

THE RHETORIC OF VIOLENCE AND SACRIFICE IN FASCIST ITALY

Mussolini, Gadda, Vittorini

The Italian fascists under Benito Mussolini appropriated many aspects of the country's Catholic religious heritage, such as ideology, mysticism, and ritual practices, to further their political goals. One concept that the fascist regime utilized as part of a core strategy was that of "sacrifice." In this book, Chiara Ferrari looks at how the rhetoric of violence and sacrifice was used by the Italian fascist regime throughout the interwar years to support its totalitarian project and its vision of an all-encompassing bond between the people and the state.

The Rhetoric of Violence and Sacrifice in Fascist Italy examines speeches by Mussolini and key literary works by prominent writers Carlo Emilio Gadda and Elio Vittorini and their influence on the body politic. Through this investigation, Ferrari demonstrates how the idea of sacrifice functioned in relation to objectives of fascist discourse, such as averting an impending national crisis, promoting collaboration among social classes, and the forging of a social contract between the state and the people.

(Toronto Italian Studies)

CHIARA FERRARI is an assistant professor in the Department of Italian Studies at New York University.

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CHIARA FERRARI

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Introduction

In April 1924, Benito Mussolini remarked with satisfaction that the fascist *legioni nere* (Black Legions) of Imola had in the past made him the gift of a sword inscribed with Machiavelli's motto *Cum parole non si mantengono li Stati* (Not by words are States maintained).

The irony of the all-too-literal gift was probably not lost on the Duce. Even in its more refined book version, Sir Niccolò's advice never travelled very well in public, and, when given to the powerful, his infamous little tome had ended up more quickly on night tables than displayed on coffee tables. But flattery is hard to resist, and the fascist "prince" promptly fell *cum parole* on the rhetorical sword that he had received. Marking the self-ascribed importance of the Machiavellian motto for his political vision would be nothing less than the publication in the journal *Gerarchia* of Mussolini's own "Preludio al Machiavelli" (Prelude to Machiavelli), an essay he originally wrote as foreword to his university thesis on the Florentine statesman.

Perhaps in a faint attempt to sidestep the rhetorical corner he was painting himself into by using lots of words to honour a motto that called for few, if any, he pointed out that his "Preludio" contained a "scarsa bibliografia" (meagre bibliography). If words were impossible to avoid in making his political vision public, footnotes, at least, he could discard. The inscribed sword would fall on those marginal and annoying references that might problematize or interfere with the totality and closure of his main body of discourse. A futile gesture, to be sure, for as soon as the footnotes were eliminated, the main body would be confronted – from within, rather than from the margins – with its own inescapable limitations, which included *lack* of word limitation. That his verbose "Preludio" was, in a sense, becoming a giant footnote

to Machiavelli's text, did not discourage the Duce from further elaborating on the meaning of the words *Principe* and *Stato*:

La parola Principe deve intendersi come Stato. Nel concetto di Machiavelli il Principe è lo Stato. Mentre gli individui tendono, sospinti dai loro egoismi, all'atomismo sociale, lo Stato rappresenta una organizzazione e una limitazione. L'individuo tende a evadere continuamente. Tende a disubbidire alle leggi, a non pagare i tributi, a non fare la guerra. Pochi sono coloro – eroi o santi – che sacrificano il proprio io sull'altare dello Stato. Tutti gli altri sono in istato di rivolta potenziale contro lo Stato.¹

The word Prince should be understood as State. In Machiavelli's conception the Prince is the State. While individuals, driven by their egoism, tend to social atomism, the State provides an organization and a limitation. The constant tendency of the individual is to stray. He tends to disobey laws, to avoid paying taxes and making war. Few are those – heroes or saints – who sacrifice their own self on the altar of the State. Everyone else is in a potential state of rebellion against the State.

Mussolini's gloss of Machiavelli is clearly aimed at placing himself in the shoes of the prince or, if you will, in the Italian "boot," so that he can bolster his representational claim to embody the state. His impatience with those little footnotes "clinging to the main body" suggests that controlling the discursive economy of the new fascist Italy would be crucial in determining how the masses would be brought into the state. Placing limits on those egotistical individual feet inclined to wander off in disparate directions would be the chief mission of the new totalitarian state and the basis of its political and social organization. The difficulty of the task, however, was clearly evident to Mussolini, whose pessimistic remark on human nature highlighted the scale of the project he was embarking on: "Few are those – heroes or saints – who sacrifice their own self on the altar of the State. Everyone else is in a potential state of rebellion against the State."

It was a remarkable assessment, indeed. Not only did it provide a measure of the Duce's unbridled ambition, but most importantly, it pointed to the fundamental principle that would guide his regime in the following twenty years: to have "the few," heroes or saints, ready to sacrifice themselves on the altar of the state, become "the many" citizens of fascist Italy. Nobody would be left too far from the sacrificial altar, since lack of propensity to approach it voluntarily signalled the

individual's potential for rebelling against the state. To maintain his state, the modern "prince" would have to make sure that sacrificial propensity became synonymous with being a fascist. The *uomo nuovo* (new man) that the regime strived to promote as a model for "the many" would, above all, incorporate the sacrificial characteristics of "the few": self-effacing heroism and constant readiness to serve the nation would be the benchmarks of ideal fascist behaviour.

If the propensity, or readiness for sacrifice was considered an essential trait that every fascist subject should display, actual physical sacrifice clearly had to be reserved for the few. Literal sacrifice on a grand scale would have led to the rapid extinction of the new fascist man and consigned the Duce to a rather lonely *ventennio*, as the regime's twenty-year tenure is known. The rhetoric of sacrifice, however, had no such dire implications and was used unsparingly by the regime throughout the *ventennio* to support its totalitarian project and its vision of an all-encompassing bond between the people and the state. Repeated introduction and narrative dramatizations of a sacrificial scene were fundamental to the regime's ability to sustain a revolutionary ethos beyond its early movement phase and to its efforts to create a fascist subject who would view self-abnegation as a necessary component of fascist identity.

This book analyses the specific uses to which sacrificial discourse was put during fascism and its afterlife in key literary texts by prominent Italian writers of the *ventennio*. It examines how sacrifice functioned in relation to other elements of fascist rhetoric, such as the frequent reiterations of an impending national crisis, of the need for collaboration among social classes, and the forging of social contact between the leader and the people. Through an analysis of Benito Mussolini's speeches and other fascist texts, I show how the formation of a fascist "new man" – a principal goal of the regime – was grounded in the voluntary sacrifice of individual voice and the acquisition of a collective "echoing" voice by the fascist subject. The literary texts I examine are similarly concerned with the mechanisms of social integration of individuals and groups in the emerging mass society and with how these "voices" would be refashioned and repositioned in a collective, national whole. I show how the sacrificial economies at work in their writings enable a complex operation of recoding fascist discourse itself.

Despite its ubiquitous deployment by the fascist regime, sacrificial rhetoric has not been properly dissected, and no sustained critical analysis on the subject has appeared to date. In the past two decades, a

resurgence of studies on Italian fascism has produced numerous analyses of the relationship between culture and ideology (see, e.g., Ben-Ghiat 2001, Bonsaver 2007, Gori 2004, Lazzaro and Crum 2005, Nerenberg 2001, Pickering-Iazzi 1997, Pinkus 1995, Schnapp 1996, Spackman 1996, Stone 1998, and Witt 2001),² leading to a general reassessment of the importance of rhetoric and public discourse under fascism. In particular, Spackman's analysis has shown how previous approaches that characterized fascist rhetoric as "empty verbiage" – the regime's smokescreen to obscure tangible misdeeds – has not furthered our understanding of how large segments of the population came to share fascist ideals. Although a critical reappraisal of rhetoric and culture during fascism has produced valuable studies of the mechanisms of consensus from a wide variety of perspectives, the literature in the areas of sacralization and spectacularization of politics under fascism has paradoxically reintroduced some of the critical pitfalls and blind spots of the earlier "empty rhetoric" approaches – a limitation particularly evident in the works of Emilio Gentile (*The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, 1996),³ Mable Berezin (*Making the Fascist Self: The Political Culture of Interwar Italy*, 1997), and Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi (*Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy*, 1997) that have underscored the "emotive" and "non-rational" resonance of rituals and spectacles deployed by fascism while eschewing textual analyses.

The rhetoric of sacrifice continues to occupy one of the largest and most conspicuous blind spots of the sacralization/spectacularization paradigms. Scholars have frequently placed sacrifice alongside the many fascist appropriations of "words" from the linguistic field of Italian Catholicism. Lumped inside the voluminous and opaque container labelled "religious rhetoric," sacrifice has been viewed as part and parcel of the terminological veneer that the regime used to present itself as a secular religion and to infuse its nefarious activities with the mystique and power of the sacred. While not disputing the regime's efforts to capitalize on the deeply embedded and culturally resonant linguistic field of religion, my analysis moves beyond relegating sacrifice to the contextual bin of secular religion. The question that I pose, then, is not whether the fascist rhetoric of sacrifice had its roots in, or attempted to infringe on some of the terrain traditionally occupied by the Catholic Church. Certainly, fascist rhetoric was harkening back to that tradition and trespassing on that field as much as it could while still maintaining an official line of separation between church and state. Rather, my aim is to read sacrificial rhetoric in its textual applications – to trace the

specific discursive uses both of the term and the broader concept of sacrifice during the ventennio. To do so requires investigating how such deployment functioned in conjunction with other elements comprising fascist rhetoric, that is, how sacrifice was linked to such notions as crisis, social class, social contact, and the voice of the labouring body. I ask: what kind of ideological “scene” or “scenes” emerge when a sacrificial logic dominates a particular text? Through which discursive devices was sacrifice put in the service of fascist ideology?

Often derided as bombastic, Mussolini’s speeches, in fact, illustrate how sacrificial rhetoric was used to displace and deflect potential class conflict by emphasizing the need to eliminate differences within the nation. As the displacement of conflict was never far removed from its reintroduction, the two moments of violence and peace were held in close discursive proximity, bound together, as it were, by the repeated rhetorical dramatization of a sacrificial crisis and resolution.

The concept of sacrificial rhetoric is equally relevant to the literary texts I examine. The writings of two authors not identified as explicitly fascist (but who initially harboured fascist sympathies), Carlo Emilio Gadda and Elio Vittorini, reveal similar preoccupations with defining which social classes should be constitutive of the Italian nation and of delineating whose voices should be heard and whose should be suppressed. Their work is particularly useful for understanding the populist aspects of sacrificial rhetoric exploited by the regime as they make opposite criticisms of the fascist modality of integrating the lower social classes into the Italian state. Gadda’s anti-populism and Vittorini’s populism informed their conflicting narrative representations of Italian social structure. The regime’s exploitation of the mechanisms of social inclusion and exclusion, rather than fascism itself, would be problematic for the two authors as they struggled to come to terms with the changing landscape of mass society under the dictatorship. Understanding these critiques also enables one to shed light on their relationship to fascism during the ventennio and their effort to distance themselves from it in the postwar period.

The analyses of literary and political texts complement each other. Gadda’s and Vittorini’s efforts to describe which parts of the fascist body politic should have their purity preserved point to the tensions that Mussolini’s efforts at incorporation of the lower classes into the state were trying to overcome.

Chapter 1, “Discursive Ritual and Sacrificial Presentation: The Rhetoric of Crisis and Resolution in Fascist Italy,” examines the performative

aspects of Mussolini's rhetoric of crisis and resolution and argues that such aspects are best understood when viewed through the logic of a sacrificial crisis.

In 1925, Mussolini delivered the speech "Discorso del 3 gennaio" (Speech of 3 January) in response to the political crisis that followed the murder of the Socialist leader Giacomo Matteotti. An analysis of this famous speech traces the rhetorical configurations that allowed Mussolini to present himself as a sacrificial victim by staging the substitution of his body with Matteotti's body. The performative and ritual dimensions of the speech enabled Mussolini to stage the formal inauguration of the fascist regime and continued to play a crucial role in the fascist rhetorical articulation of crisis and resolution throughout the ventennio. The dramatization of anti-fascist forces as specular doubles to fascist entities characterized critical speeches delivered during commemorative occasions, such as the 1932 celebration of the tenth anniversary of fascist rule (*Decennale*), and at times of national uncertainty, such as the 1939 "Discorso del 23 settembre" (Speech of 23 September) that confirmed Italy's temporary neutrality in the European conflict. The range in time – 1925, 1932, and 1939 – as well as the range of contexts speaks to the centrality of sacrificial discourse to Mussolini's rhetorical repertoire.

Understanding the ritual and performative logic underlying the contradictory images of Mussolini's public persona is key to assessing the Duce's charismatic dimension and its relation to popular consensus. By analysing recent scholarly contributions that discount such logic, the chapter illustrates how such omission has far-reaching consequences for a critical evaluation of the historical experience of fascism and for understanding the discursive mechanisms of ideological production.

By providing a detailed analysis of the deployment of rhetorical devices in these three speeches, I can shed light on the complex interaction of the sacrificial field with other thematics. Indeed, it is the ubiquity of this that points to its centrality in fascist discourse.

Whereas [chapter 1](#) focuses on the rhetorical strategies that allowed Mussolini to constantly redeploy and recharge the moment of violence as a way to resolve political crises, [chapter 2](#), "Sacrificial Turns and Their Rhetorical Echoes," focuses on the Duce's more "benign," if not less dangerous, side. I examine how Mussolini's goal of establishing direct contact with the Italian masses without the intervening mediation of speech led to the prescription of a paradoxical discursive style of rhetorical suppression, where the bond between the people and the leader would be defined as the sharing of a linguistic void. The sacrifice

of words was deemed a crucial step in forging a new collective fascist voice that would displace friction among social classes by codifying a linguistic behaviour of selfless expression.

The fascist new man would have to imitate the Duce's style of "labouring in silence," an activity construed as the sacrifice of one's voice, as the constant, tireless effort to renunciate/reduce one's words. Social contact would eliminate the need for words, communion replacing communication in the bond between Mussolini and the Italian people. The structure of the *discorsi-dialogo* (speech-dialogues), or *prese di contatto* (forging contacts), as Mussolini liked to characterize his countless public speeches, was to reflect such logic of rhetorical suppression and, paradoxically, reproduce it with every rhetorical performance. The mechanical canned answers from the crowd that regularly punctuated such speeches were not elicited as voices but as disembodied echoes of the Duce's words, returned to him as confirmation of his capacity to comprehend the people. A *voce unica* (voice in unison) was said to characterize such "dialogues," establishing an echoing circuit between the Duce and the people.

The voice of the fascist subject was simultaneously elicited and denied. Specifically, it was elicited as a sacrificial, self-denying voice that bounced back – echoed – the master's voice. Through the sacrifice of one's voice, the new man could acquire mastery of a fascist discursive style, and the ability to performatively exchange subject/master positions with the Duce. This relation of exchangeability was also reinforced by the frequent Mussolinian claims to be the faithful servant of the people, always working late into the night for the benefit of the nation and, of course, to provide the chief example of laborious submission. Mastery of a fascist identity required, first and foremost, the acquisition of one fundamental skill: labour in silence. The collective *voce unica* of the fascist nation would not tolerate the potentially dissonant voices of individual labourers, or even worse, those of labour organizations affiliated with specific social classes.

Although the regime did not seek to eliminate the economic class structure, it strove to deflect potential class conflict by emphasizing the harmonious cooperation of different social classes in the attainment of national goals. Cooperation would be fostered by closer interaction among groups, particularly between constituencies representing physical and mental labour, or what Mussolini called "accorciare le distanze sociali" (reducing social distance). Reducing social distance did not mean that the fascist state favoured eliminating class-based economic differences; it meant, rather, that these differences should not count in

ideological terms. They would be there, and yet, effectively displaced – sutured, as it were – in the equalizing act of sacrificial giving to the nation. As the only body sanctioned to speak, the organic state would mirror, unify, and recirculate the “voice of the people,” erasing background noises or other disturbances to the Duce-masses echo-chamber.

This ideological suture, however, did not appear entirely seamless to two prominent literary figures of the ventennio. The question of which social classes a collective, national voice should represent – and which it should exclude – preoccupied the writers Carlo Emilio Gadda and Elio Vittorini. They shared a deep concern with the new “proximity” of social classes that fascism promoted and articulated through sacrificial displacement and, in particular, with the mechanisms that facilitated social inclusion of lower strata of the population into the state. They differed sharply in their view of the masses. Gadda’s anti-populism became a crucial referent of his narrative representations of Italian society. Vittorini’s populism was no less fundamental to his journalistic and literary production. As I argue in [chapters 3 and 4](#), Gadda’s and Vittorini’s respective discursive positioning of the Italian masses in relation to fascism sheds light on an important function of sacrificial discourse during the ventennio: its usefulness and adaptability as a rhetorical field for describing the relation between parts and whole and naturalizing the desired outcome as if it had stemmed from properties of the body. The mechanisms of social class mobility (and, of course, its interdiction) within the nation, were often articulated by linking the function of specific social classes with the corresponding parts of the physical body. Prioritizing those functions and identifying their hierarchical order for the proper organization of the national whole involved excluding, and often forcefully expelling, problematic parts.

In [chapter 3](#), “Gadda’s Sacrificial Topographies,” I examine just how problematic some of those parts were for Gadda and what kind of textual control he attempted to exert over them. I argue that in his novel *La cognizione del dolore* (*Acquainted with Grief*) (1938–41), the portrayal of sacrificial mothers (mothers whose sons died in war) as gatekeepers of social exchange (verbal and sexual) constitutes a counter-narrative that masks the novel’s obsession with other labouring bodies. The household servants are depicted as the source of incoherent and obscene voices that constantly trespass the norms of propriety and, ultimately, threaten “to bring down the house.” These “other bodies” are Gadda’s real concern and bone of contention with the regime: fascism’s invitation of the previously excluded masses of workers into the totalitarian

state. The figure of the sacrificial mother with her bodily resemblance to the town's bell-tower that summons the multitudes, stands in the novel as fascism's "whorish" appeal to the lower classes. The dangerous entry of "lower parts" into the national body is the image that Gadda's novel insistently reproduces and simultaneously displaces by drawing a narrative topography of open sites.

Another famous work by Gadda, *Eros e Priapo* (*Eros and Priapus*) (1967), affords a further opportunity to clarify the relation between sacrificial figures and "lower parts" that governs the narrative of *La cognizione*, as well as providing an insight into Gadda's own peculiar and problematic brand of anti-fascism. My analysis of *Eros e Priapo* links this text to a central preoccupation of *La cognizione* – the insistence on exerting textual control over the new mechanisms of social mobility unleashed by fascism. Those mechanisms are, indeed, brought into stark relief in the pages of *Eros e Priapo*, where they become the target of Gadda's ferocious invective. With his unique blend of scorn and derision, he attacks the fascist regime's populist "allargamento delle basi" (expansion of the base), which he sees as a threat to the more regulated mechanisms of social mobility based on specialized, technical expertise.

I argue that Gadda does not object to the fascist displacement of class-based identity – on the contrary, his texts naturalize the fragmentation and incoherence of the labouring body: physical, mechanical labour should stay below; mental, organizational labour should stay above. The two realms reach their utmost efficiency when they specialize in their respective functions, that is, when they belong to different people. Gadda conflates organization from below with the following of priapic instincts and loss of productive energy. He vehemently objects to the fact that fascism, while displacing and silencing the class-based identification of labourers, simultaneously provided a new cohesive principle of organization of those "fragmented" labourers in the exemplary, national, and indeed, collective figure of the Duce. It is this new mechanism of cohesion, not fascism as a political system, that Gadda's texts oppose with their focus on the "fragments below." The obsessive descriptions of lower parts in isolation, which effectively detaches them from the other parts, can be seen as Gadda's attempt to freeze them in their proper place, to discursively naturalize their separateness by focusing on their specialized function as parts.

Gadda's anti-populism and anti-socialism is not in itself remarkable or unique among writers of his generation. What I suggest is that his anti-populism and "anti-fascism" cannot be thought of apart from each

other. To do so would play into Gadda's own postwar ideological revisionist placement of himself, as the keeping apart of these two terms renders his detachment illegible and, hence, more unassailable.

If Gadda's discursive strategy is, ultimately, to protect the bourgeoisie by insulating it from the encroaching masses, Vittorini's strategy is to insulate the masses from the temptations of bourgeois values.

If Gadda's texts naturalize a fragmentary "below," Vittorini's texts naturalize an undifferentiated "below": a stable, homogeneous, essential people not riven by internal differences. In [chapter 4](#), "The Redemption of Vittorini's *New Man*," I examine Vittorini's attempts to define the natural and essential qualities of the Italian people in his journalistic writings as well as in his novel *Uomini e no* (*Men and Not Men*) (1945). I trace an intertextual discourse in which Vittorini links the formative process of an emerging new man to the simple nature of "the people." Simplicity, I argue, is the term that allows Vittorini to literally replace the fascist new man – whose virtues he had extolled during the 1920s and 1930s – with the anti-fascist new man that he wants to personally embody and give life to in his postwar literary work.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Vittorini often advocated, along with other exponents of the regime, the sacrificial expulsion of bourgeois elements from the fascist man. After the Second World War, however, and his concomitant disillusionment with fascism, he focused on another abject element that now needed to be expelled in order to elevate the people: Italy's fascist past. The simple nature of the young who "mistakenly" believed in the fascist cause is presented as evidence of their ideological and political innocence in several articles he penned for the journal *Il Politecnico* (1945–47).

The novel *Uomini e no*, which portrays the struggles of the Resistance movement against the German occupation of Milan in 1944, enables a complex operation of recoding Vittorini's previous cultural policies. The textual and ideological perimeter of popular simplicity still includes elements of a redemptive project but one that now attempts to shift the "real fascism" onto the Germans. Vittorini's narrative presents the final "simple" immolation of the novel's protagonist, a Resistance fighter, as the ultimate sacrificial act on the altar of national heroes. If the new man of the Resistance has to die in killing the German occupier, it is because the latter had ended up occupying much more than Italian soil: in Vittorini's novel, the occupier represents that old fascist self that has to be removed for the new man of anti-fascist Italy to claim a new beginning.

1 Discursive Ritual and Sacrificial Presentation: The Rhetoric of Crisis and Resolution in Fascist Italy

On 18 January 1925, the fascist Curzio (Suckert) Malaparte posed the following question: “il discorso del 3 Gennaio è stato un atto sincero di fede rivoluzionaria, o non piuttosto una mossa dell’abilissima tattica mussoliniana, una maschera rivoluzionaria gettata, per ingannare gli amici e gli avversari, sul viso della normalizzazione?” (Was the “discorso del 3 gennaio” a sincere act of revolutionary faith or, rather, a crafty move by Mussolini, a revolutionary mask thrown over the face of normalization to mislead friends and enemies?) In answering his own question, he depicted a sacrificial scene: fascism had been immolated on the altar of normalization.

Si verifica oggi, cioè, quello che noi abbiamo avvertito da tempo: il Fascismo è il capro espiatorio della normalizzazione, la quale non può attuarsi che a sue spese attraverso un processo inevitabile di reazione del Governo non già contro l’Aventino, ma contro esso Fascismo.¹

We are seeing today what has concerned us for some time: That Fascism would be the scapegoat of normalization, which can only take place at its expense through an inevitable process of reaction by the government, not against the Aventine but against Fascism itself.

Historical accounts, as well as those of fascists less critical of their movement’s institutional turn, of course, would disagree with Malaparte’s choice of victim in relation to the speech of 3 January for the “normalization” that Mussolini promised – and inaugurated, in this famous speech – in fact, marked the end not of fascism but of Italian liberal democracy. Renzo De Felice has aptly described that day as the

placing of a tombstone on other political forces.² Fascist and anti-fascist accounts, thus, seem to converge on this point: there was a political corpse and a political epitaph – the speech itself.

In this chapter, I propose a reading of this “epitaph” and a survey of the ideological and critical contours of the corpse that the speech produces. It was a national corpse, not only because it marked the death of Liberal Italy, but also because it was rhetorically installed by Mussolini as a specular double to his own body – the body that became the symbol of fascist national unity. In my analysis of the speech of 3 January, I will argue that Mussolini presents himself as a sacrificial victim by staging the substitution of his body with Giacomo Matteotti’s body. This substitution allowed Mussolini to provide a sacrificial grounding to the formal inauguration of the fascist regime. The performative and ritual dimensions of the speech were crucial to this inauguration and, as I will argue, remained crucial to the fascist rhetorical articulation of crisis and resolution throughout the *ventennio*. Without an understanding of the rhetorical and performative logic underlying the contradictory images of Mussolini’s public persona, we cannot adequately conceptualize the Duce’s charismatic dimension or assess its relation to popular consensus.

In the past two decades, studies of Italian fascism have emphasized the role played by ritual practices in articulating and consolidating fascist ideology. Building on Emilio Gentile’s analysis of the “sacralization of politics,” which he defined as fascism’s attempt to present itself as a political religion, the works of Mabel Berezin and Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi have explored the regime’s deployment of ritualized political spectacles to elicit popular consensus.³ Their efforts coincide with a resurgence in studies of nationalism and fascism and, more particularly, with renewed scholarly interest in the relationship between spectacle and ideology.⁴ Walter Benjamin’s famous characterization of fascism as the “aesthetization of politics” continues to resonate in studies that, like Berezin’s and Falasca-Zamponi’s, focus on the “formal” properties of fascist political communication in order to underscore the “non-rational” and “emotive” popular response that underpinned consensus. Departing from these categorizations, my analysis of ritual presentations directly links ritual practices to textual and linguistic categories, thereby enabling me to recognize patterns of meaning and rhetorical strategies employed in the service of regime consolidation.

Although thoroughly exploited by the fascist regime, rituals and spectacles cannot be defined as intrinsically fascist, for they are obviously

present in a variety of cultures and political systems including present-day democratic societies. We cannot, therefore, merely assume that fascist ideology derived its persuasiveness from those practices' inherent ability to "tap" into the irrational and emotive side of people any more than we can assume that the mere staging of a modern political convention or festival will ensure the unproblematic reception and acceptance of its political message. To understand the relationship between culture and fascist ideology without falling into reductionist characterizations, we need to take seriously the textual implications of rituals, and that means that we have to assume that they can be read and not simply experienced.⁵

My analysis does not attempt to quantify the level of popular acceptance of fascist political performances; it seeks, however, to explore the textual mechanism that subtended Mussolini's charismatic self-fashioning. Specifically, I argue that Mussolini's charismatic dimension can be investigated by looking at the rhetorical mechanisms that constructed it as a text: a text that performed, rhetorically, its own logic of power presentation. Investigating such logic does not require assuming that the Duce's rhetorical performances were intrinsically powerful presentations, for that would be just a sanctioning of its intended effect. What is required is an investigation of the textual mechanisms that supported the construction of power *through its presentation*. Indeed, when we foreclose the possibility of reading such mechanisms, we validate (often unintentionally) Mussolini's self-ascribed demiurgic abilities. Furthermore, the performative dimension of fascist rhetoric becomes opaque (hence, retains its mystique) when the so-called various sides of Mussolini – the self-styled, often contradictory images that composed his public persona, are either lumped together under the rubric of a generic (and inscrutable) Mussolinian ambiguity, or are analysed in a way that discounts their interconnectedness and interdependence – what I call the "parcelling of the Duce" – the exclusive assignment of a particular ideological aspect, or Mussolinian "side" to a political or social constituency.

The perils of foregoing such legibility are particularly acute in studies where the experience of the ventennio is brought to bear on the political and cultural milieu of contemporary Italy. Questions of continuity or continued resonance of fascist culture and discourses are distorted, when not altogether precluded, by a resistance to grant legibility to fascist rhetoric, to Mussolini's ambivalence and, ultimately, to fascist consensus. I deliberately use the term "resistance" here to indicate the

danger of conflating the refusal to (read) fascist rhetoric and its ideological configurations with the historical experience of opposition to fascism of the Italian *Resistenza*. The latter was undoubtedly justified, indeed, necessary; nevertheless, in opposing the legitimacy of a repugnant regime, the resistance to grant legibility to fascist rhetoric continues to handicap our understanding of the historical experience and of its significance for the culture and politics of modern Italy. Without such legibility, ultimately, we curtail the possibility of recognizing and effectively opposing neo-fascist movements as well as more embedded, and less visible, remnants of the ventennio in contemporary cultural practices.

A recent example of the exclusive assignment of a particular Mussolinian “aspect” to a specific social constituency is Sergio Luzzatto’s otherwise intriguing study of the vicissitudes of Mussolini’s cadaver after 1945, *The Body of Il Duce: Mussolini’s Corpse and the Fortunes of Italy*.⁶ Before analysing the political and imaginary trajectory of the Duce’s corpse in postwar Italy, Luzzatto traced a “prehistory of the dead Duce’s body,” that explores the ventennio and that ends with the following observation: “It had taken the partisan firing squad mere seconds to finish off Mussolini, but in fact he had begun to die two decades earlier, when his henchmen plunged their knives into the body of Giacomo Matteotti.”⁷

This conclusion is striking as it is uncanny, for it is right despite itself, that is, despite what it means within the prehistory’s narrative. It is right, insofar as Luzzatto’s book documents the extent to which the specularity of the body of Matteotti with the body of Mussolini became a national obsession during the ventennio and beyond.⁸ More problematic, however, is his reading of this specularity within the ventennio. In Luzzatto’s narrative, the anti-fascist fantasy of the dead Duce fostering the various assassination attempts becomes the historical nemesis, the specular counterpart of the fascist fetishization of the body of the living Duce. “Le avventure del corpo del duce” (The vicissitudes of the body of the Duce) come to occupy “la dimensione che è loro propria, quella di una lotta pluridecennale combattuta all’insegna del più impietoso fra gli adagi, *mors tua vita mea*” (their appropriate dimension – a decades-long struggle fought in the name of the most merciless adage, *mors tua vita mea*).⁹

The danger of a retroactive installation of an epic battle of two irreducible forces is that, within this narrative, fascism can be read as a Liberation in the making, hence, surreptitiously erasing itself. If the