

ITALIAN MODERNISM:

Italian Culture between Decadentism and Avant-Garde

Edited by Luca Somigli and Mario Moroni

Italian Modernism offers a historiographic and theoretical reconsideration of the concepts of *decadentismo* and the avant-garde within the Italian critical tradition. The essays in this volume focus on the confrontation between these concepts and the broader notion of international modernism, understood as the complex phase of literary and artistic practices as a response to the epistemes of philosophical and scientific modernity at the end of the nineteenth century and in the first three decades of the twentieth.

This study is the first attempt in English to provide a comprehensive examination of Italian literary modernism. The volume documents how the previous critical categories employed to account for the literary, artistic, and cultural experiences of the period have provided only partial and inadequate descriptions, and have prevented a fuller understanding of the complexities and the interrelations among the cultural phenomena of the time. Provocative and wide-ranging, *Italian Modernism* will be of interest not only to Italianists but to specialists in a variety of fields, including comparative literature, fine arts, and cultural studies.

(Toronto Italian Studies)

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Edited by

LUCA SOMIGLI and MARIO MORONI

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS
Toronto Buffalo London

© University of Toronto Press Incorporated 2004
Toronto Buffalo London
Printed in Canada

ISBN 0-8020-8828-7 (cloth)

ISBN 0-8020-8602-0 (paper)



Printed on acid-free paper

Toronto Italian Studies

National Library of Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Italian modernism : Italian culture between decadentism and avante-garde/
editors, Luca Somigli and Mario Moroni.

(Toronto Italian studies)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8020-8828-7. ISBN 0-8020-8602-0 (pbk.)

1. Modernism (Literature) – Italy. 2. Italian literature – 20th century – History and criticism. 3. Italian literature – 19th century – History and criticism. 4. Literature and history – Italy – History – 20th century. 5. Literature and history – Italy – History – 19th century. I. Somigli, Luca II. Moroni, Mario, 1955– III. Series.

PQ4088.173 2003 850.9'112 C2003-906908-7

Publication of this book was made possible by a Senate Research Grant from Victoria University, University of Toronto.

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial assistance to its publishing program of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council.

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial support for its publishing activities of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP).

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Acknowledgments

The publication of this volume was made possible by a generous Senate Research Grant from Victoria University.

The essays by Antonio Saccone and Keala Jewell are published with permission of, respectively, Pendragon editore and The Pennsylvania State University Press.

The editors would like to thank Patrizia Di Vincenzo and Christine Sansalone for their assistance in translating some of the material into Italian, and Marisa Ruccolo for her help in compiling the index.

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Foreword: After *The Conquest of the Stars*

Étoile mourante, hélas! À demi-nue et toute flexueuse
avec sa chair moite et verdissante!

...

Elle m'inonda de ses larmes d'amour,
l'inconsolable Étoile de mon Rêve!

F.T. Marinetti, *La Conquête des étoiles* (1902)

[A dying Star, alas! Half-naked and supple
with her flesh drenched and livid!

...

She flooded me with her love tears,
the inconsolable Star of my Dream!]

F.T. Marinetti, *The Conquest of the Stars* (1902)

Italian Modernism marks a significant turn in the development of contemporary research – in Italy, the United States, and elsewhere – on modern Italian literature. Italianists in Italy are often content to rehearse the (undeniable but in itself not very interesting) fact that in Italian literature the category of 'modernism' has never been really at home. The editors of this book (Mario Moroni and Luca Somigli), on the other hand, have finally decided to take the logical next step: to acclimatize this category in the landscape of contemporary critical discourse on modern Italian literature, thus making this territory more accessible and comparable with the general panorama of other European (as well as non-European) literatures.

One might think such an effort pleonastic for a literature that, thanks in part to Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and his Futurist movement, has been one of the creators of the very idea of modernism. But Italian literature (both in its primary language and in its critical metalanguage) is paradoxical. Indeed, I know of no other great literature in the modern period that has demonstrated the same amount of self-criticism (at the limit of defeatism) cultivating, at least at the level of traditional popularizing statements, a less-than-positive, and reductive, image of whole periods of its own history, including the late Renaissance and Baroque, Romanticism, and (until recently) that peculiar mixture of Symbolism and Futurism that gave birth to Italian modernism. One might say that, traditionally, Italian literature has not seemed very interested in the idea of 'selling' itself, as far as its history after the end of the sixteenth century is concerned.

It is high time to abandon this suicidally selective and hardly communicative attitude. Italianists should reclaim the continuous greatness and international relevance of the literature they study, from its origins to today, including its conflictual and ambiguous situation during the period of the Fascist dictatorship (it is not the least of the above-noted paradoxes that this overdue vindication of the importance of Italian modernism comes about at the initiative of two expatriate Italian scholars).

The problem with the implementation of the category of modernism at this point in time, however, is that the development of a large critical literature has revealed the ambiguities and uncertainties connected to it, so that a unified theory of modernism is no longer possible or even desirable. (All the essays in this book are of high scholarly quality; the most stimulating among them are the ones that show a critical attitude towards their own categories, and the future development of those categories.)¹ The most we can hope for in the present situation is the elaboration of some general perspectives on modernism, rather than formal definitions of the phenomenon.

For instance, we can look at modernism as a locus of paradox – 'the paradox of an art freed in principle and yet neutralized in practice. It is this paradox which provides the context for, and in a general way defines, the phenomenon of modernism in art' (Adamson, 222) – so that modernism would appear to be a particularly apt vehicle for the generally paradoxical nature of Italian culture and society. This kind of tension can be further specified in socio-political terms: 'Committed politically to leading an aestheticization of the public sphere that chal-

lenged all parties, left and right, that failed to face up to the crisis of values in the social and political world, the early modernists were also committed culturally to a politicization of art. Cultural against actually existing politics, they were also political against actually existing cultures' (Adamson, 223). In this vein, we can also have recourse to some of those broad categories, like 'bourgeoisie' and 'capitalism,' that seem to have taken the place of theological concepts in the secular religion of modern times, observing, for instance, that in this period a division develops in 'the field of artistic production along a major fault line, separating industrial literature, which obeys the demands and rules of the marketplace, from high art, which finds in the rejection of the norms of bourgeois society its own validation. It is this critical and at times radically anti-bourgeois thrust that defines, in broad strokes, modernist literature.' At the same time, this 'oppositionality' may grow in opposite directions, from the reactionary to the revolutionary (Somigli, 310 ff.).

On the other hand, and leaving aside for the moment the political problem, it is sobering to note that the critique that is appropriately aimed at the old-fashioned category of decadentism could also be applied to modernism: 'Despite a large bibliography, Italian *Decadentismo* appears to be, in fact, an excogitation *a posteriori*, developed by critics to explain cultural phenomena and attitudes that were simply *contemporary* to each other and that seemed to lie beyond the realm of other possible designations' (Moroni, 66). Indeed, it is hard to find a category in literary history that could not be subject to the same criticism, whether or not we accept 'the principle of concomitance rather than disjunction' (Ceserani, 38). In the field we are dealing with here, the basic inadequacy of intellectual(istic) categories for describing concrete literary phenomena could be summarized by stating that, if a label like 'decadentism' is misleading, 'modernism' is always already belated, and 'postmodernism' is premature. But, before slipping into a Wildian cynicism or a post-Crocean irrationalism with respect to the application of these and similar critical categories, an important distinction should be maintained: whereas 'decadentism' is irremediably compromised by its moralistic and ideological connotations, 'modernism' can and should be salvaged because of its more descriptive and detached tone. Admittedly, the term sends us back to the essentially mysterious nature of the concept of time, as debated at least from Saint Augustine to Bergson (see also the discussion in note 2), but it is still functional to a hermeneutic circulation of knowledge, by

virtue of which the specific texts studied in this book throw some light on what we might mean by modernism, at the same time as the modernist emblem plausibly defines a general mental landscape.

Perhaps we should be more mindful of the fact that the rhythm of history is very slow. This is one of the realities of life that the arrogantly noble utopianism of modernist avant-gardes tries to ignore – or rather, valiantly (and uselessly) fights against. Not only have we, at the beginning of the third millennium, still to come fully to terms with thinkers like Heidegger: we have still to come to terms with his predecessor Nietzsche, *his* predecessor Kierkegaard, and *his* predecessor Hegel (whom not even Kierkegaard succeeded in exorcizing and laying to rest).

History might be said to move very slowly, or, conversely, human events may be regarded as a mere blip in the history of the cosmos. But these two apparently contrary views are actually united by the same consequence, in the way we look at historical events, or historical events look at, as well as to, us, in what might be called the ethos of history. That is, no single historical event at bottom matters very much, because it is always part of a slow and complex evolution, *and* because its scale, with regard to universal reality, is infinitesimal.²

Italian literature – or more precisely, Italian literary thought – is perhaps one of the most impressive international illustrations of this slow movement (we return to the Italian paradoxes). When Italian literature ceased to be the moving force of European literature, many Italian literary thinkers began to play what can be called the game of the past (a game that Marinetti among others found exasperating): that is, they uttered a series of sophisticated 'No's' to the ideas and movements that came from abroad, especially from Northern Europe. For instance, Leopardi brilliantly eluded the issue of Romanticism (which is the whole issue of early modern, or premodern, literary thought) in the name of the Classic tradition; later, Vincenzo Cardarelli and (more subtly) Giuseppe Ungaretti, elegantly circumnavigated the issue of modernism in the name of Leopardi and Petrarch. But then, what is the issue of modernism? Or, more ambitiously, what is the philosophy of modernism? Put in this form, the question is of course too vague. Let me try to clarify it.

When I ask about the philosophy of modernism, I am not (primarily) asking what is the philosophical system which is most representative of modernism – an interesting question but a very difficult one to answer. There is no single philosophy of modernism but several

competing ones with conflicting claims, from the heretical trends of modern Christianity (it is not by chance that the term 'modernismo' in Italian cultural history has a para-Catholic reference) to the heretical trends of modern Judaism (Freud's thought being perhaps the prime instance) to the various trends of that quintessentially modern heresy – the heresy of modernity – that is Marxism. (More or less radical forms of heresy are the driving forces of modern philosophical and theological thought.) Nor am I (foremostly) asking what is the philosophical system that is best suited to interpret modernism *a posteriori* – another interesting question, and again, one that is difficult to answer, because the misleadingly uniform rhetoric of 'postmodernism' obscures several different and competing philosophies – which are, by and large, the more or less thoroughly updated versions of the philosophies of modernism (the slow rhythm of history, again). For instance, Marxist trends tend to survive, somewhat sheepishly, in ideologies like feminism and cultural studies, while on the other hand Christian trends, Catholic or not, seem to have, with honorable exceptions, renounced even the attempt to elaborate some new perspective on world culture and literature. The Judaeo-Christian rhetoric has become a thoroughly secularized rhetoric, leading to a reductive view of modernism, since 'Mysticism – its definition, and the appropriation of its power – is at the heart of the modernist crisis. This is the crucial intuition that literary modernism, in particular in its decadent and symbolist roots, brings to religious modernism' (Wittman, 131).

When I ask what the philosophy of modernism is the question I propose is more modest, but perhaps also more ambitious, than the ones just evoked. More modest, because I do not presume to identify, much less to privilege, a single full-fledged philosophical system; more ambitious, because I am thinking of nothing less than a general characterization of the mental tone or atmosphere of modernism.

The philosophy of modernism is a form of erosion, or subtle vulgarization (a necessary oxymoron), of philosophy – a 'filosofia bruciata,' as I have called it elsewhere; where 'bruciata' means neither 'burned out,' nor, at the other extreme, 'burning': rather, it refers to a desertified, scorched-earth kind of thought.³ This 'filosofia bruciata' consists essentially in a questioning of philosophy as a consistent, non-contradictory system – a kind of degradation of philosophy as systematic thought. The philosophical tone of modernism is one of indifference towards the principle of non-contradiction – an indifference that does not bother with the niceties of Hegelian dialectics. The enduring, and

disquieting, legacy of modernism is its dizzying capacity for simultaneously saying everything and the contrary of everything – and the champion of modernism is appropriately Futurism, which creates the rhetoric of the avant-garde on the international scene thanks mostly to its frightening ability to juggle aporias (I listed some of them elsewhere). This relaxed attitude towards consistency characterizes modernism not only in the cultural but also in the socio-political sphere; indeed, such a philosophical (or post-philosophical, or para-philosophical) strategy can be called a form of vulgarization because it powerfully represents the philosophy of the man in the street, who (to limit myself to one example that is particularly relevant to the rhetoric of modernism) has become adept at employing the term 'bourgeois' with a tone of ironic superiority in the same breath in which (s)he extols the elements of bourgeois conformism.

Having sketched the answer to one ambitious question, I will be so bold (the intellectual restlessness, not to say recklessness, of modernism encourages such boldness) as to ask another, equally daring, one: What is next? Postmodernism has turned out to be, by and large, a coda to modernism; and since one of the distinctive features of modernism is the speed (some might say, the unseemly haste) with which it consumes the various positions and attitudes which it itself creates, postmodernism in its wake seems to have exhausted itself almost as thoroughly as modernism. The question 'What is next?', in the continuous fast-forward rhythm of (post)modernism, thus translates into 'And what now?'

Well, the 'returns to order' are always possible: after all, Italy can rightfully boast that she, after having given birth to the first great avant-garde movement in Europe, generated the first great reaction in Europe against that very movement ('ritorno all'ordine' is originally an Italian expression). We could then search the current artistic and intellectual landscape for signs of such 'returns,' and we would be sure to find some significant such signs. But there is always something predictable and predetermined about these findings, although specialized research along these lines enriches our detailed knowledge of the period.

Perhaps the story that awaits us – the story of which we are already a part – is more simple than that, and it has to do, once again, with the slow rhythm of history. Literary history is not necessarily made up of successive, clearly distinguishable, movements that we can characterize as opposite to one another, thus remembering them more easily. There is undeniably a vivaciousness and an excitement in the way a

historian (literary or not) is able to show how, say, the correction even of one year in the dating of a novel or play or painting can modify our view of the work in question and of its position in a given cultural context. But at the same time there is something slightly absurd about all this – something hurried and a bit hysterical – a spectacle that the avant-garde (I think for instance of Futurist theatre) is so good in both exalting and demystifying.

Literary history should resist the pull of Futurism's fascination with velocity, and insert modernism into the rhythm of a long and slow view of history. There is a 'multiplicity that only certain cultures possess by virtue of their longevity and their "long view"' (Jewell, 367). My previous reference to Hegel was also meant to suggest that in literature we are still absorbing the end-of-the-eighteenth-century shock of Romanticism; so that the abbreviation used above – (post)modernism – is not simply a play on words. It is important to ask 'can we also think of modernism as a critical anticipation of exactly those themes and metaphors which structure the self-understanding of postmodernism?' (Somigli, 335). This formula is a way of ensuring that statements like 'As a modernist, then, de Chirico already behaves as a postmodernist' (Hirsh, 410) do not sound like parodies of themselves.

What is at stake, in this historiographical slowing down, is nothing less than the chance of properly *contemplating* single works of art. This idea of contemplation is clear with regard to the visual arts (as exemplified in this book especially by Giorgio de Chirico's paintings), but it concerns, in a more important because not self-evident way, the literary texts as well; and the category of listening (which I developed elsewhere) is the auditory equivalent of the visually based experience of contemplation. In fact, the appreciation of any kind of work of art is at heart a synesthetic experience, which is particularly enhanced in the act of reading. Reading a page is also a way of *looking* at the words, and through them at the referred images (this act of looking at the words as concrete objects is particularly important in the perception of poetic texts); it is also a way of *listening* to the oral discourse that underlies the page. This comprehensive view of the act of reading makes it clearer that ideas of listening to the whispered discourse of a painting, or contemplating the architecture of a musical piece, are something more than fancy images: they are cognitively significant metaphors.

Contemplation allows us to develop an ontological perspective on texts, and generally on works of art and culture. Now, (post)modernism is perhaps the most articulate challenge to such a contemplative atti-

tude towards the work of art – a contemplation that (to repeat) brings to the fore the ontology of the work. Future work on modernism, then – in the wake of innovative collections like the present one – might also take the form of an effort to, so to speak, save modernism from itself. And it is not by chance that the strongest philosophical advocate in the twentieth century of the ontological look at works of art and culture is Heidegger, that resolutely anti-modern(ist) thinker. What I am elaborating is an attitude of slowing down – taking one's time, in order to develop a long view of the texts. Such a long view makes it possible for the critic to calibrate more carefully the real achievements of the period, to see that the most significant works, authors, movements sometimes turn out to be those which, to a fast-moving view, may appear marginal and out of step.

The most glaring example of such an equivocation in modern Italian literature (see note 5) is the case of Gabriele d'Annunzio, still too often the object of a historiographical and esthetic myopia which relegates him to some sort of nineteenth-century archaeology, or flattens his extraordinary achievements with a pseudo-sociological approach. The truth (that Marinetti, for instance, anxiously intuited) is that the genial Symbolist experimentation of d'Annunzio is essentially what makes modernism possible in Italian literature. D'Annunzio was 'among the first writers in Europe to explore the labyrinthine link between eroticism, the unconscious, the body, temporality, myth, and the death drive' (Re, 103.)

The critic, then, can never relax his or her guard against the recurrent temptations of reductionism and determinism: there is no necessary, unified, privileged connection between the single works of art, philosophy, and so forth created in a given historical period and the main features which, by accretion and sedimentation, are most often used in elaborating the traditional narrative about that period.⁴

Such a fruitful dis-connection (which does not mean, of course, the lack of any relationship) deserves to be underscored, because philosophico-literary historiography must constantly defend its phenomenological detachment against the encroachment of unilateral political posturings. For instance, the darkest period in modern European history witnessed a richness of divergent philosophical, theological, critical systems (and anti-systems) of thought: the uncompromising reflections of Antonio Gramsci, Piero Gobetti, Simone Weil, Walter Benjamin, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer; the uncompromised theologizing of Karl Barth and others; the more-or-less uncompromised philoso-

phizing of Benedetto Croce et al.: the brilliantly compromised meditations of Giovanni Gentile and Martin Heidegger, etc.; the turbidly compromised conceptions of Julius Evola, etc. This list is partial and discontinuous, but not haphazard; while clearly insufficient, it is nevertheless necessary as a starting point for an honest assessment. There is no easy lesson, no facile moralizing or ideologizing, to be drawn from this uneasy coexistence.

In fact, the historical connections of modernism are as broad as they are disquieting: modernist literature coexists with the formation of modern imperialism and with the birth of the two totalitarian systems that tragically renewed for the twentieth century the dramatic urgency of that Stendahlian title, *The Red and the Black*; and nowhere is that coexistence more intimate and perplexing than in Italy, the birthplace of one of the two totalitarian creatures. At first sight, modernism, with its rhetoric of fragmentation, would seem to be intrinsically opposed to the forcible and forced rhetoric of unification implicit in the very term 'totalitarianism.' The actual situation is considerably more complex, and only now – now that we have apparently left the twentieth century behind – have we begun to analyse the full extent of that complexity. I say 'apparently' because we will not come out of the *Novecento* until we develop a phenomenologically detached view of it, and we will not attain such a view until we achieve full distance from both forms of totalitarianism. The politically correct focus on 'such monsters as Fascism, Nazism, and racism' (Ceserani, 45) is both too broad and too narrow. It is too broad because the term 'racism' (eroded by current opportunisms and partisan squabbles) no longer identifies clearly enough that distinctive modernist horror, the genocide of the Holocaust, and too narrow because it no longer seems possible (as it often was for Italian literary historiography, until recently) to keep totalitarian communism out of that monster list, or to euphemize and personalize the issue by salvaging communism and reserving the blame for 'Stalinism.'

These implications and entanglements are not to be conceived in a deterministic perspective: there is no straightforward cause-and-effect relationship between Fascism, Nazism, imperialism, and communism on the one hand and philosophico-literary modernism on the other. What is called for is an analysis that respects the full complexity of the web of interrelationships. Before being shot for his collaborationism, the critic and novelist Robert Brasillach hinted at the poetic nature of two of the above-listed monsters, twinning Fascism and communism

as 'the poetry of the twentieth century.'⁵ One does not have to agree with this hyperbolic, unilateral, and ultimately desperate idea, but one should also not be too shocked by it. The suggestion is not completely irrational, not so much because of the enduring importance of so many compromised poets (Bertolt Brecht, Ezra Pound), but rather because poetry, if not monstrous, is at least irreducible to morality. (This is one of the features that poetry has in common with religion – one of the genealogies of theological modernism being Kierkegaard's famous analyses of the divarication between religion and morality.) My proposal is actually very modest: I am simply suggesting that the literary historian (as any other historian) cannot adequately criticize one of the two totalitarian formations of the twentieth century while remaining entangled in the principles of the other totalitarian formation.

Returning to Italy, this extreme laboratory of modernity: to speak of the modernistic nature of Fascism is not the same thing as alleging a fascistic nature of modernism; the former connection is hard to deny, the latter is demonstrably false. It seems to me that politically interested and interesting literary analyses of Italian modernism at the heart of the twentieth century have passed through two phases, a puritanical phase and a purist one. In the first, puritanical, phase, a simplistic opposition is developed between the category 'Fascism' and the category 'culture,' as if they were incompatible – hence the rhetoric about Italian culture 'under' Fascism. The fact that this strategy was originally understandable because of certain political and social conditions⁶ does not make it any the less inadequate. This black-and-white (or black-and-red) assessment has by and large been superseded by a more subtle kind of analysis, purist rather than puritanical (some of whose best results are represented by American scholarship on these issues). This more sophisticated criticism is aware of the complexity of the Fascist phenomenon, but seems to be very concerned with the danger of contagion, as if it were still worried about what has been called, with an effective alliterative label, 'the fascination with Fascism,' evoking the picture of an 'innocent' (see below) passerby hypnotized and dominated by the relentless, icy gaze of some witch or magician. Hence, the minute dissection of literary and generally esthetic productions, to extract from them something that is often described as the 'stain' or 'taint' of Fascism.

But the immersion in the diverse landscape of Italian modernism reflected in this rich collection has reinforced an idea that had been for some time developing in the mind of one observer: the time has come

to abandon excessively hygienic, or quarantine-oriented, preoccupations, and to study Italian culture – literature, philosophy, the arts, and so forth – as it develops above, under, and through Fascism (the Italian attribute ‘*trasversale*’ may be useful here). This phenomenologically descriptive and detached critique requires in turn a detachment from (to repeat) all forms of totalitarian *Novecento* ideologies. European scholars, justifiably worried by the European origins of these more-or-less-poetic monstrosities, may take refuge, and pride, in that other, much more reassuring European creation rooted in the Enlightenment, that is, liberalism.⁷ Liberalism has a rich history in non-extremist Italy: beside the already-quoted Gobetti and Croce, one thinks, for example, of those modern forms of Catholic thought of which Antonio Fogazzaro’s essayistic novels are one of the first modernist poetizations.

But here American (or American-based) scholars and critics would seem to have a great advantage with respect to their European counterparts, because the enlightened origins of their cultural history (which are, of course, European) excluded any direct conspiracy in the creation of those monster-poetics, although America felt their deep effects. It is as if the American critics might vindicate, in the study of modernism as well as of other cultural formations, a strong and critically articulated position of *innocence*: not innocence as a synonym of naiveté (still a widespread European cliché about Americans in general), but innocence as a form of hard-gained purity.

The situation, however, turns out to be considerably more complicated than that, if we look at the actual interaction of the primary and secondary forms of rhetoric. American innocence (both in the weak and the strong variant of the concept) is irremediably compromised by the evolution of American imperialism, which from the late nineteenth century to the present runs parallel to the history of American (post)modernism. This large problem cannot be dealt with here,⁸ and in any case one has to insist on the absence of deterministic cause-and-effect relationships. But the point is that the American critical look at modernism, as well as other cultural phenomena, is at bottom not any the more innocent than the European one. As already noted with respect to the apparent opposition between the logic of modernism and that of totalitarianism, there would seem to be a deep contrast between the apparently ‘soft’ category of modernism – with its connotations of anarchic individualism, e(s)th(et)ic rebelliousness, fluidity, cosmopolitan nomadism – and the *prima facie* ‘hard’ category of empire,

with its connotations of tight political organization, economic rationalization, and systematic application of military power. There is indeed a truth to this contrast, and one could trace a whole history of opposition between, for instance, the modernist style in Italy and the imperial ambition that found its broadest, but not its first, expression during the Fascist period.⁹ And yet, once again (as in the case of modernism and totalitarianism), the actual rhetorical interaction is more complicated.

There is indeed a whole dimension of modernistic literature – its aggressive utopianism, its energetic celebration of strength and decisiveness, its scorn for conformism, social mores, etc. – that lends itself to the celebration of empire, whether it be the ‘reactionary’ Italian empire, the ‘revolutionary’ Russian empire, or the ‘democratic’ American empire (phenomenological descriptivism is here more important than ever). But modernism’s capacity for simultaneously expressing contrary notions (a capacity explicitly theorized by Marinetti), is revealed also in its ambivalent attitude towards violence and its celebration of both the ‘hard’ machines glamorized by Futurism and various type of ‘soft’ machines.¹⁰ Finally, the American connection between modernism and imperialism is more subtle. American modernism, with its open-space and generously experimental rhetoric seems to have realized a kind of philosophical master move: the hollowing out, so to speak, of the American empire, freeing it from its self-consciousness as empire. The American empire, then, is perhaps the first in world history that resolutely refuses to conceptualize itself as an empire; and this refusal (as Europeans find hard to accept) is not so much a form of hypocrisy – a Machiavellian gesture in the degraded sense of the term – but a deep conviction that importantly modifies the style and perhaps the substance of this empire. The consequence is that the basic imperial style, from ancient Rome to Great Britain to Fascist Italy, appears archaic with respect to the American style even as it begins to take shape in the time of Theodore Roosevelt. In other words, the American empire has a distinctively modernist style. This is of course a larger history than the one covered in the present book; but the basic importance of *Italian Modernism* lies in my opinion in the way in which this collection encourages thought, exploration, and criticism.

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NOTES

- 1 One should distinguish a secondary rhetoric (the metalanguage of criticism) from a primary rhetoric: the creatively structured use of language in literature, philosophy, and so forth (the distinction, as in all such cases, is significant but relative – as proved by that indispensable and hybrid genre, the essay). Any structured use of language has an unavoidable ritual quality about it, so that, to come to the case in point, the rituals of modernistic literature – its recurrent invocations and evocations, its tics and tricks – are paralleled by analogous rituals in modernistic criticism. This is inevitable, and it is even a good thing (recurrences confer a certain compactness and recognizability on a whole field of discourse, just as they confer it on a single poem), but it is also good occasionally to question the traditional citational hierarchies within a given critical rhetoric. Certain authors are over-cited (and we know who they are), while others are under-cited. To confine myself to just one example: the study of the great modernist obsession with repetition should, so to speak, repeatedly insist on its basic genealogy, that bewildering philosophico-epistolary novel by ‘Constantin Constantius,’ *Repetition: A Venture in Experimental Psychology* [1843] (see Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*). The problem goes beyond specific philologies and genealogies; as an economist (quoted in the *New York Times*, 26 July 2003, B9) noted a quarter-century ago: ‘Research reflects prevailing moods at least as much as it influences them.’
- 2 ‘What we formerly called history is ended – an intermediary moment of five thousand years between the prehistoric centuries in which the globe was populated and the world history which is now beginning. Three millennia, measured by the preceding era of man’s existence and by future possibilities, are a minute interval. In this interval men may be said to have gathered together, to have mustered their forces for the action of world history, to have acquired the intellectual and technical equipment they needed for the journey which is just beginning’ (Jaspers 103–4). The initial part of this passage is more convincing than the last, although one might be tempted to say that this idea of ‘the journey which is just beginning,’ originally enunciated in the 1950s, is prophetic with respect to the hopes and aspirations of contemporary mankind. But this is precisely the problem: always applicable, this futuristic idea risks being irrelevant – like the eloquent utterances of the Biblical prophets (only they were not naively intent on predicting the future, nor on moralizing about the present: they tried instead to attain an ontological position outside of history). The

ambiguity of the quoted passage is pertinent to the question of modernism. 'Modernism' is an essentially *deictic* term: it really makes sense only with respect to the existential position of the subject who uses it (which is a *fortiori* true also of 'postmodernism').

- 3 I insist on this Italian expression, 'filosofia bruciata,' in its original form: the metalanguage of modernism is too narrowly dominated by the imperial claims of the French and English languages. Apropos of this contemporary and international 'questione della lingua': the fact that all the essays in this book are written in (or at least translated into) English has obvious advantages, but it also confronts us with an unavoidable ambiguity, as we miss the epistemological flavour of the secondary Italian rhetoric (see note 1) applied to the primary Italian rhetoric. But the interplay of advantages and disadvantages may reserve some surprise (if the present non-native writer may venture an observation on English usage): while the 'native' American essays are clearly more lively in their idiomatic-stylistic implementation, they tend also, at times, to be prone to jargon and to be a bit self-conscious.
- 4 'It is a far remove from the opinions held generally in a given epoch to the content of the philosophical works created in that epoch' (Jaspers 142). To return to the distinction mentioned in note 1: what we actually face in any given period of literary history is not one secondary rhetoric paralleling one primary rhetoric, but conflicting *rhetorics*, on both the secondary and the primary level. This may sound obvious: how else would literary scholarship progress, if not by virtue of fruitful disagreements and successive readjustments? Or (to put it in a less reverent and more Wildian way): How else would individual scholars in the humanities justify their grant applications, and universities with strong humanities components, their fund-raising efforts? What is less obvious – and here lies the real challenge of rhetoric as a discipline – is the possibility of a meta-rhetoric that would analyse and evaluate, in each given case, the turbulent chorus of secondary and primary rhetorics.
- 5 For the full quotation, see my *Gabriele d'Annunzio* (27–8).
- 6 The conditions I refer to have essentially to do with Italy's defeat in the Second World War, one of whose results on the cultural plane is a peculiar, and slightly perverse, coupling of the triumphalistic ideology of the victors with the victimistic ideology of the vanquished. The Italian author who perhaps expresses in the most effective way the mixture of tragedy and grotesqueness which marks the peculiarity of this ideological marriage is Curzio Malaparte.

- 7 It is useful to keep in mind that, in European political discourse, 'liberal' is a synonym, rather than an antonym, for 'moderate.'
- 8 Suffice it to cite a serious and ambitious analysis like that undertaken by Hardt and Negri in *Empire*. This analysis, however, still did not leave the oppressive *Novecento* atmosphere behind, because it is entangled in one of its two master-pseudo-narratives or monster-poetics. The book that opens with a scornful dismissal of an early-nineteenth-century social theory as 'a fantastic utopia' (6) ends more than four hundred pages later with a contradictory statement (echoing Marx's *Communist Manifesto*) that is a bit sinister and also a little pathetic: 'This is the irrepressible lightness and joy of being communist' (413). We remain in a situation of sad symmetry with the disparate and desperate hyperboles exemplified by the quotation from Robert Brasillach.
- 9 One instance of this is Aldo Palazzeschi's, *Due imperi mancati* (the four ellipses belong to the original title).
- 10 There is a rhetorical strain connecting a modernist title like Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons: Objects, Food, Rooms* (originally published in semi-private form by a very small New York publishing house, Claire Marie, in 1914) to a 'postmodernist' title like *The Soft Machine*, by William Burroughs, originally published in Paris in 1961 by the adventurous Olympia Press. One thinks also of Surrealist-style paintings (the most popular ones are those by Salvador Dalí) that represent melting machines.

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ITALIAN MODERNISM

Italian Culture between Decadentism and Avant-Garde

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Modernism in Italy: An Introduction

LUCA SOMIGLI AND MARIO MORONI

Modernism and Modernity

In introducing a special volume of the journal *Annali di Italianistica* on postmodernism in Italy, the editor Dino Cervigni noted the difficulty of dealing with such a category from the perspective of a cultural tradition in which modernism remains at best a vague and under-determined concept. Obviously, the issue is not that Italian culture has not gone through a 'modernist' phase – though the terms of that 'modernism' are precisely what need to be addressed – but rather that the word, if not the phenomenon itself, has until recently had very little purchase in the context of Italian arts and letters. In fact, it is arguably because of the 'importation' of postmodernism, first via the discourse of architecture and then that of philosophy, that it has been necessary to consider to what, precisely, postmodernism can be said to be *post*. The '-ism' in postmodernism is a suffix traditionally linked in Italian cultural discourse with specific and localized phenomena such as Decadentism, *Crepuscolarismo*, Futurism, and Hermeticism – in other words, with what Walter Binni would have called 'poetics' – and the term itself has raised some eyebrows, since from the beginning 'postmodernism' has been received as a more ambitious program – even, famously, a 'condition' – rather than the merely artistic project of a group or school. Investigation of the relationship between this supposed condition and the cultural production that characterizes it has led to conclusions that will appear familiar to scholars of Anglo-American modernism. For instance, Romano Luperini's blistering attack of postmodernism, from a Marxist perspective not unlike that of Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Contradictions of Late*

Capitalism, was founded upon a distinction between postmodernity as 'a historical period, namely the age which began roughly forty years ago and which is characterized by the electronic and computer science revolution' and postmodernism as 'the ideology and the artistic tendencies which accept the self-representation of postmodernity' ('Bilancio di un trentennio' 7). However, in his analysis of certain contemporary cultural products, such as the works of the poets associated with the journal *Baldus*, Luperini also suggests the possibility of a critical instance that uses the tools of postmodernity to break down its monologic discourse. Thus, Luperini's reading of postmodern culture recalls similar descriptions of modernism, which also emphasize openness. Modernism, too, brings into focus the contradictions of modernity. Its celebratory dimension – most famously exemplified by what has been called Futurist 'modernolatry,' that is, the exaltation of progress and of industrial technology – is accompanied by a series of antagonistic and critical strategies which recent Anglo-American scholarship has brought into focus. For instance, Marshall Berman, in *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, defines modernism as 'any attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it' (5), while for Astradur Eysteinnsson modernism can be understood as 'an attempt to *interrupt* the modernity that we live and understand as a social, if not "normal," way of life' (6).

This is not to say, of course, that the term 'modernism' itself is foreign to Italian literary historiography and theory. Rather, what we want to suggest is that there have been historical reasons for its limited application. It is precisely because of its relative neutrality – its 'foreignness' to the Italian tradition, if you will – that modernism can serve as a less ideologically charged term to define a range of cultural experiences between the turn of the twentieth century and the Second World War. In other words, and to anticipate some of our conclusions, far from attempting to interpret modernism as a monolithic notion, yet another of the many '-isms' already canonized by cultural history, we use it as an 'open' or 'weak' epistemological category to access the constellation of cultural phenomena which reflect, in complex and contradictory ways, on the experience of modernity in Italy.

We must consider, first of all, the fact that in Italy, as in France, the term 'modernism' was introduced at the beginning of the twentieth century to indicate the religious movement within the Catholic Church which sought to 'democratize' its structures and, most importantly,

suggested an 'evolutionary' view of dogma, which was, as Dennis Mack Smith puts it, 'not formulated once and for all, but could be expected to grow organically and change to suit the times' (202). Fiercely condemned by Pope Pius X in his 1907 encyclical *De modernistarum doctrinis* (also known as *Pascendi dominici gregis*), which associated modernism with 'the most blasphemous and most scandalous things that could be imagined from the perspective of Christian religiosity and tradition: [...] materialism, rationalism, atheism, anti-Catholicism and anti-Christianity' (Saresella 74), modernism was nevertheless influential for Catholic intellectuals who sought a closer relationship with the social reality of their time. It is certainly possible to establish links between it and a broader literary modernism, not only through such figures as the novelist Antonio Fogazzaro, discussed in Laura Wittman's essay, who were directly influenced by the debate within the Church, but more generally through the spiritual meditations of several writers of the period preceding the First World War, who saw both the necessity for a spiritual renewal after the crisis of nineteenth-century positivism and the loss of faith in the power of positivist science – and therefore also of its literary declensions, such as 'verismo' – but who were also unwilling to accept the institutional strictures of the Catholic church. It is in the light of a dialogue with the modernist instances of Catholicism that one can read the experience of writers such as Giovanni Papini, Piero Jahier, or Scipio Slataper, for whom writing becomes the central activity in an ethical and moral quest in which the Church represents a negative, repressive model and in which the desire for a more intimate relation with one's fellow human beings is ideologically sublimated by nationalism or a form of 'regionalist' solidarity.

We leave to Remo Ceserani's contribution a more thorough theoretical discussion of modernism. Here, we simply want to suggest that a broader notion of modernism as a constellation may account for the diversity of the cultural production of the period under consideration. In order to do this, it is necessary to examine the ways in which the period has been theorized within Italian literary historiography. The problem, as we see it, is that the most influential or simply the most common attempts to account for the cultural experiences between (to use two convenient sign posts) Carducci's late neo-Classicism and post-war neo-realism have employed overdetermined categories which have limited their range of application and obscured the common roots of the various forms of cultural production of the period. Here

we will consider the two most common historiographic categories, Decadentism and the avant-garde.

As Walter Binni noted in his highly influential study *La poetica del decadentismo* (1936), by the 1930s the debate on the moral and ideological implications of the term 'Decadentism,' clearly related to its etymological origins, had relaxed to the point that it now seemed possible 'to consider Decadentism historically, to separate it from the abstract concept of decadence, to give it the same historical value that we give to "romanticism." Let us remember that even the term "romantic" can be used to indicate a more or less pathological character' (6). Binni's invocation of Romanticism was not casual, since at the time of his writing an established critical tradition considered *Decadentismo* as an excessive manifestation of the most extreme aspects of Romantic individualism and *superomismo*. According to Benedetto Croce, whose influence on this issue was especially long-lasting, Decadentism was first and foremost one of the currents of contemporary art which precipitated the more general crisis of Romanticism. As he wrote in the entry on 'Aesthetics' for the *Encyclopædia Britannica*,

The crisis of the romantic period [...] asserted an antithesis between *naïve* and *sentimental* poetry, *classical* and *romantic* art, and thus denied the unity of art and asserted a duality of two fundamentally different arts, of which it took the side of the second, as that appropriate to the modern age, by upholding the primary importance in art of feeling, passion and fancy. [...] Later, it was thought that the disease had run its course and that romanticism was a thing of the past; but though some of its contents and some of its forms were dead, its soul was not: its soul consisting in this tendency on the part of art toward an immediate expression of passions and impressions. Hence it changed its name but went on living and working. It called itself 'realism,' 'verism,' 'symbolism,' 'artistic style,' impressionism, 'sensualism,' 'imagism,' 'decadentism,' and nowadays, in its extreme forms, 'expressionism' and 'futurism.' (268–9)

As we can see, and as Matei Calinescu has convincingly argued in *Five Faces of Modernity*, Croce makes an implicit distinction between a suprahistorical notion of 'decadence,' denoting a general sense of decline in several realms of modern life (moral, political, religious, and aesthetic), and a historical *Decadentismo* which, from being singled out as one of the post-Romantic '-isms,' finally comes to include a range of

artistic and literary movements later canonized as modernist or avant-garde. Thus, Crocean thought casts its shadow over both uses of the term – the moral and the historical – and makes it difficult to differentiate them clearly.

The use of Decadentism as a period term has been such that an informed reader like Calinescu, in discussing Elio Gioanola's 1972 study, entitled precisely *Il Decadentismo*, could say that it 'might be taken by an English reader [...] as one more introduction to literary modernism' (219). And yet clearly this is not a perfect fit, if only because it remains difficult to escape the value judgment implicit in the term. Even Binni, the first advocate for the 'historicization' of the notion of Decadentism, could not avoid this problem. Thus, his book concludes on what we might call an 'optimistic' note, which serves at the same time to declare the experience of Decadentism at an end. According to Binni, Eugenio Montale and Giuseppe Ungaretti, the 'new poets' who have learned and interpreted in a personal way the lesson of the 'foreign poetics' of what we could call modernism (from Baudelaire to Valéry to Apollinaire), also consign Decadentism to history: the new poets 're-affirm the human values, the serene song, which brings them back to the core of our most intimate tradition. All we intend to do is to indicate the new period as the conclusion of Decadentism and the birth of a new poetry – Italian, yes, but experienced, European' (137). Aside from the fact that it sets up an implicit hierarchy of values in the experience of modern Italian poetry, this *caesura* between Decadentism and post-First World War poetry, and, in another permutation, between Decadentism as an uncritical appropriation of European tendencies and the new poetry as its critical re-elaboration, further conceals or denies the dialogic relationship that links the authors of so-called Decadentism to their successors, and to the broader landscape of European modernism. Consider, for instance, the question of the poet's role in bourgeois society: if Baudelaire had announced the loss of the 'halo,' the auratic quality of the work of art and of its producer, Italian modernism, from D'Annunzio to the *Crepuscolari* to the Futurists to Montale and Ungaretti and the Hermetics, can be read as the articulation of a series of responses to that crisis. The *Crepuscolare* Guido Gozzano's famous renunciation of the title of poet is certainly related to the loss of the social function of art and to the breach between the aesthetic and the praxis of life which, according to Peter Bürger, characterizes late-nineteenth-century aestheticism. Cristina Della Coletta's reading of Gozzano's travel writ-

ings shows that the epic mode, which allowed the poet to construct a coherent narrative of his civilization, appears no longer practicable. The poet's role is thus ambiguously positioned between the posturing of the aesthete and the materialism of the bourgeois. In 'La Signorina Felicita, ovvero la felicità' [Miss Felicita, or Happiness], he famously writes:

Oh! questa vita sterile, di sogno!
Meglio la vita ruvida concreta
del buon mercante inteso alla moneta,
meglio andare sferzati dal bisogno,
ma vivere di vita! Io mi vergogno,
sì, mi vergogno d'essere un poeta! (191)

[Oh! This sterile, dream-like life!
How better the rough, concrete life
Of a good merchant concerned with money
How better to be whipped on by need
and yet live life! I am ashamed
yes, ashamed, of being a poet!]

Yet, this impossibility of assuming the role, the *persona*, of the poet constitutes the direct link between – in Binni's terms – a decadent experience like that of *crepuscolarismo* and its supposed overcoming in a poet like Montale, who in *Ossi di seppia* [The Bones of Cuttlefish] finds himself forced to admit the purely negative – yet necessary – role of the poet in modern society:

Non domandarci la formula che mondi possa aprirti,
sì qualche sillaba storta e secca come un ramo.
Codesto solo oggi possiamo dirti,
ciò che *non* siamo, ciò che *non* vogliamo. (*Tutte le poesie* 29)

[Do not ask us for the formula which could open worlds for you,
yes, some twisted syllable and dry like a branch.
This alone nowadays can we tell you,
what we are *not*, what we do *not* want.] (*The Bones of Cuttlefish* 29)

Thus, Decadentism is problematic as a historical category, because it parcels Italian literature at the turn of the century in such a way that

it erases the complex relationship, between the pre- and the post-war period, of the different articulations of the question of the role of intellectual and literary labour and of the writer him/herself in modern society. It is equally problematic as a conceptual/aesthetic category insofar as it involves a moral judgment on the validity of certain literary experiences which has traditionally functioned to repress them (as in the case of D'Annunzio). Indeed, in the last two decades the fortune of the term '*Decadentismo*' has declined significantly, so much so that Paolo Giovannetti, in one of the most recent monographs on the problem, could conclude his study by writing that 'nowadays, the idea that for over a century world art has been decaying after reaching the apogee of its aesthetic and cognitive greatness in the middle of the last century is seen as an absurdity, as nothing more than a polemical exaggeration' (99).

'Avant-garde' proves similarly problematic. Here, too, we are confronted with a series of partially overlapping applications of the term. 'Avant-garde,' of course, tends to project a certain cultural experience beyond the borders of the national literary debate and to insert it in the context of a broader European phenomenon articulated in a series of movements, from Futurism in Italy and Russia to Vorticism in England to Surrealism in France. But the notion of avant-garde, like that of Decadentism, also entails a certain parcelling of the literary landscape. The term 'avant-garde' has been applied to those movements which have sought to break openly with the conventions of the literary traditions and, in particular, have confronted both the reification of language in bourgeois literature and the institutional roles constructed by the conventions of literary communication. Futurist *serate*, Dada *happenings*, Surrealist exquisite corpses, and so forth may demonstrate the same sense of uncertainty with respect to the question of 'what is a poet' found in the stanzas of Gozzano and Montale quoted above, but they also entail a radically different relationship with the institution of literature, as Bürger has explained.

A further, specifically Italian, question needs to be considered, given the fact that, within the Italian tradition, the historical avant-garde has been identified with the Futurist movement. Because of the links between Futurism and Fascism, and also as a result of the cultural hegemony of neo-realism after the Second World War, the notion of avant-garde found itself eclipsed until it was resurrected by the neo-avant-garde of the late 1950s and the 1960s as a specifically stylistic option which at the same time articulated a critical and antagonistic

relationship between the artist and bourgeois society. Thus in Italy more than anywhere else the avant-garde has been associated with a practice of writing which aims at deconstructing the formative and normative power of language, and which is carried out at the level of expression. It cannot easily account, on the other hand, for all those cultural phenomena, especially in the wake of the First World War, which sought to establish a dialogic relation with tradition, or at least to mediate between the necessity of giving formal expression to the sense of alienation and futility of artistic practice and the desire to recuperate in a critical fashion, the cultural tradition. Thus, movements such as Hermeticism, *Novecentismo*, or *arte metafisica*, and figures such as Massimo Bontempelli, Alberto Savinio, Giorgio de Chirico, and even Luigi Pirandello or Italo Svevo, whose relationship with the cultural tradition entails neither the epigonistic mode of decadence nor the rebellion associated with the avant-garde, but who are nevertheless involved in a debate with both experiences, are either cut off from a general discourse on the characteristics of the culture of the first half of the century or interpreted (Binni's reading of Ungaretti and Montale above is an example) as returning to traditional forms of aesthetic experience after the iconoclastic moment of the avant-garde. In this latter construction, the 'system-immanent critique' (to use Bürger's term) opposing the avant-garde to the traditional institutional sites that mediate between the work of art and its public is simply suppressed from the unfolding of literary history by re-establishing a continuity that by-passes the avant-garde and connects the new poetry of the post-war period to the lyrical tradition and, at best, to the less emphatic aspects of D'Annunzio's oeuvre and the more melodious strains of *Crepuscolarismo*.

The critical commonplace that Futurism was responsible for an enormous amount of propaganda material – especially manifestos – but for very few 'important' works is typical of this inability to read the key moment of the avant-garde in terms of its own challenge to the institution of aesthetics: the separation between art and life which Futurism repeatedly called into question is precisely what is reasserted through the very gesture of distinguishing between the work of art and the act of propaganda, the aesthetic object to be contemplated and the 'event' (the *serata futurista*, the concert of noise-tuners, the pamphleteering activity) which brings the audience into the performance and exchanges the place of the receiver with that of the producer. But, as was well known by those artists who, after the First

World War, sought to re-establish a suitable distance between the artist and the public, between the sphere of the aesthetic and the praxis of life, the work of restoration cannot simply be a matter of returning to the pre-avant-garde tradition. It must also involve an engagement with the practical and theoretical questions raised by the avant-garde itself, as Antonio Saccone demonstrates in his study of Ungaretti's poetic theory. It is significant, of course, that the return to order should be carried out, in many instances, by artists who had gone through the experience of the avant-garde. For the artists who came to intellectual maturity during the war, like Ungaretti himself, a confrontation with the avant-garde, in one or another of its configurations, was often unavoidable, whether that meant militancy in Futurism (from Aldo Palazzeschi to Mario Sironi to Bontempelli) or a loose affiliation with '-isms' still on the margins of the national culture, like Surrealism (Savinio or de Chirico) or the adoption of techniques borrowed from the avant-garde itself (as, for instance, in the case of Pirandello). Bontempelli acknowledged as much in a programmatic essay in his journal *900* [The Twentieth Century], when he wrote of the Futurist leader F.T. Marinetti:

Marinetti ha conquistato e valorosamente tiene certe trincee avanza tissime. Dietro esse io ho potuto cominciare a fabbricare la città dei conquistatori. Evidentemente, la trincea è più 'avanzata': ma non tutti ci possono andare ad abitare. (25)

[Marinetti has conquered and bravely holds some very advanced trenches. Behind him I was able to begin building the city of the conquerors. Obviously, the trench is more 'advanced,' but not everybody can go and live there.]

More generally, the work of reconstruction characterizing the post-war *ritorno all'ordine* can be understood as a response to the Futurist challenge to the aesthetic and as an attempt to translate the Futurist destructive *élan* into a constructive program. The success of Fascism, whose rise accompanied the *ritorno all'ordine*, was due, among other things, to the fact that it was able to do precisely what the avant-garde had sought to do: it managed to close the gap between art and life by aestheticizing the everyday, and to eliminate the antithesis between producer and recipient by turning each individual into an extra on the stage of the spectacles of the regime. Indeed, one of the most original

moves of Fascism was to appropriate the anti-institutional discourse of the avant-garde and to mediate it with that of its moderate epigones.

By adopting the notion of modernism as it has developed in the critical debate on the cultural crisis of modernity, we intend to contribute to a broader understanding of the period under study. If we interpret modernity as the ground of formation of epistemes of knowledge centred on the Enlightenment categories of reason, social emancipation, and scientific progress, whose beginnings can be found in the eighteenth century and culmination in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, modernism can then be considered as the network of cultural responses – at times openly antagonistic, at others characterized by a much greater ambiguity – which reflect upon, react to, and seek to articulate alternatives to the triumph of the institutions of modernity. Modernism thematizes a series of issues that are central to an understanding of the culture of the period, such as the relationship between the artist and the institutions of culture; the relationship between the artist and tradition and the question of cultural memory; the role of the sacred, the mythical, and the metaphysical vis-à-vis the positivist discourses of modernity; the status of technology within modern society and its effect on the production, circulation, and reception of the work of art; the tension between the homogenizing power of modernity and the persistence of local cultural traditions; the emergence of the counterdiscourses of marginalized groups questioning the coherence and unity of modern culture; the rejection of realism and the emergence of new modes of representation. Modernism thus allows us to bring into significant relation experiences which have traditionally been kept separate in Italian criticism, but it also makes it possible to show the links between the various manifestations of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Italian culture and the more general European context. In this sense, what we call modernism is related to what others – for instance, Giovanni Dotoli in *La nascita della modernità* or Fausto Curi in *La poesia italiana d'avanguardia* – have recently called '*modernità letteraria* [literary modernity].' We think, however, that the term 'modernism' has the advantage of being more clearly distinguished from modernity, a term loaded with historiographic and sociological implications.

We believe that we are not alone in our undertaking. In fact, in the last few years a new comparative and international perspective on the notion of modernism appears to have emerged, as Edward Mozejko indicated in an article published in 1998. Of course, the Anglo-Ameri-

can modernist tradition has been discussed in relation to its European counterparts in a variety of forums – for instance, at the international conference held at the University of Antwerp in 1993, and in the volume *Modernism 1890–1930*, edited by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane in 1976, a critical and historiographic attempt to discuss such artistic currents as Symbolism, Expressionism, and Impressionism. However, these discussions did not permit an in-depth study of specific issues and texts concerning Italian culture between the turn of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth. This is precisely the gap that this volume aims to fill.

The Cultural-Historical Framework

As we have argued above, modernism must be understood in its complex network of relations and reactions to modernity. Such an understanding requires knowledge of the particular cultural-historical framework of the period. Thus, we intend to outline the features of modernity in Italy between 1861, when the question of the political formation of the nation gave way to that of the creation of a national culture and identity, and the mid-1930s, when the cultural protectionism fostered by the now-consolidated Fascist regime became pervasive and weakened the ties linking Italian modernism to its European counterparts.

The annexation of the city of Rome by Italy on 20 September 1870, and the transfer of the capital of the kingdom from Florence to Rome in 1871, marked the realization of the program of Italian unity and independence initiated in 1861 with the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy, and it opened a long and complex phase of construction of a unified state. The intellectual group that best represented a commitment to the major issues of modernity – which in Italy meant not only the process of modernization of economic and productive structures and of everyday life, but also an evolution from the heroic and idealistic values of the *Risorgimento* to the constitution of a culture suitable to the new state – was that of the so-called Hegelians in Naples, represented by Bertrando Spaventa (1817–1883) and Francesco De Sanctis (1817–1883). Their cultural politics consisted of connecting the Italian philosophical and literary tradition with Hegelian dialectical historicism in order to generate the necessary conditions for the emergence of a new type of Italian intellectual, one capable of forging an Italian cultural identity. The legacy of the Neapolitan School was extremely

influential, shaping the intellectual formation of such philosophers as Benedetto Croce (1866–1952) and Giovanni Gentile (1875–1944).

When Prime Minister Camillo Cavour – the key figure in the process of political unification – died in 1861, unification remained incomplete. Cavour's political heirs, the so-called Right, had to integrate the peninsula into a single state. This was a different and less heroic task than the struggle for independence which had characterized the *Risorgimento*. During its tenure in power the Right was dogged by the serious political opposition of the Left. The Left was composed of former followers of Giuseppe Mazzini, who had joined the Piedmontese camp in the 1850s to make unification possible. The old *Risorgimento* question of whether Italy should be united as a monarchy or a republic constituted the original distinction between these two political groups and persisted in the newly formed kingdom.

Prior to 1870, the major issue dividing Left and Right was that of Rome. The Left, influenced by its anticlerical and revolutionary origins, criticized the Right's timid Roman policy. In addition, the two groups fought over issues such as tax policies, and the Left insisted that the Right neglected Italy's pressing social problems and failed to widen the country's electoral base. The Left gained support in the South of Italy because of resentment of the Right's perceived 'Piedmontization' of the area, as well as the poor treatment of Garibaldi's volunteers after unification, the free-trade regime that crippled the region, and the frequent use of police to quell social agitation. The Left's constant hammering and the South's decisive support produced a major change in the 1874 elections. While the Right preserved a slight majority, parliamentary arithmetic opened the possibility of negotiations that would produce an eventual majority of the Left. Neither the Left nor the Right was a 'party' in the modern sense; both were divided into many groups, centred on prominent individuals, which could suddenly shift their political allegiance.

Finally, on 18 March 1876, a cabinet of the Right headed by Marco Minghetti lost a crucial vote on the question of taxation of wheat-milling. A government of the Left replaced Minghetti, and in November new elections were held. The new interior minister, Giovanni Nicotera, brought the government's power to bear in favour of the Left. As a result, the Right lost most of its seats in the Chamber, and the Left took control of the Italian government. Following this political change a dramatic separation ensued between those intellectuals who accepted the institution of the monarchy and those who wanted to

continue pursuing a republican and radical agenda, especially in the city of Milan. Alberto Asor Rosa has described this division in terms of its ideological implications: among the intellectuals who accepted the monarchy, the dominant ideology would shift from the old progressivism of the *Risorgimento* to a form of social conservatism that found expression in the literary works of such authors as the novelist Giovanni Verga and the nationalist poet Giosuè Carducci. The more radical group would instead mature the impulse that moved bourgeois intellectuals in the direction of the common people, in the conviction that only by embracing their values and needs could Italian culture find a solution to Italy's problems as a young nation. However, both intellectual blocks were united by a common aversion to the tradition of Catholic thought, especially after Pope Pius IX condemned all trends of contemporary philosophy and their corresponding political ideologies in 1864, in his encyclical *Quanta cura* and the document entitled *Sillabo*. The Pope had demanded from believers an absolute respect for Christian dogma and a strong opposition to the political unification of Italy. Thus the ideological ground for Italian intellectual groups was comprised of a combination of anticlericalism, atheism, and positivism. More complex attempts to mediate between the principles of positivist science and liberal politics on the one hand, and the Catholic Church on the other, were frustrated by the Church's sweeping condemnation of modernism.

In the cultural and literary realms, the combination of anticlericalism, atheism, and positivism generated, in turn, two different, if not opposing, tendencies within the original social conservative intellectual attitude. The prevalence of a scientific mentality favoured the formation of a naturalistic literature, whose major representative was the Sicilian novelist Giovanni Verga. The main goal of this trend was the application of the methods of the exact sciences to literary production. The demand for national autonomy, in contrast, encouraged a revival of the culture of pre-Romantic Classicism. There is no doubt that this second tendency prevailed in Italian popular opinion, and Carducci, its major representative, was loved and admired as a spiritual guide by generations of Italians.

It remains difficult to formulate a definitive judgment about this period in Italian culture. In general, it may be argued that the lay, scientific mentality often represented the means by which the leading intellectual groups legitimated the survival of the dominant class in Italian society, which it considered an inarticulate and impersonal en-

tity to be guided according to a series of mechanical laws. The Darwinian theory of evolution, with its emphasis on the survival of the fittest, could be used to justify the supremacy of the ruling class.

In Italy, positivist culture and ideology found a particular application. Asor Rosa has argued that the positivist attempt to reduce intellectual intervention in reality to the determination of the rational mechanisms that regulate it appeared to be inadequate for the task that a dominant ideology was supposed to undertake. Positivism ended up as a tool of the leading political group, the *Sinistra Storica* (historical Left), which believed that the future of Italy could be based on an absolute trust in the elements of progress. Thus the idealist and spiritualistic critiques of positivism in Italy came to represent a critique of the contemporary political climate. The reaction to positivist culture and ideology, in fact, assumed the form of a resurgence of idealism. Two philosophers dominated the idealist revival: Croce and Gentile. These two authors and their works influenced Italian culture, including its Marxist components, throughout the twentieth century. Croce and Gentile shared the belief that contemporary Italian culture ought to be connected with the historicist tradition, from Gianbattista Vico to Francesco De Sanctis, the nationalist tradition of Vincenzo Gioberti, and Hegelian philosophy. Each of these traditions tended to look at life in terms of organicism and complexity rather than in terms of fixed structures and the pseudo-scientific concepts of positivism. Croce and Gentile also tended to reject the purely materialistic principles of Marxism in favour of a more inclusive conception of history founded on the creative and autonomous activity of the human spirit, although both were profoundly influenced by Marxist principles, which remained the basis of their approach to society through the categories of material conditions and economics.

Croce and Gentile also shared the conviction that philosophy was a superior form of science, compared to which the natural sciences appeared as pseudo-sciences – an attitude that generated the prejudice and diffidence towards scientific thought which would characterize Italian cultural discourses throughout the twentieth century. Finally, Croce and Gentile strongly believed that their views and principles ought to be linked to a specific cultural politics, and that they ought not to be used in a spontaneous way, but should instead be deployed within a struggle among ideas, according to a strategy. In other words, Croce and Gentile's was not a form of speculative idealism; rather, they theorized what was called 'militant idealism.' The tool for this

militancy, and for the collaboration between the two philosophers, was the journal *La critica* [Criticism], founded by Croce in 1903. Over the years, Croce and Gentile's thought intersected with that of young Italian intellectuals, in particular that of the Florentine group led by Giovanni Papini (1881–1956) and Giovanni Prezzolini (1882–1982). Walter Adamson demonstrates in his essay in this volume that Papini and Prezzolini were committed to elaborating adequate cultural responses to and solutions for the need for change in both Italian culture and politics at the very beginning of the twentieth century. The organ for the expression of this intersection of tendencies and interests was the journal *La Voce* [The Voice] (1908–14).

In order to grasp the complexity of Italian culture in the period between the 1880s and the First World War, it is necessary to consider the works and the influence of Croce vis à vis those of another major figure, Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863–1938). Interestingly, both the philosopher and the poet/novelist shared the same point of departure: modern Italian poetry as it was articulated by Carducci's Classicism. Carducci's enormous influence on Italian literature at the end of the nineteenth century may best define the difference between it and other contemporary European modernist experiences, and neither Croce nor D'Annunzio could conceive literary modernity outside the context of Classicism. For Croce, however, Carducci represented the ideal fulfilment of the values of the *Risorgimento*, namely, the love of freedom and patriotism, whereas for D'Annunzio Carducci was the master of poetic form, as well as the prophet (or *vate*) of a new Italian nation, unfortunately run by people whom D'Annunzio considered second-rate politicians. Carducci came to represent the bard of a high poetry characterized simultaneously by the praise of beauty and the passion for national ideals and glory. It was precisely with respect to D'Annunzio and his works that Croce outlined the theory of Decadentism, whose formation as both a conceptual and a historiographic notion is the subject of Mario Moroni's essay.

If the decade 1890–1900 was characterized by a series of literary experiences defined as *post-carducciane*, new and more ambitious forms of literary experimentation marked the decade 1900–10. But even this phase was influenced by the works by Croce published in that decade and immediately after, in particular, *Estetica* [Aesthetics] (1902), *L'intuizione pura e il carattere lirico dell'arte* [Pure Intuition and the Lyric Character of Art] (1908), *Breviario di estetica* [Manual of Aesthetics] (1912), and *Il carattere di totalità dell'espressione artistica* [The Total Char-

acter of Artistic Expression] (1917). Croce's notion of art was based on the concept of 'pure intuition,' which implied the negation of intellectual knowledge and practical objectives in the process of artistic creation. In some respects, Croce's conception was close to the 'decadent' view of art; the philosopher displayed a Classicist conception of style, however, and a strong interest in the ethical nature of the sentiments expressed in the work of art. The complexity of Croce's influence on early-twentieth-century Italian culture and literature consists in the fact that it was innovative and conservative at the same time. The philosopher emphasized the importance of creative subjectivism, along with some of the principles of literary modernism, but he also opposed the forms of expression of that very same European modernism, since he saw in its experiments an attempt to overturn the balance between idea and form. This largely accounts for Croce's lack of understanding and appreciation of the European avant-garde, including Italian Futurism. At the same time, the influence of Croce contributed to the rebellion of the young authors against the two major father figures, Giovanni Pascoli and D'Annunzio, in that Croce himself strongly criticized the former for expressing confused sentiments and the latter for his aestheticism and sensuality.

Practically every young Italian writer and poet of the early twentieth century faced the challenge of overcoming the influence of Pascoli and D'Annunzio, and of Carducci before them. This struggle generated three major cultural and literary experiences: *Crepuscolarismo*, Futurism, and *Frammentismo*. In the works of the two major representatives of *Crepuscolarismo*, Guido Gozzano (1883–1916) and Sergio Corazzini (1886–1907), poetry is confronted by the reality of the modern world. These poets acknowledged the illusory nature of any celebratory or vitalistic use of poetic language and denounced the fracture between the high tone of art and the frantic pace that characterized contemporary reality. They responded to this situation by adopting a colloquial language, which did not mask or falsify the experience of modern reality, but, unlike the Futurists, they avoided any form of participation in or celebration of that same reality.

On the opposite end of the cultural spectrum there was, of course, Futurism. In the 'Founding Manifesto' of 1909, Marinetti outlined the movement's unconditional acceptance of the features of modern civilization: its technology, the exasperated dynamism of human and verbal relationships, the mechanicity and automatism of images, and the break with past modes of expression and of existence. Futurism was

also characterized by a wide-ranging intervention in the cultural and political arena. Its openly nationalistic rhetoric established from the beginning a connection between the production of literary and artistic artifacts and a broader project of renewal and regeneration for the nation. Futurism viewed the question of national identity as an open one, which could not be solved simply by appealing to the inherited cultural tradition – to what the Futurists vituperated as the ‘cemeteries’ of the museums, the cities of art, and the literary canon. By presenting itself as not limited to a specific domain but involved in all realms of art (a long-established tradition even considers Futurist art rather than literature as its highest achievement) and in life in all its various aspects – politics, economics, architecture, fashion, and even cooking – Futurism was the first movement in Italian culture to question the validity of the category of the aesthetic and to seek a new mediation between it and life praxis. Nationalism provided the overarching ideology within which this mediation could be accomplished.

The authors of *La Voce* expressed a rather different attitude towards the function of literature and its formal structures. This group of young writers such as Scipio Slataper (1888–1915), Piero Jahier (1884–1966), Carlo Michelstaedter (1887–1910), and Giovanni Boine (1887–1917) developed a ‘fragmented’ style of lyrical and ethical content embodied in short poetic or prose pieces. The experimentation of the writers of *La Voce* can be considered a parallel avant-garde with respect to Futurism. *Frammentismo* rejected the Futurist collective spirit and its programmatic purpose, as well as its cult of modernization. The fragmented style of the ‘*vociani*’ tended to implode into an investigation of the self and its problematic relationship with the world, animated by an intense moral and ethical tension, which Thomas Harrison identifies as the features of ‘expressionist modernism’ and which differentiates it from the historical avant-garde.

The First World War represented a turning point for Italian culture and Italian intellectuals. There were those who, like Croce, opposed the intervention of Italy in the war, but found themselves isolated. Most of the intellectual sector justified the war according to its own point of view, and used the war to support and confirm its agenda. D’Annunzio and his followers were looking for both the glories of Italy and an opportunity for an adventure that would exalt the qualities of the individual hero. The nationalists represented the front line of interventionism and recruited intellectuals such as Prezolini, Papini,

and Soffici. Marinetti and the Futurists welcomed the war as a form of ethical and biological activity, in the hope that a new generation of men would be born out of the bloodshed, a generation of younger, more dynamic, and stronger Italians.

In terms of more specific political groups, the right-wing socialist reformists, led by Bissolati and Bonomi, thought that the war would consolidate the unstable relationship between the masses and the ruling class. Even the Socialist Party, the only organized mass party in Italian politics, which was officially against intervention in what it considered a capitalist war, found itself divided over the issue. The so-called leftist socialist revolutionaries, led by Benito Mussolini, hoped that the war would provide a healthy education in violence and fighting, leading to a revolution. Even progressive democrats like Gaetano Salvemini tended to justify the war ideologically, conceiving it as the continuation and final stage of the historical process of the *Risorgimento*. They also supposed that the peasants, who had hitherto contributed little to the construction of a strong national consciousness and identity, might acquire political maturity via the sacrifice and sense of unity generated within the common experience of the battlefield. Finally, the irredentists, including the Triestine writer Scipio Slataper, fought for the annexation of their native region to the territory of Italy.

In spite of their various motivations and hopes, the war ultimately had the same function for everyone: it shattered the illusions of those who had believed that it could constitute a means for social emancipation and political education, and reinforced instead the militaristic and authoritarian tendencies already present in certain quarters of the ruling class and in public opinion. In the meantime, the war had taken the lives of major representatives of the Futurist movement, including the painter Umberto Boccioni and the architect Antonio Sant'Elia, along with the *vociano* Slataper. Even for those who survived, the war was a traumatic experience. For instance, Giuseppe Ungaretti's poetry, written in the years after the war, was imbued with a sense of human life as tragedy; this sense of tragedy led the author to a religious experience that would colour his poetry for the rest of his life.

As Luperini argued in *Il Novecento*, the signs of a sense of tragedy came from practically the entire intellectual front. Apart from the historical events of the war, there seemed to have been a death of the very role of the intellectual, who could no longer continue to operate in a space which could guarantee both artistic autonomy and an influ-

ence on the cultural-political sphere. The general sense of discontent which developed in public opinion after the war required the ruling class to channel the explosive tension by configuring not only political, but also cultural and moral solutions for the future. In this historical scenario, intellectuals found themselves confronting a reality in which the war had reinvigorated the masses of workers and peasants, but, in obvious reaction, had also strengthened the subversive agenda of the revolutionary Right. In addition, the war had promoted the rise of the middle class, which was pervaded by strong anti-socialist feelings and resented the working-class movement which emerged in the aftermath of the war.

It is within what can be defined as a crisis of liberal culture – a culture of which Croce was the major representative – that we can see how Italian intellectuals were forced to abandon their autonomous space and to side with one or the other of the two antagonistic political solutions which would characterize Italian society until the consolidation of the Fascist regime. For the intellectuals it was, essentially, a question of choosing between socialism and bourgeois reaction, between social democracy and a rigid classist social structure. A parallel alternative between two antagonistic solutions emerged in the realm of art and literature: one could either follow the trend of the dominant ideology or live in a separate realm of ‘pure’ literary and artistic experience. In such a cultural and political atmosphere, the intellectual group around the journal *Lacerba* moved from one alternative to the other, first exalting art as a totalizing activity, and later championing, with an analogous exclusiveness, interventionist and hawkish politics. When Papini closed the publication of *Lacerba* at the onset of the war, he made it very clear that an autonomous ideological space was no longer practicable. In other words, on the one side there was literature, on the other politics.

It is only within this framework that we can understand the ‘restoration’ which characterized Italian culture after the First World War; it was not simply a return to tradition, but the institutionalization of the separation between art and literature and politics. This institutionalization retrieved from the past not so much content, or the social role of the intellectual, but rather traditional forms and styles, as well as the exaltation of the dignity and the rigour of literary studies. The post-war years in Italy represented a turning point of major consequence. The war plunged the intellectual and artistic avant-garde into