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Fascism, Writing, and Memory: The Realist Aesthetic in Italy, 1930–1950*

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Our past and present existence is a mirror from which spill both
deception and truth. / The places where the spirit was not happy,
you know / they remain opaque beyond the horizon.

(MARIO LUZI, "Poesie," 1946)

Over the past decade, the political dimensions of the construction of collective memory have become increasingly apparent.¹ In France and Germany, the desire to create new visions of national identity unencumbered by recollections of the Nazi and Vichy regimes has led intellectuals on the Right to adopt a variety of tactics designed to alter historical memory. These strategies have ranged from the outright negation of the Holocaust by "revisionists" such as Robert Faurisson, to the attempt to relativize the crimes of Nazism, to the more insidious tactic—employed during the trial of French collaborator Paul Touvier—of calling for a collective suspension of the rancors of the past in the name of national harmony in the present.² At the same time, partly in response

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¹ For recent work on the relationship between memory and the construction of identities, see Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn, eds., "Special Issue: Memory and Counter-memory," *Representations*, vol. 26 (Spring 1989); Pierre Nora, ed., *Les lieux de mémoire*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1984–); Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, trans. Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Clamon (New York, 1992); Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge, 1989); David Thelen, ed., *Memory and American History* (Bloomington, Ind., 1989); and the essays in John Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, N.J., 1994). The interest in collective memory has also led to the appearance of a specialized journal, *History and Memory*, which began publication in 1989.

² Discussions of the *Historikerstreit* include Richard Evans, *In Hitler's Shadow: West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape from the Nazi Past* (New York, 1989); and Charles Maier, *The Unmasterable Past* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988). On revisionist attempts to deny the Holocaust, see Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (New York, 1993).

to these trends, the production and utilization of memory has emerged as a central issue in the work of historians of modern France and Germany.³ In these recent studies, which explore the contextual elements that have influenced the manner in which the Nazi and Vichy regimes have been represented in the postwar period, scholars have begun to examine not only what is remembered but also the mechanisms that encourage us to forget.

In Italy, until the victory of the Right in the elections of March 1994, the construction of a collective memory of the fascist dictatorship had received relatively little attention from historians.⁴ The *Historikerstreit* was followed with interest among Italian scholars, and it did lend a new urgency to ongoing discussions in Italy regarding the representation of the regime.⁵ But as the German historian Wolfgang Schieder noted at a 1987 conference on the

³ On Germany, see Harold James, *A German Identity, 1770–1990* (London, 1989); Saul Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992); Rudy Koshar, “Building Pasts: Historic Preservation and Identity in Twentieth-Century Germany,” in Gillis, ed., pp. 215–38; and Rudolf Vierhaus, “Historische Entwicklungslinien deutscher Identität,” in *Die Frage nach der deutschen Identität*, ed. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (Bonn, 1985), pp. 11–22. On the links between memory and identity in modern France, see Nora, ed.; Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991); and Herman Lebovics, *True France: The Wars over Cultural Identity, 1900–45* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London, 1992). Recently, a number of studies have appeared that address the function of monuments in the construction of collective memory in France. See, e.g., Daniel Sherman, “Art, Commerce, and the Production of Memory in France after World War One,” in Gillis, ed., pp. 186–211; and Avner Ben-Amos, “Monuments and Memory in French Nationalism,” *History and Memory* 5 (Fall/Winter 1993): 50–81.

⁴ Exceptions are the studies of Luisa Passerini, *Torino operaia e fascista: Una storia orale* (Rome-Bari, 1984), and *Storia e soggettività: Le fonti orali, la memoria* (Florence, 1988); also those of Pier Giorgio Zunino: see his *L’ideologia del fascismo* (Bologna, 1985), and *Interpretazione e memoria del fascismo: Gli anni del regime* (Bari, 1991).

⁵ For Italian opinions on the *Historikerstreit*, see Enzo Collotti, “C’era una volta Hitler . . .” *Rivista di storia contemporanea* (January 1987), pp. 3–11; and Gian Enrico Rusconi, *Germania: Un passato che non passa: I crimini nazisti e l’identità tedesca* (Turin, 1987). For discussions that take into consideration the Italian past as well, see the proceedings of the seminar held in Turin on November 6–7, 1987, “Historikerstreit e dintorni: una questione non solo tedesca,” *Passato e presente* (March–April 1988), pp. 9–53; and Brunello Mantelli, “Al magazzino della storia: Riflessioni sull’Historikerstreit e i suoi echi italiani,” *Quaderno di storia contemporanea* 4 (1988): 11–19. Jader Jacobelli, ed., *Il fascismo e gli storici oggi* (Bari, 1988) is a collection of essays on the historiography of Italian fascism. Previous evaluations include Francesco Perfetti, *Il dibattito sul fascismo* (Rome, 1984); Guido Quazza et al., *Storiografia e fascismo* (Milan, 1985); and Emilio Gentile, “Fascism in Italian Historiography: In Search of an Individual Identity,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 21 (1986): 179–208.

Historikerstreit held in Turin, Italians did not seem eager to begin the process of coming to terms with their own national past.⁶ For example, while Italian scholars have produced a flood of academic publications that testify to the support intellectuals gave to the regime, when “new” information has appeared in the press regarding the fascist past of well-known members of the intellectual and political classes it has not generated much debate.⁷ The 1987 publication (in the weekly newsmagazine *Panorama*) of a list of nearly 900 intellectuals who received secret subsidies from the Ministry of Popular Culture during the 1930s provoked little more than a few angry letters from those whose names appeared.⁸ Nor have these disclosures stimulated any discussion of the strategies Italians employed to repress the memory of fascism after the fall of the dictatorship. If the desire to investigate Mussolini’s regime has proved enduring in Italy, so has the impulse to cordon fascism off from the path of national history.

Recently, though, this reticence to discuss the past has vanished, as Italian scholars have begun to respond to the revisionist views of fascism and the resistance that emerged in the press following the victory of the Right. Immediately after the elections, a campaign was launched to re-script the April 25 commemoration of the liberation of Italy—which has traditionally been an occasion to remember and honor the deeds of antifascist partisans during World War II—as a holiday honoring the soldiers who fought for the

⁶ Wolfgang Schieder, in “Historikerstreit e dintorni,” p. 28. On this point, see also Patrizia Dogliani, “The Debate on the Historiography of Fascism,” *Differentia* 3–4 (Spring–Summer 1989): 243–58; and R. J. B. Bosworth, *Explaining Auschwitz and Hiroshima: History Writing and the Second World War, 1945–90* (London and New York, 1993).

⁷ Works by Italian scholars on the relationship between intellectuals and the regime include Emilio Gentile, *Gli origini dell’ideologia fascista, 1918–25* (Bari, 1975), and *Il culto del littorio* (Bari, 1993); Gabriele Turi, *Il fascismo e il consenso degli intellettuali* (Bologna, 1980); Mario Isnenghi, *Intellettuali militanti e intellettuali funzionari* (Turin, 1979); Arcangelo Leone De Castris, *Egemonia e fascismo: Il problema degli intellettuali negli anni Trenta* (Bologna, 1981); Gian Piero Brunetta, ed., *Intellettuali, cinema e propaganda tra le due guerre* (Bologna, 1972); Luisa Mangoni, *L’interventismo della cultura: intellettuali e riviste del fascismo* (Bari, 1974); and Giuseppe Carlo Marino, *L’autarchia della cultura: Intellettuali e fascismo negli anni trenta* (Rome, 1983).

⁸ See Romano Cantore, “Sul borderò del duce,” *Panorama* (February 22, 1987), pp. 106–21. The list was discovered in Italy in February 1986, and *Panorama* published it in defiance of an order by the Presidente del Consiglio, Bettino Craxi, to release only certain names therein. For responses, see “Lettere,” *Panorama* (March 8 and 14, 1987). The list can also be found in the National Archives, as it forms part of the documents captured by the Allies during World War II. See the Personal Papers of Benito Mussolini (hereafter PPBM), job no. 26, negs. 012384-012738, National Archives (hereafter NA), Washington, D.C.

Republic of Salò as well.⁹ This endeavor forms part of a larger strategy by the neofascist Alleanza Nazionale party to legitimize and normalize fascism by representing it as a patriotic movement like others in the national past. The intention of the new Italian Right to reshape the collective memory of fascism was underscored by an article on the commemoration written by Silvio Berlusconi, the prime minister of Italy, just weeks after the victory of his party, Forza Italia. Using simple language and a paternalistic tone, Berlusconi reproached the Left for appropriating a heritage of liberty “which belongs to Italians of all generations and all parties” and contended that the divisions between fascists and antifascists are a “piece of history” that could now be forgotten. April 25, he suggested, should celebrate the liberation of Italians not from the terror of fascism but rather from the corruption of the First Republic. Berlusconi concluded by urging Italians to think of the national holiday as “the beginning of a new era” that would allow them to heal “the wounds and profound scars left on the body of the Country by the long reign of a blocked representative democracy.”¹⁰ In the face of this and other rereadings of the past, the relationship between memory and history will undoubtedly preoccupy Italian intellectuals much as it has those in Germany and France. Just ten days after the surprise victory of the Right, in fact, one commentator broached the question to his peers in the leftist daily *L'unità*: “We must ask ourselves: have we really come to terms with the legacy of fascism in Italian society?”¹¹

In this article, I will address the relationship between politics and memory on the peninsula by examining how Italian intellectuals responded to fascism and how they then represented this response in the postwar period. As a case study, I will focus on the political uses of the realist aesthetic in literature by both fascist and antifascist writers and critics. Italian realism is most commonly identified with the post–World War II neorealist movement, which chronicled the struggles of the Resistance through works such as Roberto Rossellini’s *Roma città aperta* (Rome open city; 1945) and Elio Vittorini’s

⁹ In Tuscany, a recent ceremony in the military cemetery of Futa honored not only antifascist partisans but also German and Austrian soldiers who lost their lives fighting in Italy. See *La repubblica* (April 17, 1994), p. 6. For the reinterpretation of April 25 by the Right, see, e.g., the declaration of Alessandra Mussolini, the Duce’s granddaughter and newly elected fascist parliamentarian: April 25, she claims, “should honor all those who, from whatever side of the barricade they choose to act, offered their lives with courage and loyalty in order to defend the honor, dignity and independence of the nation.” Quote in *La repubblica* (April 8, 1994), p. 11.

¹⁰ Silvio Berlusconi, “25 aprile, festa per tutti . . .,” *La repubblica* (April 17, 1994), p. 4.

¹¹ Piero Fassino, “A quei ragazzi hanno negato la memoria,” *L'unità* (April 7, 1994), p. 4.

Uomini e no (Men and not men; 1945).¹² This association between realism and the Resistance has structured critical narratives of the development of the movement in the prewar period, as literary historians have tended to link the impulse to chronicle reality with antifascist political sentiments.¹³ I will argue instead that realism evolved in the early 1930s as part of an endeavor by Italian intellectuals to create a culture that would reflect the notion of fascism as a revolutionary “third way” after liberalism and Marxism.¹⁴ As envisioned by writers, critics, and cultural functionaries, realist literature was to serve as a vehicle of this revolution by addressing contemporary social and moral problems on the peninsula and by promulgating new antibourgeois values and codes of behavior. If Italian realism was to be “revolutionary,” though, it was also to be clearly distinguishable from contemporary realist literature in Weimar Germany and Russia. Fascists claimed that while the materialistic mentality of leftist authors limited them to the mere reproduction or documentation of reality, the new Italian novelists were free to transfigure reality and produce works that would chronicle the present and yet bear the imprint of an individual creative and ethical sensibility.

The emphasis placed by fascist intellectuals on the ethical imperative of the literary work corresponded to the importance accorded the category of “spirituality” within the ideology of the third way.¹⁵ Even before the March

¹² The bibliography on neorealist cinema is vast. I have found useful Peter Bondanella, *Italian Cinema from Neorealism to the Present* (New York, 1983); Patrice Hovald, *Le néoréalisme et ses créateurs* (Paris, 1959); and Lino Miccichè, ed., *Il neorealismo cinematografico italiano* (Venice, 1975). For literature, the best treatment is Lucia Re, *Calvino and the Age of Neorealism: Fables of Estrangement* (Stanford, Calif., 1990); also Claudio Milanini, ed., *Neorealismo: Poetiche e polemiche* (Milan, 1980).

¹³ See, e.g., Arnaldo Bocelli, “Letteratura italiana,” *Enciclopedia italiana: Appendice*, 2 vols. (Rome, 1949), 2:116–18; Silvio Guarnieri, *Cinquant’anni di narrativa italiana* (Florence, 1955), p. 78; Beppe Manfredi, *Angoscia e solitudine nel romanzo italiano contemporaneo* (Fossano, 1969), pp. 29–30; Elisabetta Chicco Vitzizzai, ed., *Il neorealismo: Antifascismo e popolo dagli anni Trenta agli anni Cinquanta* (Turin, 1977), pp. 91–123; Giuseppe Farinelli, *Il romanzo tra le due guerre* (Brescia, 1980), pp. 219–39; and Gualtiero Amici, *Narratori italiani da Verga alla neo-avanguardia* (Bologna, 1973), pp. 93–150.

¹⁴ See the “Manifesto realista,” *L’Universale* (February 1933); Enzo Paci, “Il nostro realismo storico,” *Cantiere* (March 24, 1934); and “Realismo rivoluzionario,” *Camminare* (February 28, 1934).

¹⁵ For expressions of fascism as a “spiritualistic” third way, see Giuseppe Bottai, “Totalità, perennità, universalità della rivoluzione fascista,” *Quadrante* (December 1933); Benito Mussolini, “Fascismo,” in *Enciclopedia italiana*, 35 vols. (Rome, 1932), 9:847–51; Gastone Spinetti, *Fascismo universale* (Rome, 1934); Rino Longhitano, *Rivoluzione nazionale* (Catania, 1935). On this point, Marino, pp. 73–88. The

on Rome, Mussolini had characterized his movement as an ethical force that, as he asserted in 1921, would reclaim “those moral and traditional values that socialism neglects and scorns.”¹⁶ But the recourse to “spirituality” as a defining characteristic of fascism became especially evident in the years of the Depression, when the perception of an irreversible decline of the liberal-capitalist order led to debates both within fascist Italy and abroad over which revolution—the red or the black—would triumph in the future.¹⁷ In this climate, the presentation of fascism as a moral revolution allowed the fascists to differentiate themselves from the materialistic regime of communism even as they made use of a familiar left-wing rhetoric to advance a competing program of radical social and political change. Throughout the thirties, the ideological construct of the third way would serve as a conveniently vague emblem of fascist identity that allowed a wide variety of political discourses to be expressed within the framework of the regime.

Realism, I will argue, absorbed the ambiguity inherent in the rhetoric of the third way. Realist discourse reflected both the regime’s appropriation and recontextualization of leftist ideology and the anxieties of fascists to develop a literature that would be “social” but not socialist. Moreover, I maintain that the writing practices of many fascist intellectuals were designed to confirm the regime’s self-presentation as the embodiment of a “humane” and “ethical” revolution that, unlike that of communism, allowed for the retention of individual conscience and will. Fascist writers and critics encouraged one another to produce works that, while political, were not openly propagandistic. As one critic commented in 1933, fascist cultural production was not to “evade” reality, but neither was it to openly “refer to” or “photograph” that reality.¹⁸

The ambiguous and allusive quality of realist discourse not only allowed Italian intellectuals living under fascism a large degree of maneuverability in their declarations on the political function of culture; it also facilitated the reinterpretation of realist texts as antifascist after the fall of the regime. Exploiting the polysemic quality of the category of realism, writers and critics reread the engagement with reality and the emphasis on “revolution,”

concept of the third way is discussed in reference to French fascism in Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right nor Left*, trans. D. Maisel (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1986), pp. 213–265, and “La terza via fascista o la ricerca di una cultura alternativa,” *Storia contemporanea* 22 (December 1991): 961–74.

¹⁶ Benito Mussolini, “Dopo due anni,” *Il popolo d’Italia* (March 23, 1921).

¹⁷ See Giulio Santangelo, “La Russia: questione di civiltà,” *Occidente* (July–September 1933); and the debate held in the pages of *Critica fascista*: articles include Riccardo Fiorini, “A proposito dell’antitesi Roma o Mosca,” *Critica fascista*, no. 20 (October 15, 1931); Mario Rivoire, “Affinità e antitesi fra Roma e Mosca,” *Critica fascista*, no. 21 (November 1, 1931); and Luciano Inganni, “Roma e Mosca: Nettissima antitesi,” *Critica fascista*, no. 23 (December 1, 1931).

¹⁸ Mario Robertazzi, “Questo giornale,” *Oggi* (October 22, 1933).

“morality,” and “social art” that appear in their writings of the thirties as stemming from leftist sentiments. In this examination of the realist aesthetic in Italy, I hope to shed light on the strategies utilized by Italian intellectuals on the peninsula after 1945 to reshape the collective memory of their relationship with the regime.

REALISM AND THE FICTION OF THE UNPOLITICAL

“Realism” is a rather slippery term that in interwar Europe was associated with a variety of representational modes and ideological positions.¹⁹ It is thus helpful to locate Italian realism with respect to similar movements on the Continent. As James Wilkinson has observed, the years following World War I saw intellectuals at both ends of the political spectrum united in a campaign for a “return to the concrete” that would counter the solipsism and evasiveness of bourgeois cultural production.²⁰ In France, for example, both left-wing proletarian novelists such as Henri Poulaille and right-wing critics such as Thierry Maulnier rejected the bourgeois literature of the Third Republic as “frivolous” and “artificial” and called for writing that would be inspired, in Poulaille’s words, by “a direct contact with authentic things and feelings.”²¹ In Weimar Germany, the interest in the “real” found expression under the rubric of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement, which purported to present a “factual” and “objective” picture of the social and economic conditions

¹⁹ The catalog *Les réalismes entre révolution et réaction, 1919–39* (Paris, 1980) provides some sense of the range of these positions in France, Italy, Germany, and the United States, although it does not discuss Soviet realist movements and ends its coverage of Italy in the 1920s. See also *Kunst und Diktatur: Architektur, Bildhauerei und Malerei in Österreich, Deutschland, Italien und der Sowjetunion, 1922–56*, 2 vols. (Baden, 1994).

²⁰ See James Wilkinson, *The Intellectual Resistance in Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), pp. 11–16. Works that address aspects of this shift in cultural taste include Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979); Kenneth Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford, 1975); Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism* (Cambridge, 1984); Sternhell, *Neither Right nor Left*, pp. 213–65; and Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle, *Les non-conformistes des années trente* (Paris, 1969), pp. 233–47. For a discussion of recent works that address the cultural impact of the war, see J. M. Winter, “Catastrophe and Culture: Recent Trends in the Historiography of the First World War,” *Journal of Modern History* 64 (September 1992): 525–32.

²¹ Henri Poulaille, *Nouvel âge littéraire* (Paris, 1930), p. 113; also Georges Valois, “La Révolution culturelle,” *Chantiers coopératifs* (June 1932). On the aims of proletarian literature, see J. A. Bernard, *Le parti communiste français et la question littéraire, 1921–39* (Grenoble, 1972). For statements from the Right, see the essays of Thierry Maulnier and Jean-François Thomas in *Réaction* (February 1932); and that of Jean de Fabrègues in the *Revue du siècle* (May 1934). On the literary climate of the early thirties, see Jean-Paul Maxence, *Histoire de dix ans, 1927–37* (Paris, 1939).

of the postwar years. The desire among intellectuals for a more direct relationship between the observation and representation of reality sparked interest in the techniques of reportage and nonfiction cinema and led German authors such as Alexander Döblin to insert tram maps, newspaper articles, and other “documents” into their fictional narratives in order to ground them in an “authentic” sociohistorical context.²²

Of course, those who advocated a return to “objectivity” in cultural practice were anything but neutral. In the case of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, the fetish of the factual and the impersonal and the repudiation of aestheticism in the name of purity were accompanied by a totalizing conception of the political function of culture that after 1933 would serve the German Right as well as it had the German Left.²³ One model for the elaboration of this fictive objectivity was Soviet culture of the 1920s, in particular Dziga Vertov’s “cinema of facts” which, according to Vertov, would “substitute the document for the *mise en scène* . . . and enter into the arena of life itself.”²⁴ Vertov’s realist cinema, like Sergei Tretyakov’s “literature of fact,” posited the artist as both an interested apostle of a new revolutionary culture and as a neutral “gatherer and transcriber of facts” whose subjectivity did not meditate his or her representation of reality.²⁵

²² On the interest in documentary film, see Lewis Jacobs, *The Documentary Tradition* (New York, 1971); and Roger Manvell, ed., *Experiment in the Film* (London, 1949). On literary reportage in the Weimar Republic, see Erhard Schütz, *Kritik der literarischen Reportage* (Munich, 1977); and Michael Geisler, *Die literarische Reportage in Deutschland* (Königstein/Ts., 1982). On *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in the context of Weimar cultural concerns, see Dagmar Barnouw, *Weimar Intellectuals and the Threat of Modernity* (Bloomington, Ind., 1988), pp. 246–66. Overviews of Weimar culture are John Willett, *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period* (New York, 1978); and Walter Lacquer, *Weimar: A Cultural History* (New York, 1974).

²³ On the paradoxical “objectivity” of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, see Pierre Vaydat, “Neue Sachlichkeit als ethische Haltung,” *Germanica* (“Die ‘Neue Sachlichkeit’: Lebensgefühl oder Markenzeichen?”) 9 (1991): 37–54; and Giovanna Grignaffini and Leonardo Quaresima, “La ‘Nuova oggettività’: Fanatica rassegnazione, debolezza d’acciaio,” in *Cultura e cinema nella Repubblica di Weimar*, ed. Giovanna Grignaffini and Leonardo Quaresima (Venice, 1978), pp. 11–52. A good survey of the fortunes of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* in both Weimar and Nazi periods is Jost Hermand, “Unity within Diversity? A History of the Concept ‘Neue Sachlichkeit,’” in *Culture and Society in the Weimar Republic*, ed. Keith Bullivant (Manchester, 1979), pp. 166–82; and Peter Reichl, *Der schöne Schein des Dritten Reiches* (Munich, 1993), pp. 101–13.

²⁴ Dziga Vertov, quoted in Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of Russian and Soviet Film* (New York, 1973), p. 176. On Vertov, see also Annette Michelson, ed., *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1984); and Roman Karmen, “Il documentario sovietico,” in Manvell, ed., pp. 241–52.

²⁵ Soviet culture was well known in Weimar Germany, and Tretyakov had lectured on literature in Berlin in 1931. See Hugh Ridley, “Tretyakov in Berlin,” in Bullivant,

Italy did not remain estranged from these developments. Until the mid-1930s, fascist officials such as Giuseppe Bottai encouraged Italian intellectuals to familiarize themselves with the latest cultural trends in America, Germany, Russia, and other countries so that Italy would be able to develop a modern culture to match its innovative “revolutionary” politics.²⁶ It is not surprising, then, that the call for a new aesthetics of the concrete on the Continent found an echo in the Italian cultural press. Already in 1928, concluding a survey of recent modernist building, the fascist architect Carlo Enrico Rava applauded the first signs of a “new objectivity” that he hoped would bring Italian intellectuals out of their “ivory towers” and into the “new climate of our times.”²⁷ Rava’s comment referred to the groups of young Bauhaus-influenced “rationalist” architects who denounced the “decorativist decadence” of past Italian buildings in favor of streamlined projects designed for mass production that they touted as the embodiment of “truth, logic and order.”²⁸

In other areas of culture as well, Italian intellectuals worked to develop an aesthetic that, as one put it, would be “more direct and immediate in its

ed., pp. 150–65. On Tretyakov’s “literature of fact,” see Gleb Struve, *Russian Literature under Lenin and Stalin* (Norman, Okla., 1971), pp. 215–18.

²⁶ See the editorial “Valori umani e civiltà corporativa nelle nuove generazioni,” *Critica fascista* (March 1, 1934); also the editorial “Camminare” in Luigi Chiarini’s review, *Educazione fascista* (June 1932). Literary reviews that introduced Soviet, American, and *Neue Sachlichkeit* authors to the peninsula received support by the government and by the Italian Academy. For example, the journal *Circoli*, which published a large number of foreign poets and narrators (including an issue on American poetry that appeared with a huge American flag on the cover), received L5,000 in April 1932 from Mussolini’s press office and an honorable citation from the Italian Academy in 1932 “for the intelligent work it performs toward the development of the new Italian literature.” See *Annuario della reale Accademia d’Italia, 1931–32* (Rome, 1932), p. 413; Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome (hereafter ACS), Ministero della Cultura Popolare (hereafter MCP), b. 155, f. 10; and PPBM, job 31, neg. 014964, NA. On Bottai’s role in cultural policy, see Alexander De Grand, *Bottai e la cultura fascista* (Bari, 1978).

²⁷ Carlo Enrico Rava, “Diorama architettonica,” *La tribuna* (March 12, 1928).

²⁸ Adalberto Libera and Gaetano Minucci, “Introduzione alla esposizione,” in *Primo esposizione internazionale di architettura razionale* (Rome, 1928), now in Michele Cennamo, *Materiali per l’analisi dell’architettura moderna*, 2 vols. (Naples, 1973), 1:105–6; for similar declarations see the articles of the “Group 7,” which appeared in *La rassegna italiana* (December 1926, and February, March, and May 1927). On Italian rationalism, see Diane Ghirardo, “Italian Architects and Fascist Politics: An Evaluation of the Rationalists’ Role in Regime Building,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* (May 1980), pp. 109–27; and Richard Etlin, *Modernism in Italian Architecture, 1890–1940* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), pp. 255–322, 377–90.

effects.”²⁹ Cineasts exposed to the latest films of Walter Ruttmann and Alexander Dovzenko through the Venice Biennale and the Young University fascist cinema clubs called for a “cinematography of real life” that would “bring the camera into the streets, courtyards, bunkers, and train stations.”³⁰ And directors such as Alessandro Blasetti, Raffaele Matarazzo, and Mario Camerini experimented with Russian editing techniques and integrated documentary footage into their feature films.³¹ In the field of philosophy, young scholars such as Enzo Paci and Luciano Anceschi denounced idealist philosophy as self-referential and worked to combine fascist ideology, pragmatism, and Husserlian phenomenology into a new Italian thought born “directly and immediately from practice.”³² By 1933, in a poll on the emergence of a “new culture” in fascist Italy, dozens of intellectuals singled out a renewed interest in “the concrete” and “the real” as the dominant tendency of this culture.³³

Italian realism also displayed a similarity with contemporary realist movements abroad in its recourse to a rhetoric of objectivity to conceal and naturalize a particular point of view. While realist reconstructions of the immediate past and the present were clearly guided by political and social concerns, the films and novels of the movement made use of documentarist codes of representation to achieve an air of authenticity and naturalness. Critics, too, presented realism as a “transparent” genre even as they affirmed

²⁹ Libero Solaroli, “I giovani d’oggi: Vinicio Paladini,” *L’interplanetario* (March 1, 1928).

³⁰ Quotes from Leo Longanesi, “L’occhio di vetro,” *L’italiano* (January–February 1933); and Vinicio Paladino, “Cinematografia della vita vera,” *Cinematatro* (September 1928).

³¹ On filmic realism in fascist Italy, see the articles reproduced in Massimo Mida and Lorenzo Quaglietti, eds., *Dai telefoni bianchi al neorealismo* (Bari, 1980); and Brunetta, ed. (n. 7 above).

³² Quote from Enzo Paci, “Cenni per un nostro clima,” *Orpheus* (February 1933). See also Paci, “Il nostro realismo storico” (n. 14 above); and Luciano Anceschi, “Giovane Europa,” *Cantiere* (March 10, 1934); Francesco Orlando, “Fuori della metafisica,” *Saggiatore* (May–June 1930); and Alfredo Poggi, “Herbatism in atto,” *Espero* (November 1932). Paci and Anceschi were students of the phenomenologist Antonio Banfi (who in turn had studied with Husserl) and became the leading exponents of phenomenological philosophy and criticism in Italy. For the interest in pragmatism, Domenico Carella, “Riflessioni sul pragmatismo,” *Saggiatore* (May–June 1930). On the reaction against idealism, see Leone De Castris (n. 7 above), pp. 57–132; and Mario Sechi, *Il mito della nuova cultura* (Manduria, 1984).

³³ See, e.g., the responses of Giorgio Prosperi, Sigfrido Wolfango, Alberto Sartoris, Luciano Anceschi, Rino Longhitano, Armando Ghelardini, Eugenio Galvano, and Fausto Seniga in “Contributi per una nuova cultura,” *Saggiatore* (August–October 1933). This special issue of *Saggiatore* printed the responses of more than fifty-five Italians.

the fascist affiliation of the new aesthetic. One article in the review *Saggiatore*, which attempted to sum up the “revolutionary” mentality of fascism, defined realism as “an objective, unprejudiced examination of the facts and a mistrust of all theoretical orderings of reality.”³⁴

Having established the affinities of Italian realism with other contemporary realist currents, it is now possible to investigate the mediating effect exercised by Italian fascism on the development of this cultural trend on the peninsula. Like their counterparts in other countries, some Italian intellectuals felt that the new “rationalist” mentality of modern technological society required the adoption of what one youth termed a “decisive, non-ideological attitude.”³⁵ But in Italy, unlike France or Weimar Germany, the “rejection” of ideology that informed realist cultural practice received official sanction by the head of state. Certainly, the rhetoric of antirhetoric had been a feature of fascist propaganda since the earliest days of the movement. In the early 1920s, it had served Mussolini to justify his violent “direct-action” politics and to market himself successfully to a wide gamut of interest groups.³⁶ During the years of the Depression, though, the Duce presented his anti-ideological and vitalistic “spiritual revolution” as a sort of bricolage that underwent reassembly and revision as circumstances required. As such, he claimed, it was the only political force “adaptable” enough to survive in an uncertain social and economic climate. As the Duce boasted, “Fascism did not come to power with a tidy prepared program to implement. If it had had such a program, it would have been a failure by now. Nothing is more ruinous than parties which have their doctrinal baggage all tidy and packed and still delude themselves that they can keep up with the grand and mutable reality of life.”³⁷ At a time when artists, architects, filmmakers, and writers throughout the Continent were engaged in the elaboration of an antiaesthetic aesthetic, Italian fascism offered

³⁴ Massimo Cimino, “Concetto del lavoro,” *Saggiatore* (November 1933).

³⁵ Quote from Domenico Carella, “Crisi della cultura,” *Saggiatore* (May 1932). Also Massimo Cimino, “Dal concetto di classe a quello di funzione,” *Saggiatore* (December 1932); Corrado Alvaro, “Opinioni sul romanzo,” *Corriere padano* (September 3, 1932); and Ugo Manunta, “Crisi economica e crisi spirituale,” *Critica fascista* (March 1, 1931).

³⁶ See Benito Mussolini, “Nel solco delle grandi filosofie: Relativismo e fascismo,” *Il popolo d'Italia* (November 22, 1922); also the statements of followers Cesare Rossi, “La critica alla critica del fascismo,” *Gerarchia* (April 25, 1922); and Dino Grandi, *Le origini e le missioni del fascismo* (Bologna, 1922), p. 61. On Mussolini’s “relativism,” see A. James Gregor, *Young Mussolini and the Intellectual Origins of Fascism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1979); and Adrian Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power* (London, 1973), pp. 42–46.

³⁷ Mussolini, cited in Riccardo Mariani, *Fascismo e “città nuova”* (Milan, 1976), p. 54; also Benito Mussolini, “Decidersi,” *Il popolo d'Italia* (January 12, 1932), and “Fra due civiltà,” *Il popolo d'Italia* (August 22, 1933).

the appealing vision of an anti-ideological ideology that took its imperatives from “fact” rather than theory.³⁸ In Italy, then, realism became a signifying category for the political style of the third way, and Italian intellectuals who worked to develop their own aesthetic of the concrete were provided with a point of reference that allowed them to locate attitudes and practices common to the European avant-garde within the framework of the regime.

REALISM AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A FASCIST LITERARY AESTHETIC

The desire to recover the concrete affected literature perhaps more than any other area of Italian culture in the thirties. Just as young documentary filmmakers and mural painters confessed an urge to narrate on an epic scale, writers and critics searched for new modes of representation that would facilitate the narration of a present that one fascist intellectual characterized as “dense with facts and content.”³⁹ These Italian *letterati* rejected the traditional *prosa d’arte* as a symbol of the small confines and “subjective” values of the liberal era and argued that only the sweeping gaze of the modern novel could capture the “fuller life experience” and the “tumultuous, passionate, and fervid” events made possible by the fascist era. As one youth explained in the review *Critica fascista*, the novel mirrored Mussolinian values in that it stood for “life willed and constructed, action rather than simple spectacle.”⁴⁰

If Italians looked to the war and postwar period to provide the content of the new novel, they cast their gaze beyond the peninsula for suggestions on style and narrative strategy. In a 1929 article entitled “Unburdening My Conscience,” a twenty-year-old Vittorini confessed that his generation could find nothing in Italy’s recent past to serve as a model for the creation of a “modern” literature. Rejecting futurist experimentalism, D’Annunzian emotionalism, and the “restraint” of verists such as Verga, Vittorini concluded that the Italian novel would have to develop through a process of “exchanges and

³⁸ On the perceived links between the new aesthetic and the ideology and political style of fascism, see Giorgio Granata, “Realismo,” *Saggiatore* (November 1933); Sigfrido Wolfango, “Nuova cultura,” *Cantiere* (March 3, 1934); Luigi Chiarini, “Per una nuova cultura,” *Il giornale d’Italia* (November 7, 1933); and Luciano Inganni, “Intellettuale speculativi e intellettuale d’azione,” *Critica fascista* (March 15, 1931).

³⁹ Carella, “Spade di carta,” *Lavoro fascista* (October 11, 1932).

⁴⁰ Quotes from Domenico Carella, “Filosofie costruttive,” *Saggiatore* (February 1931); Giovanni Titta Rosa, “Invito al romanzo,” *Corriere padano* (February 16, 1928); and Attilio Riccio, “Arte e costruzione,” *Critica fascista* (April 15, 1932). See also Arnaldo Bocelli, “Ritorno al romanzo,” *Corriere padano* (August 28, 1930); and Bonaventura Tecchi, “Inchiesta sul romanzo,” *Corriere padano* (October 27, 1932).

correspondences" with European literary culture.⁴¹ Over the next few years, Italians clarified the boundaries of their own literary identity through a series of encounters with texts by Döblin and other contemporary realist authors. The sense of a collective political endeavor tended to structure the reception of this literature, and many reviewers utilized an openly didactic tone designed to steer their fellow *letterati* away from certain types of realism that were judged "unsuitable" for the Italian climate. In the early thirties, such essays became sites for the articulation of difference and played an important role in the elaboration of a fascist literary aesthetic.

The reception of *Neue Sachlichkeit* literature in the early thirties provides a case in point. Many Italian critics admired the spare prose of these novels and their unflinching examinations of the social and economic conditions of the postwar period. The very starkness of the German aesthetic, observed the critic and translator Bonaventura Tecchi, brought forth "the most wondrous and modern poetic evocations."⁴² Yet the majority of reviewers bracketed the works of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* as "unacceptable" because of their "materialistic" worldview. For example, in his 1930 review of Döblin's novel for *Pegaso*, the critic Enrico Rocca praised the German's integration of "life" into the text through the use of street slang, newspaper clippings, and tram maps. Yet he denounced Döblin's brand of realism as "fanatic" and "coldly brutal" and dismissed the text as "history of things, an arrangement of things, a document." Rocca concluded his review with a suggestion that his peers should avoid trying to "imitate" either the style or the spirit of the book.⁴³

The normative tone of these reviews comes through most clearly in a 1933 review of Leonard Frank's novel *Von drei Millionen Drei* that appeared in the militant literary review *Oggi*. After lambasting Frank for his "photographic" art, his characters that "lack all human interest," and his "materialistic" worldview, the critic Luigi De Crecchio used a complicitous first-person plural voice to remind his fellow Italians that "we do not advocate Naturalism understood either as crude realism or documentarism. . . . It should be understood that this is not the art of *our time*. What matters to us is objectivity,

⁴¹ Elio Vittorini, "Scarico di coscienza," *Italia letteraria* (October 13, 1929); also G. G. Napolitano, "Difesa di una generazione," *I lupi* (February 10, 1928); Vitaliano Brancati, "Chiuso mondo verghiano," *Lavoro fascista* (August 8, 1931), and "Chiuso mondo dannunziano," *Lavoro fascista* (September 22, 1931); and Mario Puccini, "Rigurgiti dannunziani," *Oggi* (June 18, 1933). The writer Alberto Moravia discusses his generation's repudiation of past literary models in his essay "Assenza di maestri," in *L'uomo senza fine e altri saggi* (Milan, 1963), pp. 58–62.

⁴² Tecchi, "Inchiesta sul romanzo"; also Enrico Rocca, "Tappe del romanzo tedesco e letteratura italiana," *Critica fascista* (September 1, 1929).

⁴³ Enrico Rocca, review of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, *Pegaso* (May 1930).

that objectivity which permits an autonomous existence for its characters who have human qualities linked to the spirituality of the artist.”⁴⁴ By emphasizing the centrality of the category of “spirituality” to the fascist outlook, De Crecchio attempted to draw a boundary between the social literature of the Right and the socialist literature of the Left. In fact, in numerous articles and reviews of the early thirties, writers and critics insisted that Italian realism would be distinguished from other movements because writers would “transfigure” reality in order to allow the expression of “spirituality”—understood here as the presence of an individual ethical and creative sensibility—in the creative work.⁴⁵ As the critic Giovanni Titta Rosa wrote, Italian realist novels would also be informed by a “new objectivity,” but one that would “allow for the intrusion of imagination and permit authors to interpret reality rather than merely reproduce it.”⁴⁶ The discussions over realism reveal a desire among Italian intellectuals to delineate their own aesthetic of the “concrete” that would reflect the notion of fascism as a “moral” revolution that protected rather than obliterated individuality.⁴⁷

THE REALIST NOVEL AND THE SEARCH FOR A NEW MORALITY IN FASCIST ITALY

I would now like to explore three novels that appeared in the midst of these critical conversations: Alberto Moravia’s *Gli indifferenti* (The indifferent ones; 1929), Euriolo De Michelis’s *Adamo* (Adam; 1930), and Umberto Barbaro’s *Luce fredda* (Cold light; 1931). Although only De Michelis identified himself openly as a “fascist writer,” all of these men were frequent contributors to the most militant journals of the fascist “revolution” and actively participated in the debates over the lineaments of the realist aesthetic. Moreover, while their works make use of different narrative strategies, they display remarkable similarities in tone and theme. Like other realist novels that appeared in this period, these texts denounce the moral corruption of the

⁴⁴ Luigi De Crecchio, review in *Oggi* (July 16, 1933). A similar prescriptive discourse marks the essays of Guglielmo Serafini, review of *Elzel Andergast*, by Jakob Wassermann, *Saggiatore* (November 1932); Francesco Bruno, “Realismo germanico,” *Saggiatore* (July 1931); and Enrico Rocca, review of *Fabian, Emilio, and Auskunft*, by Erich Kästner, *Pegaso* (August 1932).

⁴⁵ Attilio Riccio, “Indicazioni,” *Occidente* (July–December 1933); Antonio Delfini, “La vita,” *Oggi* (June 18, 1933); Elio Talarico, “Trasfigurazioni nelle arti,” *Oggi* (June 11, 1933).

⁴⁶ Giovanni Titta Rosa, “Dalla lirica al romanzo,” *Corriere padano* (November 21, 1934).

⁴⁷ For contemporary expressions of this notion, Mussolini, “Fascismo” (n. 15 above), p. 850; “Dogana,” *Critica fascista* (February 15, 1932); Domenico Carella, “Coscienza collettiva e coscienza individuale,” *Critica fascista* (December 1, 1932).

Italian middle class and assert the need for a new moral “transparency” in Italy. The emphasis on ethics that marks these books was not lost on Italian critics, who lauded them as contributions to that “revision of values” prophesied by proponents of the fascist “spiritual revolution.” Yet in the postwar period these same writers and critics attempted to reshape their personal histories and the collective memory of the past by depicting the novels as antifascist critiques that encountered the disapproval of the authorities of the regime.

The first and most famous of these novels, Moravia’s *Gli indifferenti*, appeared in 1929 and was immediately hailed by critics as an example of the new realist sensibility in literature. The publication of the novel was something of an event in the cultural community of fascist Italy. Moravia’s youth and the frank and colloquial language he used to describe the mechanisms of desire and seduction earned the twenty-two-year-old Roman writer the title of enfant terrible of Italian letters. Yet *Gli indifferenti* is a highly moralistic portrayal of hypocrisy and corruption. Set in Rome in the mid-1920s, the narrative focuses on a bourgeois family composed of Mariagrazia and her children, Carla and Michele, who are both in their early twenties. The third-person narrator identifies Mariagrazia as a snobbish society woman who fills her life with charity balls at the Ritz, shopping expeditions with her girlfriend Lisa, a lascivious divorcée, and encounters with her lover, Leo, a lecherous and violent man who plans to swindle the family out of their home. In contrast, both Carla and Michele are alienated and disgusted by the superficiality of those around them, although they react to their situation in very different ways. Carla openly denounces her existence as “oppressive, miserable and petty” and dreams of a “new life” through a good marriage to a man she loves, while Michele distances himself by becoming an “indifferent” voyeur for whom “gestures, words, feelings were all just a sham.”⁴⁸

Once Moravia has situated the unhappy siblings as “outsiders” with respect to prevailing codes of values, he goes on to structure the book around their parallel seductions by Leo and Lisa, who are both depicted as base and manipulative predators. Carla’s sad destiny is established by the narrator from the first touch of Leo’s hands on her skirt; even as she manages to turn away from the “stupid and excited face” of Leo, her mother’s lover, she thinks “there was just no way out of it, everything was fixed and governed by a wretched inevitability.” In the chapters that focus on Carla, Moravia seems intent on demonstrating how the continued hegemony of bourgeois codes of financial and sexual conquest prohibited the development of new values. As Leo makes progress in his seduction, he tightens his hold over the family’s

⁴⁸ Alberto Moravia, *Gli indifferenti* (Milan, 1929; reprint, Milan, 1993), pp. 7, 31.

finances and over Carla's dreams for a "pure life." Indeed, Carla's decision to give herself to Leo parallels her resolve to begin an existence in which "everything must be impure, filthy, base, with no love or sympathy, but only a dark sense of ruin."⁴⁹

Michele, too, finds himself the target of sexual conquest by a woman who, like Leo, embodies sexual and moral corruption. Even as Michele submits to Lisa's flirtations, though, her "impurity" causes him to wish for love with a "real woman, a pure woman, neither false nor corrupt," and he undergoes a crisis in which he questions the ethical significance of his "indifference." He asks himself, "Why not be a sincere and instinctive man? Why not have a bit of faith?" As the novel goes on, Michele's desire to be rid of his indifference grows ever stronger, and he dreams of living in a "paradise of concreteness and truth" where "people killed and hated and loved seriously . . . and all men were made of flesh and blood and rooted in reality as trees are in the earth." Toward the close of the book, overtaken by a "hysterical need for truth," he decides he must leave Lisa.⁵⁰

The ethical significance of transparency and concreteness is underscored in several different ways in *Gli indifferenti*. First, Moravia engages in lengthy and detailed descriptions of the decor of the rooms that frame the action of the novel, and he draws a typically modernist analogy between well-lit, simply designed spaces and moral clarity. For example, in Lisa's apartment, "at first sight everything seemed pure and innocent . . . but a closer look revealed . . . torn curtains, broken picture frames, dusty books, and large cracks in the ceiling . . . corruption." In contrast, Carla's room is described at the beginning of the novel as bathed in "a luminous and special white light," with "hygienic, white, low-slung furniture."⁵¹ The necessity of linearity and clarity is also underlined at the level of narrative strategy: Moravia repeatedly juxtaposes interior monologues and third-person narration to highlight the contrast between what characters such as Leo think and what they actually say. From his position as omniscient narrator, Moravia then contrasts this hypocrisy to Michele's ideal world, where "every gesture, feeling, and word would have an immediate and direct connection [*aderenza*] with the reality that inspired them."⁵²

Toward the end of the novel, the narrative takes a dramatic turn. When Michele learns of Leo's affair with his sister, he decides he must act and goes to Leo's house to shoot him. Yet his one attempt to save his sister and redeem

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 83, 46.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 49, 122, 248–49, 211.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 247.

himself ends farcically when he fires the pistol and discovers he has forgotten to load the gun. Carla decides to marry Leo, sealing the economic ruin of the family, and resigns herself to a future as a “tough and cold” wife who will find what she calls “a true and pure love” only in the arms of her lovers. While Carla manages to rationalize her fate, Michele cannot: he is “oppressed by an opaque disgust” and thinks that if he had at least killed Leo he would have been “as clean and clear as a drop of water.” He puts himself through a mock trial for his “sin of indifference” and concludes . . . that while Leo is evil, he too is guilty: as he reflects, “I have done nothing . . . nothing but think. . . . That is my error.” If, as the narrative ends, Michele’s paradise of the concrete remains a mirage, his condemnation of his “indifference” opens the possibility of his future transformation from amoral spectator of society to active agent of ethical change.⁵³

The denunciation of bourgeois morality and the incitement to action and sincerity that form the main themes of *Gli indifferenti* have led postwar critics to consider it a foundational text of antifascist literature. Accordingly, literary histories have emphasized the novel’s negative reception by contemporary critics and by the fascist government.⁵⁴ Moravia has also maintained in interviews that the book quickly vanished into oblivion after important Blackshirts such as Arnaldo Mussolini, the Duce’s brother, labeled it an antifascist work.⁵⁵ Although some reviewers were certainly hostile to the book when it appeared, their objections centered on the book’s frank language and erotic subject matter rather than its politics.⁵⁶ And while Arnaldo Mussolini did complain about the moral content of *Gli indifferenti*, his own editorial house (Alpes) served as the book’s publisher. Moreover, the novel was a

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 311–12, 315, 310.

⁵⁴ For *Gli indifferenti* as an antifascist text, see Olga Lombardi, *La narrativa italiana nelle crisi del novecento* (Caltanissetta-Rome, 1971), p. 30; *Dizionario della letteratura italiana*, 2 vols. (Milan, 1977), 1:348; *Dizionario critico degli autori italiani contemporanei*, 2 vols. (Florence, 1974), 2:860; and Edward Reichl, “Literarischer Text und politischer Kontext: Faschismuskritik in narrativer Form: Moravias *Gli indifferenti*,” *Romanistische Zeitschrift für Literaturgeschichte* 1 (1980): 65–81. On the book’s negative reception, see Giuliano Manacorda, *Letteratura e cultura del periodo fascista* (Milan, 1974), pp. 187–95; *Dizionario degli autori italiani* (Florence-Messina, 1974), p. 978; and Riccardo Scrivano, *Riviste, critici e scrittori del Novecento* (Florence, 1965), p. 61.

⁵⁵ See, most recently, the book-length interview with Moravia by Alain Elkann, *Vita di Moravia* (Milan, 1990), pp. 50–51.

⁵⁶ See Nello Quilici, review in *Corriere padano* (November 5, 1929); Aristotele Campanile, review in *Antieuropa* (November 15, 1929); Luigi Chiarini, “Doveri della critica,” *Quadrivio* (November 3, 1934); and Giuseppe Lombrassa, “L’indifferenza: male di moda,” *Critica fascista* (January 1, 1930).

resounding success. By April 1930 it had already gone through four printings, and Alpes had even issued a deluxe version for collectors and bibliophiles.⁵⁷ A second edition appeared in 1934 after the larger publishing house Bompiani bought the rights to the novel.

In postwar interviews and autobiographical writings, Moravia often emphasized his isolation from both political matters and the fascist literary community during the years he was developing *Gli indifferenti*. In the years 1925–29, he took rest cures in the Alto Adige region of Italy to recover from tuberculosis and various other illnesses, and he wrote his novel mostly in bed.⁵⁸ But Moravia always neglected to recall that *Gli indifferenti* took shape as a series of parables and stories that he contributed in 1928 to the fascist avant-garde reviews *I lupi* and *L'interplanetario*.⁵⁹ Both these reviews brought together artists, experimental playwrights, and novelists who viewed fascism as an agent of political and aesthetic revolution. The editors of *I lupi* were particularly enthusiastic followers of the Duce, and the review advertised itself as the voice of a new generation of “partisan, factious, but disciplined” fascist activists whose main preoccupation was to “jump headfirst into the fray.”⁶⁰ This stance found an aesthetic expression in what one editor of *I lupi* called “our disgust for words, our esteem for ‘the fact’ and ‘the concrete thing,’ which we sum up in the provisional formula ‘Anti-literature.’”⁶¹

That Moravia would be sympathetic to such sentiments can be surmised from an essay on the novel he wrote in 1927 for the *Fiera letteraria*. He warned Italian writers to avoid the “cerebralism” and “psychological showmanship” of Proust and Joyce and urged them to write “true and convincing representations of reality.” The Italian realist novel, he concluded, was to function as a “testimonial” of its time.⁶² In 1928, as he was completing *Gli indifferenti*, he contributed a parable to *I lupi* that features an emotionally numb protagonist (the prince of Denmark) who cannot rouse himself to avenge the death of his corrupt father by his uncle. In a rather forced play on

⁵⁷ See the ad for the 4th ed. in *Italia letteraria* (April 27, 1930), p. 6.

⁵⁸ Elkann, p. 31.

⁵⁹ See Alberto Moravia, “Dialogo fra Amleto e il Principe di Danimarca,” *I lupi* (February 29, 1928); and the four stories published in *L'interplanetario* on February 15, March 15, April 1, and June 1, 1928. On the stories and their relation to the novel, see Umberto Carpi, “Gli indifferenti rimossi,” *Belfagor* (November 30, 1981), pp. 696–709.

⁶⁰ See Napolitano, “Difesa di una generazione” (n. 41 above); also “Ingratitudine,” *L'interplanetario* (March 1, 1928).

⁶¹ Napolitano, “Difesa di una generazione.”

⁶² Alberto Moravia, “C’è una crisi del romanzo?” *Fiera letteraria* (October 9, 1927). The article is reprinted with critical commentary by Pasquale Voza, “Nel ventisette sconosciuto: Moravia intorno al romanzo,” *Belfagor* (March 31, 1982), pp. 207–12.

Shakespeare, Moravia's protagonist asks Hamlet to solve his problem for him. While Hamlet recommends revenge, the prince cannot even feel the hatred necessary to commit the act. As the story ends, the prince reflects that the question is no longer to be or not to be, but whether or not to act. This parable presents the moral stance of *Gli indifferenti* in distilled form, and its ideological assumptions are entirely consistent with those of *I lupi* and other fascist youth reviews of the period. Moravia's choice to publish his story in a review whose masthead proclaimed "Mussolini is our God" clarifies the political referent of the concreteness and transparency he advocates in his novel.⁶³

Indeed, many fascist literary critics acclaimed the book in the early thirties. Quite a few admired it for its penetrating exposé of the bankruptcy of existing values, and they pointed out that the book was condemning indifference rather than encouraging it. As the critic Bonaventura Tecchi commented in an essay comparing the works of young German and Italian realist writers, while many works of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* betrayed "a certain cynicism and moral apathy . . . the merit of *Gli indifferenti*, in my opinion, is that Moravia has presented moral indifference as a problem, described it and, in a certain sense, judged it." Most reviewers, then, interpreted the book as a courageous and timely gesture directed at the definition of a new morality.⁶⁴ Far from being shunned, Moravia's book became a model for other realist works and was canonized as an example of the new Italian literature in the *Enciclopedia italiana* published in 1932.⁶⁵ After the fall of Mussolini's regime, critics—with help from Moravia himself—would interpret the moral preoccupations of the book as a reaction against the dictatorship.⁶⁶

The interpretation of *Gli indifferenti* as an oppositional work has also led postwar critics to categorize it as an "exception" to the literary production of the fascist period. In the words of one scholar, Moravia's work "stands isolated until the war like a rock in the sea."⁶⁷ But *Gli indifferenti* was merely the first of a series of realist texts being produced at that time that posited a new moral code based on a direct and linear connection between thought and

⁶³ See the first issue of *I lupi* (January 20, 1928), where this quote is placed in bold type.

⁶⁴ Bonaventura Tecchi, "Quesiti sulla nuova generazione," *Saggiatore* (December 1932); also Granata, "Moravia o dell'indifferenza," *Saggiatore* (December 1931); Giovanni Titta Rosa, "Gli indifferenti o del moralismo," *Corriere padano* (November 5, 1929); Enrico Rocca, review in *Critica fascista* (September 1, 1929); and Luciano Anceschi, "Socialità del romanzo," *Cantiere* (January 14, 1934).

⁶⁵ "Italia," in *Enciclopedia italiana* (n. 15 above), 19:958.

⁶⁶ See n. 54 above; also Alberto Moravia, "Ricordi di censura," *La rassegna d'Italia* (December 1946).

⁶⁷ Geno Pampaloni, "La nuova letteratura," in *Storia della letteratura italiana*, ed. Emilio Cecchi and Natalino Sapegno, 9 vols. (Milan, 1969), 9:807. Also *Dizionario critico della letteratura italiana*, 2 vols. (Turin, 1986), 2:650–52; Arnaldo Bocelli,

action and the necessity of the individual to engage with the ethical and social problems of society. Just a few days after Moravia's novel appeared, the twenty-five-year-old Venetian writer De Michelis sent his first novel, *Adamo*, off to the publisher. While De Michelis had no prior knowledge of Moravia's work, his autobiographical novel also details the search of an alienated young man for a new set of values that would give meaning to his "aimless" and "purposeless" existence. The narrative is organized around the trope of enlightenment and recounts Adamo's quest to evolve from a solipsistic ethos to a state of moral clarity founded on the ability to sustain "sincere and clear" relationships with others.⁶⁸ De Michelis's narrator presents the novel as an account of "the formation of my spirit," and the text is an exacting reconstruction of Adamo's thought processes and states of mind, which shift as a result of random occurrences and encounters. De Michelis provides no physical description or background information about any of the secondary characters, and they are present in the book only insofar as they have an impact on the moral development of the protagonist.

Like many novels and films of the early thirties, *Adamo* sets up an opposition between the purity of the provinces and the immorality of the city. The narrator represents himself as living an outwardly pious if self-directed life in the placid town of Vicenza. His one connection is with a librarian who represents the triumph of the life of the mind and the spirit over that of the flesh. Visiting her home, Adamo observes approvingly that "her bed occupied very little space, just like everything that was part of her physical life."⁶⁹ But his self-satisfaction is disturbed when he moves to Venice to take up an office job and is exposed to attitudes and behaviors that recall those described by Moravia in *Gli indifferenti*. Cast by De Michelis in the role of the wide-eyed provincial innocent, Adamo records the indecent and superficial behavior of his colleagues, who have a penchant for "obscene sayings and vulgar jokes." He anguishes over their acceptance of a value system that privileges lust and greed over love and honesty, and he despairs at their conformist mentality that allows them to "always be influenced by the strongest person around them." But when he confides this disgust to his friend Perri, a young banker who represents the utilitarian morality of the bourgeoisie, he is told that it is better to "be simple and accept ourselves as we are, not as we would like to be."⁷⁰

Like Moravia's Michele, Adamo reacts to his environment by distancing himself and becoming an obsessively self-reflexive spectator of all that goes

"Questo Neorealismo," *Il mondo* (March 10, 1951); and Carlo Bo, ed., *Inchiesta sul neorealismo* (Turin, 1951), p. 8.

⁶⁸ Euralio De Michelis, *Adamo* (Vicenza, 1931; reprint, Venice, 1983), pp. 9–10, 18, 23.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 60, 62, 61.

on around him. And like Michele, he finds that this attitude quickly leads to a sort of moral paralysis. Thus when Perri proposes a visit to a brothel, he agrees: "I'd like to have the courage to rebel," he thinks, "but it is impossible for me to decide anything for myself, it is as though my hands were tied. . . . I have no face, no soul, I've been emptied of all thought."⁷¹ His actions at the brothel send him into a downward spin; he remembers his dreams of having a pure love with his librarian and wonders, "Is there nothing beyond a body with certain needs to satisfy, nothing else?"⁷² As the narrative proceeds, he becomes so alienated that he puts aside his goal of moral change, since, as he admits, "I knew very well that the significance of any act I would commit would be annulled by my inability to carry it out without spontaneous love." When at the close of the novel he is diagnosed with tuberculosis, he is strangely relieved and views the end of his life as a "liberation from a nightmare." Rather than close on such a defeatist note, De Michelis grants his suffering character an eleventh-hour dispensation: as Adamo lies in the hospital waiting to die, he notices that the blankets have fallen off a fellow patient. In a gesture that is presented as the first spontaneous and humane action of his life, he gets out of bed and gently covers up the sleeping invalid.⁷³

The denunciation of apathy and the necessity of constructing a new moral code also take center stage in a novel that appeared one year later, Barbaro's *Luce fredda*. Unlike De Michelis, who made no secret of his fascist faith, Barbaro was an enigmatic figure whose politics throughout the entire fascist era were extremely ambiguous. The few accounts of his activities in the interwar period have been framed by his postwar position as the foremost communist theoretician of cinematic neorealism, and his literary endeavors have received almost no attention from critics.⁷⁴ Born in 1902, the precocious Barbaro founded his first journal (*La bilancia*) just months after the March on Rome. The review became a forum for Marinetti and other enthusiasts of the fascist "revolution," but it also championed left-wing avant-garde movements such as dadaism and surrealism. In the late twenties and early thirties, Barbaro wrote about Italian, Russian, and Weimar German literature and cinema for many journals of the fascist avant-garde. His familiarity with contemporary cultural trends and the diversity of his activities (critic, editor, novelist, filmmaker, screenwriter, playwright, translator, and teacher at the government-

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 70, 71.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 167, 197, 203–4.

⁷⁴ The only critic to study Barbaro's ideas under the fascist era is Gian Piero Brunetta. See his *Umberto Barbaro e l'idea del neorealismo* (Padova, 1969); also his introduction to a collection of Barbaro's essays titled *Neorealismo e realismo*, 2 vols. (Rome, 1976). Barbaro's fiction, however, has yet to come to critical attention.

run Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia) made him a key mediator of modernist culture in fascist Italy.⁷⁵

Luce fredda is a text produced by this intricate web of cultural influences. Barbaro alternates between a satirical-ironic tone reminiscent of that of the Russian writer Mikhail Bulgakov (whose novel *Fatal Eggs* he was translating at that time) and reportage-like discourse—underlined by the insertion of documents such as letters and diary pages into the narrative stream—similar to that of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*. Like Moravia's novel, *Luce fredda* is set in Rome and is a scathing attack on bourgeois ethics. A seedy boarding house, its inhabitants, and their friends and fleeting acquaintances provide the parameters of the narrative, which begins in May 1922 (months before the March on Rome) and continues into the late twenties. This time the “ethnographer” of the bourgeoisie is Sergio, who is depressed by the superficiality and hypocrisy of those around him. He asks himself, “Is it possible to create a moral code of one's own that would be independent of and better than the one that is recognized and consecrated? . . . Perhaps not, but certainly anyone who does not try is a contemptible person, no?” But like the other protagonists, he is abulic and cannot overcome his inertia. As a consequence, Sergio, like Michele and Adamo, feels that his existence lacks a purpose, and he laments that “banal and uncontrolled combinations of circumstances have determined the acts of my life.”⁷⁶

This “randomness” and absence of linearity is underscored and replicated by Barbaro's multiperspectivist narrative strategy. While Sergio's anguish provides the main thread of the novel, *Luce fredda* has no central plot. It is, rather, a collage composed of snapshots of the interlinked lives of over a dozen characters. The polyphonic narrative is given structure by a succession of interior monologues that introduce each protagonist, and Barbaro jumps from the thoughts of one character to those of another, sometimes in midsentence. In its use of this multiperspectivist narrative position and its depiction of the disjointed consciousness associated in those years with “modernity,” this novel can be located alongside better-known works by Döblin and other interwar realist authors.

In *Luce fredda*, Barbaro calls the “cold light” of “objectivity” into service to produce a damning collective portrait of the Italian bourgeoisie. Maria is the emancipated New Woman plagued by ennui. She leaves the home of her war-hero father and frequents nightclubs where she drinks, in her words, “an interminable series of cocktails which I toss off one after the other with perfect

⁷⁵ Umberto Carpi, *Bolscevico immaginista: Comunismo e avanguardie artistiche nell'Italia degli anni venti* (Naples, 1981), gives information about Barbaro's activities in the twenties and presents Barbaro as a dissident Communist.

⁷⁶ Umberto Barbaro, *Luce fredda* (Lanciano, 1931; reprint, Montepulciano, 1990), pp. 157, 121.

poise.”⁷⁷ Barbaro also introduces Lorenzo, a young careerist who thinks only of work and social climbing, and Ruggero, a cynical seventeen-year-old who enters the narrative as he forges his wealthy father’s signature on a check so that he can take his “beautiful and decorative lover” to lunch. Ruggero and other rich rogues frequent private nightclubs where politicians mingle with prostitutes and German and Russian intellectuals joke about photomontages and cabarets. They drink and dance while listening to “the latest jazz of Witheman [*sic*] and Jack Hilton.”⁷⁸ At the time he authored *Luce fredda*, Barbaro was immersed in translations of the film theories of Eisenstein and Pudovkin. Throughout the book, he makes an effective use of the cinematographic technique of montage as he cuts back and forth from the other characters to Sergio to juxtapose their descent into complete corruption with Sergio’s struggles to create a new ethical code.⁷⁹ While Barbaro’s reputation as a Communist has led postwar critics to position him as an antifascist defender of modernism, in this text he employs experimental literary techniques to produce a critique of modernist culture. In *Luce fredda*, as in many fascist nonfiction texts, the foreign, the modern, and the modernist are associated with political corruption and moral degeneracy.

In fact, *Luce fredda* ends as do many morality tales, with the punishment of the damned and the redemption of the merely tempted. The text takes on naturalist tones as the omniscient narrator sets up Ruggero’s fall. By the end of the novel, Ruggero has killed himself, his sister Clelia has stabbed their father and been placed in an insane asylum, and Barbaro has revealed Maria’s emancipation to be a sham when she crumbles after having been seduced and abandoned by a handsome athlete. Only Sergio is saved, inspired by the “moral” gesture of Ruggero’s suicide to shed his passivity. As the novel ends, he decides to “get rid of all this intellectualism” and “find a sense of reality and the concrete” so that he can be a participant in rather than a critic of society.⁸⁰

REALISM AND THE POLITICS OF DISCOURSE

By 1933, the cultural press was filled with discussions over the “taste for the documentary” that defined the new Italian literature.⁸¹ Several observers remarked that the realist texts took their place alongside rationalist architecture

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 105, 114.

⁷⁹ Barbaro’s translations in those years included Vsevolod Pudovkin, *Il soggetto cinematografico* (Rome, 1932); Sergei Eisenstein, “Principi della forma cinematografica,” *L’Italia letteraria* (May 28, 1932). He also translated articles by Rudolph Arnheim and Paul Rotha.

⁸⁰ Barbaro, *Luce fredda*, p. 224.

⁸¹ Quote from Armando Ghelardini, “I misteri editoriali,” *Occidente* (April–June 1933); also Elio Talarico, “Motivi di poesia,” *Oggi* (May 28, 1933).

as evidence of an “antirhetorical” aesthetic emerging in Italy. As the Bolognese journalist Sigfrido Wolfango remarked, the novels were major contributions to a new fascist culture characterized by a “spirituality that, in perfect antithesis to the affected bourgeois culture of the pre-war period . . . poses serious and urgent problems and engages man in his entirety.”⁸² As they had done in the case of *Gli indifferenti*, most critics interpreted the works of De Michelis and Barbaro as calling for what one termed a “new ethical attitude” that would underwrite new codes of behavior. Aldo Capasso lauded Barbaro’s “disgust” at the passive and overly cerebral nature of the Italian intellectual class, while Piero Nardi applauded De Michelis’s attention to the “internal mechanisms of the spirit” and the author’s presentation of himself as a “whole man” of “feelings and intellect, flesh and spirit.”⁸³ This reception of the novelists as messengers of a new moral activism was sanctioned by the influential critic Arnaldo Bocelli in a 1931 discussion of the works of Moravia, De Michelis, and Barbaro. Bocelli praised the “intimate spirituality” and “chorality” of these works and urged readers not to be put off by the “cold, clear, and implacable” gaze these authors trained on the world. For “behind all the pitiless analysis, there lurks an aspiration to harmony and synthesis; behind the ostentatious cynicism and coldness, there hides a sincere need for a faith and authentic human warmth. . . . These writers contain the seeds of the rebirth of man.”⁸⁴

Realist novels did meet with criticism on aesthetic grounds. A number of reviewers found them “arid” and “clinical” and argued that their “robotic” characters and relentless presentation of moral decadence gave them a “materialistic” and “pessimistic” air more suited to Weimar Germany than to Mussolini’s Italy.⁸⁵ De Michelis and other realists responded to these charges in a series of essays that appeared both in major newspapers and in independent literary journals such as *Oggi*. These writings confirm the extent to which realism rested on an understanding of fascism as an antibourgeois “revolution” whose goal was to effect a social and moral transformation of

⁸² Sigfrido Wolfango, “Contributo all’inchiesta sulla nuova cultura,” *Saggiatore* (August–October 1933); also Edoardo Persico, “Tendenze d’oggi,” *Italia letteraria* (March 23, 1930); editorial in *L’universale* (March 1932).

⁸³ Aldo Capasso, “Luce fredda,” *Il Tevere* (July 15, 1931); Piero Nardi, review of *Adamo, Pegaso* (December 1932). On the “new ethical attitude” of the new literature, see Riccio, “Arte e costruzione” (n. 40 above); also Ugo Betti, “Osservazioni sull’arte e sul tempo,” *Oggi* (June 11, 1933); Domenico Carella, “Cultura e mentalità del dopoguerra,” *Saggiatore* (April 1932); and Elio Vittorini, “Radiografia di una notte,” *Il lavoro* (August 31, 1932).

⁸⁴ Arnaldo Bocelli, “Luce fredda,” *Corriere padano* (July 21, 1931).

⁸⁵ See Alfredo Gargiulo, “Profondità,” *Espero* (January 1933); Francesco Jovine, “Aspetti del neorealismo,” *I diritti della scuola* (September 23, 1934); Massimo Bontempelli, “Opinion sul romanzo,” *Corriere padano* (July 29, 1932); and Felice Benuzzi, “Disfacitori,” *Frontespizio* (January 1934).

the peninsula. In one such essay in *Oggi*, which regularly featured Mussolinian maxims on fascist “realism” across its masthead, De Michelis argued that “fascism is not just a party or a regime” but rather “a new way of approaching and interpreting life” that entailed a constant confrontation with oneself and one’s surroundings. Whereas the liberal intellectual had evaded reality, the duty of the fascist “revolutionary” was to “gather the courage to examine reality thoroughly: because the reality of tomorrow is created by acting on the reality of today.” De Michelis concluded that the true pessimists were those who impeded change by remaining out of touch with the problems of the present, and he reminded his critics that the same “collapse of all past ideologies” that had made possible the triumph of fascism had also left his generation with “a vocation to look at things as they are, not as they should be.”⁸⁶ The writer Ugo Betti also defended realism as a literary expression of the transformative mentality brought to Italy by Mussolini. He explained that the new writing expressed an anti-ideological “mind-set” that “corresponds to revolutionary epochs in general and to fascism in particular: an unforgiving pitilessness, seriousness, dissatisfaction with the quiet life, and anxiety for the future.”⁸⁷

Other authors emphasized that the point of the novels was not to celebrate indifference but to denounce it. Elio Talarico, author of a 1932 novel (*Tatuaggio*) that satirized the lifestyle of the bourgeois family Boccadoro, maintained that realist novels constituted a reaction against traditional bourgeois narratives structured around a hero and a happy ending. The “revolutionary” element of realism, he claimed, lay precisely in its attempt to spark social change by presenting life as it was actually experienced.⁸⁸ For his part, Barbaro asserted that works such as *Luce fredda* were meant to spark reflection on “the sad and fatal consequences of individualism” and urge the reader to “acknowledge the problems of daily life in order to give him an overwhelming urge to put an end to them, to transform himself and the world.”⁸⁹

The militant character of the journals in which these essays appeared, the enthusiasm for fascism showed by most of those who were involved in the realist movement, and the emphasis on “morality” and “concreteness” that

⁸⁶ Euralio De Michelis, “Pessimismo della letteratura giovane,” *Oggi* (June 4, 1933); Vitaliano Brancati, “Risposta di un esortato,” *Lavoro fascista* (September 24, 1932); Berto Ricci, “Condizioni per una letteratura,” *Lavoro fascista* (September 27, 1932).

⁸⁷ Ugo Betti, “Inchiesta per un’arte del nostro tempo,” *Italia vivente* (June 30, 1933); also see his “Esame di coscienza,” *Oggi* (October 15, 1933).

⁸⁸ Elio Talarico, “Motivi di poesia.” *Boccadoro* means “mouth of gold” in Italian.

⁸⁹ Umberto Barbaro, “Considerazioni sul romanzo,” *Quadrivio* (December 1932); also his essays “Come si diventa scrittori,” *Quadrivio* (August 1934), and “La mia fede,” *Giornale d’Italia* (February 3, 1933).

pervades realist texts would seem to leave little doubt as to the political referent of the movement. Yet “revolution” was a term that, as fascist officials well knew, could be used in various political contexts. While the antibourgeois sentiment and revolutionary rhetoric that marked fascist discourse was a legacy of nationalism and other movements on the political Right, it also reflected Mussolini’s adaptation and recontextualization of aspects of socialism.⁹⁰ The consequent potential for equivocation and the possibilities offered to Italian intellectuals to carry on a counterdiscourse of antifascism did not escape the notice of officials at the time. Bottai, who was the most aware of the lure of the Left for young intellectuals, once observed that the ideological project of the third way, which hinged on the elaboration of the “social” rather than “socialist” in politics, economics, and culture, was “an experiment conducted “on a razor’s edge.”⁹¹ In 1932, when a lively debate over corporatism had inflamed many young fascists’ hopes for radical social and economic change, Bottai reminded his readers in *Critica fascista* that revolution did not mean rupture but simply “accelerated evolution.”⁹² By 1934, after some realists had begun to call for the end of capitalism, he was admitting that some youth “had taken us seriously . . . and are giving a different meaning to many of the ideas contained in the fundamental documents of fascism.”⁹³ It is no accident that he chose the youth review *L’orto* as the site of articles on “the relationship between language and revolution” that, like the new lexicons and dictionaries commissioned by the fascist government, had the aim of situating heavily connoted phrases such as “syndicate,” “labor,” and “collectivism” within the framework of Blackshirt ideology.⁹⁴ After 1945, though, such efforts were quickly forgotten, along

⁹⁰ On this issue, see Paolo Agosto, “Mussolini: Strumentalizzazione e desementizzazione di lessemi marxisti,” *Movimento operaio e socialista* (“Parlare fascista”) (January–April 1984), pp. 15–23; Michele A. Cortelazzo, “Mussolini socialista e gli antecedenti della retorica fascista,” in *La lingua italiana e il fascismo*, ed. Erasmo Leso et al. (Bologna, 1977), pp. 69–75; and Walter Adamson, “The Language of Opposition in Early Twentieth-Century Italy: Rhetorical Continuities between Prewar Florentine Avant-Gardism and Mussolini’s Fascism,” *Journal of Modern History* 64 (March 1992): 22–51.

⁹¹ Giuseppe Bottai, speech delivered at the University of Pisa on March 3, 1929, reprinted in his *Il Consiglio nazionale delle corporazioni* (Milan, 1931), p. 23.

⁹² Giuseppe Bottai, “Questo tempo,” *Critica fascista* (September 15, 1932).

⁹³ Giuseppe Bottai, “Mussolini e le nuove generazioni fasciste,” *Critica fascista* (April 15, 1934).

⁹⁴ See Giuseppe Bottai, “Appunti sui rapporti tra lingua e rivoluzione,” *L’orto* (May–June 1934); and the contributions of Camillo Pellizzi and Bruno Migliorini to the debate “Lingua e rivoluzione,” *L’orto* (September–October 1934). For the results of this recontextualization, see Amerigo Montemaggiori, ed., *Dizionario della dottrina fascista* (Turin, 1934); the National Fascist Party’s *Dizionario di politica*, 4 vols. (Rome, 1940); and the *Dizionario mussoliniano* (Milan, 1940). The massive project

with much of the ideological scaffolding of fascism. At that point the important place of leftist rhetoric within the language of the third way, coupled with a critical strategy intent on removing realist texts from their matrix in the fascist cultural climate, made it possible to reinterpret both fictional and nonfictional writings of the movement as stemming from oppositional sentiments. For example, this 1933 definition of realism by the fascist novelist Talarico—"a need for commitment, humanity, for a true sense of things and a concrete vision of the world"—is identical on a *semantic* level to many pronouncements of left-wing neorealist writers and artists after 1945.⁹⁵

The reinterpretation of realist discourse in the postwar period was also facilitated by the reluctance of fascist writers and critics to explicitly name the regime in their writings. Although almost all of those who promoted realism did at some point make explicit the connection between the narration of "the present" and the narration of the dictatorship, fascist literary etiquette favored allusion over denotation when referring to the regime. I contend that this practice stemmed from a collective need among Italian intellectuals to maintain the fiction that, unlike communism, which "standardized" its intellectuals, fascism was a "regime of liberty" that allowed for the retention of individual conscience and will. The central place of this fiction in the fascist imaginary became clear in a debate that began in the review *Critica fascista* over the circulation of ideas within fascism and the right to engage in criticism. In a 1931 article of rare candor, the journalist Manlio Pompei charged that under fascism "the ability to argue, to openly criticize and make fraternal objections has been lost: too many people fear compromising themselves and think that the best way to avoid this is to renew their party card, put on their black shirts when necessary, and remain silent."⁹⁶ This touched a nerve in many intellectuals, who responded that that fascist "pragmatism" and "love of truth" demanded a continuous "lively," "unprejudiced," and "open" exchange of ideas. As the critic Pier Maria Bardi reassured his peers, "we are fascists. We will discuss, argue, and fight with all

undertaken by the Italian Academy to produce a new *Vocabolario della lingua italiana* was interrupted by the war. On this and other fascist linguistic projects see Sergio Raffaelli, *Le parole proibite* (Bologna, 1983), pp. 193–229.

⁹⁵ Talarico, "Motivi di poesia" (n. 81 above). On the continuities between fascist and antifascist rhetoric, see Andrea Battistini, "Lingua e oratoria nei volantini della Resistenza bolognese," in *L'Emilia Romagna nella guerra di liberazione*, vol. 4, *Crisi della cultura e dialettica delle idee* (Bologna, 1976), pp. 331–64. I have italicized the word "semantic" to emphasize that my affirmation refers to similarities on a purely linguistic and formal level that allowed critics and authors to later manipulate their texts in order to repress the memory of their adherence to the culture of the regime.

⁹⁶ Manlio Pompei, "Dialettica fascista," *Critica fascista* (February 1, 1931).

the frankness and liberty that distinguish the fascist man.”⁹⁷ This equation of fascism with intellectual “liberty” lay behind the proclamations made by Bottai and other functionaries that it was important to reward writers and artists whose works reflected the spirit of fascism even if they did not have a party card. One editorial in *Critica fascista* maintained that for this reason those who cared about culture had a duty to champion works by a “true artist” such as Moravia (who never joined the fascist party) over the dozens of “ungrammatical and hysterical” sonnets that were being written in honor of Mussolini.⁹⁸

This collective desire to present the intellectual climate of fascism as “impartial” and “objective” rather than partisan and propagandistic also lay behind the repeated reminders sent out within the Italian literary community to “transfigure” rather than simply “reproduce” reality. As the critic Francesco Bruno argued in an essay for the peer review *L'Italia che scrive*, fascist authors must avoid creating works “whose political function is too obvious.” For this reason, Bruno discouraged the production of novels on directly political themes and recommended that, whatever the topic Italian writers chose to address, they should take care to “transform” reality rather than remain “too closely tied to the crude documentary or chronicle” so that readers “will be almost unaware of the propagandistic function [the novels] are fulfilling.”⁹⁹ By the same token, the etiquette of fascist literary criticism prescribed the avoidance, when possible, of openly political references when discussing aesthetic issues. As a result, the discussions over realism in the fascist press often took place through a series of coded messages in which intellectuals exhorted one another to observe, understand, and feel “contemporary life” and to produce literature situated “in the concrete history of current times.”¹⁰⁰

Some fascists found these practices frustrating. De Michelis complained in the youth journal *Saggiatore* that he was reprimanded by several older critics after he wrote several essays in which he explicitly linked the new literature to the political and social goals of fascism. “I was told that although I had said

⁹⁷ P. M. Bardi, “Principii,” *Quadrante* (May 1933); Valentino Martelli, “Saggio di critica scientifica,” *L'universale* (February 1933); and Domenico Rende, “Fascismo e discussione,” *Critica fascista* (February 15, 1931).

⁹⁸ “La tessera e l'ingegno,” *Critica fascista* (April 15, 1931).

⁹⁹ Francesco Bruno, “Impopolarità del romanzo,” *L'Italia che scrive* (February 1934); also Gherardo Casini, “Elementi politici di una letteratura,” *Critica fascista* (May 1, 1933).

¹⁰⁰ Quotes from Titta Rosa, “Invito al romanzo” (n. 40 above); Corrado Alvaro, “La prosa,” *'900* (August 1, 1928); also Bocelli, “Ritorno al romanzo” (n. 40 above); Giovanni Titta Rosa, “Il chiodo del romanzo,” *Corriere padano* (May 25, 1930); and Umberto Barbaro, “Albori di una narrativa attuale,” *Quadri* (December 16, 1935).

things that were true, they were still things that 'should not be said,' " he noted polemically.¹⁰¹ The editors of the periodical *Italia vivente*, for their part, tried to "pin down" their peers by phrasing one question in a 1933 survey on the "culture of our time" in such a way as to exclude ambiguous discourse: "Do you believe that it is justified to complain that our current art does not adequately express the spirit of our time, that is to say—since we are in Italy—the spirit of fascism?" Few fell for this ruse. Barbaro, for example, answered that art can never capture a given period, because "true art" will always have a prescriptive function and look to the creation of new times even as it is describing the present. "A greater clarification would require evaluation, development, and demonstration that space prohibits," he concluded enticingly.¹⁰² This conscious use of an ambiguous and allusive prose facilitated the decontextualization of realist discourse after the fall of the regime, as there was little evidence of a direct relationship between the new aesthetic and the ideology of the dictatorship.¹⁰³

An essay Moravia wrote in favor of the realist aesthetic offers an example of the interpretative difficulties created by these literary practices. At the end of April 1933, Mussolini made a speech to the Italian Society of Writers and Editors in which he encouraged writers to "immerse yourselves in life, don't distance yourselves from it." The speech received much coverage in the cultural press and was published in the June 1933 issue of enthusiastically fascist reviews such as *Quadrante* and *Oggi*. Shortly after, Moravia published an essay in *Oggi* that used language similar to that of Mussolini and made a similar point. Moravia attacked the "moralists" who objected to the literary trend and urged his peers to "be real, speak of real things, don't detach yourselves from reality. . . . Capture life in your writings, even at the cost of

¹⁰¹ Euralio De Michelis, "Contributo all'inchiesta sulla nuova cultura," *Saggiatore* (August–October 1933).

¹⁰² Umberto Barbaro, "L'arte e il tempo," *L'Italia vivente* (June 15, 1933).

¹⁰³ An example is the relative silence surrounding the writings of Barbaro, who wrote dozens of ambiguous essays for explicitly political publications such as *Educazione fascista* and *Roma*. Gian Piero Brunetta mentions this ambiguity as a reason Barbaro has been neglected by other postwar critics. "In Barbaro's writings," Brunetta notes, "one finds things very similar to those being said by intellectuals who were openly fascist." Brunetta argues that it is not Barbaro's language that leads to ambiguous interpretations, but rather the context, which "distorts . . . and neutralizes his intentions" and leaves him open to associations with the Right. In this way, Brunetta steps around the question of why Barbaro chose to use that particular language when writing in those particular forums. Brunetta concludes that today (when we can read Barbaro's words *out of context*) "the texts can assert their profound meaning with absolute clarity: all his writings presuppose the rejection of the present Italian society and aim at the construction of new times conceived on the socialist model" (Brunetta, introduction to Barbaro, *Neorealismo e realismo* [n. 74 above], 1:22).

beauty . . . because life is composed of facts and not of your sterile fantasies.”¹⁰⁴ Although Moravia’s article expressed sentiments common to many European intellectuals in those years, his choice to publish it in a militant fascist review (rather than on the cultural page of a daily newspaper or a less politicized literary publication such as *Italia letteraria*), together with his use of a language that carried heavy ideological connotations at that time, could easily warrant a reading of the article as fascist discourse. At the very least, his opinions are framed by an explicit political context, in this case a fawning *Oggi* editorial titled “Mussolini and Fascist Doctrine,” which featured a quote by the Duce in bold type urging Italians to engage with their surroundings. The editors commented that “in these words we see the true essence of the spirituality of fascism and of its Leader: realistic and yet revolutionary.” In one 1934 essay for *Oggi*, Moravia did become more specific. Discussing the future of the new realist novel, he recommended that his fellow writers “trace the most essential themes of fascism and concretize them in a protagonist, rather than photographically reproduce insignificant details of everyday reality.”¹⁰⁵ But in most of Moravia’s writings, the absence of any specific referent allowed him to argue in the postwar period that such statements were made from a position of subversion or, alternatively, were simply apolitical expressions of an aesthetic preference.¹⁰⁶ While it can never be completely excluded that writers such as Moravia and Barbaro made use of this language and these journals to convey an oppositional message, it is also clear that viewing their works within the context of the fascist literary climate highlights the complex and ambiguous nature of their relationships with the regime.¹⁰⁷

Of course, one also cannot exclude the possibility that Moravia and Barbaro were merely opportunists who wished to take advantage of the convergence between the themes of their novels and fascist ideology in order to better their standing with the regime. If that was indeed the strategy they chose, it worked very well. By the early thirties, the apathy and indifference of young intellectuals had become a worrisome problem for the fascist regime, and the novels appeared in the midst of a campaign in the press to encourage

¹⁰⁴ Alberto Moravia, “Non mangiate il pesce col coltello,” *Oggi* (July 16, 1933). Quote from Mussolini, speech of April 28, 1933, in *Opera omnia di Benito Mussolini*, ed. Edoardo Susmel and Duilio Susmel, 44 vols. (Florence, 1951–63), 35:51.

¹⁰⁵ Alberto Moravia, “La moda del collettivismo,” *Oggi* (February 1934).

¹⁰⁶ Moravia made both these claims in a 1990 interview; see Elkann (n. 55 above), pp. 19, 44.

¹⁰⁷ One can compare Moravia’s words with similar statements made by militant fascists in the same review. See Sigfrido Wolfango, “Il realismo moderno,” *Oggi* (December 31, 1933). On the shifts in legibility produced by recontextualizing “coded” or “secretive” literature, see Matei Calinescu, *Rereading* (New Haven, Conn., and London, 1993), pp. 227–72.

intellectuals to become active and participatory members of the fascist collective.¹⁰⁸ Barbaro and De Michelis participated in this campaign, urging artists and writers to abandon their “fear of contact with reality” and become, in Barbaro’s words, “men like all the others . . . who live and suffer the same as everyone else.”¹⁰⁹ These contextual elements, together with the activist message of realist novels, certainly aided critics to emphasize the activist message of realist novels and to read them as texts compatible with both the ideological and the aesthetic preferences of the fascist regime.¹¹⁰

Moravia in particular benefited both professionally and personally from the concordance of the ideology of fascism and that of his novel. The book made him a success not only within the literary community but also among the social elite of fascist Italy. As he once recalled, after the publication of the book, “I was invited to all the best salons, it was the most worldly period of my life. I spent my evenings with aristocrats, grandi borghesi, and fascist ministers.”¹¹¹ The close relationships he forged with high-ranking officials and journalists in this period served him well throughout the *ventennio*: he became a foreign correspondent for *La stampa* and *La gazetta del popolo*, and, although he was half-Jewish, he managed to be married in 1941—when fascist anti-Semitic legislation was in effect—by the Jesuit priest who had supervised the concordat between Mussolini and the Vatican.¹¹² While Moravia did not take out a party card, his postwar affirmation that in the early

¹⁰⁸ For the regime’s concern about the attitudes of young intellectuals, see the report of Carlo Scorza, the head of the Young University Fascist (GUF) organization, to Mussolini, dated July 11, 1931, in ACS, Segretario Particolare del Duce (hereafter SPD), Carteggio Riservato, f. 242/2, Riunione del Direttorio del PNF, sf. 2. For critiques of the apathy of young intellectuals, see Lombassa (n. 56 above); Romano Bilenchi, “Indifferenza dei giovani,” *Critica fascista* (August 15, 1933); and Nino Bertocchi, “Imposizione della sobrietà,” *L’orto* (April 1932). On fascist policies regarding young intellectuals, see Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce: Gli anni del consenso, 1929–36* (Turin, 1974) pp. 228–46; Tracy Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight: The Political Socialization of Youth in Fascist Italy, 1922–43* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1985), pp. 184–252; Michel Ostenc, “Les étudiants fascistes italiens des années trente,” *Le mouvement social* (July–September 1982), pp. 95–106; and Michael Ledeen, *L’internazionale fascista* (Bari, 1973), pp. 25–40.

¹⁰⁹ Barbaro, “Considerazioni sul romanzo,” and “Come si diventa scrittori” (both in n. 89 above); De Michelis, “Contributo.”

¹¹⁰ Arnaldo Bocelli, “Scrittori d’oggi,” *Nuova antologia* (December 1, 1931); Domenico Carella, “Luce fredda,” *Saggiatore* (November 1931); Corrado De Vita, “Luce fredda,” *La Tribuna* (July 1, 1931); G. B. Angioletti, “Ragguaglio delle nostre lettere,” *Giornale di politica e di letteratura* (July 1932); and Giovanni Titta Rosa, “Il romanzo,” *Corriere padano* (September 19, 1936).

¹¹¹ Elkann, p. 44.

¹¹² Moravia married the writer Elsa Morante in a Catholic ceremony performed by Father Tacchi-Venturi, who was then the priest of the Chiesa del Gesù in Rome. His father, who was Jewish, did not attend. See Elkann, p. 129.

thirties “I was poor, I was anti-fascist, people turned away when they saw me walking down the street” seems debatable. Indeed, the consensus of literary critics—including Pannunzio, who was Moravia’s closest friend in those years—was that the political referent of realism was fascism, and that the appearance of realist novels was a sign, as Pannunzio asserted, of “a precise and categorical desire of these young men to insert themselves into the political life of the Nation.”¹¹³

The positive response realist novels received from fascist officials confirmed the critical judgment of them as texts that advanced an ideological agenda compatible with that of the regime. The Italian Academy, which was founded by the regime in 1929 as a patronage institution, awarded De Michelis and other realists “encouragement” prizes to produce more work in the same vein.¹¹⁴ Bottai and Galeazzo Ciano also supported the novelists, granting them subsidies and arranging for journalistic collaborations with important publications such as *Lavoro fascista* and *Critica fascista*.¹¹⁵ Barbaro was made chief editor of *Italia letteraria* in 1935 and was selected to teach at the new government-run Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia. The novels also received official sanction in two publications that reflected the cultural preferences of the regime. In a 1936 handbook titled *Fascism and Literature* written for the National Institute of Fascist Culture, Luigi Chiarini praised the “spirituality” of realism and notes that it was the only literary movement to have “risen out of the fascist climate.”¹¹⁶ That same year, Arnaldo Bocelli authored a volume on fascism and culture designed for use in Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF) political preparation courses for youth in

¹¹³ Mario Pannunzio, “Realismo,” *Oggi* (May 28, 1933); Moravia’s quote in Elkann, p. 44.

¹¹⁴ De Michelis won L5,000 from the Italian Academy in 1931 for *Adamo* and shared the Premio Fracchia literary prize that year. See *Annuario della reale Accademia d’Italia, 1930–31* (Rome, 1931), p. 257. That same year, the academy awarded Vittorini L4,000, while Ugo Betti won L3,000 and the *Italia letteraria* prize for the best collection of stories. See *Annuario della reale Accademia d’Italia 1931–32* (Rome, 1932), pp. 338–39. In 1933, Emanuelli won L2,000 “for his narrative writings”; see *Annuario della reale Accademia d’Italia, 1932–33* (Rome, 1933), p. 336. In 1935, Carlo Bernari won L3,000 “for his work *Tre operai*”; see *Annuario della reale Accademia d’Italia, 1935–37* (Rome, 1938), pp. 550–51. All of these awards were termed “encouragement prizes” and were designed to spark more work in the same vein.

¹¹⁵ While under Ciano’s direction, the Ufficio Stampa del Capo del Governo also gave funds: Romano Bilenchi got L6,000, in PPBM, job 42, neg. 012622, NA; and Talarico got L4,500, in PPBM, job 42, neg. 012640, NA. De Michelis began to write for *Lavoro fascista* and *Critica fascista*; the novelist Enrico Emanuelli, like Moravia, began a parallel career as journalist for *La gazzetta del popolo* and *Il lavoro*; and Ciano found Bilenchi a job with the Florentine daily *La nazione*.

¹¹⁶ Luigi Chiarini, *Fascismo e letteratura* (Rome, 1936), pp. 8–11, 15–16.

which he called realism “not a tendency, but *the* tendency of today’s literature.”¹¹⁷

The canonization of realism occurred at a time when changing political circumstances brought an end to much of the revolutionary rhetoric that had underwritten the movement. The experimentalism and lively literary discussions of the early thirties all but vanished after the Ethiopian War. Censorship increased for literature and the press and was not relaxed until after the fall of fascism.¹¹⁸ Many independent journals were shut down, and intellectuals were discouraged from starting new publications.¹¹⁹ The imposition of economic autarchy coincided with attempts by officials to restrict the flow of foreign culture into Italy.¹²⁰ While realism continued to inform literary production on the peninsula, the critical tone of the early novels was increasingly replaced with a more introspective and allegorical voice, and populist stories, often set in the countryside, prevailed over narratives of urban malcontents.¹²¹ Some realist novelists, such as De Michelis, left fiction for literary criticism, while others produced reportage on military themes. Barbaro made a movie (*L’ultima nemica*; 1937) that put forth a new image of the “corporatist” intellectual who places his talents at the disposition of the fascist state. Increasingly, film became the arena for the articulation of an aesthetic of the third way that would mediate between the documentary and the lyrical. Until the end of the dictatorship, Barbaro played a central role in the development of an Italian filmic realism. At the government-run Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, where he taught film theory, his pupils included the future neorealist directors Rossellini and Giuseppe De Santis.¹²² Indeed, neorealist

¹¹⁷ Partito Nazionale Fascista, *La cultura fascista* (Rome, 1936), p. 23.

¹¹⁸ On the increase of censorship after 1935, see Philip Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso: Fascismo e mass media* (Bari, 1975), pp. 119–37; and Maurizio Cesari, *La censura nel periodo fascista* (Naples, 1978), pp. 51–78.

¹¹⁹ On the closure of so-called left-wing fascist journals such as *Cantiere*, see De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce* (n. 108 above), p. 779; and Ruggero Greco, “Largo ai giovani,” *Lo stato operaio* (October 1936). Berto Ricci, who edited the polemical youth journal *L’universale* in the early thirties, suspended the publication when he volunteered for the Ethiopian War. After he returned, he was unable to get permission to revive the review. Documentation in ACS, SPD, Carteggio Ordinario, 514829/2.

¹²⁰ On this point, Marino (n. 7 above), pp. 179–94; Carlo Bordon, *Cultura e propaganda nell’Italia fascista* (Messina, 1974), pp. 82–83. For complaints of fascist officials regarding the continued influx of translations into Italy, ACS, MCP, b. 29, f. 426, and b. 28, f. 413.

¹²¹ One may compare Elio Vittorini’s *Il garofano rosso* (Milan, 1948) with *Conversazione in Sicilia* (Milan, 1941), and Romano Bilenci’s *Vita di Pisto* (Turin, 1931) with *Il Conservatorio di Santa Teresa* (Florence, 1940).

¹²² On the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia and Barbaro’s role there, see *Vivere il cinema: I cinquant’anni del Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia* (Rome, 1986).

works such as *Roma città aperta*, which are often viewed as a stylistic rupture with the culture of fascism, may be better considered as the products of a decade of experimentation and debate over the realist aesthetic.

COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND THE REWRITING OF REALISM

There is a popular saying in Italy that reflects the manner in which many on the peninsula have chosen to remember the fascist period: “non c’ero, e se c’ero, dormivo” (I wasn’t there, and if I was, I was sleeping). Immediately after the fall of the Duce, Italian intellectuals began to view the dictatorship—and their own pasts—as a distant and unrecognizable other. Just months after the fall of the regime, the liberal philosopher Benedetto Croce noted in his diary that “almost no one speaks of Mussolini any more, not even to curse him.”¹²³ Yet Croce’s own explanation of fascism as an “intellectual and moral disease” that had infected and “intoxicated” Italians after World War I also contributed to the climate of estrangement from the recent past, as his theory posited the dictatorship as a “parenthesis” with respect to the continuum of national history and traditions.¹²⁴ The tropes employed by Italian intellectuals to express their life experiences under the regime confirm the collective need to represent fascism as a period “outside” of history and time. Moravia stated that Mussolini had frozen Italian life for twenty years under a “vacuum-packed glass bell,” while others wrote of awakening from a “limbo” or an “underwater stupor.”¹²⁵ The proliferation of images of paralysis, intoxication, and amnesia facilitated the defamiliarization of the fascist past and enabled Italians to sidestep troubling issues of accountability and responsibility for the regime.

In contrast to these representations of fascism as a period of “unreality,” the Resistance emerged in the accounts of the immediate postwar period as a “return to history.” Beyond its military contribution to the liberation of Italy, the Resistance became a signifier of morality and gained “ideal value” as a

¹²³ Benedetto Croce, entry of December 2, 1943, in *Quando l’Italia era tagliata in due: Estratto di un diario luglio 1943–giugno 1944* (Bari, 1948), p. 37.

¹²⁴ Croce first characterized fascism as a “parenthesis” just months after the fall of Mussolini in a *New York Times* article in 1943. He expanded his analysis for Italian audiences in January 1944 and again in an interview of March 1947. See his *Scritti e discorsi politici (1943–47)*, 2 vols. (Bari, 1963), 1:7–16, 56, and 2:46–50, 361–62. On Croce’s theory of fascism, see Renzo De Felice, *Le interpretazioni del fascismo* (Bari, 1983), pp. v–vi; Zunino, *Interpretazione e memoria* (n. 4 above), pp. 111–42; and David Roberts, *Benedetto Croce and the Uses of Historicism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1987).

¹²⁵ Moravia, “Ricordi di censura” (n. 66 above); Cesare Zavattini, “Diario,” *Cinema nuovo* (March 19, 1945); “Premessa,” *Mercurio* (September 1944).

redemptive force that absolved Italy from the sins of the past.¹²⁶ As one realist writer who had supported the regime to the end reflected in 1944, the experience of blood and pain allowed the soul to “free itself from all that moral laziness had made it taste in the past years. In this way wars cleanse many sins of the spirit.”¹²⁷ Certainly, repressing the memory of the regime facilitated the construction of a new national identity based on antifascism. Paradoxically, though, the impulse to draw a veil of silence over the past helped to guarantee a large degree of institutional continuity between the regime and the republic.¹²⁸ If in 1944 one Italian had noted that his contemporaries were fast succumbing to an epidemic of amnesia, by 1948 another felt it necessary to publish a short history of fascism “to remind those who have lost their memory that the events of our recent past must not be too quickly forgotten.”¹²⁹

The collective desire to forget the dictatorship shaped the representation of fascist culture in the postwar years. Particularly in the first decades after World War II, many historians and critics dismissed the concept of “fascist culture” as an oxymoron and displaced “true” Italian culture to a parallel history composed of the works of antifascists such as Ignazio Silone and Cesare Pavese.¹³⁰ When scholars did acknowledge the involvement of Italian

¹²⁶ The notion of a “unified” Resistance that emphasized the Italian struggle against the Nazi occupiers and downplayed the support for the republic of Salò has been questioned by Claudio Pavone in his book *Una guerra civile: Saggio storico sulla moralità della Resistenza* (Turin, 1991); see also Sergio Cotta, *Quale resistenza?* (Milan, 1977). During and after the Italian electoral campaign of 1994, this interpretation of the Resistance as a “civil war” was appropriated—and distorted—by the Alleanza Nazionale as part of a strategy aimed at minimizing the contribution of the Communists to the liberation and reconstruction of Italy in the period 1943–48. See Gianluca Luzi’s interview with Gianfranco Fini, head of the Alleanza Nazionale in *La repubblica* (April 12, 1994).

¹²⁷ Enrico Emanuelli, cited in Enrico Falqui, *La letteratura del ventennio nero* (Rome, 1948), p. 236.

¹²⁸ As Roy Domenico has observed in his book on sanctions against Italian fascists, “serious attempts to craft sanctions against political criminals were doomed to failure because many Italians could or would not consider fascism per se an offense” (Domenico, *Italian Fascists on Trial, 1943–48* [Chapel Hill, N.C., and London, 1991], p. 10). On the institutional continuities between the regime and the republic, see Sabino Cassese, “Le istituzioni del fascismo,” *Quaderni storici* 12 (1969): 424–37.

¹²⁹ Quotes from Giuseppe Agnello’s 1944 essay, “Amnesia,” in his *Chi farà il processo al fascismo?* (Siracusa, 1946), p. 53; and Francesco Gualdi, *Il fascismo alla tribuna del popolo* (Venice, 1948), p. 7. On collective amnesias and other reactions to ruptures in national identities, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York, 1991), pp. 187–206.

¹³⁰ For negations of the concept of fascist culture, see C. L. Ragghianti, “Il fascismo e la cultura,” in *Storia dell’antifascismo*, 2 vols. (Rome, 1964), 1:100; Norberto

intellectuals with the regime, they often made use of the Marxist trope of a passage from false consciousness to enlightenment to emplot these involvements as a “long voyage” from fascism to antifascism.¹³¹ In these accounts, antifascist culture (embodied in the literature and cinema of neorealism) is represented as a “return to the real” founded on a “reaction against rhetoric” and a desire to “go toward the concrete.”¹³² As one critic commented, neorealism answered “an impetuous and irrepressible need to reestablish contact with the reality that had eluded us for so many years.”¹³³ The boundaries of this reality were the experiences of the present, but also those of the immediate past—after September 1943. Much of neorealist cultural production studiously avoided all reference to the regime and concentrated on reconstructions of the Resistance. These connections with the Resistance imbued neorealism with an ethical significance in postwar culture, and critics accepted the texts of the movement as repositories of collective morality that, according to one, were to “redeem and reeducate the ‘bad conscience’ of history.”¹³⁴ In this way, neorealism not only determined what it was necessary to remember, such as the contributions of the Left to the liberation of Italy, but also provided a model for what would be elided from memory in the postwar period.¹³⁵

The postwar identification of an aesthetics of the concrete with antifascist ideology led to a reinterpretation of the realist movement by those writers who

Bobbio, “Se sia esistita una cultura fascista,” *Alternative* (December 1975), pp. 57–64; and G. Cotroneo, “Una cultura inesistente,” *Nord e sud* 22 (1975): 6–20. For a recent statement of this view, see Doug Thompson, *State Control in Fascist Italy* (Manchester, 1991), pp. 118–19.

¹³¹ The most famous of these histories is Ruggero Zangrandi, *Il lungo viaggio attraverso il fascismo* (Milan, 1962); but see also Franco Catalano, *La generazione degli anni '40* (Milan, 1975); Valdo Magnani and Aldo Cucchi, *Crisi di una generazione* (Florence, 1952); and Paolo Alatri, “Cultura e politica: gli studenti romani dal 1936 al 1943,” *Incontri meridionali* 3–4 (March–April 1979): 7–17.

¹³² Bocelli, “Questo neorealismo” (n. 67 above); Carlo Muscetta, *Realismo e contorealismo* (Milan, 1958); Gian Carlo Ferretti, *Introduzione al neorealismo* (Rome, 1974), p. 21; Maria Corti, *Il viaggio testuale* (Turin, 1978), pp. 25–110; Carlo Salinari, *La questione del realismo* (Florence, 1960); and Domenico Cadonesi, “Senso del realismo,” *Momenti* (September–October 1953).

¹³³ Lombardi, *La narrativa italiana* (n. 54 above), p. 32.

¹³⁴ Salvatore Battaglia, “Neorealismo,” in *Dizionario critico della letteratura italiana*, 2 vols. (Turin, 1986), 2:675.

¹³⁵ On the depiction of the Resistance in neorealist narratives, see Giovanni Falaschi, *La resistenza armata nella narrativa italiana* (Turin, 1976); and Re (n. 12 above). On memoirs and other “documentary” literature of those years, see also Sandro Frigeri, “Percezione della natura ed esperienza nella memorialistica partigiana,” *Studi e ricerche di storia contemporanea* (December 1987), pp. 38–56; and Giorgio Pullini, *Il romanzo italiano del dopoguerra, 1940–60* (Milan, 1961).

had been instrumental in its development in the thirties. Most authors did not find it convenient to talk about their literary activities under the regime, and this reinterpretation took the form of a collective amnesia surrounding the fiction and nonfiction narratives of the realist movement. Romano Bilenchi expressed the feelings of many realist novelists when he wrote in November 1945 that “the war has recently ended, and at times none of us can remember what his life was like before. None of us recognizes his own past.” Bilenchi formalized this estrangement by repudiating early works such as *Vita di Pisto* that were unmistakably inspired by the ideology of the fascist “revolution.”¹³⁶

Other writers were careful to discuss their works without any reference to the political and ideological context that had generated them. In one postwar essay on the genesis of his novel *Adamo*, De Michelis never mentions fascism but merely gives a long list of literary influences on the book (which included the Bible, Leopardi, and Tolstoy) and frames it as a Christian and existentialist text, while in a discussion of 1962 he positioned *Adamo*, along with other realist novels, as a work written against the regime.¹³⁷ Still other authors, such as Vittorini, brought out new editions of their writings that utilized paratextual commentaries (notes, prefaces, afterwords) to direct the reading of their works away from what one critic termed “dangerous misunderstandings.”¹³⁸ Moravia chose a more aggressive approach. In 1946, he authored an article in order to “state clearly” what his relationship had been to fascism. Not only had he been an antifascist, he asserted, but so had “almost all” of his literary peers. Indeed, he continued, because the regime had no ideology and no culture, “even if they would have wanted to be fascists, Italian intellectuals would have found themselves in the embarrassing position of not knowing how to do

¹³⁶ Romano Bilenchi, “Letteratura d’occasione,” *Società* (November 15, 1945). Bilenchi repudiated his squadrist narrative *Vita di Pisto* (n. 121 above) and the “documentary” novel *Cronaca dell’Italia meschina ovvero Storia dei socialisti di Colle* (Florence, 1933). See his statement in Elio Filippo Accrocca, *Ritratti su misura* (Venice, 1960), p. 80.

¹³⁷ Euralio De Michelis, “Storia di un romanzo,” in his *Novecento e dintorni* (Milan, 1976), reprinted as an appendix to the 1983 edition of *Adamo*; also his statements in his *Narratori al quadrato* (Pisa, 1962), pp. 308–23. For other purely “literary” discussions of Realist novels, see Emanuelli’s statements in Accrocca, pp. 173–74.

¹³⁸ The phrase “dangerous misunderstandings” was used by the critic Anco Marzio Mutterle in reference to postwar interpretations of Emanuelli’s realist fiction. See Mutterle, “Enrico Emanuelli,” in *Dizionario critico della letteratura italiana*, 2:28. Vittorini published an anthology of his critical writings, *Diario in pubblico* (Milan, 1957), in which he used notes to guide the reading of articles that were already edited for publication in the volume. His fascist writings in the review *Bargello* are not included. The realist writer Carlo Bernari reissued *Tre operai* (Milan, 1965) with an afterword, “Nota 1965.”

so.” Moravia also stood at the forefront of those who attempted to portray their realist texts as a subversive exception to fascist-era cultural production. In an essay written a year later, he maintained that under the dictatorship “it was impossible to write a realist novel.”¹³⁹

The rewriting of realism received support and confirmation from critics who in the early postwar years were engaged in the formation of national literary canons for the new republic. As there was little desire among intellectuals to effect a purge of their ranks, Arnaldo Bocelli and most of the other critics who had sanctioned the development of realism in the early thirties were in place after the war to reshape the collective memory of the movement. In 1936, Bocelli had praised realism as a fascist movement in the PNF textbook on the culture of the regime. Sixteen years later, he was chosen to write an article on Italian literature from 1930 to 1948 for the new postfascist appendix to the *Enciclopedia italiana*. While Bocelli mentioned the “coexistence” of realism and fascism, he maintained that “with very few exceptions . . . they were on opposite sides and spoke two completely different languages.”¹⁴⁰ Luigi Chiarini, who had managed to retain his directorship of the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia despite the central role he had played in fascist cultural life, also rewrote the genealogy of the realist movement. While in 1936 Chiarini had applauded realism as a quintessentially fascist aesthetic in his handbook *Fascism and Literature*, in 1951 he claimed that Italians were drawn to realism for the first time during World War II “out of a sincere need for truth and humanity after the sufferings of a war and a foreign occupation.”¹⁴¹ These assertions provided an interpretive paradigm for the realist aesthetic that has been utilized since World War II. In textbooks, encyclopedias, and monographs, critics have consistently tied the impulse to represent reality and the desire for “objectivity” and “authenticity” in literature during the thirties to antifascist political sentiments.¹⁴² This postwar gloss on the movement has obscured not only the multivalency of realist

¹³⁹ Moravia, “Ricordi di censura” (n. 66 above); also his essay in *Vie nuove* (November 2, 1947).

¹⁴⁰ Bocelli, “Letteratura italiana” (n. 13 above). The exceptions he referred to were works belonging to the *Strapaese* current.

¹⁴¹ Luigi Chiarini, “Discorso sul neorealismo,” *Bianco e nero* (July 1951).

¹⁴² For the separation of fascism and Italian literature, Beppe Manfredi, *Angoscia e solitudine nel romanzo italiano contemporaneo* (Fossano, 1969), pp. 29–30; G. Cavallini and L. Marguati, *La narrativa italiana contemporanea* (textbook for middle schools) (Florence, 1971), pp. 159–60; Francesco Flora, *Storia della letteratura italiana* (Milan, 1965), pp. 623–46; Amici (n. 13 above), pp. 93–150. For realism as antifascist, see Vitzizzai, ed. (n. 13 above), pp. 91–123; Giuliano Manacorda, *Storia della letteratura italiana tra le due guerre* (Rome, 1980), p. 235; Olga Lombardi, *Narratori neorealisti* (Pisa, 1957), p. 15; and Farinelli (n. 13 above), pp. 219–39. Such was the strength of this paradigm that the first works to appear that openly discussed the influence of fascist ideology on Italian writers quickly became objects of political

discourse—its use by the Right as well as the Left—but also the many and nuanced positions Italian intellectuals could assume within the fascist cultural field.¹⁴³

In this article, I have presented a different reading of the realist aesthetic. Italian realism, I have argued, developed in the early thirties in the context of a more generalized trend among European intellectuals in the interwar years toward the development of aesthetics of the “concrete.” At the same time, realism represents an example of how the fascist beliefs of Italian intellectuals mediated their reception and practice of modernist literary techniques. The fascist claim to do away with ideology and rhetoric in the name of transparency—captured in Mussolini’s characterization of fascism as a “glass house” into which all could look—inspired Italian writers to interpret realism as the expression in literature of the pragmatic and linear political style of the regime. The need to maintain this fiction of transparency and liberty, and the concern to develop an Italian aesthetic distinct from contemporary “propagandistic” left-wing realist movements, led to the incorporation of allusive and ambiguous language in fascist writing practices. After the fall of the regime, the existence of a corpus of texts whose antibourgeois rhetoric was unattached to a specific political referent facilitated both the repression of realism and its reinterpretation as an antifascist aesthetic. As Bertolt Brecht once commented, realism is a concept that “must be cleansed before use, for it is an old concept, much used by many people and for many ends.”¹⁴⁴ If the writing of Italian realism in the early thirties testifies to the appeal fascism held for intellectuals on the peninsula, its rewriting in the postwar years sheds light on the strategies utilized by these same intellectuals to reshape the collective memory of the relationship between culture and power under the dictatorship.

debate themselves. This was the case with Giorgio Luti’s *La letteratura nel ventennio fascista* (Florence, 1969). In the preface to the 2d ed. (1972) of his book, Luti complained about those critics “who wanted to see in every page the accusation or defense of the Italian letterato in the dark years of the Fascist *ventennio*” (p. ix). For a critical look at the historiography of Italian literature, see Robert Dombroski, *L’esistenza ubbidiente: Letterati italiani sotto il fascismo* (Naples, 1984), pp. 7–27.

¹⁴³ One example concerns the writer Vittorini. It is widely known that Vittorini’s introduction to an anthology of American writers (*Americana*) was censored in 1942. This action by the fascist government is often given as proof of Vittorini’s poor standing with the regime. Yet it has not been remembered that just a few months after this incident, he, along with the critic Giame Pintor, received Mussolini’s personal approval to attend a conference of European writers in Nazi Germany. Host of the conference was Joseph Goebbels. See ACS, MCP, b. 19, f. 269 for Mussolini’s telegram and Vittorini’s letter of acceptance. In the postwar purge trials of intellectuals in France, attendance at this conference was often used as evidence of collaborationist sentiments.

¹⁴⁴ Bertolt Brecht, “Against Georg Lukács,” in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. R. Taylor (New York, 1977), pp. 79–85.