

5

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Italy

In order to outline a history of Italian modernism, we must begin with a reflection on the category of modernism itself, which in recent years has substantially broadened its scope. From a term indicating a particular moment in Anglo-American literature (what we might now call “high modernism”), modernism has grown into a period label encompassing much of Western literature from the middle of the nineteenth century to the Second World War. This re-interpretation has tended to privilege the northern Paris–London–Berlin–Moscow axis, as in the case, for instance, of the critical anthology edited by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, arguably the key text in redefining the boundaries of modernism.¹ At the same time, as a historiographic category, modernism has played a very minor role in the Italian critical debate. The question with which we might begin, then, is to ask precisely what is at stake for Italian literature in the appropriation of modernism. I should point out that this is not a peculiarly Italian problem. Indeed, as Edward Mozejko has argued in a recent essay, the “internationalization” of modernism as a term – its increased adoption on the part of critical traditions to which it was, until recently, foreign – entails a continuous process of redefinition of its meaning and implications.²

Until the 1970s, “*decadentismo*” might have seemed to cover much the same ground as modernism in Italian literary history.³ However, *decadentismo* was always a problematic term, one that, even when used in the most neutral sense, could not be easily disjoined from the implicit moral judgment that its relation with “decadence” entails. Indeed, its fortune has had much to do with its negative implications, and was the result of the unlikely convergence of two otherwise rather distant currents of thought: Benedetto Croce’s idealism, which censured modernist art in its defense of classical aesthetic values, and postwar Marxist criticism, which, following Georg Lukács, regarded modernism as a kind of irrationalist response to the crisis of the bourgeois social order. Since the 1980s, though, *decadentismo* has practically disappeared from the critical discourse as a general category,

and now “seems more like a relic of past polemics.”⁴ Other, less ideologically charged terms, like “modernità” or even “modernità letteraria,” have been used to define the period with which we are concerned – but there is a certain vagueness about them, their boundaries often stretching to include late twentieth-century phenomena that might be more often associated with postmodernity.

So, what is to be gained by introducing “modernism” into the debate?⁵ As it has escaped the narrow boundaries of Anglo-American literature, modernism has become a productively “soft” literary category, an “-ism” which denotes not a set of specific stylistic–rhetorical options or a particular articulation of the relationship between aesthetics and politics, but rather a series of strategies to engage and come to terms with the challenges of modernity. For this reason, it might be useful to take as our point of departure a very minimal characterization of modernism, such as Matei Calinescu’s account of a “culture of crisis,” which also has parallels in Italian historiography. This “crisis” can be inflected in several ways, but it seems to me that, at its core, it entails a constant process of questioning and re-negotiation of the function of art and the artist within the political, social, economic, and, of course, artistic institutions of dominant bourgeois society. Our initial task will be to see what the articulations of that “crisis” might be in turn-of-the-century Italian culture, and where some of the fault lines delineating a properly modernist culture might lie.

Realists and aesthetes

To fulfill this task, it is also necessary to consider some of the peculiarities that distinguished late nineteenth-century Italy from the other major European powers, in particular its very late formation as a nation-state. While at the cultural level, the peninsula had been de facto united by the language of literary Italian since the fourteenth century, political unification was achieved only partially in 1861, with the foundation of the Kingdom of Italy, and completed over the following decade, culminating with the conquest of Rome in 1870 (the period of political activism and insurrections leading to unification is known as *Risorgimento*). However, unification in many ways only brought into relief the divisions – both social and cultural – of the peninsula: for instance, the uneven development between a moderately industrialized north and a fundamentally agrarian south; or the low level of literacy and the fact that Italian was spoken by a small minority of the population, with local dialects being used virtually everywhere for everyday interaction. As was said at the time, once Italy was made, the problem became how to make Italians. Indeed, well into the Fascist regime,

the cultural and political debate would be oriented by two questions: how to forge a shared Italian identity, and how to improve the nation's status on the world stage.

Unification also affected the status of intellectuals. Like their colleagues in other European nations, they faced the “loss of aura,” of moral and even political authority, incisively represented by Charles Baudelaire's *poème en prose* “Perte d'auréole” (1865), and the consequent integration of their works into the marketplace. The loss was felt more acutely in this context because during the Risorgimento, in the absence of Italy as a political entity, it had been precisely writers and artists who had been vested with the task of representing the nation and its aspirations, as in the paradigmatic case of composer Giuseppe Verdi, whose operas were often interpreted as national allegories. After unification, on the contrary, the work of intellectuals became subaltern to that of politicians, who were now the legitimate representatives of the unified nation. Writers benefitted from the expansion of publishing venues made possible by the new technologies for the production and distribution of printed matter, but at the same time literature became “subjected to the laws of other industries, and, like other industries, it [was] exploited by capitalists,” as writer and librettist Arturo Colautti put it in an interview in 1895.⁶ Furthermore, the cultural life of the nation remained relatively scattered, as no individual city – neither those that in quick succession had the role of political capital, namely Turin (1861–65), Florence (1865–71), and Rome (1871–), nor the industrial capital Milan – emerged as a cultural center comparable for its influence to the great cultural capitals of Europe.

Of course, for Italian writers, as for many of their European colleagues, the true center of intellectual life was Paris. In Italy, as in France, the turn of the century was characterized by the conflict between two opposing, but also complementary tendencies: realism and aestheticism. Italian culture metabolized quickly the lesson of Émile Zola, especially through the mediation of the great literary historian Francesco De Sanctis and novelists Luigi Capuana and Giovanni Verga, who with their works and theoretical writings laid the ground for *verismo*. Informed, like naturalism, by the scientific paradigm of positivism, *verismo* entrusted narrative with the task of producing objective and “true” (“*vero*”) knowledge of its object of study, to be achieved through the practice of strict impersonality. Behind this veneer of objectivity, however, lies a profound skepticism regarding modernity and its promise of progress, especially in Verga's two masterpieces, *I Malavoglia* (1881), about a poor family of fishermen, and *Mastro Don Gesualdo* (1889), about a laborer who ascends the social ladder to marry into an aristocratic family. In both novels, the characters' struggle to improve their material conditions

culminates in defeat, as suggested by the very title of the projected and incomplete narrative cycle of which they were part: the “cycle of the vanquished.” Thus in Verga the *tranche de vie*, the objective representation of a particular social milieu, acquires an ethical dimension, and the task of the artist becomes that of giving voice to the weak who are overwhelmed by what Verga calls the “fiumana,” the deluge of life. If the urban proletarian of Zola’s fiction is a victim of the new economic and political institutions of capitalist modernity, the characters of Verga’s rural and semi-feudal Sicily appear rather the victims of historical cycles that have the inevitability of natural phenomena, and in which today’s conquerors are tomorrow’s victims. A similar pessimism underlies *I Viceré* [The Viceroy] (1894), the last great novel of *verismo*, in which, through the vicissitudes of the corrupt noble Sicilian family of the Uzedas, Federico De Roberto expresses the failure of the ideals of the Risorgimento.

At the other end of the spectrum, we have a literary production characterized by the rejection of the materialism of *verismo* in favor of a form of writing that plumbs the depths of the human psyche or elevates the subject from the mundane to the ideal. At the core of this poetics, we find a vindication of the peculiar function of art: art does not simply provide an account of what exists, but rather makes it possible to give shape to experiences that, because they have no material substance, cannot otherwise be articulated. Once again, France led by example, as the younger generation of Italian writers turned to the writers grouped under the labels of “decadents” and “symbolists” – Huysmans, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Mallarmé – who became synonymous with literary modernity *tout court*. In this respect, the critic Vittorio Pica, in his essays on contemporary French literature collected in *All'avanguardia* (*Avant-Garde*, 1890) and *Letteratura d'eccezione* (*The Literature of Exception*, 1898), played a crucial role in defending the conception of art as an aristocratic activity.

Yet critical opinion on the Italian fin-de-siècle was shaped quite early on by Croce’s condemnation. In the essay “Di un carattere della più recente letteratura italiana” [On a Characteristic of the Most Recent Italian Literature], published in his journal *La critica* in 1907, Croce linked this literary production with the decay in the moral and political conditions of the country. For him, “modern Italian spiritual and literary life” divided into two periods, with the dividing line placed somewhere between 1885 and 1890.⁷ The literary culture of the first phase was dominated by the figure of Giosué Carducci, the national poet of the new state; the second, by a triad composed of Gabriele D’Annunzio, Giovanni Pascoli and Antonio Fogazzaro. Whereas Carducci and his contemporaries represented the healthy ideals of the Risorgimento (patriotism in politics, realism in literature, positivism

and historicism in the natural and social sciences), the “triad,” which Croce famously dubbed the laborers “in the great industry of emptiness,” represent the degeneration of those ideals: imperialism (and authoritarianism), mysticism, aestheticism. Making recourse to what Barbara Spackman has called “the rhetoric of sickness,”⁸ Croce describes D’Annunzio *et al.* as “malati di nervi” [neurotics]; and although he did not actually use here the term “decadence,” this essay would become one of the foundational texts in the historiographic tradition that described Italian modernism as “*decadentismo*.”

In fact, the “triad” and the other authors influenced by decadent and symbolist poetics constitute a far less unified group than Croce’s account suggests. The Catholic novelist Fogazzaro is very much a transitional figure, and his novels of characters caught in the struggle between religious faith and the demands of the modern world – *Piccolo mondo antico* [Little World of the Past] (1895), *Il santo* [The Saint] (1905) – are indebted less to the contemporary avant-garde than to Catholic modernism, the current of thought that sought in the early twentieth century to reconcile Church doctrine and scientific thought.⁹ Pascoli, in such works as *Myricae* [Tamarisks] (1891) and *Canti di Castelvecchio* [Songs of Castelvecchio] (1903), reframed the symbolist idea that poetry probes the mysteries of life and of the soul in terms of a series of personal, homely myths, which he expressed in a subtle and modulated language that accommodates vocabulary ranging from regional and foreign languages to the canon of modern and classical poetry (he was also a fine poet in Latin). For Pascoli, the model for the poet is not the visionary prophet, but rather the little child (*Il fanciullino* is the title of his statement of poetics published in 1897), who can look at the world with wonder and astonishment, and who remains uncorrupted by modernity.

Among the minor figures of Italian aestheticism, the symbolist poet Gian Pietro Lucini played an especially important role in renewing Italian versification. While most of his contemporaries still clung to traditional forms, he championed free verse, used for instance in his *I drammi delle maschere* [Tragedies of Masks], only partially published before his death and collected in 1973, and theorized in his massive *Il verso libero* (1908). In prose fiction, Grazia Deledda, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1926, achieved a unique synthesis of *verismo* and decadentism with her narrative rooted in the culture of her native Sardinia.

The figure who dominated the landscape of turn-of-the-century Italian literature, however, was without a doubt D’Annunzio, who enjoyed literary success quite precociously with the poems of *Primo vere* [First Spring] (1879), published when he was just sixteen. His initial influences were Carducci in poetry and *verismo* in fiction, but his voracious interests quickly

spanned the whole of turn-of-the-century European culture, from the then-fashionable Russian novelists to French symbolism, from Wagner to Nietzsche, and he demonstrated an uncanny ability to absorb and use for his own purposes the most diverse contemporary currents of thought.

The central problem of D'Annunzio's major works is the conflict between the protagonist, who is invariably male and often an artist, and a modern society governed by material rather than spiritual values. The motto that governs the life of Andrea Sperelli, the protagonist of his first and still most widely read novel, *Il piacere* [Pleasure] (1889) – “one must *fashion* one's own life, as one fashions a work of art” – might well summarize D'Annunzio's approach to the modernist question of how to renegotiate the relationship between art and life. In his novels in particular, D'Annunzio attempted (through the figure of the aristocrat) to weld together art and politics; these he presents as activities in which an exceptional man can heal the community's divisions and return order to a social body torn apart by the rise of new forces: the materialistic bourgeoisie of the founding fathers of the nation, and later the proletariat, eventually represented by the Socialist Party (founded in 1892). In *Il piacere*, set in the fashionable sites of the Roman *beau monde* with which D'Annunzio had become familiar as a journalist in the 1880s, Sperelli's struggle to assert his authority remains mostly confined to the domain of sexual politics. However, in later works, such as *Le vergini delle rocce* [The Virgins of the Rocks] (1895), which was influenced by the Nietzschean theory of the *Übermensch*, the broader socio-political implications of his project, as well as its chimerical aspects, come into focus. Claudio Cantelmo, another variation on the aristocratic aesthete, goes into self-imposed exile to his ancestral country estate, abandoning Rome to the hands of the rapacious middle class. Faced with the stark choice of either accepting the values of the new dominant class and becoming a cultural laborer, or recognizing his superfluity and marginality, the Dannunzian artist–aristocrat seeks a third alternative: the reassertion of his cultural–political authority by collapsing essence and performance, by closing the circle between nobility of birth and nobility of deed. Cantelmo dreams of generating a child, a new “King of Rome” who will redeem the nation from the vulgarity of its new masters; to this end, he intends to take as his bride one of the three daughters of the ancient and noble Capece-Montaga family, proudly loyal to the deposed King of the Two Sicilies. Yet the Capece-Montagas, plagued by neuroses and madness, appear rather to epitomize the decadence of their class. It is significant that D'Annunzio was unable to imagine their redemption through Cantelmo and his scion: the second and third volumes of the trilogy begun with *Le vergini delle rocce* were never written. In the end, it is not the ivory tower, but rather direct

contact with the masses, that can endow the artist with a new guiding role – as in *Il fuoco* [The Flame] (1900), where rhetoric is the instrument that allows the protagonist, Stelio Æffrena, to translate words into action.

As Sperelli's maxim suggests, the circuit between aesthetics and politics could flow not only from art to life, but also inversely, turning life into a work of art. This offers a key for understanding D'Annunzio's own political activity, both inside and outside established practice. His most important intervention in the political domain occurred in 1919, when, at the head of an army of volunteers, he marched on the Istrian city of Fiume (now Rijeka), over which Italy had failed to obtain control at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. Dubbing the territory "Reggenza del Carnaro," D'Annunzio turned it into a semi-independent, libertarian state, to which streamed artists and adventurers from Italy and the rest of Europe until the state's suppression by the Italian army on December 21, 1920 (the territory having been ceded to Italy by the allies the previous November). As Claudia Salaris has written, Fiume was "a sort of small experimental 'counter-society,' with ideas and values not exactly in line with current morals, open to the transgression of rules, to the mass practice of rebelliousness."¹⁰ After the bloody conclusion of the "adventure of Fiume," D'Annunzio retired to "Il Vittoriale," his estate in Gardone, in a sort of self-imposed exile, honored but not particularly loved by the Fascist regime. He devoted the later years of his life to memorialistic labors, of which the best result is *Notturmo* (*Nocturne*, 1921), a series of short pieces mostly written during the war while recovering, in total darkness, from an eye injury.

The integration of art and life: the avant-garde

D'Annunzio's aristocratic aestheticism – *dannunzianesimo*, as it was called – cast its shadow over much of early twentieth-century literature, and for younger writers, an engagement with this poetics, if only by negation, was an inevitable starting point. For instance, the *crepuscolari* [twilight poets], an informal grouping of poets thus described by the critic Giuseppe Antonio Borgese, rejected the heroic version of the artist that D'Annunzio proposed. Instead, they used as a subject of their poetry the diminished status of the poet – sometimes considered ironically, as in the case of Guido Gozzano, sometimes dolefully, as in the case of Sergio Corazzini – and focused on the banal aspects of their own emotional experiences and their daily lives. The most pressing problem for many young intellectuals at the turn of the century, however, was that of finding new means to reconcile culture and politics, especially in light of a political establishment that was seen as hopelessly corrupt.

The major center of this debate in the first decade of the twentieth century was Florence, where militant journals and little magazines proliferated, starting with the foundation in 1903 of *Leonardo*, edited by Giuseppe Prezzolini and Giovanni Papini. Steeped in the rhetoric of fin-de-siècle aestheticism, *Leonardo* articulated in more openly political terms a number of decadent themes, such as the decline of the bourgeoisie, the call for national regeneration, and scorn for the political liberalism embodied by Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti. In its short life (it closed in 1907), *Leonardo* also played an important role in introducing to Italy a number of currents and figures of European thought (in particular pragmatism), that its editors championed. In 1908, Prezzolini launched *La Voce* [The Voice], a more ambitious project that shed the Dannunzian frills of its predecessor for a more active engagement with Italian political and cultural life. Its goal, as its director put it with an intentionally plain-spoken expression, was “star sempre al sodo” (“to stand on firm ground”), and the journal went on to provide a space of confrontation for many of the most important intellectuals of the period, from Croce and his fellow philosopher, Giovanni Gentile, to political leaders such as the Socialist Gaetano Salvemini. In this context, literature, too, was called to rediscover its moral mission, and artists to come out of the ivory tower. Rejecting the rhetorical excesses of decadent literature, the writers of *La Voce* and the publishing house that it established – Piero Jahier, Clemente Rebora, Giovanni Boine – turned to writing as a means of investigating their own consciences and their relationships with the world, in an exercise of autobiographical investigation that eschewed the order and coherence of traditional genres in favor of brief moments of illumination narrated through short prose fragments (as a result this poetics is often called *frammentismo*). An example is *Il mio Carso* [My Carso] (1912), in which the Triestine writer Scipio Slataper explores his complex relationship with his homeland and with Gioietta, the woman he loved and whose suicide prompted the writing of the book, which is built through the juxtaposition of narrative blocks characterized by sudden shifts in tense, narrative point of view, and linguistic register.

The most ambitious and influential project of cultural renewal, however, was that proposed with characteristic iconoclasm by the futurist movement, which the poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti founded on February 20, 1909 with a manifesto on the front page of the Parisian paper *Le Figaro*. Born in Egypt of Italian parents, Marinetti began his career as a symbolist poet, writing most of his works in French, the language in which he was educated. Initially an advocate for a revolution in Italian poetic language through the adoption of French innovations like *vers libre*, in 1909 he proposed a much more radical program. Arguing that the progress of Italian culture had been

hindered by its obsessive worship of the past, he called for the suppression of academies and museums, and for an art that would represent the energy and dynamism of modernity, exemplified by the machine. (As he famously put it, “a roaring automobile [. . .] is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*”.) At the core of the futurist program lay the faith in the regenerative power of rebellion and struggle, as opposed to the stagnation resulting from traditional artistic and social values. Futurism quickly expanded into other domains: music, theatre, architecture, and even fashion and cookery. It had a particularly profound impact on the figurative arts. In 1910, the painters Umberto Boccioni, Giacomo Balla, Carlo Carrà, Gino Severini and Luigi Russolo urged modern artists to rethink the relationship between the work of art and its audience. Whereas traditional art, they argued, had sought simply to fix a moment in time to be contemplated at a distance, futurist painting would render the continuous flow of existence in all its dynamism, placing “the spectator in the center of the picture.” Meanwhile, in the literary domain, Marinetti experimented with a form of writing that freed language not only from traditional prosody, but from syntax itself, in a practice that he called “words in freedom,” and of which he gave the best known example with *Zang Tumb Tumb* (1914), based on his experience as a war correspondent during the First Balkan War. Although they are less radically experimental, the futurist works of Aldo Palazzeschi (pseudonym of Aldo Giurlani), especially the poems in *L’Incendiario* [The Arsonist] (1910) and the allegorical fable, *Il codice di Perelà* [Perelà’s Code] (1911), undermine through laughter the institutions of middle-class social life.

Like the *vocianti*, although with very different means, the futurists saw themselves involved in far more than an artistic project: Marinetti issued a political manifesto as early as 1909. The movement is an example of what historian Emilio Gentile has called “modernist nationalism” – that is, a project of cultural revolution, aimed at “the regeneration of the Italians and the creation of a ‘New state’ and a ‘New Man’.”¹¹ Indeed, the rubric of nationalism allowed Marinetti to bring together, in a union that was sometimes unstable, different strands of turn-of-the-century political and cultural thought, from anarchism to Sorelian syndicalism to republicanism. After the war, nationalism became the means to reconcile the initially rather libertarian politics of the movement with those of Mussolini’s Fascism. At the same time, however, Marinetti’s cosmopolitan background naturally led him to conceive futurism as a means for Italian culture to expand beyond the narrow confines of the nation. Through his international contacts, his considerable managerial skills, and his personal fortune, Marinetti embarked on a continental campaign of cultural promotion that earned him the

nickname of “the caffeine of Europe.” There is no doubt that on the eve of the Great War, futurism played a crucial role in the formation of an avant-garde culture throughout the continent, even when Marinetti’s heavy-handed self-promotion led him to clash with his erstwhile supporters, as in the case of English vorticism or Russian futurism. Furthermore, futurism’s attack on traditional sites of artistic legitimation and its ridicule of the sacralization of the work of art paved the way for other forms of anti-institutional avant-garde, such as Dada.

Pirandello and Svevo

The two Italian writers whose contribution to European modernism was most significant and long-lasting, the Sicilian Luigi Pirandello and the Triestine Italo Svevo, stand rather apart from these collective projects and avant-garde movements. In order to understand Pirandello’s poetics, it may be useful to consider the notion of humor articulated in his 1908 essay *L’umorismo*. Half historical survey, half theoretical statement, the study distinguishes “humor” from other forms of comic writing by emphasizing the centrality of reflection. While the moment of reflection, in the organic work of art, becomes invisible in the harmonious coming together of form and content, in the humorous work it is foregrounded, thus precluding such reconciliation. The bitter laughter of the humorist reveals the simultaneously comic and tragic dimension of human illusions, the unredeemable contradiction between the real and the ideal.

Indeed, a surfeit of reflection is what distinguishes and alienates Pirandello’s protagonists from their social environment. An early example is *Il fu Mattia Pascal* [The Late Mattia Pascal] (1904), the story of a man who attempts to escape his stifling existence in a provincial town and build a new life for himself in Rome after he is believed dead. Inspired by the advertisement for a puppet show based on a Sophoclean play, the protagonist’s landlord, the arm-chair philosopher Anselmo Paleari, explains to him the difference between classical and modern tragedy:

If at the climactic moment, just as the puppet representing Orestes is about to take revenge on Aegisthus and his mother for his father’s death, the paper sky of the theatre were to be torn up, what would happen then?

[...]

Orestes would still feel his thirst for revenge, he would still want to pursue it with feverish passion, but his eyes would look up there, at the tear from which all sorts of ill influences would come in, and his arms would drop. Orestes would then become Hamlet.¹²

The tragic-comic – that is, humorous – condition of the modern subject lies precisely in his inability to live fully his passions and desires, as he is haunted by the awareness that there are no outside agents to endow his actions with meaning: neither the gods of classical or Christian mythology, nor the gods of the bourgeois fathers, science and material success. The torn paper sky is Pirandello's homespun version of the Nietzschean death of god.

The opposition between Orestes and Hamlet is one of a series of dichotomies that underlie Pirandello's narrative and theatrical production. Another fundamental opposition is what critic Adriano Tilgher described as the "Dualism of Life and Form": "In Pirandello's vision," he wrote, "it is essential for Life to take on a Form and yet not exhaust itself in it."¹³ In this sense, identity is nothing more than the construction and fixation of an image of the self by isolating certain elements from the flow of existence: hence the Pirandellian theme of the impossibility of human relations, as they are predicated on the fundamental misunderstanding that each individual construction of the other (including one's self-image) is the truth. As the title of Pirandello's last novel, *Uno, nessuno e centomila* [One, No One and One Hundred Thousand] (1926), makes clear, under our layers of constructed selves there lies no core, no ultimate truth, only the mutable stream of becoming.

Pirandello turned to the theater in earnest relatively late, in 1910, but it quickly became his favorite medium, and the one which ensured his international reputation. Like the works of the group of dramatists who created what became known as "grotesque theater" – Luigi Chiarelli, Pier Maria Rosso di San Secondo, Enrico Cavacchioli – Pirandello's early plays subverted from the inside out the bourgeois theatrical tradition, founded on the themes of adultery and betrayal, that dominated the Italian stage. The critical function of exposing, through the paradoxes of *umorismo*, the pettiness of the conventions of middle-class life was entrusted to the figure of the *raisonneur*, who, like the protagonists of Pirandello's novels, is plagued by the demon of self-reflection. In his later works, self-reflection even becomes a formal principle through the device of the theater-within-the-theater. This device is employed most famously in his best-known work, *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* [Six Characters in Search of an Author] (1921), in which the titular six characters irrupt into a theatre during rehearsals (of a Pirandello play, of course!) and demand that the company take on the task of staging their own stories. A veritable *summa* of Pirandellian themes, *Sei personaggi* is also a play about the failure of art: as they repeat obsessively the actions that led them to disaster and death, the characters are unable to give an organic shape – and therefore a meaning, a moral – to their stories.

If Pirandello was one of the most public and influential artists of the period between the wars, especially after the Nobel Prize consolidated his status in 1934, Italo Svevo was perhaps the least visible of the major Italian modernists. Born Aron Hector Schmitz, Svevo carefully chose his pen-name, which can be loosely rendered as “Italian Swabian,” to reflect the multi-cultural dimensions of his city, Trieste, a crossroad of Italian, German, and Slavic cultures and until 1919 the major port of Austria–Hungary, as well as his own experiences as an Italophone partly educated in Germany. After his first two novels, *Una vita* [A Life] (1892) and *Senilità* [As a Man Grows Older] (1898), failed to attract critical attention, he withdrew from writing almost completely, devoting himself to his work in his father-in-law’s business, and returned to fiction only in 1919 – in part thanks to the encouragement of his English teacher and close friend, James Joyce (according to Richard Ellmann, Svevo, who came from a Jewish family, was a model for Leopold Bloom).¹⁴ In 1923, Svevo published his masterpiece, *La coscienza di Zeno*, which Joyce recommended to the French critics Valéry Larbaud and Benjamin Crémieux. They edited a special issue of *Le navire d’argent* on Svevo in 1926, while in Italy Eugenio Montale devoted a long essay to him in 1925. Thus, after over thirty years of neglect, he was almost simultaneously “discovered” in Italy and France just before his death in 1928.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Svevo was influenced above all by Central European culture, in particular Schopenhauer and, in his final novel, Freud. Indeed, *La coscienza di Zeno* (the title can be translated as *Zeno’s Conscience* or *Zeno’s Consciousness*) is the first work in Italian literature to use psychoanalysis as its frame of reference (albeit with serious reservations about its therapeutic effectiveness), as it is purported to be an exercise in self-examination written by the protagonist as part of his psychoanalytic treatment for nicotine addiction. This addiction is, of course, only a symptom of a more profound neurosis, a kind of existential alienation that characterizes the individual who is unable to live life unreflexively. Zeno is the greatest incarnation of the central figure of Svevo’s narrative, the “inept,” the character who is too estranged from others and himself to be able to act (the original title for *Una vita* was *Un inetto*). Like the Pirandellian *raisonneur*, the inept is obsessed to the point of paralysis with self-reflection and self-analysis, as exemplified by one of the funniest scenes in the novel, where Zeno develops a limp when his thoughts become fixated on the complicated muscle movements involved in taking a step. In this view, life itself is an illness, and social relations and institutions – marriage, business, friendships – are mere palliatives that do not cure the subject of his existential dis-ease. We stand once again in a universe empty of meaning, as is suggested by the

series of missed opportunities, misunderstandings, coincidences, and misinterpretations that shape the life of Zeno and the other characters. What sets this novel apart from Svevo's previous fiction is the vein of humor that runs through it, as the protagonist's retrospective gaze brings out the disconnection between the characters' plans and their fates.

Modernism under Fascism

Although it divided the general population, Italy's entry into the Great War enjoyed widespread support among artists and intellectuals, especially those of the younger generation. Once again, what appeared to be at stake were the two complementary projects of defining Italy's role on the international scene and forming a national identity. Coming on the heels of an aggressive colonial policy that had yielded decidedly mixed results – Italy wrested Libya from the Ottoman Empire in 1912, but was thwarted in its attempt to conquer Ethiopia by the disastrous defeat at Adowa in 1896 – the European war seemed to provide a new opportunity for national redemption. Furthermore, many saw the prospect of shared sacrifice against a common enemy as a means of forging a strong sense of national unity that would cut across all classes – especially when that enemy was Italy's “natural” adversary, the Habsburg Empire, which held the so-called “unredeemed territories” of Trent and Trieste claimed by the Italian state. Indeed, for many interventionists, the European war was nothing less than the final phase of the Risorgimento.

Perhaps because of this initial enthusiasm, the literature produced during the war and in its aftermath does not reflect the same sense of disillusionment and disgust that characterizes that of other European countries. The most profound expression of the dehumanizing effects of the war is found in Giuseppe Ungaretti's *Il porto sepolto* [The Buried Harbour] (1916) and *Allegria di naufragi* [The Happiness of Shipwrecks] (1919), which includes the previous collection. A son, like Marinetti, of fin-de-siècle cosmopolitanism (he also grew up in Egypt and spent part of his formative years in Paris), Ungaretti had already begun to dismantle the highly stylized conventions of Italian poetry by fragmenting traditional verse and using direct and evocative language. Though not always free of nationalist rhetoric, his highly compressed war poems often achieve a remarkable balance in expressing the horrors of trench warfare, the existential loneliness of human beings confronted by their own mortality, and the human solidarity that is fostered by shared danger.

In many ways, the aftermath of the war played a more important role in shaping Italian modernism than did the war itself, as it precipitated the

liberal state into a period of instability that eventually shattered its institutions. The economic crisis following the war radicalized social conflict between urban and rural proletariat and property owners, and land and factory occupations characterized the so-called “red biennium” of 1919–20. Among the nationalists, the failure to obtain territorial control over parts of Dalmatia fostered the myth of the “mutilated victory” – the term was coined by D’Annunzio – according to which the victory obtained with the sacrifice of thousands of Italian soldiers had been rendered vain by the ineptitude of Italian politicians and by the machinations of international diplomacy. In founding the Fascist party in 1919, Benito Mussolini, the former socialist leader and erstwhile author of the anti-clerical historical potboiler *L’amante del cardinale* [*The Cardinal’s Mistress*] (1910), drew heavily upon disappointed interventionists, officers, and elite soldiers, but he also found support among property owners who relied on Fascist squads against socialist insurrectionists. The “March on Rome” of October 28, 1922 dealt the final blow to the liberal state. King Victor Emmanuel III refused to let the army intervene to stop the rebellious Fascists, and he appointed Mussolini prime minister: thus, with apparent respect for the form of parliamentary monarchy, began the *ventennio*, the twenty-year Fascist regime.

In this context, the most remarkable aspect of cultural life immediately after the war is the gradual withdrawal of art from direct engagement with social reality and the re-articulation of that autonomy that so many artists had challenged a decade earlier. Two journals, one in the figurative arts, the other in literature, best represent this general “return to order”: *Valori plastici* [Plastic Values] (1918–22) and *La Ronda* [The Patrol] (1919–23). *Valori plastici*, founded in Rome by the critic and painter Mario Broglio and published simultaneously in Italian and French, aimed at defining aesthetic modernity not in terms of an antagonistic relationship with the past, but rather as the recovery of a series of classical formal values through which the experience of modernity can be articulated. The paradigmatic expression of this form of artistic research was the “metaphysical painting” of Giorgio De Chirico, another cosmopolitan Italian – born in Greece, educated in Germany and France – who had returned to serve in the army during the war. In De Chirico’s works, it is precisely the manipulation of traditional tropes and techniques, such as perspective, classical figures, and statuary, that generates a sense of mystery and unease lurking behind the composure of the surface of the canvas. Many artists of *Valori plastici* also contributed to *La Ronda*, which was founded by a group of intellectuals that included poet Vincenzo Cardarelli, critic Emilio Cecchi, and novelist Riccardo Bacchelli. This journal proposed a similar program for literature, which they understood as a polished and controlled exercise of stylistic research, the

highest example of which was the works of the nineteenth-century poet, Giacomo Leopardi. Like the *vocianti*, the *rondisti* identified in short prose the most effective means of literary expression, but whereas the fragment of the *vocianti* was the instrument for investigating the torments and anguishes of the modern subject, the “prosa d’arte” of the *rondisti* appeared rather as a means of sublimating the shock of modernity through the superior harmony of art.

The policy of the Fascist regime regarding cultural production developed gradually. After the outcry in 1924 over the kidnapping and murder, by Fascist thugs, of the socialist Member of Parliament Giacomo Matteotti threatened to topple Mussolini’s government, the Duce enacted a series of laws that, among other things, outlawed other political parties and curtailed freedom of the press. The regime did not, however, use censorship alone to assert its control over artists and intellectuals. To be sure, a number of them were silenced by force, and even paid with their life for their anti-fascism, as in the case of the Liberal Piero Gobetti and the Communist Antonio Gramsci. Nevertheless, a perhaps more effective strategy was the establishment of a complex system of patronage, “designed to contain dissent and draw creative individuals into a collaborative relationship with the state.”¹⁵ Literary and artistic prizes, public commissions, new institutions such as the Accademia d’Italia (Pirandello and Marinetti were among its members), all ensured the apparently non-coercive integration of intellectuals into the Fascist system. This was only one component in the broader totalitarian project of Fascism, which aimed to identify the nation with the regime. Other cultural strategies were quickly developed for that purpose, including the expansion of and control over mass media (cinema and, above all, radio), and the sponsorship of youth organizations, leisure activities, mass spectacles and rallies, and other events that aimed to link individuals into a collective social body. As Emilio Gentile puts it, “mass politics in Fascist Italy took the form of permanent totalitarian education.”¹⁶

Nevertheless, the Fascist regime did not impose a coherent cultural program beyond a generic defence of “Italianness.” Modernism was never the object of Fascist opprobrium that it was for Nazism, and under Fascism the arts maintained a degree of autonomy. A paradigmatic example is that of architecture: the functionalist and anti-decorative rationalist style, in dialogue with the experiences of the “international style” of Le Corbusier or Gropius, flourished during the *ventennio*, along with a more rhetorical neo-Classicism meant to evoke the continuity between Fascism and imperial Rome. Literature, too, remained relatively open to an engagement with foreign models, if only as a means of defining the peculiarities of Italy’s own approach to modernity: indeed, one of the salient characteristics of

the period was the “discovery” of American modernism. (Hemingway and Dos Passos were particular favorites.) Yet anxiety over foreign influences could also result in very public polemics, like the one that opposed Massimo Bontempelli to *Strapaese* [Supercountry], an anti-bourgeois, anti-intellectual artistic and literary movement that took the view that true Fascist culture was to be rooted in the rural traditions of provincial Italy. (Its organ was Mino Maccari’s periodical *Il Selvaggio* [The Savage] (1927–43).) Bontempelli’s journal *900* (1926–29), initially published in French and with an editorial board that included Joyce, Georg Kaiser, and Ilya Ehrenburg, was attacked for its cosmopolitanism, and it did not survive long after its conversion to Italian in 1928.

In general, the atmosphere of “return to order” continued in the inter-war years, and even the futurists renounced their old political ambitions, retreating into the secure ambit of art. Whereas in other countries new movements, such as Surrealism, continued the anti-institutional project of the avant-garde, in Italy the most innovative program of the 1920s was Bontempelli’s *novecentismo*, which proclaimed as its aim the reconstruction of the ordered and structured universe that futurism had sought to demolish. In Bontempelli’s “moderate avant-garde,”¹⁷ the mission of the artist becomes the creation of “new myths,” narratives characterized by “realist precision and a magical atmosphere” (hence the description of this style as “magical realism”), in which archetypal characters and situations could structure and order lived experience. In his own literary practice, Bontempelli moved from the ironic social commentary of the highly compressed and meta-literary micro-novels of *La vita intensa* [Intense Life] (1920) to the rarefied atmospheres and the carefully crafted language of his late, fable-like narratives, such as *Il figlio di due madri* [The Son of Two Mothers] (1929). In this period, fantastic literature also flourished. Its more famous practitioners included De Chirico’s brother Andrea, better known by the pseudonym Alberto Savinio, and Dino Buzzati, whose allegorical novel, *Il deserto dei Tartari* [The Tartar Steppe] (1940), has been compared to Kafka’s fiction for its disturbing atmosphere.

In poetry, Umberto Saba (pseudonym of the Triestine Umberto Poli) sought to find a new authenticity for art through the exploration of personal experience, while Eugenio Montale, whose *Ossi di seppia* [Cuttlefish Bones] (1925) was one of the seminal works of the period, derived from the arid landscape of his native Liguria symbols through which to express the bleakness and desolation of a world empty of meaning although occasionally lit by elusive moments of epiphany (for instance, in “Limoni” [Lemons]). Ungaretti and Montale have traditionally been regarded as the “first generation” of *ermetismo* (hermeticism). The second generation, which includes

Vittorio Sereni, Mario Luzi, and the 1959 Nobel Prize winner Salvatore Quasimodo, was a more self-conscious movement. Its poetics harked back to the symbolist notion of poetry as an absolute language, removed from, and even antagonistic to, material experience – a detachment from the world that has been read politically as an attempt to preserve individual freedom in the midst of Fascist repression.

In 1929, Alberto Moravia (pseudonym of Alberto Pincherle) gained immediate notoriety with *Gli indifferenti* [The Indifferent Ones], a withering portrayal of the hypocrisy and moral squalor of the Italian bourgeoisie, written in a direct and detached style that reflected, in its distance from its subject, the disturbed human relations represented in the novel. Moravia was not alone in wishing for literature to play a more critical role. For many novelists of the new generation, too young to have been “Fascists of the first hour,” the time had come to return Fascism to its supposed original revolutionary purity, which they saw as threatened by the progressive bureaucratization and bourgeoisification of the regime. Indeed, they considered their attacks on middle-class complacency and mediocrity not as subversive gestures, but rather as the recovery of the idealism of “original” Fascism. Such works as Carlo Bernari’s *Tre operai* [Three Workers] (1934), the story of three poor laborers before and after the First World War, Alba De Cespedes’s *Nessuno torna indietro* [No Turning Back] (1938), which follows the life of eight young women in a religious boarding house, Elio Vittorini’s *Il garofano rosso* [The Red Carnation], serialized in the magazine *Solaria* (1933–34), the story of a personal and political coming of age, Paola Masino’s *Nascita e morte della massaia* [Birth and Death of the Housewife], published in its final form in 1945, a surreal tale of female oppression, are all examples of novels that sought to explore the social contradictions of Fascist Italy. This new engagement with social reality did not come at the expense of formal experimentalism. Ranging from Masino’s grotesque take on magic realism to Bernari’s expressionistic mixture of direct and indirect discourse to Vittorini’s stylized and hieratic language, evident in particular in *Conversazione in Sicilia* [Conversations in Sicily] (1941), stylistic experimentation remained a central feature of the fiction of the 1930s and 1940s. The most experimental writer of the period is Carlo Emilio Gadda, whose work is often described as “plurilinguistic,” not only for its characteristic impasto of standard Italian and regional languages, but also for its mixture of registers and genres. Although Gadda’s major works appeared – often unfinished – after the war, the first version of *La cognizione del dolore* [Acquainted with Grief], his complex meditation on familial and social alienation, was serialized in *Letteratura* in 1938–41.

When the sanctions that the League of Nations imposed after Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935–36 isolated the regime on the international scene, Mussolini responded with his official policy of autarchy. Censorship then became more heavy-handed, though it could not completely stifle literary debate. Fascism attempted to co-opt the new generation of intellectuals with the journal *Il Primato (Supremacy)*, founded in 1940 by Giuseppe Bottai, who, as Minister of National Education, had presided over the purge of Jews from Italian schools, universities, and cultural institutions after the promulgation of the anti-semitic Racial Laws in 1938. This attempt to provide an official venue for dissenting voices came, of course, too late: Italy was about to enter another world conflict that would bring about the collapse of the regime in 1943, followed by two years of de facto civil war. Pinpointing an end of modernism is no easier than determining its precise beginning. Certainly, the postwar reconstruction and the need to come to terms with the legacy of Fascism, a task that culture accomplished much more effectively than other sectors of Italian society, meant that the questions that oriented the intellectual debate were quite different from those that governed the first half of the century. In this sense, it can be argued that the war put an end not only to Fascism and the monarchy, but also to modernism.

NOTES

1. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, eds., *Modernism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).
2. Edward Mozejko, "Tracing the Modernist Paradigm: Terminologies of Modernism," in Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska, eds., *Modernism* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007), vol. I, pp. 11–33.
3. Cf. Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 2nd edn. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1987), pp. 211–21.
4. Paolo Giovannetti, *Decadentismo* (Milan: Editrice Bibliografica, 1994), p. 24. Other major studies of the period include: Carlo Salinari, *Miti e coscienza del decadentismo italiano* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1960), Leone de Castris, *Il decadentismo italiano* (Bari: De Donato, 1974), and Elio Gioanola, *Il decadentismo*, 2nd edn. (Roma: Studium, 1977), this last notable because it spans the whole of European modernism.
5. Of course, this is not to say that the term is completely new to Italian Studies, especially in the English-speaking world, e.g. Cinzia Sartini Blum, *The Other Modernism: F. T. Marinetti's Futurist Fiction of Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
6. In Ugo Ojetti, *Alla scoperta dei letterati* (1895; Florence: Le Monnier, 1946), p. 288.
7. Benedetto Croce, *La letteratura della nuova Italia* (Bari: Laterza, 1915), p. 187.
8. Barbara Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D'Annunzio* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989).

9. On Catholic modernism, see Daniela Sarasella, *Modernismo* (Milan: Editrice Bibliografica, 1995).
10. Claudia Salaris, *Alla festa della rivoluzione: Artisti e libertari con D'Annunzio a Fiume* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002), p. 12.
11. Emilio Gentile, *The Struggle for Modernity: Nationalism, Futurism, and Fascism* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003), p. 5.
12. Luigi Pirandello, *Tutti i romanzi*, ed. Giovanni Macchia (Milan: Mondadori, 1973), vol. I, pp. 467–68.
13. Adriano Tilgher, *Saggi sul teatro contemporaneo*, 2nd rev. edn. (Rome: Libreria di Scienze e Lettere, 1923), p. 203.
14. Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, rev. edn. (Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 374.
15. Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 9.
16. Emilio Gentile, “The Totalitarian Experiment,” in Adrian Lyttleton, ed., *Liberal and Fascist Italy* (Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 162.
17. Luigi Baldacci, *Massimo Bontempelli* (Turin: Borla, 1967), p. 65.

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