on the basis of ethics—

the ethics of a common enemy, or shared rejection—rather than on basis what had previously been

understood as the nation.

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[166] Unlike other filmmakers of the era—and unlike many of his collaborators on *Paisà*—Rossellini's own anti-fascist *bona fides* were somewhat questionable. David Forgacs explains: "Rossellini was almost certainly never a committed Fascist, but neither was he one of the anti-Fascist directors and critics, like Visconti, De Santis, Carlo Lizzani, Gianni Puccini, Massimo Mida, Umberto Barbaro, on whom the Fascist police kept files in 1942-43. He was one of those numerous relatively apolitical bourgeois artists and intellectuals who made their compromises with the regime. […] Rossellini was therefore, at the time the regime collapsed in the summer of 1943, a film-maker with a Fascist past who needed to remake himself." (Forgacs 63).

André Bazin famously called *Paisà* "the first film to resemble closely a collection of short stories" (34). Each episode in the film is structured around at least one cross-cultural encounter.[167] Such encounters thus typically include several instances or manifestations of hospitality—or more accurately a Derridian *hostipitality*, a curious admixture of welcome and exclusion, friendliness and enmity. Although it may initially appear to be primarily dedicated to nascent forms of friendship, cooperation, and hospitality, *Paisà* is perhaps even more deeply concerned with the question of rejection. Composed within the immediate memory of Nazi aggression, the film confronts the felt obligation to forcefully reject an Otherness that must be called by name, identified, and remembered.

In so doing, it reactivates the inescapability of the friend-enemy distinction at the heart of the political thought of Carl Schmitt, as discussed in Chapter Four. Schmitt's politics of naming might be understood as one end of a spectrum in terms of possible responses to Otherness. We might locate Jacques Derrida's concept of absolute hospitality, an equally extreme case of Levinasian reverence and non-violence in the face of the Other, at the other end of such a spectrum. Through its many complex stagings of hospitality, *Paisà* dramatizes a vision of ethics as a kind of ground-level negotiation of identities that takes place in a space between pure hospitality and pure enmity. It suggests that ethics can at times depend on the violence of discernment and naming.

The theme of hospitality begins during the film's first episode, which is among the sequences in the film that is most directly linked to the themes of language, power, and naming. At the beginning of the episode, a group of American GIs encounter the Sicilians in their own space, a local village Church. In this respect, the Sicilians play the role of host while the Americans take on

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[167] "In each episode," Bondanella explains, "Italians and their American liberators meet and interact with varying degrees of familiarity and human warmth" (64). *Paisà* dramatizes "six attempts to make contact" (Conley 104) as well as "people struggling to understand one another […] through the false but troublesome divisions of language" (Brunette 65).

the role of guests or *arrivants*, those who arrive. But this dynamic quickly becomes quite complicated

due to a reversal of the standard host-guest power dynamic. Although traditionally it is the host who

is in position of power, these American guests arrive with guns. Consequentially, the Sicilian hosts

are at the mercy of their guests:

> The Sicilians are naturally suspicious of the GIs who are invading their island.
> […] [T]here is at least one citizen who mistakes the GIs for Germans and
> greets them cheerfully. […] The Americans, of course, are justly suspicious of
> the intentions of the Italians (or the "Eyeties," as they call them), because
> Italy and Germany are still allies at this point and Mussolini's government has
> not yet fallen. (Bondanella 69)

The first *pas d'hospitalité* (Derrida's phrase means both "step of hospitality" and "no hospitality") is

the simple matter of identification. The Sicilians must decide who everyone is in a concrete sense.

The new arrivals must be given a name, sorted as American or German, possibly even identified as

friends or enemies. Because one of the American soldiers, Tony Mascali, speaks some Italian, the

two camps manage to establish a verbal line of communication. Perhaps seeking to ingratiate himself

or negate a certain portion of their cultural difference, Tony says that his father is Sicilian and was

born in a town called Gela. At this point a villager named Luca—who, significantly, had previously

welcomed these visitors after misidentifying them as German soldiers—raises an objection. "He's

not from Gela," Luca argues because "There aren't any Mascalis in Gela" (172). An atmosphere of

mistrust is thus introduced through language. Rather than facilitating communication, oral exchange

quickly becomes an impediment to mutual understanding and friendship.

Mistrust does not only flow from Sicilians toward the armed Americans, but in the opposite

direction as well. When one of the townspeople, Carmela, agrees to help by providing safe guidance

through the mines, an American sergeant expresses concern: "How do you know this girl? How do

you know where she'll lead us? […] This dame stays here with the rest of the Eyeties" (176).

Through the use of a mild ethnic slur ("Eyeties" is a derogatory bastardization of the word I-talians)

the girl is identified as Other. Moreover, she is branded a member of a non-friend group which is implied to be untrustworthy if not downright dangerous.

But another soldier, Joe from Jersey, convinces the group to follow the Sicilian girl Carmela by identifying her as a lesser of two evils: "Well, it's one or the other—either we trust the girl or try our luck with the mines. You might know, I'm less afraid of the girl than I am of the mines" (176). Note, however, just how far Joe still is from establishing any form of trust or common ground with Carmela. Joe's language of comparison portrays the Sicilian girl as a source of danger, a kind of weapon which is to be trusted only because she is less dangerous than land mines.

FIGURE 5.1: Contrasting Spaces in Two Stills from *Paisà*

A contrast in settings for hospitality between the Church where the Sicilians feel at home and the unheimlich*, neutral space of the "Frankenstein" tower.*

After a group of soldiers depart the church with the girl as their guide, the scene transitions to the next instance of hospitality, the strange "Frankenstein tower." This space will function as the predominantly neutral site for the exchange of hospitality between Carmela and Joe. Upon first catching a glimpse of the tower, the sergeant reinforces its *unheimlich* quality: "Some joint! Hey, Junior, remember Frankenstein? This reminds me of the old mill there!" (177). Junior doesn't help matters any when he responds, "Ha ha! It does now that you mention it. What a place for a

murder!" (177). Unfortunately, the joke soon proves prophetic; the Frankenstein tower does indeed

soon play host to a murder.

FIGURE 5.2: The Centrality of Naming in Two Stills from *Paisà*

At left, Joe and Carmela establish each other's names. At right, Carmela and Joe experience hostility before Joe is differentiated from the rest of the men with guns.
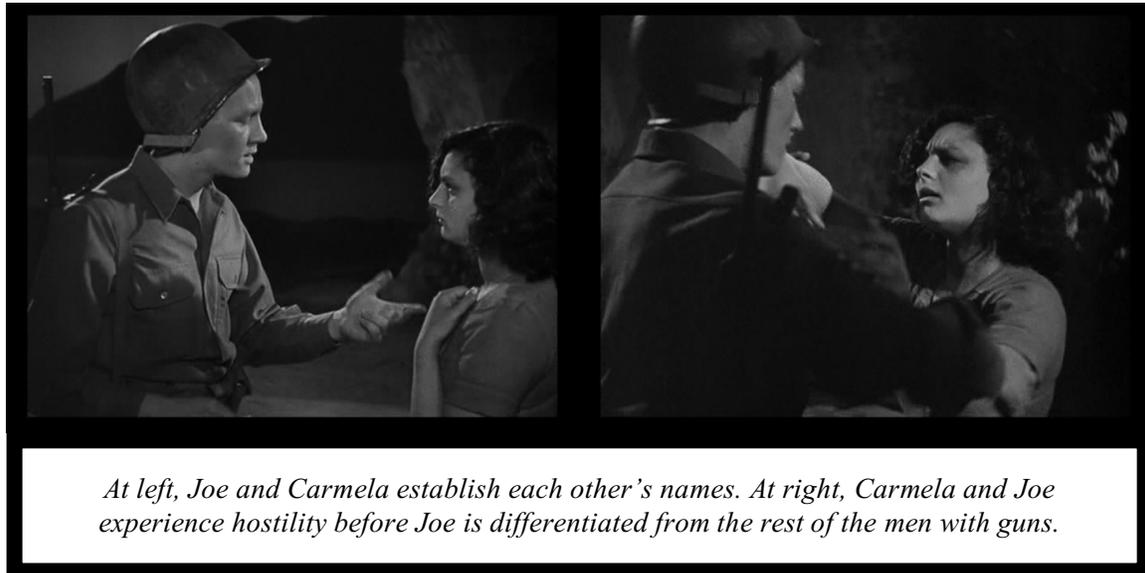
Before Carmela meets her tragic end, however, the Frankenstein tower plays host to one of

Paisà's most extraordinary exchanges of hospitality. To the extent that it can be called home by

neither party, the *unheimleich* tower ironically becomes an ideal for cross-cultural exchange. After the

majority of the American soldiers depart, Carmela and Joe—who do not share a language—are left

alone together to play out the first great conversation sequence in *Paisà*. Indeed, it is perhaps

because they do not share a language that Joe and Carmela succeed in establishing a bond of trust

and friendship.[168] Neither is forced to speak the language of a host; each is both welcomed and

welcomer as though two navigate a process of naming and discernment.

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[168] In the same way that the Frankenstein tower corresponds to the effacement of the concept of home (which would in turn prohibit hospitality), the lack of a shared language effaces the obstacle to hospitality which is represented by language. Language, and specifically the question of which language, represents a serious threat to hospitality: "[T]he foreigner […], inept at speaking the language, always risks being without defense before the law of the country that welcomes or expels him; the foreigner is first of all foreign to the legal language in which the duty of hospitality is formulated, the right to asylum, its limits, norms, policing, etc. He has to ask for hospitality in a language which by definition is not his own […]. This personage imposes on him translation into their own language, and that's the first act of violence. That is where the question of hospitality begins: must we ask the foreigner to understand us, to speak our

Despite the fact that Joe and Carmela do not share a language, their whole scene is about language. More specifically, it is a scene about names and naming. One of Joe's first gestures is an act of attempted identification: "You a Fascist? I bet you're a Fascist" (183). Before deciding shortly thereafter that Carmela is "a good girl!" and "not Fascist, really!" (183), Joe attempts another step of identification: "Maria? You Maria? What's your name? Maria?" (183). Progress only begins once Joe establishes vulnerability by divulging his own name:

> **JOE:** Look! I'm Joe, from Jersey. You?
> **CARMELA:** Ah! I'm Carmela.
> **JOE:** Me Joe—you Carmela. (184).

After establishing one another's names in "Me Tarzan, you Jane" fashion, Carmela attempts to leave in search of her family but Joe prevents her. The two experience one last moment of hostility in which Carmela proclaims, "You're all alike, you, the Germans, the Fascists! All you people with guns! You're all the same!" (184-185) thus using a generalization to avoid an authentic ethical encounter with an individual Other. In the language of Kahneman and Tversky, she employs what is called the representativeness heuristic. Faced with uncertainty, she assumes that because Joe shares one aspect with the others (he has a gun) he will be like them in other respects as well.

While it is true that, for Carmela, Axis and Allies remain somewhat undifferentiated, the connection she establishes with with Joe raises him "above the level of sameness to which she consigns Americans, Germans, [and] Fascists" (Marcus 20). Peter Brunette characterizes their exchange as enabling a passage between considering the Other as object and the Other as individual:

> Carmela is little more than a detection device, employed for the purpose of avoiding German land mines, and as far as she is concerned Joe and his friends are no better than the Germans […]. Yet once they have communicated, their humanity is revealed to one another and they can no longer treat each other as objects. (66)

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language, in all the senses of this term, in all its possible extensions, before being able and so as to be able to welcome him into our country?" (Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 15)

FIGURE 5.3: Joe's Vulnerability in Two Stills from *Paisà*

At left, Joe enumerates his several words of Italian. At right, Joe illuminates a lighter to show a picture to Carmela, an act that draws the German gunfire that causes his death.

During their gestural conversation of mutual (mis)understanding, Joe enumerates a list of the words he knows in Italian: *paisan*, *spaghetti*, *bambina*, *mangiare*, *tout de suite*, *c'est la guerre*. Tellingly, the list of "Italian" words (some of which are French) begins with *paisan*. The term is matched during Carmela's English lesson by another important word, friend:

> **JOE:** Is your English any better than my Italian? Let's try you now. Go—me Joe. Understand? Joe.
> **CARMELA:** Joe. […]
> **JOE:** Good! Good! […] Okay, now try this: me Joe, boy—you Carmela, girl.
> **CARMELA:** Ah, girl!
> **JOE:** Fine, fine! You're doing this fine! We're friends, understand? Friends!
> **CARMELA:** Friends. (187).

It is a moment when speech becomes performative, as the utterance of those words "We're friends" seems to usher in an almost sacramental kind of new reality. Next, Joe takes out a picture of his sister to show to Carmela, but she doesn't understand who it is and seems upset, perhaps thinking it is Joe's wife or girlfriend. So Joe takes out a lighter and ignites it in order to show Carmela the family resemblance. But the light from the lighter makes Joe tremendously vulnerable. The sudden light

marks him as a clearly visible target in the darkness for a group of German soldiers, who shoot and badly wound Joe just as Carmela correctly names the image: *sorella*.

The third and final instance of hospitality in this episode begins when a group of German soldiers join Carmela in the Frankenstein tower after Joe's death. Although the encounter takes place in the same physical place, the Frankenstein tower, it is no longer the same mental place for Carmela. She has a history there. It has been inscribed with the memory of her friendship with Joe. The space is now more significantly hers; it belongs to her as host in a more meaningful way. At the beginning of the encounter, she is already in the tower and it is the Germans who arrive, thus placing Carmela in the more natural role of host although, once again, the guests are at a considerable advantage with respect to the power dynamic. Accordingly, the Germans immediately begin to name her and make plans for how she will be used and controlled.

Significantly, the German soldiers never ask her name. Thus, she is not an individual but a series of other categories. She is Italian certainly, but primarily she is defined as "woman." Rather than asking for a name, a story, or a set of motivations, the Germans supply her with a backstory of their own invention. Because she is understood primarily as "woman," the Germans explain her presence in the tower as the result of an unsuccessful romantic rendezvous: "You're not here because you're afraid. No, no. You were supposed to meet your boy friend, eh? […] Your boy friend's very stupid not to come. I'm right aren't I? I've guessed right?" (195). Without waiting for her answer, the German interrogator decides that his explanation must be correct and—thinking that Carmela couldn't possibly pose a threat—treats her like a servant, sending her out to fetch some water.

FIGURE 5.4: Carmela's Enmity Towards the Germans in Two Stills from *Paisà*

*At left, the failure of hospitality with the German soldiers. At right, Carmela grabs a gun
to demonstrate her friendship to Joe through hostility against his enemy.*

But instead of water, Carmela discovers Joe's dead body. Perhaps she realizes that died as a
result of his attempts to communicate with her. The Sicilian woman kneels down beside the
American soldier's body and quietly pronounces his name one last time in a gesture of
memorialization: "Joe!" (197). He has become for her not just an undifferentiated Other, but an
individual with a name—and therefore an individualized subject to whom she owes not simply
hospitality, but also friendship.

Perhaps paradoxically, the sign of Carmela's friendship is enmity. She grabs Joe's gun and
fires at the Germans—thus alerting Joe's fellow American soldiers to the presence of a threat in the
tower and likely saving their lives. Badly outgunned and outnumbered, however, Carmela is soon
killed, sacrificing her own life to perform that final act of friendship, communication, and defiance.
But how should her self-sacrifice be understood? As an ideological act, in defiance of the Germans
and in solidarity with the Allied cause? The viewer is free to interpret Carmela's action in this way,
but ultimately there is no evidence to reach such a conclusion: she has given no indication of her
allegiances or her thinking on any such matters. The only thing she has shown concretely, in fact, is

her newly forged friendship with Joe. It is thus from specific friendship, rather than a set of lofty ideals, that her action most likely seems to derive. Joe was her friend, the Germans killed her friend, and so the Germans are now the enemy. In this sense, Carmela's self-sacrifice is purely political in the Schmittian sense of the term.

FIGURE 5.5: Chiasmus of Carmela's Death in Four Stills from *Paisà*

The first episode concludes with a lovely visual chiasmus: camera looking down on a body, soldiers looking down, soldiers looking down, camera looking down on a body.

Much of the essence of Schmitt's work is expressed in his oft-quoted assertion that "[t]he specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between the friend and the enemy" (*Concept* 26). The Schmittian enemy is concrete rather than abstract,

practical rather than ontological, political rather than natural.[169] There is no space in between; every

Other must be either friend or enemy and the distinction must be made without hesitation or

indeterminacy. Derrida, who was a vocal critic of Schmitt particularly in *The Politics of Friendship*,

explains the German theorist's point of view:

> [D]oubts must disappear […] above all, relative to *who* the friend and enemy
> are. If *the* political is to exist, one must know who everyone is, who is a friend
> and who is an enemy, and this knowing is not in the mode of theoretical
> knowledge but in one of a *practical identification*: knowing consists here in
> knowing how to identify the friend and the enemy. (Derrida, *The Politics of
> Friendship* 116, Trans. George Collins)

The fact that friends and enemies are identified through practice is fundamental, and its

ramifications are far-reaching. The practicality of the friend-enemy distinction, the fact that it is

made in the heat of battle, means that enemy is not natural, ontological, or eternal. As such, the

enemy need not have any particular characteristic. The only necessary qualification for the potential

enemy is therefore that he or she be Other:

> The political enemy need not be morally evil or aesthetically ugly; he need
> not appear as an economic competitor. […] But he is, nevertheless, the other,
> the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specially [sic]
> intense way, existentially something different and alien […]. Consequently,
> the reverse is also true: the morally evil, aesthetically ugly or economically
> damaging need not necessarily be the enemy; the morally good, aesthetically
> beautiful, and economically profitable need not necessarily become the friend
> in the specifically political sense of the word. (*Concept* 27, Trans. George
> Schwab)

Schmitt thus unhinges the concept of enemy from any qualities or characteristics that are inimical to

the self. In this way, politics is thereby purified of all moral or aesthetic considerations. The enemy is

a political fact, a question of praxis rather than ideals.

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[169] "The friend and enemy concepts are to be understood in their concrete and existential sense," Schmitt explains, "not as metaphors or symbols" (*Concept* 27). In order for politics to have a meaning, there must always be a "real possibility of physical killing" (*Concept* 33) which would constitute the exercise of power on the body in the most extreme possible sense.

The arbitrary nature the enemy means that, for Schmitt, violence is not justifiable for ideological, moral, or aesthetic reasons. It is justifiable only for political reasons, because of an existential threat posed by a concrete enemy:

> There exists no rational purpose, no norm no matter how true, no program no matter how exemplary, no social idea no matter how beautiful, no legitimacy nor legality which could justify men killing each other [...]. Just as little can war be justified by ethical and juristic norms. [...] The justification of war does not reside in its being fought for ideals or norms of justice, but in its being fought against a real enemy. (*Concept* 49)

As discussed in the previous chapter, there can be no individuals who are the enemies of humanity as such, for humanity-*qua*-humanity has no enemy. Troublingly, this moves all enmity beyond the sphere of any possible objectivity: there is no enemy-without-us, an enemy only becomes an enemy as a result of subjective perception and partisan decisionmaking.

There is, however, a clear paradox in Schmitt's thinking. Although no idea in and of itself can justify men killing each other in its name, any idea can potentially become the basis for a friend-enemy grouping. The ideological enemy can thus become a political enemy simply by means of an intermediate step.[170] A great many ideas are "sufficiently strong to group human beings effectively

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[170] This transformation of ideology into friend-enemy politics is a more central aspect of Schmitt's *Theory of the Partisan*. Schmitt traces the birth of the modern, revolutionary partisan to Vladimir Lenin who, "as a professional revolutionary of global civil war, [...] turned the real enemy into an absolute enemy" (*Theory* 93). The identification of an absolute (rather than political) enemy functioned to remove all limits to the enmity of the partisans who—when they become revolutionary—seek not only to defend a certain land against a political enemy (*hostis*) but pursue the extermination of the personal, absolute enemy (*inimicus*) everywhere. By conflating enmity and ideology, Schmitt argues that the partisan "blurs the boundaries" of the clear distinctions on which the classical laws of war depend: clear distinctions between concepts like war and peace, combatants and non-combatants, enemy and criminal. As such, *Theory of the Partisan* begins the erosion and critique of the strict friend-enemy binary that Schmitt himself had established in *The Concept of the Political*. The impossible purity the public vs. private (*hostis* v. *inimicus*) distinction is the primary target of Derrida's critique of Schmitt in *The Politics of Friendship*. The first of Schmitt's impossible purities is the binary distinction between the public and private enemy, between *hostis* and *inimicus*. Here is Schmitt: "The enemy is not [...] the private adversary who one hates. An enemy exists only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity. The enemy is solely the public enemy [...] *hostis*, not *inimicus* [...]. The often quoted "Love your enemies" (Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27) reads *diligite inimicos vestros* [...] and not *diligite hostes vestros*. No mention is made of the political enemy. Never in the thousand-year struggle between Christians and Moslems did it occur to a Christian to surrender rather than defend Europe out of love toward the Saracens or Turks. The enemy in the political sense need not be hated personally, and in the private sphere only does it make sense to love one's enemy, i.e. one's adversary." (*Concept* 28-29) It is, of course, deeply ironic that Schmitt should come to rely so heavily on the purity of the concept of enemy as *hostis*, since it is a word that famously harbors such strong contradictions within itself.

according to friend and enemy" (Schmitt, *Concept* 37). This feature of the human mind has, unfortunately, been borne out again and again in experimental psychology—as in, for example, Heni Tajfel's "Kandinsky versus Klee" experiment and other clinical explorations of the minimal group paradigm. Even a small, arbitrary distinction, such as a preference for the abstract paintings of Wassily Kandisky over the abstract paintings of Paul Klee, can be sufficient to generate an in group and an out group and trigger the corresponding implications of friendship and enmity.[171]

Much like Schmittian friend-enemy politics, traditional or "conditioned" hospitality depends on at least two rigid identities: guest and host. It demands the rigid demarcation of a border between what is *proper*—in the sense of belonging to the self, being "one's own"—and what is *strange*, in the sense of being foreign or Other to the self. Conditioned hospitality therefore involves inviting the Other into a space that has been designated as home, a space defined primarily in terms of its belonging to the self. Home is property; in order to invite the Other into that space, there must previously be a line to separate and exclude the Other. In other words, to offer this kind of hospitality is to define the Other as not belonging to the space into which they are welcomed. According to Derrida, this fact of a boundary line creates an inhospitable fissure within the concept of hospitality:

> It does not seem to me that I am able to open up or offer hospitality […] without reaffirming: this is mine, I am at home, you are welcome in my home […]. [F]or there to be hospitality, there must be a door. But if there is a door, there is no longer hospitality […] as soon as there are a door and windows, it means that someone has the key to them and consequently controls the conditions of hospitality. There must be a threshold. But if there is a threshold, there is no longer hospitality. (Derrida, "Hostipitality" 14. Trans. Barry Stocker, and Forbes Morlock)

Hospitality always begins with the ownership of a home. It presupposes a division, a relationship of power. There is, for Derrida, no possibility for conditioned hospitality "without sovereignty of

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[171] Personally, I much prefer Kandinsky. What are you gonna do about it, punk?

oneself over one's home, but since there is no hospitality without finitude, sovereignty can only be exercised by filtering, choosing, and thus by excluding and doing violence" (*Of Hospitality* 55).

In *Paisà*, strange dynamics are unleashed when by the presence of an oddly powerful *hostis* (occupying Germans/liberating Allies) within a land that is supposed to be home for the Italians. Proclaiming ownership of the space is, in many ways, easier for the German occupiers. It is enough to declare "this land is ours, you must leave." But what about the liberators? In delivering a home back to the previously occupied, is the liberator guest or host? Both? Neither? And what is hospitality for the guest who has, in a sense, delivered your home back to you? Any traditional understanding of hospitality depends on, and cannot exist without, these names and categories.

At the very least, the violence at stake in conditioned hospitality is the violence of thought. "Thought is in essence a force of mastery," Ann Dufourmantelle explains, "It is continually bringing the unknown back to the known, breaking up its mystery to shed light on it. Name it" (28). The gesture of asking for the name, since it participates in both welcome and exclusion, is defined by Derrida as the quintessential *pas d'hospitalité* (step of hospitality/no hospitality):

> Does [hospitality] begin with the question addressed to the newcomer […]: what is your name? […] Or else does hospitality begin with the unquestioning welcome, in a double effacement, the effacement of the question *and* the name? Is it more just and more loving to question or not to question? to call by the name or without the name? (*Of Hospitality* 27, 29)

The question of the name is central to the distinction between conditioned hospitality (which depends on laws, traditions, and understanding) and what Derrida calls absolute hospitality. In order to know whether conditioned hospitality should be granted or denied, it is necessary to supply the Other with a name—a name that very well might be friend or enemy.

Conditioned hospitality is thus quintessentially political in a Schmittian sense. It demands concrete, practical identity—it needs to know exactly who everyone is—so as to be able to divide them between those to whom hospitality is granted (friends) and those to whom it is refused

(enemies). In order for hospitality to become absolute, it must therefore break with conditioned hospitality, with "the law of hospitality as right or duty, with the 'pact' of hospitality" (Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 25). It must move beyond conditions not only in order to open up to receive the absolute Other who cannot be named, but also so as to sidestep the force of mastery and metonymic violence that is implied in naming. Absolute hospitality must be free of any kind of law—not only in order to be free of the requirement of a name—but also to be free of all other imperatives, orders, and duties:

> [T]o be what it "must" be, hospitality must not pay a debt, or be governed by a duty: it is gracious, and "must" not open itself to the guest, either "conforming to duty" or even […] "out of duty." This unconditional law of hospitality, if such a thing is thinkable, would then be a law without imperative, without order and without duty. A law without law, in short. (Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 81-83)

When hospitality is governed by a law, duty, or condition it answers to something which exists prior to the encounter with Otherness. One might even draw an analogy with Schmitt's presupposition of the two concepts of friend or enemy. Such a presupposition, because it takes place prior to the encounter with the Other, consequently begins to shackle the Other with a shape: it steers the encounter in one of two directions as thought does its work as a force of mastery.

It is only by moving outside all conditions, duties, or responsibilities that absolute hospitality can be achieved: "Let us say yes *to who or what turns up*, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any *identification*" (Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 77). Unlike conditioned hospitality, which requires the drawing of a boundary around what is understood as proper space, absolute hospitality requires an opening up and a giving over of proper space to the Other:

> [A]bsolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner […] but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names (Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 25).

In allowing for this potential contamination of space, absolute hospitality is "borne of the deconstruction of the very idea that self and Other, host and guest, are easily and readily distinguishable" (Mills-Knutsen 528). But how does one offer hospitality in a space no longer fully one's own? How can hospitality be offered without being able to distinguish between self and Other? Conditioned and absolute hospitality thus engage in a continual dialectic of mutual transgression:

> It is as though hospitality were the impossible: as though the law of hospitality defined this very impossibility, as if it were only possible to transgress it, as though *the* law of absolute, unconditional, hyperbolical hospitality, as though the categorical imperative of hospitality commanded that we transgress all the laws (in the plural) of hospitality […] *The* law is above the laws. It is thus illegal, transgressive, outside the law, like a lawless law, *nomos anomos*, law above the law and law outside the law. (Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 75-81)

It is a contradiction that is difficult to resolve, particularly if we are to restore any kind of an ethical imperative to the idea of hospitality. Absolute hospitality involves an unconditional welcoming of the Other as *arrivant*: a welcoming that is prior to naming or discernment. It is, as accordingly, also prior to the space of ethics. If absolute hospitality prevents discrimination on the basis of Otherness, it also impedes the ability to discriminate between different kinds of Otherness. So, *primum non nocere*, should absolute hospitality be taken as a kind of moral imperative?

Derrida never advocates such a thing. Instead, absolute hospitality is presented almost under erasure as a kind of unrealizable point of aspiration (which may not even be ideal). Richard Kearney, however, treats the idea of absolute hospitality as a serious suggestion for morality and—in so doing—offers quite an interesting critique. Kearney asserts that "[t]he problem with this analysis of hospitality is, I fear, that it undervalues our need to differentiate not just legally but *ethically* between good and evil aliens" (70). For Kearney, absolute hospitality thus faces an issue with respect to ethical discernment:

> How can we tell the difference between benign and malign others? How do we know […] when the other is truly an enemy who seeks to destroy us or an innocent scapegoat projected by our phobias? Or a mixture of both? How do we account for the fact that not every other is innocent and not every self is an egoistic empire? (67)

In other words, how can absolute hospitality discriminate between a true enemy—the enemy that poses a true existential threat to our very being—and the scapegoat, the arbitrary enemy who has been violently, unethically, or arbitrarily selected as such a threat? Although Kearney is perhaps too quick to unproblematically evoke grand concepts like good and evil, his critique of Derrida is well-founded, at least with respect to the practicality or desirability of *absolute* hospitality.

Joshua Mills-Knutsen—whose article is formed as a critique of Kearney's objection to absolute hospitality—does not necessarily disagree with the other philosopher's fundamental point: namely, that absolute hospitality is irreconcilable with ethical discernment. Instead, Mills-Knutsen denounces discernment as quintessential unethical. "The ethical conception here," he explains, "is that the self abdicates its ability to judge between benign and malignant others because the other as such is unrecognizable and beyond our ability to judge justly" (525). For Mills-Knutsen, absolute hospitality "does not so much offer an ethics per se, but rather deconstructs the possibility of ethics [by] exposing as ungrounded the power the self has to make decisions concerning the other" (529). Abdicating this power, however, the self necessarily assumes a pose of non-violence, rendering impossible any ethics founded on discrimination or rejection. For Mills-Knutsen, this should not be seen as a problem:

> Absolute hospitality may leave us vulnerable to abuse, but the virtue of Derrida's reorientation of our roles in this matter is that it forces a split between justice and safety. […] [O]ur humanity is essentially vulnerable to the ravages of the monstrous other. To seek to eliminate that vulnerability is to eliminate our very humanity, it is to sacrifice our ontological standing for a political one. While Derridean ethics may leave us vulnerable, this is not in and of itself a counter argument. It might instead be an indication that we are behaving ethically. (532)

It is on precisely this point that Mills-Knutsen and I depart ways. As in the Pact of Geryon, I believe that ethics depends on a willingness to act in the spirit of a necessary transgression.

Mills-Knutsen's model of non-violent ethical vulnerability makes sense only in terms of a very particular vision of ethics, one that I would be tempted to term religious rather than pragmatic or existential. What is the sense in having acted ethically in the face of the Other-as-aggressor if the practical result of such a stance is that extermination of the self? Such an ethics, if it is to find justification, will not do so on the basis of real-world practice. It will have no reward in this world and therefore must depend upon the assumption of another one. Hence the religious quality of this vision, which thus privileges ethics over justice and, in so doing, again places the values of the self over the value of the Other, regarding salvation or self-satisfaction as more fundamental than friendship. In this sense, isn't there an ethical necessity to violence? To enmity? Perhaps even hatred? Or at least transgression? Derrida himself even rewrites and turns the famous Nietzschean maxim on its head: "For the man of knowledge must not only love his friends: he must also be able to hate his enemies!" (*Politics* 288) Despite the historical horrors that he unleashed and, indeed, participated in, is there a place in contemporary ethics for Schmitt? Is there a place, within ethics, for the naming of friends and enemies or must ethics now become ineluctably complex—obscured in the Derridean swirl of the *hostis*, the *pas d'hospitalité*?

In search of an answer, I will turn back to *Paisà*, and specifically to its ambiguous and frequently misunderstood fifth episode. At the level of plot, this sequence centers on a single instance of hospitality: three American military chaplains arrive at a Franciscan monastery in search of food and shelter. The chaplains are initially welcomed as allies according to the terms of a friend-enemy grouping which, at this point, places Americans and Italians on the same side of the conflict.

FIGURE 5.6: The Exchange of Gifts in Two Stills from *Paisà*

The exchange of gifts. At left, the protestant chaplain Jones shares a Hershey bar. Martin and Feldman enjoy a liqueur made from local apples; Jones abstains.

This initial phase of hospitality is analyzed in spectacular fashion by Tom Conley, who explains the encounter as a series of failed exchanges, gifts, and gestures of hospitality:

> In the fifth sequence the trials of "meeting" and "comprehending" the other recur with the same outcome of total incomprehension: salutations are first offered, then cigarettes and candy; news of the outside world is mentioned before Fra' Raffaele accepts a bar of Hershey's chocolate and clasps it between his hands erected in prayer. (105)

These initial failed exchanges represent the *pas d'hospitalité* at the heart of the episode. Whatever hospitality the monks offer to the trio of visitors is deeply and ineluctably conditioned by an understanding of their identity.[172]

But the discovery that two of the visiting chaplains are, respectively, a Protestant and a Jew, reactivates an older (and perhaps more fundamental) friend-enemy grouping than the anti-Fascist alliance that had been active during the war. For the monks, hospitality approaches hostility and

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[172] "After food is exchanged, their ideologies are put on the block. Nonreception of the other's faith confirms the failure that has taken place in all of the initial contacts […]. Feldman and Jones, the Jew and the Protestant, are seen by the Italians as infidels, while Feldman and Jones view the monks as hopelessly anachronistic in the limits of their belief." (Conley 105)

every step becomes a *pas d'hospitalité*. In a brilliantly choreographed sequence, the monks confront

the Italian-speaking chaplain Martin about his attempts to proselytize his friends:

> **FATHER SUPERIOR:** You've never tried to lead them to the true religion? […]
> **MARTIN:** But, Father, the Protestant and the Jew are just as convinced they are in the true path. […]
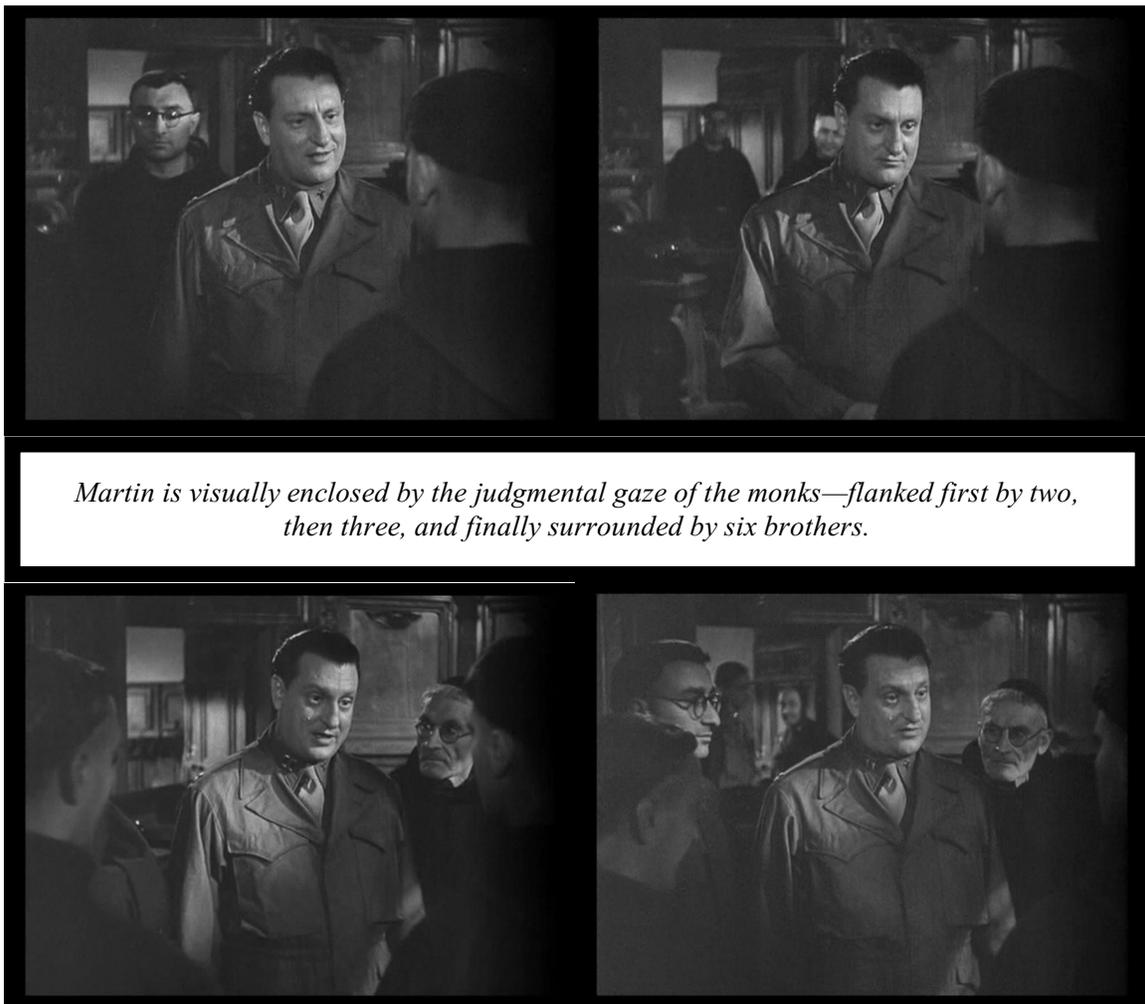> **FATHER SUPERIOR:** But we know they're in error.
> **VICAR:** We know it.
> **MARTIN:** Oh yes, yes, of course. […]
> **FATHER SUPERIOR:** Have you ever discussed these things with them?
> **MARTIN:** No, I've never examined their consciences. I've never discussed this with them. I've never asked them anything, because I've never thought I could judge them. (309-311)

FIGURE 5.7: Martin is Confronted and Enclosed in Four Stills from *Paisà*

Martin is visually enclosed by the judgmental gaze of the monks—flanked first by two, then three, and finally surrounded by six brothers.

In this instance, Martin's refusal to judge provides an interesting and perhaps meaningful parallel with his later actions. After all, the fifth sequence will conclude with Martin's vocal of the Franciscans' refusal to share a meal with their three visitors—a gesture that, as we shall see, appears to be supported and reinforced by the diegetic semiotics of the film.

Indeed, the monks' gesture, their refusal to dine with the three visiting chaplains, is the most clearly defined *pas d'hospitalité* in the entire film. The monks cook a meal and serve it to the three military chaplains (step of hospitality). They decide, however, to abstain from breaking bread with these lost souls (no hospitality), but do so as a gesture of prayer and faith that they might too be saved (step of hospitality + no hospitality = *pas d'hospitalité*).

For the viewer, Captain Martin's favorable response to the monks' *pas d'hospitalité* is quite surprising. Indeed, it strikes many as almost incomprehensible. When the priest understands the reason why the monks have decided to fast, he addresses them "in an extraordinary manner that the film's viewers have always found puzzling" (Bondanella 79):

> I want to talk to you. I want to tell you that what you've given me is such a great gift that I feel I'll always be in your debt. I've found here that peace of mind I'd lost in the horrors and the trials of the war, a beautiful, moving lesson of humility, simplicity, and pure faith. (315-316)

Not only does Martin not condemn the monks for their actions—which could certainly be interpreted as an act of "religious intolerance," "bigotry" and "anti-Semitism" (Bondanella 80)—he thanks them for such a great lesson in "humility, simplicity, and pure faith." Moreover, he implies that this lesson is precisely related to the peace of mind that he had "lost in the horrors and trials of the war." And so he offers praise for their rejection? Praise for intolerance? What exactly are we to make of Father Martin's reaction?

Despite the efforts of several critics, including Bondanella and Marcus, to dismiss the troubling ramifications of Martin's final words by classifying them as mere irony or parody, every aspect of the construction of the episode's narrative structure and *mise-en-scène*—not to mention the

217

overarching structure of the entire film—demands that Martin's speech be taken at face value. Prior to this moment, the viewer has been led to identify positively with Captain Martin and his words are delivered with terrible seriousness, without a trace of irony. The speech occurs in a highly privileged position at the end of the episode, and, as Marcus points out, it is delivered in the context of a visual montage that is highly evocative of Leonardo's *Last Supper* (34), with Martin figured in place of Jesus. Perhaps most significantly, there is the scene's use of music, which Marcus describes as "designed to maximize the emotional impact of the words" (34). Brunette goes so far as to suggest that the scene is somewhat heavy-handed: "the music indicates to us precisely what we are supposed to feel" (70-71). And yet, as Brunette explains, the moral that the scene ostensibly urges the viewer to accept is quite hard to swallow—not only in the context of the rest of the film, but in the post-war context as a whole:

> Critics have had great difficulty reconciling this segment with the overall structure and themes that seem to be operating in the film, and have tried in vain to naturalize its perplexing sentiment. The problem is that its themes clash in "impermissible" ways, for the reading that the episode seems to demand does not correspond with traditional views of brotherhood, kindness or even good sense. […] [H]ow can these monks judge real men and worldly right and wrong if they are so utterly isolated from it all? (73-74)

Martin's final speech denies thematic closure by leaving the viewer hovering between two potential ethical extremes, which are roughly equivalent to a Schmittian partisan friend-enemy politics and a Derridean law of absolute hospitality.

The monks, without violence, take a clear ethical stance which does not leave the three visiting chaplains in a state of indecipherable Otherness, but which defines them in their very specificity as, to a certain extent, the enemy.[173] Here is an enemy born not of a present-day political

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[173] They are not, it is true, the enemy in the sense present in *The Concept of the Political*, the enemy emptied of all affect, and they are instead an ideological enemy, something closer to what Schmidt associates in later works with the figure of the partisan combatant.

alliance, which demands the hospitality initially shown to these visitors to the extent that they are Americans and therefore friends, but from an idea. In this case, it is the idea of salvation, the idea of a binary distinction between heaven and hell.

In his refusal to judge (for Martin refuses to judge not only his fellow chaplains for the religious differences but also refuses to judge the final *pas d'hospitalité* embodied in the monks' fasting) Martin more closely approximates the spirit of non-judgmental hospitality. This is interesting to the extent that he is presented as one who has participated in, and had his values altered by, the praxis of military conflict. It would therefore be easy for him to adopt the attitude that, because the monks did not participate in the war, they are now unqualified, by virtue of their particular history and identity as non-combatants, to speak authoritatively about ethics in the post-war world. But Martin frames this issue in exactly the opposite way. He declares that it is he who has "lost" his peace of mind in the horrors and trials of the war. It might be said that he longs for their perspective, the perspective of non-combatants, a point-of-view that seems temporally isolated from the post-war context.

If so, the scene demands quite a different interpretation. Martin's tolerance of the monks' seeming intolerance is not an example of absolute hospitality, but rather an embrace of continuing relevance of the ethics of rejection. Perhaps what Martin has perhaps learned is that the friend-enemy pairings that had served him during the horrors of war will now have need to be revisited, and perhaps replaced, in favor of the re-introduction of different ethical distinctions. Now that the war is over, the identity of friends and enemies must perhaps be revisited and renegotiated. It is a difficult and unsettling message, but I believe there is no better way to resolve the discomfort occasioned by the conclusion of this episode.

Does hospitality involve the unquestioning, unconditional acceptance of the Other in whatever state that the other arrives—as dictated by absolute hospitality—or does the possibility of

ethical discernment allow for certain otherness to be rejected? And up to what point? It is easier to say, perhaps, that the Otherness of the Nazi can be rejected, for this is form of Otherness is almost universally condemned. But does this make ethics a matter of intersubjective agreement? Surely we have seen enough of history to know that relegating ethics to intersubjectivity (or, unfortunately, even to democracy) is profoundly misguided. After all, the widespread oppression of women and the exploitation of slave labor were once agreed upon as morally unproblematic practices by a certain kind of majority.

Indeed, so much of what I would classify as moral progress in the contemporary world has depended on the bravery of groups and individuals to articulate a non-conformist view of ethics, to win others to their cause, and to forge a new kind of intersubjective agreement about right and wrong. Although I personally find it abhorrent, the monks' gesture of hostility is a demonstration of their willingness to perform an act of necessary transgression for the sake of communication. It sends a message that is unabashedly spoken from a particular place and from a partisan perspective, an act of communication that fights for particular values and strives to win others to the cause. The monks strike a blow against the do-no-harm model of ethics, an argument in favor of transgressive intervention by artists and real-world actors alike. It is a transgression of hospitality, but one with salvific intent: a pact with Geryon.

CHAPTER SIX

[W]hen we put up a sign or a label—this event happened in this
space, this monument is erected to the memory of—we admit
defeat. We hand the responsibility of memory to the sign, to
the object. It becomes canned memory, like canned laughter on
a TV show, which laughs on our behalf, it remembers on our
behalf, it does the work for us. We are let off the hook.
– William Kentridge

On Mixed Compositions: An Ethics of Historical Stories

The Coen brothers' 1996 true crime classic *Fargo* might seem entirely irrelevant to "The Pact

of Geryon" if not for the perfect exemplarity of its opening disclaimer:

> THIS IS A TRUE STORY.
> The events depicted in this film took place in Minnesota in 1987.
> At the request of the survivors, the names have been changed.
> Out of respect for the dead, the rest has been told exactly as it occurred.

There is quite a bit to unpack here, beginning with that first, almost oxymoronic declaration. On a

certain level, of course everyone knows what the phrase "true story" means. Although individuals

might quibble about whether this or that historical retelling rises to the level of a true story, there is a

general consensus among consumers of artistic representations that telling a true story is possible.

The phrase true story is not meaningless. There is a generally agreed-upon understanding of what it

means to tell a true story.

And yet there remains an unresolved tension that lingers in the interaction of those two

words. What does it mean to be both true and a story? What kind of ethical obligations arise when a

story is presented as a kind of historical truth? To what extent is the simplification, falsification,

fictionalization, and contamination of the past permissible in the effort to preserve the value of

memory? When and how do representations—which may be aimed at memorializing and preserving

the value of the past—cross the line into deception? When do they transform into instruments of

forgetting? What kind of ethical guidelines and obligations apply to the crafting of historical stories?

It must be recognized that, perhaps even on the level of how the word is written, no hi*stories* exist without stories. Italian, like many other languages, uses the single word *storia* for both meanings. Elsa Morante exploited this double meaning to great effect in her historical novel *La storia*, a sprawling six hundred-page imagining of the untold history of how the grand narratives of History are written on the bodies of the poor, the illiterate, and the small. The title of Morante's book is instantly provocative because it activates both meanings simultaneously: *storia* as history and *storia* as story. Giving a novel the unadorned title of *History* functions to pull the reader in contradictory directions: the word history asserts a truth claim that is quite clearly undercut and called into question by the work's concurrent self-identification as a novel.

Alessandro Manzoni called such things "mixed compositions," works that blended historical truth with products of the imagination, and criticized them heavily in a substantial essay entitled *Del romanzo storico*, which will be our primary text in this chapter. As Cristina Della Coletta put it in *Plotting the Past*, "Immediately after publishing his historical novel *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*) in 1827, Alessandro Manzoni renounced the entire genre of historical fiction" (1). Not only was the historical novel renounced, but so too were all varieties of mixed composition that would seek to blend history and invention, truth and fiction. *Del romanzo storico* offers an ethical critique of all such compositions as impure. Historical novels either fail as teachers of history by leaving the reader deceived or in doubt about the true nature of the past or they fail as art by compromising their structure in order to clearly distinguish truth from invention.

"Despite Manzoni's […] views," Della Coletta explains, "historical fiction has known an almost unbroken development in Italy" (*Plotting the Past* 2). This is especially true in the history of Italian cinema which, in the 20th century and beyond, has become the most important arena for historical stories. The centrality of the historical film might be said to begin with the *kolossal storici*, large-scale historical spectacles such as Enrico Guazzoni's *Quo Vadis?* (1913) and Giovanni

Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914) which might be described as Italy's first blockbusters. Under fascism, historical films supplemented spectacle with ideology, as historical themes and settings became vehicles for state propaganda. Works like Mario Volpe's *Il grido dell'aquila* (1923), Giovacchino Forzano's *Villafranca* (1934), and Alessandro Blasetti's *1860* (1934) set out to establish a historical continuity between fascism and the Italian *risorgimento* while others, notably Blasetti's *Vecchia guardia* (1934), sought to memorialize a more recent historical event: the 1922 march on Rome.

As World War II drew to a close and the political climate in Italy shifted, it was the quasi-historical gaze of neorealism that brought Italian film to international prominence. Mixed compositions like Rossellini's War Trilogy—*Roma, città aperta* (1945), *Paisà* (1946), and *Germania, Anno Zero* (1948)—still number among the most emblematic in the history of Italian cinema. Although perhaps less directly engaged with the grand narratives of History with a capital H, Vittorio de Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (1949) and *Umberto D* (1955) nevertheless mixed real-life inspiration with invention to document the depression and desperation of the post-war period. Even after the period of classic neorealism, films dedicated to historical subjects have continued to be among Italy's most prominent works. The 1960's brought two contrasting portraits of post-war Rome. Federico Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1961) showed the disillusionment and decadence of the city-center while Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Mamma Roma* (1962) documented the post-fascist struggles of the poor in the city's periphery. Luchino Visconti cast his historical gaze even further back with 1963's *Il gattopardo*, returning to post-unification Sicily in the late 19th century.

De Sica's *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (1970), a heartbreaking portrayal of the Jewish experience in Ferrara during the era of the fascist *leggi razziali* from 1938 to 1944, continued the genre in the 1970s. In 1976, Bernardo Bertolucci's epic two-parter *1900* portrayed the class struggle and the rise of fascism in the Emilia region during the first half of the 20th century, covering nearly five decades stretching roughly from 1901-1945. The 1980s and 1990s featured the Taviani brothers' historical

fantasy *La notte di San Lorenzo* (1982) set in the fictional town of San Martino (a thinly veiled

portrayal of the Tavianis' hometown of San Miniato) in August 1944 during the final days of World

War II. There was also Giuseppe Ferrara's *Il caso Moro* (1986) which—like certain classic works of

neorealism—took aim at the relatively recent past: 1978's abduction and murder of prominent

Christian Democrat Aldo Moro. Then there is Roberto Benigni's *La vita è bella* which followed in

1997 and soon became—in terms of worldwide distribution—the highest-grossing film in the

history of Italian cinema. Another take on the Moro incident came in the new millennium with

Marco Bellocchio's *Buongiorno notte* (2003). The same year witnessed another marathon historical epic

as Marco Tullio Giordana's *La meglio gioventù* (2003) which covered the lives of two brothers from

1966-2000, thus filling in the rest of the 20th century left uncovered by Bertolucci in *1900*. In 2008,

there was Paolo Sorrentino's *Il divo*, a spectacularized portrayal of the life of career politician Giulio

Andreotti, and 2010's *Noi credevamo* by Mario Montone took another look at the Italian *risorgimento*.

Of course, this list is by no means complete. It is merely a partial listing of a few prominent

films by decade that I have assembled in order to support my claim that the history of film in Italy is

littered with prominent historical films.[174] I do, however, feel the need to place "historical" within

quotation marks, to offer it with a certain caveat. Each of the works above—indeed, every film that

might be called historical—makes a different kind of truth claim about how accurately and

transparently they represent the past: some strive for maximum fidelity whereas others might

prioritize entertainment value, originality, or ideological message. But all of them, nevertheless, are

compatible with Manzoni's definition of mixed compositions—*componimenti misti di storia e

d'invenzione*—works which combine material that is invented with material that belongs to the realm

of history. Although originally crafted primarily in reference to the historical novel, I believe that

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[174] This is particularly true when considering those films that have achieved the most international fame as well as those which have entered the academic canon as art cinema or *cinema d'auteur*.
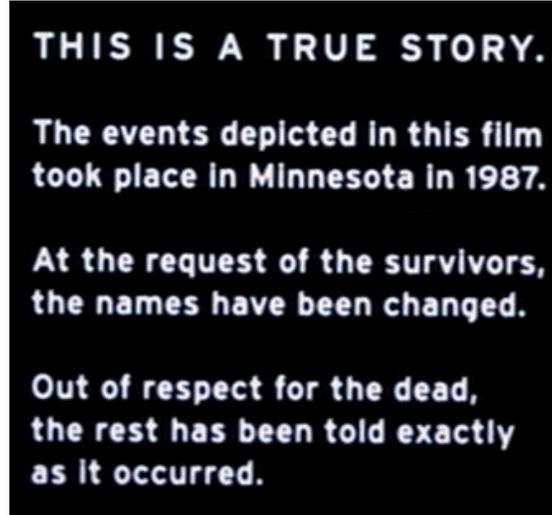
Manzoni's essay is most useful and intriguing today as a tool for interrogating the ethics of historical filmmaking. In the terminology of "The Pact of Geryon," historical stories are works that aim to express (or which present themselves as expressing) a historical impetus: the true past as embodied in the interaction of atoms. In other words, what we are dealing with here are true stories.

In order to facilitate this discussion, I will choose just one text to exemplify the historical film, Rossellini's *Roma città aperta* (1945). I have chosen this film precisely because of how deeply mixed it is as a work of art. It clearly and transparently displays both its inventedness and its debt to real-world history and events. For David Forgacs, *Roma città aperta* is essentially a "hybrid" film, which combines several opposing elements including history and invention:

> It is a hybrid, in which cinematic innovation is grafted onto dramatic convention, the values of anti-Fascism and working-class collectivism onto a narrative with a conservative sexual and social ethos. It is also a film where photographic documentation and historical testimony coexist with a mythical reconstruction of the past in which good memories are made to drive out the bad. Several of the early reviews recognized this hybridity in the film, and spoke of its elements of 'melodrama' or 'Grand Guignol' in the same breath as they praised its documentary style and veracity. (12)

By examining this foundational text of neorealism as a paradigmatic embodiment of Manzoni's mixed composition, I hope to contribute a reading of *Roma città aperta* that serves as "an important corrective to the view of neorealism as a direct transcription or recording of a real-world event into a film or literary text" (Forgacs 22). Along the way, I will ponder and ultimately deny the possibility of an unmixed composition, suggesting that all artistic representations combine a historical impetus with subjective inventiveness. Paradoxically, such a reading both invalidates Manzoni's specific critique of the historical novel as a genre while suggesting that the essay's ethical framework is applicable to virtually all forms of artistic representation. But first, let me return to *Fargo*, and to the idea of the true story.

FIGURE 6.1: A Film Still of the Disclaimer at the Beginning of *Fargo*.

THIS IS A TRUE STORY.

The events depicted in this film took place in Minnesota in 1987.

At the request of the survivors, the names have been changed.

Out of respect for the dead, the rest has been told exactly as it occurred.

Upon closer inspection, it is precisely the mixture of history and invention that activates the paradox at the heart of this phrase. Simultaneously, it invokes answerability to the truth of the past while acknowledging that it will be a telling of the past. The *Fargo* disclaimer's use of verbs expresses this co-presence of truth and emplotment: "depicted" is paired with "took place" and "told" is later wedded to "occurred." For though not always fictional, a story is always something that is told, something that must be created. The telling of a story implies a degree of emplotment; it suggests the imposition of a structure. As such, we accept that the true story is separated from the true past in at least two ways: it arrives at a different time and in a different form. It must be remembered, of course, that the translation of history into representation is not without effect. The word is not a gentle breeze which plays lightly over the surface of things, which grazes them without altering them. And neither is the moving image.

In this respect, however, cinema is perhaps somewhat different than words or literary language. As Pier Paolo Pasolini once explained: "Cinema does not evoke reality, like literary language; it does not copy reality like painting; it does not mimic reality like theater. Cinema *reproduces* reality: image and sound! […] Cinema expresses reality with reality" (135. My translation. Emphasis

original).[175] It is important not to overstate Pasolini's point here. Rather than arguing that films offer entirely transparent, unfiltered access to something like reality or truth, Pasolini is articulating the idea that the functional communicative unit of cinema is an image generated through interactions with real objects. Cinema, in other words, is created by the interactions of atoms.

And so *Roma città aperta*—because so much of it was filmed on location in Rome in 1945—does have access to a uniquely powerful truth claim, at least on a visual level. It is a true, documentary record of the physical appearance of a city at a certain point in time.[176] Forgacs attributes a similar point-of-view to André Bazin, calling it the "most radical insight" of his film theory: "[N]amely, that motion pictures and still photography possess a unique property in comparison with other arts: the ability to record the presence of objects in the exterior world directly by the exposure of film to light and to reproduce images of them by chemical processes" (25).[177] But Forgacs couches his praise of Bazin within a widely held critique of articulation of filmic realism, which one might apply quite well to Pasolini's film semiotics as well:

> There were, to be sure, some serious weaknesses to Bazin's arguments about filmic realism, notably his failure to develop his own insight that film, at any rate when used as a medium for narrative, has language-like properties, so that it may represent the world rhetorically or ideologically as well as demonstratively; it may in other words be used to tell lies as well as to show truths. (25)

Despite its dependence on heavy machinery, cinema is perhaps more capable than the written word of appearing to efface itself. By "representing reality with reality" cinema may appear to offer access to something like truth or reality that is unmediated by the biases of human cognition and decision-

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[175] "Il cinema non evoca la realtà, come la lingua letteraria; non copia la realtà, come la pittura; non mima la realtà, come il teatro. Il cinema *riproduce* la realtà: immagine e suono! […] Il cinema esprime la realtà con la realtà." (Pasolini 135)

[176] "It includes photographic evidence of Rome at the end of the Second World War. It shows what the city and its inhabitants looked like in 1945 and it shows something of what the war did to the city, notably in the various shots of bomb-damaged buildings. […] All these are real places shot at the time, not sets or reconstructions." (Forgacs 22)

[177] Let us leave aside, at least for this sustained argument, the concept of CGI or "computer generated imagery" which would substantially alter any kind of ethical film semiotics rooted in Pasolini or Bazin.

making. But to the extent that film participates in narrative, to the extent that it narrativizes by imposing a kind structure or grammar onto the filmed image, film also takes on "language-like properties." It represents through the filter of the self (or selves) involved in production.

In other words, montage is not a gentle breeze which plays lightly over the surface of things. The influence of human decision-making can indeed function, as Forgacs provocatively suggests, to tell lies despite using a language constructed of reality. Cinema will not always tell lies, but it will always offer up a kind of mixed composition, a representation that combines reality with human decision-making. To this extent, there is something ethically troubling when a film insists on its own objectivity, and about a style of realism that is calculated to minimize the appearance of its createdness as well its debt to human intervention.

There is at least one inevitable change: the true story will be a reduction. Any story will be less than the whole truth of the past. The totality of the past is far too vast to permit any comprehensive record or communication. Consequentially, even a true story is an act of selection. True stories tell a certain portion of the past. They separate relevant details and events from irrelevant ones, and they do so from a particular perspective, perhaps in the service of a certain goal. In the case of *Roma città aperta*, Forgacs outlines precisely how the act of selection—which portion of the past should we represent?—can be a key component of the ideological presentation of the past:

> The German occupation of Rome lasted nine months, from 11 September 1943 to 4 June 1944. The action of the film is compressed into a few days in winter […]. By concentrating the story into this period the film leaves out on either side the two worst episodes of mass coercion and violence during the occupation: the round-up and deportation of Jews on 16-18 October 1943 and the Fosse Adreatine massacre on 24 March 1944. […] The most likely reason why these two events are not alluded to in *Rome Open City* is that the memory of them was too painful and negative to be incorporated into a text which sought to tell a story of courage and survival. (64)

But does such this awareness, the knowledge that the timeframe of *Roma città aperta* was chosen in such a way so as to color the narrative in a certain way, mean that the film can no longer tells a true

story? On its own, the answer is "No." The incompleteness of all emplotments of the past does not make the phrase true story meaningless in everyday practice.

Some changes are seen as quite permissible. Some alterations are even consistent with the ethics of what it means to tell a true story. The next line of the *Fargo* disclaimer attests as much: "At the request of the survivors, the names have been changed." But let's be clear about precisely what is being condoned here: changing the names at the request of the survivors amounts to a knowing and deliberate withholding of the full truth of the past. Names were certainly changed in *Roma città aperta* as well. The actress Anna Magnani plays a woman named Pina; the name of her real-life inspiration was Maria Teresa Gullace. The actor Aldo Fabrizi plays Don Pietro Pellegrini, a composite character based on at least two figures: Don Pietro Pappagallo and Don Giuseppe Morosini. In other words, names seemingly amount to a kind of insignificant detail that do not penetrate down into the heart of a story, to where its truth or falsehood resides. In the case of the *Fargo* disclaimer, the changing of names is an act of willful obfuscation. The survivors—those the story touches upon most closely, those who we assume the truest and most direct knowledge of the interactions of atoms—have decided that a part of the story must be changed so as to remain hidden. The artists telling the story have agreed to this condition. Indeed, nothing seems particularly morally questionable in the filmmaker's willingness to acquiesce and grant the survivors' demands that names be changed. Such a change merely functions to protect the living from the consequences of a story that is too true, one whose excessive transparency might too directly impact the world impetus the film. At times, we may even feel that storytellers have a certain obligation to make such changes. Inventedness thus functions a shield protecting the truth of the past, or else preventing the truth of the past from impinging upon the present.

And yet, the telling of a true story is certainly not free from all moral or ethical obligations. For example, there is the final line of the *Fargo* disclaimer: "Out of respect for the dead, the rest has

been told exactly as it occurred." The word "respect" explicitly introduces an ethics of storytelling, a set of moral obligations, established in a pact between the film and its viewers, that has been active since the first appearance of the phrase "true story." The *Fargo* disclaimer implies that, at least when the dead are involved, accurate storytelling is presumed to be an ethical duty. The only way to show respect for the dead is to change as little as possible. Any other departure from the truth of the past could be considered an unacceptable affront to the dead.

As viewers, we find this sentiment familiar. There is nothing radical or unusual about proclaiming that the past, particularly a past in which people have died, burdens all present and future tellings with the obligation to strive for maximum fidelity. We might even accept the proposition that, by virtue of their death, the deceased (and particularly if they are considered victims of history) should have some form of ownership or control over any subsequent tellings. Just as the survivors exercise a right censor overly transparent naming, the dead invoke their right to faithful representation. We accept, after all, that in a way the story belongs to them.

The reader of this essay might, quite understandably, raise an objection at this point: how exactly do I presume to know what we all expect from a true story? And why on earth am I talking about *Fargo*? The answer to both questions is connected. Despite its opening disclaimer, *Fargo* is brazenly and outrageously *not* a true story. "It's completely made up," *Fargo* co-creator Joel Coen told *The New York Times* in 2015, "Or, as we like to say, the only true thing about it is that it is a story" (Roberts).[178] Likewise, if any moral or ethical obligations apply to *Fargo*, they apply not

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[178] It is fair to say, in my opinion, that the Coen brothers' film does not relate any singular story of a particular set of victims, but rather simply sets out to capture the kinds of true crime stories that the brothers heard about growing up in Minnesota in the 1960s and 1970s. There were, of course, several real-life incidents that helped to inspire the plot of the movie *Fargo*. Although Joel Coen has denied knowledge of the case, the "true story" that bears the most resemblance to the plot of *Fargo* is the tale of T. Eugene Thompson, a Minnesota man who was convicted of first-degree murder in 1963 after allegedly hiring a hitman to kill his wife Carol in order to collect on her million-dollar life insurance policy (Roberts). Joel Coen has spoken specifically about a case of serial number fraud involving General Motors as well as the murder of Helle Crafts, whose murderer used a wood-chipper to dispose of her body (Bradley). The film *Fargo* arguably contains elements of all of these stories, but it is meaningfully different than any one story. It certainly strays far enough

because it is a true story but simply because it is a story. "We wanted to make a movie just in the genre of a true story movie," Coen's brother Ethan told *The Huffington Post* in 2016, "You don't have to have a true story to make a true story movie" (Bradley). Ethan Coen suggests key point here which should not be overlooked. At least in filmmaking, truth has a *style*. This is precisely the reason that I have chosen to use *Fargo* to begin this chapter: it has all the appearance of a true story—of a kind of mixed composition—and very little of the real substance or obligations of a true story. *Fargo* makes a big show of its allegiance to the formal and stylistic commands of the genre while violating the core component of the true story: that it should attempt to communicate the true past. In other words, *Fargo* is an invented story that dresses up as a true crime film. As such, it is quite interesting that an integral part of its costuming as true story is precisely its feigned sense of ethical duty to the past. It is fascinating that *Fargo*, in order to pretend to be true, decides to posture about "respect for the dead." The events really happened in a specific place at a specific time and—out of respect for the dead—nothing has been changed. Well, maybe just the names are different. Any appeals it makes to an ethics of storytelling are purely cosmetic. The opening disclaimer has been crafted in order to activate what we all understand to be the ethics of historical storytelling. But what happens when a film not only dresses up as a true story, but actually begins to make a kind of truth claim?

An altogether different kind of "truth disclaimer" can be found at the beginning of Rossellini's *Roma città aperta*:

> The events and characters of this film—although drawing inspiration from
> the heroic and tragic news events during nine months of Nazi occupation—
> are imaginary.
>
> Thus any similarity to real events and people should be considered
> coincidental.[179] (my translation)

from each individually to delegitimize the truth disclaimer's proclamation that, aside from the names, "the rest has been told exactly as it occurred."

[179] *I fatti e i personaggi di questo film, pur ispirandosi alla cronaca tragica ed eroica di nove mesi di occupazione nazista, sono immaginari.*
Pertanto ogni identità con fatti e personaggi reali è da ritenersi casuale.

Although dismissed by Forgacs as simply a "conventional disclaimer" that does not detract from the film's status as "dramatized documentary" (18), I believe that such an interpretation fails to account for the impact caused by the disclaimer's placement. Rather than being buried in the end credits like many conventional legal disclaimers, *Roma città aperta* prominently displays this message front and center at the very beginning of the film. Indeed, it is one of the very first communications made by the film. As such, I believe it is worthwhile to examine disclaimer in some detail, particularly in terms of its wording and structure.

The first sentence declares the characters and events of the film to be "imaginary," but this assertion is completely undercut by the rhetorical structure of the sentence. For viewers at the time, the sheer temporal proximity of the events in question would only have enhanced *Roma città aperta*'s the temptation to view the film as a kind of "quasi-documentary." Forgacs explains:

> The film's early reception as a quasi-documentary was probably due at least as much to its closeness to the events it reconstructed as to the way it was directed or photographed. These events had taken place in Rome in the first months of 1944 when it was under German occupation. Allied (British and US) troops had entered the city on 4 June 1944 and the film had begun to take shape that summer. The script was written between September and December 1944. The film went into production in January 1945, when the Germans still occupied the north of Italy and as Soviet troops were advancing west across Poland. It was post-produced in the summer of 1945 (all sound was post-synchronized) and its first public screening was in Rome on 24 September, five months after Italy was liberated and just three weeks after the Japanese capitulation in the Pacific. As Dino Risi put it, the film's subject was still 'scorching.' (9)

Accordingly, with respect to a mid-20th Century audience, the film might be expected to rely on the viewers' memory of the reporting of actual events in order to recognize *Roma città aperta* as a kind of re-imagined version of the true past.

And yet, as far as the disclaimer is concerned, the task of expressing the fictitiousness of the film is assigned to a single word at the end of the sentence: *immaginari*. Stranded at the end of a sentence, the word "imaginary" must bear quite a heavy burden: it alone expresses the inventedness

of the film. Moreover, it does so within a sentence that is rhetorically dominated by a much longer and more ornate intervening clause: *pur ispirandosi alla cronoca tragica ed eroica di nove mesi di occupazione nazista*, "although drawing inspiration from the heroic and tragic news events during nine months of Nazi occupation." This is a phrase that points in the opposite direction, towards the "documentary" status of the film. Such an assertion might be seen as particularly problematic for future audiences who no longer have the events of German occupation fresh in mind and are therefore unable to compare the film to the memory of true reported events.

Indeed, it is this intervening clause—which functions as an assertion of continuity with the true past—that dominates the disclaimer, catching the eye from the opening elegance of the flowery, almost poetic *pur ispirandosi* and deviating substantially from the quasi-legalese of the rest of the disclaimer by introducing two loaded adjectives: *tragica ed eroica*. These adjectives interject an editorializing consciousness, a kind of point of view, into the disclaimer: calling the events "heroic and tragic" functions to invoke an ethical dimension. As Forgacs suggests, "*Rome Open City* is not a neutral or disinterested account of the occupation" (64). Rather, the introduction of these adjectives can be interpreted as the beginning of what Robert Burgoyne has called the film's "active support of the Italian liberation" (17). Equally important is the fact that these two words are deeply entangled with the history and terminology of literature, where tragic stories are told about the heroic deeds of a hero who meets a tragic end. In fact, this is perhaps *the* single most dominant narrative in the history of fiction. True newspaper accounts are thus brought into conversation with Aristotle. And so even within this assertion of the film's factual *bona fides*, there is a drift towards literariness, or at the very least towards the emplotment of true events.

Again, there is also the fact that the disclaimer, with its only partially undercut assertion of historical continuity with the period of German occupation, is presented so prominently at the beginning of the film. *Fargo* too chooses to place its fake disclaimer at the very beginning of film.

Indeed, this is part of what made it such an effective piece of misdirection.[180] How should the viewer interpret such a disclaimer? Is it part of the "fiction" of the film and therefore potentially invented like the rest of the story? Or is it part of a kind of paratext, the extradiegetic discourse a film tells about itself? As far as truth and fiction is concerned, where does the text begin and end? Do paratexts participate in the language game of truth and falsehood or in the language game of history and fiction?

Indeed. the history of fiction and its reception has proven time and time again that the location of truth claims matters a great deal. Statements made "within the text" (e.g., Ariosto's appeal to Turpino as the original historian of the *Furioso*'s fantasy world) can usually be discounted as part of the fiction, but statements outside the text—particularly those issued by biologically real individuals—are seen as potentially true or false. A statement made outside the text (e.g., this is a true story) can be denounced as lie. A statement that is made as part of the text cannot be. Or at least an internal statement cannot be a lie so long as the work in question is considered fictional rather than as a type of writing or filmmaking (such as history, documentary, memoir, biography) that includes a truth claim as part of its genre identity. Joel and Ethan Coen, speaking outside the text, admit that *Fargo* is not a true story. Knowing what we know about the film, the opening disclaimer must be therefore interpreted as part of the work itself. The disclaimer is part of the fiction of the text; the truth disclaimer is part and parcel of the fictional film named *Fargo*. Although placed in a nearly identical position, the *Roma, città aperta* disclaimer cannot be understood in the same way. It must be seen as a kind of outside statement, one that is not fictional, and can therefore

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[180] Indeed, many viewers were fooled into believing that the Coen brother's film was *actually* a true story; some even went in search of the real events that it depicted. In 2014, there was even a film, *Kumiko, the Treasure Hunter*, dedicated to telling the story of a woman who—thinking *Fargo* was real—went in search of the treasure. The film was based on a true story that turned out to be an untrue story.

be either true or false. It is not a truth with the face of a lie or a lie that helps us realize truth. It is either true or false, it might be simply a kind of lie.

Elsa Morante, in contrast to *Fargo* and *Roma, città aperta*, buries a kind of truth disclaimer (if it can be called as much) in the brief end notes that follow the nearly thousand-page *La storia*:

> As far as the bibliography of the Second World War is concerned, since it is obviously vast, I can only refer readers to some of the many accounts everywhere available on the subject. Here I must limit myself to mentioning—also by way of thanks—**the following authors who, with their documentation and testimony, have given me some (real) suggestions for some (invented) individual episodes in the novel**: Giacomo Debenedetti (*16 ottobre 1943*, Il Saggiatore, Milan, 1959); Robert Katz (*Black Sabbath*, Macmillan, Toronto, 1969); Pino Levi Cavaglione (*Guerriglia nei Castelli Romani*, Einaudi, Rome, 1945); Bruno Piazza (*Perché gli altri dimenticano*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1956); Nuto Revelli (*La strada del Davai*, Einaudi, Turin, 1966, and *L'Ultimo fronte*, Einaudi, Turin, 1971). (689. Trans. William Weaver. My emphasis)[181]

Almost in passing, Morante establishes the relationship between *La Storia* and the works of pure history that preceded it. Morante begins by declaring that the literature dedicated to World War II is vast. Actually, the word in Italian is the much more colorful and evocative: *interminabile*. The bibliography is unending; indeed, so much has been written about World War II that no biological individual could read and master all of it. Though less highly disclaimed, *La Storia* offers much the kind of truth claim as *Roma, città aperta*. Although drawing inspiration from real events, it is a work of invention. But unlike Rossellini's film, Morante offers no claim that her novel resembles the true past purely as the result of chance.

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[181] "Riguardo alla bibliografia—ovviamente, interminabile—sulla Seconda Guerra Mondiale, io non posso che rinviare i lettori a qualcuno dei tanti cataloghi disponibili ovunque in proposito. Qui devo limitarmi a citare—anche a titolo di ringraziamento—**i seguenti autori, che con le loro documentazioni e testimonianze mi hanno fornito degli spunti (reali) per alcuni singoli episodi (inventati) del romanzo**: Giacomo Debenedetti (v. *16 ottobre 1943*, Il Saggiatore, Milan, 1959); Robert Katz (v. *Black Sabbath*, Macmillan, Toronto, 1969); Pino Levi Cavaglione (v. *Guerriglia nei Castelli Romani*, Einaudi, Rome, 1945); Bruno Piazza (v. *Perché gli altri dimenticano*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1956); Nuto Revelli (v. *La strada del Davai*, Einaudi, Torino, 1966, e *L'Ultimo fronte*, Einaudi, Torino, 1971)." (661, my emphasis)

Indeed, it is here—in the assertion that the resemblance between the film and real people and events is merely coincidental—that I find the lie in the *Roma città aperta* disclaimer. The first sentence of the disclaimer could almost certainly have stood alone. It establishes that, although inspired by real events, the events depicted in the film are imaginary. Ultimately, this amounts to little more than asserting that the film is a mixed composition. And yet there is the second sentence: "Thus any similarity to real events and people should be considered coincidental." What exactly does this sentence accomplish? It appears to do nothing but add a strong internal tension, almost implying a kind of logical contradiction. It is also deeply inconsistent with what is known about the film's origin and production. Forgacs explains:

> The initial idea, which took place in discussions in August 1944 between Rossellini, [Sergio] Amidei and Alberto Consiglio […] was for a film in episodes based on certain events of the German occupation. There were to be four stories: a priest who helps the resistance and is captured and executed; a pregnant woman shot in the street while trying to reach her arrested husband; a Communist resistance leader who is betrayed, arrested and tortured; and the activities of a group of child saboteurs.[182] […] The first episode to be developed (initially by Consiglio as an idea for a documentary) was that of the priest. […] Consiglio's original model was Don Pietro Pappagallo, who had forged documents for the partisans, was caught after being betrayed by Italian spies, and was one of 335 people shot on 24 March 1944, on the orders of the SS, in the tunnels of a disused sandstone quarry on the Via Ardeantina. (14)

And so at least part of the idea for the film began as a documentary about a specific individual, but the resemblance to real people and events is purely coincidental? In the end, the figure of the priest in the film became a kind of composite character that combined elements of two real-life

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[182] According to Forgacs, it is unclear to what extent these latter two plot-lines were based on real, identifiable individuals: "The character and the story of the Communist did not have a single historical source but was a composite of different people and events. […] As for the story of Romoletto's gang, it is not clear whether it had a documentary basis at all. Stefano Roncoroni has claimed that it was Rossellini's idea to add to Consiglio's proposed documentary about the priest 'a documentary about boys in Rome during the occupation', but Tag Gallagher, in his biography of Rossellini, suggests that the inspiration came from the novel *The Paul Street Boys* (*A Pál-utcai fiúk*, 1906) by Ferenc Molnár. This had become a children's classic in Italy in translation. It tells the story of a group of boys, led by their 'general', János Bóka, who carry out battles with a rival gang on a derelict building site in Budapest." (17)

individuals: Don Pietro Pappagallo, a document-forger killed at the *Fosse Adreatine* massacre and

Don Giuseppe Morosini, whose was—in a strikingly similar manner to what occurs in the film—

executed by an Italian firing squad under German orders on April 3, 1944.

Morosini's death is clearly invoked in *Roma città aperta* when the priest character Don Pietro

is tied to a chair awaiting his death at the hands of an Italian firing squad. In what appears to be a

classic moment of filmic invention, all of the Italian soldiers misfire, intentionally missing the target

so as to grant the priest a temporary moment of reprieve. A German SS officer then angrily executes

the priest with a pistol shot to the back of the head. Indeed, this would be a classic example of a film

taking small liberties with the truth of the past in order to achieve a calculated dramatic effect,

except for one thing: this detail is consistent with contemporary historical accounts of the death of

Don Morosini. I am reminded of one of my favorite lines from Elsa Morante's *La storia*: "an

incredible thing was to happen: so incredible that even today, from this distance which makes the

living and the dead equal, I continue to suspect it of being a fraud. But, instead, it happened"

(485).[183] And so it is a detail that might seem invented but is actually based on contemporary

accounts of the truth of Morosini's death, as Forgacs explains:

> A contemporary obituary (in *Il Popolo* on 11 June 1944) reported that the volley of bullets did not kill him and that the Italian commander of the squad 'finished him off by firing his revolver into the back of his head.' Another account, published in April 1945 on the first anniversary of his death, added further details: that when the firing squad realized that the person they were to shoot was a young priest (Don Morosini was thirty-one) they exchanged 'a look and a nod of agreement' and aimed their guns 'up into the air or to one side' and that it was a German officer at the scene who gave the Italian commander the sign to shoot the priest in the head. Many of these details entered the script of *Rome Open City*. (16).

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[183] "doveva sopravvenire una cosa incredibile: tale che ancora oggi, da questa distanza che pareggia i vivi e i morti, io séguito a dubitarne come un'impostura. Ma invece capitò." (464)

Figure 6.2: Don Pietro Hears the Children's Whistle in a Film Still from *Roma città aperta*

There is another detail from the sequence leading up to Don Pietro's death that cannot be mistaken for anything other than a melodramatic invention. A group of onlooking children whistle a familiar song to Don Pietro just before he is killed. "It is sentimental and therefore seductive," Rossellini said of the whistle, "I was trying to be honest but I was still tied to a certain kind of system. I tried to reduce without erasing" (Cited in Aprà, p. 28).[184] But what does Rossellini mean by "a certain kind of system"? For Forgacs, the scene of Don Pietro's death suggests that *Roma città aperta* is still operating within a conventional form of the screen drama: "The spectator is directed to follow a linear sequence of shots, and a relay of looks, aided by a careful overdubbing of diegetic sound and music […] It is a very powerful scene, but it is also too easy, something of a cheat" (61). Both the intentional misfiring and the whistle seem like a cheat; does it matter that one of them is historically justifiable and the other is not? If artists want to tell the truth of the past without the embellishment of genre requirements, what should they make of a true past that conforms to dramatic conventions?

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[184] Rossellini's quotation comes from a debate with James Blue and students at Rice University on January 22, 1973. An extract of this interaction is poublished in *Il dopoguerra di Rossellini*. Ed. Adriano Aprà. Rome: Cinecittà International, 1995.

In addition to the two priests, there is also the film's re-staging of the death of another historically identifiable individual: Maria Teresa Gullace, a 37-year-old pregnant woman and mother of five who was shot and killed by a German soldier on March 2, 1944. The murder of Gullace came after a two-day protest by a group of women outside of a military barracks. Along with other men, Gullace's husband had been taken to the barracks in order to provide labor for the Germans:

> According to the report in the Communist Party newspaper *L'Unità*, which [Sergio] Amidei had read, it was an 'intimidatory murder,' carried out by a German soldier on a motorcyle who shot Gullace as she 'stretched out her hand to greet her husband who was leaning towards her out of a window of the barracks.' (Forgacs 16)

Gullace's death is both recognizable and recognizably altered in *Roma città aperta*'s most iconic scene, in which Anna Magnani's Pina is gunned down in the street while frantically chasing after her fiancé Francesco as he is taken away in a German-led roundup of suspected partisans. In the film, everything happens very quickly: Pina recognizes Francesco among those being carried away and is shot and killed a mere thirty seconds later. In the original script, however, the death scene was modeled more closely on Gullace: it was meant to be filmed outside of the actual barracks where she had been killed. "The decision to film it instead in the same street as the round-up (Via Montecuccoli, off Via Prenestina) was therefore a late change made during production," Forgacs explains.[185] So let me get this straight: *Roma città aperta* is admittedly inspired by real events, even specific real events that can be identified and were known to the cast and crew. But at the same time

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[185] The scene may have even been inspired by quite a different real-world event: "Amidei claimed subsequently that the idea had come to him after he had seen Anna Magnani running after a van on which her lover, Massimo Serato, with whom she had been arguing, was leaving the set. Whatever the truth of this, the change not only saved the time and costs of moving the cast and crew to a different location but it also compressed the action to great dramatic effect, producing one of the most memorable sequences in the film. Some elements of the source story remain nonetheless. Pina stands in a line of women and the solidarity between them and their hatred for the Germans is visible. As she breaks out of the line and runs to Francesco she is stretching out her hand." (Forgacs 17)

any similarity to real events is coincidental?[186] Are the similarities knowing and deliberate, as inevitably occurs when something is inspired by something else, or are they coincidental? Come to that, what would coincidental even mean for filmmakers who had lived through the experience of Nazi occupation, talked about it with family and friends, and read about it every day in the newspaper? Such a contradiction might even be reframed ethically: must *Roma, città aperta* operate out of respect for the dead that inspired the film?

Figure 6.3: Anna Magnani's Iconic Scene in a Film Still from *Roma città aperta*

In the case of Don Pietro, we have a detail—the intentional misfire at the execution—that seems quite invented, but which turns out to be true (or at least based on documentary evidence). We also have a clear, outrageous and "seductive" invention in the form of young children whistling to the soon-to-be-executed priest: a change that clearly serves the purposes of "a certain system"

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[186] To be fair, the truth of these evidence-based accounts—such as the reporting of incidents in *L'Unità*—is somewhat debatable. As Forgacs puts it, "What *Rome Open City* and other works from the early post-war period capture and preserve for posterity are not the raw events of the resistance but a set of already shaped representations of selected events." (22)

associated with the screen drama. In the case of Pina, the invented setting of her death (in the film she is shot while causing a commotion during a roundup of opposition fighters) is actually more plausible than the documentary-based account, which includes a point-blank execution by a motorcycle-riding Nazi after a prolonged protest over forced labor. The compression of Pina's drama into a shorter time period also certainly serves the purposes of screen drama. It heightens the drama and intensely emotional nature of the scene, but it does so less transparently. It is an invention that, particularly for present-day viewers, hides its inventedness.

What are the ethical duties taken on by a film like *Roma città aperta*, and how well does it pursue them? What are the difficult choices and tradeoffs that it makes, and can they be justified? Or are these even the correct ethical questions to ask about historical filmmaking? One of the reasons that I appreciate Forgacs' reading of the film so much (and why I have relied on him so heavily) is that he allows value creation and representational transgression[187] to coexist at the same time within the same work:

> [*Roma città aperta*] should not be acclaimed simply as a piece of pure filmic mimesis or historical realism, or dismissed out of hand as a falsification of history. The will to show the truth without embellishments produced a visual record of wartime Rome which is accurate in many respects. It also produced an account, of considerable historical value, of what it was like to live in the city under occupation and of how space and power interacted within it. At the same time the film's depiction of space was made to serve a set of schematic moral oppositions, and the need to produce a 'good memory' led to a selective treatment of historical events, in which some were drawn into

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[187] Forgacs points to five specific ways in which the film molded or selectively deployed historical in order to pursue its rhetorical or communicative purpose: "The first is the time in which the story takes place. […] By concentrating the story into this period the film leaves out on either side the two worst episodes of mass coercion and violence during the occupation: the round-up and deportation of Jews on 16-18 October 1943 and the Fosse Adreatine massacre on 24 March 1944. […] Second, the representation of Italian Fascists in the film shows them as passively subservient to the Germans […]. By minimizing the political autonomy of the Fascists in Rome, and by not showing the true extent of Fascist violence and espionage, Rossellini's film in effect transfers all real responsibility for the crimes of this period onto the Germans. Third, […] is the lack of explicit representation of divisions among the civilian population. […] Fourth, the depiction of the priest, and more generally of the Catholic Church, in the film is redemptive. […] What the film expresses in the figure of Don Pietro, then, are only the most progressive aspects of the Church: its community activity, support for victims of Nazism and anti-Fascism. Fifth, and finally, the film serves a mythical function in giving the impression of a unity of aim between parties and factions in the resistance. (Forgacs 64-68.)

the foreground, while others were pushed into the background or omitted. These layers, however, coexist in the film without cancelling each other out. (70-71)

Similarly, the purpose of ethical criticism is not to identify representational transgressions and then simply scold historical for being inaccurate and therefore morally evil. Rather, what I want to do is underscore the presence of the Pact of Geryon: the inevitability—and therefore perhaps even the desirability—of violation and transgression in the pursuit of communicative value.

But not all violations are created equal. There is a difference between what is a necessary evil and what is simply an evil, a violation that does not pursue a positive effect. And so I will harp again on the film's truth disclaimer which declares that—not only are the characters in the film imaginary—but any resemblance to real people and events is coincidental (despite the fact that real people and events inspired them). Earlier, I suggested that such a self-contradictory disclaimer served no purpose: but what if it actually pursued a malevolent one? On a certain level, and perhaps specifically on a legal one, *Roma città aperta*'s truth disclaimer might function as a way to wrest ownership of the past away from those most directly involved. Imagine, for example, that the family of Teresa Gullace came to the makers of the film and said: "You've got it all wrong, her death wasn't really like that at all." The filmmakers have an easy, ready-made response: the scene in our film is not Teresa's death. Indeed, any similarity to her death is purely coincidental, and so our invention is under no obligation to honor it or represent it faithfully. It is not a true story. As we saw in the *Fargo* disclaimer, there is a commonly held expectation that, out of respect for the dead, the true story will be told exactly as it occurred, with only the necessary alterations. But who are the dead? When do the dead (or the living for that matter) "own" a story? And what part of it do they own? Does ownership imply the right to preserve a memory as unrepresented? To exercise a right of censorship over the free expression of artistic creativity? How much should the past, or its survivors for that matter, be able to control how things are remembered in the present?

It might be argued that the dead own a true story to the extent that it is true, but not to the extent that it is a story. Artists should seemingly have some ownership of their inventions, but branding something as an invention is a way to claim pure, unadulterated creative control. In such a way, the mixed composition becomes an appropriation of the past. At times it is a benevolent or well intentioned one, but it is an appropriation nonetheless. Particularly in the hands of talented artists, inventions alter the past. They can become more vivid than reality: more solid, more comprehensible, and seemingly more rational than the actual truth of the past. If truth is stranger than fiction, then historical fiction must be a kind of normalized truth, a truth made familiar. The danger of historical inventions, then, is akin to what Amos Tversky said of metaphor:

> Because metaphors are vivid and memorable […] they can have considerable impact on human judgment even when they are inappropriate, useless, or misleading. They replace genuine uncertainty about the world with semantic ambiguity. A metaphor is a cover-up.[188] (Cited in Lewis, "A Bitter Ending")

In much the same way, any memory of Teresa Gullace is forever mediated by the image of Anna Magnani being gunned down in the street. Precisely for its vividness and memorability, the image of Anna Magnani is rendered uniquely available to the mind and to memory. But in remembering that image of Magnani, Gullace both is and is not memorialized. Or else we might say that Gullace is remembered, but not as herself. She is memorialized in a form that is so self confessedly distant from her reality that it claims any relationship between the two is merely coincidental.

Andreas Huyssen's brilliant little book *Present Pasts* addresses this contradiction in the context of monuments and historical memorials, offering a fascinating take on the interconnectedness of memorializing and forgetting in contemporary culture. "Inevitably," Huyssens explains, "every act of memory carries with it a dimension of betrayal, forgetting, and absence" (4). And so the drive to

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[188] Tversky's statement was made at a conference on metaphorical thinking at the University of Illinois. It is cited by Michael Lewis both in his 2016 book *The Undoing Project* and his 2017 article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

preserve the impetus through representation ends in an ethical cul-de-sac, another iteration of the same Catch-22. We must either remain silent until a memory is forgotten or cause it to be remembered as something other than itself. William Kentridge offers a compelling explanation of this ethical problem of preservation through signs:

> A forest we know contained mass killings is filled with wind in the leaves. Only a section where the trees are shorter, in a straight line, marks the spot of the mass grave. […]. What should be proclaimed clearly—HERE THIS HAPPENED, let us not forget—becomes ever thinner, ever harder to see, the landscapes and the memory push it farther away, until we get lost in the undergrowth. Even our outrage is lost. […] Knowing that when we put up a sign or a label—this event happened in this space, this monument is erected to the memory of—we admit defeat. We hand the responsibility of memory to the sign, to the object. It becomes canned memory, like canned laughter on a TV show, which laughs on our behalf, it remembers on our behalf, it does the work for us. We are let off the hook. (79-80)

This is the ethical paradox at the heart of neorealism, one which led to the critique by Pasolini and others that the films erased a true history of suffering and replaced them with a reassuring story or a certain political agenda. "Part of the history of the reception of neorealism is, in fact, the history of the persistence with which it was judged a failure," John David Rhodes explained, "and Pasolini shows himself to be writing and thinking in that tradition" (60). The technical brilliance of neorealism had, for Pasolini, outstripped and overshadowed its lack of mature thought and consequently led to its failure as a cultural and political movement. The same critique can be easily leveled at any would-be historical film or novel. Does this mixed composition preserve the past or transform it into an invisible city? Is the truth of the past converted into the sign of something absent?

Rhodes convincingly argues that, for Pasolini, early neorealist works had neglected the specificity of the past in order to pursue a naïve and outdated political agenda. According to Rhodes, not only Pasolini's writings but also his films—particularly *Accattone* and *Mamma Roma*—offer a critique of the failure of neorealism's mixing of truth and invention:

> Pasolini […] adopts the trappings of neorealism in order to push past what he believed were its sentimental progressive politics and into a realm in which the ideas of social mobility or collective betterment are negated. Actors, events, locations—Pasolini has appropriated what we should call the mise-en-scène of De Sica while calling what he regards as the idealism and humanism (perhaps even sentimentality) of its politics into question. (58)

Accordingly, Pasolini's *Accattone* ends in an event, the protagonist's death in a motorcycle crash, which cannot be easily assimilated into a reassuring or sentimental narrative arc. Unlike Pina and Don Pietro, the death of Pasolini's not-exactly-admirable Accattone does not tug at the heartstrings or become a part of the narrative of resistance:

> [H]e turns the corner and we hear the sound of tires squealing, a collision. Accattone dies on the Ponte Testaccio, his last words "I'm all right now" ("Mo, sto bene"). Only death brings succor to the underclass, the film seems to say. This assertion—if, indeed, that is the import of this final scene— rankled critics on the left who had been weaned on the humanist optimism of neorealism. […] What Pasolini objects to in neorealism and the critical discourse surrounding it is not the belief in film as a meaningful medium for the representation of contemporary reality, Pasolini's attack on neorealism (waged through his films) is premised on a mistrust of what he wants to understand as neorealism's political sentimentality. That Accattone's only chance to feel, in the character's words, "all right," arrives in the moment of death suggests that this, in fact, was the fate of the subproletariat that had been left out of Italy's economic miracle an pushed to the margins of the urban public sphere. […] Neorealism, with its "lack of mature thought," so Pasolini believes, would never be able to digest the stubborn fact of subproletarian existence. (Rhodes 66-7)

In such a way, *Accattone* functions as what might be called an ethical critique of neorealism. A film like *Roma città aperta* invoked the concept of historical truth to pursue a particular failed ideological theme. But, in the terms of the Pact of Geryon, is this simply an example of the historical film's capacity for productive transgression?

Although they may at times be incredibly valuable instruments for preserving and memorializing the past, we must not ignore the fact that mixed compositions walk a thin ethical line. Particularly when dealing with history, an ethical approach to literature demands that representations can either get it right or get it wrong in communicating the past. There is the potential that a given

artistic rendering may fail to do justice to historical events or individuals, that it might sacrifice too much accuracy for the sake of beauty or persuasiveness, or conversely that it might fail to properly persuade or communicate because of an excessive fealty to the ever-elusive truth of the past. This is why I believe that, despite its flaws, Manzoni's essay *Del romanzo storico* continues to be a fascinating and relevant text for the interpretation of historical stories, and historical films in particular. For Manzoni, the mixed composition sets itself two tasks, to create a work of art and teach the reader valuable truths about history, that cannot coexist in the same work. Consequentially, the mixed composition will either lack the necessary unity (and therefore fail as art) or it will leave readers deceived or in doubt (and thus fail as history).

While I agree in principle with the ethical questions and concerns voiced by Manzoni and believe that they can be important guiding considerations for approaching historical stories from an ethical perspective, I ultimately reach a different conclusion. I believe that historical stories must embrace the unavoidable violation and transgression that enables them to come into being as vehicles for communicating meaning and value. To the extent that all works of art (or works of history, science, or philosophy for that matter) are born of an admixture of historical reality and the inventions of subjective point-of-view, I would argue that all compositions are inevitably mixed in nature. And so given the choice between forbidding mixed compositions (which is to say all of them) or accepting that communication cannot take place without violence, I choose to embrace an inevitably transgressive approach to representing the past. I side with the Pact of Geryon.

Del romanzo storico, which was written while revising Manzoni's most famous historical novel *I promessi sposi*,[189] examines the ethics of the historical novel during the height of the genre's popularity

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[189] Although "Del romanzo storico" was first published in Manzoni's *Opere varie* in 1850, it was largely written much earlier in his career: after the 1828 version of *I promessi sposi* and before the definitive publication of the novel in 1840. According to Sandra Bermann the essay "occupied Manzoni from 1828 to as late as 1850" and thus "effectively telescopes the author's overall intellectual development" (3).

in the early 19th century. At the heart of Manzoni's critique lies a certain conviction about the relationship between historical truth and its representation. He believes that historical truth demands a pure, unadulterated style of representation. "The fact that one can do nothing with historical truth but represent it plainly as such is not a function of the genre in which it appears," Manzoni explains, "it is a function of the historical truth itself" (*DRS* 76).[190] And so any addition of non-true content to a work, even the addition of verisimilar fiction, will always make it harder for readers to locate the truth. "Trying to represent positive truth by enlarging it with the verisimilar only serves to diminish it, to efface it in part," he explains (*DRS* 77).[191]

To illustrate the point, Manzoni compares the attempt to enlarge the truth through the addition of verisimilar elements to the story of a man who wanted to increase his stock of oil by supplementing it with water. Despite the man's intentions, adding water to oil ultimately proves to be quite counterproductive:

> He thought he could, by stirring and beating it well, succeed in making it a homogeneous liquid. He beat and beat, and managed to make of it an awful mess that ran together and filled the oil lamp. But now it was worthless. It was no longer oil; indeed, as far as giving off light was concerned, it was less than nothing. This our friend realized as soon as he tried to light the wick.[192]
> (*DRS* 78)

For Manzoni, it is much the same with historical truth and invention. Adding invented elements does not increase or amplify the value of historical truth. Indeed, it transforms the precious oil of

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[190] "Non è per cagione del titolo, né della forma, né dell'assunto dell'opera, che della verità storica non si può far altro di bono, se non rappresentarla più distintamente che si può; è per la natura della verità storica." (Manzoni *DRS* 467)

[191] "Ché il positivo non è, riguardo alla mente, se non in quanto è conosciuto; e non si conosce, se non in quanto si può distinguerlo da ciò che non è lui, e quindi l'ingrandirlo con del verosimile, non è altro, in quanto all'effetto di rappresentarlo, che un ridurlo a meno, facendolo in parte sparire." (Manzoni *DRS* 469)

[192] "Ho sentito parlare (cosa vecchia e vera anche questa) d'un uomo più economo che acuto, il quale s'era immaginato di poter raddoppiar l'olio da bruciare, aggiungendoci altrettanta acqua. Sapeva bene che, a versarcela semplicemente sopra, l'andava a fondo, e l'olio tornava a galla; ma pensò che, se potesse immedesimarli mescolandoli e dibattendoli bene, ne resulterebbe un liquido solo, e si sarebbe ottenuto l'intento. Dibatti, dibatti, riuscì a farne un non so che di brizzolato, di picchiettato, che scorreva insieme, e empiva la lucerna. Ma era più roba, non era olio di più; anzi, riguardo all'effetto di far lume, era molto meno. E l'amico se n'avvide, quando volle accendere lo stoppino." (Manzoni *DRS* 469)

truth into a diluted and useless mixture that fails to shed any light on the present. This is the crux of

Manzoni's argument. A mixed composition like the historical novel is like a mixture of oil and water.

Something of great value (oil/true history) has been compromised by adding something of lesser

value (water/invention). Individually, both oil and water have value. Mixed together, they become

"less than nothing." Rossellini's rejection of the unnecessary "seductiveness" of the children

whistling at Don Pietro's execution follows similar lines. The scene would have been more effective,

Rossellini argues, had it merely presented the evidence-based scene rather than watering it down

through the addition of melodramatic elements.

In the first part of *Del romanzo storico*, Manzoni imagines various moral and aesthetic

criticisms that might be levelled against the historical novel. The first criticism is that they fail to

clearly separate what is true from what has been invented. The oil, in other words, cannot be

separated from the water: only the mixture can be seen. As a result of such an imperfect distinction,

the historical novel fails in one of its primary missions, the teaching of historical truth:

> Some complain that in certain historical novels or in certain parts of a historical novel, fact is not clearly distinguished from invention and that, as a result, these works fail to achieve one of their principal purposes, which is to give a faithful representation of history. […] To know is to believe; and for me to believe, when I know what is presented is not all equally true, it is absolutely necessary that I be able to distinguish fact from invention (*DRS* 63-64).[193]

To return to *Roma città aperta* again, this is the heart of what is at stake in the death scenes of Don

Pietro and Pina. The firing squad *really did* intentionally miss the priest. And yet, amid the noise of

imaginary whistles, there is no way for the viewer to recognize this detail as historically accurate.

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[193] "Alcuni dunque si lamentano che, in questo o in quel romanzo storico, in questa o in quella parte d'un romanzo storico, il vero positivo non sia ben distinto dalle cose inventate, e che venga, per conseguenza, a mancare uno degli effetti principalissimi d'un tal componimento, come è quello di dare una rappresentazione vera della storia. [. . .] Conoscere è credere; e per poter credere, quando ciò che mi viene rappresentato so che non è tutto ugualmente vero, bisogna appunto ch'io possa distinguere. E che? volete farmi conoscere delle realtà, e non mi date il mezzo di riconoscerle per realtà?" (Manzoni *DRS* 457)

With Pina, the dynamic moves in the opposite direction. It simply isn't true (so far as we know) that a woman was immediately gunned down in the street as her fiancé was being dragged away by soldiers. There are many other elements in the scene that are historically justifiable, so how can a viewer hope to separate truth from invention? Must the truth of history present itself in such a way to clearly distinguish itself from invention?

Perhaps the most problematic claim in Manzoni's essay is that the truth of history cannot be known and recognized unless it is known and recognized as truth. The link between an author's intention and the belief status of his readers is explained by Sandra Bermann:

> Once defined primarily in rhetorical terms—as a communicative event linking author to audience—writing becomes history or poetry largely according to the author's intention and the audience's belief; and what marks history is, not its external features, which may be indistinguishable from poetry's, but the fact that it is intended and accepted as truth. Its identity has become, in a word, contingent not only on authorial intentions, which may as easily be to deceive as to instruct. (17)

Historical truth, in other words, is not self-sufficient. It cannot provide convey its unique value entirely on its own; it can only do so when the reader approaches it with the proper attitude. And so, in order to experience the truth as truth, the reader must approach the text with the expectation that it is true. Manzoni calls this "historical" belief, which he opposes to "poetic" belief. Historical belief is activated when readers sit down to contemplate a work of "pure" history, one which "sets out to tell real facts and so to produce in the reader a unified belief, the credence we lend to positive truth" (*DRS* 72-73).[194]

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[194] "Gli chiedon troppo; ma troppo in ragion di che? Della sua possibilità? Verissimo; ma ciò appunto dimostra il vizio radicale del suo assunto, perché, in ragione delle cose, chiedere al vero di fatto, che sia riconoscibile, e chiedere a un racconto, che produca assentimenti omogenei, è chiedere quello che ci vuole per l'appunto. Sono due cose incompatibili, ma dove? Nel romanzo storico? Verissimo ancora: ma peggio per il romanzo storico, perché, in sé, sono due cose fatte apposta per andare insieme. E se ci fosse bisogno d'addurre le prove d'una tal verità, le troveremmo subito in uno de' due generi di lavoro, che il romanzo storico contraffà e confonde, voglio dire la storia. Questa infatti si propone appunto di raccontare de' fatti reali, e di produrre per questo mezzo un assentimento omogeneo, quello che si dà al vero positivo." (Manzoni *DRS* 464)

In the case of mixed compositions, however, the author—by failing to provide a clear line of demarcation between truth and invention—prevents readers from adopting the right kind of belief. Without the proper pre-existing belief, readers simply cannot recognize historical truth as such:

> To believe, to believe swiftly, readily, fully, is the wish of every reader, except one who reads to criticize. And we take as much pleasure in believing the purely verisimilar as in real facts, but [...] with a different, even contrary sort of belief. And still, I might add, one condition must always be met: our mind must be able to identify what is before it in order to lend it the appropriate belief. By concealing the reality in what he tells, the author would, as you might wish, keep the reader from lending it a historical belief, but this at the risk of denying him the chance of any belief. Whatsoever you may say, the effect also runs counter to the purposes of art; for what is less conducive to the unity and homogeneity of the reader's belief than no belief at all? (*DRS* 71)[195]

In order to learn the true past, Manzoni argues, readers must abdicate any intention to "criticize" what they read and give themselves over wholly to belief in a quasi-dictatorial text. With respect to fiction, such an attitude is called the willing suspension of disbelief. It is, after all, often necessary for the enjoyment of the text that the reader should not fight with its assertions and premises at every moment. But is a kind of willing suspension of disbelief desirable for the reader of history? Or are we starting to slip dangerously to a practice that could—particularly within the context of fascist or authoritarian regimes—be easily exploited by those would would prefer to forget or to erase the past?

This predisposed-to-believe approach to history is a textbook example of motivated reasoning. Reading anything in such away would inevitably cause a person to be led astray by a heavy confirmation bias. If you expect to find the truth (or lies, or a conspiracy for that matter), you will

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[195] "Assentire, assentir rapidamente, facilmente, pienamente, è il desiderio d'ogni lettore, meno chi legga per criticare. E si assente con piacere, tanto al puro verosimile, quanto al vero positivo: ma [...] con assentimenti diversi, anzi opposti: e, aggiungo io, con una condizione uguale in tutt'e due i casi; cioè che la mente riconosca nell'oggetto che contempla, o l'una o l'altra essenza, per poter prestare o l'uno o l'altro assentimento. Dissimulando la realtà della cosa raccontata, l'autore sarebbe riuscito, secondo il vostro desiderio, a impedire un assentimento storico, ma levando insieme al lettore il mezzo di prestarne uno qualunque. Effetto contrario anch'esso, quanto si possa dire, all'intento dell'arte; poiché, qual cosa più contraria all'unità, all'omogeneità dell'assentimento, che la mancanza dell'assentimento?" (Manzoni *DRS* 463)

begin to see it everywhere. This is the root of the fallacy underlying Maslow's hammer: to a hammer, everything is a nail. Manzoni's demand that a work clearly signal whether it is true so that the reader will be able to believe it wholeheartedly is ultimately nothing but a suggestion that pure history must create its own confirmation bias. It is an argument that historical truth, like fiction, demands a willing suspension of disbelief on the part of the reader. A work of history must prime the reader by declaring "what you are about to encounter is true" because doing so creates a confirmation bias, the expectation of truth, which in turn makes it far more like that any kind of communicative content is encountered as truth. Real news is forced to rely on the same principle as fake news.

Put another way, the historical novel fails because readers lack the potentially heavy-handed guidance of a text that offers a single, pure truth claim at the outset—*this is a true story*—and sticks to that truth claim at every moment. Without a clear and sufficient signaling from the text, readers will inevitably adopt the wrong kind of belief. The result is one of two things: deception or doubt. Readers are deceived if they confront purely verisimilar invented details with historical belief; they are likely to interpret artistic inventions as true historical facts. Viewers of *Roma città aperta* are likely to believe that Pina—or at least a woman very much like her—was gunned down in the street following a roundup of partisan fighters. On the other hand, readers who do not approach the text with a sufficient level of belief—those who may encounter the truth of history as though it were poetry—are left in doubt. Surely, they say, this didn't really happen. It's a lovely piece of imagination, but there is no way that an Italian firing squad would intentionally miss the target.

It is on precisely this point that, perhaps paradoxically, Manzoni's critique has real teeth. After all, he has a point here. How often have you seen or read a work based on a true story and been left in doubt, left to wonder: did this really happen? That character, that scene, that detail—was it part of the truth or part of the story? These same questions might also apply the deception that dwells within living memory. Do we remember events or their telling? How clearly can the two be

distinguished in memory? It is here, in the space between doubt and deception, that ethical calculus of mixed compositions finds its center. There is a clearly justifiable moral impulse that prompts the telling of a historical story: the truth of the past has value. The past has something to offer to the present; therefore, it must be communicated. And so it is clearly undesirable to tell a story that leaves the reader in a state of doubt about the past. No, the story must be crafted and presented in such a way that it is taken for truth. In so doing, however, a confirmation bias is created and it swings in such a way so that all things, even artistic inventions, might be taken for truth and misunderstood as assertions about the real past. How much truthfulness can be claimed and asserted before the work itself becomes a lie, an instrument of deception? When does it start to do more harm than good? At what point does a work of historical fiction move from necessary evil to an unnecessary one? These may be impossible questions to answer definitively, but this does not mean they should not be asked.

According to Manzoni, the mixed composition is doomed to fail in a way that a pure or unmixed composition is not. Manzoni admits that "even the most conscientious, most meticulous historian will not give us, by a long shot, all the truth or as plain a truth as we might wish," but asserts that, even in such a case, the fault lies with the *materia* rather than with the *arte* (73).[196]

> History, it is true, does not lack its tall tales, even its lies. But these are the historians' fault and are not endemic to the genre. When we say that a historian is embellishing, that he is making a jumble of fact and invention, that we do not know what to believe, we mean to fault him for something he could have avoided. And after all, he did have an alternative, as simple as it was sure. For what could be simpler than refraining from invention? Do you really think the author of a historical novel has this means available to avoid deceiving his reader?[197] (Manzoni, *DRS* 73)

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[196] "È certo ugualmente, che anche dallo storico più coscienzioso, più diligente, non s'avrà, a gran pezzo, tutta la verità che si può desiderare, né così netta come si può desiderare. Ma anche qui non è colpa dell'arte: è difetto della materia." (Manzoni *DRS* 465)

[197] "Certo, risponderemo, non mancano nella storia fandonie, anzi bugie. Ma è colpa dello storico, e non condizione del componimento. Quando d'uno storico si dice che fa la frangia alle cose, che vi fa un pasticcio di fatti e d'invenzioni, che non si sa cosa credergli, s'intende fargli carico d'una cosa che aveva il mezzo di schivare. E infatti il mezzo c'era, sicuro

Even if we believe that all histories are flawed, Manzoni appears to believe in the theoretical possibility of a perfect history. While the historical novel carries its own impossibility within its structure (e.g., is flawed on the level of *arte*) flawed works of history are due to external limitations. A perfect human with perfect knowledge could write a flawless work of history, but he or she could not write a flawless historical novel.

Even if a work of pure history fails spectacularly—if it omits, changes, distorts, or even blatantly and deliberately lies about the past—the fault lies not with the enterprise of history writing but with the limitations of the individual historian. According to Manzoni, histories are flawed and limited because humans have flaws and limitations. It is true that no perfect history exists (nor, indeed, will it ever exist) but this is only because there is no perfect human being to write it. For Manzoni this is deeply problematic. Even if it will not achieve its perfect end, any "good and rational art" must pursue a sensible, perfectible goal:

> For an art to be good and rational, it need not be able to achieve its aim fully and perfectly: no art does. Good and rational art is an art which sets a sensible objective and uses the most suitable means to achieve it, the means that, when applied to the right material, will achieve it as far as the human intellect allows. It is possible to obtain and convey, if not perfect knowledge, then at least a reasonably accurate impression about certain real facts, about the human condition in a given time and place. This is what history tries to do, assuming it is in good hands. It may not go as far as one might wish, but it does not willfully drag its feet.[198] (*DRS* 73)

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quanto facile; giacché, qual cosa più facile che l'astenersi dall'inventare? Vedete se vi pare che l'autore del romanzo storico possa far uso di questo mezzo, per schivar, quanto è in lui, d'ingannare il lettore." (Manzoni *DRS* 465)

[198] "È certo ugualmente, che anche dallo storico più coscienzioso, più diligente, non s'avrà, a gran pezzo, tutta la verità che si può desiderare, né così netta come si può desiderare. Ma anche qui non è colpa dell'arte: è difetto della materia. Perché un'arte sia buona e ragionevole, non si richiede che sia propria ad ottenere interamente e perfettamente il suo fine: non ce ne sono di tali. Arte buona e ragionevole è quella che, proponendosi un fine sensato, adopra i mezzi più adattati a ottenerlo fin dove si può, i mezzi che sarebbero adattati a ottenerlo interamente, ne' limiti delle facoltà umane, quando ci fosse la materia corrispondente. De' fatti reali, dello stato dell'umanità in certi tempi, in certi luoghi, è possibile acquistare e trasmettere una cognizione, non perfetta, ma effettiva: ed è ciò che si propone la storia: intendo sempre la storia in buone mani. Non arriva fin dove vorrebbe; ma non ne sta volontariamente indietro un passo." (Manzoni *DRS* 465)

We might imagine quite easily the opposition between a meticulously researched historical novel and a poorly documented, propagandistic work of history. As an end product the historical novel is likely to more accurate; it is likely to a less destructive and reductive version of the historical impetus. But for Manzoni, it is still flawed in terms of its *means*: it has set itself an impossible task.

In other words, *Del romanzo storico* offers a distinctly anti-Utopian vision of literature, one which is diametrically opposed to my reading of Calvino's Utopian quest for self-erasure in *Le città invisibili.* A work of pure history, even if its end product is of questionable value, does not pursue that end through flawed means. The historical novel, by contrast, cannot help but pursue any communicative ends through means which are always already compromised. And so it is that the historical novel is seemingly expelled from Alessandro Manzoni's vision of the ideal Republic. My echo of Plato is quite deliberate; readers should recognize that Manzoni is enacting a representational ethics that is highly reminiscent of *The Republic*'s treatment of mimetic poetry. Because a purity of means is impossible, the entire enterprise is doomed to produce impure results. Beginning as a flawed means, the historical novel—like mimetic poetry written by those without full knowledge—will inevitably produce a flawed result. There is no *felix culpa*, no path to communicating historical value through flawed instruments.

Manzoni does manage to gesture at something resembling a kind of epistemology of the imagination, in what I find to be the most beautiful sentence of his treatise:

> It is a characteristic of man's impoverished state that he can know only part of what has been, even in his own little world; and it is an aspect of his nobility and his power that he can conjecture beyond what he can actually know.[199] (*DRS* 75)

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[199] "È una parte della miseria dell'uomo il non poter conoscere se non qualcosa di ciò che è stato, anche nel suo piccolo mondo; ed è una parte della sua nobiltà e della sua forza il poter congetturare al di là di quello che può sapere." (Manzoni *DRS* 466)

It is part of man's power and nobility and it is a motive force for the imagination, but—at least as Manzoni sees it—the power of conjecture should play no part in the writing of history. And yet it always does. There is no history untainted by imagination and conjecture. Manzoni's argument crumbles on this single, monumentally important point. He conceives of mixed compositions as a distinct style of artistic representation, a separate category of the writing of history. Put another way, Manzoni's seems to suggest that there are both mixed compositions—works that combine history and invention—and unmixed compositions: works which would be, presumably, pure history or pure invention.

From the vantage point of the 21st century, I believe it is misguided to believe that either pure form is possible. There is no history so pure as to never comingle with invention; and there is no art so invented that it owes nothing to history. I have chosen "owes" carefully, for I believe that art is both derived from history and owes an ethical debt to all that has come before. And so for this reason, though I find much to appreciate in *Del romanzo storico*, I have ultimately come to bury Manzoni, not to praise him. I believe his essay is investigating the right issues—it asks the kinds of ethically based questions are ones that should still be applied to works of the art—but it reaches what I believe to be the wrong conclusion. Of course, I am well aware that I am critiquing Manzoni from the vantage point of two hundred years in the future, that I am speaking from a time and place with a more nuanced understanding of the writing of history. But because I am primarily interested in ethical questions, I believe this to be permissible: to what extent are Manzoni's criticisms of mixed compositions still valid today? And what parts of his ethical argument can be attributed to a different historical understanding of the meaning of concepts like history and fiction? To that end, I will use any knowledge or concepts at my disposal, even if there is a certain anachronism which is inevitable in criticizing Manzoni for not possessing a conception of history that was preternaturally ahead of its time.

But what exactly is Manzoni's idea of the work of the history writer? He was quite aware, for example, that history is an act of accounting; it is a kind of creation that arises from the actions of the historian. One of the central themes of his famous 1820 *Lettre à M. Chauvet*—which is considered a kind of early manifesto of Manzoni's poetics—is that the work of the historian involves grasping the relationship of cause and effect between events, establishing proper historical sequence, and separating relevant details from irrelevant details. But, for Manzoni, the logic of history appears to reveal itself as somehow distinctly true rather than constructed: the logic of history emerges through a kind of mystical Romantic revelation. Indeed, the more a historical event is studied, the more it reveals a kind of logic and inevitability that is consistent with our own mind:

> The more we contemplate and study a historic action that may be subject to dramatic representation, and the more we discover links between its diverse parts, the more we see in its whole a simple and profound logic. We discover a distinct characteristic, almost a unique and exclusive one that makes it what it is. We feel more and more that such moral codes, such institutions and such circumstances were necessary to bring about this result. We feel that such characteristics were needed to produce these acts; […] How do we explain our desire to contemplate such an action ? Why do we find it to be not only credible, but even interesting? It is because we discern the real causes behind it, and because we follow not only the march of the human spirit but also the particular events that find their way to our imaginations. We discover, in a given series of facts, a part of our own nature and destiny. We end up saying to ourselves: In such circumstances, with such means, with such men and women, nothing could have happened any differently.[200] (Manzoni, *Opere varie* 432. Trans. Elizabeth Barron).

[200] Although I will not usually provide footnoted citations in French, I have chosen to do so in this case because I am using an unpublished translation that I commisioned from Elizabeth Barron, a personal friend and an expert in French literature and culture. Here is the French: "Plus on considère, plus on étudie une action historique susceptible d'être rendue dramatiquement, et plus on découvre de liaison entre ses diverses parties, plus on aperçoit dans son ensemble une raison simple et profonde. On y distingue enfin un caractère particulier, je dirais presque individuel, quelque chose d'exclusif et de propre, qui la constitue ce qu'elle est. On sent de plus en plus qu'il fallait de telles moeurs, de telles institutions, de telles circonstances pour amener un tel résultat, et de tels caractères pour produire de tels actes; […] D'où vient l'attrait que nous éprouvons à considérer une telle action? pourquoi la. trouvons-nous non seulement vraisemblable, mais intéressante? c'est que nous en discernons les causes réelles, c'est que nous suivons, du même pas, la marche de l'esprit humain et celle des événemens particuliers présens à notre imagination. Nous découvrons, dans une série donnée de faits, une partie de notre nature et de notre destinée; nous finissons par dire en nous-mêmes: Dans de telles circonstances, à l'aide de tels moyens, avec de tels hommes, les choses devaient arriver ainsi." (Manzoni, *Opere varie* 432)

This conception of history expressed in the *Lettre à M. Chauvet* appears to survive relatively intact in the later essay *Del romanzo storico*, in which Manzoni speaks of the "valuable and useful service" performed by historians in arranging the past to reveal its inevitability:

> The historian surely performs a meaningful and useful service when he gathers all this information, when he sorts it out, when he identifies for each thing and each person its particular characteristics and contribution to the whole, and when he studies and establishes the actual sequence of events— all of this so that the reader may, while appreciating the significance and the uniqueness of the result, at the same time find it both very natural and even quite inevitable.[201] (*DRS* 85)

But from a contemporary perspective, Manzoni's argument the labor of the historian causes History to seem "natural" and "inevitable" strikes me as particularly misguided. It is a classic example of hindsight bias in action. Manzoni declares that man, in his impoverished state, can know only part of what has been. How can a historian discover the true arc of history without knowing the full extent of what has been? This is impossible; it is only possible to reason on the basis of what is known.

Moreover, the historian would tend to reason on the basis of what has been separated out and identified as relevant. This process too, separating important from unimportant details, is enacted on the basis of limited and incomplete information. As Daniel Kahneman explains, the limited availability of information can lead straight to a certain pernicious form of hindsight bias:

> You cannot help dealing with the limited information you have as if it were all there is to know. You build the best possible story from the information available to you, and if it is a good story, you believe it. Paradoxically it is easier to construct a coherent story when you know little, when there are fewer pieces to fit into the puzzle. Our comforting conviction that the world makes sense rests on a secure foundation: our almost unlimited ability to ignore our ignorance. (201)

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[201] "E, certo, fa un'opera sensata e utile lo storico, a raccoglier tutte quelle notizie, a depurarle, a serbare a ciascheduna cosa, e a ciaschedun uomo il suo proprio modo, il suo proprio grado d'efficienza sul tutto, a studiare e a mantenere l'ordine reale de' fatti, dimanieraché il lettore, ammirando la grandezza e la novità del resultato, lo trovi insieme naturalissimo, anzi relativamente necessario." (Manzoni *DRS* 474)

And so the historian must jump to conclusions. On the basis of information which is limited and incomplete, he or she must make conjectures—some of which are eminently reasonable and justifiable, and some of which may not be—in order to craft a fuller, more comprehensible past. As such, even on the basis of Manzoni's own logic, it should be clear that even the purest history is a kind of mixed composition.

After discussing various forms of the epic as mixtures of history and invention, *Del romanzo storico* concludes with a discussion of tragedy. More so than any kind of epic, Manzoni believes that tragedy is able to exist in isolation from history. Tragedy is composed of pure poetry, it consists of nothing but the verisimilar:

> Tragedy does not use the same vehicle for both history and invention, as the epic does in using narrative. The only immediate subject for the language of tragedy is the verisimilar; thus the discourses that Shakespeare, Corneille, Voltaire and Vittorio Alfieri put into the mouth of Caesar are all poetic fabrications. On the other hand, Lucan relates actions of Caesar that can be either invented or real. In the epic, then, words may produce a poetic effect at one moment, a historical effect at the next—or, by failing to produce either, may remain ambiguous. In tragedy it is only poetry that speaks; history effectively stands outside, related to the work but not a part of it.[202] (*DRS* 114-115)

One of the primary ways that tragedy protects itself from any obligations to the world of historical truth is by observing the conventions of the genre: "All of tragedy's advantages—the primary one of its dialogue form, the secondary but important one of staging, and still more subordinate ones not worth going into here—allow the tragedy, more easily than the epic, to shield itself from history"

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[202] "La parola della tragedia non ha altra materia, dirò così, immediata, che il verosimile. I discorsi che lo Shakespeare, il Corneille, il Voltaire, l'Alfieri, mettono in bocca a Cesare, è tutta fattura poetica, l'azioni che Lucano rac conta di Cesare, possono essere o inventate o positive. Quindi, nel poema la parola può produrre, ora un effetto poetico, ora un effetto storico; o, non riuscendo a produrre né l'uno né l'altro, rimanere ambigua. Nella tragedia è sempre la poesia che parla; la storia se ne sta materialmente di fuori. Ha una relazione col componimento, ma non ne è una parte" […]. (Manzoni *DRS* 497)

(116).[203] Much like the literary epic, but perhaps to an even more extreme degree, tragedy thus owes its obligations primarily to other literature rather than to the outside world.

Drawing in part from Pierre Corneille, Manzoni explains that—although tragedy does owe a certain pledge of fidelity to the facts of the fiction it reworks (e.g., Clytemnestra must killed by Orestes, Eriphyle must be killed by Alcmene)—it remains much more free than any art that owes fidelity to the world of history. Even in revisiting accepted fables in the form of a tragedy, the poet retains full control of the means and circumstances through which the known events of fiction come about. Although Orestes must kill Clymnestra, the poet is free to determine how and why as well as to fill in any other information or circumstances that would make the story more poignant. Not so with pure history:

> [H]istory provides, along with subjects, also means and circumstances that might not lend themselves so well to the purposes of art, hence the need to change them, or, rather, to alter the subjects with which they are, so to speak, associated. True, if history does not provide them, it leaves something to be desired; but that does not mean that poetic invention can supply them.[204] (118)

This is, of course, precisely, the method so often pursued by a mixed composition like the historical novel. Quite often, the operation works backwards: it begins with the unalterable facts of history (Aldo Moro must be killed by the Red Brigades, just as Clytemnestra must killed by by Orestes) and works backwards, imagining the connective tissue that could transform history into the kind of narrative that communicates a fuller, more comprehensible version of the past.

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[203] "Il vantaggio essenziale della forma, quest'altro vantaggio secondario, ma considerabile, e altri ancora più secondari, che non importa qui di rammentare, fanno che la tragedia possa, meglio del poema epico, schermirsi dalla storia." (Manzoni *DRS* 498)

[204] "Ora, applicato alle favole ricevute, il precetto non ha bisogno né di temperamenti, né di distinzioni, poiché quelle non davano, né imponevano altro al poeta, che appunto l'azione principale: Clitennestra uccisa da Oreste, Erifile da Alcmeone. I mezzi e le circostanze rimanevano davvero nell'arbitrio de' poeti. La storia in vece dà, insieme co' soggetti, anche de' mezzi e delle circostanze, che possono non accomodarsi con l'intento dell'arte. Quindi il bisogno di cambiarle, val a dire d'alterare i soggetti coi quali sono, per dir così, immedesimate. Che se la storia non le dà, le lascia desiderare; ma ciò non vuol dire che un tal desiderio possa essere appagato col mezzo dell'invenzione poetica." (Manzoni *DRS* 523)

It is here that we encounter a certain contradiction between different incarnations of

Manzoni. Denying poetic invention the right to fill in the gaps left open by story seems—indeed,

like so much of *Del romanzo storico*—to be almost a direct affront to Manzoni's own masterpiece, *I

promessi sposi*. Consider, for example, how a younger Manzoni had articulated the relationship

between history and poetry in this celebrated passage from the 1820 *Lettre à M. Chauvet*:

> For what, in the end, does history give us? Events that are known only, so to
> speak, from the outside, what men have done. But what they have thought,
> the feelings that have accompanied their decisions and their plans, their
> successes and misfortunes, the words by which they have asserted—or tried
> to assert—their passions and wills on those of others, by which they have
> expressed their anger, poured out their sadness, by which, in a word, they
> have revealed their individuality: all that, more or less, is passed over in
> silence by history: and all that is the domain of poetry. (Trans. Sandra
> Bermann, cited in "Introduction to *On the Historical Novel*, p. 23)

It is ultimately a difficult discrepancy to resolve. Although it is quite clear that *I promessi sposi* is

crafted in such a way so as to minimize the ethical problems of the genre (e.g., it demarcates the line

between history and invention fairly clearly), it is still quite hard to reconcile the Manzoni of *Del

romanzo storico* with the Manzoni of the *Lettre à M. Chauvet*.

It much easier, however, to say which of Manzoni was more influential for future

generations, including Elsa Morante. I would venture to say that the M. Chauvet letter's idea of the

function of the historical novel—as a way for invention to fill in the gaps that pure history passes

over in silence—is essentially the blueprint for *La storia*. On a small-scale level, the novel functions

as a kind of reverse engineering of a particular news story. The text reproduces, in brief, a small

portion of that article in its final pages: "The next day the news report appeared in the papers:

Pathetic drama in the Testaccio quarter—Crazed mother watching over little son's corpse. And at the end you

could read: *It was necessary to destroy the dog*" (677, Italics original).[205] Morante biographer Lily Tuck

offers a bit more background:

> The plot of the novel is based on a real event that was reported in a Roman newspaper in June 1947: a mother, her six-year-old little boy, and their *maremmana* (a type of big white sheep dog from the Maremma region of Italy) were discovered in an apartment in the Testaccio district of Rome; the little boy is dead, the mother insane with grief, the dog so aggressive in its attempt to protect its owners that it has to be killed in order for the authorities to gain entrance into the apartment. What, the writer of the newspaper piece asked, brought this poor little family to such a tragic end? (181)

La storia might be described as a six hundred-page answer to the journalist's question. The novel

imagines and fills in the backstory of that child, that mother, and that sheep dog who—later named

as Useppe, Ida and Bella—are three of the main characters in the novel. *La storia* functions to make

the newspaper story becomes comprehensible, causing it to assume dimensions of something like a

Greek tragedy. Indeed, the newspaper account corresponds to the final climactic tragedy of the

novel.

On a large-scale level, *La storia* is conceived in order to tell the story of those who were

condemned to endure the effects of History with a capital H without participating in it, shaping it, or

even understanding it in any meaningful way. Morante articulates this idea perhaps most directly in a

passage towards the end of the long chapter dedicated to 1946, in which the protagonist Ida

Raimundo reflects on the work of the *Grandi della terra* and the various summit meetings that were

held to put the world back together at the end of World War II:

> Meanwhile, in the course of that postwar year, the "Big" men of the earth, with various "summit meetings," trials of the most notorious criminals, interventions, and noninterventions, were busy reestablishing some kind of appropriate order. […] The Duce and his supporting cast had been buried, and the Royal Family had packed its bags; but those who pulled the strings remained backstage, even after the scenery changed. The landowners still

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[205] "Il giorno dopo sui giornale apparve la notizia di cronaca: *Pietoso dramma al quartiere Testaccio – Madre impazzita vegliando il corpo del figlioletto*. E in conclusione vi si leggeva: *Si è reso necessario abbattere la bestia.*" (Morante 647)

held the land, the industrialists the machinery and the factories, the officers
their ranks, the bishops their dioceses. And the rich were fed at the expense
of the poor, who then aimed, in their turn, at taking the place of the rich,
according to the general rule. But neither among those rich, nor among those
poor was the place of Iduzza Ramundo, who belonged, truly, to a third
species. It is a species that lives (perhaps endangered?) and dies, and gives no
news of itself, except at times, perhaps, in the crime reports. […] Of that
year's events—political battles, changes of government—she knew little or
nothing. […] We already know that, by habit, she never read the
newspapers.[206] (503)

One of the most interesting aspects of the above passage is the way the novel's central character, Ida

or "Iduzza" Ramundo is identified. She belongs neither to the rich nor poor, but to a kind of "third

species" which is defined by its inability to communicate. "It is a species that lives (perhaps

endangered?) and dies, and gives no news of itself, except at times, perhaps, in the crime reports"

(503). Despite the lack of documentation, there is a truth to their past; they too have a history. But

how can this history be accessed if the members of this species leave no trace of themselves? How

can their story be told?

The artist or historian has nothing to work with, except perhaps a brief article in the *cronaca*

nera (such as the one about the sheepdog) written by someone else. The Manzoni of *Del romanzo*

storico had an answer to the question of what is to be done in such cases. It is a Wittgensteinian

response: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (82). Such people, because they

leave no trace, cannot be rendered *historically*:

[H]istory provides, along with subjects, also means and circumstances that
might not lend themselves so well to the purposes of art, hence the need to

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[206] "Frattanto, nel corso di quell'anno postbellico, i «Grandi della terra», coi vari «incontri al vertice», i processi ai
criminali più vistosi, gli interventi e i non-interventi, si industriavano a ristabilire un qualche ordine opportuno. […] Il
Duce e i suoi comprimari erano stati sepolti, e la Famiglia Reale aveva fatto le valige; ma chi teneva i fili stave sempre
dietro alla scena, pure mentre le quinte giravano. Agli agrari spettava sempre la porprietà della terra, agli industriali quella
dei macchinari e delle fabbriche, i gradi agli ufficiali, ai vescovi le diocesi. E i ricchi si nutrivano a spese dei poveri, i quali
tendevano, a loro volta, a pigliare il posto dei ricchi, secondo la regola generale. Ma né fra tali ricchi, né fra tali poveri,
aveva posto Iduzza Raimundo, la quale apparteneva, invero, a una terza specie. È una specie esiste (forse in via
d'estinzione?) e passa, né se ne dà notizia, se non a volte, eventualmente, nella cronaca nera. […] Dei fatti di quell'anno –
lotte politiche, mutamenti di governi – essa sapeva poco o nulla. […] Già si sa che d'abitudine essa non leggeva i
giornali." (Morante 481-482)

change them, or, rather, to alter the subjects with which they are, so to speak, associated. True, if history does not provide them, it leaves something to be desired; but that does not mean that poetic invention can supply them. (Manzoni, *DRS* 118)

But the Manzoni of the *Promessi sposi* or the *Lettre à M. Chauvet* might have had a different answer: perhaps artistic invention can fill in the gaps of history here and invent a life for those who have left no trace.

I am tempted to identify Morante's non-communicative third species—this group of people who read no newspapers and leave no trace of their lives—with a group found in the novel's epigraph: *Por el analfabeto a quien escribo*, "To the illiterate for whom I write." As Tuck explains, there is good reason to emphasize the importance of the illiterate in her concept of the book:

> In the early 1970s while she was working on her novel, *History: A Novel* (*La storia*), Elsa Morante took many long walks through the old ghetto, the Testaccio and San Lorenzo districts of Rome, entering buildings, inspecting rooms, peering closely at objects (after all she was very near-sighted). She took copious notes and jotted down her observations. A friend, Luca Fontana, who often accompanies her on these walks, found this very uncharacteristic and, although he knew he was transgressing the writer's code, he could not resist, and one day, asked her: "What sort of book are you writing?" Elsa's reply was cryptic: "I'm writing a book for the illiterate." And in fact, the epigraph for *History*, Morante's most well-known novel, is a line from the militant Peruvian poet César Vallejo: *Por el analfabeto a quien escribo* (To the illiterate for whom I write). (176)

The English translation that both Tuck and I provide, "To the illiterate for whom I write," is the best among bad options, but it is a bit misleading. It fails to convey the precise meaning of the phrase—which is, moreover, quite problematic syntactically in Spanish as well. The primary reason is that Morante has cited the phrase out of context, throwing the grammatical function of the word *por* into a bit of chaos. In the context of Vallejo's original poem, the line reads as follows:

> Hacedlo por la libertad de todos,
> del explotado, del explotador,
> por la paz indolora – a sospecho
> cuando duermo al pie de mi frente
> y más cuando circulo dando voces
> **y hacedlo, voy diciendo,**

por el analfabeto a quien escribo,
por el genio descalzo y su cordero,
por los camaradas caídos,
sus cenizas abrazadas al cadáver de un camino![207] (576. My emphasis)

Morante's epigraph is taken from part of a longer phrase, "and do it, all of you, I keep saying, / for the illiterate to whom I write," in which the meaning of the word *por* is relatively clear: do it "for" the illiterate in the sense of doing it for their benefit, in their honor. In Vallejo's poem, the line functions as part of an exhortation: you must do this for the illiterate.

By removing the phrase from its grammatical context and—even more significantly—by placing it as an epigraph, Morante injects the word *por* with a proliferation of different meanings.[208] The original Vallejo meaning, "for their benefit" is preserved, but because the line is used seemingly as part of a dedication, the reader might expect to find a different word in place of *por*—if not *a*, then *para*, which like *por*, also translates to English as "for," but rather in the sense of a recipient. The phrase *para el analfabeto,* which is not the phrase used by Vallejo but would be typical of a dedicatory line, would mean that *La storia* was a book "for the illiterate" in the sense that the book is intended for them. They are its ideal audience and its recipients; it is dedicated to them. In Morante's out-of-context citation, a part of this meaning remains—particularly when strengthened by the final *a quien escribo* ("to whom I write"), which makes little sense grammatically without the remainder of Vallejo's poem. Instead of **para** *el analfabeto*, however, Morante's dedicatory epigraph begins **por** *el*

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[207] Do it for the freedom of all,
of the exploited and the exploiter,
for a painless peace—I glimpse it
when I sleep at the foot of my forehead
and even more when I go around shouting—
and do it, I keep saying,
for the illiterate to whom I write,
for the barefoot genius and his lamb,
for the fallen comrades,
their ashes clasped to the corpse of a road! (Trans. Clayton Eshleman, 577).

[208] My grateful thanks to the Hispanists Alison Atkins and Anais Holgado-Lage for their help in interpreting this difficult line and its relation to the original poem.

analfabeto. In the absence of the rest of Vallejo's poem, the *por* phrase, in addition to meaning "for the benefit of the illiterate," suggests a meaning of "for the illiterate" in the sense that it is written instead of them, in their place, speaking for them, or on their behalf. In other words, because they are illiterate and thus cannot write, I will write the book *for* them.[209]

As a result of this proliferation of possible meanings, the epigraph *por el analfabeto a quien escribe* simultaneously a variety of ethical paradoxes. What does it mean to write a book to those who cannot read it? Perhaps more pressingly, what are the ethical implications of writing on their behalf? Is it morally permissible to write a book on behalf of this "third species" that cannot write, to appropriate their experience and imagine what it might have been? Or, on the other hand, is it a moral obligation to give voice to the voiceless through whatever means necessary? It seems both morally impermissible and ethically necessary to tell the stories of the individuals who have been erased from history, those whom history passes over in silence. Ultimately, it is a question of whether such a book (which would inevitably need to be produced, to a certain extent, by the imagination) would serve as a way to remember the illiterate, or as procedure for forgetting them.

By calling *La storia* primarily a product of the imagination, I do not wish to imply that Morante did not do the necessary research. Like any good teller of a historical story, she clearly read a great deal of the interminable bibliography dedicated to the second World War in order to make her imagination more historically accurate, to minimize the violence of appropriating their story. But in writing a book for the illiterate, Morante has set herself a Utopian task. Having identified this third species as precisely those who leave no trace of their existence, she has made their story by definition inaccessible to the methodology of the historian. Any *reading* she might do to better understand the illiterate (e.g., those who cannot read) would only function to further separate her from them. This is a realm, such as Calvino's Utopia, that can only be accessed via the imagination.

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[209] Isolated from all context, *por el analfabeto* also has the flavor of a toast or celebration of the illiterate.

This is what makes *La storia* so interesting and problematic on the level of ethics and representation. There is a clear violation that might be condemned under the banner of something akin to cultural appropriation. In writing a book *por el analfabeto*, Elsa Morante (or any literate writer for that matter) is telling the story of people who are different than she is. They differ from her, moreover, in a fundamental epistemological respect: they cannot read or write. This alone suffices to make them deeply and profoundly other. Given that the labor of telling their story must be performed by the imagination, the result is a kind of epistemological colonialism. Recall that Calvino's Marco Polo inevitably perceived and imagined the cities he visited from a specific point of view: Venice, the native city of the mind. As a human being, Morante too departs from a certain place: a subjectivity that is profoundly different from her illiterate subjects. There is a reductive violence in such a methodology, even when the impulse to imagine others comes from a place of generosity.

Indeed, where precisely is the generosity in writing a book to the illiterate? What is the purpose of bestowing a gift on someone who cannot use it? Might it be, perhaps, that the gift is not the unreadable book itself, but the rather the process of writing such a book? Perhaps it is a book written for the illiterate in the sense that writing the book would lead the author herself to a different kind of understanding and compassion for their sense of otherness. Despite a profound difference in terms of perspective, Morante (1912-1985) also lived through the years she describes as an embodied person. She would have been in her early thirties during the primary years, 1941-1947, that are imagined in *La storia*. Might the effort of researching a writing be a way, albeit imperfect, to attempt to gain an understanding and compassion for the illiterate? In this sense, however, does it truly redound to the benefit of the illiterate or to the benefit of the author herself? If Morante gains a better understanding of the illiterate, is this really beneficial for them?

There is a character in the novel *La storia*, Davide Segre, who attempts to do just such a

thing: to write upon his own body, to write as a kind of embodied experience.[210]

> In reality, Davide told himself, the true meaning of his present act lay
> precisely in his subjecting himself voluntarily to such an aberrant misdeed.
> This, in fact, was his pledge: to write the infamy of the worker's experience
> not on paper, but on his own body, like a bloodstained text: in which his
> IDEAL would become living, to cry the Revolution and to liberate the
> world!! (434)[211]

Before he decides to write on his body, there is Davide's fervent desire to write a book: "And

among these [plans] the first, perhaps the most urgent, was to write a book: with the writing of a

book, he had declared, you can change the life of all mankind" (461).[212] But his project ends in

failure. Although he does write poetry, Davide never writes the book that would change the life of

all mankind. Moreover, he never really learns to understand the working classes, or how to speak

their language: "Rather, because of his different social class, they seemed to consider him descended

from a kind of decayed nobility, if not actually from an obscure planet" (630).[213]

Davide's failure to communicate with the working class is made painfully clear in an

extended scene—highly reminiscent of Renzo's trip to the osteria described in Chapter Four—in

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[210] Writing on the body is a theme in *La storia*, particularly the way in which History is inscribed on the bodies of the poor. Useppe's physical malnourishment clearly communicates his experience in wartime as Ida walks the streets convinced that both her Jewishness and her rape at the hands of German soldier are somehow written on her skin: "E le pareva che le sue membra proiettava sui scolari e su tutti quanti il disonore dello stupro e che sulla sua faccia, come su una cera bagana, fossero impressi i segni di baci. Nella sua vita, fuori di Alfio essa non aveva mai accostato a nessun uomo, nemmeno col pensiero; e adesso la sua avventura le pareva scritta dovunque, come un adulterio clamoroso." (Morante 82)

[211] "In realtà, si diceva Davide, proprio nel consegnarsi, lui stesso, a un misfatto così aberrante, stava il senso della sua azione attuale. Appunto questo, difatti, era il suo impegno: di scrivere l'infamia dell'esperienza operaia non sulla carta, ma sul proprio corpo, come un testo sanguinoso! Nel quale la sua IDEA si renderebbe vivente, per esclamare la Rivoluzione e liberare il mondo!!" (Morante 415-416)

[212] "E fra questi [progetti] il primo: con la scrittura di un libro, gli aveva dichiarato, si può trasformare la vita di tutta quanta l'umanità." (Morante 410)

[213] "Piuttosto, a motive della sua classe sociale differente, sembravano considerarlo disceso da una sorta di nobilità decaduta, se non addirittura da un pianeta oscuro." (Morante 560).

which Davide similarly unleashes a river of words while drinking in an osteria. He is overwhelmed

not by a concrete message, so much as by the sheer desire to speak something:

> Why, or of what, he talked so much, Davide himself didn't know. At present, his voice […] could be heard drilling on a point his listeners couldn't be persuaded to take up, no matter how stubbornly he reiterated it: he was accusing everyone—not only his audience, but all living people, in general— of willful reticence on the subject of the last war and its millions of dead. Nobody wanted to talk about it anymore, as if the matter were settled: this was the point he kept hammering home.[214] (632)

Unlike Renzo, it is not truly the wine (at least not initially) that makes Davide loquacious, it is the

feeling that History had inscribed something within him—that it had penetrated his silence—and he

was now called upon to exorcise it like a kind of demon or a bout of *tarantismo*. Precisely why Davide

found himself in that osteria is somewhat unclear, but once there he becomes aware of the sheer

"ordinariness" of the place and is overwhelmed by a desire to speak:

> And it was only at the moment when he opened his mouth that he realized his real desire, today, was to *speak*. […] It was a battle, to be faced today, without hesitation; and then, after the victory, he would rest. If he had to make a speech, or rather a lecture, he didn't care about knowing it ahead of time. He was certain of only one thing: that these were *urgent communications*! […] To speak, yes; but beginning where? From when?[215] (633-634, italics original)

The problem is not that he has nothing to say. He has too much to say, too much to communicate

and no idea how to communicate it in a kind of solid, comprehensible form. There is no way to

make it all make sense, or to really do it justice, but all of it cannot simply be forgotten! We cannot

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[214] "Perché, o di che cosa, parlasse tanto, Davide non lo sapeva nemmeno lui. […] Presentemente, si udiva la sua voce […] ribattere su una questione che i circostanti non si decidevano a raccogliere, per quanto lui si intessasse a reiterarla: accusava, cioè, tutti quanti – non solo gli astanti, ma tutti i viventi in generale – di reticenza volontaria a proposito dell'ultima guerra e dei suoi milioni di morti. Come si tratasse di un affare liquidato, nessuno più voleva parlarne: questo era il chiodo sul quale lui ribatteva." (562)

[215] "E solo al momento di aprir bocca, si rese conto che la sua vera voglia, oggi, era di *parlare*. […] Era una battaglia, da affrontarsi oggi, senza ritardo; e allora, dopo la vittoria, lui si sarebbe riposato. Se poi dovesse tenere un colloquio, o una conferenza piuttosto, non gli importava saperlo prima. Di una sola cosa era certo: che si trattava di *comunicazioni urgenti!* […] *Parlare*, sì; ma incominciando da dove? da quando?" (564).

simply go about our lives as if it didn't happen! Someone has to talk about all of these things! Meditate that *this* has existed.

It might have been a time of relative peace, but what could the word "peace" even mean if the dead or forgotten or, at best, filed away and replaced by rituals and monuments:

> To use the word PEACE for certain intrigues is … is pornography! It's spitting on the dead! But, of course, as far as the dead are concerned, you make an approximate count, and then they're filed away: dead files! On anniversaries, gentlemen in mourning clothes carry a wreath to the unknown soldier.[216] (Morante 635)

And so Davide, unsure of precisely how to deliver these urgent communications, just unleashes all of it at once. It is, as Cristina della Coletta puts it, "a drunken and unconnected speech, an ideological cauldron mixing anarchic, Marxist, and loosely evangelical inspirations, climaxing in his Franciscan view of the messiah who silently exists within every leper, beggar-woman, or idiot child" (*Plotting the Past* 150). He tries to prepare himself first, to set up for himself a schematic, step-by-step argument in the mind, but the end result is just an endless deluge of intellectual-sounding words.

For the listeners in the osteria, all of this philosophizing means next to nothing. It is received "at most, as an acoustical phenomenon" (637). It serves as mere background noise as the customers in the tavern go about their business playing cards, drinking, and talking about soccer. Davide, of course, is aware that his message is not connecting:

> This multitude, however, was fairly distracted (he was aware of that) or even alienated from him: some played cards, some listened to the songs; and though an old man or two, in the second rows, nodded at some of his phrases, he could see (with a curious lucidity) that those were almost mechanical movements, rather of vacuous amazement than of participation. "What the hell am I saying?" he asked himself curtly. (656)

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[216] "Usare la parola PACE per certi intralazzi, è… è pornografia! È sputare sui morti! Ma già, i morti, se ne fa un conto approssimativo, e poi vanno in archivio: pratiche estinte! Per le ricorrenze, dei signori in tight portano una corona al milite ignoto" (Morante 565).

It's a decent question. David's speech is passionate, angry, and—although quite boring and perplexing for the listeners in the tavern—actually quite engaging for the reader. Nothing he says is completely out of left field, but his method of delivery is unhinged. He is all over the place, jumping from one topic to the next, speaking in metaphorical images and sentence fragments. In order to give a bit of the flavor of his discourse, here are a few highlights of Davide's verbal outburst (ellipses not enclosed by brackets are original, bracketed ellipses are mine):

> – [A]ll History is a history of fascisms, more or less disguised […] The system never changes … it was called religion, divine right, glory, honor, spirit, future … all pseudonyms … all masks […] and it's no accident that, in its language, mankind is called MASSES, which means inert matter … And so, here we are … this poor matter, material for work and labor, becomes fodder for extermination and destruction … Extermination camps … they've already found the earth's new name … Extermination industry, this is the system's real name today! […] *Quieren carne de hombres*!![217] (636-637)

> – [T]he famous established eternal universal system of exploitation, etc., by definition is always attached to property, whether private or governmental … And by definition it's racist … And by definition it has to produce itself and consume itself and reproduce itself through oppression and aggression and invasions and various wars … it can't escape from this circle … And its vaunted "revolutions" can be understood only in the astronomical meaning of the word, which means: motion of bodies around a center of gravity. Which center of gravity, always the same, is: Power. Always one: POWER …[218] (638-639)

> – In the all-one, death is nothing. Does the light suffer, if you or I close our eyelids?! Unity of consciousness: this is the victory of the revolution over death, the end of History, and the birth of God! That God created man is another of the many fairy tales; on the contrary, it's from man that God must

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[217] "che insomma *tuta* la Storia *l'è* una storia di fascismi più o meno larvati […] Il sistema non cambia mai… se *ciamàva religion*, dritto divino, gloria, onore, spirito, avvenire… *tuti* pseudonimi… *tute* maschere […] e non per niente, nella sua lingua, l'umanità viene nominata MASSA, che vuol dire *materia inerte*… E così, ormai ci siamo…questa povera materia di servissio e de fatica, se rende una pasta de sterminio e disintegrassione… *Campi di sterminio*… il nuovo nome della terra l'hanno già trovato… *Industria dello sterminio*… questo è il vero nome odierno del sistema!"(Morante 566)

[218] "che quel famoso sistema istituito eterno universale della sopraffazione ecc. per *definissione* si tiene sempre incollato al patrimonio, di proprietà privata o statale che sia… E per definizione è razzista… E per definizione deve *produrse e consumarse e riprodurse* attraverso le oppressioni e le aggressioni e le invasioni e le guerre varie… non può sortire da questo giro… E le sue pretese «rivoluzioni» si possono intendere solo nel senso astronomico della parola che significa: moto dei corpi intorno a un centro di gravità. Il quale centro di gravità, sempre lo stesso, qua è: il Potere. Sempre uno: il POTERE…" (Morante 568)

be born. And we're still waiting for his birth; but maybe God will never be born. There's no more hope in the true revolution…[219] (641-642)

– But the bourgeois Power, in its passage, leaves only a slimy, repulsive streak, an infected pus. Wherever it puts down roots, it reduces all living substance—indeed, all inanimate substance—to corruption and rot, like leprosy … and it feels no shame! In fact, shame is a sign of consciousness—and the bourgeois have amputated consciousness, which is man's honor. They think they are whole beings, whereas they're maimed.[220] (645)

Just as the reader of the *Promessi sposi* recognizes some of Manzoni's beliefs about language in Renzo's speech, the reader of *La storia* likely recognizes several of the overriding thematic preoccupations of the novel in Davide's impassioned diatribe against, well, against everything. His speech, like the novel, functions as "an act of accusation and a prayer" (2). Everything is guilty and everything is holy, in equal measure. This is certainly not an alien message. Indeed, the previous sentence about all-encompassing guilt and holiness might serve as something of a mantra for the novel as a whole.

It is therefore tempting, as some critics have done, to see Davide—even in this somewhat less-than-eloquent moment—as a kind of mouthpiece for Morante herself. "A fierce anarchist and lifelong Marxist, Morante created Davide partially in her image," writes Risa Sodi, who identifies Davide as "both mouthpiece and target" for Morante (199, 206). It is undeniable that Davide (much more than Ida or any other character who has been proposed as an alter ego for the author) shares certain similarities with his Morante. A young Jew (he is probably about the same age Morante would have been at the time), Davide is the only well-educated individual among the main characters

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[219] "Nel tutti-uno la morte non è niente: forse che la luce soffre se tu, o io, chiudiamo le palpebre?! Unità della coscienza: questa è la vittoria della rivoluzione sulla morte, la fine della Storia, e la nascita di Dio! Che Dio abbia creato l'uomo, è un'altra delle tante favole, perché invece, al contrario, è dall'uomo che Dio deve nascere. E ancora si aspetta la sua nascita; ma forse Dio non sarà mai nato. Non c'è più *speransa* nella vera rivoluzione…" (Morante 571)

[220] "Ma il Potere borghese, sul suo passaggio, non lascia che una striscia bavosa repulsiva, un pus d'infezione. Dove attacca, riduce ogni sostanza vitale – anzi, perfino ogni sostanza inanimata – a necrosi e marciume, come fa la lebbra… e non se ne vergogna! Difatti la vergogna è ancora un segnale della coscienza – e i borghesi, la coscienza, l'hanno amputata. Si credono degli esseri interi, mentre sono dei monconi." (Morante 574-574)

in *La storia*. He is an anarchist, he reads poetry and aspires to be a writer. What is the ethical obligation of such an individual who has lived through the horrors of that war? "To speak, yes; but beginning where? From when?" (634).

The extended scene of Davide in the osteria can be interpreted as a restaging of Morante's own Utopian project in *La storia*: to write a historical novel of World War II *por el analfabeto a quien escribo*, to write a book for and on behalf of the illiterate, a book for their benefit. Though the listeners in the tavern are not illiterate per se, it is clear that they belong to a different social class than Davide. They listen from an entirely different place. The cavernous disconnect, the failure of communication between Davide and his listeners is hammered home again and again throughout the scene. No one listens to him—or, to be more precise, no one really hears him—because he speaks from a place they are not prepared to understand. And who can blame them? They have not come to this osteria to speak about the war or about History with a capital H. They have come to play cards, to talk about soccer and family, to drink wine, and to listen to music.

A constant theme of Morante's novel is how the impact of History strikes hardest at those who do not understand it, those who are incapable of understanding it. While Davide speaks, his listeners interject occasionally, distractedly trying steer the conversation back closer to their own arena of experience and understanding:

> – "What might this good revolution be, then?" the proprietor asked from his counter, giving Davide a lazy glance. Without awaiting a reply, however, he resumed the argument already begun with the fans, exclaiming in their direction, somewhat heatedly: "If you ask me, it was the referee who screwed things up."[221](637)

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[221] «E quale sarebbe, questa rivoluzione buona?» si informò dal suo banco l'oste, allungando a Davide un'occhiata pigra. Però senza aspettare la resposta, ripreso dalla discussione già iniziata con gli sportivi, rivoltandosi a costoro esclamò, con una certa foga: «Secondo me, là il pasticcio l'aveva combinato l'arbitro» (Morante 567).

– "But what God do you believe in?" Clemente interrupted him, his mouth half-twisted, his question already denoting a derogatory opinion of the man questioned.[222] (640-641)

– "All the same, a little million would come in handy for me." At this point the unexpected voice of the peddler was heard, with a sigh. And in his eyes, worn and small as two pennies, there was the expanse of a legendary vision: perhaps a stupendous supermarket of his own property, brimming with tons of fritters and peanuts…[223] (643)

– "All right, all right, we get it!" the usual carefree voice arrived from the radio listeners, "the bourgeois give you a pain in the ass." And Davide in reply, charged with greater emphasis his uninterrupted series of bad words, which, for that matter, exploded as harmlessly as firecrackers amid his present audience.[224] (646)

By far the most heartbreaking scene exchange involves Davide's discussion of his family. For the first time, discussion of his family had roused some real interest in the spectators, who once again try to divert Davide's abstract philosophizing towards concrete questions. Where is your family now? Is your sister pretty?

"And where's your family now?" the man with the bloodshot eyes asked, with interest. But Davide didn't answer his question, nor did he show any reaction to the interruption except a vacant glance, returning at once, as if pressed, to tell his rosary of charges: there was nothing, in his family's existence, nothing that wasn't counterfeit and polluted: their actions, their vocabulary, their thoughts. […] His father was considered by all a respectable man, his mother a lady above reproach, his sister a well-raised little girl, *a putèla bene allevata* […]

"Is she a pretty girl, your sister?" the old man with the medal asked him, directly, at this point.

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[222] «Ma tu, in Dio ci credi?» lo interrupe Clemente, con una mezza bocca storta, che detonava, già dentro l'interrogazione, un giudizio spregiativo sull'interrogato. (Morante 570)

[223] «Eppure un milioncino mi farebbe comodo», suonò qua, inattesa, in un sospiro, la voce del venditore ambulante. E nei suoi occhi, scialbi e piccoli come due centesimi, spaziò una grande visione di leggenda: forse uno stupendo supermercato, suo di proprietà, straripante a quintali di mostaccioli e noccioline… (Morante 572)

[224] «E vabbè, t'avemo capito!» sopravvenne la solita voce spensierata dalla parte dei radioascoltanti, «a te i borghesi te stanno sui coglioni» E Davide, in risposta, caricò di maggior enfasi la serie ininterrotta delle sue *parolacce*, le quali, peraltro, scoppiavano innocue come petardi fra il suo presente uditorio. (Morante 575).

> "… Yes …" Davide answered, dumbfounded, after a moment, "she's pretty […] but she's stupid …" he added, in the tone of certain fifteen-year-old brothers who, embarrassed, pretend to taunt.[225] (652-653)

It is strongly implied, both in this scene and elsewhere in the novel, that Davide's family—the bourgeois family he professes such hatred for—was killed in the Holocaust, most likely by the poison gas Zyklon B. But beyond occasionally mentioning the word *mucchio* or "pile," Davide speaks little about his family's fate.

Instead, to the delight of at least one listener, Davide (nostalgically or derisively?) recounts the emotions, fears, and gullibility of his sister:

> "Any nonsense is enough to make her laugh: you just have to whisper into her ear, pretending it's some big secret, a word you've invented at random, which doesn't mean anything, like *perepè* or *bomborombò*, and she'll explode right away in terrific laughter! […] She thinks that if you plant a pearl, a necklace will grow, or maybe that a donkey was born of the cart; and if her girlfriends disagree with these opinions of hers, she says they're ignorant … She strokes her dolls as if they were cats purring, and she ties ribbons on the puppy, convinced she's doing him a favor … But she's afraid of big dogs … She's even afraid of thunder …"
>
> This information about the nameless sister was received, on Useppe's part, with a series of laughs, in which you could sense, beyond his amusement, a hint of boasting. In fact, among the subjects dealt with today by Davide, all more or less abstruse and inaccessible to him, it was a matter of personal satisfaction to encounter one that belonged to him at last, within his experience.[226] (653-654)

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[225] «E dove si trova, adesso, la tua famiglia?» s'interessò, a questo punto, l'ometto degli occhi sanguinosi. Ma Davide non rispose alla sua domanda, né mostrò di reagire all'interruzione altro che con uno sguardo vacuo, tornando poi súbito, e quasi di rincorsa, a sgranare il suo rosario d'imputazioni. Che non c'era niente, nell'esistenza della sua famiglia, niente che non fosse contraffatto e inquinato: né i loro gesti, né il loro vocabolario, né i loro pensieri. […] Suo padre veniva stimato da tutti un galantuomo, sua madre una signa senza macchia, sua sorella una *putèla* bene allevata […]
«È una bella ragazza, tua sorella?» lo interpellò qua, direttamente, il vecchio dalla medagliuccia.
«…Sì…» rispose Davide, interdetto, dopo un istante, «è *belina* […] però è stupida…» aggiunse, colo tono di certi fratelli quindicenni che, per pudore, fanno mostra di canzonare. (Morante 582)

[226] «A farla ridere, qualsiasi stupidaggine è buona: basta borbottarle in un orecchio, fingendo un gran segreto, una parola improvvisata lì a caso che non significa nulla, come *perepè* o *bomborombò*, che lei sbotta senz'altro in una risata fenomenale! […] Crede che, a seminare una perlina, nasce una collana, o magari che il somaro sia stato partorito dal carretto; e se le amiche sue la contestano in queste sue opinioni, lei dice che sono ignoranti… Carezza le bambole come fossero gatti che usano, e agghinda di fiocchi il cagnolino, convinto di fargli un piacere… Però, dei cani grossi ha paura… Si spaventa perfino del tuono…»
Tali notizie sulla innominata sorella vennero accolte, dalla parte di Useppe, con una fila di risate, nelle quali si poteva avvertire, oltre allo spasso, un sapore di vanto. Difatti, fra le materie oggi trattate da Davide, a lui tute, più o meno,

This final line is the key to the sequence. Useppe's response encapsulates the attitude of all of Davide's listeners in the osteria. It is not that they don't care about all of the things that Davide is trying to say: the listeners are no way implicated or criticized for the fact that they *should* care about anarchy or class struggle, about human suffering or religious mysticism. It is that such things are inaccessible to them. Unlike a topic like Davide's family, for example, such things are simply not within their experience.

But who precisely are these listeners? They are not real historical individuals; they are Morante's own invention. And so the question of ethics and identity returns with a vengeance: what right does Morante have to imagine this class of people? To tell her readers what such individuals do and do not understand about history or the class struggle? Isn't she simply inventing a group of characters with little or no class consciousness, with no capacity to understand or ask questions about history? I am certainly not the first reader to voice this critique of *La storia*. Indeed, following the best-selling novel's release in 1974, it sparked an intense debate about its use of language, its highly traditional style, and its depiction of the lower classes. Many well-respected intellectuals (including, notably the Nobel prize-winner Natalia Ginzburg) praised the novel for its accessibility and grace, while certain left-wing critics panned it for imagining a class of helpless "eternal victims of history." Walter Pedullà called *La storia* excessively traditional, criticizing it for an ideology that would seemingly ineluctably condemn the poor to a state of subaltern immobility. According to Pedullà, Morante had forced them to speak a false, manufactured language. Rather than creating a novel for the illiterate, Pedullà suggests that she had created one whose function was to console bourgeois readers with its reassuring sentimentality. Rossana Rossanda too pointed at the immobility of Morante's portrait of the subaltern:

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astruse o inaccessabili, per lui era un titolo di soddisfazione personale d'incontrarne una che appartenesse, alfine, anche alla sua competenza. (Morante 582-583)

> The limitation of Morante [...] is that the only world she can conceive of is one of the humiliated and the offended who are unavoidably condemned to be victims because of poverty, or because of complex conditions of marginalization or difference, or because of generational collapse or, at times, even because of war or the condition of Jewishness. [...] There are those who make history and those who endure it: between these two levels there exists no possibility of interaction, unless it is unilateral.[227] (Reprinted in Bernabò 124. My translation).

For Alberto Asor Rosa, not only Morante's characters but also her readers were immobilized by the novel, which deployed the myth of a "language accessible to all" to create a kind of spectacular appeal reminiscent of the *kolossal storici* in the early days of Italian cinema. There is also the letter of July 18, 1974—signed by Nanni Balestrini and others—entitled simply *Contro il romanzone della Morante*, "Against Morante's Giant Novel," that accuses the work of being an "elegy of resignation" which is written in a false and mannered language apt to serve only the interests of the dominant class. The criticism was directed, in other words, not so much at the novel's historical content but at the portion of this mixed composition that was "invented": precisely what was added stylistically and ideologically by its author in filling the gaps left open in the past.[228] In other words, left-wing critics offered a critique of *La storia* that ran parallel to Pasolini's critique of neorealist film. After ostensibly setting out to fill in some of the gaps and silences passed over by official history, both Morante's novel and early neorealist films had—in Pasolini's opinion—ultimately told a story that was sentimental and somewhat reassuring rather than a truthful or beneficial portrayal of the subaltern.[229]

In his own fascinating review of *La storia*, Pasolini did a bit of both praising and panning, dividing the novel into three parts. He praised the first, panned the second, and gave the third a

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[227] "il limite della Morate [...] è [...] il non risucir a concepire che un mondo di umiliati e offesi, che la povertà, o complesse condizioni di emarginazione o devianza, o tracolli generazionali o, stavolta, la guerra e la condizione dell'ebraismo, condannano ad essere ineluttabilmente vittime. [...] Fra questi due livelli non esiste interazione possibile, se non unilaterale: c'è chi fa la storia, e color che la subiscono." (Rossanda, cited in Bernabò 124).

[228] For a useful compendium of critical responses, including excerpts, see Bernabò pp. 91-144.

[229] The Italian word I want, which struggles to find a perfect English expression, is *consolatorio*.

mixed review. What Pasolini appreciated most in the *primo libro* was the sheer incompatibility of the

lives narrated with the ongoing march of History:

> The novel is structured as a juxtaposition of life and History: between each of the novel's chapters (organized as year-by-year annals) there are even brief digressions that summarize—in the style of a history textbook—objective historical events from 1941 to 1967. In the first book, this device, and we might call it a structural device, is extraordinarily effective. Why? Because the life that is opposed to History is a life of the dead, and therefore a life that is not exalted and instrumentalized as such. There is a real incompatibility between this life and History. The opposition cannot be dialectic: and so it doesn't run the risk of becoming ideological or fanciful. This is just what things are like, and that's that.[230] (Reprinted in Bernabò 121. My translation)

Pasolini appreciated, for example, the fact that Ida's ancestors had a "non-ideological" death: "This

allows their life, once ended, to be expressed completely: it allows their life to be what it is and

nothing else" (Reprinted in Bernabò 121. My translation).[231]

So what are we to make of a novel like *La storia*? Is it a tool for memorialization or an

instrument for forgetting or distorting the past? It is a hard question, but Morante it seems was quite

aware of questions like these. There is an awareness, embedded in the epigraph, of The Pact of

Geryon: the idea that writing a book *por el analfabeto*—representing the war to, for, on behalf of, in

place of and instead of the illiterate victims of history—is a fundamentally transgressive choice. As

with Elena Ferrante (and, perhaps, Anita Raja), the morality of Morante's novel is not to be found in

her decision to imagine the lives of people who are very different than she is. It is to be found

instead in the end result. Ultimately, it boils down to that uncomfortable question at the crossroads

of ethics and aesthetics, judgment and taste: is *La storia* a "good" book? Although individual critics

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[230] "L'insieme del romanzo si configura come un confronto tra la vita e la Storia: tra un capitolo e l'altro del romanzo (concepito ad annali) ci sono infatti brevi inserti che riassumono gli avvenimenti storici oggettivi – con stile da manuale – dal 1941 al 1967. Nel «primo libro» questa è una trovata, diciamo «strutturale», straordinaria. Perché? Perché la vita che si oppone alla Storia è una vita di morti, e quindi una vita non esaltata e strumentalizzata in quanto tale. C'è una reale in-compatibilità tra essa e la Storia. L'opposizione non può essere dialettica: e quindi non rischia di essere ideologica e velleitaria. Le cose stanno così e basta…."

[231] "Essa consente dunque alla loro vita, finita, di essere totalmente espressa: di essere questa e non altra."

and readers have and will continue to disagree about the value of Morante's novel, one thing can be agreed upon: it exists. Morante has signed the Pact of Geryon. There is something—indeed something quite substantial, a thousand-page novel—rather than nothing. At the very least, *La storia* functions as a means of keeping alive a discussion about the history of an oft-forgotten group of individuals. And that ongoing debate is what will keep this imperfect novel—and others like it— alive and churning as a space for historical re-imagination and ethical debate.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become. Conversely, the absolute absence of burden causes man to be lighter than air, to soar into heights, take leave of the earth and his earthly being, and become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant. What then shall we choose? Weight or lightness?

– Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

In Search of an Ethics: Pirandello and the Unbearable Lightness of Words

"The years in which Pirandello wrote *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and *Henry IV* were the years of the post-war political crisis and the triumph of fascism" (Giudice *Pirandello* 143, Trans. Alastair Hamilton).[232] This is the very first sentence of the chapter dedicated fascism in Gaspare Giudice's influential 1963 biography of Luigi Pirandello. Understood in the proper context, it is quite a staggering statement. This giant of Italian literature wrote his two most celebrated plays during the height of a political crisis unfolding in his own country. Rather than addressing that crisis, however, the plays were deeply metaliterary and self-referential. In other words, rather than donning the mantle of engaged artist by directly representing the political or historical world around him, Pirandello retreated even further inward by creating works that seem, almost to an unsettling degree, quite timeless.

The apparent separation between Pirandello's plays and his historical-political world is not unique to these two great works. Giudice points out that two of Pirandello's plays, *L'imbecille* and *Vestire gli ignudi*, were being staged in Rome at the *Teatro Quirino* during the fascists' March on Rome in late October 1922. And yet, according to Giudice, Pirandello's plays seemed to be unfolding in a different, completely disconnected world:

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[232] Gli anni in cui Pirandello scrive e dà alle scene *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* e l'*Enrico IV*, sono gli anni stessi della crisi politica del dopoguerra e dell'avvento del fascismo. (Giudice 413)

Both plays, as well as later ones, serve to mark the immense distance between external events such as the development of fascism and the inner chamber in which Pirandello's creation took place. […]. This same distance continues to exist in almost all his later works, which do at times show concessions and imperceptibly blurred and transposed affinities with the "new times," but never engage with fascism as an ideology. (144, translation altered)[233]

Indeed, it might be fairly said that topics like history and politics are conspicuously absent from nearly all of Pirandello's theater. This absence is even more striking considering the timing of his theatrical writing, which stretched from about 1910 until his death in 1936. Among other things, these were the years of the Italo-Turkish War (1911-12), World War I (1914-1918), Gabriele D'Annunzio's *impresa di fiume* (1919-1920), Mussolini's March on Rome (1922), the murder of Giacomo Matteotti (1924), the Second Italo-Ethiopian War (1935-1936), and the vast majority of the *ventennio fascista* (1924-1943). It was, in other words, not exactly an uneventful time period in the peninsula. A better case could be made that it was in fact the most artistically fecund period for Italy in the 20th century. And so how is it that one of the country's so-called great artists, a Nobel prize-winner, had so little to say about such things? Does an ethically based approach to literary criticism demand that Pirandello be discounted as ethically insignificant? Or can his ethical center be located outside any concrete, easily detectable form of engagement with contemporary reality?

Before moving towards a kind of answer, let me start by addressing the elephant in the room. Wasn't Pirandello an unrepentant fascist? Well, yes and no. Letizia Argenti puts it this way, "both statements—that Pirandello was a fascist and Pirandello was never a fascist—are gross simplifications" (131). There is a marked difference, in other words, between Pirandello's adherence

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[233] "mostrano una vertiginosa distanza fra le vicende esterne, fascismo o meno, e la camera interiore in cui si sviluppa la creazione pirandelliana. […] La quale distanza continuerà a sussistere in quasi tutte le opere successive, che risentiranno di altri cedimenti e di impercettibili sfumate e trasposte affinità con i tempi nuovi; ma non col fascismo come ideologia." (Giudice 415). The alteration to the translation reflects the fact that a portion of Giudice's original is absent from Hamilton's translation.

to fascism as a private citizen and as public intellectual (which is, of course, well-documented)[234] and

the lack of concrete pro-fascist political content expressed in his fiction. Pirandello did publicly and

unambiguously voice his adherence to fascism several times and, unlike many other intellectuals who

flirted with the regime, he never fully withdrew his support for Mussolini.[235]

Given the controversy it generated as well as its timing, just a few months after the

kidnapping and murder of prominent anti-fascist politician Giacomo Matteotti, Pirandello's most

important public statement endorsing fascism was a letter sent to Mussolini which was reprinted in

L'Impero on September 19th, 1924:

> Your Excellency, I feel that this is the most propitious moment for me to
> declare a loyalty which I have hitherto observed in silence. If Your
> Excellency finds me worthy to join the Partito Nazionale Fascista I will
> consider it the greatest honour to become one of your humblest and most
> obedient followers. With utter devotion.[236]
> – *L'Impero*, September 19th, 1924 (reprinted in Giudice, *Pirandello* 150)

An editorial comment printed alongside Pirandello's letter in *L'Impero* frames it as "an act of courage

and faith," positioning the playwright's public profession of faith as a massive public relations

victory for the regime. As they quite hyperbolically put it, fascism could thus boast of having

attracted "the writer who is most representative of Italy and perhaps of Europe and one of the most

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[234] According to Ivan Pupo's *Interviste a Pirandello*, the playwright's earliest public expression of support for Mussollini came a couple months after the March on Rome in mid-December of 1922 in an interview Benedetto Migliore published in the *Giornale di Sicilia* on December 16-17 1922 (*Interviste* 186-190). There is also the short excerpt "La vita creata" (included below) which was published in *L'Idea Nazionale* on October 28, 1923—also prior to Pirandello's well-known letter of adherence to the party after Matteotti's murder in 1924.

[235] Upon his death Pirandello did, however, refuse an official state funeral (which is to say a fascist funeral). This refusal has been interpreted by some as a gesture to distance himself from fascism, but—particularly since his rationale for doing so is unknown—I believe this act falls far short of an official disavowal.

[236] "Eccellenza, sento che per me questo è il momento più propizio di dichiarare una fede nutrita e servita sempre in silenzio. Se l'E. V. mi stima degno di entrare nel Partito Nazionale Fascista, pregierò come massimo onore tenervi il posto del più umile e obbediente gregario. Con devozione intera."
– In *L'Impero*, September 19th, 1924 (Pirandello, reprinted in Giudice 425).

elevated spirits that honor the Nation today" (Giudice 426. My translation). An accompanying

editorial in *L'Impero* argued, in part, as follows:

> The writer who is most representative of Italy and perhaps of Europe and
> one of the most elevated spirits that honor the Nation today […] pledged his
> adherence to fascism in a letter […]. Surely Fascism must be a historical
> event of great importance if the most tormented spirit of the contemporary
> age, in his tormented negation of all certainties, sees Fascism as the only
> doctrine able to continuously create a new, contingent reality that can enable
> a great people to ascend towards a future of power.[237] (Reprinted in Giudice
> 151).

A few days later, *L'Impero* printed a long interview with the playwright, which was written and

conducted by the famously anti-Semitic and pro-fascist journalist Telesio Interlandi. The piece,

entitled "Why Pirandello is a Fascist," linked the future Nobel prize-winner to some of the most

extreme anti-democratic positions of fascism, including the suppression of the rival press.[238]

It seems to me that much of the question of Pirandello's fascism hinges on the Interlandi

piece. To what extent can or should "Why Pirandello is a Fascist" be taken as an accurate expression

of the playwright's own political beliefs? In this respect, it is significant that the piece is not

structured as a traditional interview. Interlandi offers a prose summary of his conversation with

Pirandello; he does not quote the author's precise statements (it is quite possible that Interlandi is

paraphrasing or combining other statements made by Pirandello). Giudice finds the piece to be

somewhat paradoxical, but nevertheless credible:

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[237] "Lo scrittore più rappresentativo d'Italia e forse d'Europa, uno dei più alti spiriti che onorino oggi la Patria, aderisce alla dottrina fascista con una lettera che è, soprattutto, un atto di fede. Se il più tormentato spirito dell'età contemporanea, nella sua spasimosa negazione d'ogni certezza vede il Fascismo come l'unica dottrina atta a creare di continuo una sempre nuova realtà contingente che può permettere a un grande popolo slanci verso un avvenire di potenza, veramente il Fascismo deve essere un fatto storico d'importanza capitale." (Pirandello, reprinted in Giudice 426)

[238] Pirandello did send a letter to Interlandi clarifying his position on this point, and this point alone: "Caro Interlandi, a chiarimento del mio pensiero, mi permetto di farle osservare che io non dissi così recisamente e crudamente come appare dalla sua intervista, che avrei voluto 'la soppressione della stampa avversaria'. Dissi che, applicato il decreto sulla stampa, come misura eccezionale per impedire una macabra e oscena propaganda d'odio partigiano, s'era represso ben poco e col solo risultato di render vana a un tempo e nociva l'applicazione di quel decreto […]. (Pirandello, reprinted in Giudice 430).

> Interlandi's report is occasionally something of a parody with respect to the plays and ideas of Pirandello, but it is not apocryphal: it is a faithful reproduction of the writer's words. Pirandello was later to sanction it. [239]
> (151)

One public statement by Pirandello (which seems to have been paraphrased by Interlandi) comes from "La vita creata," a short excerpt he wrote for an edition of *L'Idea Nazionale* (October 28th, 1923) composed on occasion of the first anniversary of the March on Rome, which marks it as one of the Sicilian author's first public statements about Mussolini. Here, Pirandello positions his worldview as a kind of precursor to fascism, explaining how he saw fascism as the political expression of one of his most consistent themes, the ongoing tragic conflict between life and form:

> Mussolini can receive only blessings from somebody who has always felt the immanent tragedy of life which […] requires a form, but senses death in every form it assumes. For, since life is subject to continual change and motion, it feels itself imprisoned by form: it rages and storms and finally escapes from it. Mussolini has shown that he is aware of this double and tragic law of movement and form, and hopes to conciliate the two. Form must not be a vain and empty idol. It must receive life, pulsating and quivering, so that it should be forever recreated and always prepared for the act that affirms it to itself and imposes it on others. The revolutionary movement inaugurated by Mussolini with the march on Rome and all the methods of his new government seem to me, in politics, the necessary realization of just this conception of life.[240] (Reprinted in Giudice 145)

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[239] "La relazione che Interlandi fa del colloquio e che subito riproduciamo, ha qua e là l'apparenza del paradosso e della parodia, rispetto al teatro e ai concetti pirandelliani di quei giorni, ma non è un apocrifo, è una riproduzione fedele delle parole dello scrittore. Fedele per due ragioni: la prima, perché Pirandello stesso aveva detto analoghe e quasi identiche cose, quando aveva già capziosamente distorto in chiave politica (*L'Idea Nazionale*, 28 ottobre 1923) i concetti di forma e vita, e quando (*Giornale d'Italia*, 8 maggio 1924) aveva espresso il suo disprezzo politico per le masse (e un implicito nietzschismo di marca fascista); la seconda, perché egli sottoscriverà in pieno l'articolo di Interlandi, smentendo, come si vedrà, confusamente, una sola di quelle dichiarazioni." (Giudice 427)

[240] "Non può non essere benedetto Mussolini, da uno che ha sempre sentito questa immanente tragedia della vita, la quale per consistere in qualche modo ha bisogno d'una forma; ma subito, nella forma in cui consiste, sente la morte; perché dovendo e volendo di continuo muoversi e mutare, in ogni forma si vede come imprigionata, e vi urge dentro e vi tempesta e la logora e alla fine ne evade: Mussolini che così chiaramente mostra di sentire questa doppia e tragica necessità della forma e del movimento, e che con tanta potenza vuole che il movimento trovi in una forma ordinata il suo freno, e che la forma non sia mai vuota, idolo vano, ma dentro accolga pulsante e fremente la vita, per modo che essa ne sia di momento in momento ricreata e pronta sempre all'atto che la affermi a se stessa e la imponga agli altri. Il moto rivoluzionario da Lui iniziato con la marcia su Roma e ora tutti i modi del suo nuovo governo mi sembrano, in politica, l'attuazione propria e necessaria di questa concezione della vita." (Pirandello, reprinted in Giudice p. 418)

On the basis of this perplexing statement alone, it is somewhat difficult to follow the logical connection between Pirandello's Bergsonian philosophizing and the political practices of fascist regimes. Indeed, one could be forgiven for simply having no idea what Pirandello is talking about.

But Interlandi is more than happy to translate Pirandello into more transparent rhetoric, filling in some of the necessary gaps to make the playwright's philosophizing sound quite fascist indeed:

> Fascism creates for itself, and imposes on those who are unable to create for themselves, a new reality […]. In this sense Pirandello sees Mussolini as a formidable creator of contingent realities, a superb animator and architect of life. […] And the people is the sum of the many beings incapable of creating their own reality: they require it from a great leader. Mussolini's task is to impose his own reality on the Italian people: and that reality, today, is fascism.[241] (Interlandi, cited in Giudice 428)

The passage cited above, purportedly written by Interlandi on the basis of his conversations with the playwright, certainly does appear quite consistent with Pirandello's thought. In fact, it seems to be the logical result of two strains of thought in Pirandello that are clearly undeniable: 1) his philosophy of conflict between life as movement and form as permanence and 2) his deeply undemocratic disdain for the masses. It is quite possible that, in writing the paragraph cited above, Interlandi is combining aspects of Pirandello's "La vita creata" with another of the playwright's public statements about democracy:

> The basic error on which the whole concept of American life is based is, in my opinion, the democratic concept of life. I am anti-democratic *par excellence*. The masses need someone to form them. Their needs and aspirations do not go beyond practical necessities. Well-being for the sake of well-being, riches

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[241] "Il Fascismo crea per sé, e impone, a quelli che non sanno crearsene una per proprio conto, la nuova realtà […]. In questo senso Pirandello vede in Mussolini un formidabile creatore di realtà contingenti, un superbo animatore, un artefice di vita […]. I popoli sono appunto la somma di tanti esseri incapaci di crearsi realtà proprie; le chiedono ai grandi capi. Mussolini ha il compito di imporre al popolo italiano la sua realtà: che è, oggi, il Fascismo. (Interlandi, cited in Giudice 428)

for the sake of riches, have no significance or value.[242] (*Il giornale d'Italia*, May 8th 1924. Reprinted in Giudice 148)

The common people, for Pirandello, lack the intelligence or introspection to see through the masquerade of day-to-day existence and adopt a more enlightened and cynical conception of life. In fact, using this idea as a starting point, virtually every one of Pirandello's plays enacts a conflict between a blind group of prisoners shackled by the masquerade of everyday life and one or more enlightened protagonists who rise above the *hoi polloi* by performing a kind of non-conformist, often irrational mental gymnastics aimed at altering their experience of reality.[243] In this sense, then, a typical Pirandello play can be read as quite fascist in content, despite the clearly apparent, "vertiginous distance" that separates its world from everyday political practices.

Returning to the Interlandi interview, it was this piece in particular that drew the ire of journalist and politician Giovanni Amendola, who published a scathing critique of Pirandello that branded him as *un uomo volgare*, a vulgar man, and kicked off a war of words between public intellectuals who attacked Pirandello and other equally prominent individuals who publicly came to his defense. Just after the controversy, Pirandello sought to distance himself from the entire affair. "My life is nothing but study…" he told Trieste's *Il piccolo* only a few weeks later on October 21st:

> I am isolated from the world and have only my work and my art. Politics? I have nothing to do with them, I have never had anything to do with them. If you are referring to my recent act of allegiance to fascism, I can tell you it was done to help fascism in its task of renovation and reconstruction […].[244] (reprinted in Giudice 156)

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[242] "L'errore fondamentale su cui riposa tutta la vita americana è quello stesso che, secondo me, informa la concezione democratica della vita. Sono antidemocratico per eccellenza. La massa per sé stessa ha bisogno di chi la formi, ha bisogni materiali, aspirazioni che non superano le necessità pratiche. Il benessere per il benessere, la ricchezza per la ricchezza non hanno né significato né valore." (Pirandello, reprinted in Giudice 422).

[243] They look to alter reality not, of course, by fighting to change it through praxis, but by working to change their own perception of it.

[244] "La mia vita non è che lavoro e studio. Le mie opere, che alcuni credono non meditate e buttate giù di getto, sono invece il risultato di un lungo periodo di incubazione spirituale. Sono isolato dal mondo e non ho che il mio lavoro e la mia arte. La politica? Non me ne occupo, non me ne sono mai occupato. Se alludete al mio recente atto di adesione al

This was not, of course, strictly true. Even if the highly public nature of Pirandello's support of fascism (and perhaps his private belief in the regime) would start to wane the years that followed.[245] Regardless of whether or not Pirandello was or remained a true believer in fascist ideas, he nevertheless continued to be quite cozy with the regime throughout the remainder of his life. He was happy to receive praise from Mussolini (who in fact once told Pirandello that he was a big fan of *Sei personaggi* and *Enrico IV*). Despite the decreasingly public nature of his fascism, Pirandello continued to benefit on a personal financial level from his support of the government, and he always remained anxious to curry favor in the hopes of pursuing one of his most important goals: the creation of an Italian National Theater.

Even if it is difficult to call Pirandello a true believer in the Fascist regime, we can quite comfortably say this: an anti-Fascist he was not. An advocate for justice and democracy? Hardly. Indeed, in "The Pact of Geryon," Luigi Pirandello functions as something of a deliberately chosen challenge case for the ethics of representation. I have chosen Pirandello, in part, in order to argue a specific point: ethics must be an operative and important category in assessing the work of art because of the *structure* of representation. Put another way, we must consider ethics not simply in cases when we believe that "what" is represented is important, but also simply because artistic representation always inevitably activates important ethical tradeoffs, compromises, and decisions. It is somewhat easier to make a case for the centrality of morality and ethics in speaking about authors

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fascismo, vi dirò che è stato compiuto allo scopo di aiutare il fascismo nella sua opera di rinnovamento e di ricostruzione" […]. (Pirandello, cited in Giudice 439).

[245] According to Argenteri, Pirandello was initially drawn to fascism by the what he considered to be the ideals of the movement but was never fully in line with the regime itself: "Pirandello's declaration perhaps regarded fascism more as a movement than as a regime since his perceptions of fascism were closer to the original, 'primitive' meaning of the term, in the way the young Mussolini had forged and conceived the movement. The creator of fascism in his youth had stressed the 'revolutionary,' antibourgeois component of the fascist movement […]. Let us not forget that Pirandello, like Mussolini, shared a genuine dislike for the bourgeoisie—a class that the writer frequently attacked in his work. […] Everything considered, Pirandello's behavior in 1924 was more a profession of faith in a movement than in a nascent regime." (130)

and causes (Sartre, Calvino, Levi, etc.) who found themselves on what I see as the right side of history. It is more difficult to make the case for someone like Pirandello who, at best, essentially opted out of the political sphere while allowing his prestige to be exploited by fascism. At worst, Pirandello can be quite convincingly accused of promoting a deeply relativistic and proto-existentialist worldview that found its natural political expression in fascism. There is no redemption to be found there.

Instead, perhaps there is content of ethical value to be found on the level of language itself, in Pirandello's almost monomaniacal obsession with language and its limitations. Few artists have spent as much energy reflecting upon and, indeed, dramatizing the potentialities of an art form and the pitfalls and limitations of human communication. A pressing concern with the ethics of representation is, of course, quite incompatible with the kind of linguistic relativism that is often erroneously associated with Pirandello. It is, after all, tempting to characterize Pirandello's approach to language as entirely relativistic: e.g., there is no correspondence between signifier and signified, communication is impossible because words mean something different to each speaker, etc. One can go on and on listing well-known Pirandello themes like these that point towards the fragility of language. And indeed, these themes lie at the heart of Pirandello's theater. There is an unbearable lightness to words. This lightness stems from their inconstancy, their malleability, their intermingling and contamination with the unceasing flux of life, *la vita*. But Pirandello's conception of language is more nuanced than this; the unbearable lightness of words is balanced by their paradoxically oppressive weight. The relativity of language that attaches to individual usage and utterances, to language as Saussurian *parole*, is balanced by the strange and terrifyingly heavy solidity of the socially constructed *langue*. Words can mean nothing on their own, but can mean everything to the extent they are believed: the weight of words is supplied by something akin to intersubjectivity or public opinion. Pirandello, mind you, may have reached what I regard to be entirely the wrong political

287

conclusions on the basis of this contradiction. The unbearable lightness of being requires the fascist strongman (or at least a kind of interventionist government structure) capable and willing to provide everyday practice with the necessary weight, imposing a set of meanings (and perhaps a set of enemies)—arbitrarily if need be—in order to provide a political center for ethical decisionmaking. Abstracted from politics, however, Pirandello's exploration of the dual nature of language fits quite comfortably within the overarching Sartrian theme of "The Pact of Geryon": words are not a gentle breeze, which plays lightly over the surface of things, which grazes them without altering them. The potential for alteration is consistent with the weight of words, but is this heaviness a necessary precondition for existence or a violence to be Utopianly avoided?

Given the events in the author's own personal biography (specifically, the paranoid schizophrenia of his wife Antonietta which culminated in her forty-year institutionalization in a mental hospital beginning in 1919) it is unsurprising that two of the words that most obsessed Pirandello were *pazzo* ("crazy") and *marito* ("husband"). For Pirandello, the meanings of these words are entirely relative. There is, of course, no singular definition of what it means to be a husband or a madman. And yet, when it comes to everyday practice, whatever provisory, temporary, and intersubjective meanings such words have at a given time will exercise real physical power over the bodies of human beings. Consider this soliloquy from Leone Gala, the enlightened *übermensch* protagonist of Pirandello's *Il giuoco delle parti* (1918):

> I assure you, however, that I make every effort to exist as little as possible—
> and not just for others, but also for myself. The fault lies with a single fact,
> my dear one! I was born. And when a fact exists it just lies there like a prison
> for you. I exist. And others should take this into account, at least for that
> little bit that absolutely I can't help… the little bit I exist. I married her; or, to
> be more fair, I let myself be married. Another fact: a prison! What do you
> want me to do about it? […] [T]he part—assigned to me by a fact that can't
> be destroyed—remains: I am the husband. (My translation, 292)[246]

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[246] "T'assicuro però che mi sforzo quanto più posso, d'esserci il meno possibile, e non solo per gli altri, ma anche per me stesso. La colpa è del fatto, caro mio! Sono nato. E quando un fatto è fatto, resta là, come una prigione per te. Io ci

In much the same vein, here is the elderly professor Agostino Toti from the early play *Pensaci,*

Giacomino! (1916):

> It means that you are exactly like all the others; they see the profession and
> miss the man! They hear of my getting married—they imagine a wife—and
> me as a husband—and they start to laugh. […] I will take a young woman—
> poor, pious, from a good family—and she will play the part of a wife before
> the State, otherwise the government wouldn't pay her the pension. But what
> a wife! What a husband! It's laughable at my age.[247] (*Think it Over, Giacomino!*
> 372, Trans. Victor and Robert Rietti).

Here is the point that is frequently overlooked. Although you are personally free to define these

mere words in any way you see fit, these same mere words will continue weigh you down with

absolutely no regard for your own personal definitions. This is how the malleability of language

interacts with power. Although words themselves are infinitely malleable, they are given tremendous

weight in everyday practice. *Pensaci, Giacomino!* provides an interesting test case for this phenomenon.

Although less transparently metaliterary than Pirandello's later works, this early play can be read as a

treatise about the simultaneous relativity and fixity, the lightness and weight, of everyday language.

The plot, in brief, is as follows. Toti is an elderly schoolteacher with no family. He is set to

receive a pension when he retires, but he has no heirs to inherit it when he dies. And so—partly in

order to do a good deed and partly just to stick it to the government—Toti decides to marry Lillina,

a young girl of low social standing who has been impregnated by one of his former pupils, the titular

Giacomino. The professor, it seems, feels no romantic affection or sexual desire for the young girl,

and so he believes he can divide the role of husband in two. He himself will be Lillina's official

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sono. Ne dovrebbero tener conto gli altri, almeno per quel poco, di cui non posso fare a meno, dico d'esserci. L'ho
sposata; o, per esser più giusti, mi son lasciato sposare. Fatto, anche questo: prigione! Che vuoi farci? [L]a parte
assegnatami da un fatto che non si può distruggere, resta: sono il marito." (Pirandello *Teatro* 292)

[247] "Mi accorgo che lei è come tutti gli altri, allora; vede la professione e non vede l'uomo; sente dire che voglio prender
moglie – s'immagina una moglie – e me marito – e si mette a ridere; […] Io mi prendo una giovine – povera, timorata, di
buona famiglia – la quale, sì, dovrà pur figurare da moglie davanti allo stato civile, altrimenti il Governo non le
pagherebbe la pensione. Ma che moglie poi! che marito! Roba da ridere, all'età mia!" (Pirandello *Teatro* 81-82)

husband on paper (e.g., in order to pass on the pension) but Giacomino will continue to play the role of husband in the bedroom. So far so good. Everyone involved agrees to the situation and things seem to be going along just fine. Toti, Lillina, and Giacomino have tweaked the definition of their roles (and the words that define them) to reach a comfortable compromise.

Unfortunately, the stakes of this fake-marriage scam are raised dramatically when two things happen at about the same time. First Professor Toti unexpectedly inherits a large sum of money and then his "wife" Lillina gives birth to a child fathered by Giacomino. Lillina and Giacomino's family members are so embarrassed that they can't show their faces in public. In order to lessen suspicions, the families decide that Giacomino should be immediately married to a different woman.

But Toti is committed to making sure that everything continues according to his original plan. And so he threatens to visit Giacomino's betrothed, the *promessa sposa*, and reveal to her the truth of the situation. According to societal definitions of words and roles, Giacomino has in fact been cuckolding a married man and has fathered a bastard child with another man's wife. Bringing the fact out into the open would make the marriage impossible, regardless of whether Giacomino's bride-to-be knew or suspected all of this already. In a moment of unusual insight, the former pupil Giacomino shouts at his professor: "Don't you realize, Professor, that . . . certain . . . certain situations can only exist if nobody knows about them. They have to be hidden; and you can't do things openly for everyone to laugh at" (*Think it Over, Giacomino!* 415).[248]

Public scrutiny, in other words, collapses the wavefunction. Lillina's husband must be one man or the other; the husband cannot be both men. Certain things can only exist if they are hidden. Even in such a seemingly world-distant play, the implications for an undemocratic authoritarianism

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[248] "Vuole che glielo dica? Non comprende dunque da sé che certe cose si possono fare soltanto di nascosto, e non sono possibili alla vista di tutti, con lei che sa, con la gente che ride?" (Pirandello *Teatro* 119).

are starting to come to the forefront. The behind-the-scenes truth of a situation doesn't matter, all that matters is the truth-as-seen.

The tremendous irony of the play's conclusion is that Toti, who had been so vocal in denouncing and rejecting the traditional meaning of *marito*, forms and executes a plan that depends entirely on asserting his rights as a "husband" according to the intersubjective understanding of the term. The plan depends on the knowledge that his marriage, although he himself believes it is meaningless, is nevertheless quite powerful. It is a "fact" because others believe in it. He can rely on the weight and stability of definitions even if he doesn't believe in them.

Ultimately, then, Toti's threats achieve their desired results. Giacomino is prevented from marrying another woman and the status quo of the strange love triangle is restored. The resolution of the play, a fine embodiment of Pirandellian *umorismo*, is shot through with a strong *sentimento del contrario*. Giacomino, who never officially married Lillina, becomes inextricably bound to her for the rest of his life. Giacomino did not betray Toti by sleeping with his wife, but he would betray Toti if he stopped sleeping with his wife. And so Toti, like a jealous husband, takes revenge on Giacomino for threatening to stop cuckolding him, and thereby preserves the three-person marriage. Whether this is done for the good of the woman and child or out of a bizarre, sadistic sense of control hardly matters. This is still Pirandello after all; it's all very confusing and complicated and the main character rarely displays any recognizably human emotions.

One thing is for sure, however. Although the private meaning of words is fully malleable you can always depend on the public's need to believe words have fixed, stable meanings. Read in the context of a certain (pre)fascism, the implications are deeply troubling. Language has tremendous weight in everyday practice, but it is also infinitely malleable in its essence. Despite crisis of representation occasioned by the First World War, people cannot—in terms of everyday practice— simply decide that words mean whatever they want them to mean. Public opinion, a realm governed

by consent, imposes a set of relatively stable meanings. Accordingly, an authoritarian leader can, like Professor Toti, invoke the power of rights, norms, and practices that the leader had previously disdained. The distance between words and meanings offers a point of entry for a post-truth perspective, a certain freedom to act as though words bear no relationship (and owe no duty) to any sense of the truth of existence. Moreover, *Pensaci, Giacomino!* suggests that certain things "can only be done in private." There is a certain malleability that exists outside the prying eyes of the public sphere. Unlimited freedom is synonymous with unlimited privacy. So long as our practices are unobserved, they need not answer to public opinion or consent, which might force a certain consistency of thought or messaging. There is a greater connection to politics than may initially appear.

In other words, troubling though it may be, there is an ethics of language in play here, one that exploits the lightness of words for the pursuit of pragmatic objectives. Praxis is facilitated by establishing a less problematic relationship between signifiers and the signified: the ability to call a spade a spade, a cat a cat, or the enemy the enemy. It is facilitated by adding a false, arbitrary solidity to words and categories, pretending that a given description of the world is truer than it is known or believed to be, resolving the infinite multiplicity of private meanings into a solid, communicable public truth.

This is one of the many moments where I myself, as author, feel the need to inject myself into this essay and put some cards on the table. Because here is the issue: although it may not seem this way from what I have said thus far, I love Pirandello's theater. In terms of what I am drawn to on the level of taste and aesthetics—and what I believe should continue to be read and studied in perpetuity and be saved from the crisis of the humanities—plays like *Il giuoco delle parti, Sei personaggi* and *Enrico IV* are spectacular works of literature. I had set out to save them, to reposition their metaliterariness and self-reflexivity as a form of engagement in the real world, and to a certain extent

I succeeded. I did not like what I found, however. What I have argued thus far and what I will continue to argue throughout the remainder of this essay is that the playwright's most clear-cut link to fascist ideology can be found in the ethics of language expressed in his plays. Much as I personally love Pirandello's plays, this is an abhorrent message in terms of ethics and representation. And so is there a way to save Pirandello through a Statius-like misreading of the content, e.g., by discovering something of value that most likely is not there? Or should I, in fact, abandon Pirandello as the kind of literature worth saving?

Così è (se vi pare) (1916) is the most prolonged example of a clash between public and private meanings and perhaps the most direct manifestation of a post-truth approach to language and meaning. At issue once again is the idea that intersubjective public understanding (which is necessary though perhaps arbitrary) can have tremendous impact even on something as ostensibly fluid as identity. Moreover, such an impact is often beyond the control of the individual who is given a name.[249] Though it is far from one of Pirandello's best, this play is well known enough to permit a much shorter plot summary.[250] Essentially it boils down to this: there is a disagreement about the identity and personal history of one of the characters, Signora Ponza. A man says Signora Ponza is X; a woman says Signora Ponza is Y. These two identities are mutually exclusive. In terms of the

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[249] A name that might be Anita Raja, or Elena Ferrante.

[250] "Three survivors of the Marsica earthquake—a husband, a wife, and an old woman—arrive in a small, provincial town. Their life is shrouded in mystery, which tickles the fancy of the town gossips who start digging and investigating and even call upon the authorities to intervene. But to no avail. The husband says one thing, the old woman says another and they both make say the other one is crazy: but who is telling the truth? Signor Ponza claims to be the former husband of Signora Frola's now-deceased daughter. He says that he has since remarried but he keeps the old woman nearby (in the same town, but in a different house) out of a sense of compassion because Signora Frola—who was driven insane by her daughter's death—believes that his second wife is her still-living daughter. Signora Frola maintains, on the contrary, that there was a certain point in time when Signor Ponza lost his mind and that—during that period of time—his wife was taken away from him and he became convinced that she was dead. He refused to remarry Frola's daughter until a fake wedding was staged in which his first wife was given a new name so that he believed she was a different person. Signor Ponza and Signora Frola, when viewed individually, both seem to make a lot of sense, but a contradiction inevitably arises when comparing the two stories, even though they each operate as though they were acting out a charade out of pity for the other. So which version is true? Which one of them is crazy? There is no evidence: their hometown has been destroyed by the earthquake and everyone who could tell their story is dead."(Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere* 5 October 1917, printed in *Letteratura e vita nazionale*, p. 300. My translation)

truth of history, it simply cannot be true that Signora Ponza is both X (the man's second wife) and Y (the woman's daughter), but there is no way to tell which of the two identity scenarios is correct. The distinction, to rephrase it in the terms of "The Pact of Geryon," is between the truth as historical impetus (Level 1) and the truth-as-knowable (Level 2). Although certain atoms did or did not interact with each other, the truth of Signora Ponza's identity is not a knowable fact of history— at least not for those who are investigating the matter.[251]

And why is that? Primarily, it is because there are no documents that can speak to the truth of the matter. The most interesting scenes in *Così è (se vi pare)* revolve around these missing documents, which turn the play into a commentary about the practice of history-writing. Laudisi and company, who seemed to be little more than neighborhood busybodies prying into the affairs of others, are momentarily transformed into a company of amateur historians:

> **AGAZZI:** Nothing.
> **SIRELLI:** They can find nothing?
> **AGAZZI:** Everything's either missing or destroyed: town hall, archives, all vital statistics. […]
> **LAUDISI:** Documented facts, really. And what would you hope to learn from them?
> **AGAZZI:** Now listen here! The daughter's death certificate, for example, if the lady is the crazy one (unfortunately it can't be found, because nothing at all can be found) but there had to be such documents there; they could be found tomorrow and if so—once the document is found—it would be clear he was right, the son-in-law. […]
> **SIRELLI:** Either he's crazy or she's crazy! There's no getting out of that! Which one is it? […] (*Six Characters … and Other Plays*. Trans. Mark Musa 168-170)[252]

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[251] Or at least is not knowable for those who are investigating the case, e.g., the public observers. Presumably, Signora Ponza herself knows the truth, but chooses to treat it as irrelevant. Either the man or the woman—her supposed husband and mother—likely also knows the truth of history, but has no way to convincingly argue the point in a case of he-said-she-said.

[252] AGAZZI. Niente.
SIRELLI. Non si trova niente?
AGAZZI. Tutto disperso o distrutto: Municipio, archivio, stato civile. […]
LAUDISI. I dati di fatto, già! Che vorresti desumerne?
AGAZZI. Ma scusa! L'atto di morte della figliuola, per esempio, se la signora Frola è lei la pazza (purtroppo non si trova più, perché non si trova più nulla), ma doveva esserci; si potrebbe trovare domani; e allora trovato quest'atto – è chiaro che avrebbe ragione lui, il genero.[…]
SIRELLI. Benissimo! E non dicono appunto che uno dei due è pazzo? O pazza lei, o pazzo lui: di qui non si scappa! Quale dei due? […] (Pirandello, *Teatro* 148-149)

The crux of the scene is the conflict between Agazzi's faith in proof, documents, and archival evidence—e.g., in the raw materials of history writing—in contrast to Laudisi's disdain for the ability of any document to reveal the truth of Signora Ponza's identity. What strikes me as most fascinating in this exchange is that both perspectives seem to be simultaneously so convincing and so deeply misguided.

Laudisi makes a compelling argument that the *realtà* of the past, even supposing it could be known, is irrelevant because Signora Ponza has replaced it with a *fantasma*. It does not matter what the actual truth of the past was because the three newcomers have constructed a "world of fancy" that has been constructed with no regard for the historical interactions of atoms. It is, in other words, a purely post-factual or post-truth reality construction. These three people will act in the present and the future as if their version of the past were true. It is not that the past is unknown or unknowable; it is simply that the past doesn't matter. Laudisi's argument is therefore as follows: the past has no bearing on the present, so what is the use in knowing it? Even supposing these documents could be found and could be trusted to be accurate, what does it matter if Signora Ponza is really X or is really Y when she now seems perfectly content to be both X and Y?

Laudisi's suggestion might seem harmless enough in this instance. Let the newcomers act according to whatever past they desire, who really cares? Read in the context of fascism, however, this is quite troubling. The implications of his disregard for the actual truth of the past is absolutely abhorrent on the level of a generalizable ethics of understanding. I hardly need to underline the dangers of suggesting that there is no need to look behind an invented history to find a true one, or suggesting that humankind should be free to act as though the past were whatever they might pretend it to be. At least on a biological level in terms of inherited genetic characteristics and the continued influence of shared DNA—interactions of atoms, as I like to call it—Signora Ponza

either is or is not Signora Frola's daughter. And, from the perspective of ethics as I understand it, this has to matter.

But Laudisi is not the only misguided individual in the scene. Despite his faith in the evidence-based pursuit of the truth of history, Agazzi also falls prey to basic cognitive errors that call into question his ability to reach the truth through investigation. The first and most important error is what we might call Agazzi's blind faith in the "documented-ness" of the past. If something happened, there must be document to prove it. If there is no document, the logical conclusion is that it did not happen. Of course, it seems eminently reasonable to surmise that there once were documents in the destroyed town, but this is ironically an assumption for which Agazzi has absolutely no documentable evidence. There is no proof that this destroyed town ever kept any such documents. By definition, there is no document that can prove the documented-ness of the past. Agazzi never considers the possibility that an event like a death or marriage might have occurred without leaving behind any evidence. If the death certificate of the daughter were to be found, well then, yes, there would be strong evidence to believe that Signora Frola's daughter is dead and that she is mistaken in believing that she is still alive.[253] But Agazzi was also seemingly ready to draw another conclusion: if he had found the archives intact but had not found a death certificate, well this would mean the daughter was still alive and the crazy one was her husband, not her mother. He is quite prepared to mistake the lack of evidence for an evidence of lack.

This is a logically flawed conclusion, but one which is nevertheless quite common. Indeed, it is a perfect example of cognitive error made famous by Kahneman and Tversky under the moniker WYSIATI (What You See Is All There Is) which involves reasoning using only what is known while

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[253] Laudisi, of course, would contest this conclusion as well. Even if the document were discovered, there is no way to recover the circumstances and motivations that surrounded the document's creation. Accordingly, a death certificate or a marriage certificate could have been faked. The imagination, by adding details to a story of the past, can virtually always add enough imaginary details so as to invalidate any documentable version of the past.

discounting the importance of what is unknown.[254] Human beings, according to Kahneman and

Tversky, tend to form initial assessments on the basis of only the evidence that is readily available.

As a result, "[w]e often fail to allow for the possibility that evidence that should be critical to our

judgment is missing" (Kahneman 87). In fact, it can be easier to construct a coherent, explanatory

narrative when there is little data available and fewer pieces of information must be reconciled. In

jumping to a conclusion on the basis of available information, the reliability of data (in terms of its

source, history, and potential for bias) also tends to be initially discounted. Unless a message is

immediately processed and rejected as a lie, "[it] will have the same effect on the associative system

regardless of its reliability" (Kahneman 127). WYSIATI involves, essentially, reasoning from known

knowns and discounting all unknowns, whether known or otherwise. It is akin, therefore, to the kind

of "historical belief" that Manzoni demanded be shown to works of history. In order to recognize

truth as truth, it must be approached with the expectation and belief that it is true. From the

perspective of behavioral economics, this kind of historical belief is merely a kind of irrational

heuristic: a way of replacing difficult questions about the past (is this true?) with easier ones (is this

source reliable?).

Agazzi presents the idea of the archives as a totality of knowledge, as containing

documented, touchable proof of all events in the past as well as all exterior information necessary to

interpret the documents in their proper context. For Laudisi, Agazzi's ignorance of the context

surrounding the creation of the documents is damning. The importance of context, the ongoing

story that stretches before and after the creation of a document, is illustrated when the document-

skeptical Laudisi wonders aloud about the consequences of finding a certificate for the man's second

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[254] In this respect, Donald Rumsfeld's famous crypto-explanation of military intelligence reveals logic far surpassing
Agazzi's work as historian: "As we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know
there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown
unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know." (Graham)

marriage. Any certificate that indicated that the son-in-law remarried after the death of his first wife

would most almost certainly lead a historian to a definitive conclusion. The man is telling the truth,

Signora Ponza is X not Y—she is the man's second wife and not the woman's daughter—and so the

mother-in-law is the one that is crazy. There could, however, be any number of other potential

explanations that would keep alive the possibility that Signora Ponza is Y not X:

> **LAUDISI:** […] [T]he document, madam, this second marriage certificate, could very well be—just as Mrs. Frola assured us—a fake one prepared with the help of friends to foster that fixation that his wife was no longer his first one but another woman.
> **SIGNORA CINI:** Ah, you mean a public document like that one can be worthless?
> **LAUDISI:** That is, I mean . . . it has value, ladies, the value each of you wishes to give it. After all, aren't there also those little letters that Mrs. Frola says she receives every day from her daughter by means of that basket hanging out there in the courtyard. There are such letters, true?
> **SIGNORA CINI:** Yes, and so?
> **LAUDISI:** And so: documents, madam! Aren't these little letters also documents? It's just a matter of how much value you wish to give them. Mr. Ponza steps in and claims they are false documents prepared to foster Mr. Frola's fixation –
> **SIGNORA CINI:** Oh, my, my, my, then we really know nothing for certain.
> **LAUDISI:** What do you mean we know nothing? Let's not exaggerate. There are the days of the week, for example. How many are there?[255] (*Six Characters … and Other Plays* 176)

The document-skeptic Laudisi posits the existence of two kinds of physical documentation, the

second marriage contract and the letters Signora Frola receives from her daughter. The former

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[255] LAUDISI. […] [Q]uesto atto del secondo matrimonio, può essere benissimo come ha assicurato la signora Frola - un atto simulato, mi spiego? - fatto per finta, con l'ajuto degli amici, per secondare la sua fissazione, che la moglie non fosse più quella, ma un'altra.
SIGNORA CINI. Ah, ma allora un atto… così, senza valore?
LAUDISI Cioè, cioè.. Con quel valore, signore mie, con quel valore che ognuno gli vuol dare! Non ci sono, scusino, anche le letterine che la signora Frola dice di ricevere ogni giorno dalla figliuola per mezzo del panierino, là nel cortile? Ci sono queste lettere, è vero?
SIGNORA CINI. Sì; ebbene?
LAUDISI. Ebbene: documenti, signora! Documenti, anche queste letterine! Ma secondo il valore che lei vuol dar loro! Viene il signor Ponza e dice che sono finte, fatte per secondare la fissazione della signora Frola.
SIGNORA CINI. Ma allora, oh Dio, di certo non si sa niente!
LAUDISI. Come niente! come niente! Non esageriamo! Scusi, i giorni della settimana, quanti sono? (Pirandello, *Teatro* 154-155)

seems to suggest that the daughter is dead; the latter indicate that she is still alive. And yet, as Laudisi suggests, even access to both documents would be insufficient to tease out the truth of the situation. If Signor Ponza is sane and telling the truth, the second marriage certificate is simply confirmation that he remarried after his first wife's death: Signora Ponza is X. The letters from Signora Frola's "daughter" are simply evidence of his second wife's compassion for the poor woman and her willingness to participate in the charade that her daughter is still alive. But if Signora Frola is sane and telling the truth, these letters really are written by her daughter and—as Laudisi suggests—the marriage contract is simply a fake prepared for Signor Ponza's second marriage to his first wife: Signora Ponza is Y.

Accordingly, these documents are meaningless until supplied a meaning within a narrative of the past that clarifies the circumstances of their creation. Even documents, then, are a kind of wavefunction collapsed by inspection and interpretation. They acquire a solid, communicable meaning only through their insertion into a narrative of the past. It is superbly ironic, in this respect, that as an example of one thing that is known for sure, Laudisi cites the number of days in the week. This is, however, a pure creation of intersubjective agreement, a convenient arrangement that has no astronomical basis. The number of days in the week could just as easily be three, or fourteen, or twenty-one; we have simply all agreed that there are seven because it makes life easier to live. There may be those who believe there are not seven days in the week, but they are quite isolated from the structures of power that make society function according to a seven-day week. This is quite a harmless agreement, but can't we imagine non-harmless ones? Black people are less than human? Women need no formal education? Though by no means unanimously agreed-upon, such things were nevertheless once matters of widespread consensus, "facts" that facilitated the writing of law and the functioning of society.

Unwavering faith in the transparent meaning of historical documents reaches its *reductio ad absurdum* when Laudisi pleads with the police commissioner Centuri to falsify some kind of document so that one of the two stories might be believed:

> **LAUDISI:** […] Would you like to do some real good, Commissioner, to render an outstanding service to the citizens of this town and for which service the good Lord above will certainly reward you?
> **CENTURI** [*looking at him perplexed*]**:** What service is that? I wouldn't know.
> **LAUDISI:** Now let me explain. Sit here. [*Points to the desk.*] Tear this sheet of useless information that proves nothing in two, and here on the other half write down something that is precise and clear.
> **CENTURI:** [*stunned.*]**:** So? How? What information?
> **LAUDISI:** Oh, any information. Say anything! Your choice! […] They all want the truth and it doesn't matter which truth so long as it is something specific, categorical. And you are the one to give it to them! Give them the truth![256]
> (*Six Characters … and Other Plays* 186-187).

The community needs to believe in a story, they need to believe in X or Y, and the thing that will make them believe is a document. It need not be true, but it must be believable and unambiguous. The implication is that, were such a document to be presented, no one would bother to verify it: the important thing is to have *a* truth, not necessarily *the* truth. This is a case where comprehensibility and communicability of the message are valued much more highly than its truth value. Laudisi, in this respect, is an extreme pragmatist. He is willing to sacrifice an incredible amount of truth in favor of solidity, stability, and comprehensibility of meaning. As a representative of the community, Laudisi begs the police commissioner, a representative of governmental power, for a kind of "noble lie" that will ease the unrest of the citizens. A more dangerous communicative ethics is hard to imagine; the link to demagoguery is unmistakable. "I am anti-democratic par excellence," Pirandello

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[256] LAUDISI. […] Vuol fare un bene davvero, signor Commissario? rendere un segnalato servizio alla cittadinanza, di cui il buon Dio certamente le darà merito?
CENTURI (*guardandolo perplesso*). Che servizio? non saprei!
LAUDISI. Ecco, guardi. Segga lì. (*Indicherà la scrivania.*) Strappi questo mezzo foglio d'informazioni che non dicono nulla; e qua, sull'altro mezzo, scriva qualche informazione precisa e sicura.
CENTURI (*stupito*). Io? Come? Che informazione?
LAUDISI. Una qualunque, a suo piacere! […] Vogliono una verità, non importa quale; pur che sia di fatto, categorica? E lei la dia! (Pirandello, *Teatro* 163-164)

once said. "The masses, for their own good, need someone to form them." They also, apparently,

need a clearly comprehensible truth, even in cases where no such truth is verifiable.

Indeed, this kind of a truth, one by common consensus rather than historical truth, is

precisely what the unenlightened Greek chorus of *Così è (se vi pare)* most desire. When these amateur

historians at long last come face-to-face with the much discussed daughter/second wife Signora

Ponza, they are finally able to get their information straight from the horse's mouth as it were.

Unfortunately, however, they discover that Signora Ponza conceives of herself as an uncollapsed

wavefunction. She has grown accustomed to the idea that, depending on the situation, she is both

daughter and second wife. Naturally, Pirandello's chorus finds this explanation wholly intolerable:

> **MRS. PONZA:** What else could you want from me, after this, ladies and gentleman? Here, as you have seen, we have an unfortunate incident that must remain hidden, because only in that way can the remedy which compassion provides be of any use.
> **GOVERNOR:** And we do want to respect compassion, madam. We would, however, like you to tell us—
> **MRS. PONZA:**—what? the truth? The truth is simply this. Yes, I am the daughter of Mrs. Frola—
> **EVERYONE:** —Ah!—
> **MRS. PONZA:** —and Mr. Ponza's second wife—
> **EVERYONE:** —Oh! But how?
> **MRS. PONZA:** Yes. And for myself no one! I am no one!
> **GOVERNOR:** Ah, no, for yourself, madam, you are either one or the other!
> **MRS. PONZA:** No, ladies and gentleman, I am the one you believe me to be.[257] (*Six Characters… and Other Plays* 206. Stage directions removed for brevity)

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[257] SIGNORA PONZA. Che altro possono volere da me, dopo questo, lor signori? Qui c'è una sventura, come vedono, che deve restar nascosta, perché solo così può valere il rimedio che la pietà le ha prestato.
IL PREFETTO (*commosso*). Ma noi vogliamo rispettare la pietà, signora. Vorremmo però che lei ci dicesse –
SIGNORA PONZA (*con un parlare lento e spiccato*). – che cosa? la verità? è solo questa: che io sono, sì, la figlia della signora Frola –
TUTTI (*con un sospiro di soddisfazione*). – ah!
SIGNORA PONZA (*subito e. s.*) – e la seconda moglie del signor Ponza –
TUTTI (*stupiti e delusi, sommessamente*) – oh! E come?
SIGNORA PONZA (*subito c. s.*) – sì; e per me nessuna! nessuna!
IL PREFETTO. Ah, no, per sé, lei, signora: sarà l'una o l'altra!
SIGNORA PONZA. Nossignori. Per me, io sono colei che mi si crede. (*Guarderà attraverso il velo, tutti, per un istante; e si ritirerà. Silenzio.*) (Pirandello, *Teatro* 178-179)

Precisely because it fails to offer any satisfaction or resolution, the play's conclusion implicates the spectators.[258] It forces us to identify with the unsatisfied band of busybodies/amateur historians.

As readers, we are implicated in terms of our unwillingness to accept anything but a comprehensible, documentable past. We are implicated in terms of our need to believe both that a singular truth exists (which it does) and that it is accessible to human knowledge in a knowable form (which it may not be). What Signora Ponza asserts in her closing speech is that—much like our professor Toti the half-husband—she both does and does not control her own identity. She does control her identity in the sense that it is fully malleable. She is not the same at all times and for all people, she must adapt to suit the situation. In the presence of another, she must answer to a name: daughter, second wife. Alone, she need not be anyone at all. Hidden from the light of prying eyes, she could continue to be both: a kind of human Schrödinger's cat. "Here … we have an unfortunate incident that must remain *hidden,*" Signora Ponza explains, offering a clear parallel of Giacomino's starting observation: "Don't you realize, Professor, that . . . certain . . . certain situations can only exist if nobody knows about them."

Although many of Pirandello's characters give voice to the meaninglessness and arbitrariness of words, the arc of his plot structures frequently illustrate that meanings remain infinitely malleable only to the extent that they remain unobserved. This is clearly the case in both plays we have discussed thus far. Toti's unconventional *ménage à trois* breaks down under public scrutiny until he makes recourse to the more widely accepted understanding of the term "husband" to preserve the status quo he had created. The three earthquake refugees seem to get along perfectly well so long as no one else pokes their nose into their business demanding documentation of (and a resolution to)

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[258] Signora Ponza's answer is also unlikely to please the play's audience. This certainly appears to be the reaction observed in contemporary spectators by Gramsci, who concluded a less-than-stellar review of the play by pointing out that there was "little applause at each closing of the curtain."

their past identities. The political implications of such themes? Once again, they are troubling: it

amounts to a kind of defense of the necessity of secrecy, the usefulness of operating behind closed

doors. Public scrutiny—because the word at large needs to believe in a singular set of meanings—

would force a government actor to adopt a singular position, and he or she would be expected to

remain faithful to that position.

To the extent that Pirandello does offer any critique of existing structures of power, he does

so by drawing attention to social control over the shared *langue*: their ability to take a word that

means nothing intrinsically and transform it into a performative utterance that exerts real force.[259]

This is perhaps most skillfully articulated by the nameless protagonist of Pirandello's finest work,

Enrico IV:

> Words, words, words. Simple words which anyone can make mean whatever
> they like. That's what's called public opinion! God help anyone who finds the
> public's got a word for him . . . "crazy," or, I don't know, "imbecile"? Tell
> me something. Would you be so calm if you knew that there are people out
> there determined to make the world see you the way they want you to be
> seen?—to force their view of you and their valuation of you on everyone
> else?[260] (*Henry IV* 48. Trans. Tom Stoppard)

Here Enrico struggles with two seemingly contradictory ideas regarding the relationship between

words and social power. On the one hand, there are those who wish to control the way that others

see and are seen, those who determine the so-called *opinioni correnti* can only succeed in imposing

"words." Such words have no intrinsic, stable meaning; they are understood and repeated by each

individual in his or her own way. And yet, the relativity of meaning (or even the absence of stable

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[259] True, it is not clear whether this is ultimately a critique of how power operates or rather a statement about how—in Pirandello's view—power can and should operate: giving solidity to an ambiguous world.

[260] "Parole! parole che ciascuno intende e ripete a suo modo. Eh, ma si formano pure così le così dette opinioni correnti! E guai a chi un bel giorno si trovi bollato da una di queste parole che tutti ripetono! Per esempio: «pazzo!» – Per esempio, che so? – «imbecille» – Ma dite un po', si può star quieti a pensare che c'è uno che si affanna a persuadere agli altri che voi siete come vi vede lui, a fissarvi nella stima degli altri secondo il giudizio che ha fatto di voi?" (Pirandello, *Teatro* 449)

meaning) has absolutely no effect on the real force of the words in everyday practice. Even though *pazzo* is an empty signifier with no stable referent, those who are branded with such a word are nevertheless in deep trouble.

It is a serious error, after all, to believe that such a word is "a gentle breeze which plays lightly over the surface of things, which grazes them without altering them" (Sartre 22). It does no good to argue that the concept of madness is a social construction from within an asylum. You will not be taken seriously. No matter how convincing your argument might be, it will be received as madness on the basis of the architectural position from which it is spoken.[261] Anachronistically channeling Michel Foucault, Enrico explains that this is precisely the reason that asylums were created: so that no one has to give any consideration to the things that are said by "crazy" people, which is to say all those who represent a challenge to commonly accepted patterns of thought:

> It's everyone. It suits them to make out that someone is crazy so they can shut him away. Do you know why? Because they can't bear to hear what he might say … But why? If it's not true? … You shouldn't believe a madman. But they listen, wide-eyed with horror. Explain that to me. […] What do you expect?—faced with a madman?—with someone who shakes the foundations of everything you've shored up, inside and out?—your logic! Right? Of course! Madmen, lucky them, don't build logically. Or with the logic of a feather on the breeze, this way, that way, day to day. You hold everything tight; madmen let everything go. You say: this can't be; madmen say: anything is possible! But now you're thinking: not true. Because it's not true for you—and you—and you—and to a hundred thousand others. All right, take a look at what they think is the truth, the sane majority—what a show they make with their common ground, their wonderful logic.[262] (50)

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[261] Likewise, when spoken in a lab coat or from the endowed chair of a university, most any definition of madness is likely to have weight, a phenomenon critiqued in *Enrico IV* through the play's continual ridicule of the character of the doctor.

[262] "Conviene a tutti, capisci? conviene a tutti far credere pazzi certuni, per avere la scusa di tenerli chiusi. Sai perché? Perché non si resiste a sentirli parlare. […] Non è vero! Nessuno può crederlo! […] Non si può mica credere a quello che dicono i pazzi! Eppure, si stanno ad ascoltare così, con gli occhi sbarrati dallo spavento. Perché? […] Perché trovarsi davanti a un pazzo sapete che significa? trovarsi davanti a uno che vi scrolla dalle fondamenta tutto quanto avete costruito in voi, attorno a voi, la logica, la logica di tutte le vostre costruzioni! – Eh! che volete? Costruiscono senza logica, beati loro, i pazzi! O con una loro logica che vola come una piuma! Volubili! Volubili! Oggi così e domani chi sa come! – Voi vi tenete forte, ed essi non si tengono più. Volubili! Volubili! – Voi dite: «questo non può essere!» – e per loro può essere tutto. – Ma voi dite che non è vero. E perché? – Perché non par vero a te, a te, a te, e centomila altri. Eh,

Regarding the threat to "common ground," Ciampa, the protagonist of *Il berretto a sonagli* (1917), is rather more direct: "It doesn't take much to act like a crazy person, believe me! […] All you have to do is get up in everyone's face and shout the truth" (My translation 222).[263] It is impossible to deny that the word "crazy" has been, historically, deployed against various forms of Otherness and even, as in the case of Galileo for example, unprecedented forms of genius. But it is not exactly the case that those branded as madmen by society simply run around shouting the truth in everyone's face. It is more accurate, perhaps, to say that the insane are labeled as such because they draw attention to fragility of shared inventions—the mutually agreed-upon, intersubjective fictions that facilitate our daily existence: that the earth is the center of the universe, for example.

Pirandello was inclined to characterize such things as the "masquerade" of life within a community. Despite what he believed to be the truth of human personality—that the self was beholden to nothing but the radical, existential freedom to create itself anew at every moment—Pirandello saw members of society as content to wear various masks that limited their freedom, playing the part of "father," "wife," "husband," or "professor" in order to give their actions weight and solidity. By creating and believing in an alternative fiction, or else by exercising an unconstrained freedom, the madman called attention to the fictitiousness of the weight given to everyday words and categories within polite society.

These "fictions of cooperation" are among the central topics of Yuval Norah Harari's endlessly provocative 2015 book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*:

> [Humans] control the world because we can cooperate flexibly in large numbers. […] How, exactly, do we do it? What enables us alone, of all the animals, to cooperate in such a way? The answer is our imagination. We can

cari miei! Bisognerebbe vedere poi che cosa invece par vero a questi centomila altri che non sono detti pazzi, e che spettacolo danno dei loro accordi, fiori di logica!" (Pirandello, *Teatro* 451)

[263] "Niente ci vuole a far la pazza, creda a me! […] Basta che lei si metta a gridare in faccia a tutti la verità." (Pirandello, *Teatro* 222)

cooperate flexibly with countless numbers of strangers, because we alone, of all the animals on the planet, can create and believe fictions, fictional stories. And as long as everybody believes in the same fiction, everybody obeys and follows the same rules, the same norms, the same values.[264]

According to Harari, the ability to create and believe in these shared fictions is ultimately a product of human language. Oddly, it is the lightness of our language—the fact that, in contrast to the language of other animals, ours is so uniquely capable of operating untethered to observable reality—that enables us to create such powerful fictions of cooperation:

> We humans control the world because we live in a dual reality. All other animals live in an objective reality. Their reality consists of objective entities, like rivers and trees and lions and elephants. We humans, we also live in an objective reality. In our world, too, there are rivers and trees and lions and elephants. But over the centuries, we have constructed on top of this objective reality a second layer of fictional reality, a reality made of fictional entities, like nations, like gods, like money, like corporations. And what is amazing is that as history unfolded, this fictional reality became more and more powerful so that today, the most powerful forces in the world are these fictional entities.

Marriage, madness: these too, at least for Pirandello, are fictions. And yet, they are fictions that everyone, or at least everyone in the sane world, believes in.[265]

But despite our reliance on fictions, humans very much do live within an objective reality: atoms really do interact with other atoms. And so what about true madness, the kind of madness

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[264] Since the work is not quite as brief as the title suggests, and the concept of what I call fictions of cooperation is distributed throughout the work, I cite from Harari's 2015 TED talk which expresses this idea more concisely and persuasively.

[265] Morante's Davide Segre expressed the concept quite well, taking aim at what Harari called the most powerful and successful fiction in human history, money: "'Money,' he cried, 'was History's first screwing! […] It was one of their first tricks! […] and they, with this trick of money, have bought our whole life! All money is fake! Can money be eaten!? They sell their garbageman's frauds at a high price. Selling it by weight, a million is worth less than a pound of shit […]'" (598). Characteristically, one of the deeply uninterested listeners in the tavern greets Davide's outburst with a sarcastic remark: "All the same, a little million would come in handy for me" (Morante 598). To Davide's listener—a traveling salesman relaxing in the tavern—the inventedness of money is entirely immaterial: it can still be exchanged for goods and services. "If I believe it, and you believe it, and everybody believes it, it actually works […]," says Harari, "Money, in fact, is the most successful story ever invented and told by humans, because it is the only story everybody believes. Not everybody believes in God, not everybody believes in human rights, not everybody believes in nationalism, but everybody believes in money."

caused by the interactions of chemicals within the brain? What about psychological conditions and aberrant behavior that are caused on a biological, chemical level? How can we tell the difference between what is truly mad and "madness" as a social construction? At the risk of deliberately committing a cardinal error of literary criticism and attempting to enter the mind of an author, I imagine that Pirandello must have thought about this last question a great deal. After all, Pirandello's wife Antonietta was believed to suffer from paranoid schizophrenia. She was highly mentally unstable and prone to violent, jealous rages. It is quite likely, in other words, that Antonietta really was mentally ill, not simply that she had been labeled insane as an excuse to lock her away.[266]

Upon close inspection, the plot structure of *Enrico IV* turns on the difference between true mental illness and "madness" as an intersubjective construction, between madness as it *is* and madness as it is known, understood, and communicated. After all, the motive force for the plot is the onset of the protagonist's true mental illness. An anonymous man (we will call him Enrico) attended a masquerade party. For the purposes of this party, the man had taken on the identity of Henry IV, the Holy Roman Emperor of Germany. He had dressed up as Henry IV and was acting out the role of a medieval monarch as he interacted with other guests. During the party, the man fell from a horse, hit his head, and somehow became convinced that he really was Henry IV.

For as long as it lasted, this was the nature of Enrico's true mental illness. He believed that it was the 11th or 12th century, and that he was the Holy Roman Emperor. As a result—and for god knows what reason—the people around Enrico decided to create an elaborate and unconventional asylum for him. A castle was constructed complete with period props and actors were hired to serve as secret counselors to help Enrico live out his insane fantasy as Emperor Henry IV. This state of

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[266] She was eventually committed to a mental institution in 1919, a few years before Pirandello wrote and staged *Enrico IV* in the shadow of fascism.

affairs—in which Enrico really was insane (in addition to being labeled "insane" by society)—went on for twelve years.

Then, all of the sudden, Enrico regained his sanity. He became aware that it was, presumably, the 20th century and he was not Holy Roman Emperor. Despite this realization, however, Enrico chose to feign insanity and continue the masquerade, acting as if he were truly insane—and continuing to be understood as "insane" by society—while enjoying life in the asylum as a kind of game. And here is the crucial point: no one noticed. Because he was still "acting crazy" by enjoying his historical masquerade, there was no way to know that anything inside his own mind had changed.

As far as we know, everything was seemingly going along just fine for Enrico and his language game of insanity until his real-life sister died. As a result of her death, a group of people come to visit him in the castle-asylum. The most significant visitor was the Marchesa Matilde Spina. As a young man, Enrico had been in love with Matilde. In fact, he had been in the process of courting her while attending the fateful masquerade. Also among the band of visitors to Enrico's fantasy castle is the Baron Tito Belcredi. He had also been at the masquerade ball and subsequently went on to become Matilde's lover, usurping Henry in that role. Matilde and Belcredi are accompanied by her young daughter Frida, ostensibly the spitting image of the young Matilda that Enrico had so desired, as well as the Frida's fiancé Carlo Di Nolli and a psychiatric doctor. At the beginning of the visit, all of the visitors naturally believe that Enrico is still quite insane.

The audience, however, learns halfway through the play that this is not the case—at least not in the same way as before. Enrico is quite aware and in control of what he is doing. He uses the mask of his madness to ridicule the guests, to make oddly knowing remarks, and vent his sadness, jealousy, and frustration. Then things get even stranger and more complicated; it is Pirandello after all. The doctor, who is clearly a figure of ridicule in the text, comes up with a plan. He decides to

attempt to shock Enrico back to sanity by replacing one of stage props in Enrico's castle, a painting of a young Matilde, with Matilde's flesh-and-blood daughter Frida dressed to look like the painting of Matilde.

Unsurprisingly, it doesn't go well. Enrico tries to grab Frida, confusion ensues, and he ends up stabbing and mortally wounding his rival Belcredi with a sword. The play's tragic conclusion is designed to leave the audience in doubt as to whether its protagonist really is still insane or merely feigning insanity:

> **BELCREDI:** Let go of her! Let go! You're no madman!
> *Henry takes Di Nolli's sword.*
> **HENRY:** Oh no? (*He runs Belcredi through.*) Are you sure?
> *Belcredi screams. Everyone rushes to Belcredi's aid, shouting in confusion.* […]
> **MATILDA:** He's mad!—Mad!
> **DI NOLLI:** Hold him down!
> **BELCREDI:** (*protesting fiercely*) Oh no . . . there's nothing crazy about you! He's not mad! He isn't mad!
> *They take Belcredi, continuing to yell out. Among the cries there is a more piercing one from Matilda, followed by silence. Henry remains onstage, between Landolf, Harold, and Ordulf, with his eyes wide open, in astonishment.*
> **HENRY:** Now . . . yes . . . no two ways about it . . . Together again . . . Henry the Fourth, now and forever.
> <div align="center">THE END[267] (65)</div>

And so, ultimately, Enrico has verifiably done something "crazy" (or that seems crazy). Does that mean that he really is insane? For the characters on stage, there is certainly some disagreement about the answer to this question, although the only person fiercely attesting Enrico's sanity is the soon-to-

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[267] BELCREDI (*si libera subito e si avventa su Enrico IV*): Lasciala! Lasciala! Tu non sei pazzo!
ENRICO IV (*fulmineamente, cavando la spada dal fianco di Landolfo che gli sta presso*): Non sono pazzo? Eccoti!
E lo ferisce al ventre. E un urlo d'orrore. Tutti accorrono a sorreggere il Belcredi, esclamando in tumulto.[…]
DONNA MATILDE: È pazzo! È pazzo!
DI NOLLI: Tenetelo!
BELCREDI (*mentre lo trasportano di là, per l'uscio a sinistra, protesta ferocemente*): No! Non sei pazzo! Non è pazzo! Non è pazzo!
Escono per l'uscio a sinistra, gridando, e seguitano di là a gridare finché sugli altri gridi se ne sente uno più acuto di Donna Matilde, a cui segue un silenzio.
ENRICO IV (*rimasto sulla scena tra Landolfo, Arialdo e Ordulfo, con gli occhi sbarrati, esterrefatto dalla vita della sua stessa finzione che in un momento lo ha forzato al delitto*): Ora sì… per forza… (*li chiama attorno a sé, come a ripararsi*), qua insieme, qua insieme… e per sempre!. (Pirandello, *Teatro* 462)

be-dead Belcredi. Audience members—particularly if they have only seen the play rather than reading it and have nothing to go on but the confused look on an actor's face—might similarly be left in a state of confusion. Does this final murderous act mean that Enrico never truly recovered his sanity? Or is he simply a sane murderer taking revenge on the man who fully embodies the life with Matilda he has been denied? Did Enrico truly recover his sanity before being driven insane again by the doctor's insane experiment? Or did a fully recovered, sane Enrico experience a fit of temporary madness, kill Belcredi, and then relapse into sanity? Those reading Pirandello's stage directions (*esterrefatto dalla vita della sua stessa finzione che in un momento lo ha forzato al delitto* –"terrified by the life of his own fiction that, in a moment, had forced him to the crime") should be inclined towards a verdict of not crazy by reason of temporary insanity. Ultimately, the truth of Enrico's state of mind is presented as unknowable. If madness is, on some level, attributable to a chemical state of the brain then there really is a true answer to the question. And yet, in terms of present and future action, this true answer is irrelevant. The conclusion of the play leaves absolutely no doubt about how Enrico will be labeled and understood by society: he must remain, *per forza*, a "madman." He will be Henry IV now and forever, a madman playing a madman's game.

Understood in this context, *Enrico IV* too can be read—much like *Pensaci, Giacomino!* and *Così è (se vi pare)*—as structured around the collapse of an identity wavefunction. Just imagine, for example, how the story of Enrico's murder of Belcredi would be interpreted by a historian. There would presumably be a document, most likely some kind of report written by the doctor who has his own reasons for telling a certain story about what happened. In posterity, all doubt about Enrico's sanity or insanity would disappear. His story would be as follows: man falls off horse, thinks he is the Holy Roman Emperor for 20 years, then kills a man. There would be no trace of Enrico's inner mind, no hint that he had control of his actions. His identity as voluntary madman would be collapsed into the memory of a "madman." Something, in other words, would be lost.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Se pareba bovis
alba pratalia araba
albo versorio teneba
negro semen seminaba.[268]
      – The Veronese Riddle

The Reticence of Empty Space: Pasolini and an Unwritten Future

Conceived in 1965, Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Uccellacci e uccellini* was born into a world where the future was highly uncertain, particularly for the Italian Left.[269] The ten years prior to the release of the film witnessed an exponential decline in both numbers and influence for the Italian Communist party, which dropped from 2,035,000 members in 1956 to just 1,576,00 in 1966 (Ginsborg 290). The death of party leader Palmiro Togliatti in 1964 was both a real and a metaphorical crossroads, which would provide both a "convenient date" for the crisis of Marxism as well as an "incentive for revision" (Viano 147). The same year, 1964, marked a huge symbolic victory for the forces of neocapitalism: the completion of the initial 755-kilometer *Autostrada del sole* connecting Milan and Naples (Rhodes 164).[270] The feeling of uncertainty that pervaded Italy in the mid-sixties is

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[268] The *indovinello veronese* or "Veronese Riddle" is considered to be among the first poems written in vulgar Italian. It dates back to the 8th century or early 9th century, and operates as a kind of metaphor or riddle for the act of writing on a blank page. Here is my translation:

> He led oxen in front of him;
> He plowed white fields;
> He held a white plow;
> He sowed a black seed.

[269] Although it is usually titled *The Hawks and the Sparrows* in English, *Uccellacci e uccellini* means literally simply "big birds and little birds." As such, the overtones of class conflict are more present in the original Italian. I will refer to the film using the original Italian title, hereinafter abbreviated as simply *Uccellacci*.

[270] For Pasolini, the mid-60s were a time of both political and artistic re-examination. The period from 1965 to 1966, when *Uccellacci* was conceived and produced, was also a crucially important stretch for Pasolini as a theorist and semiotician of film—including his highly influential and controversial 1965 essay, "The Cinema of Poetry." Although criticized by contemporaries for his supposed intention to "collapse the notion of reality onto cinema and reintroduce a neo-Bazinian reverence for reality" (Bruno 90-91), Pasolini's film theory may have simply been ahead of its time. It was certainly of crucial importance for Gilles Deleuze, who granted Pasolini a pivotal position in his two-volume taxonomy of cinematic language.

underlined in *Uccellacci*'s establishing shot, which introduces the dominant visual motif of the film. The frame is divided almost equally between land and sky, creating a strong horizontal line. The land is crossed perpendicularly by a road, which separates several structures on the left from open space on the right. Two faint figures approach from the distance. Superimposed over the sky is a quotation attributed to Mao Tse-Tung: *Dove va l'umanità? Boh!* Throughout the film, Pasolini's framing emphasizes strong horizontal lines that separate what might be called open and closed spaces. It is also permissible, in my opinion, to treat these as written and unwritten space. The uncertainty about the future expressed in the opening quotation finds its visual embodiment in a persistent and strategic non-representation of space.

Figure 8.1: Establishing Shots in Two Stills from *Uccellacci e uccellini*

In this establishing shot, Pasolini introduces the dominant spatial setting of the film and uses the quotation to establish its political context and comic tone.

As the film proceeds, a narrative of space can be read in Pasolini's framing as more and more of the open sky is blotted out or problematized by the ongoing rush of capitalism. Moreover, openness is not exclusively located in an unknown and unreachable future. *Uccellacci*'s narrative of space is also a telling of history that juxtaposes the precapitalist past against a present of neocapitalist expansion while communicating a constant preoccupation with the need to engage with the future. But engaging with the future, in this film, does not mean organizing or writing it according to any pre-existing narrative. Instead, the ethical impulse pushes towards a yet-to-be-written future, towards

preserving a future of openness and possibilities against the ongoing and seemingly inevitable march

of capitalist expansion and colonization.

In accordance with the mandates of Pasolini's essay describing the "Cinema of Poetry,"

Uccellacci's landscape is not simply allegorical, but also real: it is a journey through a space that is

simultaneously a Deleuzian "any-space-whatever" and a concrete realization of the Roman periphery

(the *borgate*[271]) during the period of the *miracolo economico*.[272] This is the central paradox of Pasolini's

famous semiotic treatise "The Cinema of Poetry." Poetic cinema must display a deep reverence for

reality without compromising its dedication to the poetic, dreamlike, and expressionistic aspects of

poetry. The cinema of poetry must be oneiric in its resonance with traces of memory and dream, but

must nevertheless be constructed using only the building blocks of reality: "Cinema does not evoke

reality, like literary language; it does not copy reality like painting; it does not mimic reality like

theater," Pasolini explains, "cinema *reproduces* reality: image and sound! […] Cinema expresses reality

with reality" (139. My translation. Emphasis original).[273] Christopher Wagstaff suggests that Pasolini

"felt the contradictory pull of two desires: one to push aside the barrier of conventional language

and make contact with reality, and the other to transform reality and language into poetry and make

'poetry' his form of direct, active participation in the 'pragma' of reality"(187). A better description

of *Uccellacci* is hardly possible.

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[271] I will continue to use the word *borgate*—translatable as "outskirts" or "periphery"—to refer to this area, which is historically and geographically specific phenomenon and must therefore be identified with a more specific word choice. According to Rhodes, "Pasolini's Roman films are among the most significant and compelling aesthetic responses to and documents of the Roman periphery as it existed in the 1960s" (x).

[272] The "economic miracle" is a widely used phrase that describes the intense economic growth experienced in Italy after World War II. Temporally, the *miracolo* stretched roughly from around 1950 until the mid- to late-60s: the period in which *Uccellacci* was filmed.

[273] "Il cinema non evoca la realtà, come la lingua letteraria; non copia la realtà, come la pittura; non mima la realtà, come il teatro," Pasolini explains, "Il cinema *riproduce* la realtà: immagine e suono! …Il cinema esprime la realtà con la realtà" (139).

For Wagstaff, this "realist-expressionistic aesthetic" is best understood as a kind of forced marriage between two contradictory pulls. For Gilles Deleuze, however, this marriage is perfectly realizable. Indeed, the marriage of the real and the oneiric lies at the heart of Deleuze's conception of neorealism in *Cinema II*:

> Everything remains real in this neo-realism […] but, between the reality of the setting and that of the action, it is no longer a motor extension which is established, but rather a dreamlike connection through the intermediary of the liberated sense organs. It is as if the action floats in the situation, rather than bringing it to a conclusion or strengthening it. (4)

For Deleuze, Italian neorealism served as a key representation of the condition of cinema in the aftermath of the Second World War. Not only had discontinuities begun to develop between setting and action, but post-war cinema had entered into a new period with respect to its treatment of character and space. For English readers, Deleuze expresses this break with remarkable clarity in the Preface to Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta's English Translation of *Cinema II*:
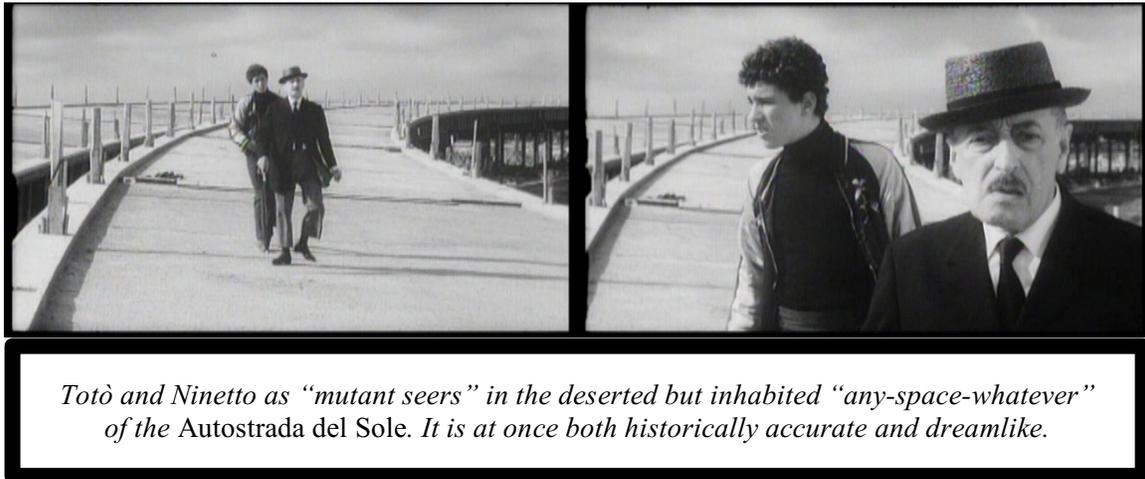
> Why was the Second World War taken as a break? The fact is that, in Europe, the post-war period has greatly increased the situations which we no longer know how to react to, in spaces which we no longer know how to describe. These were "any spaces whatever," deserted but inhabited, disused warehouses, waste ground, cities in the course of demolition or reconstruction. And in these any-spaces-whatever a new race of characters was stirring, kind of mutant: they saw rather than acted, they were seers. (xi)

Crucial in Deleuze's articulation is the suggestion that these indescribable spaces, the deserted but inhabited cities in the course of demolition or reconstruction, are not a purely cinematic creation. They are also historically real. They are spaces generated by the historical period that "we no longer know how to react to" or how to describe. In this sense, they are very much real despite their dreamlike, poetic unreality.

Unlike Deleuze, Pasolini emphasizes the *written-ness* of these any-spaces-whatever. The historicity of these places reveals a deep entanglement with the ongoing march of capitalism. The any-space-whatever is one of its products—perhaps even one its byproducts, its waste and its

314

wasteland. In *Uccellacci*, Totò and Ninetto travel as "mutant" seers through a space that is at once

both allegorical and real. Through the paradoxical coexistence of realism and dream, the film

achieves the realist-expressionistic aesthetic of the cinema of poetry. The particular historical

moment that Pasolini realizes is the experience of the Roman periphery during the period of the

economic miracle. The majority of the film's exterior shots, including those in Totò and Ninetto's

visit to the Roman *borgate* in the first sequence, were filmed on location in the Tuscania and

Alberone rural districts as well as parts of Fiumicino (B. Schwartz 489). It is here that Pasolini could

find what Angelo Restivo calls "the spatial realization of the contradictions in the emergent

neocapitalism" (149)—a space in which reality itself embodies the poetic tensions between past and

future that Pasolini wishes to probe.

**Figure 8.2: Mutant Seers in Two Stills from *Uccellacci e uccellini***

Totò and Ninetto as "mutant seers" in the deserted but inhabited "any-space-whatever"
of the Autostrada del Sole. *It is at once both historically accurate and dreamlike.*

It is in the sequences shot in the *borgate* that Pasolini's framing of space is most directly

evocative of the neorealistic aesthetic, as seen in the two frames below.[274] In addition to the presence

of roads and children (perhaps the two most quintessential symbols of neorealism) it is striking how

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[274] As explained by Rhodes, neorealism becomes a kind of imaginary, a repository of images and themes, which Pasolini mimics and redeploys in differing ways in order to articulate his own critique of the political ideology and effects of early neorealism.

these shots also foreground subjectivity, which lies at the heart of Deleuze's description of the movement. In the first still image below, both the small child and his cat stare directly into the camera. In contrast, the still on the right is presented as a point-of-view shot as Ninetto and Totò approach the group from behind. The image of the child and his cat is therefore a moment of pure camera consciousness that cannot be assimilated with the view of any on-screen character. The image on the right, meanwhile, also captures the atmosphere of a "sordid Borgata of multi-story houses and apartment buildings at various stages of shoddy incompletion" (Rhodes 144) which gives this realistic space an air of the any-space-whatever: "deserted but inhabited […] cities in the course of demolition or reconstruction" (Deleuze, *Cinema II* xi).
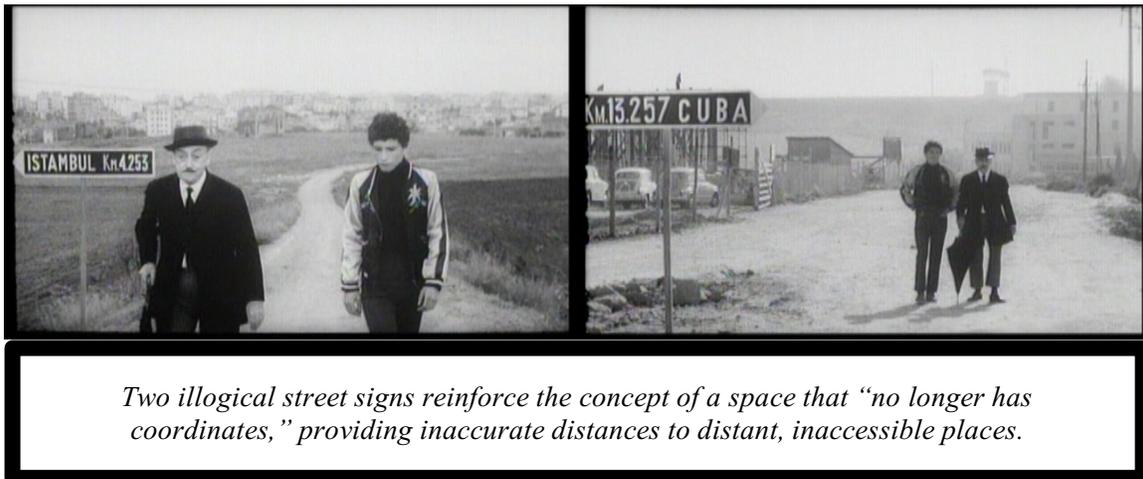
Figure 8.3: Neorealist Echoes in Two Stills from *Uccellacci e uccellini*

Two striking images from Pasolini's extended waltz with the history of neorealism.
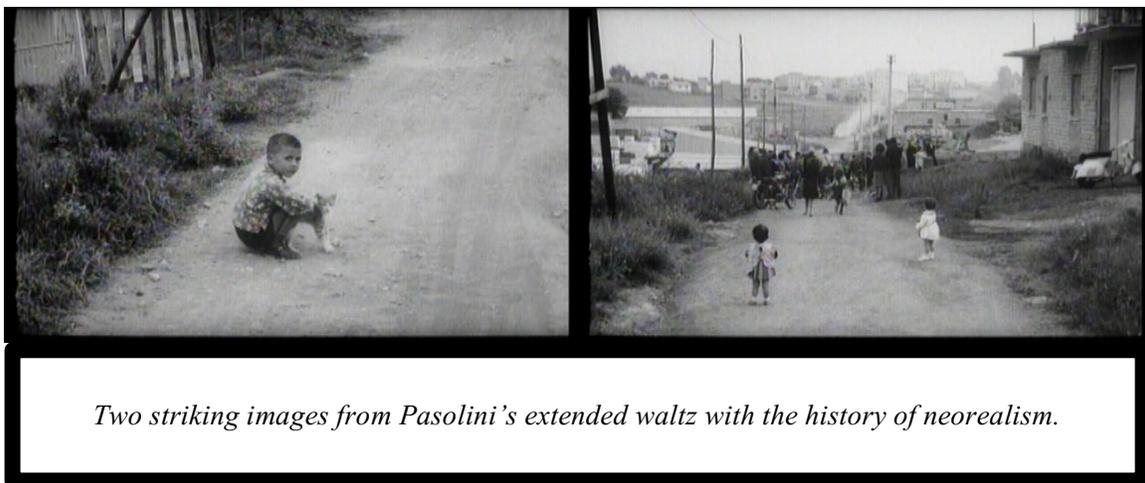
In *Cinema I*, Deleuze had described any-spaces-whatever that exist independently of cinema in "the post-war situation with its towns demolished or being reconstructed, its waste grounds, its shanty towns, and even in places where the war had not penetrated, its undifferentiated urban tissue, its vast unused places, docks, warehouses, heaps of girders and scrap iron" (120). These types of seemingly non-cinematic any-spaces-whatever abound in *Uccellacci*, where space itself seems robbed of any sense of finality or completion.

It is certainly true that, like Deleuze's any-space-whatever, the space of Pasolini's film "no longer has coordinates" (*Cinema I* 120). This point is underlined emphatically by the presence of illogical and/or nonsensical street signs. Totò and Ninetto make their way into the *borgate* on the *Via Benito La Lacrima: Disoccupato* (The Road of Benny the Tear: Unemployed). The pairing of funny-sounding names with strange occupations continues shortly after when the camera fixates on signposts for the *Via Antonio Mangiapasta: Scopino* (The Road of Tony Pasta-Eater: Streetsweeper) as well as the *Via Lillo Strappalenzola: Scappato di Casa a 12 Anni* (The Road of Lyle Bedsheet-Ripper: Twelve-Year-Old Runaway). The signposts begin to resemble tombstones commemorating the locally famous but globally anonymous celebrities of the *borgate*. These nonsensical markers later give way to wholly illogical ones, which are depicted in the two still frames below.
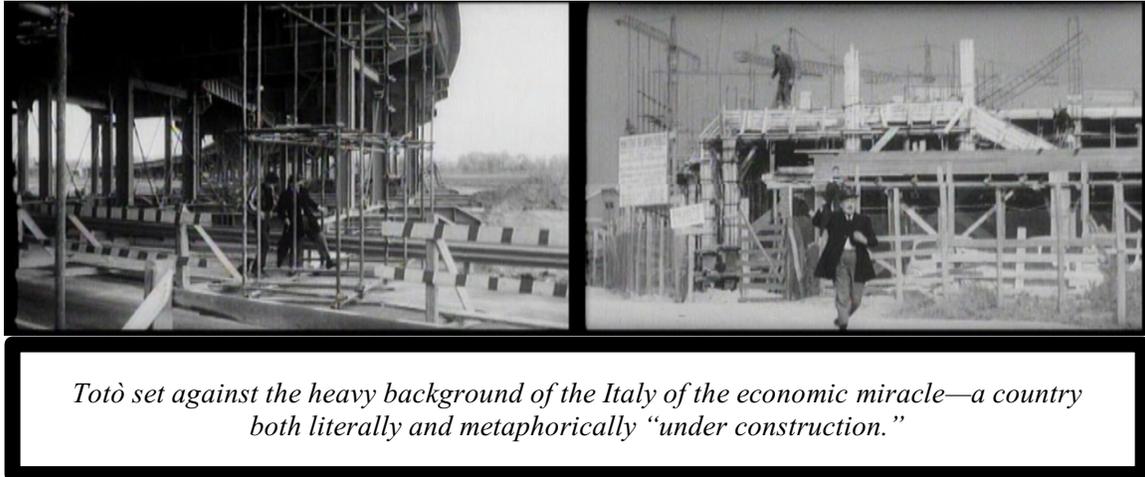
Figure 8.4: Illogical Street Signs in Two Stills from *Uccellacci e uccellini*

Two illogical street signs reinforce the concept of a space that "no longer has coordinates," providing inaccurate distances to distant, inaccessible places.

Not only do these signs choose absurdly distant points of reference, but they also offer inaccurate, possibly randomly invented kilometer counts. Moreover, these massive distances seem absurd and almost anachronistic when juxtaposed with a pair of pedestrians on a dirt road. Totò, who walks unsteadily with an umbrella as his cane, is hardly going to walk across an ocean to Cuba. The signpost thus also makes a point about the seeming distance and inaccessibility of pursuing a Cuban

revolutionary model in present-day Italy, an Italy burdened, like the aged marionette Totò, by the tremendous weight of the past.

Figure 8.5: Heavy "Construction Site" Backgrounds in Two Stills from *Uccellacci e uccellini*

Totò set against the heavy background of the Italy of the economic miracle—a country both literally and metaphorically "under construction."

Shortly after the sign indicating the distance to Istanbul comes into view, Totò and Ninetto find themselves in the film's quintessential any-space-whatever, the *autostrada*. John David Rhodes explains that this sequence was shot "on the furthest outskirts of Rome where the newly completed Autostrada del Sole […] still had the air of a construction site" (xi). As seen in the two images above, examples of "construction site space" appear throughout *Uccellacci*. In the image at left, Totò and Ninetto navigate a maze of scaffolding in its underbelly. At right, Totò is dominated and nearly crushed by the visual noise of capitalism. Although a thin strip of open space still remains at the top of the frame, these structures will soon fly up to blot out the sky completely. In its status as construction site space, the *autostrada* also embodies Deleuze's description of the any-space-whatever as being "in the course of demolition or reconstruction" (*Cinema II* xi) or perhaps even as "undifferentiated urban tissue" (*Cinema I* 120). Rhodes affirms that the *Autostrada* "is, and was, certainly, for Pasolini, a nonplace—or rather a structure that threatened to dissolve the very possibility of (specific, regional) space" (146). In the same vein, Angelo Restivo suggests that "construction site space" was characteristic not simply of the Roman periphery and the *Autostrada*,

but of the metaphorical status of the entire country, pointing out that "the Italy of the economic

miracle was once again a nation 'under construction'" (48).

Italy was quite literally under construction by the economic forces of the *miracolo economico*,

which spread to peripheral spaces like some kind of metastasizing architectural cancer. *Uccellacci*

engages visually with what Pasolini calls this "obscene health of neocapitalism" (131) by creating a

dialogue between open and closed visual space. In his 1971 theoretical piece, "Teoria delle giunte,"

Pasolini discusses open and closed space with respect to visual style. The crux of this short essay is

summarized expertly by Wagstaff:

> [Pasolini] suggests that for the poetic and expressive purposes of film, what
> counts is the formal relations between spatial relationships in one shot and in
> another shot, and the temporal relationships between the length of one shot
> and the length of another. Spatially, it might be the relationship between
> "pieni e vuoti" in one shot and the "pieni e vuoti" in the next. (216)

Figure 8.6: *Pieno e vuoto* in Three Stills from *Uccellacci e uccellini*

Three of Pasolini's seemingly infinite horizontal lines that divide the frame between the "fullness" of the ground and the "emptiness" of the sky.

Pasolini illustrates this contrast between *pieno* and *vuoto* by imagining a shot of a woman looking at a plain in extreme close-up and a subjective master shot of the plain seen as a reverse shot: the image above shows a highly similar frame depicting Luna in *Uccellacci e uccellini*. Pasolini describes: "The shot of the Woman is a space that has a relationship with itself, of *pieno* (full) and *vuoto* (empty): the *pieno* is the space of the woman's face; the *vuoto*—or other space—is the background of the horizon, plain, and sky" (290. My translation).[275] These three shots illustrate the horizontal relationship of *pieno* and *vuoto* that characterizes the majority of the first two-thirds of *Uccellacci*.

In "Teoria delle giunte," the juxtaposition of *pieno* and *vuoto* is considered as purely a matter of style. But in *Uccellacci*, open and filled-in spaces are accorded symbolic resonance. The oceanic space of the sky suggests lightness and mystery, while the filled-in spaces bear the weight of past and present economic structures. In this sense, the film's use of these spaces anticipates Deleuze and Guattari's concept of smooth and striated space.[276] During the first two-thirds of the film, Pasolini's sky permits no sense of contamination: it is oddly blank, unnaturally open. Indeed, it is not the landscape but the profound emptiness of the sky that instills the film's opening episodes with a dreamlike atmosphere despite the realism of its architectural language.

In contrast to the unnaturally open sky, Pasolini's textured ground is not a uniform space. Indeed, it is in the area below Pasolini's horizon line where the smooth and striated exist in mixture, a space characterized by what Restivo calls "the phantasmatic of the precapitalist space surviving in the midst of neocapitalism" (150). Put another way, not everything that is written in the landscape is

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[275] "Vediamo: il P.P.P. della Donna è uno spazio che ha un rapporto con se stesso, di pieno e vuoto: il pieno è lo spazio del volto della donna; il vuoto – o altro spazio – è il fondo dell'orizzonte, pianura e cielo […]." (290)

[276] "A 'smooth space' is one that is boundless and possibly oceanic, a space that is without border or distinction that would privilege one site or place over another. It does not belong to a prelapsarian world from which humans have fallen […] nor is it utopian unless it can be thought of in conjunction with its 'striated' counterpart, a space drawn and riddled with lines of demarcation that name, measure, appropriate, and distribute space according to inherited political designs, history, or economic conflict. (Conley, "Space" 248)

necessarily depicted as the undesirable onrush of capitalist logic. As Deleuze and Guattari explain,

not all space which is textured or cultivated is necessarily striated:

> When the ancient Greeks speak of the open space of the *nomos*—
> nondelimited, unpartitioned; the pre-urban countryside; mountainside,
> plateau, steppe—they oppose it not to cultivation, which may actually be a
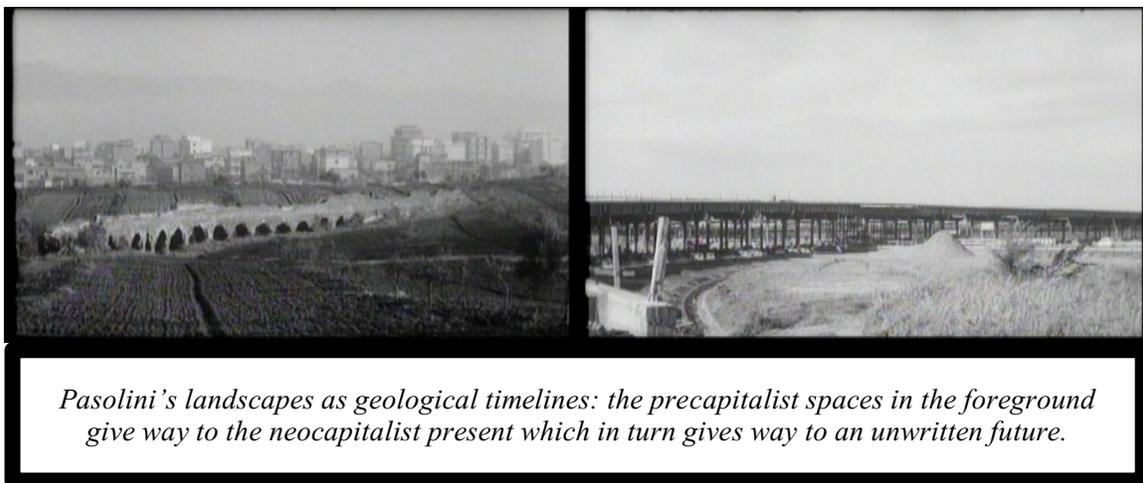> part of it, but to the *polis*, the city, the town. (481)

Consequently, there are actually three kinds of space-textures in play: the smooth but cultivated

precapitalist structures, the striated architectures of neocapitalism, and the monolithically smooth

sky. These three space-textures correspond roughly to phases of historical time: past, present, and

future. In this respect, several of Pasolini's landscapes can be read as geological timelines of space.[277]

According to Deleuze, every cinematic image is inevitably an image of time, and indeed "It is

characteristic of cinema to seize this past and this future that coexist with the present image" (*Cinema

II* 37).[278] With respect to *Uccellacci e uccellini*, the still images on the next page provide two examples of

an archaeology of the present expressed in landscape. The still on the left has three distinct layers. In

the first strata, the textured farmland and the aqueduct in the foreground make present a pre-

capitalist past. The second layer is occupied by the shabby high-rises of the *borgate*, representative the

striating forces of the neocapitalist present. These buildings stretch upward and threaten to inscribe

the still open, unwritten blank space of the sky-as-future that occupies the third level. In the image at

the right, the middle strip of the neocapitalist present is occupied by the *autostrada*, not only the

film's quintessential any-space-whatever but also its clearest manifestation of a homogenizing force

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[277] Through repetition of visual motifs and settings, his framings acquire a tremendous richness that moves far beyond their narrative importance. In the words of Naomi Greene, Pasolini's repeated views of "the same segment of reality seen from different distances" or shots which are held "for an unusually long time" causes "objects, landscapes, or perhaps cityscapes, [to] assume a vibrancy, an ontological density, often denied the characters" (142). A certain measure of this density is related to these landscapes' relationship to time, for it is most evident in these spaces that "Time… thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible… space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (Bakhtin 84).

[278] "There is no present which is not haunted by a past and a future […]" Deleuze explains, "Simple succession affects the presents which pass, but each present coexists with a past and future without which it would not itself pass on" (*Cinema II* 37).

of striation. With its mile-markers, pylons, and support beams distributed at regular intervals, the *autostrada* is itself a tightly woven striated space. "The more regular the intersection, the tighter the striation, the more homogeneous the space tends to become," Deleuze and Guattari explain, "it is for this reason that from the beginning homogeneity did not seem to us to be a characteristic of smooth space, but on the contrary, the extreme result of striation, or the limit-form of a space striated everywhere and in all directions" (488). Not only is the *autostrada* itself a striated space, it is also an instrument of striation: a north-south line traversing and homogenizing the landscape of Italy. Rhodes is characteristically excellent on this point, describing the *autostrada* as "a profound and concrete expression" of the "homogenizing forces of capitalism" (147).[279]

Figure 8.7: Landscapes as Timelines in Two Stills from *Uccellacci e uccellini*

Pasolini's landscapes as geological timelines: the precapitalist spaces in the foreground give way to the neocapitalist present which in turn gives way to an unwritten future.

For Pasolini, the obliteration of geographic distance promised by the automobile, by the *autostrada*, and to an even greater extent by the airplane that haunts *Uccellacci*'s final sequence, is a highly lamentable phenomenon.[280] "The modern highway," Rhodes explains, "[…] breaks down the historical geographic distances that separated distinct places, and re-creates every place as just yet

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[279] "Automobile culture," Rhodes continues, "[…] is but one index of the forces of capitalism that are really responsible for the reshaping of the city and its periphery" (147).

[280] Most likely, Pasolini would have reacted in sheer horror to Thomas Friedman's 2005 declaration that *The World is Flat*.

another place to travel through, another place to see" (146). In this respect, the meaning of the illogical signposts indicating the distance to Istanbul and Cuba becomes clearer: not only do they destabilize the viewer's conception of geographical location, they also comment on the obliteration of history and distance that rendered distinct geographies possible. But this obliteration of distance and specificity does not mean that foreign revolutionary models can be easily exported abroad; it means that, quite the opposite, past revolutions thrived under specific local historical and geographical conditions that the progress of capitalism has rendered unrecoverable and unrepeatable. If there is hope to be found in the future, it must be something other than the past, something quite different.

Figure 8.8: Examples of Open and Closed Space in Four Stills from *Uccellacci e uccellini*

Top left, the typical "open horizon" of the film's first phase. To right, another geological timeline of space. At bottom, the sky is shifted to a thin corner of the frame

Uccellacci's narrative of space moves through three phases. The first two-thirds of the film is predominantly characterized by open horizons. The opening walk down the road, the exterior scenes
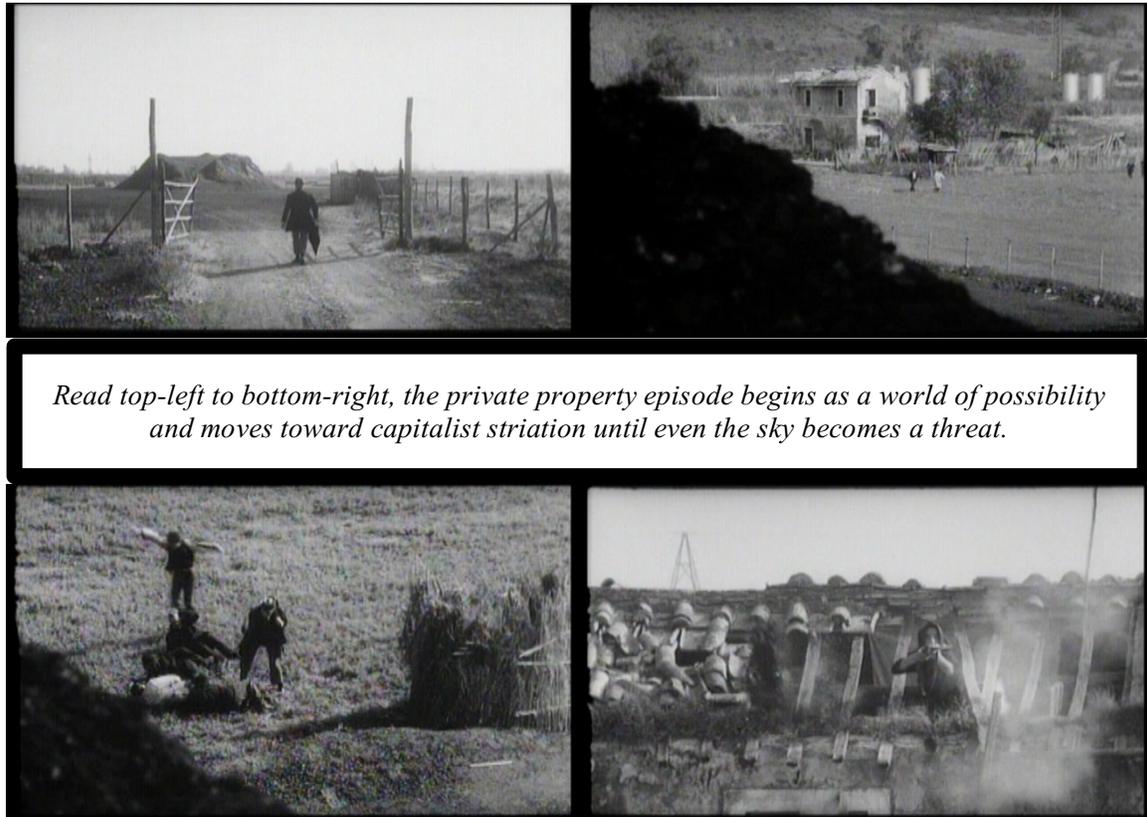
at the Bar Las Vegas, the moments on (rather than beneath) the *autostrada*, and certainly the extended 13th century film-within-a-film prominently feature substantial strips of open sky. In its mixture of open and closed frames, the sequence in the *borgate* shares more affinities with the second phase of *Uccellacci*'s narrative of space. In this phase, which begins after the end of the 13th century mini-film and reaches its culmination in the scenes from Togliatti's funeral, the strip of open sky at the top of the frame gradually fades from view, giving way to interior scenes and enclosed exterior spaces. The effect is gradual, but nevertheless clear.

The first sequence of this phase—the "private property" sequence—is a microcosm of the film's movement from openness towards enclosure and striation before moving back again to a problematic openness. In the images above in Figure 8.8, the top-left frame shows the thick strip of open sky that typifies the creation of expansive space in the out-of-field which is typical of the film's first phase. Totò and Ninetto's trip to the *borgate* is at best a mixed space. Top right shows one of the rare instances where the open sky can be seen from the *borgate*. Here is another of Pasolini's framings that transforms space into a geological timeline. The children sit on a mound in the foreground. They are outlined by shabby high-rises which are in turn outlined by the open sky. The sky is present, of course, in this wholly exterior sequence but Pasolini often chooses to saturate the frame to illustrate the striation and claustrophobia in a periphery infiltrated by the waste products of neocapitalism. At times, the sky is obliterated completely. At other times, as in the two images in the top row above, the sky is consigned to just a thin strip in the upper right corner. Seen top left above, the beginning of the scene offers a characteristically open horizon: this space can still be experienced freely. Totò and Ninetto take advantage of this sense of freedom to pee in some nearby bushes. However, the sense of enclosure and striation begins—both visually and thematically—when the owners witness their act and rush across the field to confront them by asserting their sole ownership of the property (top right). Shot from the same strange, unjustified downward angle, the horizon

remains absent in the scene of class conflict that follows (see Figure 8.9 below, bottom left). The

horizon reappears in the next sequence, but now manifests itself as the source of a threat.

Figure 8.9: Chaos and Enclosure in Four Stills from *Uccellacci e uccellini*

Read top-left to bottom-right, the private property episode begins as a world of possibility and moves toward capitalist striation until even the sky becomes a threat.
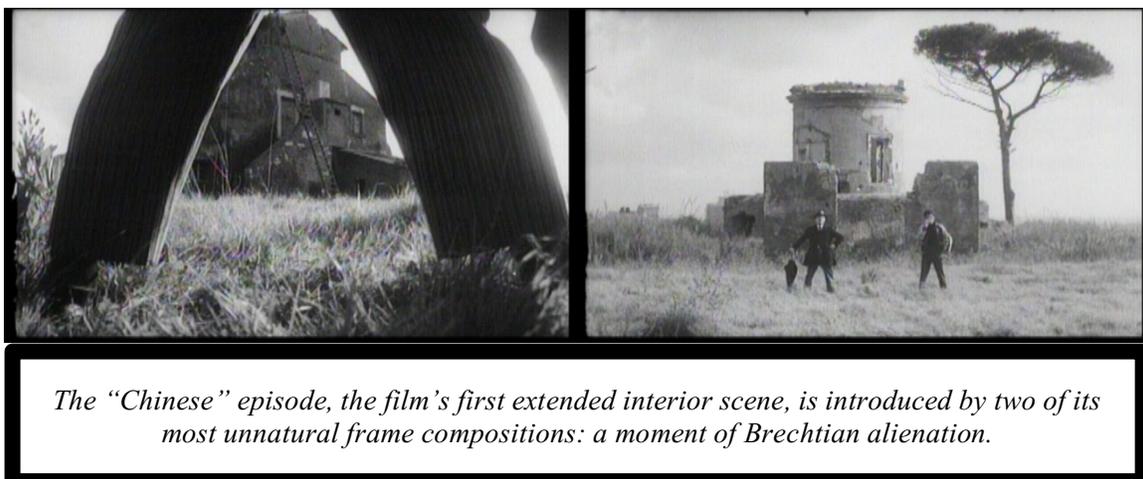
What begins visually as just one woman shooting a rifle becomes, once transferred out-of-field, the

sound of machine-guns, missiles, and bombs: the martial technologies of capitalism. In a sequence

that makes a mockery of any lingering conception of logical, realistic spatial mapping, Totò and

Ninetto run behind bushes and up and across a giant mound before playing leapfrog over the backs

of singing peasants and crawling through a set of miscellaneous tubes. Meanwhile, the camera

continues to cut back to the woman firing from a single motionless building. Despite their constant

movement, they cannot escape the aerial bombardment of gunfire and projectiles that continue to

persecute them audibly from out-of-field. Although the source of the threat is unseen, it is clearly

established as coming from above: it is almost as if they are being chased by the sky itself. This scene

of the horizon-as-threat can be read as a prefiguration of *Uccellacci*'s final sequence when an airplane audibly and visually haunts the open space above.

After Totò and Ninetto escape the horizon-as-threat, the film enters its first extended interior sequence. In what Maurizio Viano calls the "Chinese" episode, "the disenfranchised tenants are portrayed with stark, neorealist tones and with constant references, both aural and visual, to China" (157). It is in this interior space where Pasolini will most directly explore what he claimed was the "real subject" of the film: the encounter with the Third World. The importance of this episode is underlined in its visual introduction, which features a juxtaposition of perhaps the two most strikingly artificial shot compositions of the entire film. Shown below, the first of these shots frames the tenant's home between Toto's legs. It is an image that expresses not only enclosure (there is certainly no open sky at the top of the frame) but also domination. Its visual form prefigures Totò's assertion of dominance over the poor tenants in the sequence that follows. Immediately after the shot between Totò's legs the film cuts to the image of unnaturally perfect harmony shown at right below.

Figure 8.10: Highly Staged Framing in Two Stills from *Uccellacci e uccellini*

The "Chinese" episode, the film's first extended interior scene, is introduced by two of its most unnatural frame compositions: a moment of Brechtian alienation.

Both Totò and Ninetto look extraordinarily posed and artificial as they stand with their feet shoulderwidth apart. Totò stands stock-still like a statue, both arms splayed out at perfect forty-five

degree angles. His left arm rests on his hip, his right arm plants an umbrella into the ground. Ninetto takes a long, slow drag on whatever it is he is smoking.

The space afforded to the sky is ample, but troubled by two notable obstructions. Both scenes are punctuated by unmistakably Asian-sounding music. In this juxtaposition of frames, Pasolini clearly creates a moment of Brechtian alienation to gain the viewer's full attention for the scene that follows. Once inside, the conversation turns to business: it seems these tenants owe Totò some money. Accompanied by the approving comments of his son, Totò treats them without sympathy: he is only interested in payment. "Business is business," he explains in English after threatening to call in his lawyer and take away their house. *Uccellacci*'s other extended interior scene—Totò and Ninetto's encounter with the Engineer and his dogs—is a very deliberate mirror reflection of the interior sequence of the Chinese episode. Rather than dominating others, it is Totò's turn to be dominated as the Engineer turns a deaf ear to his excuses and threatens to send him to jail. As an echo of Totò's palindromic "business is business," the Engineer invokes a three-pronged repetition of its Italian equivalent, *affari*: *Io sono soltanto un uomo d'affari, faccio gli affari, ci tengo agli affari* ("I am a businessman, I do business, I stick to business"). Even the seemingly harmless interior moments at the Bar Las Vegas at the beginning of the film are associated with purchase and exchange: Totò enters to buy an aperitif that he orders by name brand, Cinzano. Interior scenes are thus always spaces already pervaded by the logic of capitalism. As such, *Uccellacci*'s interior scenes are clearly deliberately associated with the language of business and capitalist exchange.

Between the two mirrored interior scenes there is another outdoor episode which is characterized by a strange sense of visual enclosure: Totò and Ninetto's interactions with the members of a traveling show and their broken-down automobile. In this sequence, the sky as horizon returns, but no longer as a thick strip at the top of the frame. Rather, Pasolini's horizons are characterized by vertical obstacles, both natural and artificial, which stretch to the top of the screen.
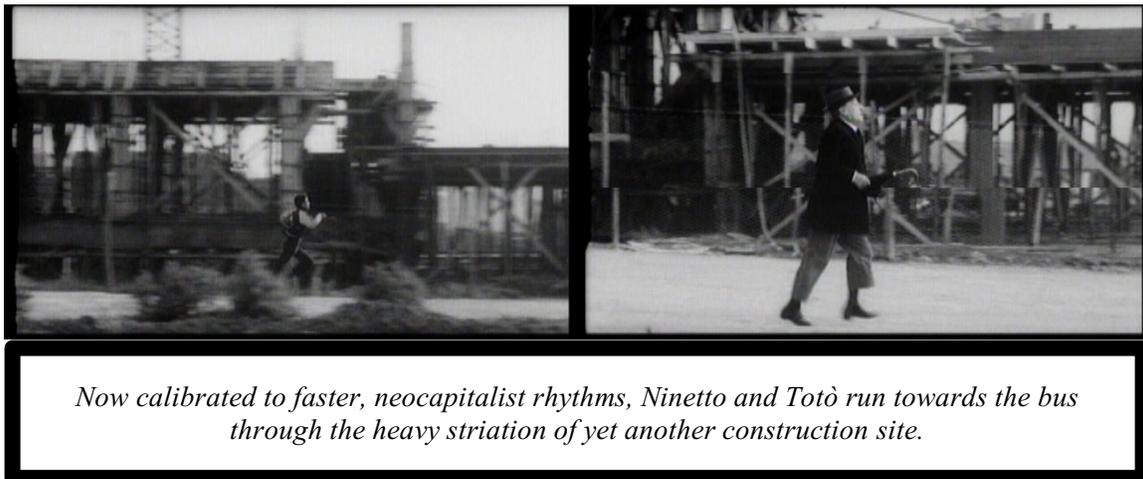
The clear, open, untroubled horizon that was Totò and Ninetto's constant companion for the first two-thirds of the film is now glimpsed only intermittently. More frequently, it is marked and divided by trees, poles, and scaffolding so that even this outdoor episode possesses a constrained, almost claustrophobic atmosphere. The stills below (Figure 8.11) provide a few examples of the types of framing most characteristic of this episode. The image at the top left shows the saturated, construction site atmosphere of the space where the automobile had broken down. The Fellini-esque band of characters push the car down the road in the frame at top right, where the sky is divided first by several strange man-made poles (or smokestacks?) and then by trees. The two images at the bottom present more rarefied frames in which the absence of an "open" strip of horizon at the top of the frame is similarly striking. Bottom left, trees reach up and extend through the top of the visual field for much of the sequence.

Figure 8.11: Increasing Claustrophobia in Four Stills from _Uccellacci e uccellini_

Pasolini creates claustrophobic outdoor scenes through framings that are both saturated (above) and somewhat rarefied (below) but almost always enclosed.

Shown in the bottom right above is one of *Uccellacci's* most brilliant shots. Totò and Ninetto sit down to watch the traveling show in what begins as a rarefied, smooth ground. Slowly a series of legs—judging by the scenes that follow, this is presumably a procession headed to the communist leader Palmiro Togliatti's funeral—traverses the screen from left to right. Accompanied by the sound of some ominous funeral dirge, they soon become trapped at the bottom of the frame. As this last frame suggests, the traveling show episode lays the groundwork for *Uccellacci's* great sequence of outdoor claustrophobia at Togliatti's funeral.[281] After leaving the house of the Engineer and the Dantist Dentists, the funeral episode is introduced by a brief but important sequence in which Ninetto and Totò—these quintessential walkers, these pedestrians of the *autostrada*—take off running to catch a bus.

Figure 8.12: Accelerating Pace in Two Stills from *Uccellacci e uccellini*

Now calibrated to faster, neocapitalist rhythms, Ninetto and Totò run towards the bus through the heavy striation of yet another construction site.

They too have now been calibrated to the rapid rhythms of neocapitalist progress (the two interior scenes could almost be read as Ninetto's rite of initiation into this rhythm). The sequence is marked by a heavy, striated construction site atmosphere which encloses and imprisons them. The open

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[281] Palmiro Togliatti was a major figure intellectual and political figure in the Italian Communist Party, serving as its leader from 1927 until his death in 1964. He died shortly before *Uccellacci* was filmed and released; the film integrates archival footage from his funeral.

horizon does appear in this sequence, but only so as to show it under siege, threatened by structures that fly up to efface it. Totò and Ninetto miss the bus and begin walking toward the camera while the same funeral dirge from the traveling show sequence begins to play again. It is at this point that the funeral episode begins. At first, it takes the form of an illogical shot-reverse-shot alternation that shows the fictional protagonists watching actual documentary footage of the funeral. During these reverse shots, Totò and Ninetto are framed and enclosed by high-rises.

Figure 8.13: Claustrophobia at Togliatti's Funeral in Stills from *Uccellacci e uccellini*

The documentary footage of Togliatti's funeral is characterized by extreme saturation. Every inch of the frame is covered by faces, flags, and other obstructions.

The funeral sequence proper signals the high point of *Uccellacci*'s movement from open sky to enclosed, claustrophobic space. In this "wholly visual event," (Snyder 79) Pasolini selects documentary footage that is marked by extreme visual saturation. Every inch of these frames is covered. The shot shown top left above (Figure 8.13) shows a semi-vertical line of faces that gives way to heavy flags and shoulders. The top-right and bottom-left are are likewise filled with faces and

flags. At the bottom right is the final shot of this sequence which includes the one notable appearance of the horizon. It is thin, dwarfed, and nearly invisible. The visual enclosure of the funeral sequence also seems to exude a sense of narrative closure. There is a sense that something—and not just Togliatti's life—has drawn to a close, that a certain historical moment has ended, perhaps even that a certain possibility has been cut off.

These shots, which Pasolini has certainly chosen but did not himself compose, provide a potential key to the film. If we accept, as I have argued, that *Uccellacci* progresses as a narrative of space that juxtaposes closed, semi-closed, and open spaces, it is difficult to avoid associating Togliatti's funeral with the film's most extreme moment of closure. It is not, to be sure, a closure that results from the ongoing rush of capitalist expansion. Instead, it is a closure made up of faces and flags, human beings and ideology. The death of Togliatti—or more particularly the "mourning" of Togliatti—is staged as a possible moment of closure for the forces in opposition to capitalism, the creation of a different kind of obstacle for an unwritten future.

It is therefore remarkable that *Uccellacci* cuts directly from the claustrophobic documentary footage of Togliatti's funeral to the rarefied, open setting of the film's opening sequence. The raven even self-consciously comments on this curious admixture of beginnings and ends, repeating a phrase that was also used earlier in the film: *il cammino incomincia e il viaggio è già finito* ("the road begins and the voyage is already over"). However, in this repetition of space from the film's beginning there is also substantial difference. The final episode is dominated by Totò and Ninetto's interaction with two opposing forces: the prostitute Luna and the airplane that haunts the sights and sounds of this once-familiar landscape. Colleen Ryan addresses this opposition, suggesting that the airplane is a "paradoxical, almost anachronistic presence" that "juxtaposes the woman's vitality with the death of authenticity in Western cultures" (95). In the context of a visual reading of *Uccellacci*'s narrative of space, the presence of the airplane in the midst of the open sky is extremely troubling. The vision of

a flying machine above the otherwise empty farmland definitively hammers home the point that has been suggested from the very beginning of the film: there may be nothing left that is so peripheral so as to be beyond the homogenizing reach of global capitalism. It is a noise that drowns out speech, and makes communication with Luna and the forces that she represents difficult if not impossible.[282]

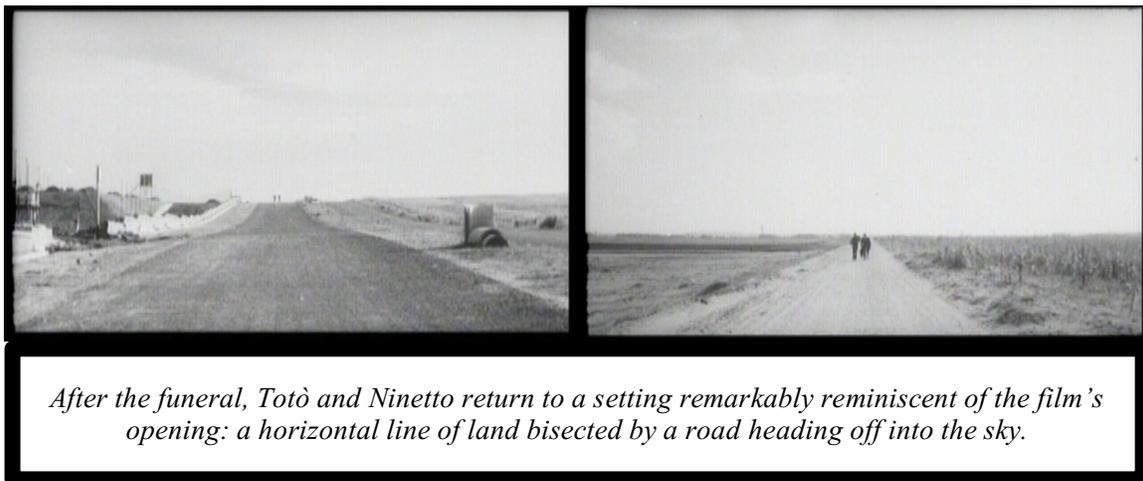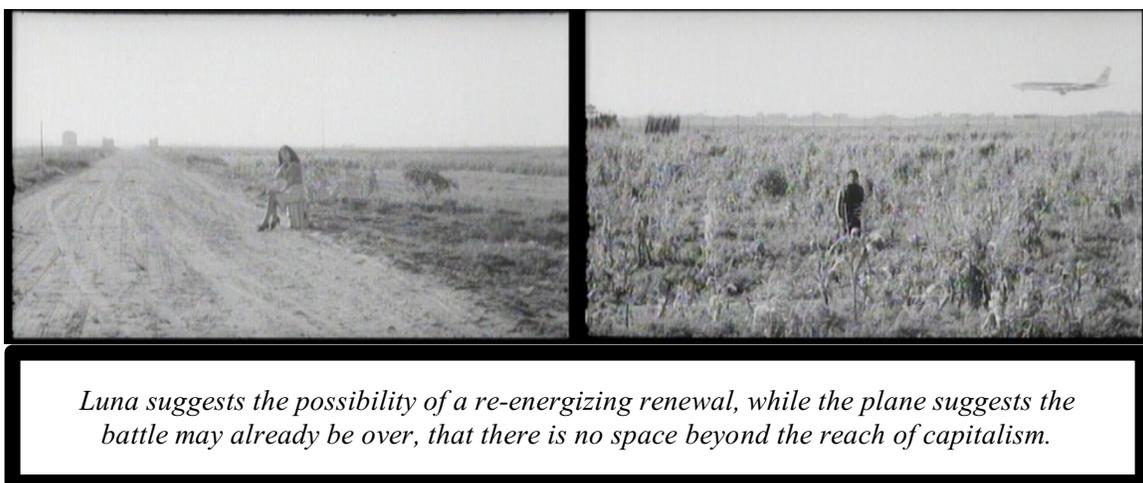**Figure 8.14: Return to Beginnings in Two Stills from *Uccellacci e uccellini***

After the funeral, Totò and Ninetto return to a setting remarkably reminiscent of the film's opening: a horizontal line of land bisected by a road heading off into the sky.

Figure 8.15: Luna's Promise and the Threat of the Plane in Stills from *Uccellacci e uccellini*

Luna suggests the possibility of a re-energizing renewal, while the plane suggests the battle may already be over, that there is no space beyond the reach of capitalism.

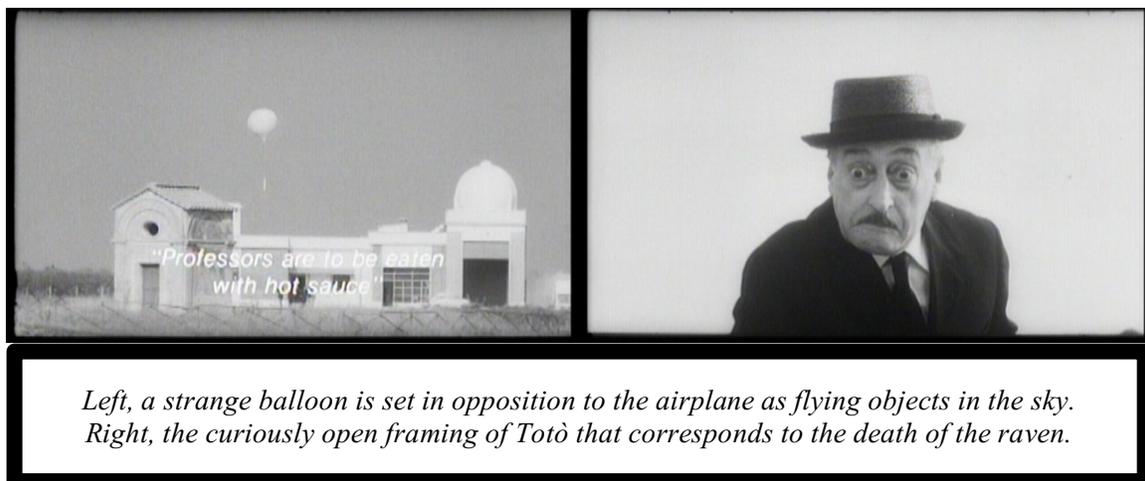[282] Or as Colleen Ryan puts it, "Though Luna appears and works in a rural space that is obviously detached form the city centre and its homogenizing ideals, she and her world are still susceptible to the 'noise' or intrusion of capitalist culture […]." (95)

Moreover, the airplane has inscribed the sky itself; it too has become a written space. The last truly open, smooth space—the horizon of the unknown future—has already been traversed and striated by the logic of capitalism. The thick strip at the top of the field, which at the beginning of the film seemed to offer the possibility of escape to an open and potentially different future has now been definitively and finally problematized by the airplane. The sky becomes just another mode of rapid transport. In its capacity to homogenize by making all geographic spaces rapidly accessible, this giant mechanical *uccellaccio* has transformed the sky into an immense *autostrada*. Worse than the *autostrada*, the sky does not simply move north and south across Italy, but infinitely in all directions.

Despite the implications carried by the airplane, *Uccellacci* is not ultimately a pessimistic film. The airplane is not the only difference that is integrated into Pasolini's repetition of the opening space. The major event that precedes Totò and Ninetto's final retreat into the horizon is the eating of the raven, whose death and consumption is accompanied by rarefied, open visual images which—in terms of the spatial semiotics of the film—suggest that it should be interpreted as a positive, perhaps even sacramental event.

Figure 8.16: The Eucharist of the Raven in Two Stills from *Uccellacci e uccellini*

Left, a strange balloon is set in opposition to the airplane as flying objects in the sky.
Right, the curiously open framing of Totò that corresponds to the death of the raven.

The moment in which this sacramental sentiment is expressed by the raven himself ("Professors are to be eaten with hot sauce." See above, at left) is accompanied by the image of another flying object

that is seemingly set in opposition to the airplane. This object, ostensibly some sort of balloon, rises

up into an extremely open, rarefied frame and begins to resemble one of *Uccellacci*'s moons, which

certainly carry a positive connotation in this universe. The moment of the bird's demise (see above,

at right) is also characterized by a striking, curiously open frame: it is perhaps the only moment in

the film where Totò is the only filled-in object (the only *pieno*) in the visual field.

Although both characters partake in the final communion of the raven, Pasolini draws a

number of distinctions between Totò and Ninetto throughout the film. Most of these differences

are clearly conveyed by the choice of actors. Ninetto Davoli is a young, fresh-faced actor of non-

professional origin who is appearing in one of his first film roles. Totò by contrast is old, a heavy-

footed marionette, and one of the most famous and instantly recognizable comedic faces in the

history of Italian cinema. Beyond these differences between actors, however, Pasolini creates visual

contrasts between Totò and Ninetto in terms of their relationship with space. Stephen Snyder points

out that, in the film's first sequence, "Nino is shot in front of almost nonexistent backgrounds

(blank sky with an indistinct horizon). In contrast, the backgrounds for Totò […] are highly complex

configurations, primarily of buildings under construction" (80).

Figure 8.17: Contrasting Character Backgrounds in Two Stills from *Uccellacci e uccellini*

Above, the introduction of Totò in textured backgrounds and Ninetto in open spaces. For all their differences, they are both very, very good at making hilarious faces.

Unfortunately, Snyder misinterprets the significance of this juxtaposition, claiming that "[a]s an experienced and sarcastic man of the word, Totò is a man of backgrounds, a man more emotionally complex than his son" (80). Rather than signifying Totò's greater emotional complexity—indeed, it seems quite odd to insist on emotional complexity in a film with such a deconstructed conception of character—Totò's initial association with buildings under construction clearly associates him with a history more fully written by the progress of capitalism. Of the two characters, Totò is presented as clearly more firmly entrenched within a capitalistic mindset. What Snyder calls his power of "reason," as evidenced by "his invocation of laws and sense of controlled purpose" (80), is simply Totò's greater comfort in the capitalist milieu, a point underlined, as explored above, by the film's various interior sequences.

Figure 8.18: Nino's Eyes in Two Stills from *Uccellacci e uccellini*

Two shots of Ninetto peering over various "horizons" so as to isolate and emphasize his eyes. All four images are drawn from his visit to the borgate.

Unlike his misreading of Totò's association with textured backgrounds, Snyder's identification of Ninetto's link to the "potentials of vision" is entirely on point. As shown in the series of shots on the next page, Snyder correctly points out that Ninetto "is often situated on the screen in such a manner that his eyes become his most prominent feature" (82). Not only is Ninetto associated with vision, he is also associated with open space and lightness. In contrast to Totò who appears heavy and consistently weighed-down by his surroundings, Ninetto is fleet of foot. At times,

he seems almost incapable of remaining rooted to the ground. This is especially true during the 13th Century film-within-a-film.

Figure 8.18: Nino's Lightness in Two Stills from *Uccellacci e uccellini*

Two shots demonstrating Ninetto's association with open space and lightness.
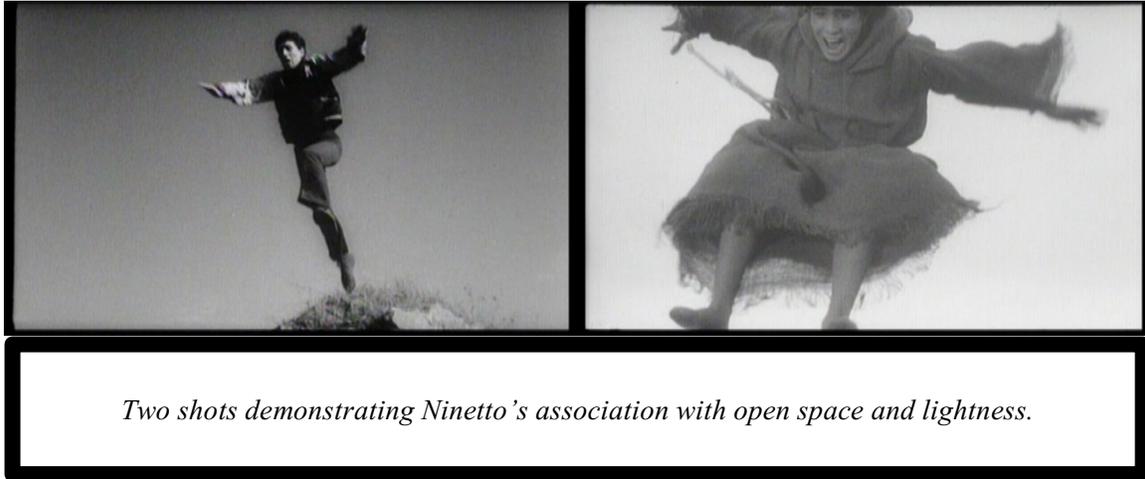
The contrast between Totò and Ninetto's relationship to space suggests that that a different future may await the two of them. Totò may be representative of an Italy that is simply beyond rescue, too firmly entrenched within past and present structures to envision any kind of alternative future. There may be hope yet, however, for Ninetto who is at least willing to look at things and to question them. By associating Ninetto with both the open space of the horizon and the act of looking beyond the horizon, Pasolini may instill this figure with a greater sense of hope for a different future beyond the horizon.

But although Pasolini frequently shows Ninetto looking beyond the horizon, he does not represent what it is that he might find there. The reticent moral optimism of Pasolini's film—if it is to be found at all—must be found in its insistence on showing Ninetto looking into and beyond the horizon. *Uccellacci*'s narrative of space describes a skyline under siege by the homogenizing forces of the new technology of the *miracolo*, suggesting that any hope of a different future has already been effaced. However, the film also demonstrates a refusal to stop looking for new ways to engage with the future. In this respect, Pasolini's film fable embodies the need to find new ways to go on—new

ways to see and new ways to tell—perhaps ways that rebel against the heaviness of contemporary experience with a paradoxical lightness.

Figure 8.19: The Moon in Two Stills from *Uccellacci e uccellini*

Two rarefied framings of the moon that associate it with open space.
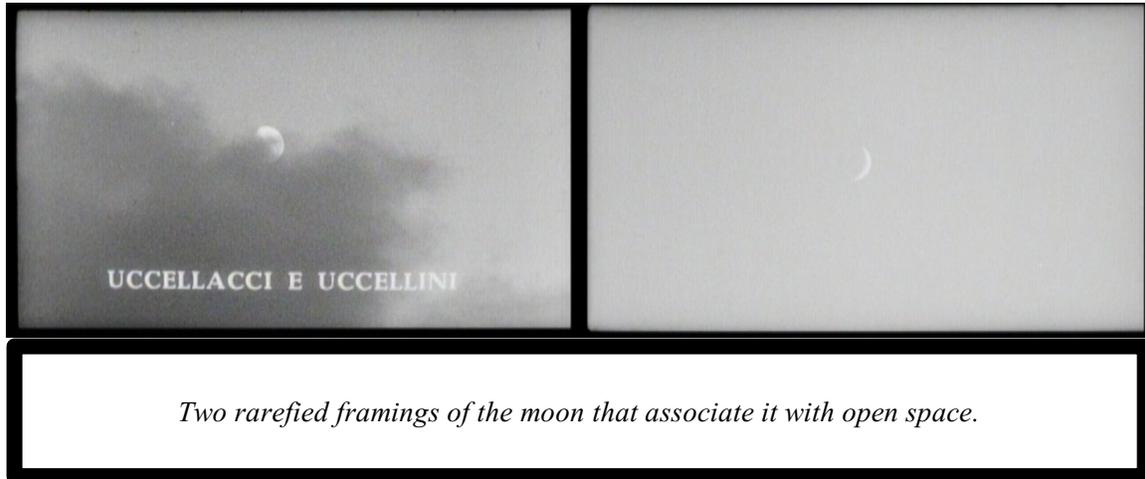
"I quickly understood," Italo Calvino once remarked, "that in order to say something, including something that had to do with Italian society, with the history of Italian society, it was necessary to look within oneself or to expose social mechanisms through representations that might very well *not* be realistic in the traditional sense" (247). The world must be changed, and it is the responsibility of the morally engaged *auteur* to continue the project of working to change it, even if it is no longer clear how the world can be changed, and what kind of world such a change would produce. Reticence, self-reflexivity, metaliterariness: these can be instruments of engagement at times when the way forward is not exactly clear.

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