

ACTION OR CONTEMPLATION? THE POLITICS OF ART IN FIN DE SIECLE

ITALY

by

ELENA BORELLI

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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By ELENA BORELLI

Dissertation Director:
Professor Paola Gambarota

My dissertation narrates how artists and writers in *fin de siècle* Italy restaged the dilemma of action and contemplation in order to understand the nature and function of humanistic knowledge and the role of the man of letters in the increasingly modern society of the newly unified Italian nation. In Italy, at the turn of the twentieth century, two models prevailed, that of the aesthete, devoted to the cult of Beauty, and that of the engaged intellectual, who supported the revival of nationalism. I argue that the problem of the intellectual's role in society had not only a political dimension, but also an ethical and an aesthetic one, inasmuch as it involved a reflection on the moral utility of art and literature and on the process behind artistic creation. In addition, I show that the two models of conduct, action and contemplation, are not radically opposed, but rather inextricably entwined, as they both represent attempts to negotiate a function for the man of letters in modernity. Thus, my dissertation sheds light on the relationship between late nineteenth century Aestheticism and modern nationalism. The dilemma discussed in this thesis provides insight into similar issues of the present day as we continue to debate the utility of humanistic knowledge in our post-modern society.

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Action or Contemplation? The Politics of Art in Fin de Siècle Italy

Introduction

The role of intellectuals in politics has been the subject of a century-long debate, which spans from the Antiquity to the present day. At the core of this debate lies the question of whether those who possess theoretical knowledge should use it for the benefit of society. It was Plato who first envisioned a community ruled by philosophers, as they possess clarity of vision and their judgment is not corrupted by greed and subjective opinion (Plato VII, c, II, 39). On the other hand, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle establishes the difference between a life devoted to public affairs and one spent in the contemplation of eternal objects and in speculative thinking (Huber 23). In distinguishing practical wisdom, *arete*, and theoretical knowledge, *theoria*, Aristotle laid the foundation for the dichotomy between the life of action, (or *bios praktikos*, translated into Latin as *vita activa*) and the life of contemplation (*bios theoretikos*, or *vita contemplativa*).

The debate over which life best suits the intellectual, one at the service of the community or one spent in the pursuit of knowledge, continued uninterrupted in the Western world through the Middle Ages and well into the twentieth century. For instance, the distinction between *intellettuale tradizionale* and *intellettuale organico* is central in Antonio Gramsci's reflection on the function of the intellectual in society. Here the first represents the man of letters, devoted to philosophy and literature, and the second is an intellectual who is deeply involved in the public sphere and whose knowledge is rooted in science, technology, and economics (Gramsci III,12, 1513-14). Gramsci's distinction recapitulates the opposition between action and contemplation by drawing the line between the intellectuals 'who understand the rules of the game' and those who actually play it (Garin 117).

The question of the intellectual's function and the role of humanistic knowledge in society are highly relevant in our post-modern world. As Joseph Francese observes, globalization homogenizes our fragmented selves into consumer identities—synthetic models produced by the industries of culture (Francese 296). Within this context the intellectual, in particular the scholar of literature and culture, should rethink himself or herself as a voice resisting the dominance of the media and 'their tendency to shape the popular *forma mentis* in a consumerist direction' (*ibidem* 305).

The advent of modernity¹ had a significant impact upon the role and function of the intellectual in society, making the dilemma between engagement and disengagement particularly relevant. Modernity coincided with the victory of technical and scientific culture over purely speculative thinking, philosophy, and the humanities, a phenomenon Hannah Arendt called 'the reversal of the hierarchy between contemplation and action' (Arendt 289). In a world dominated by empirical truth and by the scientific paradigm of falsifiability, the traditional intellectual, that is, the philosopher and the man of letters lost importance in favor of the scientist and the engineer. Furthermore, with the increasing specialization of modern bureaucracies, classical intellectuals were forced into narrow fields of study, relegated to academia and denied participation in the sphere of politics. In addition, modernity required the submission of intellectuals to the laws of the market and equated their work to that of other laborers. For instance, the creation of the 'mystique of art for art's sake' on the part of nineteenth century French artists can be interpreted as an attempt to excuse intellectual activity from the logic of capitalism (Berman 119). As a result of these changes, modern

¹ I take modernity and modernism in the sense suggested by Marshall Berman in his *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (1982), in which the former is the 'maelstrom' of changes brought about by scientific discoveries and by rapid industrialization (Berman 16) and the latter is the 'attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it' (*ibidem* 5).

European intellectuals tried to carve out a role for themselves by either engaging with the new scientific culture and supporting political movements in an attempt to have their voice heard, or by withdrawing into the world of art, literature and pure research.

This dissertation narrates how writers and artists in *fin de siècle* Italy restaged the ancient dilemma of *the vita activa* and *contemplativa* in order to understand the nature and function of humanistic knowledge and the role of the man of letters in the increasingly technological and bureaucratic society of the newly unified Italian nation. I show that within this context intellectuals chose to employ the categories of action and contemplation because these concepts have a political and ethical dimension as well as an aesthetic one. In other words, discussing the issue of the intellectual's engagement in society through the framework of the dichotomy of action and contemplation allowed *fin de siècle* writers to view this problem not only as a political one, but also as a reflection upon the moral utility of the humanities and ultimately on the process behind the creation and fruition of art and literature. Furthermore, in *fin de siècle* Italy, the discussion on the role of the intellectual was triggered by the appearance of the masses on the political stage, due to the advent of parliamentary democracy. Intellectuals were faced with the challenge of either taking an active role in educating the masses, or else refusing to engage with the public by withdrawing into the ivory tower of literature. I argue that in the context of post-unification Italy, the intellectuals' stance on the problem of their function in society does not sustain a clear-cut opposition between action and contemplation, but that these two choices are predicated on the same premises, as both are attempts to negotiate a role for humanistic knowledge in the modern

world, and to establish such knowledge as a source of morality and spiritual fulfillment to counter the 'disenchantment'² which characterizes modernity.

In her book *The Human Condition* (1958), Hannah Arendt defines the *vita activa* as the fundamental state of our existence, inasmuch as it involves not only our physical survival on earth, but also our interaction with one another as members of political communities. This German-Jewish philosopher sees 'action', which she explains as the activity of debating and engaging in discussion in order to establish rules and norms for society, as the most prominent dimension of the *vita activa* (Arendt 8-9). In doing so, she revives the classical meaning of the *vita activa*, political engagement, which in ancient Rome was also named *negotia*, that is, the time devoted to public affairs. Conversely, the antonym of *negotia*, *otia*, refers to a quintessentially unpolitical time devoted to literature and introspection, that is, the sphere of individuality. For modern intellectuals this distinction translated into the difference between a type of art and literature that is used as a means of political propaganda and one that possesses inherent value as an exploration of the human self³. The former was often accused of not possessing artistic quality, as is the case in the Italian aesthetes' criticism of Risorgimental literature (for instance, Angiolo Orvieto's and Diego Garoglio's critiques of engaged poetry in *Il Marzocco*). On the contrary, the latter bore the stigma of *oisiveté*⁴,

² I use the term 'disenchantment' in the context of Max Weber's description of the modern world as being dominated by scientific and philosophical empiricism, rationalism and technical development and by the disappearance of the 'magical worldview' that characterized pre-modern times (Weber *The Protestant Ethic* 120). Indeed, in his *Science as Vocation*, Weber declares: 'The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the disenchantment of the world' (Weber *Essays in Sociology* 155).

³ It is clear that the opposition between 'active' and 'contemplative' literature is no longer sustainable, and appears to be an oversimplification. Literature, like any other artistic expression, offers an insight into the human self as well as providing situations and characters, with which the reader can identify, gain an awareness of his or her condition, be it personal or social, and possibly change it.

⁴ As Fritz Schalk has shown, in the dictionaries of the 17th and 18th centuries the adjective *oisif* and *oiseux* share the ambiguous meaning of 'lazy' and 'devoted to *loisir*, the time devoted to scholarly pursuits' (Schalk 236-37).

laziness, and sterility. These traits characterized the late nineteenth century critical discourse on decadence, which portrayed the literary production of that time as morbid, excessively introspective, and lacking positive values (Moroni 69-72).

In ancient Rome the dichotomy between *vita activa* and *contemplativa* was reflected in the spatial difference between the city, as the place for business and politics and the countryside, the preferred locus for literature and the philosophical *otium*. Introspection, study and contemplation often took place in a garden (Vickers 8). Interestingly, the same distinction continued in modernity, where it overlapped with the reflection on the rapid urbanization occurring in Europe and the consequent romanticization of nature. Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire* (1778) epitomizes the idea that contemplation and introspection occur in the proximity of nature, and that this combination leads to contentment, as opposed to the frenetic life of the city, which causes nervousness and instability. Thus it is not coincidental that decadent artists such as Giovanni Pascoli and D'Annunzio conceptualized contemplative art as being in the setting of a garden. They inherited this idea from a long tradition where this image was already associated both with peace and beauty but also with isolation, inactivity and stagnancy, which constitute the negative portrayal of decadence.

According to Arendt, the dimension of the *vita activa* also encompasses the construction of artifacts and tools that are meant to enhance our existence on earth (Arendt 136). This aspect became particularly relevant in modernity, due to unprecedented technological development, which literally changed the face of the earth, and allowed man mastery over nature. Thus, in the modern era, being engaged in the life of action also meant taking part in a process of radical transformation that involved the lives of many people, and possibly included a change of subjects and topics usually celebrated in literature and poetry.

As Hannah Arendt pointed out, the life of action deals with permanent things, such as social structures and technological achievements, whereas contemplation strives for the eternal, that is, what is outside space and time. In fact, at the turn of the twentieth century the idea of art as a pure idea transcending the contingency of space and time constitutes the modern declension of the ancient and medieval concept of religious contemplation as a way of reaching the divine.

In the nineteenth century the ethical and political dimension of the debate of the *vita activa* or *contemplativa* intersected the aesthetic one thanks to the new significance attributed to the concept of contemplation. The convergence of the two dimensions is found in Arthur Schopenhauer's 1818 *The World as Will and Representation*. In this powerful synthesis that merges Eastern philosophies with the Platonic concept of eternal ideas, contemplation represents both the artistic gaze that is capable of capturing the universal form and one of the ways in which one can assuage the relentless drive of desire. As such, contemplation became the key concept of the philosophical trends of pessimism and spiritualism that arose in the late nineteenth century, reinforced by the crisis of the scientific credo and a resurgence of religion, as well as by the artistic and literary movements of that period. For instance, Symbolism, as Mario Moroni has explained, was fuelled by the idea that the artistic gaze could go beyond the restrictive code of social reality 'by working at the renewal of the soul and the deepening of human feelings, with the consequent expansion of the perceptive sphere' (Moroni 72). As a result, the aesthetic meaning of contemplation justified the liberation of art from any external value, such as politics, education or morality: beauty became the only goal of the artist.

The adoption of the ethics of action or contemplation on the part of the intellectual implies the adoption of a different code of values and a different way of perceiving his or her

role in society. Indeed, in the late nineteenth century, Francesco De Sanctis' distinction between *intellettuale impegnato* and *letterato*, of which Dante and Petrarca are the most emblematic examples, shows that this difference was already an important device of identification for intellectuals. However, in the context of post-unification Italy the two models coexisted and overlapped, as in the decades between 1870 and 1910 the political and social situation in Italy changed significantly, so that many of the intellectual figures of that time, influenced by ideological trends coming from abroad, switched from engagement to disengagement and vice versa.

The sociopolitical climate of the newly unified Italy represented fertile ground for the debate of action and contemplation. During the Risorgimento artists and writers had actively participated in the movements that led to the unification of the country. As a consequence, intellectuals perceived themselves as the spiritual guides of the nation and 'seemed to retain a guiding function that prevented their assimilation into the ranks of salaried workers' (Somigli 912). Figures like Giuseppe Verdi, Giuseppe Mazzini or Giosue Carducci combined art with an intense political passion, thus embodying the model of the engaged intellectual. However, during the first decades of unification intellectuals lost their importance, as the country was ruled by bureaucrats and was more in need of professional politicians than poets. Their frustration at their perceived loss of importance was especially acute given the role they had played during the Risorgimento (Somigli 913). As a consequence, the younger generation of intellectuals turned to foreign movements such as French Symbolism, whose mission was summarized by the motto *l'art pour l'art*. This turn can also be interpreted as an attempt to assert their primacy on the domain of art, which risked being commercialized. Nonetheless, the concept of the intellectual as a voice of wisdom was so well established in Italian culture that the idea of withdrawal into the contemplation of beauty took a specific form in Italy, that

of a new kind of morality that poets and artists taught through their works. At the same time, at the turn of the twentieth century the advent of modern nationalism was perceived by many intellectuals as a way of returning to the political scene, as this movement provided them with an opportunity for action. In other words, while French modernist artists established barrier between intellectuals and modern society, in Italy the legacy of the Risorgimento led intellectuals to try to renegotiate their relationship with their audience and to attempt to recreate a social function for themselves.

In my dissertation I focus on Giovanni Pascoli and Gabriele D'Annunzio, two of the major intellectual figures of *fin de siècle* Italy. They are perhaps the most relevant literary figures for our discussion because they were active in the decades at the turn of the twentieth century, and thus they witnessed the ideological turnovers and political changes that I discussed previously. More importantly, in their lives and works one can observe their interpretation of the two models, that of the contemplative artist and that of the intellectual as the spiritual guide of the nation. Ultimately, their experience illustrates the coexistence, rather than the opposition of these ideas, as both poets strive to reintegrate art and literature in modern society by evoking ideals which belong both to the life of action and to that of contemplation.

Giovanni Pascoli achieved notoriety in the eighteen-eighties, while living in the countryside with his two sisters. This time of tranquility followed his years as a student in Bologna, in which he was briefly involved with socialism and anarchism. Pascoli's works celebrate not only rural life and the joys of nature but also poetry as a value unto itself, and completely independent from any political or moral message: *'Il poeta è poeta, non oratore o predicatore, non filosofo, non storico, non maestro, non tribuno o demagogo, non uomo di stato o di corte'* (Pascoli *L'Era Nuova* 32). At the same time, in the eighteen-nineties Pascoli

began his career as university professor and was regarded in Italy as Giosue Carducci's successor and as the national poet. Indeed, during this time Pascoli's poetic production engages with current issues such as emigration, nationalism and the imperialistic expansion of Italy. In fact, a careful reading of all of Pascoli's production shows that he never ceased to believe in the function of the poet as the moral guide of the nation. As I show in my dissertation, Pascoli's disavowal of engaged literature reveals that he envisions a much greater role for the poet, as being the conscience of modern society and as the supreme teacher of morality.

Gabriele D'Annunzio began his poetic career as the Italian counterpart of the French decadent artists. His early works are inspired by French and English Aestheticism, and he was close to Angelo Conti, who introduced him to Schopenhauer's philosophy and to the concept of artistic contemplation. However, as Jared Becker has shown in his book *Nationalism and Culture: Gabriele d'Annunzio and Italy after the Risorgimento*, in the eighteen-nineties D'Annunzio changed his attitude towards political engagement and set out to refashion himself as a politician, a soldier and Italy's *poeta vate*, a change that is reflected in his lyrical and prose production. However, D'Annunzio's choice of the *vita activa* is rooted in the aristocratic ideal of Beauty and in the Schopenhauerian idea of the suppression of desire.

My account of the dilemma of action and contemplation in *fin de siècle* Italy is based on narrative analysis of the literary and historical sources of that period, namely the works of Pascoli and D'Annunzio, that is their poetry, novels and journalistic prose, and the most important cultural journals of the time such as *Il Marzocco* and *Il Convito*.

My interpretation of the significance of the *vita activa* in modernity is informed by Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*. In particular, her phenomenological analysis of the

idea of the *vita activa* as encompassing 'labor', 'work' and 'action'⁵ is the theoretical basis for my inclusion of technological modernization into the concept of the active life. Furthermore, her idea of the reversal of action and contemplation functions as a lens for understanding the crisis of humanistic knowledge in the modern world.

The issue of the intellectuals' involvement in politics and the connection between the various cultural movements of *fin de siècle* Italy is based upon Emilio Gentile's notion of Italy as a laboratory of political modernism. While Gentile has illustrated the connection between modern nationalism and the Avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century, in my dissertation I show that the roots of nationalism are to be found in the late nineteenth century's Aestheticism and its cult of Beauty, its disdain for the masses, and its critique of parliamentary democracy.

The relationship between Italian intellectuals and the phenomenon of modernization is inspired by Marshall Berman's seminal work on modernity: *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (1982). In particular, Berman's reflection on French artists' proclamation of the autonomy of art as a reaction to the threat of the capitalistic and bourgeois mentality is the starting point for my analysis of the situation of Italian intellectuals in *fin de siècle* Italy. A brief outline of the relationship between Italian artists and the society of post-unification Italy, in particular with regards to the discourse of decadence, appears in Luca Somigli and Mario Moroni's *Italian Modernism. Italian Culture between Decadentism and Avant-Garde*, which I develop further in this thesis.

My dissertation is divided into four chapters. The first one reconstructs the debate of action and contemplation, as it appeared in the pages of *Il Marzocco*. This journal represents

⁵ According to Arendt the *vita activa* is comprised of three aspects, the effort to physically survive (labor), the construction of artifacts and tools which enhance our existence (work), and political interaction (action).

a testimony on the ideological currents of *fin de siècle* Italy, as it hosted intellectuals from different backgrounds over the span of twenty years. Here I show how the dichotomy of action and contemplation is used to frame the intellectuals' opposition to the establishment of a unified Italy and its cultural agenda. Furthermore, I illustrate the aesthetic and moral implications of the debate, as it was framed by the writers of *Il Marzocco*. Ultimately, the analysis also illustrates the ideological continuity between the supporters of contemplation and the new generation of engaged intellectuals from the early twentieth century.

The second chapter analyzes the choice between engagement and disengagement, as discussed by Pascoli and D'Annunzio, through their use of the figure of Dante Alighieri as a role model for the poet in society. In his exegetical work on the *Divine Comedy* Pascoli identifies with Dante and sees the journey to Heaven as a path leading the poet to abandon the active life to embrace contemplation, which involves complete detachment from worldly ambitions. On the other hand, D'Annunzio's depiction of Dante is strongly influenced by his own conviction about what the role of the modern poet should be, that is, as an inspiration for great deeds. Through D'Annunzio's use of the image of Dante I trace his evolution from decadent aesthete to political activist, thereby extending Jared Becker's and George Mosse's studies on D'Annunzio's involvement with nationalism.

In Chapter Three I focus on the image of the garden in Pascoli's and D'Annunzio's works as a metaphor for aesthetic contemplation in which the two authors display their ambivalent views about this concept. For D'Annunzio, the garden is either the locus of pleasure, beauty and the return to innocence or the visual representation of decadence and sterility, as exemplified by his use of this image in his novel *Le Vergini delle Rocce* (1896). In Pascoli's works the seemingly humble images of gardening and cultivation actually reveal the high value that he places on the contemplative attitude of poetry as a way to achieve

spiritual fulfillment. In addition, the garden is for this poet a closed space symbolizing regression to childhood, withdrawal from society, and refusal to live a full life.

The last chapter deals with the relationship between intellectuals and the phenomenon of technological modernization, which Arendt sees as the triumph of the *vita activa*. Here, the opposition between action and contemplation is employed by Pascoli and D'Annunzio to articulate the man of letters' dialectic relationship with a modern and increasingly technological society. For Pascoli, poetry shares with science the contemplative attitude of wonder when faced with the mystery of a universe divested of any transcendental religious meaning. Pascoli regards the technological achievements of mankind, the activity of the *homo faber*, as a dangerous delusion of immortality. In contrast, D'Annunzio acknowledges the capacity of technology to supplement and perfect the human body. His attempt to incorporate the reality of the technological world into his works betrays his preoccupation with the marginalization of poetry and its relegation to the past.

This dissertation stems from my interest in the philosophical and sociological dimension of Giovanni Pascoli's and Gabriele D'Annunzio's works, in particular their reflection on morality and its relationship to artistic production. The frequent occurrence of the categories of action and contemplation in their theoretical writings led me to investigate these ideas in the broader context of post-unification Italy, where they appear to work as key-concepts thanks to which writers identified themselves and viewed their role in society. Through the analysis of the debate of action and contemplation, as it was enacted by Italian intellectuals in the *fin de siècle*, I shed light on the relationship between the educated elite and the establishment and between the opposing cultural trends in which artists partook, as well as showing that the discussion on the nature and function of literature was viewed not only as a matter of aesthetics, but, more importantly, as a moral and political problem.

CHAPTER 1

ACTION OR CONTEMPLATION? THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST IN FIN DE

SIECLE ITALY

'And Jesus answered and said to her, 'Martha, Martha,
 thou art careful and troubled about many things.
 But one thing is needful; and Mary hath chosen that good part,
 which shall not be taken away from her'
 (Luke 10:38-40)

In 1897 the Florentine journal *Il Marzocco* published a poll on the issue of the intellectual's engagement in politics. The poll questioned the compatibility of art and politics and the suitability of the man of letters to the realm of public affairs. The plethora of responses that followed the poll indicate that the role of the intellectual in the society of post-unification Italy was much debated, that it had undergone significant transformations and that it was in need of redefinition. Specifically, from this poll two opposing models emerged, that of the contemplative aesthete that had prevailed during the eighteen-eighties, and the emerging figure of the engaged *intellettuale*, which dominated the cultural scene of the early twentieth century.

In the present chapter I argue that participation to public life - or the lack thereof - became a crucial device of identification for the man of letters at the turn of the twentieth century. The problem of the intellectual's engagement in politics took the form of the century-long dilemma of the *vita activa* versus the *vita contemplativa*. Such categories helped the intellectuals of the time not only to define their role with regard to the political situation of their country, but also to negotiate a role for the man of letters in the society of the newly unified kingdom of Italy.

The opposition between action and contemplation also constituted the framework within which *fin de siècle* intellectuals read the conflicting cultural trends and ideological currents of their time. Caught between the last remnants of the ideologies that had prevailed during the nineteenth century- Positivism, scientism, liberalism- and the expectation that the upcoming century would usher in a new worldview, the man of culture searched for a way to understand the philosophical and sociological changes occurring before his eyes. Within this framework, action and contemplation provided very useful interpretative keys to the cultural scene of post-unification Italy.

The reconstruction of the debate on action and contemplation sheds light not only on the opposition between these two models of conduct for the intellectual of the time, but also on the similarities between them. In fact, it is from the anti-Positivistic culture of the Italian *fin de siècle* that the wave of engagement that swept up intellectuals at the beginning of the twentieth century was born. Hence my analysis also illustrates the relationship between late nineteenth-century Aestheticism and modern nationalism, as the political movement that gathered many of the most prominent intellectual figures of the new century.

This chapter illustrates the debate of action and contemplation as it took place on the pages of *Il Marzocco*, as it is in this journal, more than in others, that one can trace the development of the figure of the artist and his or her role in society. In fact, *Il Marzocco* was widely read in the intellectual community, at least until 1901⁶, and accepted contributions from different backgrounds, some of which even challenged the official position of the journal on the issue of intellectuals' engagement in politics. In fact, *Il Marzocco* represents an excellent document of the debate on action and contemplation, as on its pages one can find

⁶ In 1902 Adolfo Orvieto took control of *Il Marzocco*. This new director turned the journal into a commercial enterprise, thus switching the focus from literary and cultural debates to subjects more to the taste of the general public (Oliva *I Nobili Spiriti* 141).

both supporters of the contemplative nature of artists and those intellectuals who called for the active participation of the artist in politics. Furthermore, the cultural panorama of this journal helps the reader understand the background against which the two protagonists of my dissertation, Giovanni Pascoli and Gabriele D'Annunzio, moved during their careers.

The political events of the years following the unification of Italy had strong repercussions on the relationship between intellectuals and the establishment. First, the patriotic ideals that had accompanied the birth of the nation, and which had inspired the works of poets such as Giosue Carducci, collapsed at the sight of the myriads of practical problems that the unification of the peninsula had brought about. As Luisa Mangoni observes, the Italian revolution, supported by 'an intelligent and patriotic minority' had to tackle the difficult issue of social renovation, for which literature could not provide any help (Mangoni 475). Indeed, Carducci, witnessing the end of the movements of the Risorgimento, declared that the era of his enthusiastic political engagement in the name of the ideal of the fatherland was over: *'La rivelazione di gloria che apparì alla nostra fantasia, la epopea della nostra gioventù, la visione ideale degli anni virili sono disparite e chiuse per sempre. La parte migliore del viver nostro è finita'* (Carducci Prose 926).

In this passage Carducci speaks on behalf of the many Italian intellectuals who had lived the *Risorgimento* and who had found that the new kingdom of Italy was much more in need of bureaucrats and professional politicians than it was of idealists. Secondly, the institutions of parliamentary democracy, the multiplication of political parties and the advent of socialism instigated what the intellectual elite saw as 'an irruption of masses' onto the political stage (Bagnoli 31). In the new mass society art lost its Benjaminian 'aura' (*ibidem* 32) and increasingly became a commodity, and was as such subjected to the laws of the market. The reaction of some artists and writers was to extract art from the sphere of

consumable goods by making it the domain of few select spirits. At the same time, the necessity of conquering a larger audience led to the creation of journals and periodicals targeted at the masses and to the publication of novels that would become bestsellers (34). In general, the disdain for mass society was widespread amongst intellectuals, an attitude which pushed them to retire into the ivory tower of an aristocratic idea of art.

Besides the sociopolitical transformations occurring in many European countries, the late nineteenth century in Italy was also a time of great ideological turnovers. In his essay entitled "La Cultura Italiana Tra Ottocento e Novecento", Norberto Bobbio sees an ideological rupture between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, with the former being characterized by scientism, Positivism, and the birth of socialism and the latter by Idealism and modern nationalism (Bobbio 2). More precisely, opposite cultural trends were already overlapping in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. In the pages of *Il Marzocco*, for instance, one can already observe strong opposition to the positivistic mentality being voiced by intellectuals such as Angiolo Orvieto (1869-1968), who in the early nineties was already actively engaged in subtracting art from the science-oriented mode of analysis that characterized the literary studies of the time.

The critique of Positivism was not only a cultural issue but also, and more importantly, a political one. Positivism was linked with Naturalism, the literary current that had prevailed in the eighteen-seventies, and Naturalism with socialism, inasmuch as both focused on the condition of the lower strata of the population. In fact, in those years the association between Positivism and all kinds of pacifist, humanitarian, democratic and socialist movements was commonly assumed, as if all of these theories ultimately stemmed from the Positivistic faith in human progress (Abate Storti 155-56). At the same time, the positivistic mentality was associated with the establishment, and was seen by most

intellectuals as agreeing with the attitude of the practical and, in their opinion, mediocre bourgeoisie that ruled the country⁷. Indeed, in the eyes of the new generation of intellectuals who gathered around the journals of the early twentieth century, the *Zeitgeist* of the nineteenth century was represented by the union of Positivism, Naturalism and the institutions of parliamentary democracy enforced by the bourgeoisie: *'Positivismo, erudizione, arte verista, metodo storico, materialismo, varietà borghesi e collettiviste della democrazia son cose legate non solo razionalmente, ma che si tengon tutte per mano, strette da un vincolo sentimentale'* (Giuliano il Sofista 4).

The reaction against Positivism, which reached its peak in the eighteen-nineties, was a phenomenon that took manifold forms. First, between 1880 and the beginning of the twentieth century many important scientific discoveries were made which had a deep impact in the way the general public perceived the ability of science to describe reality. The discovery of X-rays and of the theory of the ether shook the positivistic faith in common perception and data alone, as it introduced the idea that there are realities beyond the scope of our senses (Henderson 385). This fomented a new interest in occultism and reinforced the belief in the continuation of life after death in a parallel reality. Another blow to Positivism came from the so-called 'bankruptcy of science', as Ferdinand Brunetière (1849-1906) labeled the criticism that was challenging scientism on many fronts. The arguments of such criticism were that not only had science failed to provide material well-being, but also that the pursuit of scientific development threatened to destroy the ethical framework upon which European

⁷ The mentality and cultural trends that characterized the years after unification were indeed informed by the positivistic worship of 'facts' and by the faith that science could tackle and resolve societal issues. In the following passage Luigi Capuana summarizes the shift from Risorgimental ideals to the down-to-earth character of the bourgeoisie that came to constitute the ruling class of Italy: *'Molte cose dal 1830 al 1848 stimate nobili e belle, già apparivano sciocche e ridicole, perché non se ne scorgeva più l'immediata ragione: molte aspirazioni, uscite dal loro stato di nebulosa, si erano concretate in un fatto certamente assai lontano dal loro ideale, ma che valeva più di esse precisamente perché era un fatto'* (Capuana 236).

civilization rested. As a result, the last decades of the nineteenth century saw a resurgence of religion, either Christianity (mediated by the influence of the Russian authors Lev Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky) or Buddhism, which had filtered through the philosophical interpretation of Arthur Schopenhauer.

In the context of literature, the philological methodology, with its Positivistic attention to the historical context of literary works, was being fiercely attacked and accused of overlooking the only attribute that qualifies art as such: beauty. At the same time the literary currents of Naturalism and *Verismo* seemed to have exhausted their novelty. Starting on the pages of *La Vita Nuova*, a literary journal that was published in Florence from 1889 to 1890, the new generation of intellectuals questioned the predominance of the Veristic canon and manifested an interest in French Symbolism and other literary novelties coming from abroad. Furthermore, in the following years the young intellectuals of the Florentine circles attempted to establish the autonomy of literature from the engagement that had characterized *Verismo*, with its focus on the lower classes and the *questione sociale*. By claiming that the only criterion for judging artistic creations is their beauty, and not their ideological content, intellectuals detached themselves from what they saw as the culture of the establishment and the manipulation of art for propaganda purposes. Lastly, at the turn of the twentieth century, the collapse of Positivism gave way to a return to idealism as a philosophical trend. In Italy this manifested itself as a return to Georg Friedrich Hegel's philosophy, as shown in 1903 lecture *La Rinascita dell'Idealismo* by Giovanni Gentile (1875-1977), in which the author praises the Hegelian scholars Bertrando Spaventa and Donato Jaja and criticizes Positivism, materialism and Naturalism (Bobbio 5) as having already been surpassed.

The very context of the cultural conflicts and sociopolitical changes of the *fin de siècle* paved the way to the rise of modern nationalism, in which intellectuals found a new

role. This movement mixed theories of racial supremacy, ultimately derived from interpretations of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, with the mystique of the nation that originated both from the dissatisfaction with parliamentary democracy and with the cult of beauty and heroism in which men of letters felt at home. In fact, the new wave of engagement that characterized intellectuals in the first decades of the twentieth century was born precisely from the circles of the educated elite that had manifested their dissent through abstention from politics and by disengaging literature from ideology. Figures like Enrico Corradini (1865-1931) and Mario Morasso (1871-1938) contributed to *Il Marzocco* and shared many of the ideals that inspired the journal. However, they embody the passage from the *letterato* to the *intellettuale*, where the former indicates the aesthete, the pure man of letters, and the latter the philosopher-intellectual who, because of his superior knowledge of reality, is called to intervene in society. In fact, as Luisa Mangoni observes, at the beginning of the twentieth century the man of letters turns into an intellectual whose interests go beyond the sphere of literature and extend from politics to philosophy and sociology (Mangoni 498).

Having briefly outlined the political and cultural background of *fin de siècle* Italy, I will now proceed to explain how the categories of action and contemplation are evoked in order to understand the role of the intellectual in society, and to frame the conflicting ideologies of post-unification Italy. Initially, the opposition between contemplation and action expressed the contrast between the Aesthetic movement and the establishment of the kingdom of Italy, as well as the Positivistic ideology associated with it. Subsequently, the new century saw the revival of the *vita activa* amongst the younger generation of writers such as Mario Morasso, Enrico Corradini, and Gabriele D'Annunzio himself. However, as I will show, the supporters of action and contemplation shared similar views, as the new nationalistic ideal was steeped in the concept of Beauty. Indeed, the ideological confluence

between *fin de siècle* Aestheticism and nationalism can be found in the pages of *Il Marzocco*, specifically in the poll on intellectuals' engagement published in the last few years of the nineteenth century.

The word 'contemplation' recurs very often in the pages of *Il Marzocco*. In fact, it is contemplation that enters the cultural discourse of the time and it is used as a definition for both the attitude of the artist in society and the key to the creative process culminating in the work of art. Contemplation is a word loaded with a plurisecular tradition going back to Greek Antiquity and passing through Christian mysticism. However, in the nineteenth century this concept received a new meaning from the diffusion of Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy, specifically from his reflection on *Kontemplation*, as contained in *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*⁸ (1818). Schopenhauer's observations on the contemplation of beauty, as found in art and in the enjoyment of nature, became the quintessential definition for the artistic gaze, both of the artist and of the spectator. At the same time, the idea of contemplation maintained its connotation of 'speculation', meditation and even 'idleness', which stems from the Christian tradition of the *vita contemplativa*, or a life of study and prayer completely away from the troubles of everyday life and from engagement in the 'things of this world. It is within this context -though deprived of the religious sense- that the intellectuals of the late nineteenth century assumed contemplation as a counter-ideal to what they saw as the mainstream mentality of Italian society.

As a matter of fact, the concept of action does not appear to be as explicitly defined as is contemplation in the cultural discourse of the nineteenth century. However, this concept is clearly recognizable in the criticism that Italian intellectuals expressed of the *Zeitgeist* of

⁸ Schopenhauer devotes the third chapter of the first volume of this book to the idea of the 'genius' as the individual who is capable of portraying the pure platonic idea of an object, thus bypassing the distorting lens of greed and desire (Schopenhauer 265).

post-unification Italy. Indeed, the aspects of it that were under attack fall precisely into the category of action, in the exact sense that the tradition of this concept has given us. In fact, the concept of the *vita activa* refers to a life devoted to earthly matters, that is, political engagement, a practical attitude, and a commitment to progress and welfare during our existence on earth (Arendt 12). The Italian aesthetes criticized the submission of art to education, the exaltation of material progress and the attention to social issues, all of which were features of the Positivistic culture of the new Italian ruling class.

The dichotomy of action and contemplation can be mostly found in the debate concerning the function and purpose of art and literature on the pages of *Il Marzocco*. Contemplation represents the attitude of the artist, who should only be concerned with the vision of beauty, or, in other words, the revelation that assigns artistic quality to his or her work. Indeed, the writers of *Il Marzocco* rejected the idea that art can be an active means of political propaganda, that it receives its value from its moral content and ultimately, that the artist should be engaged in contributing to the society in which he or she lives.

The idea of the quintessentially contemplative nature of art allows the writers of *Il Marzocco* to measure the distance between themselves and both the enthusiastic supporters of literature as a *documento sociale* and the Risorgimental generation that had imbued literary works with patriotic ideals. In an article that appeared in 1896, Ugo Ojetti observes that for the development of Italian literature it is not necessary that there be a strong political or linguistic unity, or otherwise there would not have been any good books before unification. In considering the disappointment that the first twenty years of unification had caused among those who expected great things from the new country, Ojetti claims that literature is in any case above political contingencies, as it is by nature 'universal' and more concerned with the human condition in general than with national issues:

Noi artisti che dovremo fare? Noi siamo convinti che il vero, per divenire arte, non deve subordinarsi a nessuna idea e nessun fine, per quanto grande e nobile, collocato fuori di sé; ma in sé stesso, appunto perché universale può e deve trovare la sua applicazione ad ogni idea ad ogni fine della vita. Quindi senza perder la virilità nostra in cerca di un inesistente pubblico italiano noi dovremo tendere più ad una letteratura nostra o anche ad una letteratura latina, o a una letteratura universale a cui le varie razze non portino che diversità puramente formali. (Ogetti 2)

In "L'Anima Italiana del Cinquecento", also published in *Il Marzocco* in 1896, G.A. Fabris adds that what is really missing in the present time is not the national spirit, *l'anima italiana* in a political sense, but rather the aesthetic vision that constitutes the very soul of the Italian people. In fact, he gives the example of the Italian Renaissance, a historical time troubled by violence and political instability, but which produced great works of art because the love of beauty was alive and well:

Pareva anzi che allora si facesse reale il sogno bello della vita che consiste tutto nel puro godimento estetico (...) Che cosa importa se nel Cinquecento le sale dei palazzi erano bagnate del sangue dei trucidati; se il Valentino propinava nelle tazze i veleni ai gentiluomini alle donne bellissime; se il vento del tradimento spirava ovunque; se dinnanzi ai barbari e ai signori nostrani l'Italia non seppe unirsi e difendersi? Era un popolo di esteti, quello, e come tale morì. (Fabris 3)

The intellectuals' turn 'inward' in the decades after unification may well be read as compensation for the collapse of the Risorgimental dream. Men like Francesco De Sanctis had in Dante celebrated the unity of the man of letters and the citizen, and the fruitful marriage between political passion and the literary career. Specifically, De Sanctis had seen Dante as a champion of the *vita activa*, as opposed to the more contemplative Petrarch (De Sanctis 152). At the turn of the nineteenth century intellectuals attempted to reestablish the primacy of contemplation, as a way of overcoming the impasse of the *vita activa* in the context of post-unification Italy. In a modern refashioning of the evangelical dispute between Lazarus' sisters, in which Mary has the last word (Luke 10, 38-40), contemplation is said to

be superior to action, as it is more universal and, more importantly, not subjected to the ups and downs of history. In shaping the defense of *l'art pour l'art* the Italian intellectuals more or less explicitly reenacted the medieval debate of the *vita activa* and *contemplativa*. Intriguingly, they stated the superiority of the purely aesthetic view of art by using the same arguments that the medieval theologians employed to assert the primacy of the *vita contemplativa*, that is, intangibility and freedom from external conditions (Haas 111 and Kuntz 77). In fact, Angiolo Orvieto goes as far as to affirm that the artist must not meddle with politics, lest the quality of his work be affected:

...Occorrono dei grandi scrittori, i quali abbiano la virtù quasi divina di penetrare con intuizione geniale il grande mistero della vita e luminosamente rivelarlo agli uomini sotto specie di pura bellezza. L'idea politica e sociale, anzi, piuttosto che dare all'artista ispirazioni profonde lo turba e lo travia, distogliendolo da quella contemplazione interiore della essenza intima della vita e dalla cosa che sola può nutrirne la mente creatrice. Il poeta (scrive lo Schopenhauer) contempla l'idea; l'essenza dell'umanità al di fuori di ogni relazione, al di fuori del tempo. "Al di fuori del tempo", si noti. Ecco perchè la preoccupazione politica o sociale, che è essenzialmente temporanea o transitoria, inceppa e offusca il processo creativo dell'ingegno. Guardatevi intorno: quale poesia bella è mai uscita dal nostro Risorgimento? (Orvieto "La Grande Speranza" 1)

As the writers of *Il Marzocco* supported the idea of *l'art pour l'art* with arguments in favor of the *vita contemplativa*, they also had to face the same accusations that were made against the latter. For instance, contemplation has always been tainted with the suspicion of idleness, as it does not lead to any concrete achievement. The idea of *otium* - time away from business and devoted to introspection and the cultivation of the self- has always been strictly associated with contemplation. Therefore, in many Romance languages this concept also bears the negative connotation of laziness, or inactivity⁹. Interestingly, in an article of *Il Marzocco* Diego Garoglio replies to the accusation of weakness and sterility, made against

⁹ In his essay "Otium in Romanischen", Fritz Schalk reminds us of the connection between this *otium* and *otiositas*, apathy and languorous inactivity (229).

the aesthetes by Luigi Torchi, a literary critic. Torchi distinguishes *arte popolare* from *arte aristocratica*, where the former has the practical goal of educating its audience, while the latter is practiced only for its own sake. According to Torchi, *'l'arte per l'arte (...) maschera spesso l'impotenza dell'artista ad agire sopra una vasta cerchia. L'arte fatta per sé, a scopo di diletto, oziando, è una forma di produzione inferiore'* (Garoglio 1). Garoglio replies to Torchi by saying that practical purposes are only accidental when it comes to art: what really distinguishes the masterpiece from minor works is the quality of the artistic vision that generates it: a vision that is obtained by contemplating the pure idea behind reality (Garoglio *ibidem*). Contemplation leads the artist to discover something new and unheard of and to transfuse this awareness in his or her work: *'Bisogna abituarsi a contemplare con tale concentrata attenzione ciò che si vuole rappresentare, che non si riesca a scoprirvi qualcosa di nuovo'* (Orvieto "L'Estetica di Leone Tolstoj" 2).

If art for art's sake cannot have any external goal, this does not by any means imply that it is useless. Through the concept of contemplation, the aesthetes of *Il Marzocco* were able to elaborate a new value for art. In fact, they were able to establish that art has a supreme moral function, even if it does not embody or support moral values. Against the supporters of an educational, morally engaged literature Salvatore Gargano affirms:

Chiedere all'arte di ritrarre la vita sociale, cioè darle uno scopo pratico, è inammissibile (...). La letteratura non deve porre a nudo le miserie sociali e denudarle nelle loro cause antiche, perché questo è l'ufficio di altre attività del pensiero umano. Certe idee possono trovare la loro manifestazione in un determinato temperamento d'artista, ma esse non avranno valore per se, se non in quanto sono diventate una manifestazione artistica. (Gargano 2)

The intellectuals of *Il Marzocco* were acquainted with Schopenhauer's philosophy. In discussing artistic contemplation they made use of Schopenhauer's idea of *Kontemplation* as a way of suspending desire and the force of the Will. In Italy the main follower of

Schopenhauer's doctrine was Angelo Conti, a close collaborator on *Il Marzocco*. Angelo Conti believed that the contemplation of beauty provided temporary oblivion from the cares of life. According to him, the function of art as an embodiment of supreme beauty was to provide consolation to the human existence. Hence, even if not strictly moral, art was to be considered of great benefit to mankind. On the same note, Angiolo Orvieto observes:

Non è dunque -io pensava- non è dunque questa la liberazione suprema? Nel puro officio di contemplare e consolare, suscitando dalla propria anima qualche scintilla di bellezza che illumini altre anime umane, non è forse un altissimo fine della vita? E non sono così ingiusti tanti ironici sorrisi che spesso io mi veggo balenare dintorno, quasi questo mio ufficio contemplativo fosse meno degno o meno utile d'altri che gli uomini esercitano sopra la terra? (Orvieto "Letterato" 2)

Art improves the human condition inasmuch as it frees people from the distorting lens of desire and greed, and allows them to return to the purity of their own selves:

Durante la contemplazione estetica noi guardiamo le cose come se non avessero più alcuna relazione con noi, come se d'improvviso questa scena esteriore del mondo non fosse più quella in cui ieri nacque e si alimentò in noi il dolore e il desiderio, come se avessimo aperto gli occhi in questo momento dinnanzi alla natura... Chi capisce la gradazione e lo scopo dell'arte non potrà più farsi ingannare né scambiare l'arte per l'industria con l'arte vera che migliora l'uomo (Conti "La Bellezza" 2)

Both texts refashion Schopenhauer's theory of art as salvation. Thus, in both texts the exaltation of the supreme value of art appears to act as a defense against the accusation of uselessness made by the bourgeois. In a world driven by utilitarian purposes and by the frenetic activity of industry and the market, art calls for a suspension and a rejuvenation of our inner selves. At the same time, art sets itself higher than any other activity, even above that art that means to support moral values and educational purposes, inasmuch as it is only beauty that carries out the mission of quenching desire and reestablishing the purity of the human soul.

One can say that for the intellectuals of *Il Marzocco* the opposition between action and contemplation expressed the dichotomy between two mentalities, or even two moral systems. On the one hand there was the activist, the bourgeois, and the scientist, who believed in the endless progress of mankind and had faith that science and technology could achieve it. On the other there was the artist, the contemplator, and the aesthete, whose contribution to the world was only apparently null, as in reality his or her task was to restore beauty as a means of consolation and salvation for mankind. This is particularly evident in the discussion that arose on the publication of Tolstoy's pamphlet *Zola, Dumas e Guy de Maupassant* (1896). Tolstoy's book is composed of three parts, each of them constituting a response to those three writers' views on art and morality. In particular, the first part is called *Le Non Agir* and is conceived as a critique to one of Emile Zola's speeches devoted to French youth. The title of this part is programmatic, inasmuch as Tolstoy criticizes Zola's call for the *vita activa* as the core of his moral discourse. The writers of *Il Marzocco* followed the debate passionately and it is clear from Orvieto's review of Tolstoy's book that he is on the side of the Russian author¹⁰. In his speech to French youth Zola had identified work as a solution to the malaise affecting the generation of the Second Empire in France, which had manifested itself in the return to mysticism and in the penchant for sterile introspection which characterized many literary works of that period. As D'Annunzio summarized in his article on *La Tribuna*: '[Zola] offre alla gioventù contemporanea un mezzo empirico di trarre la vita onestamente, quasi quietamente': that is, work. (D'Annunzio *Scritti Giornalistici* II, 221). According to the French writer, work guarantees happiness to those who engage in it

¹⁰ Orvieto does not always side with Tolstoy. In an article that appeared in the subsequent number of *Il Marzocco* Orvieto criticizes Tolstoy's assumption that art derives from a moral sense and, in agreement with the ideology of his journal, he affirms that even criminals can conceive images of pure beauty (Orvieto "L'Estetica di Leone Tolstoj" 3)

constantly, inasmuch as it provides people with a sense of achievement, contributes to the general improvement of society, and, more importantly, 'frees humans from the torment of the Infinite' (*ibidem* 222). What Zola expresses here is praise of the *vita activa* as an antidote to the anxiety of the new generation, who sought refuge from the disappointments of the historical situation in the realm of dreams and mysticism. Furthermore, Zola also played the part of a champion of Naturalism, and of the faith that science will provide the ultimate knowledge of reality: '*À mesure que la science avance, il est certain que l'idéal recule*' (224).

In his review of Tolstoy's pamphlet, Orvieto illustrates the opposition between the active and the contemplative mentality. First he introduces the distinction between *religione umana* and *religione divina*, where the former, as a metaphor for science and humanism, deals with the welfare of humans on this earth and the latter prepares us for the afterlife (Orvieto "Un Nuovo Libro di Leone Tolstoy" 1). Having established the superiority of the *religione divina* over its counterpart, Orvieto emphasizes Tolstoy's criticism to Zola's ideal of work. The Russian writer declares himself a follower of Lao-Tse when he proclaims that work is not a virtue but a burden that obfuscates and hinders man's spirituality:

Non solo il lavoro non può considerarsi come una vera virtù, ma la sua vera funzione nella società nostra così male organata è affine a quella del tabacco o dell'alcool: il lavoro serve come agente di anestesia locale, ci stordisce e nasconde a noi medesimi il disordine, le contraddizioni e il vuoto pauroso della nostra esistenza. (ibidem 2).

Zola claimed that work prevents us from falling prey to a sterile and self-scrutinizing malaise. However, in Tolstoy's argument this very aspect of work becomes a dangerous diversion from focusing on one's soul.

This discussion on the two different morals was far from being a merely philosophical matter, as it resonated with the issues that Italian society was facing in the late nineteenth

century, and which had a deep repercussion on the condition of intellectuals. The writers of *Il Marzocco* voiced their critique of Zola's ideal of 'work' and of his call for the *vita activa* supported by the authority of Tolstoy. In criticizing Zola, they also attacked what they saw as the values not only of the bourgeoisie, but also of the working class that was now making its appearance on the political stage of Italy. By stating the importance of introspection and of the spiritual dimension, intellectuals attempted to defend the only realm that art could claim as its own. Indeed, the defense of contemplation against action represents the reaction of the man of letters against the triumphant advance of mass industrial society, in which the value of labor figures prominently¹¹. To idolize work meant to sanction the values of the working class which did not share the ideals of the leading bourgeoisie or of the decaying nobility. Therefore, the intellectual elite felt the need to negotiate a space for itself, which was neither the space of political action nor of rampantly evolving technology, and certainly was not that of labor. In other words, they re-claimed contemplation, a space that encompassed both the aesthetic dimension and the spiritual one.

The opposition between action and contemplation also worked as a framework in which intellectuals inscribed their debate on the two opposite approaches to literature, namely historical criticism and so-called aesthetic criticism. Specifically, this opposition embodied the clash between the analytical, science oriented mentality of Positivistic culture and the 'synthetic' view of the supporters of the resurgent idealism. The historical methodology had dominated the Italian panorama of literary studies for the two decades following unification.

¹¹ Indeed Hannah Arendt talks about another reversal of values occurring in modernity, besides the one involving action and contemplation: the one within the *vita activa*, between work and labor (Arendt 306). In fact, in modern mass society the individual does not aspire to immortality through his or her actions but rather to the conservation and improvement of his or her life and therefore supports those movements, such like socialism, which defend the values of the *oikos* (*ibidem* 321). Labor is the value of the working class, whose immediate necessity is the preservation of their existence.

This approach mimicked the scientific method inasmuch as it was based on the assumption of a direct correlation between the historical context and the literary work and on a set of rules that allowed for the prediction of future developments in literature in agreement with social circumstances. Furthermore, the success of evolutionary theories and of the biological sciences had infiltrated the field of literary studies, and it had generated a series of studies on the artistic genius as being brought about by neurological pathologies. This approach celebrated the know-how of the *homo faber*, who can reproduce life in a laboratory (the Zolian idea of the writer as a scientist) and who, by the same token, can dissect and analyze the outcome of his experiment by reconstructing the process that led to its creation. On the other hand, the aesthetic approach was based on the idea of artistic contemplation both as a creative moment and as the fruition of the work of art. In other words, contemplation leads the artist to see the idea, or beauty, behind reality, and to condense it into his or her work. At the same time, by means of the contemplative gaze, the spectator reaches, in a purely subjective way, the concept of beauty of the work of art.

The writers of *Il Marzocco* were very critical of the historical method. They accused it of breaking the work of art into many pieces, and of studying them separately without being able to formulate a truly aesthetic evaluation and understanding of the object: '*Perché credere di poter sminuzzare tutto il lavoro di un artista e su quelle particelle esercitare quelle pazienti ricerche che vogliono assurgere nientemeno che a giudizi estetici, senza aver avuto la forza di ricomporle insieme è fare quella opera vana dei ragazzi, i quali si propongono di scoprire il meccanismo degli orologi smontandone i pezzi*' (Gargano "Certa Critica" 1). This attitude was regarded as narrow-minded, limited in scope, and ultimately quintessentially bourgeois, inasmuch as it was guaranteed to provide those who adopt it with solid work, academic positions and economic rewards:

Egli [the scholar] non aspira più alla contemplazione artistica dell'universo e alle sintesi universali, ma si accontenta di illuminare un angolo oscuro del pianetino che noi abitiamo senza accasciarsi più nel Weltschmerz -dolore mondiale- e senza preoccuparsi più delle prime origini, come la buon anima del dottor Fausto...Esperimenti di laboratorio vogliono essere, documenti d'archivio, statistiche...unica salvezza è nella rinuncia alla metafisica e all'arte in favore della scienza, dell'adorazione dell'analisi in luogo della sintesi, della ricerca di un poco di benessere materiale invece della pazza corsa dietro il Sogno inafferrabile.. (Garoglio 2)

Contemplation here stands for the synthetic view of the scholar who is able to elaborate universal theories of the world, and who believes in intuition rather than in analysis. On the contrary, the scientific and experimental mode of analysis is linked the bourgeois spirit of achievement and action, as it leads to concrete results, however small.

It is obvious that such statements do not concern only the field of literary studies, but have indeed a political significance. The demonization of the Positivistic mentality reveals the intellectual's fear of the predominance of the lower classes, able to access knowledge through an easily available, ready-to-use and reliable approach. On the other hand, contemplation seems to be accessible to those fewer, elected spirits, who are by nature predisposed to create and understand art, and whose mystery cannot be unveiled with the tools of science. Through contemplation the man of letters establishes the primacy of an intellectual aristocracy, composed of the artists themselves and of those who can deeply understand art, the aesthetic critics, or the *artifices arti additi*. The fear of the lower class is evident in this article, where Luciano Zuccoli ridicules the impact of Positivistic culture on society and openly despises the *uomo medio*:

Lasciateli andare questi scienziati! Essi hanno il loro pubblico e in breve a furia di predicare che non si può avere ingegno se non a prezzo dell'onestà e della ragione ci formeranno una generazione nuova di uomini medii severamente occupati s sviluppare quel benefico cretinismo il quale è l'indice più sicuro di un'anima gentile e di mente equilibrata. (Zuccoli 2)

This model of the *vita contemplativa*, which predominated amongst intellectuals in the last decade of the nineteenth century, went into decline at the beginning of the new century. In the years before World War I intellectuals began to take an active interest in politics and became involved with nationalism, as shown by journals such *Hermes* (1904), *Il Regno* (1903-1906) and *Il Leonardo* (1903-1907). During these years, there was a switch from the figure of the pure man of the letters to that of the well rounded *intellettuale*. Nonetheless, already in 1897, in the pages of *Il Marzocco*, one can already see a hint that things were about to change and that the period of withdrawal of intellectuals from the public sphere was about to finish.

In February 1897 *Il Marzocco* was taken over by Enrico Corradini, the future founder of *Il Regno* and probably the least 'contemplative' amongst the contributors to the Florentine journal. In this very issue Mario Morasso published an article entitled "Ai Nati Dopo il Settanta", in which he called for the participation of writers and artists in politics, specifically addressing the generation born after the unification of Italy. According to Morasso, this young generation was charged with the mission of fundamentally renewing society, in the name of a resurgent national feeling, '*il sentimento nazionale*' (Morasso *Ai Nati Dopo il Settanta* 3). Furthermore, in his article Morasso depicts the cultural turns of the late nineteenth century as opposing each other in a chain of reactions. Indeed, in his opinion the Romantic era had been followed by the concrete and objective *forma mentis* of Positivism, which, in return, had been opposed by the current revival of mysticism and spiritualism and by Decadentism (*ibidem*). Morasso foresees a 'third reaction': '*La terza reazione si incarna nelle pure fonti eterne e solenni dell'arte nazionale, nella semplicità, nell'anima e nella forza della terra natale, nella risurrezione del sentimento nazionale*' (*ibidem*). Morasso also questions the current position of the intellectual outside the public sphere and claims that the

moment has come for artists and writers to pour their energies into the task of political and social renovation:' *Finora noi procedemmo con timidi conati singolari, l'ora nostra non era giunta; adesso nella gagliarda fioritura della nostra giovinezza, immune da ogni traccia antica, dobbiamo riunirci, conoscerci, avanzare nella vita e operare a seconda di quello spirito nuovo e personale che speciali contingenze ci hanno dato'* (ibidem).

Although Morasso was not a regular contributor to *Il Marzocco*, his article provoked quite a reaction amongst the journal's readership. Initially, the editors cautiously warned the reader that the thoughts expressed by Morasso did not represent the point of view of *Il Marzocco*. The same precaution accompanied the publication of the second article by Morasso, in May 1897, entitled "La Politica dei Letterati". The reaction to this contribution was even more sensational, and it was followed by a poll in which readers were requested to express their opinion on the question whether or not the man of letters should engage in politics.

In "La Politica dei Letterati" Morasso reverses the paradigm of the superiority of contemplation over action, as established by the writers of *Il Marzocco*. He accuses intellectuals of being responsible for the lack of ideals in current politics, because of all people, it is they who should be providing such ideals. Hence their withdrawal from public life is the ultimate root of such evils (Morasso "Ancora della Politica dei Letterati" 1). At the same time he agrees that the old, Risorgimental ideals and the institutions of parliamentary democracy deserve all the ridicule they have received. In Morasso's opinion it is time for artists and writers to help create the ideals of the new century, specifically the myth of the nation. In describing the then attitude of intellectuals, Morasso caricatures the contemplative attitude, as idle, sterile and useless:

Tanto meno invochiamo l'oraziano 'procul negotiis' riferito alla politica! Perchè artisti, perchè letterati, perchè studiosi dubitiamo forse di sapere conciliare le tendenze dell'anima nostra con le necessarie qualità che occorrono nell'uomo politico? Ormai è ben lontana dal nostro modo di fare la condotta del poeta passeggiatore fra le nuvole, asceta del quinto piano, alcoolista da bettola e inetto da ogni espansione pratica di vita, sudicio nell'abbigliamento e orso nelle relazioni sociali. Tanto l'arte quanto la scienza vivono oggi con la realtà sotto la fiammeggiante e universale luce del sole e il sognatore che si chiude nella sua camera o fra cose morte è un debole, un vinto, un ignorante (ibidem).

In this passage Morasso ridicules the stereotype of the Romantic poet, that of the *Scapigliatura* and that of the Decadent aesthetes. Conversely, he celebrates the *espansione pratica* of life, and the possibility of the man of letters of making a difference in society. Morasso's article is a unique case in the panorama of *Il Marzocco*, as his positions are closer to Gabriele D'Annunzio's and to those of figures like Edoardo Scarfoglio, who were responsible for the revival of nationalism in Italy. However, Morasso's views also show some affinity to the ideology of *Il Marzocco*, as he shares with the journal the fear of the masses and the exaltation of the individual. For Morasso, the political scene of Europe, and of Italy in particular, is now dominated by the party of the masses, socialism, whose only ideology is the achievement of material welfare and the sanctification of labor. Morasso wishes that the new generation of intellectuals fight to oppose socialism in favor of the primacy of the individual (Morasso "La Politica dei Letterati II" 2).

The reaction to Morasso's article induced the editors of *Il Marzocco* to run the poll on the issue of intellectuals' engagement in politics, which asked the following questions: first, whether political engagement was suited to the man of letters; second, if it was good or bad for the country to have intellectuals amongst its politicians; and third, which aspect of political action was most indicated for them (*Inchiesta del Marzocco* 1). In the responses, one can observe the clash between the image of the 'contemplative' man of letters, which had

dominated the pages of *Il Marzocco* of the previous years, and the new perspective of the engaged intellectual that Morasso prophesies.

The responses to the poll and to Morasso's articles were numerous, and many illustrious figures, such as Antonio Fogazzaro and Giovanni Pascoli, expressed their opinion on the issue of intellectuals and politics. These contributions can be classified into two groups: those who were against the idea of the engaged intellectual, and those who attempted to reconcile this idea with that of *l'art pour l'art*. An analysis of these articles shows that the categories of action and contemplation are still at play, as they are used to configure the conflict between the opposing ways of conceiving the role of artist in society.

The most critical reaction to Morasso came from Angiolo Orvieto, one the most fervent supporters of the contemplative nature of art and of the artist. Interestingly, Orvieto completely dismisses Morasso's article by pointing out that his observations are not in conflict with the views on art expressed by *Il Marzocco* because the latter deals only with the pure man of letters or the artist, whereas the young author '*non è puro letterato: è cultore delle scienze giuridiche, è anche se non erro giornalista politico, sembra dotato di quella piena coscienza del proprio valore che rappresenta l'ubi consistam dell'uomo d'azione e da questo complesso di circostanze e in specie della versatilità dell'intelligenza appare chiamato all'arringo politico*' (Orvieto "Ancora della Politica dei Letterati" 1). Pure 'men of letters' are not called to participate to the public sphere, and Morasso's call concerns those who, like him, are 'men of action', *polytropoi*, intellectuals in a much broader sense. Orvieto's response is worth mentioning for two reasons. First of all, his distinction between the man of letters and the journalist marks the difference between his generation, which expressed its critique of the establishment by separating art from society and the youth of the early twentieth century. For the latter, the distinction between the *letterato puro* and the man of action will

blur, and the intellectual will be not only a poet and a writer, but also a social scientist, a political scientist, and as such capable of influencing the course of history. Secondly, Orvieto describes Morasso as a 'man of action', thereby explicitly reenacting the dichotomy of action and contemplation as a way of understanding the generational difference between himself and 'those born after the eighteen-seventies'.

Even more remarkable is the article "Ancora della Politica dei Letterati" which the editorial board of *Il Marzocco* published in 1897 to re-establish the position of the journal on the issue of literature and politics. First, the author proceeds to clearly define *letterato* as the scholar of letters and the lover of Beauty, in line with the ideology of *Il Marzocco*: '*Poiché se noi intendiamo che il letterato non debba essere estraneo ad alcuna di quelle idee che derivano da una coltura larga e forte, crediamo pure che egli debba badare più al valore estetico che esse hanno nella vita, alla loro manifestazione artistica*' ("Ancora Sulla Politica dei Letterati" 2). The editors of *Il Marzocco* purposefully rejected the idea that a *letterato* could also be an *intellettuale*, and reaffirmed their dedication to *l'art pour l'art*. The problem arose when they had to comment on D'Annunzio's *Discorso agli Elettori d'Ortona* (1897), in which the poet expressed his newfound philosophy of action. As in other occasions when dealing with D'Annunzio's engaged works, the writers of *Il Marzocco* preferred to continue focusing on the aesthetic aspect of this poet's production, and ignore their actual political significance. In this case, the editors interpreted D'Annunzio's speech as if the 'action' discussed there was to be intended only in a metaphorical sense, as being the duty of the man of letters to remind everybody of Beauty (*ibidem*). As a celebrator and creator of ideals, the poet and the writer can indeed benefit their country. Once again, it is the cult of the nation in which the contemplation of beauty intertwines with political action: '*Come se l'ideale di una nazione prospera, forte e gloriosa non fosse una concezione altissima di Bellezza!*' (*ibidem*).

When it comes to discussing the practical engagement of the *letterati* in politics, *Il Marzocco* remains skeptical:

Noi non sappiamo quale azione egli potrà esercitare sugli ingegni mediocri che ordinariamente reggono le sorti del nostro paese, né se avverrà mai che le sue aspirazioni possano essere costrette nella dura e serrata forma di una legge imperativa. Forse egli stesso non saprebbe ancora indicare quali sono tutti i mezzi pratici che possono condurre a quella meta ch'egli vagheggia, nè, se li sappia, ricorrere a quei piccoli maneggi che sono così necessari (come del resto furono sempre) per ottenere certe vittorie. (ibidem)

In this passage the editors of *Il Marzocco* express their disdain for the man of action, who must delve into the trivial practicality of everyday administration. On the contrary, for the man of letters the contemplation of beauty becomes the supreme form of political action, as the former is the inspiration of all great deeds.

In spite of the negative reaction of the editors of *Il Marzocco*, many of the responses to the poll indicate that the idea of the man of letters in politics was not so inconceivable. Even amongst the contributors of *Il Marzocco* there were some who attempted to integrate political engagement and literary vocation. Interestingly, the point of convergence of action and contemplation lay in the new wave of nationalism. Indeed, in Italy the rise of nationalism was accompanied by the growth of the secular religion of the nation (Mosse 88), which thrived thanks to myths and symbols and to the creation of its own liturgy. Thus, it was here that the poet, the writer and the man of letters could find a meaningful place. For instance, the response to the poll of Giovanni Borelli states: '*Portate la parola eletta al fuoco di quelle cose che rappresentano la continuità stessa dell'anima del paese e della razza e vedrete scaturirne presto o poi le vaticinate forme rinnovatrici della vita nazionale*' ('L'Inchiesta del Marzocco' 1).

The start of the twentieth century inaugurated a more 'engaged' attitude, even for *Il Marzocco*. The debate on the issue of intellectuals and politics had continued throughout the last months of 1899. Furthermore, in 1900 Enrico Corradini left the directorship of *Il Marzocco*, which was taken up by Adolfo Orvieto. The new director changed the target of the journal, so that it became accessible to a larger audience; he made it a more marketable product. *Il Marzocco* thus lost part of its elitist quality. Moreover, the new position of Corradini as an outsider allowed him to intervene in *Il Marzocco* with articles that revealed his true opinions on the matter of the engagement of intellectuals, as he was no longer required to conform to the official position of the journal. His interventions allow one to appreciate the changes that occurred in the way the role of the intellectuals was conceived at the *fin de siècle*. While the representatives of the older generation, such as Angelo Conti, continued publishing articles on the cult of beauty and on the spiritual benefits of contemplation, the ideal of the *vita activa* became a new flag of intellectuals.

The preface to the first issue of *Il Marzocco* in the new century is emblematic of the journal's shift towards the *vita activa*. It introduces a new concept, 'life', to be paired up with art in forming the new motto of *Il Marzocco*: *'L'artista non si deve chiudere in una torre d'avorio, né deve -come un fachiro indiano- guardarsi la punta del naso, ma sentendosi uomo tra gli uomini deve partecipare alla loro vita e rappresentarla nelle sue opere. Per questo noi del Marzocco siamo tutti concordi e concordi scriviamo la sacra parola di Vita vicino a quella di Arte'* ("Ai Lettori" 1). This passage is very interesting for our analysis, as it portrays the reversal of action and contemplation as ideals for the intellectual. First, contemplation is here represented metaphorically by two images, the ivory tower and the fakir. The former is a commonplace for the aristocratic isolation of the artist and is typical of the Decadent canon. The latter specifically refers to the late nineteenth century interest in

Eastern philosophies, obviously mediated through Schopenhauer, and on the doctrines of meditation and suspension of desire so popular amongst the aesthetes à la Angelo Conti. Both figures are caricatures of the contemplator, who is portrayed as being abstract, solipsistic and idle. On the contrary, the features of the *vita activa* are now exalted: inter-action and worldliness become the new characteristics of the twentieth century intellectual.

The following year Salvatore Gargano reviewed D'Annunzio's '*La Canzone di Garibaldi*', a long poem celebrating the life of the Risorgimento hero. Previous works of D'Annunzio had been praised by *Il Marzocco* only for their formal aspect and only from an aesthetic point of view. Yet now, for the first time Gargano welcomes D'Annunzio's new engaged voice: '*Il poeta a cui si faceva ora colpa e ora merito di esprimere sottili complicazioni di un'anima che vibra ad ogni lievissimo soffio del sentimento,... si è tolto dalla sua solitudine per comunicare direttamente con l'anima della moltitudine*' (Gargano "La Canzone di Garibaldi"). Gargano celebrates the end of the poet's isolation in the ivory tower of literature and his dedication to speak to the masses.

The new wave of engagement characterizing the first decade of the twentieth century was radically different from the one that had pushed the Risorgimental generation to support the dream of Italian unity. If one looks at it from the perspective of our debate, it is possible to see that the new philosophy of action has its roots in the reflection on beauty that characterized the idea of contemplation. In fact, many of the intellectuals who embraced nationalism did so in the name of the same ideals which had inspired the pure aesthetes of *Il Marzocco*: the safeguarding of beauty and of aristocratic values, as opposed to the squalor of Italy's present; the superiority of the man of letters who is able to contemplate pure ideas and who is therefore capable of clear vision and deep insight into reality. In fact, as Mosse has shown, modern nationalism was imbued with a quintessentially poetic ideal, that of

regeneration and of the new man who will come and dissolve the present, corrupt reality (Mosse 87). Joining this ideal to the theme of purification through the experience of artistic beauty was indeed an easy task.

The connection between aestheticism and activism at the end of the nineteenth century is particularly evident in the experience of *Il Convito*. However, in *Il Marzocco* this association is even more evident precisely as the journal's ideology had always been that of pure aestheticism. A few passages from *Il Marzocco* illustrate the transformation of the ideal of beauty into a political theme. In 1897 Giovanni Borelli had responded to the poll of the intellectuals' engagement in the following terms:

La politica è la lotta per l'accordo e l'equilibrio delle cose: la letteratura, ormai quasi dovunque, vuol essere soltanto l'esercizio mirabile della parola. Portate la parola eletta al fuoco di quelle cose le quali rappresentano la continuità stessa dell'anima del paese e della razza e vedrete scaturirne presto o poi le vaticinate forme rinnovatrici della vita nazionale! (Borelli 1)

In November of the same year Luigi Pompejano affirmed: *'Ma dove più altro credo debbasi perseverare è nella partecipazione -in giusta misura- dei letterati e degli artisti alla vita politica del nostro paese: partecipazione che deve significare difesa del bello, non soltanto nell'arte ma nella vita tutta'* (Pompejano 2). Both passages show that the theme of beauty turns to the idea of regeneration, which, at the same time, inspired the resurgent nationalism. The ethic and aesthetic aspects of artistic contemplation, ultimately derived from Schopenhauer, here take on a new direction as such contemplation becomes the inspiration for political action.

In conclusion, the complex relationship between the intellectual elite and the politics and ideologies of *fin de siècle* Italy can be understood more clearly through the framework of the two alternating models of action and contemplation. This is possible because these two

categories are broad concepts, entailing a political as well as an aesthetic and ethical dimension. Firstly, the aesthetic concept of contemplation enters into the political sphere, inasmuch as the idea of *l'art pour l'art* is used as a way for intellectuals to express their disavowal of the institutions of parliamentary democracy. Furthermore, the ethical implications of a purely contemplative art imply that poets and artists have a mission in society that is above any historical contingencies, and thus they do not have to subordinate their work to any political or even moral content. This idea is central in Pascoli's reflection on the role of poetry in the modern world.

At the turn of the twentieth century the intellectuals' critique takes a new form, as it is informed by the ideal of engagement. However, this idea of the *vita activa* is still predicated on categories and motivations belonging to the aesthetic dimension of the *vita contemplativa*, as engagement is justified by the necessity of a few elitist members of the *intelligentsia* to restore the cult of Beauty. The continuity between contemplation and action is particularly important in understanding D'Annunzio's turn to action, which is steeped in an aristocratic idea of politics as an expression of heroism and beauty.

CHAPTER 2

VITA ACTIVA OR VITA CONTEMPLATIVA? DANTE IN PASCOLI'S AND D'ANNUNZIO'S WRITINGS

"Ell'e' d'i suoi belli occhi veder vaga
com'io de l'addornarmi con le mani;
lei lo vedere, e me l'ovrare appaga"
Purgatorio XXVII, 105-108

The nineteenth century saw the resurgence of Dante as a role model for the engaged intellectual and as an example of civic virtue and patriotic spirit. During the *Risorgimento* patriots and poets looked at the figure of Dante as an inspiration for their dream of a unified Italy. Dante's political passion and troubled life contributed to the creation of a Romantic image of the medieval poet, who was viewed as a patriot *ante litteram*. Subsequently, after unification, Dante became a national icon and his cult an essential component of the cultural program of the new kingdom of Italy.

The influence of the Risorgimental interpretation of Dante is visible in Francesco De Sanctis' monumental *Storia della Letteratura Italiana* (1871). Here De Sanctis creates the dichotomy between the engaged intellectual and the 'contemplative man of letters', of which Dante Alighieri and Francesco Petrarca represent the most striking example. When discussing the *Divine Comedy* De Sanctis stresses how much this book differs from the contemplative genres of literature that were practiced in the thirteen and fourteenth century:

La sua forza non è l'ardore della ricerca e della investigazione, che è il genio degli spiriti speculativi. ... La fantasia creatrice, il vivo sentimento della realtà, le passioni ardenti del patriota disingannato e offeso, le ansietà della vita pubblica e privata non potevano avere appagamento in quella regione astratta della scienza che pure gli era tanto cara. (De Sanctis 163-194)

Dante is the true 'artist', according to De Sanctis' own definition, that is, a writer who is never isolated but deeply connected with the world around, and able to reproduce it in a literary creation which is indissoluble union of form and content. In contrast, in De Sanctis' view Petrarch initiates the line of the *letterati*, the writers who only concentrate on the formal aspect of literary writing and who are more contemplative spirits than men of action: *'L'uomo c'era, ma più simile all'anacoreta e al santo che a Livio o a Cicerone, più inclinato alle fantasie e alle estasi che all'azione. Natura contemplativa e solitaria, la vita esterna fu tutta a lui non occupazione ma diversione'* (288-291).

In the years after the unification of Italy, the discussion on the function of the intellectual in modern society necessarily involved a comparison with the figure of Dante as a paradigm for the marriage of literature and the *vita activa*. In this chapter I show that the figure of Dante in the context of post-unification Italy works as a thermometer for the degree of activism and political engagement amongst the intellectuals. The shifts in the significance of Dante as a model of political engagement in those years illustrate fundamental changes in the way intellectuals view their participation in the public sphere. Specifically, in the years between 1880 and 1905 Dante oscillates between being the symbol of the status quo of unified Italy and embodying the desire of the younger generation of writers to have an impact upon society and change the destiny of their country.

The model of Dante Alighieri plays a pivotal role in shaping the way Giovanni Pascoli and D'Annunzio frame the function of poetry in the modern world, either as a good in itself or an instrument of political activity. Both modern authors identify with Dante in order to bestow authority upon their choices of either contemplation or action as the sphere of the modern poet. Moreover, Dante and the *Divine Comedy* lend Pascoli and D'Annunzio vocabulary, concepts and images to frame their reflection on the position of poetry amongst

the human activities. In fact, Pascoli articulates his discourse on the nature of poetry by using Dantean categories, which he constructs while analyzing the *Comedy*. On the other hand, D'Annunzio employs the prophetic and religious quality of Dante's masterpiece to shape the idea of the poet as the *vate* of the nation.

This chapter is divided into three parts. In the first, I show the significance of Dante as an icon of the *vita activa* in the context of *fin de siècle* Italy. In the second part I discuss Pascoli's interpretation on the figure of Dante, who is no longer the patriot but rather the embodiment of human wisdom. The third section is devoted to D'Annunzio's use of Dante as part of his nationalistic propaganda.

2.1. *Vita Activa*: Dante in Nineteenth and Twentieth century Culture.

In the nineteenth century Dante was reinvented as a Romantic and national poet, the *Comedy* emerged as an educational bestseller and the poet became the subject of a critical industry and of scholarly debate. In Italy, the fathers of the *Risorgimento* identified with Dante on the grounds of his political engagement, his exile and of his struggle against the establishment. At the same time, Dante shaped the way intellectuals perceived themselves, as they thought that they were charged with a mission of political renewal in the name of a superior ideal. In this part of the chapter I argue that the image of Dante in the years following the unification reflects the relationship between the intellectual elite and the establishment. As I have already mentioned, the leaders of the new Italian nation appropriated the figure of Dante as a symbol of national identity. Therefore, the part of the Italian intelligentsia that was unhappy with the political institution of Italy detached itself from the cult of Dante, which was ridiculed as part of the empty rhetoric of the nation. Indeed, in the last two decades of the nineteenth century the revolutionary aspect of the figure of Dante faded, and the medieval poet was either a subject of philological study, or an

element of the national folklore. On the other hand, Dante became again an inspiration when the younger generation of writers that were born in the eighteen-eighties embraced political action as the mission of the intellectual in society.

The rediscovery of Dante not only as a national poet but also as a great man dates back to the end of the eighteenth century, after many years in which the poetic canon was dominated by Petrarch, Ariosto and Tasso. The reasons behind this new attitude are to be found on the one hand in a switch in the literary taste of the time and on the other in some changes in the historical situation of Europe. Indeed, the new pre-Romantic literature promoted a taste for the 'spectacular' and the 'grandiose', of which the sacred poem offers plenty of examples (Vallone 16). Secondly, the echoes of the French Revolution had a deep repercussion on the political consciousness of the Italians and awakened ideas of freedom from tyranny and self-determination. At the same time, the diffusion of a more engaged literature, such as Vittorio Alfieri's tragedies, helped reestablish Dante's importance as a master of civic virtues.

Already in the works of Ugo Foscolo and Giacomo Leopardi Dante is exalted as a great man and a citizen of Italy¹². In both cases Dante's civic involvement mirrors their own, as Dante epitomizes those times where there was still room for political engagement and 'where one could face the great powers of the Emperor and the Pope' (Vallone 72). The cult of Dante as a national poet and as a man of action reflects the influence of foreign models such as the exaltation of Shakespeare or the relevance of the figure of Lord Byron. As Carlo Dionisotti has noticed, 'only a tradition going back to its national origins and based on the

¹² For instance, in *I Sepolcri* (1807) Dante is significantly identified as '*il ghibellin fuggiasco*' and included in the section devoted to Florence, where all the greatest men of the past rest and whose tombs are supposed to inspire great deeds to whoever looks at them. On the other hand, in *Sopra Il Monumento di Dante* (1818) Leopardi juxtaposes the 'sleepiness' and 'sickness' (*i figli sonnacchiosi ed egri*' Leopardi 89,75) of his contemporaries to Italy's glorious forefathers, amongst which there is Dante.

historical, realistic and prophetic substance of Dante's poem could foster the resurrection of that rustic and humble province of Europe that Italy had become' (Dionisotti 219-221).

One of the most important figures of the Italian Risorgimento, Giuseppe Mazzini, constitutes a clear example of the appropriation of Dante as an ideological and political icon in the context of the battle for independency that Italian patriots were fighting at the time. Mazzini's writings on Dante include an edition of the *Comedy* and several essays, one of them significantly entitled *Dell'Amore Patrio di Dante* (1827). For Mazzini, Dante was not only the father of the Italian language but, more importantly, 'the citizen, the reformer, the religious apostle and the prophet of the nation' (Mazzini 29,37-38). Dante as a poet and a politically engaged citizen was the perfect role model for Mazzini's own views on the function of literature. Indeed, Mazzini explicitly rejected the concept of art for art's sake, the 'literary atheism', as he called it (Vallone 87) and supported the idea of a literature whose purpose was to serve the goals of human life and 'the interpretation of historical facts in the light of poetic and social motivations' (Vallone 86). In Mazzini's reading of Dante, the historical sense dims in favour of a 'strong reading' of the Florentine poet as his ideal forefather and as the God-sent prophet on a mission of supreme morality. Interestingly, this interpretation of Dante reoccurs in Giovanni Papini's 1907 *Dante Vicario d'Iddio*. Furthermore, in Mazzini's view, the author of the *Comedy* is glorified not so much for his poetic talent but for his greatness as a moral figure, which shows the separation between the man and the poet that characterizes Dante's interpretation in the nineteenth-century.

The last thirty years of the nineteenth century saw the inception of the philological school and the historical methodology in the field of literary studies. Influenced by the achievements of German philology, scholars of literature adopted the method already in use in many universities abroad, which also led to a more sober and less rhetoric interpretation of

Dante. The mission of the new school, which produced scholars such Pio Rajna, Francesco D'Ovidio, Ernesto Parodi and Michele Barbi, was to restitute Dante to his own time, as opposed to the forceful identification between the medieval poet's ideology and Risorgimental patriotism which had been purposefully implemented in the previous decades. Furthermore, those scholars broadened the field of Dantean studies by devoting their attention even to the 'minor' works of Dante, such as *La Vita Nuova* and *Il Convivio*. In addition, they also proceeded to a critical analysis of Dante's biography, language and philosophical background. For its part, the Italian government supported the incremented scholarly interest in Dante by creating several chairs of Dantean studies throughout Italy and financing scientific publications such as *La festa di Dante* (1864-65), *Il Giornale Dantesco* (1889) and *Il Bullettino della Società Dantesca* (1890). At the same time, the Italian government also appropriated the more 'sentimental' cult of Dante, which spread as a fashion in the young Italian nation and supported the phenomenon with public manifestations, poetry contests inspired by the sexcentenary of 1865 and anniversaries of the poet's life events and of the *Comedy* (Dionisotti 225-226).

Both manifestations of Dante's revival, the popular cult and the scholarly devotion to his works, were seen at the time as two aspects of the same phenomenon, the exploitation of an icon belonging to the Risorgimental culture for nationalistic propaganda purposes. Therefore, scholars and philologists tried to separate themselves from the cult of Dante, which soon started to be criticized by various fronts. For instance, between 1892 and 1903, in the ten years index of the *Bullettino della Società Dantesca* Michele Barbi warned the readers not to mistake the serious studies published there for the rhetoric manipulations of Dante's life and works that were so common at the time (Caretti 299). Furthermore, in 1903 the issue was dealt both by Benedetto Croce in his article *Il Monoteismo Dantesco* and in an essay by

University professor Rodolfo Renier, significantly entitled *Dantofilia*, *Dantologia*, *Dantomania*, in which the author tried to differentiate between the different phenomena. The emergence of a criticism towards the cult of Dante shows that, by the turn of the century, what used to be an inspirational symbol for the generations of Risorgimento had already become empty rhetoric.

The loss of significance of Dante as a role model for the intellectuals is emphasized by the almost complete absence of his figure in the pages of *Il Marzocco* and the other literary journals of the late nineteenth century. Such an omission is meaningful, inasmuch as it implies that the *intelligentsia* perceived the figure of Dante as belonging to the propaganda of the very establishment they criticized. For instance, in *Il Marzocco* Dante is mentioned only in the context of the critique to the philological method brought about by the supporters of Aesthetic criticism. However, the rediscovery of Dante which occurred in the nineteenth century, and the renewed interest for his whole corpus of writings made it possible for the Aesthetic movement to have access to his lesser known works. Indeed, as I will discuss in the section of this chapter devoted to D'Annunzio, Pre-Raphaelites focused on a less political image of the poet, that of the young lover of Beatrice. It is not a coincidence that one of the journals published by the Italian Aesthetes was given the title of *La Vita Nuova*, after Dante's Stilnovistic work.

Giosue Carducci's treatment of Dante is particularly emblematic of the transformations that the figure of the medieval poet underwent in the course of the second half of the nineteenth century.. Indeed, Carducci's interpretation of Dante throughout his career is one of the most significant examples of the correlation between the figure of the medieval poet and the intellectuals' engagement in the late nineteenth century. Throughout his life, Carducci's admiration for the poetic talent of Dante remained unaltered, whereas his

judgment on the Florentine's political ideas shifted from appreciation to rejection to reconsideration as a consequence of changes in his own political views and of the vicissitudes of Italy in the years preceding and following unification. Once more it is Dante as an ideological figure that is dealt with, and not so much as a literary model, which clearly illustrates that the cult of this poet is particularly sensitive to the degree of political activism that the historical circumstances ingenerate.

For young Carducci, in the years immediately preceding Italy's unification, Dante is the prototypical Italian patriot, father of the nation and inspirer of great deeds (Martini 19). Carducci's juvenile poem *Dante al Monastero del Corvo* (1853) is influenced by Foscolo's and Leopardi's lamentations on the condition of Italy. In this work, Dante appears to the narrator while being in exile from Florence and takes the opportunity to reproach Italy, divided and weakened and compared to a cruel 'stepmother' (Carducci I, 189). In 1854, in the poem *Dante*, Carducci makes Dante speak for his aspiration to see Italy finally united: '*Ne l'alta visione/ Divin surse il poeta; e disdegnando/ La triste Italia e per mancar d'obietto/ Pargoleggiante il gran vigor natio,/ Te salutó in desio/ Alma Italia novella,/ Una d'armi di leggi e di favella*' (I, 118). In the following years Carducci imbued more and more the figure of Dante with his own ideas: in the poem *Alla Croce di Savoia* he goes as far as to draw a comparison between Dante and Alfieri on the one hand and Giano della Bella and Emanuele Filiberto on the other, and to see the Savoia family as the new *gens Iulia* (II, 271-272). In other words, Dante and his time of political renovations became more and more a mirror for the current events of Italy.

Around the year of the unification, 1861, and the years immediately after, Carducci underwent a political crisis as he saw the failure of his republicanism and anticlericalism due to the formation of the kingdom of Italy. In these years Dante was still regarded by Carducci

as the supreme master of poetic style but his political ideas were bitterly criticized. In Carducci's opinion, Dante is no more a patriot *ante litteram*, but the poet of the Church and the monarchy, whereas Petrarca is seen as the fervid supporter of the values of the ancient Roman republic¹³.

The third phase of Carducci's relationship with the figure of the Florentine poet reflects his acceptance of the status quo and the emergence of a merely philological and critical interest for the works of Dante. In this phase Carducci had already come to terms both with the failure of his republican ideals and with Dante's 'betrayal' of them in favour of a monarchic ideology. In fact, Dante's thought is considered within the context of the Italian Middle Age and of Christianity and more like an utopia than a real political project:

Negare la grandezza di questo ideale concepimento della pace del mondo in una quasi alleanza di stati cristiani dei quali infine l'imperatore non fosse che il presidente è impossibile, come è per avventura difficile ammirare in esso altro che la visione di un poeta, già allora umanitario, il quale risogna il passato, riflettendolo benignamente illuminato nello specchio dell'immenso ingegno. (OEN X, 315)

It is clear that in Carducci's case the reinvention of Dante, first as a patriot, then as a monarchic and finally as an utopian is highly influenced by the political climate of the years that saw the formation of the Italian nation. The cult of Dante both as poet and as a ideological figure was most important in Carducci's youth, when it stood for an exhortation for the Italians to take the destiny of their country into their own hands. The appropriation of Dante by the cultural establishment made it impossible for Carducci to maintain the

¹³ In the occasion of the sixth centenary of Dante's birth Carducci was requested to contribute to the celebrations and after some indecision he wrote three sonnets and various reviews of Dante's biographies, in which he expressed his criticism for the medieval poet's political ideology (Sticco 1250). In the 1867 sonnet *Dante*, such a criticism finds its most bitter tones: '*Odio il tuo santo impero; e la corona/Divelto con la spada avrei di testa/ Al tuo buon Federico in val d'Olona./ Son chiesa e impero una ruina mesta/ Cui sorvola il tuo canto e al ciel risona:/ Muor Giove, e l'inno del poeta resta*' (V, 179).

revolutionary aspect of its cult and the Florentine poet became the symbol of the Italian kingdom, and ultimately lost its previous ideological connotation.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the cultural debate took place mostly in the new Florentine journals such as *Leonardo* (1903-1907), *Hermes* (1904-1906), *Il Regno* (1903-1906) and *La Voce* (1908-1916), which gathered the new generation of intellectuals of post-unification Italy. However different, all these journals show similar characteristics and intents. First of all, they voiced the young intellectuals' dissatisfaction with the culture of the new parliamentary democracy, with liberalism, reformism and Positivism. Secondly, the contributors to these journals openly lamented the degeneration of Risorgimental ideals into the pompous and empty propaganda of the new government. They criticized the dissolution of the heroic ideals of the fathers of the country into the bourgeois and narrow-minded mentality of the bureaucrats that constituted the new middle class of the Italian kingdom. Last but not least, they all believed that intellectuals should have a major role in society and the duty to actively intervene in the political sphere.

The intellectuals' criticism of the current political situation was reflected on their stance on the significance of Dante's figure for the Italian culture. Once again, the figure of Dante served as a thermometer for the political climate of the nation. Their reinvention of Dante was a mixture of the Risorgimental myth and a new, almost mystical interpretation of the poet as a 'great soul' and was focused on the ability of this icon to inspire great deeds and to oppose the mediocrity of the ruling class. Particularly significant with respect to that are the interventions of Giovanni Papini and Giuseppe Prezzolini, who both contributed to *Il Leonardo*, *Il Regno* and *La Voce*. First of all, they criticized both the popular cult of Dante and the philological studies on the poet that had multiplied in those years. The cult of Dante was regarded as ridiculous and meaningless:

Ma nessuno credeva che si arriverebbe al punto di ridicolo cui è giunta la Commissione esecutiva della società Dante Alighieri con l'aprire un concorso per una lampada alla tomba di Dante. Dopo il lumicino da notte sul sepolcro del poeta, cosa ci manca altro, che i pasticcini alla Francesca, i panciotti all'Alighieri, e gli stivaletti alla Beatrice? (quoted by Caretti 300)

Later on, in 1918, in the aftermath of World War I, Papini foresaw another wave of Dante's cult, which would culminate in the anniversary of the poet's death in 1921. In imagining the initiatives that the government would promote, Papini ridicules some aspects of the Dantean celebrations that took place before the War:

Il monumento di Trento –che ispirò alcune mediocri terzine al Carducci-è sacro al cuore di ogni Italiano per il luogo dove sorge e per quello che intendeva significare all'indirizzo dei lurchi che lassù, fino ad un mese fa, ingiustamente comandavano. Eppure, a pensarci, ci volle un bel disdegno dell'ironia storica per piantare come una minaccia contro Lamagna la statua d'un uomo che invocò appassionatamente un imperatore Tedesco perchè scendesse a riconquistare la ritrosa Italia...(Papini 307)

Papini does not mock the patriotic feelings that inspired the monument in Trento, but he ridicules the lack of historical awareness of the public manifestations of Dante's cult. On the other hand, the erudite efforts of the many Dantean philologists in the Italian universities are accused of not comprehending the greatness and the true spirit of Dante:

Tra i moderni soltanto Carlyle, De Sanctis and Carducci hanno saputo scrivere qualche pagina su Dante che valga la pena di essere ricordata. Tutti i nostri dantisti celebri, il Del Lungo, lo Scartazzini, il Torraca, il Casini, il Parodi, lo Zingarelli, il D'Ovidio, fanno della storia, dell'erudizione, della bibliografia, dell'ermeneutica, della filologia, della casistica, dell'enimmistica, tutto quello che volete, ma non certo della penetrazione dantesca. (Papini 299)

Interestingly, Papini spares from his criticism only Carlyle, who had written of Dante as a poet and a hero (Carlyle 311-346), Carducci, who in his youth had made Dante the symbol of Italian patriotism, and De Sanctis, according to whom the Florentine poet was not only a writer but also a man of action. As opposed to the merely philological approach to Dante

propped up by the cultural establishment, Papini resurrects the Risorgimental interpretation of the Florentine poet. The criticism to the philological approach is not only a judgment on the pooriness of its achievements¹⁴ but also, and more importantly, an attack to the present society. According to Papini, his contemporaries cannot truly understand Dante because they lack the moral stature to empathize with him. The current society is, in Papini's view, comprised of diligent bureaucrats, who cannot aspire to a heroic life but who are contented with relying on the glories of the past and dwell in erudite disquisitions about them. The philological approach is the expression of such a mentality:

Se per studiare Dante s'intendesse comprendere, intuire, rivivere la Divina Commedia; ... se significasse sentire davvero quell che c'è di titanicamente sovrumano nella concezione di questo uomo di penna, di questo priore fiorentino che ad un tratto si fa giudice di tutte le età e creatore di un altro mondo, allora capirei che si chiamasse grande una nazione capace di produrre simili intenditori i quali mostrerebbero di possedere almeno qualche riflesso dell'enorme genio dantesco. ... Bisogna pur avere coraggio, una volta o l'altra, di proclamare che l'Italia d'oggi non può comprendere la Divina Commedia. E non perchè manchino ingegni ma perchè mancano proprio gli ingegni del tipo dantesco, e perchè il clima spirituale dei nostri tempi è ormai troppo diverso da quello del secolo decimo terzo. (297-298)

With the due difference, Papini repeats Leopardi's lamentations for the inadequacy of his contemporaries, as opposed to the heroism of Italy's past, of which Dante is the most emblematic representative. The *pars destruens* of Papini's criticism is embedded in the general dissatisfaction with the situation of post-unification Italy shared by most intellectuals, including Gabriele D'Annunzio. As to the *pars costruens*, the figure of Dante does not embody any specific political ideology, but it is portrayed as a 'gigantic' and 'heroic figure',

¹⁴ Papini does not despise philology when it produces good results but does not believe it can provide the reader with a true understanding of the text: 'Ma su Dante –tolti i saggi del De Sanctis- non abbiamo nulla che si avvicini a quell che dovrebbe essere l'alta critica d'un'alta opera d'arte: I commenti dello Scartazzini, del Casini del Torraca, del Passerini sono sopportabili compilazioni ad uso delle scuole e nulla più: e non abbiamo neppure una ben fatta vita del poeta, che ci liberi dal lombricaio fastidioso dei contributi eruditi, parziali e particolari, e sia per Dante, d'esempio, quell ch'è per Shakespeare la biografia del Sidney Lee' (Papini 305).

charged with a superhuman mission of morality, as God's vicar, as in the title of Papini's essay *Dante vicario d'Iddio*:

Ma voglio soltanto affermare che i più non comprendono Dante come andrebbe compreso, cioè come un 'professore di grandezza morale'. Voglio invece suggerire da qual punto bisogna guardarlo per vedere tutta intera la sua figura gigantesca sullo sfondo dell'eternità. La miglior prova di quello che io sostengo, cioè dell'impotenza comune a comprendere dantescamente la Divina Commedia sta nella modestia delle concezioni che ne hanno comunemente anche gli uomini intelligenti. Si veda in lui una specie di profeta della nazione, come Carlyle, o un apostolo dell'unità della patria come Mazzini, o l'iniziato a sette misteriose come il Rossetti, o una specie di eretico precursore della Riforma come l'Aroux, o semplicemente un grandissimo artista come De Sanctis, non si fa che attribuirgli fini e qualità che molti hanno avuto o possono avere. ... Per me invece Dante è stato grande perchè ha fatto qualcosa che nessun altro ha fatto prima di lui. ... L'arte, la teologia, la politica sono, per lui, mezzi subordinati alla sua massima ambizione – quella di essere il vicario d'Iddio sulla terra. ... Il suo risentimento verso Bonifazio VIII – da lui ritenuto causa delle proprie sciagure – e le sue opinioni semighibelline e fraticelliane sulla corruzione mondana del Papato fanno ritenere che nella sua mente coesistesse una doppia ambizione: quella d'essere profeta di rinnovamento etico e civile e quella di prendere il posto, come giudice e vicario d'Iddio. (Papini 294-296)

In the eighteenth century patriots and poets had looked back at Dante's life, at his political passion as a citizen of Florence and had drawn a comparison with their own experiences as 'men of Italy'. Papini's view of Dante goes beyond empathizing with the poet's political engagement: his idea is greater, yet more vague. Dante's mission is not comparable to any man's, as it is unique and is not within the reach of human possibilities. This image of Dante as a giant contrasts sharply with Papini's depiction of the mediocre mentality of his contemporaries. Such a treatment of Dante's figure has to be understood in the context of political modernism, i.e. those ideologies and movements that arose in Italy in the first decade of the twentieth century and which were all characterized by the critique to parliamentary democracy, by the connection between nationalism and modernity and by the aspiration to imbue politics with a 'mystique' (Gentile 21). These movements arose from the

crisis of liberal nationalism, which was the ideology that had characterized the first years of the kingdom of Italy¹⁵.

At the beginning of the new century the dissatisfaction of most intellectuals towards the institutions of parliamentary democracy took the form of a new nationalistic sentiment. On the one hand those intellectuals claimed that the only way to regenerate the nation was to imbue its politics with a national mystique and with national myths¹⁶. On the other hand, they went back to the Risorgimental ideals of political activism, especially with regards to the role of the intellectual in the matter, as they felt that the intellectual elite should once again shape the destiny of its country, as it had done in the years before unification. Furthermore, the young intellectuals of political modernism reinterpreted the Risorgimental ideals of liberty and nationality in terms of expansionism and grandeur of the nation.

Within this context, the almost religious devotion to Dante's figure is part of the mystique of the nation as embodied in one of its most prestigious representatives. The figure of Dante brings to extreme consequences the ideal of the engaged intellectual, charged with the mission of becoming the consciousness of the nation and the judge of every political act. Dante as God vicar constitutes the ultimate aspiration for the intellectual, to be in a position even superior to that of politicians and rulers. Finally, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Dante's prestige as a poet and a man helped intellectuals construct the idealized image of the Italian 'spirit' as superior to that of any other nationality.

¹⁵ Liberal nationalism derived from the Risorgimento the idea of political freedom both at the level of the individual and of the nation state. In both Mazzini and Cavour's opinion, the ideal of man's dignity could only be attained within a national State, which had to be independent and sovereign (4). Emilio Gentile has pointed out that 'as with all forms of cultural nationalism, liberal nationalism thrived on the myth of greatness but this myth was formulated in terms of a cultural and spiritual *primato* rather than in terms of power and the conquering of new territories' (*ibidem*). Such a nationalism informed the cult of Dante in the years after unification, which was regarded as a way of promoting national consciousness.

¹⁶ Myth has to be intended as 'a set of beliefs and ideas, ideals and values, which are condensed in a symbolic image that is capable of mobilizing the individuals as well as the masses because it stirs up faith, enthusiasm and action' (Gentile, 2).

In conclusion, in the years between the unification of Italy and the advent of Fascism the figure of Dante signals the degree of activism amongst the intellectuals. Dante goes from being viewed as a patriot *ante litteram* to embodying the national genius, as at both ends of the temporal spectrum we have considered writers and intellectuals project upon his figure their desire to contribute to the destiny of their country. On the other hand, the decades after the unification of Italy, the apparently 'unpolitical' resurgence of philological studies of Dante signifies the detachment of the intelligentsia from the public sphere. Lastly, the critique to the establishment brought about by the Aesthetic movement manifested itself also as a voluntary omission of the author of the *Divine Comedy* as a subject of literary debate, inasmuch as Dante was perceived as a symbol of the unified Italy that had caused so much disappointment.

2.2 Poetry between Action and Contemplation in Giovanni Pascoli's Dantean Writings.

Giovanni Pascoli was not only a renowned poet, but also a devoted scholar of Dante. As we know from his correspondence to Adolfo de Bosis and Luigi Pietrobono, Pascoli expected great recognition from his critical work on Dante, which spanned over the course of fifteen years. Between 1898 and 1901 he published three volumes of Dantean criticism, *Minerva Oscura* (1898), an essay on the moral system of the *Divine Comedy*, *Sotto il Velame* (1900), an attempt to give an unifying interpretation to Dante's masterpiece and *La Mirabile Visione* (1901), a history of the poem's genesis and composition. Moreover, between 1900 and 1910 Pascoli gave several lectures on Dante and the *Divine Comedy*, later collected and published under the name of *Conferenze e Studi Danteschi* (1914).

Pascoli's exegetical work on the *Divine Comedy* diverges significantly from the principles of textual philology and historical analysis that dominated the Dantean studies of the late nineteenth century, which certainly accounts for Pascoli's failure to achieve academic

success. Indeed the poet claimed to have understood the secret structure of the *Divine Comedy* and based his interpretation on a very complex set of correspondences amongst the various parts of the text, using what Guglielmi has called a 'protostructuralist' method (Guglielmi 81). For Pascoli what counts is the understanding of the ultimate message of the sacred poem, the ascent of a man - and of mankind- to a state of pure morality, which constitutes also the modernity of Dante's masterpiece: *'ho imparato dal nostro Poeta qual sia la libertà che bisogna impetrare a sé e predicare agli altri, se si vuol essere veramente liberali: è la libertà del volere, che è inceppato, per qual ragione si può discordare, ma che e il poema antico e tanti libri nuovi affermano. (Prose III, 769-770)*. In fact, in the preface to *La Mirabile Visione*, Pascoli openly criticizes those who study Dante as a mere relic of the past, having forgotten the relevance of the *Divine Comedy* in the modern world: *'Il libro parla di Dante fiorentino e della Commedia sua ravennate; di quello spirito e di quel poema i quali io sento che avrebbero ad essere più vivi nella nostra vita moderna di quel che consentano coloro che pur li studiano e cercano col solo grande amore che si ha per le grandi, o anche piccole rovine' (ibidem 769)*.

Pascoli's interpretative method reflects the poet's appropriation of the message of the *Divine Comedy*, as well as his identification with Dante as his alter ego (Capecchi 124). In this part of the chapter I argue that Pascoli employs the narrative of the *Divine Comedy*, which he sees as the evolution from the *vita activa* to the *vita contemplativa*, to represent his personal path as a poet. Furthermore, in the discussion between action and contemplation as the two main spheres of human condition he finds a particular place for modern poetry and for the function of the poet in his time. At the same time, the Dantean poem provides Pascoli with categories, vocabulary and images that help him shape his philosophical ideas not only on the nature of poetry, but on the evolution of human society.

In Pascoli's view, the Dantean poem is an allegory of the transition from the *vita activa* to the *vita contemplativa*. This interpretation is not new, as it is found already in Francesco De Sanctis' *Storia della Letteratura Italiana* (De Sanctis *Storia* 167)¹⁷. However, the novelty of Pascoli's reading lies on the one hand in the recognition of only one theological source for the allegory of action and contemplation in the *Comedy*, Augustine's *Contra Faustum* XXV, 52 (Augustine 333) and on the other in the moral sense that this interpretation allows him to bestow upon the Dantean poem. Indeed, the paradigm of the two lives serves to Pascoli not only as a very useful interpretative key but also, and more importantly, to reveal the deeper implications of Dante's poem and its relevance as a book for all times, as it is a metaphor for the human condition.

In the reading of the modern poet, the *Divine Comedy* lends itself to a multilayered interpretation, as it can be viewed at the same time as the story of the evolution of mankind, the growth of the individual from childhood to adulthood, the parable of the abandonment of desire and the story of Pascoli himself, from the experiences of his misguided youth to the conquest of maturity and wisdom. Within this framework, I focus on the function of poetry, as it encompasses all the interpretative levels of the parable. Indeed, according to Pascoli poetry is beneficial to mankind, as it substitutes religion in creating a conscience and a set of moral values, as he explains in *l'Era Nuova* (Pascoli *Era Nuova* 117). Furthermore, poetry temporarily restores in the grown man the innocence of childhood, thus providing relief from the anxiety of everyday life. Specifically, poetry suspends the circle of desire and dissatisfaction to which men are bound, as it teaches contentment and peace of mind. Finally,

¹⁷ Pascoli himself mentions other scholars who indicated that the passage from *vita activa* to *vita contemplativa* is the main theme of Dante's poem: '*Or a lui voglio soggiungere che le sentenze di tali nobili interpreti, quali il Bennassuti, il Perez, il Lubin, tanti altri, io riferirò, non per coscienza ch'io abbia di debito a loro, ma per conferma di ciò che essi pensarono prima di me, e di ciò che io pensai senza dipender da loro* (Prose II, 297)

poetry represents the resolution of young Pascoli's misdirected aspirations for glory and worldly recognition.

The specific passage of Augustine's *Contra Faustum* upon which Pascoli relies as a basis for his interpretation is the episode of Jacob (Augustine XXV, 52, 333). This story narrates Jacob's 14 year-long labours for Laban, whose daughter Rachel he wants to marry. After the first seven years Laban makes him marry his eldest daughter Leah, and only after the completion of another seven years of work can Jacob have his beloved Rachel. In Augustine's text this episode is interpreted as an allegory for the progressive achievement of *vita contemplativa* through the experience of *vita activa*, symbolized by Rachel and Leah, respectively. In several passages of *Sotto il Velame* and *La Mirabile Visione*, Pascoli's explains how the Augustinian allegory applies to the *Divine Comedy*:

La Comedia di Dante ha questo argomento, quale è esposto nel Prologo di tutto il Poema Sacro. Tre bestie, e specialmente l'ultima, impediscono a Dante il corto andare del bel monte: cioè la vita attiva. Virgilio, mosso da Beatrice, che è pregata da Lucia che è mandata da una Donna Gentile propone a lui un 'altro viaggio', che è, prima, dell'attività dispositiva alla contemplazione, se la volontà purificata dall'ultimo fuoco sarà da sé disposta (Inf. I, 121). E' dunque il dramma della vita attiva e contemplativa. Le quali sono dai mistici raffigurate in modo diverso. Nel Convivio Dante prende, a raffigurarle, le due persone evangeliche di Marta e Maria; nella Commedia quelle bibliche di Rachele Lia. (Prose II, 692-693)

Giacobbe non può impetrare subito le nozze di Rachele; deve servire sette anni, dopo i quali ha Lia, non Rachele. Lia si interpreta laborans, e ha gli occhi deboli, e significa la tolleranza della fatica, la giustizia laboriosa e simili. Per avere Rachele Giacobbe deve servire altri sette anni. Questi ultimi sette anni si interpretano per i sette precetti inclusi nelle sette beatitudini. Ora Dante giunge alla sua Rachele, dopo essere salito per le sette cornici del Purgatorio e aver udita in ognuna di esse una delle sette beatitudini. Le sette beatitudini sono come opposte ai sette peccati. Ma codeste figurano i secondi sette anni di servaggio di Giacobbe a Laban, o di Dante a Lucia, la qual porta il suo fedele alla porta delle sette cornici. I primi sette? Quelli di Giacobbe s'interpretano come i sette comandamenti di giustizia: 'Onora tuo padre' eccetera. Quelli di Dante? Dante nell'Inferno ha veduti sette peccati, ai quali Virgilio riduce tutto l'Inferno: lussuria, gola, avarizia, peccato di color cui vinse l'ira e che portarono accidioso fummo, malizia con forza o violenza o bestialità, malizia con frode, malizia che trade. (Prose III, 783-784)

According to Pascoli, in the first Canto of the *Inferno* Dante narrates his failed attempt to engage in *vita activa*, that is, in political activity as a citizen of Florence. He is lost in a dark wood, which symbolizes, in Pascoli's interpretation, his irresponsible and misguided youth. When the encounter with the three beasts (incontinence, violence and fraud) deters Dante from ascending the mountain of *vita activa*, or a life of good deeds, Virgil comes to his rescue and proposes a different journey to him, the path that leads to the life of contemplation. Such a journey begins with a descent through Hell, corresponding, in the Augustinian allegory, to Jacob's first seven years. The voyage through Hell represents a repetition of the active life that Dante had attempted to pursue initially. However, in the Underworld active life serves as an exercise of purification towards contemplative life. In other words, when Dante observes the dangerous drives of the human soul, he overcomes them by practicing those virtues belonging to the active life (wisdom, strength, temperance and justice): *'Questo è il concetto angolare della Divina Commedia. Poiché le virtù morali della vita attiva dispongono alla vita contemplativa, Dante compie un esercizio di vita attiva che lo disponga alla contemplativa' (Prose III, 1516-17)*. Once he has mastered such virtues, he is ready to achieve contemplative life.

The voyage of Dante begins in a dark wood, where the pilgrim is lost without guidance. Pascoli interprets the image of the wood in the light of Aristotle's theory of the three souls, the lowest of which is the vegetative soul. Indeed, according to the Greek philosopher's categorization, as found in his *On the Soul*, plants represent the most basic form of living, whereas animals have in addition the animal soul, which determines perception through the senses, and humans also possess a rational soul, with which they can think. Therefore, Pascoli sees the image of the dark wood as a metaphor for a condition of irrationality and lack of moral direction.

In the multilayered metaphor sustaining Pascoli's interpretation of the *Divine Comedy*, the dark wood indicates the initial stage of both mankind and the individual¹⁸, that is, a condition where rational thought is not developed. In relation to the path of mankind the dark wood is actually the first phase of development of the human species, its plant-like stage. As a metaphor for the story of each individual, the dark wood represents childhood, or even adolescence, that is, a completely instinctual phase, where the knowledge of good and evil and the ability to make rational decisions are absent. As such, childhood is a condition where there is no virtue but also no sin:

Sicché nella selva non essendo prudenza non è alcuna virtù. E così tutti gli interpreti hanno sempre pensato; ma errano se aggiungono che vi sono tutti i vizi. Ché lo stato di chi è nella selva, ed è pur senza alcuna virtù, e senza alcun lume, è perciò senza alcun freno, e pur servo, e in peccato, e nell'inferno, e quasi morto; tale stato è più simile a quello di un parvolo innocente che muore avanti il battesimo che a quello di un uomo colpevole della più lieve delle reità.... L'ombra della carne è incontinenza, il veleno è malizia. Bene: la selva è tenebra e solo tenebra. (Prose II, 341)

Intriguingly, Pascoli extends this category of pre-morality to include the slothful in Hell, or the *ignavi* of the Antinferno, as in both cases moral judgment is impaired. Indeed, Dante in the dark wood is no longer a child, or an adolescent, but in a state more similar to that of the slothful, as he is 'lost' and only follows his impulses¹⁹.

The category of pre-morality, as both irrationality and inactivity, occupies a special place in the drama of action and contemplation that Pascoli sees enacted in the *Comedy*. Indeed, inactivity is the opposite of action, as in the development of the individual childhood

¹⁸ Pascoli draws on Ernst Haeckel's theory of recapitulation, according to which ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.

¹⁹ The most difficult point to prove is that Dante is in fact an adolescent at the beginning of his journey, as the text of the *Comedy* states clearly that he rather was '*nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*'. Indeed, Sandra Cavicchioli has pointed out the blatant contradictions created when Pascoli tries to extend the category of pre-morality to Dante in the dark wood (Cavicchioli 137). Although he admits that Dante was not technically an adolescent, Pascoli claims that the medieval poet, like many people, was still acting like an adolescent, that is, he was not making use of his own judgment and was instead following his impulses (*Poesie e Prose* II, 317-18).

precedes the life of 'care' that constitutes the human condition²⁰, and in the evolution of mankind, the brutal phase precedes the channeling of impulses into socially useful activities. However, inactivity is also the perfect counterpart to contemplation, as in the first case instincts and desires are misguided, and in the second wisdom and rationality have full mastery of the human soul. At the same time, contemplation and inactivity both appear as translations of the Latin notion of *otium*²¹. *Otium* can have a spectrum of meanings ranging from a positive one, where the time is devoted to intellectual, though non practical activities, that is, contemplation, to a negative one, idleness, or inactivity. In other words, in Pascoli's carefully built structure of the Dantean poem, idleness turns into contemplation, after turning into action during the phase of the *vita activa*, or the life of the social and political involvement.

The passage from the child-like, idle state of the dark wood to the rational wisdom of contemplative life in Heaven also refers to Pascoli's experience as a man, and more importantly, as a poet. Elio Gioanola reports that during his years at the University in Bologna Pascoli experienced a time of depression and inactivity, which the poet labeled '*le ignave brume*' (*Poesie e Prose* I, 559). Pascoli's time as a student can be described as a time in which he lived like 'dead', sleeping or daydreaming, living a life that was 'forcefully chaste and terribly sad' (Gioanola 27). Furthermore, in his poetry the theme of inactivity occurs quite often, for instance in the poems *Nebbia* (1903) and *Gloria* (1890).

Pascoli's attitude constitutes a striking opposition to the fervent vitality and the turbulent and passionate life of Giosue Carducci, who at the time was not only his thesis

²⁰ According to Martin Heidegger, 'care', or 'concern' is the fundamental basis of our being in the world (Heidegger, 187).

²¹ As Jean-Marie André explains, the Christian tradition bestows upon the Latin notion of *otium*, a time away from public affairs and devoted to literature, an idea of laziness, which remains in the Italian *ozio* and in the French *oisiveté* (André 47).

advisor, but also his mentor and an overbearing father figure for the younger poet (*ibidem* 26). Interestingly, Gioanola suggests that such an opposition illustrates the passage from traditional to modern poetry, which is characterized as 'decadent', 'sick' and neurotic (29). The position of lying down, from which one dreams or fantasizes, symbolizes the position of modern poetry, which is essentially contemplative. As Gioanola has pointed out, modern poetry begins even before the baudelairean spleen: it begins with the '*sedendo e mirando*' of Leopardi's poem *L'Infinito*, which inaugurates the condition of the lyrical 'I' as stuck in a melancholic inertia (*ibidem*). Furthermore, contemplative poetry is quintessentially different from 'active' poetry, as it is detached from the real world, disengaged from any external purpose and free from any goal of 'setting things into motion'. Contemplative poetry is fuelled only by the narcissistic pleasure of 'vision' and imagination. Thus, in the opposition between Pascoli's *ignavia* and Carducci's engagement it is possible to read the advent of a new age of poetry.

Although in many passages of his works Pascoli refuses the notion of the poet's engagement that dominated the Risorgimental era, he does not support the view that poetry should be a solipsistic pleasure. On the contrary, often Pascoli reminds us of the intrinsic moral value of poetry, although such a morality is not attached to any explicit doctrine or ideal. Doing poetry is 'doing nothing' but this apparent inactivity is not to be seen as idleness, but rather as a path towards contentment, which, when practiced, can constitute a true source of happiness and a way towards a moral life, as Pascoli explains in *Il Fanciullino*: '*La poesia benefica di per sé, la poesia che di per sé ci fa meglio amare la patria, la famiglia, l'umanità, è la poesia pura, la quale di rado si trova.*' (*Poesie e Prose Scelte* II, 967).

To understand Pascoli's complex view on poetry, it is useful to return to the philosophical system which he built upon the Dantean poem. Here, the true counterpart of the dark wood is not Paradise but another forest, the forest of Eden, as Pascoli explains:

Ripensando che nella selva oscura entrò pien di sonno, ossia in stato d'incoscienza e mancanza di libertà d'arbitrio; vediamo delinarsi la perfetta antitesi tra la selva oscura e la divina foresta; le quali sono tutte e due un'antica selva: se l'una è l'Eden l'altra è la selva erronea della vita. E da tale antitesi possiamo subito rilevare il senso allegorico della selva. La foresta è dunque l'Eden, è il luogo dove fu 'innocente l'umana radice', è, cioè, la sede dell'originale innocenza: la selva oscura è, dunque, la sede del peccato originale. Così chi è in essa è servo, cioè privo di libero arbitrio. (Prose III, 1097)

Dante's journey begins in the dark wood, or, according to Pascoli, in a state of confusion and uncertainty similar to that of adolescents who have not fully exercised their free will. Virgil, as we have seen, subsequently leads to him to recognize the virtues that belong to *vita activa* as he sees the souls in Hell as being prone to their evil desires. In between this phase and the achievement of *vita contemplativa* in Heaven, that is, rational morality, Dante also reaches the forest of Eden, which is interpreted as the primeval condition of man before exiting the Garden and the original sin of Eve. From a troubled and totally instinctual childhood Dante returns to what childhood ought to be, a mythical state of candor and innocence before any contamination.

The antithetical correspondence between the dark wood and the forest of Eden fleshes out Pascoli's twofold view on childhood, which Maurizio Perugi has described as 'bifrons' (Perugi in Pascoli *Opere* 1641). On the one hand, in his Dantean writings Pascoli sees childhood as a completely instinctual phase, similar to the first stages of human evolution. Therefore, this phase represents the point of departure from which the journey towards morality begins. Rosa Maria Truglio has noticed the striking similarity between this view and the emerging Freudian notion of childhood as a 'perverse' phase, a notion of which Pascoli

was obviously not aware, but that he shares with the Viennese author. As Truglio has observed, 'both Pascoli and Freud depart from the biblical Eden and the classical Golden Age by infusing that primary state with a fundamental ambivalence. They recast the Fall from Edenic innocence into the knowledge of death as an ascent from a bestial to a human existence...Pascoli's and Freud's writings refigure innocence as ignorance and wholeness as a loss of individual human identity- as a bestial existence' (Truglio 155-156). On the other hand, in the allegory of Forest of Eden and almost anywhere else in his poems and works, Pascoli idealizes childhood as the quintessentially moral condition, as children are able to see the world without the deforming glasses of greed and desire and with an attitude of wonder and joy, as he summarizes in the famous theoretical prose of *Il Fanciullino*:

Poesia è trovare nelle cose, come ho a dire? Il loro sorriso e la loro lacrima; e ciò si fa da due occhi infantili che guardano semplicemente e serenamente di tra l'oscuro tumulto della nostra anima... E sommamente benefico è tale sentimento, che pone un soave e leggero freno all'instancabile desiderio, il quale ci fa perpetuamente correre con infelice ansia per la via della felicità. (Poesie e Prose Scelte 951-952)

In Pascoli's view, childhood is also the quintessentially poetic age. For example, in the Forest of Eden poetry is embodied by the figure of Matelda, the beautiful woman who welcomes Dante and Virgil on the bank of the river Lethe. Matelda is portrayed in the *Comedy* as having a child-like and merry attitude inasmuch as she dances and sings, symbolizing the happy condition of mankind before the Fall²²: '*una donna soletta che si già/ e cantando e scegliendo fior da fiore/ on'era pinta tutta la sua via*' (*Purg.* 39-42, 832). Furthermore, as she dances she picks flowers from flowers, as expression of the primeval union of humanity with nature in the Garden of Eden. For Pascoli all these attributes support

²² In her introduction to Canto XXVIII Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi points out that the comparison between Proserpina and Matelda fleshes out the true meaning of the latter as 'primeval innocence, the happy youth of the world that is impossible to restore' (in *Commedia*, introduction to Canto XXVIII, 823).

the interpretation of Matelda as art, or poetry: *'Matelda soletta che canti, come innamorata, e scegli fior da fiore tra i tanti e tanti che pingono la tua via, che sei così lieta delle opere delle tue mani, che immergi nel Leté che purifica, che conduci all'Eunoé che ravviva, Matelda figlia della natura e gioconda del tuo lavoro, tu ti chiami ars' (Prose II, 718)*. However, in Pascoli's interpretation, Matelda is also the symbol of *vita activa*, and corresponds to Leah just as the other important female figure, Beatrice, corresponds to Rachele: *'In vero Lia che appare in sogno a Dante, preannunziando la canora coglittrice di fiori, è la 'faticante'; è il simbolo della vita attiva che nella giustizia si assomma. E Matelda è l'immagine di tal simbolo: sta a Lia, come Beatrice a Rachele' (ibidem)*. At the end of his journey in Hell Dante acquires the virtues pertaining to *vita activa*, or, metaphorically speaking, marries Leah. In contrast, through his journey in Purgatory Dante/Jacob becomes worthy of Beatrice/Rachel. Nonetheless, in the Garden of Eden Dante encounters first Leah's 'double', Matelda:

E' sì dunque la vita attiva, perché muove le belle mani; ma non è la fatica...E' un lavoro dunque ch'ella fa, ma a somiglianza di quello che fa Dio, che di ogni operazione sua si diletta vedendo che ella è bene e assai bene. Matelda segue, quanto può, come il discente fa il maestro, l'arte dell'onnipotente artefice. Matelda è la figlia della natura, è l'arte nipote a Dio. (ibidem 719)

Matelda is art and art is situated between action and contemplation. Indeed, although it is an activity, it is not labour, as one finds joy while practising it. Furthermore, art is a reward per se for those who practice it, and therefore it differs radically from any other human profession, as it does not have any external goal and does not result in the acquisition of any external good. Therefore, it is more similar to contemplation, which is an end unto itself. In addition, like contemplation, art is 'innocent' because it is free from the desire for glory and from any ambition or greed, being in itself a source of fulfillment. Finally, art is creation and it is in this sense the noblest of all activities, as it repeats the work of God. Art

belongs to the children in spirit, however, not to those who are misguided and prone to their instincts, such as Dante in the dark wood, but to those who have reestablished within themselves the candor of innocence, which is the ultimate mark of wisdom and morality.

The allegory of the dark wood and the forest of Eden leads to a reflection on the role of modern poetry as occupying an intermediate space between action and contemplation. If contemplation involves the domain of pure theoretical speculation and action refers to all the practical and political activities of men, then artistic *poiesis* is neither the former nor the latter, although it contains elements of both. In fact, for Pascoli poetry stems from a particular gaze on the world, a *theorein* ultimately free from practical considerations. Nonetheless, poetry is creation and is therefore active. Furthermore engaged poetry, or more generally art, can definitely belong to the sphere of *vita activa* as it supports action, and it can be included in Hannah Arendt's definition of speech as a means of 'setting things into motion' (Arendt 177). As Arendt noticed, 'the specific content as well as the general meaning of action and speech may take various forms of reification in art works which glorify a deed or an accomplishment and, by transformation and condensation, show some extraordinary event in its full significance' (*ibidem* 187). However, the allegory of Matelda does not seem to indicate this type of poetry, but rather a kind of art serving no purpose apart from the contemplation of beauty. Writing poetry is 'doing nothing', and yet constitutes being engaged in constant *delectatio*, or having wonder for the world around, which results in artistic creation and which provides joy and satisfaction per se.

The two symbols of the dark wood and the Forest of Eden embody two opposite, yet very similar conditions: one is childish, the other child-like; one is sterile, the other is virginal; one represents ignorance, the other innocence. If the two symbols, as we have seen, represent Pascoli's twofold view on childhood, we can also use them to determine his view on

the status of art. On the one hand, art's purposelessness and lack of practical application may lead to a sort of spiritual *ignavia* and inactivity. On the other, the joy of poetic creation leads to inner peace and contentment, as well as restoring the candor of childhood in the human soul.

In Pascoli's analysis, the quintessential poetic condition is that of the eternal child, which is also moral, as it is not the true childhood, with its misguided instincts, but rather a state of mind. However, in the Dantean texts, poetry has an alternative avatar, that of the woman, as embodied by Matelda. The image of the child and that of the woman are complementary and they both serve as alternate representations of the condition of the modern poet, as they are both symbols of emasculation.

Pascoli was aware of scientific theories of his time equating women with children in the basis of their incapability of rational thinking, emotionality and imitative rather than logic skills. Children and women are similar inasmuch as they both an underdeveloped intellect, but while boys are bound to grow out of this condition, females are stuck forever in it, and were therefore labeled as 'extra-historical beings' (Marcolini 398). However, for the poet the paradigm established by science according to which the man is the superior element is somewhat reversed. For Pascoli, intuition, inventiveness and imagination are positive qualities, as they are the characteristics of mythical thinking, which is the foundation of poetry. The equation between woman and eternal child is made explicit in a passage from Pascoli's *Lezioni sulla Poesia Epica*: '*Quanta parte ha nella vita del fanciullo (e della donna-eterno fanciullo) il sogno*' (Da Rin 85). The woman is indeed an 'extra-historical being' as well as the eternal child, the infantile psyche which is present in all human beings and which makes them receptive to the consolation of poetry: '*Ma é veramente in tutti il fanciullo*

musico? Che in qualcuno non sia, non vorrei credere né ad altri né a lui stesso: tanta a me parrebbe di lui la miseria e la solitudine' (Pascoli *Poesie e Prose* II, 940).

Both the woman and the child are 'poetic' beings and they embody the characteristics of the modern poet. Conversely, for Pascoli modern poetry is child-like and feminine, precisely because it excludes the typically adult and male attributes: logic, rationality, virility and commitment to action, or in other words, the tools of the scientific mentality and of the *homo faber* which are responsible for modernization. Let us consider the particular position that the allegory of art, Matelda, occupies in the ascent from action to contemplation in the *Comedy*. Matelda is analogous to Leah, or *vita activa*, however, the type of activity that she represents is similar to contemplation, not the contemplation of the speculative *theorein*, but rather the enjoyment of beauty. In making art a female icon, Pascoli also genders the dichotomy between action and contemplation. In other words, contemplation in this specific context, as a characteristic of art is the 'other' of the modern world, which belongs to the sphere of action. On the other hand, art rescues the contemplative spirits from the danger of *ignavia* and chronic melancholia, as it is an activity involving creativity and self-fulfillment.

Interestingly, as Gioanola has noticed, unlike Dante, Pascoli's voyage in the three realms of the afterlife does not continue in Heaven, but ends with Matelda in the forest of Eden (Gioanola 44). In fact, Pascoli's exegesis is mostly concerned with Hell and Purgatory, and with the characters appearing in these two realms, than with Paradise. Dante's voyage is intended as a journey towards full rationality and the knowledge of good and evil. In Pascoli's view, Paradise represents the ultimate achievement of mankind, rational morality and the quiescence of every deviating and depraving desire. Nonetheless, Pascoli follows another path, a path of regression to the 'happy ignorance of pure sensitivity' (*ibidem* 46), which leads to the domain of art and poetry. At the same time, the pleasures of imagination are not

solipsistic, as they induce a state of mind that is not a neurotic escape from reality but rather a teaching for morality who those who are not educated enough to understand philosophy.

In conclusion, in Pascoli's interpretation Dante is no longer the symbol of engaged poetry, as purported by nineteenth century culture. On the contrary, Pascoli reads the *Divine Comedy* as the parable of the poet's withdrawal from the *vita activa* in favour of his reinstatement as a teacher of morality. Indeed, the moral function of poetry is not associated with any civil or political mission, but it is to provide contentment and to temporarily restore the bliss of childhood.

This view of Dante can be explained with the historical circumstances of Pascoli's life and with his cultural background. In fact, Pascoli was close to the circle of aesthetes of *Il Marzocco*, who preached the abstention of the man of letter from society and considered art as a good in itself. At the same time, Pascoli's position differs from that of the Italian Aesthetic movement. Indeed, the identification with Dante and the importance that Pascoli places on the *Divine Comedy* as an educational bestseller reveal that he wishes to see the poet not isolated in the ivory tower of literature but restored as a voice of wisdom in the modern world. The salvific role that Pascoli attributes to poetry sets the role of the artist as the new priest of modernity.

2.3. Creating the Poeta Vate: Dante and D'Annunzio

In the last part of this chapter I investigate the relationship between the figure of Dante and Gabriele D'Annunzio's turn to the *vita activa*, which occurred in the eighteen-nineties. Dante as a 'cultural sign' in Gabriele D'Annunzio's lyrical and prose writings reflects the modern poet's shift from an aesthetic *Bildung* to his involvement with nationalism. As I have discussed in the first part of this chapter, a focus on the figure of Dante on the part of nineteenth century intellectuals often signifies their participation in the sphere of political

activity, however, here I show that in the case of D'Annunzio, Dante works as a role model even during the modern poet's aesthetic phase, although not as the writer and protagonist of the *Comedy*, but as the young lover of Beatrice of *La Vita Nuova*. D'Annunzio's deployment of Dante indicates his adherence first to the ideal of the poet as a contemplator, and, subsequently, as a master of heroism and civic virtues. Furthermore, D'Annunzio's adoption of Dante as the poet *par excellence* helps him shape the figure of the *poeta vate*, thus carving a role and a function for the man of letters in the context of the political situation of early twentieth century Italy.

In his book entitled *Nationalism and Culture* Jared Becker has studied D'Annunzio's turn towards politics, marked by a shift from decadent artist to poet-soldier. Becker claims that it is impossible to separate D'Annunzio's identity as an artist from his political vocation and, through an analysis of his literary production, sheds light on the development of his political persona (Becker 3). Furthermore, Becker has shown that D'Annunzio's shift from disengagement to engagement occurred in the mid-eighteen-nineties, and that this date corresponds to a series of crucial moments in the poet's life and artistic growth. In particular, this change is accompanied, and triggered by, D'Annunzio's newfound way of conceiving of the relationship between the poet and the crowd - his 'audience', his embrace of an imperialistic and expansionistic propaganda, his new reading of Darwinism, which led to the ideas of a regeneration for Italy and the supremacy of the Latin race, and, finally his creation of an activist paradigm for the artist, which involved the rejection of the decadent influences of his youth. According to Becker, between 1892 and 1896 D'Annunzio reinvented himself as a *poeta vate*, aiming at becoming the prophet of a 'Latin Renaissance' for Italy, while also refashioning the Risorgimental ideals. In contrast, before these years D'Annunzio had

absorbed and incorporated into his works many elements of the Decadent canon, in particular the autonomy of art and the artist's full dedication to the cult of Beauty.

Here I claim that the use of the figure of Dante in D'Annunzio's production parallels the shift described by Becker. In other words, Dante's image switches from being embedded in the discourse on aesthetic contemplation to becoming part of the religion of the nation, as D'Annunzio chooses a different model for his own persona and identity as an artist. Therefore, I analyze the occurrence of Dante as a character in D'Annunzio's writings and I show that the year 1896 coincides with the transformation of the icon of the medieval author into an emblem of nationalistic propaganda and political engagement.

The image of Dante as a poet of *Stilnovo* is present in many of D'Annunzio's early poems. Here, the medieval poet is portrayed in striking contrast to the Risorgimental depiction that was exalted in post-unification Italy. For instance, in the poem *A Firenze*, from the collection *Primo Vere* (1878-1881) D'Annunzio rewrites a Foscolian and Carduccian topic, the glory of Florence and his most illustrious citizen, Dante, in a way that highlights his allegiance to the new Aesthetic sensibility and strongly contrasts with the patriotic inspiration of the older poets.

The poem *A Firenze* begins with the poet remembering Florence, while watching the sunset on the sea: '*Seduto qui tra 'l susurrio de l'aure/ sotto quest'alto pino,/ in faccia a' colli, a la marina cerula/ a 'l tramonto divino*' (D'Annunzio *Versi d'amore e Gloria* I, 19, 1-4). The type of recollection described here looks very much like a reverie, as the poet is sitting and daydreaming, the preferred position of contemplative poetry according to Elio Gioanola (Gioanola 29). The memory of the city far away does not conjure up feelings of patriotic love but rather '*una ebrezza strana*' (*ibidem* 9) and recollections of '*possenti palpiti/ e di sognati amori,/ di illusioni care, di delirii, e di superbi ardori!...*' (21-24). Even the following

stanzas, devoted to the church of Santa Croce and *le urne de' Grandi*, do not turn into an exaltation of the great Italians of the past, but rather into a description of the solemn atmosphere of the place: *'mentre passavan mille raggi tremoli/ pe' vetri istoriati/ a rompere l'orror de l'ombre mistiche/ sotto gli archi slanciati'* (29-32).

The following eighteen stanzas can be divided in two main parts, each of them introduced by a memorial imperfect *'erano belli'*. In the first the poet remembers the beauty of Florence during the day and in the second, during the night. Both sections end (although the second one with a much higher number of verses) with the thoughts that the sight of the landscape, both diurnal and nocturnal, triggers in the poet: *'e io pensavo'*. In particular, the second section alludes more clearly to a passage in Ugo Foscolo's *I Sepolcri* where the author describes the moonlight on the hills of the city and the perfume of the flowers: *'Lieta dell'aer tuo veste la Luna/ di luce limpidissima i tuoi colli/ per vendemmia festanti, e le convalli/ popolate di case e d'oliveti/ mille di fiori al ciel mandano incensi'* (Foscolo *Sepolcri* 168-172, 149). In D'Annunzio's poem we also find an allusion to the moonlight: *'mentre la luna spargeva tra gli alberi/ splendori ed ombre molli'* (*Versi d'amore e gloria* 21, 75-76) and to the scent of flowers, which is described as being 'provocative', therefore introducing an element of sensuality in the text: *'e da' felici giardini spandeasi/ un provocante odore'* (89-90).

Interestingly, both sections of the poems devoted to the moonlight are followed by the character of Dante. However, in Foscolo's poem we see Dante portrayed as a political exile (*'e tu prima Firenze, udivi il carme/ che allegró l'ira al Ghibellin fuggiasco'* 173-174, 149-150), whereas in D'Annunzio he is remembered as the lover of Beatrice: *'e io pensavo all'Alighieri e all'estasi/ del suo sublime amore,'* (91-92). The name Dante recurs in the last two verses and it concludes the poem: *'-Ov'è il disio degli occhi miei - la giovane/ Musa*

cantava a Dante' (111-112), a quotation from Dante's *Rime* LXXXV²³. In between the two Dantean references D'Annunzio encloses a stereotypical representation of the medieval city of Florence, with its warriors and priests.

The juxtaposition of young D'Annunzio's poem *A Firenze* and Foscolo's *I Sepolcri* illustrates each poet's different treatments of the figure of Dante. D'Annunzio detaches himself from a patriotic reading and chooses to represent Dante as a poet of the *Stilnovo*, a choice more suited to D'Annunzio's poem, which emerges as an idealized recollection of the poet's youth in Florence rather than a memoir of Italy's glorious past.

In many other poems Dante is represented as the lover of Beatrice, or associated with a female figure, such as Matelda. Both images refer to Dante as a poet of divine love, as Matelda's presence in the *Comedy* offers an example of the way in which Stilnovistic style is woven into the texture of the poem. For example, the poem *Canto del Sole*, from *Canto Novo* (1882-1896) portrays the Tuscan landscape as populated by the women of *Stilnovo*, thirteenth century poets and fifteenth century painters:

*Da l'imo core mi rigermogliano
impazienti le strofe. Oh limpida
ebrezza diffusa pe' cieli
ove il sogno di Dante s'aperse!
Puri ne' l'albe i sogni erravano
di Beatrice; l'esili vergini
di Frate Giovanni e di Mino
sorridevano ne' vesperi biondi;
talor com'echi si ridestavano
la ballatella di Guido, il languido
sonetto di Cino, l'ottava melodiosa del Poliziano.
(D'Annunzio *Versi d'amore di gloria* I, 140, 37-48)*

²³ 'Dite: "Madonna, la venuta nostra/ è per raccomandarvi un che si dole,/dicendo: Ov'è il disio de li occhi miei?" (Alighieri, *Rime* LXXXV, 12-14, 110).

The figure of Dante in this poem, as an exponent of the *Stilnovo*, is situated in a cultural setting that gathers medieval and early Renaissance authors under a common aesthetic ideal. Such a setting is represented by the artistic current of Pre-Raphaelitism, with which D'Annunzio came into contact in the early eighteen-eighties. Indeed, a clear allusion to the pictorial style of the Preraphaelites is contained in the stanza preceding the verses quoted above: '*Venne una bianca figlia di Fiesole,/ alta e sottile, qual già gli artefici/ la sculsero in dolci alabastri/ e la pinsero in tavole d'oro*' (25-28). The portrayal of Dante in this fashion, as a poet of courtly love, shows how D'Annunzio absorbed some of the cultural trends characterizing British art and literature in the second half of the nineteenth century, which also found fertile ground in many intellectual circles in *fin de siècle* Italy.

Dante as a young poet of the *Stilnovo* was a popular subject of Victorian painting, due to the interest of British artists at that time for all things medieval and Italianate. As Giuliana Pieri has pointed out, 'it was the recovery of what was believed to be the portrait of Dante by Giotto in the Bargello chapel in Florence that firmly put Dante back on the Victorian cultural map. The portrait showed a youthful Dante, and it was this young Dante that entered the Victorian households with the reproduction of the popular painting by Henry Holiday, *The Meeting of Dante and Beatrice* (1860)' (Pieri "Dante and the Pre-Raphaelites" 110).

The image of Dante prompted by the Pre-Raphaelites contrasts strikingly with the icon of the poet as a national hero, which had inspired Romantic poets and the fathers of the Italian Risorgimento. As Martin McLaughlin writes, 'the different perceptions of Dante drawn by [Thomas] Carlyle and Rossetti are indicative of this shift in sensibilities between their two generations, and between early Romanticism and the Pre-Raphaelite movement; Carlyle's 'poet as a hero' is replaced by Rossetti's poet as a lover' (McLaughlin, Introduction 9).

The representation of Dante as a poet of courtly love, as portrayed by D'Annunzio, is embedded in the cultural atmosphere of Italian Aestheticism, which was inspired by Pre-Raphaelitism. Firstly, D'Annunzio was deeply inspired by Rossetti's Dantean paintings²⁴, which influenced his representation of female beauty. Pieri has shown that D'Annunzio derived from Rossetti the ideal of an extenuated and ethereal beauty, as portrayed in the painting *Beata Beatrix* (Pieri "D'Annunzio and Alma Tadema" 368). It was Italian painters such as Giuseppe Cellini, Giulio Aristide Sartorio and other members of *In arte libertas*, all followers of the Pre-Raphaelite style, who set out to illustrate *Isaotta Guttadauro*, arguably the most medievalizing of D'Annunzio's poems (see for example Sartorio's depiction of Beatrice visiting Dante at his desk, Fig. I).

In this phase of D'Annunzio's artistic production the female figures closely resemble the women of Rossetti's paintings, either in their elusive and mysterious looks or in their purity (see for example the two sonnets *Gorgon* and *Le Due Beatrici* in *Chimera*). Moreover, the attitude of the male protagonist, usually the lyrical I of the poem, is that of a lover and a contemplator. This representation is meaningful in the context of the views on the nature of art as the result of an act of contemplation, which attains the pure form behind everyday reality. The man in Rossetti's paintings and in D'Annunzio's poems embodies the contemplator, whereas the woman manifests the epiphany of beauty, which constitutes the foundation of art. According to Salvatore Baglio, in this phase of D'Annunzio's artistic development the woman also embodies Nature, partly because she is by constitution closer to it and partially because her 'otherness' reminds man of the distance between himself and the natural world (Baglio 600). Nature is a forbidden *hortus conclusus* which may only be

²⁴ It is possible, as Corrada Biazzo Curry suggests, that the poem *Beatitudine* in *Alcyone* is inspired by Rossetti's painting *Salutatio Beatricis*, which illustrates Dante's encounter with Beatrice (Biazzo Curry 60).

contemplated from afar, and the separateness of which allows only temporary epiphanies and visions, as for instance in Charles Baudelaire's poem *Correspondances*: '*La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers/ Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles*' (Baudelaire *Correspondances* 1-2, 87). Salvatore Baglio argues that in D'Annunzio's poems the lyrical I identifies itself with an eye that contemplates the woman and Nature (*ibidem* 601). Indeed, in the poem *Vas Spirituale*, in *Chimera*, the image of the woman is enclosed in a frame of astral emblems and other elements of the natural world, and she herself is a symbol to be deciphered: '*Ella, rigida e pura entro la stola,/pensa ad una verità teologale./ Chiari i segni de 'l ciel zodiacale/ a lei giran la chioma di viola*' (D'Annunzio *Versi* 500, 12-15). Moreover, in the poem *Al Poeta Andrea Sperelli*, in the same collection, the protagonist, the poet Andrea Sperelli, is portrayed as interrogating a mysterious androgynous creature who knows the secret of life but refuses to reveal it: '*In vano, in vano,/ Giovine, t'affatichi a penetrarmi*' (590, 64-64).

Within this anti-positivistic and anti-naturalistic framework we can understand the significance of the figure of Dante as a young lover of Beatrice. The perception of Dante as lover is opposed to Dante as national icon, which had already become trite nationalistic rhetoric by the second decade of unified Italy. Furthermore, Dante of the *Vita Nuova*, as opposed to the author of the *Comedy* is not an icon for the masses, but for the adepts of the cult of Beauty, as the latter is deeply connected with the idea of art as asceticism, sublimation and contemplation.

D'Annunzio's portrayal of Dante changed significantly in the last decade of the nineteenth century, as a result of the poet's 'turn to action'. In this period D'Annunzio attempted to depart from his identity as the Italian equivalent of the French *décadents*,

although he never fully abandoned the *Weltanschauung* of Aestheticism, as such view was deeply interwoven with his personal vision of the world.

According to Becker, the Italians demonstrated a reluctance to incorporate the ideas of decline and dissolution so proudly celebrated by French authors, due to the fact that after the Risorgimento 'there was a widespread expectation in Italy that culture-poets, artists, journalists, educators- would play a special role in raising up the nation' (Becker 131-133). At the height of his creative career D'Annunzio became receptive to the possibility of reinventing himself by exploiting the resurgent nationalistic wave that characterized Italian society at the turn of the century. He saw the opportunity to reactivate the mechanisms behind the relationship between the man of culture and the popular masses, which had driven the process of Italy's unification. D'Annunzio's return to the Risorgimento implied a refashioning of the myth of the *poeta vate*. As Becker has shown, the fundamental ingredients of D'Annunzio's nationalistic formula were the notions of regeneration, which he derived from pseudo-scientific studies on degeneration drawn from Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and from his personal reading of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy, and the creation of a national liturgy (Becker 134).

Within this context, as during the Risorgimento, the figure of Dante is based on Carlyle's image of the poet-hero, and it is again the author of the *Comedy* who is evoked, rather than the young poet of the *Vita Nuova*. Dante is a recurring element in the rhetoric of D'Annunzio's nationalistic propaganda, which he employed in several speeches designed to persuade the public to support his ideas of a 'Latin Renaissance'. D'Annunzio reinterprets, however, the Risorgimental depiction of Dante in a very personal way using specific imagery, which differ from the traditional portrayal of the medieval poet.

The crucial years of D'Annunzio's turn to political engagement lie between 1890 and 1897. These years saw the publication of the preface for the journal *Il Convito* (1895), the manifesto of D'Annunzio's 'militant Aestheticism', and of *Le Vergini delle Rocce*, his first politically engaged novel. Finally, in 1897 D'Annunzio was elected into Parliament, with the support of the conservative party, although he declared himself 'beyond left and right' during the campaign. D'Annunzio's entry into politics also marks the transformation of the figure of Dante, from poet of courtly love to symbol of the spirit of the nation.

In 1896 D'Annunzio wrote a speech commemorating his friend Enrico Nencioni, who had passed away that same year. This long obituary already anticipates the later depiction of Dante. Interestingly, D'Annunzio included this text in the collection entitled *Il Libro Ascetico della Giovane Italia*, which he compiled in 1926 and which contains his most significant examples of nationalistic prose. D'Annunzio portrays Nencioni exclusively as a characteristic poet of *Italianità*, thus directing the memory of Nencioni away from his friend's life-long engagement with foreign literature, specifically British. His commemoration of Nencioni is called *Comandamenti della patria celestiali e terrestri, nel culto dell'aspettazione* (D'Annunzio *Prose* 423-428) and even after a first reading one can see that it is not only an obituary but also, and more importantly, a political text.

The obituary begins by depicting the Tuscan cemetery where Nencioni is buried and where a group of young poets gather to visit his tomb. The event is connoted with religious terms: '*alcuni giovani fedeli convennero alla tomba di un poeta religioso*' (*ibidem* 423), however, the religion evoked here is not Christianity but rather the cult of the nation and the homeland, the *patria*. Indeed, D'Annunzio explains that the *giovani fedeli* at Nencioni's tomb are the new generation of young Italians who long for a renewal of their nation: '*l'ansietà della generazione nuova verso una vita più pura e più larga, verso forme di conoscenza più*

libere e più dritte, verso il ritorno necessario delle forze ideali che si dipartirono dal cielo della patria' (423-424). In his capacity as a poet, Nencioni is remembered not only as an educator, but also as a father: '*dinanzi all'immagine paterna*' (423). The image of the old poet and his young followers recalls the Socratic circle of young Athenians, which D'Annunzio evokes at the beginning of *Le Vergini delle Rocce*. The figure of the poet mirrors that of Socrates in the novel inasmuch as he is a revelator and a spiritual guide for his male disciples. Furthermore, the initial description of the landscape is not simply accessorial, as D'Annunzio uses it to introduce the theme of unity between the land and its people. In fact, in imagining the epigraphy on the tombstone of his friend, D'Annunzio claims that Nencioni '*condusse i suoi discepoli a leggere nelle linee del paese italiano i comandamenti che vi stampò l'antico genio*' (424). In this text the landscape represents a source of inspiration, as its features reveal the identity of its inhabitants, who are bound in a mystical unity with the land to which they belong: '*Veramente nessuna altra terra ha una rispondenza tanto perfetta con la struttura morale e mentale dei suoi grandi uomini*' (426). D'Annunzio argues that when this harmony is broken, there exists an urgent need to recreate it by looking at the landscape, which contains the spiritual image of Italy, *l'effigie dell'Italia bella*, a recurrent theme in his nationalistic prose.

The recovery of Italian identity is portrayed as a process of looking at oneself through a 'better' mirror, in an attempt to see clearly the features that characterize one's image and to regain consciousness of one's true self, in times where such a perception is blurred. The function of the poet as father and educator is to underscore national identity by means of the connection between landscape and people. Furthermore, the *effigie* of Italy seems to be more visible in the life and works of its greatest poets and men, who bear a stronger resemblance to

the motherland. It is within this conceptual framework that the figure of Dante appears in Nencioni's obituary.

In the second paragraph of this text, D'Annunzio imagines that the young poets at Nencioni's tomb praise their dead friend with the words of Dante. The image of Dante, together with the sight of the landscape immediately conjures up a mystical proclamation, the prophecy of a political and spiritual renewal for Italy (425-426). Both Dante and Francesco D'Assisi, who is also mentioned in these lines, are amongst the greatest representatives of the mystical identification between Italy and its people: *'E considerando le figure di quei due uomini che furon generati dalle profonde viscere della nostra terra e fatti a simiglianza della divina madre, non credettero eglino di ricevere dai colli dalle acque dalle pietre dalle glebe dalle radici e dai fiori il messaggio d'una novella apparizione certa?'* (425). Furthermore, in the following paragraph D'Annunzio recalls that Nencioni considered the *Divine Comedy* as the quintessential book of *Italianità*: *'Quid melius Roma? Con questo sentimento egli riprendeva il volume di Dante e diceva: Ecco il Libro!'* (427). Here Dante is once again the author of the *Comedy*, which D'Annunzio introduces by using a religious periphrasis modeled on the *Ecce Ancilla Domini* of the Gospels. In this text the *Comedy* represents the Holy Book of the new religion of the *patria*. In fact, the commemoration of Nencioni ends with a mention of the *culto dell'aspettazione*, the preparation for the mystical advent of Italy's new season of glory.

Another text that frames Dante in the context of D'Annunzio's nationalism is the speech entitled *Per la Dedicazione dell'Antica Loggia Fiorentina del Grano al Novo Culto di Dante*. In 1900 the city of Florence devoted the loggia of Orsanmichele to a series of lectures on Dante, the *Lecturae Dantis*. Giosue Carducci was supposed to give the inaugural speech, due to his status as national poet and illustrious scholar of Dante, however, as Carducci was

too sick to be present at the inauguration, the organizers of the lectures chose to replace him with D'Annunzio, who was very happy to play such an important role in what he immediately saw as an event '*di carattere nazionale*' (Andreoli, notes to D'Annunzio *Prose* 3762). On this occasion he produced a speech, which, as Anna Maria Andreoli points out, would have been perfectly suited to a session in Parliament (*ibidem*).

At the very beginning D'Annunzio sets a political tone to his lecture, inasmuch as he declares that the cult of Dante sustains the hopes of those who actively fight for the future glory of Italy:

A qual fine fu costituita questa Società dantesca italiana e riaperto questo tempio cittadino se non al fine di riaffermare la sovrana dignità dello spirito e di significare, in commemorazione dell'Esule che invano sperò di vincere col suo poema sacro la crudeltà ond'era serrato furo del bell'ovile, di significare- dico- che la novissima Italia prepara una miglior sorte a quanti s'affaticano e lottano per farsi degni di aggiungere una qualche pietra armoniosa all'edifizio innalzato dai padri? (D'Annunzio *Prose* 2212)

D'Annunzio explicitly distances himself from the philologists and scholars of Dante, inasmuch as he sees these lectures more as an occasion to reinforce the Italian identity by stirring up nationalistic feelings amongst the audience than a mere cultural event:

E io penso che i promotori di queste letture per il popolo non abbiano voluto soltanto dare occasione agli illustri dantisti di esporre le loro dotte ricerche in modo da renderle accessibili alle menti dei più, ma abbiano voluto principalmente istituire una tribuna libera ove gli uomini d'intelletto, al contatto con il terribile spirito di Dante, mostrino la lor potenza vitale, la forza viva del loro pensiero, la sincerità del loro nutrimento, la lor facoltà di risonare nell'anima della moltitudine, e con l'aiuto del Libro portentoso cerchino di ristabilire ne' suoi lineamenti essenziali l'immagine difformata della Patria. (2213)

D'Annunzio insists upon the power of the words of the 'men of intellect' to act upon reality and employs a vocabulary imbued with the semantics of liveliness (*potenza vitale, forza viva, nutrimento*), which implicitly creates an opposition between these intellectuals and the erudite research of the '*illustri dantisti*', which he mentions in the first lines of the passage

quoted above. D'Annunzio calls for intellectuals to restore the power of the word and to make words an instrument of political action²⁵.

In his inaugural speech for the lectures on Dante D'Annunzio pays homage to the figure of Carducci, the official *poeta vate* of Italy, and also situates himself amongst the nationalist canon. At the same time, D'Annunzio's portrayal of Dante moves away from the traditional depiction of this national icon. Early in the text D'Annunzio acknowledges Carducci as the original speaker, and, while praising the absent poet he takes the opportunity to express his own views on the role of the poet in society:

Riconoscendo il beneficio che la nazione ha ricevuto da lui e rendendogli grazie e facendogli onore, noi riconosciamo nel tempo medesimo la dignità civile delle lettere, il vero posto che oggi spetta all'artefice della parola, non più considerato come il sottile ornamento di una civiltà laboriosa, ma come il primo dei cittadini, come il più alto esemplare di coscienza prodotto da un popolo, come il testimone, l'interprete e il messaggero del suo tempo. (2213)

Here D'Annunzio presents the poet as a citizen, the greatest representative of national consciousness. According to D'Annunzio, Carducci himself, if he had been present, would have recognized that the occasion of Dante's lectures is not a display of erudition but a '*focolare di vita energica aperto nel centro della città*' (*ibidem*). In evoking Carducci, D'Annunzio acknowledges him as the most prominent figure of *poeta vate*, a category in which he also includes himself, while at the same using the authority of the older poet to support his own opinions.

It is only after this initial homage to Carducci, as if he was speaking in the illustrious poet's shadow, that D'Annunzio introduces his own depiction of Dante. First, he recasts the

²⁵ It is important to remark that in 1900 D'Annunzio was involved in the completion of his novel *Il Fuoco*, where the main theme is precisely the role of the poetic and oral word as a trigger for action, and the new relationship between the poet and the masses.

idea of the poet as father, which he had used in Nencioni's obituary, as a metaphor for generation and fertilization: the words of the Dante are like seeds, as they propagate energy and vitality in his progeny (2214). His virtue is '*virtù di fecondazione*' (*ibidem*). Secondly, he reiterates the idea of the 'lost image' of Italy and the necessity of restoring it with the help of the Book: '*Il suo canto enuncia le leggi necessarie a cui la nostra stirpe deve obbedire per ritrovare la sua potenza. Egli soltanto ci aiuterà a rintracciare l'effigie smarrita dell'Italia bella*' (*ibidem*). The *Comedy* enters once more into the liturgy of the *culto dell'aspettazione*, as it helps prepare for the advent of new men, who are able not only to think but also to actively fight for the 'raising of the nation': '*egli soltanto ci aiuterà a preparare l'avvento degli uomini che attendiamo, capaci di conciliare in una medesima idealità le grandi azioni e i grandi pensieri; egli soltanto infine potrà suscitare nei sinceri e nei forti il sentimento della vita eroica*' (*ibidem*). Lastly, D'Annunzio expands the concept of the identity between Italy and its great men by declaring that not only is Dante's poetry imbued with the elements constituting the Italian landscape (the mountains and the sea), but that his poetic *vis* is such that he continues the work of Nature:

I versi di Dante sono i musicali fratelli delle montagne, dei ghiacciai, dei fiumi, delle forze originarie. La medesima verità si esprime in essi e nelle scritture misteriose che fanno aspre le rupi... Le comunioni di questo poeta con la Natura hanno a volta a volta una terribilità e una soavità non conosciute da alcun altro' (2216)

La sua energia di contemplazione trasmuta la sua mente "in una similitudine di mente divina", come dice Leonardo, nella quale si appaga la perpetua aspirazione della Natura verso i tipi ch'ella non giunge a stampare integri nelle sue impronte... Veramente, secondo l'espressione di Bacone, l'uomo si aggiungeva alla Natura per continuare l'opera della divina Madre. (2216-2217).

It is important to note a shift from the poet as the contemplator of the woman and the mysteries of Nature, to the poet as the active mind who repeats the work of God in creating

art. Contemplation is no longer for pure enjoyment and the celebration of Beauty, but serves to create new worlds and new ways of looking at the world. In this regard, the poet is a *poietes*, a maker. In this text Dante's poetry is described as a plastic art, as it is not only made of elements from the landscape, but at the same time it forges the landscape: '*Quante volte, aprendo il poema, non vediamo noi nella materia verbale le forme organizzarsi colorarsi atteggiarsi con la stessa intensità con cui esse potrebbero apparirci sotto il sole?*' (*ibidem*). As Paolo Valesio has suggested, D'Annunzio might have taken the idea of the identification between Dante and the landscape, and in particular the mountains, from Victor Hugo's sonnet *Ecrit sur un exemplaire de la Divina Commedia* (1843) (Valesio 91-92). The image of Dante as a mountain, however, struck the audience at the time as a magnificent and original invention, as Angelo Conti observed in his report on the inaugural speech, published in the *Marzocco* on January 14, 1900: '*Nessuno, o pochi, dopo il Carlyle, avevano veduto Dante come una forza della Natura, nessuno aveva sentito passare nel suo poema le stesse forze che generano le selve e le montagne*' (reported by Andreoli and Lorenzini in the notes to *Versi* 1018).

In the inaugural speech for the dedication of the loggia to the Dantean conferences, as well as in many others from the mid-eighteen-nineties into the first decade of the twentieth century, D'Annunzio sets out to create an Olympus of Italic gods, namely Michelangelo, Leonardo, Dante, Garibaldi and even Carducci after his death in 1907. Indeed, these great representatives of Italy's glorious past are evoked, in order for them to reawaken a sense of

heroism in the new Italian nation, in line with the tradition of political utopias of renewal²⁶. They are the prophets of D'Annunzio's Latin Renaissance.

The divinization of Italy's great men, specifically of Dante, is evident in the poem *A Dante* contained in the *Laude Elettra* (1904). This poem was finished in December 1899, close to the time of the speech for the Dantean lectures, to which it is quite similar. The poem occupies the second place in the collection, preceded by the ode *Alle Montagne* and followed by *Al Re Giovine*, dedicated to the newly crowned Vittorio Emanuele III. This progression expresses the hierarchy of land, glorious ancestors and the present time. The ode has a liturgical structure, as it alternates narrative sections with invocations to Dante in a litanical form.

In the first three stanzas Dante is again described by using the image of the mountain: *'e tu come una rupe, come un'isola montuosa,/ come una solitudine di pensiero e potenza,/ come una taciturna mole di dolor meditabondo* (*Versi* 257, 12-14). D'Annunzio portrays Dante as a solitary seer, raised in loneliness on the top of the mountains: *'O nutrito in disparte su le cime del sacro monte,/ abbeverato solo nell'albe al segreto fonte/ delle cose immortali'* (*Versi* 258, 34-36). The image of the poet-prophet evokes Nietzsche's ideal of a hero based on the values of solitude, distance and difference, as embodied by Zarathustra. As Jeffrey Schnapp has shown, the aristocratic image helps D'Annunzio elaborate his ideal of a 'realm of force', constituted by strong and noble men, as a solution to the ongoing crisis in Italian society (Schnapp 252).

The fourth stanza consists of three parts, each of them ending with a refrain which echoes the Christian liturgy of the Rosary: *'noi t'invochiamo;..noi ti preghiamo; ... noi ti*

²⁶ See for instance William Wordsworth's sonnet *Milton! Thou shouldst be living at this hour*: 'O raise us up, return to us again; And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power' in *The Oxford Book of English verse*, ed. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (Oxford, Clarendon) 1939.

attendiamo' (258, 48-51-55). Each part develops an aspect of the cult of Dante, as envisioned by D'Annunzio. The first reworks the idea of Dante as a father, inasmuch as he is seen as the nurturer who increases the vigour of the race: *'tu che cresci il vigore della stirpe'* (46-47). The second addresses Dante as the prophet of Italy's destiny: *'tu che col tuo canto disveli agli uomini i cammini invisibili e discopri i volti nascosti dei destini'* (49-50). Finally, the third invokes Dante as the one who will recover the ancient virtue of Italy: *'tu che risusciti l'antica virtù delle contrade'* (52).

Dante becomes an essential element of the religion of the nation and the *culto dell'aspettazione*. In the following stanza he is compared to Jesus, as he is the Messiah of the future glory of Italy: *'perocché tu sii pur sempre atteso in prodigi, come il Figlio/ del tuo Dio'* (56-57). Dante is also a symbol of action, in the sense that his image should inspire great deeds: *'là dove un'opra si chiuse e là dove s'apre un germe,/ suono il tuo nome santo,/ e il tuo nome pei forti sia come lo squillo degli oricalchi,/ e solo il nomar del tuo nome, come il turbine agita i lembi/ d'un gran vessillo, scuota nei suoi mari e nei suoi valchi/ l'Italia inerme'* (258-259, 61-66). It is not Dante's commitment to the *vita activa*, which De Sanctis recognized as a model for the intellectuals of the *Risorgimento*, that interests D'Annunzio. Instead, the Abruzzese poet intends to make Dante a trope for the spirit of the nation, which will inflame the Italians' passions and inspire devotion to their homeland. The image of the medieval poet in D'Annunzio's treatment loses almost all human traits, as he is portrayed as being both a saint of the religion of the *patria* and an element of the Italian landscape.

In the following two stanzas D'Annunzio creates an opposition between the emperor and the pope, which symbolize the official political powers ruling Italy, and the force of the nation. Building upon a Dantean theme, the condemnation of the corruption of the Papacy, D'Annunzio depicts in vivid terms the mixture of luxury and dissolution characterizing the

rulers of Italy: *'Dove sono i pintefici e gli imperatori? Splendenti erano nella specie dell'oro, e stampavano con i piedi/ obliqui le vestigia sanguigne, vestiti dell'antica/ frode, e i lor vestimenti/ odoravano. Rotti come i sermenti aridi, perduti/ come i fuscilli nella tempesta'* (67-71). By contrast, the liveliness of the nation and the virtue of the Italian spirit, as embodied by Dante, are expressed by means of a vocabulary imbued with the semantics of freshness and vitality:

*Ma il cuore della nazione è come la forza delle sorgenti
meraviglioso;
e tu rimani alzato nel cospetto della nazione
con la tua parola eterna nella tua bocca respirante
col tuo potere eterno nel tuo pugno vivo; e la tua stagione
sta su la nostra terra
senza mutarsi; e la tua virtù è dentro le radici
di nostra vita come il sale è nel mare, come la fecondità è nella nostra terra
(76-83)*

The next section of the ode *A Dante* is devoted to the theme of the Italian landscape, *l'Italia bella*. Here D'Annunzio introduces another Dantean element, the flame, which symbolizes, in the modern poet's view, renewal and purification of Italy: *'L'Italia bella, come una figura emersa dall'interno/ abisso del tuo dolore, creata dalla tua stessa fiamma, coi suoi monti/ coi suoi piani... e la tua rampogna la rifece sacra, la tua preghiera/ fece risplendere di purità le sue membra schiave'* (90-97). Like Dante's infernal fire, which purges and punishes the sinners of medieval Florence, for D'Annunzio the flame evokes the heroic passion and the power of will that can rescue Italy. In his analysis of the liturgy of nationalistic movements, George Mosse notes that the flame often symbolizes energy, force and beauty, set against modern degeneration: 'the beauty of the flame [represents] the strenuous effort of matter to become light. This ideal formed an obvious contrast to the grayness of bourgeois existence and the disputations of parliamentary democracy, which he [D'Annunzio] hated from the very beginning' (Mosse 91). The last two sections are again

liturgical, as they repeat the invocations to Dante presented in the fourth stanza, and their repetitive and insistent rhythm, together with the accumulation and intensification of the images brings the poem to its final climax.

While the image of Dante in D'Annunzio's works from the end of the nineteenth century seems to conform to the parameters set forth by the official cult of this figure. The imagery through which he recasts this icon illustrates D'Annunzio's view on the role of the poet in modern society and the way in which he engages the particular political climate of *fin de siècle* Italy. Firstly, in his nationalistic writings D'Annunzio creates a symbiotic osmosis between Dante and the Italian landscape. The native soil and its natural beauty represent a recurring element of modern nationalistic rhetoric. George Mosse has explained the use of this image in the context of a rapidly industrializing and urbanizing Europe, where the population was struggling to become accustomed to unprecedented changes:

The nation appropriated the past, preindustrial myths and symbols in order to veil the actual speed of time... The native landscape with its flowers, woods and mountains stood outside the rush of time and the nervousness of the age. The quest for nature was linked to the quest for history- the appropriation of a classical, medieval or Renaissance past- which took place not only in nationalist ideology but also in the private lives and tastes of the bourgeoisie. (Mosse 2)

In linking Dante, an icon of Italy's illustrious past, with an emotional perception of the native land, D'Annunzio rooted his nationalistic propaganda on solid ground, that is, on a combination of elements which were bound to excite and, at the same time, reassure his readership: *'Così, se svolgiamo il libro di Dante l'effigie stessa dell'Italia bella ci appare come se la vedessimo da un culmine sublime e c'inebria l'odore del nostro suolo in cui le radici delle memorie sono mescolate alle radici degli allori e delle querci'* (D'Annunzio *Prose* 2218).

It is important to recall that the mythicization of the pre-industrial past did not conflict with the process of modernization. Instead, both phenomena grew in a dialectical relationship, formally opposing, yet agreeing with each other in promoting the might of the nation. D'Annunzio's *Laudi* and his later productions are a telling example of such a relationship. Imbued with a revival of the past, they also include and celebrate the power of man's new technological achievements.

Another important aspect of D'Annunzio's refashioning of the cult of Dante is his insistence on the power of the poetic word. Dante's poetry is not only beautiful, but it is powerful, inasmuch as it stirs the spirits of the people and reawakens in them the impetus of heroism. Moreover, his voice communicates to the people a course of action, as well as inspiring them to do great deeds.

Beyond the representation of Dante lies D'Annunzio's preoccupation with the role of the poet in politics. In the nineteenth century, the rise of modern nationalism involved a quest for self-representation, not of a monarchic dynasty but of the nation. Such a quest led to the creation of a new political style, which operated within the framework of myth and symbols closely linked to concepts of beauty in which poetry played a crucial role (Mosse 88) and in which the poet therefore had the chance to actively participate and to affect the masses.

The importance attributed to the poetic word has to do with its role in the liturgy of the nation. In 1889, in *Il Piacere* Andrea Sperelli affirms that 'verse is everything', '*il verso é tutto*' (D'Annunzio *Prose di Romanzi* 145), insofar as it captures the essence of reality in a most condensed and vivid expressions. After his turn to politics D'Annunzio engaged with the task of extending the power of the poetic word so that it reached the masses, as exemplified in the novel *Il Fuoco*. In this novel he illustrates the relationship between the poet and his audience -the crowd- as one of leadership and guidance, where the role of the

oral word is to be a triggerer for action. In fact, in the *Laudi* and in the many of his public speeches before and during World War I D'Annunzio deploys many techniques belonging to oral and popular poetry: repetition, refrains, rhythm, and imagery borrowed from the Christian liturgy, a tradition deeply rooted in Italian society. Within this context the poetic word serves as an instrument of *vita activa*, according to Hannah Arendt's definition, as it serves as a means of setting things into motion (Arendt 177).

One last observation concerns the role of Dante in D'Annunzio's post-World War I writings. According to Pericles Lewis, after the War D'Annunzio set out to reinterpret the events of the War in terms of a narrative of sacrifice and redemption (Lewis 178-180). In other words, D'Annunzio recast his own adventure as a soldier, his accident and his recovery as a story of the redemption of the Italian nation through the sacrifices of its leader. He identifies his own body with the national will and sees his physical pain as the necessary sacrifice thanks to which the nation resurrects. By the same token, his healing symbolizes the resurgence of Italy, purified and regenerated by the redemptive power of war.

Evidently based on the story of the death and resurrection of Christ, the structure of the *Divine Comedy* provides the underlying thread that guides D'Annunzio's story of redemption. Lewis has studied the structure of the 1921 version of the *Notturmo*, and has shown that the three parts into which this work is divided correspond to the three *cantiche* of Dante's poem. D'Annunzio identifies with Dante and posits his time of suffering, when he lay in bed with his wounded eye, as a descent into Hell, his convalescence as Purgatory and, finally, his return to battle as Paradise. As Lewis points out:

the *Notturmo* reveals, through its celebration of the unity between the recovering body and the reintegrated will, the transfiguration of even the most private intimate space by the myth of the nation-state and the nationalistic ideal of a total fusion of state and society, public and private, through the redemptive power of war

and the heroic figure of the leader whose most private act is a mystical rite for the community of the nation. (Lewis 178)

The Dantean references continue beyond the *Notturmo*, in the pieces of prose gathered under the name *Il Libro Ascetico della Giovane Italia* (1926). In these texts D'Annunzio expands upon the identification of Dante and the Italian landscape and interweaves it with the narrative of sacrifice and redemption. The mountains of the Carso, where many of the battles of World War I were fought, are seen as the living embodiment of Dante's *Inferno*, as well as the locus of sacrifice both for the poet-soldier and for the Italian nation:

Voglio che tu mi risponda a questa domanda. Sai tu che è il Carso? Noi già avevamo in antico qualcosa che somigliava immortalmemente al Carso: ed era l'Inferno di Dante. La sublimazione dello Spirito è nell'Inferno o nel Paradiso? Non rispondere se non sai. Sappi che oggi in Italia c'è un luogo dello Spirito, c'è un luogo inviolabile dello Spirito, c'è uno spazio spirituale dell'Eroismo, c'è una grande ara ideale del Sacrificio.. V'è la prima Cantica di Dante, che è l'Inferno; e v'è la prima Cantica del Fante, che è il Carso. (D'Annunzio Prose 486-487)

Conversely, the ultimate meaning of the *Divine Comedy* shifts in these later texts to one of a parable of sacrifice, with its narrative of descent and ascent, from the sight of pain to the contemplation of light:

Entrando nella zona del fuoco, voi giovinetti colti e incolti, voi nel primissimo fiore, voi ancor caldi del fiato materno, avete appreso in un subito quel che all'adult onon rivelano anni e anni di pensiero studioso. Quel che Dante credette di comprendere nel mezzo del cammin di sua vita, salendo di pena in pena e di lume in lume attraverso i tre mondi, voi lo avete intraveduto in un baleno di cigli. Nessun potere, né divino né umano eguaglia il potere del sacrificio, che si precipita nell'oscurità dell'avvenire. (543-544)

In these later texts Dante remains an icon of *vita activa* and he is still the alter ego of D'Annunzio. Before the war Dante represents the poet-prophet *par excellence*, through which D'Annunzio reveals his aspiration to become the leader of the cult of the nation by using the power of the poetic word to inspire great deeds. By contrast, in the aftermath of the War D'Annunzio is transfigured through the identification with the story of the *Divine Comedy*.

The events of the war become meaningful and their value is sanctified, as they facilitate the spiritual regeneration of the nation. Within this context, the sacralization of the war through literature leads to what Hannah Arendt calls the primary function of the *vita activa*, its struggle to attain immortality through the production of objects or the doing of deeds (Arendt 20).

The analysis of Dante's presence in D'Annunzio's writings elucidates how the figure of the medieval poet serves as an alter ego of the Abruzzese poet, as well as a model for the social function of the artist. The depiction of Dante as a mystical lover in D'Annunzio's early poetry reveals D'Annunzio's adoption of the Aesthetic code and his absorption of Angelo Conti's theory of artistic contemplation. Subsequently D'Annunzio refashions the Risorgimental portrayal of Dante as a patriot and he inserts it in the imagery of newly born nationalism. D'Annunzio's new representation of Dante differs significantly from the Risorgimental one, however, inasmuch the Florentine poet is no longer a man and a citizen of Italy but the embodiment of the national genius. Hence, his depiction closely resembles that of Papini and the intellectuals of *Il Leonardo*, which I have examined in the first chapter.

At the same time the figure of Dante lends D'Annunzio an imagery and vocabulary that lends itself to the creation of his own persona as Italy's *poeta vate*. The authority and the prestige of Dante allow D'Annunzio to re-establish the role of the poet as the spiritual leader of the nation, ad as the embodiment of *Italianità*, to which the Italian people should look for guidance and inspiration.

CHAPTER 3

THE ARTIST IN THE GARDEN

*Secondly: the artists, somewhat rarer than the religious yet still a not uncommon kind of man of the *vita contemplativa*, have as individuals usually been unbearable, capricious, envious, violent: this effect has to be set against the cheering and exalting effects of their works.*

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, Aphorism 41

At the turn of the twentieth century the concept of contemplation reflected the stance of the intellectuals as regards to their participation to the public sphere. The contemplative nature of poetry implied that men of letters set themselves above the contingencies of their historical time, carving out a role for themselves that would allow them to overcome the historical impasse of the sociopolitical conditions of *fin de siècle* Italy.

In this chapter, I present D'Annunzio's and Pascoli's positions on the function of poetry in the society of the late nineteenth century and their reflection on contemplation as withdrawal from public affairs. In particular, I focus on the image of the garden in Pascoli's and D'Annunzio's works as a metaphor for contemplation on which the two authors inscribe their ambivalent views on this concept. In the first part, I introduce the image of the garden as it first appeared in D'Annunzio's *Proemio* of the journal *Il Convito*, where it symbolizes the contemplative attitude of decadent artists. Subsequently I read Pascoli's introduction to his *Poemi Conviviali* as a response to D'Annunzio's *Proemio*. Intriguingly Pascoli here latches on to the image of the garden in order to claim the value of contemplation as a means of moral redemption. In the second part, I analyze the metaphor of the garden in D'Annunzio's novel *Le Vergini delle Rocce* (1896). For D'Annunzio, the garden is either a locus of pleasure, beauty, and the return to innocence, or else a visual representation of decadence and sterility. In the third part, I examine the image of the garden in Pascoli's poetry. In Pascoli's

works, seemingly humble images of gardening and cultivation actually reveal the high value that he places on the contemplative attitude of poetry as a way to achieve spiritual fulfillment.

3.1 The Artist in the Garden. Pascoli, D'Annunzio, and *Il Convito*.

The years 1895–1896 represented a crucial moment in the history of the newly unified Kingdom of Italy. In those years, the crisis that had affected the economy, the institutions, and the political situation of Italy since the early 1890's reached its peak. Indeed, since the late 1880's the country had been sliding into a deep recession, caused by a crisis in the banking sector as well as in agriculture and industry (Duggan 339–40). This general crisis culminated in the tragic outcome of the battle of Adua in March 1896, 'the worst defeat ever inflicted on a colonial power in Africa' (*ibidem* 347).

As I have previously shown, Italy's political situation had deep repercussions on intellectuals. For instance, those gathered around *Il Marzocco* expressed their critiques of the establishment by reviving the idea of the *vita contemplativa* as the only viable option for the man of letters, and by rejecting any involvement with politics. Although the experience of *Il Marzocco* paved the way for the new generation of engaged intellectuals of the early twentieth century, during the *fin de siècle* its position was firmly established on the side of *l'art pour l'art*. Indeed, *Il Marzocco* shared with French Symbolism the idea of the autonomy of art from ideology, and also from educational or propaganda purposes.

Il Convito, published between 1895 and 1907, took a different ideological stance from that of *Il Marzocco*. *Il Convito*'s ideology combined Aestheticism and political activism in the form of a battle to resurrect the glory of Italy's past and tradition. *Il Convito*'s ideology was informed by British Aestheticism, and the journal devoted ample space to Pre-Raphaelitism (which was seen as a revival of the Italian Middle Ages), while on the other hand purposefully excluding French Symbolism. In fact, the authors of the *Convito* opposed

French Symbolist aesthetics as a ‘waste of cognitive and creative energy in trying to establish new symbols, which would not be viable and recognizable within the acquired codes of reception anyway’ (Moroni 73). In his article ‘Nota su D.G. Rossetti pittore’ (1895), Sartorio formulated an opposition between French Symbolism and Pre-Raphaelitism, inasmuch as the latter did not strive to create new symbols, but rather revived the tradition of ancient Italian and Flemish painters (Sartorio 141–42). By opposing French Symbolism, the editors of *Il Convito* rejected the discourse on the crisis of society and the consequent withdrawal of the intellectual from the public sphere. On the other hand, by supporting Pre-Raphaelitism and the idea of Beauty as a supreme value, they were able to configure their cultural project in anti-positivistic terms while avoiding the code of ‘negative’ values and the extreme critique of modernity expressed by French artists (Moroni *ibidem*). The anti-positivistic reaction was recast as a recovery of the Renaissance, understood as an alternative to the process of barbarization and cultural homogenization that Italy was undergoing in the late nineteenth century. In addition, the importance placed on the national tradition of Italy made the journal palatable to intellectuals like Edoardo Scarfoglio, who was a fervent nationalist and a supporter of Italy’s imperialistic expansion.

Within the context of *Il Convito*, the ideal of contemplation lost its primacy. In the journal’s *Proemio*, written by D’Annunzio, the contemplative attitude that characterizes the figure of the artist on the pages of *Il Marzocco* is portrayed as idleness and sterility. In describing the mission of the new journal, and while introducing the very concept of a ‘militant’ Aestheticism, D’Annunzio distances himself from the idea of aesthetic contemplation shared by the contributors of *Il Marzocco*. On the other hand, amongst its most prestigious contributors *Il Convito* counted Pascoli, whose ideas on the role of the artists and the nature of art were much more attuned to *Il Marzocco*. In fact, *Il Convito* offered Pascoli

the opportunity to measure the distance between himself and D'Annunzio's turn to political engagement.

The experience of *Il Convito* sheds light on both Pascoli's and D'Annunzio's interpretation of the dilemma between aestheticism and activism. Here I examine two of their contributions to this journal, specifically its *Proemio*, where D'Annunzio formulates the mission of the periodical, and Pascoli's letter to Adolfo de Bosis, the editor of *Il Convito*, which serves as an introduction to the 1904 edition of *Poemi Conviviali*. Pascoli's letter, although written almost nine years later, can be read as a response to D'Annunzio's *Proemio*. In particular, Pascoli articulates his views on the function of poetry by reinterpreting an image that recurs many times in D'Annunzio's text—that of the garden. The analysis of how these two poets connote the image of the garden, playing on the ambivalence of its meaning in the literature and culture of the nineteenth century, illuminates their opposite, and yet very similar positions on the role of the poet as the voice of morality in modern society.

The literary image of the garden is often associated with the idea of contemplation. First, the garden as a locus of beauty represents the ideal space for aesthetic contemplation. Indeed, gardens present the observer with both the beauty of nature and the perfection of art. In fact, as David Cooper reminds us, gardens are 'nature perfected, improved or methodized [...] and hence are to be enjoyed or admired as approximations, not to the empirical world, but to an ideal nature from which rude nature marks a fall' (Cooper 24). This combination of nature and culture characterizes gardens, where matter is subdued to fit a human ideal of beauty, and corresponds perfectly to what Angelo Conti describes as the gaze of the artist (*Il Marzocco* 33, 13 September 1896). Here Conti distinguishes between the 'objective landscape', for instance the view from a window, and the 'subjective landscape', the same scene reproduced in a painting. He claims that the beauty that one can observe in a painting is

subjective, as it comes from the gaze of the artist. Hence, it is not to be found in a natural object but rather 'in the alienation of the object into [the artist's] ideal reflection, in the evasion into an emended nature' (Zanetti 113). At the same time, such beauty soothes the pain of existence and transports the viewer into oblivion (Conti *La Georgica dello Spirito* 2). In the literature of the late nineteenth century, gardens are often portrayed as places of otherworldly beauty and eternal quiet. In this place aesthetic contemplation brings about an annihilation of the self that is both Edenic and deadly. For instance, in Charles Swinburne's poem *The Garden of Proserpine*, the garden of the goddess of death represents the annihilation of all troubles and all desires²⁷.

Interestingly, Pascoli gave a poetic translation of one passage in the *Odyssey* concerning gardens, the garden of Alkinoös (Pascoli *Opere* II, 21260–61). This text describes a place of beauty away from the cares of everyday life, where nature is composed to create an ideal *locus amoenus*. The garden as a space of oblivion is antipodal to the concept of the *vita activa*, which is characterized by care: 'Eden was a paradise for contemplation, but before Adam and Eve could know the quiet ecstasy of contemplation, they had to be thrown into the thick of the *vita activa*' (Pogue Harrison 9). In the tradition of the Western world, the garden embodies the state of innocence before the fall, a condition to which aesthetic contemplation strives to return through the suspension of pain and desire.

Gardens and the *vita contemplativa* are also connected by the idea of a similar underlying morality behind the practices of gardening and contemplation. As Harrison, echoing Hannah Arendt, points out, the garden can be seen as a oasis of peace and rehumanization in the midst of adverse historical circumstances: 'what is one to do in so-

²⁷ 'I am tired of tears and laughter,/ and men that laugh and weep:/ Of what may come hereafter/ For men that sow to reap:/ I am weary of days and hours,/ Blown buds of barren flowers,/ Desires and dreams and powers/ And everything but sleep' (Swinburne 169, 9–16).

called dark times, when the world that “comes between men” no longer gives them a meaningful stage for their speech and actions? There are times when the thinker, patriot or individual has no choice but to withdraw to the sidelines’ (*ibidem* 71). When the *vita activa* is no longer possible, contemplation in the sense of a life away from *negotia* and devoted to the cultivation of one’s self takes its place. In many cases, withdrawal from active life is portrayed as happening in a garden. Notable examples include the Garden School of Epicurus and the garden of herbs in Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Reveries d’un Promeneur Solitaire* (1782). In particular, the latter sets the modern paradigm for the opposition between nature and introspection on the one hand, and urban space and action on the other. In this text, botany, which is analogous to gardening, is seen as the most moral of all activities, inasmuch as it teaches those who practice it contentment and *ataraxia*, or detachment from the passions. In this regard, contemplation is far from being a solipsistic and idle delving in beauty. On the contrary, it is seen as another type of care, *la cure du soi*, which can be even more necessary than care of the public sphere. Many texts of the late nineteenth century also portray the garden as a space of introspection, memory, and recollection of the self away from the noise and troubles of everyday life. For instance, the poet Luisa Giaconi, in her poem *Orto Antico* published in *Il Marzocco*, describes the garden as the place of memory (Giaconi 1). For D’Annunzio in his *Poema Paradisiaco* (1893), the garden is an Edenic space of innocence to which one should return in order to regain the purity of childhood.

To conclude this digression on the connection between the literary image of the garden and contemplation, it is important to highlight the fundamental ambiguity that characterizes both. On the one hand, they both symbolize opposition to the active life and their relationship to the ideal of pure Beauty. On the other hand, they seem to imply a moral purpose that is higher than that of the active life, that of the care of one’s inner self and ‘the good life’

(Cooper 89). It is within the context of this ambiguity that Pascoli and D'Annunzio use the image of the garden with a reference to contemplation in order to discuss the role and function of the artist in society. *Il Convito* offered the ideal stage for such a discussion, as the journal had its roots in the cultural background of *fin-de-siècle* Aestheticism, while at the same time ushering in the new wave of engaged intellectuals of the early twentieth century.

The *Proemio* of *Il Convito*, written by D'Annunzio in 1895, synthesizes the journal's ideology. Elements of this text reoccur in other writings by the Abruzzese poet, namely in the obituary to Enrico Nencioni and, more significantly, in his speech *Agli Elettori di Ortona*, which he delivered during his campaign to be elected as a member of Parliament, and which he published in *La Tribuna* in 1897. The frequent appearance of these excerpts shows that during the eighteen-nineties D'Annunzio was elaborating his theory of the 'militant' poet, and that this reflection encompassed not only his literary production, but also his political activity.

After the first paragraph, in which he presents the cultural project of *Il Convito*, D'Annunzio proceeds to delineate the type of intellectual participating in this new enterprise. This depiction creates a distinction between the contributors to *Il Convito* and the supporters of pure Aestheticism:

Mettendosi a questa impresa e accingendosi a darle il meglio delle loro forze, essi hanno ben considerato le difficoltà grandi a cui vanno incontro in un tempo in cui sembra abolito ogni culto delle cose intellettuali. Tuttavia essi non vogliono apparire asceti solitarii che inalzino un loro altare alla Bellezza eterna per officiarvi nella liturgia di Platone, e neppur neofiti occulti che si adunino intorno ad una mensa mistica per bere nell'unica tazza l'acqua del fonte suggellato. La loro ambizione è assai più virile. (D'Annunzio Scritti Giornalistici 283)

The pure aesthetes are described as a religious sect, due to their separateness from the real world. In fact, they are 'solitarii' and 'occulti' and drink from 'il fonte suggellato'. In

contrast, the project of *Il Convito* calls for ‘*un vivo fascio di energie militanti*’ (*ibidem*) and for a worldly mission, that is, the renewal and regeneration of society through the reinstatement of Beauty, expressed both in art and in glorious deeds. This opposition is also portrayed in terms of sexual difference, as the aspirations of the intellectuals of *Il Convito* are said to be more ‘virile’. These intellectuals perceive themselves as soldiers, as opposed to the representation of the aesthete as ‘priests’ of the cult of Beauty²⁸.

The *Proemio* continues with a section devoted to the critique of post-unification Italy, of its mediocrity and of the failure of Risorgimental hopes of renovation and glory. It is this failure that D’Annunzio blames as being the cause of the intellectual’s withdrawal from society:

Di chi la colpa? Se fino ad oggi i più si ritrassero a coltivare la loro tristezza come un giardino solitario, se taluno si chiuse nella sua cella e fissò il foco del suo pensiero su la sua anima per disseccarla, se altri cercò di ingannare il suo tedio con giochi ingegnosi e vani, se altri infine rinnegò il suo sogno e si mise una maschera sul volto per prostituirsi alla folla, di chi fu la colpa? (285)

Furthermore, it is against this failure that D’Annunzio calls for the intervention of intellectuals to restore ‘*la sovrana dignità dello spirito*’, and ‘*tutti gli altri valori che oggi dal popolo d’Italia sono tenuti a vile, e specialmente nell’efficacia della parola*’ (*ibidem*):

Non è più il tempo del sogno solitario all’ombra del lauro o del mirto. Gli intellettuali raccogliendo tutte le loro energie debbono sostenere militarmente la causa dell’Intelligenza contri i Barbari, se in loro non è addormentato pur l’istinto più profondo della vita...La nostra Bellezza sia dunque nel tempo medesimo la Venere adorata da Platone e quella di cui Cesare diede il nome per parola d’ordine ai suoi soldati sul campo di Farsaglia: – VENUS VICTRIX. (286)

²⁸ In the speech to the *elettori di Ortona*, D’Annunzio insists even more strongly on his commitment to action, inasmuch as he claims that it is time to interrupt the discrepancy between thought and action, and to restore the intellectual to a prominent role in society: ‘*Volendo vivere essi devono metter fine al dissidio che dura tra pensiero e azione; essi debbono conquistare attivamente il posto che è loro dovuto alla sommità dell’edificio sociale. Dopo il guerriero, dopo il sacerdote, dopo il mercante venga ora colui che pensa. Dopo la forza dell’arme, dopo il potere della religione, dopo il dominio della ricchezza, sia riconosciuta la superiorità della casta in cui si raccolgono le condizioni della più alta esistenza mentale*’ (D’Annunzio *Scritti Giornalistici* 271).

Together with the image of the monastic cell, D'Annunzio makes use of the metaphor of the garden to describe the condition of those intellectuals in post-unification Italy who chose to abstain from the public sphere. In tracing the characteristics of the contemplative attitude of the intellectuals of his time, D'Annunzio explicitly distances himself not only from them but also from his previous identity as a decadent aesthete and a dandy. In fact, in his speech *Agli elettori di Ortona*, he affirms:

Di questo novo proposito mostrano di meravigliarsi coloro i quali si piacciono di rappresentarmi come un asceta solitario che abbia innalzato un suo altare alla Bellezza eterna per officiarvi nella liturgia di Platone. È tempo che questa falsa immagine di me cada insieme con le favole puerili di cui si diletta la stupidità del volgo. Io per me non voglio riconoscere nulla di estraneo, essendo disposto dalla natura e dall'arte a sperimentare tutto, ad assorbir tutto, a vivere d'una vita totale, con la maggiore possibile intensità e con la maggior possibile abbondanza di armonie; perocché io credo che tanto un uomo è più virtuoso quanto più egli si sforza di accrescere l'essere suo. (271)

With *Il Convito* D'Annunzio began the process of constructing his identity as a national hero and a poet-soldier. However his relationship with *fin de siècle* Aestheticism remained ambiguous, as D'Annunzio never completely rejected his allegiance to this movement. For instance, he composed the *Proemio* of *Il Marzocco* only one year after writing the one for *Il Convito*. Furthermore, the members of *Il Marzocco* never ceased to offer 'aesthetic' readings of even D'Annunzio's most obviously political works, such as the *Laudi*²⁹, thereby still acknowledging him as a poet devoted to the cult of Beauty. Ultimately, D'Annunzio's relationship with Aestheticism is portrayed in the friendship between Stelio Effrena and Daniele Glauro in *Il Fuoco*, where the latter represents the contemplative 'alter ego' of the former.

In the passage of the *Proemio* where D'Annunzio mentions those who have withdrawn

²⁹ See, for instance, Angelo Conti's review of the *Laudi* in *Il Marzocco* XLIV (1899). Conti sees the *Laudi* as poems celebrating the beauty of Nature, and not as political texts.

from society ‘*per coltivare la loro tristezza come un giardino solitario*’ (285), the poet might also very well be referring to Pascoli. As Marinella Cantelmo has shown, D’Annunzio’s opinion of Pascoli emerges clearly on the occasion of the third edition of *Myricae* in 1894, where the author substitutes the poem *Gloria* at the beginning of the collection with the much darker and gloomier *Il Giorno dei Morti* (Cantelmo 10–11). In this poem, the representation of the family graveyard is not realistic, but it is charged with a symbolic connotation. Furthermore, in the new preface to this edition, Pascoli dedicates the poems to the memory of his dead father, and to the graveyard where he rests, framing the collection in a perspective of personal mourning: ‘*Rimangono questi canti su la tomba di mio padre. Sono frulli d’uccelli, stormire di cipressi, un lontano cantare di campane; non disdicono ad un camposanto*’ (Pascoli *Poesie e Prose* I, 988). In 1896, in a letter to Pascoli, D’Annunzio praises what he sees as the older poet’s new ‘voice’, a new way of expressing pain and sorrow: ‘*Hai trovato, in quest’ultimo tempo, suoni profondi e indimenticabili: suoni di dolore e di terrore*’ (Vicinelli *Omaggio* 386–87). Therefore, it is quite possible that when D’Annunzio mentions the garden of sadness in the *Proemio* of *Il Convito*, he has in mind a poet like Pascoli, devoted to the depiction of nature and making poetry the expression of his own personal tragedies. This is at least what Pascoli himself assumes, as in the letter to De Bosis that precedes *Poemi Conviviali*, he replies to D’Annunzio’s accusation of cultivating one’s sadness in a solitary garden as if it were directed to him.

The relationship between Pascoli and *Il Convito* was a complex one. As Emanuella Scarano has pointed out, it is possible that Pascoli’s adhesion to this journal was due to his ambition to elevate the tone of his poetry from elegiac to epic (Scarano *Pascoli e l’Ideologia del Convito* 2). In fact, between the second and the fourth edition of *Myricae* (1892–1897), Pascoli produced some of the more ‘engaged’ poems that he later included in the collection

Odi e Inni (1906–1913) and some Latin *carmina* containing a moral message of concord amongst men. For instance, the Latin poem *Cena in Claudiano Nervae* (1895) ends with an exaltation of the poet as a prophet of peace for his or her people (Scarano 6).

Although Pascoli was inclined to consider the poet as a voice of wisdom, his views on the function of poetry were in fact quite different from those of *Il Convito*'s contributors. In his prose piece *Pensieri dell'Arte Poetica*, published in *Il Marzocco* (1897), the beauty of a work of art is not seen as being in opposition to the mediocrity of the contemporary world, nor it is a value distinguishing the intellectual elite from the masses. On the contrary, poetry has a moral function, as it brings peace and tranquility to everybody's heart. Through the image of Orpheus' lyre, Pascoli fleshes out his idea on the function of poetry as an instrument of peace, and as a means to defuse one's aggression and turbulent passions:

*Già in altri tempi vide un Poeta (io non sono degno nemmeno di pronunziare il tuo santo nome, o Parthenias!), vide rotolare per il vano circolo della passione, le quadrighe vertiginose; e quei tempi erano simili a questi, e balenava all'orizzonte la conflagrazione del mondo in una guerra di tutti contro tutti e d'ognuno contro ognuno; e quel Poeta sentì che sopra le fiere e i mostri aveva ancora più potere la cetra di Orfeo che la clava d'Ercole. E fece poesia senza pensare ad altro, senza darsi arie di consigliere, di ammonitore, di profeta del buono e del mal augurio: cantò, per cantare. E io non so misurare qual fosse l'effetto del suo canto; ma grande fu certo, se dura oggidì, vibrando con dolcezza nelle nostre anime irrequiete. (Pascoli *Poesie e prose* I, 1198)*

It is not coincidental that it was in the pages of *Il Marzocco* that Pascoli published this essay, which later became *Il Fanciullino* and was published in 1904 in the collection *Miei Pensieri di Varia Umanità*. In fact, as we have previously seen, this journal declared his ideology to be anti-Risorgimental, anti-Carduccian and inspired by the principle of *l'art pour l'art* (Petrini 439). The cultural background of *Il Marzocco* represented the most congenial environment for Pascoli, who was always enthusiastically supported by this journal's contributors.

The position of Pascoli in *Il Convito* was rather that of an outsider. First of all, as

Scarano reports, when Pascoli sent the poem *Gog e Magog* (1895) to be published in the first issue of the journal, he was not aware of the *Proemio* written by D'Annunzio. The poem, which narrates a mythical barbaric invasion, was welcomed by the editors of *Il Convito* as being extremely suited to the ideology expressed in the *Proemio*, in particular to the metaphor of the Barbarians destroying every form of Beauty (D'Annunzio *Scritti giornalistici* 285). However, Pascoli interpreted his own poem as an omen of the destiny of mankind, rather than as a metaphor for contemporary Italy (Scarano 6). Furthermore, according to Scarano, Pascoli was invited to join *Il Convito* not so much for his ideological affinity with this journal but for his prestige as a Latin poet (*ibidem* 7). In 1895, Pascoli had already distinguished himself as a poet of Latin *carmina* and had been awarded several prizes at the international annual competition of Latin poetry in Amsterdam. His fame in this field made him a very good choice for the editors of *Il Convito*, as Latin was the language of the Renaissance preached by D'Annunzio and symbolized a return to the glory of Italy's ancient past.

In 1904, Pascoli wrote a letter to Adolfo De Bosis, which was subsequently added to the first edition of his *Poemi Conviviali*. The reference to *Il Convito* plays a very important role in the preface to *I Conviviali*. However, for Pascoli this letter also represents a declaration of his poetics and a justification of his own views on the function of art, in light of those expressed in the *Proemio* of *Il Convito*. In particular, Pascoli's response to D'Annunzio latches on the image of the garden in the *Proemio*, around which the poet articulates his discourse on the moral value of poetry.

Pascoli begins his response by juxtaposing the '*energie militanti*' with *Il Convito* to his own figure as an estranged and poor schoolteacher, thereby initially appearing to justify D'Annunzio's accusation:

Come fui chiamato anch'io a far parte di quel 'vivo fascio di energie militanti le quali valessero a salvare qualche cosa bella e ideale dalla torbida onda di volgarità che ricopriva ormai tutta la terra privilegiata dove Leonardo creò le sue donne imperiose e Michelangelo i suoi eroi indomabili'? ...Avevo veduta una volta sola e di sfuggita, e distratto da altre debite cure, Roma. Sottili facevo le spese, come par giusto alla nostra madre Italia che povera e trita passi la vita di coloro che la educano e istruiscono gli altri figli, nostri minori fratelli. Ero di quelli che s'erano ritratti 'a coltivare' (secondo altre parole del Proemio del Convito) 'a coltivare la loro tristezza come un giardino solitario'. (Pascoli Poemi Conviviali 73)

The bold representation of Italy as the motherland of Leonardo and Michelangelo contrasts strikingly with Pascoli's bitter remarks on the stingy 'mother' Italy keeping her teachers and educators in poverty. However, Pascoli's *pars construens* begins right after this comment. Pascoli rejects the accusation of cultivating sadness for its own sake or, in other words, he claims that the elegiac tone of his poetry is not due to a self-indulging attitude or to an aesthetic taste for melancholy:

Eppure, no: non ero di quelli; ch , in verit , non avrei cercato d'avere, per un mio proprio gusto, di quella tristezza e il fiore e il frutto! O inameni fiori! O frutti amarissimi! Chi vorrebbe essere l'ortolano e il giardiniere della morte? I frutti degli alberi nei cimiteri non si mangiano, ma si lasciano cadere. Non si d  alle bestie l'erba che nasce, cos  rigogliosa, cos  fiorita, nai camposanti; ma si brucia. (ibidem 74)

In the passage above we can recognize two main themes. The first is Pascoli's assimilation of D'Annunzio's (and his contemporary poetry's) garden to a cemetery. The garden as a symbol for introspection and return to childhood significantly becomes, in Pascoli's words, the locus of memory and, specifically, the memory of his own dead family, which is the core and the leitmotiv of his poetry. For Pascoli, poetry is symbolized by an enclosed natural space, which at times resembles the peaceful garden of a rural villa, with its humble flowers and vegetables, and at times the family graveyard. The ambivalence of this natural space as the preferred locus of poetry pervades most of Pascoli's works. The second theme is that of the usefulness of poetry. D'Annunzio in the *Proemio* had preached the

necessity for poetry to be engaged and to serve the cause of Beauty as a supreme moral value against the dissolution of his time. Pascoli agrees with him that poetry has a purpose, although it is rooted in purposeless contemplation. The idea of the usefulness of poetry emerges initially here only ‘in the negative’, as Pascoli affirms that the cultivation of sadness for its own sake is sterile, that ‘its fruits are not edible’, and that ‘the flowery and verdant grass of cemeteries cannot feed animals’. Later in the text, Pascoli explains that poetry is useful inasmuch as it teaches contentment and inner peace.

The goal of poetry beyond its apparent lack of purpose is enunciated by Pascoli in the following passage of the letter to De Bosis. Poetry helps one achieve what in Pascoli’s opinion is the supreme moral value, the quiescence of desire and the quenching of every ambition or greed. Pascoli reaffirms here the basis of his moral discourse, the elimination of desire, which informs both his Dantean writings and most of his philosophical speeches.

Ora io coltivavo e coltivo quella tristezza per un qualche utile dei miei simili: per dire ad essi la parola che forse importa più di tutte le altre: che oltre i mali necessari della vita e che noi, quali possiamo appena attenuare, quali nemmeno attenuare, vi sono altri mali che sono i veri mali, e questi sì possiamo abolire con somma e pronta facilità. Come? Col contentarci. Ciò che piace è sì il molto; ma il poco è ciò che appaga. Chi ha sete, crede che un'anfora non lo disseterebbe; e una coppa lo disseta.
(74)

In the central paragraph of the letter, Pascoli proceeds to defend himself from D’Annunzio’s claim that the disengagement of intellectuals is a corollary of the nation’s decadence and dissolution. To this end, Pascoli reenacts the metaphor of the garden, this time intended as the space of fruitful cultivation, as well as of serene contemplation.

Sono dunque sincero, quando parlo della delizia che c’è, a vivere in una casa pulita, sebben povera, ad assidersi avanti ad una tovaglia di bucato, sebben grossa, a coltivare qualche fiore, a sentir cantare gli uccelli...Ma questa sincerità si chiama, dai malati di storia letteraria, Arcadia. Io sono un arcade. La mia, oltre che finzione sarebbe anche sdolcinatura e mascolinatura, destinata a produrre, se non si castiga a tempo, gli effetti più deleteri nell’organismo nazionale. Consimili quelli che

ha prodotto nel Giappone la contemplazione ingenua degli uccelli e dei fiori? la predilezione per il piccolo orto e il semplice e puro tatami? (75)

This passage is of paramount importance in coming to an understanding of Pascoli's idea of the 'active contemplation' of poetry. Pascoli had already explained this apparent paradox by embodying it in the figure of Matelda, or art, who works without labouring and whose activity is more similar to contemplation than to action. Here the defense of the value of contemplative poetry proceeds by two steps. In the first, Pascoli rejects the accusation of insincerity and bookishness, or '*letterarietà*', by claiming that the seemingly humble tone of his poetry and the naturalistic images contained in it have nothing to do with the fashion of *Arcadia*. In other words, Pascoli reaffirms the novelty and the significance of his garden as the locus of morality, as opposed to the gardens of Arcadia, the space of disengaged poetry and of literature as a pastime. For Pascoli, the garden is the space of care, in Heideggerian terms, in the sense that the cultivation of a moral attitude and the teaching of this morality that poetry can embody and convey represent the highest service of the poet to his fellow man.

The second step deconstructs the accusations of laziness and idleness, which constitute the ghost and the negative double of contemplative poetry. In the *Proemio* of *Il Convito*, D'Annunzio had created an opposition between a strong, 'virile' poetry, and a feminine, decadent one, accusing the latter of contributing to the decline of the nation. Pascoli reaffirms the validity of his poetry as such, as pure contemplation and not necessarily as a vehicle of social and civic values. However, his argument is built in Dannunzian terms, inasmuch as he claims that this poetry is the strongest and the most virile:

Io non credo troppo nell'efficacia della poesia, e poco spero in quella della mia; ma se un'efficacia ha da essere, sarà di conforto e di esaltazione e di perseveranza e di serenità. Sarà di forza; perchè forza ci ho messo, non avendo nel mio essere,

semplificato dalla sventura, se non forza, da metterci; forza di poca vista, bensì, e di poco suono, perchè, senza gale e senza fanfare, non è altro che forza. (75–76)

Pascoli's claim of strength and virility means to outshadow D'Annunzio's, as the force described here evokes the steadiness and calm of a mature man, rather than the boldness of a boy.

The letter to De Bosis constitutes one of the most emblematic and efficacious declaration of poetics that Pascoli ever gave. With this text the poet gives his own justification for his participation in *Il Convito*, while at the same time measuring the distance between himself and D'Annunzio's newfound ideology of active poetry. In fact, he claims that even if he was 'in the garden', his poetry was not an exercise of pleasure but rather his contribution to mankind, and therefore he can be considered as part of the '*energie militanti*' of *Il Convito*: '*Dunque nemmeno allora io era chiuso in un giardino solitario, sebbene fossi molto segregato e lontano e oscuro*' (78).

In his response to D'Annunzio's *Proemio*, Pascoli affirms that the contemplative attitude characterizing the practice of poetry is morally superior to the *vita activa*. Intriguingly, such superiority is claimed on the assumption that the *vita contemplativa* is, in fact, 'active', inasmuch as it acts upon one's soul and induces a state of peace and contentment. On the other hand, D'Annunzio's newfound engagement is still deeply rooted in the ideal of Beauty, insofar as it seen as a reaction to the degeneration of current society, exactly as *fin de siècle* Aestheticism was seen. Pascoli and D'Annunzio's debate on the role of the poet in society actually reveals the ambiguity characterizing both the ideas of engagement and of disengagement. In fact, D'Annunzio's activism was born in the context of Aestheticism and continues the ongoing critique of the establishment and the bourgeois mentality of post-unification Italy. On the other hand, Pascoli's apparently 'unpolitical'

reflection on the moral function of poetry shows his desire to see the poet reinstated as a voice of wisdom in society, with the duty of influencing and inspiring the nation.

3.2 The Garden of Decadence: D'Annunzio's *Le Vergini delle Rocce*.

In 1895 D'Annunzio published *Le Vergini delle Rocce* in six episodes in the pages of *Il Convito*. This book narrates the story of a young aristocrat, Claudio Cantelmo, who wishes to fight the mediocrity and dissolution of post-unification Italy by producing a son destined to reign and restore the glory of the Italian Renaissance. The story focuses on Cantelmo's visit to the noble, though ruined, family of prince Montaga, from whose three daughters he wants to choose the spouse destined to give birth to the future king. This novel is particularly suited to the atmosphere of *Il Convito*, as it combines the motive of the Renaissance and a highly stylized prose with the current theme of the situation of Italy at the turn of the twentieth century. Indeed, as Renato Barilli has argued, *Le Vergini delle Rocce* is D'Annunzio's first engaged novel, or, in other words, the first in which he tackles directly the issue of political renewal for Italy (Barilli 115).

The publication of *Le Vergini* marks a very important year in D'Annunzio's artistic and personal evolution from embodying the paradigm of the decadent aesthete to becoming a fervent nationalist. Indeed, this novel sits at the nexus of several significant changes in D'Annunzio's development of a political persona and in his absorption of new ideological trends. Firstly, during that year D'Annunzio began to meditate on the role of the poet in politics, which led two years later to his candidature in Parliament supported by the conservative party. Moreover, in 1895 he met the actress Eleonora Duse, who contributed greatly in orienting D'Annunzio towards theatre, a change that inaugurated a more direct engagement of the poet with his audience. Secondly, as I have previously mentioned, D'Annunzio started his collaboration with *Il Convito*, where he introduced for the first time

the concept of a ‘militant Aestheticism’. Thirdly, around 1892 D’Annunzio encountered Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy and appropriated its vitalistic message, which he blended with his own idea of an active and heroic life.

Le Vergini delle Rocce signals the passage from D’Annunzio’s adhesion to Arthur Schopenhauer’s philosophy to his discovery of Nietzsche’s new morality of assertiveness and strength (Baldi *Le Ambiguità* 205). According to D’Annunzio’s analysis, as discussed in his article *Il Caso Wagner* (published in *La Tribuna* in three parts, from the 23th of July to the 9th of August, 1893), his contemporary culture is split between two opposite tendencies, the ‘negative morality’ of Schopenhauer, embodied by Richard Wagner and summarizing the characteristics of the modern mentality, and Nietzsche’s idea of an ‘ascending life’ (D’Annunzio *Scritti Giornalistici* II, 237). However, in this article D’Annunzio still considers Wagner to be the true interpreter of modernity, whereas two years later, in *Le Vergini*, he explicitly embraces Nietzsche’s condemnation of ‘decadence’ as a disease infecting Europe (Baldi *ibidem* 205). As Jared Becker has convincingly shown, Darwinian underpinnings sustained D’Annunzio’s political positions from the eighteen-eighties to the early twentieth century. For instance, in his early production D’Annunzio depicts the destiny of weak individuals succumbing to the struggle for life. However, around the mid-eighteen-nineties, the Darwinian theme of the struggle for life ‘ceases to be associated with defeat and decline and instead becomes the story of uplift and renewal, especially a nationalist/imperialist renaissance’ (Becker *From the ‘Giaguaro Famelico’* 186).

In 1895 D’Annunzio had already incorporated most of the elements characterizing his ‘philosophy of action’, which became prominent in the following years. However, at that point the process of transformation from aesthete into soldier was not fully concluded. It was only in the first years of the twentieth century that D’Annunzio defined his own concept of

the *vita activa* and it was only with his engagement in the war that he managed to actually live the heroic life that he had been preaching for years. The various stages of this process can be documented through D'Annunzio's works, specifically in *Il Fuoco* (1900), the *Laudi* (1903–1912) and *Forse che Sì, Forse che No* (1910). In these works, the male protagonist evolves from being a decadent artist to being a pilot and a man of action.

A close reading of *Le Vergini* reveals the intersecting and overlapping of the various components of D'Annunzio's 'old' and 'new' personal and artistic identity, for the novel is located at a crucial point in the author's development of his philosophy of action. Indeed, in comparison with the male protagonists of D'Annunzio's previous novels *Il Piacere* (1889), *L'Innocente* (1892), and *Il Trionfo della Morte* (1894), Claudio Cantelmo is more oriented towards political engagement and is preoccupied with the destiny of his country. He elaborates for the first time an active response to the crisis of the intellectual's role in the late nineteenth century, inasmuch as he imagines a new dynasty of rulers for Italy born into a highly educated and noble elite and inspired by the principles of Nietzsche's 'aristocratic' morality. Nonetheless, Baldi argues that Claudio's political project is still embedded in what can be considered his aesthetic *Bildung* (Baldi *ibidem* 207). In fact, the protagonist's mission is still to construe his personality and existence as a work of art, as his internal guide, *il demonico*, instructs him to do:

Certo è meraviglioso...che queste antiche forze barbare si sieno conservate in te con tanta freschezza. Esse sono ancor belle, se bene importune. In un altro tempo ti varrebbero a riprendere quell'ufficio che si conviene ai tuoi pari; ciò è l'ufficio di colui che indica una meta certa e guida i seguaci a quella. Poiché un tal giorno sembra lontano, tu cerca, per ora, condensandole, di trasformarle in viva poesia. (D'Annunzio Prose di Romanzi II, 19).

Cantelmo does not reject or reverse the code of aesthetic values. On the contrary, he resignifies and reinforces this *Weltanschauung* by inserting it into an ideological context, the

restoration of Italy's greatness.

The conclusion of the novel also indicates that D'Annunzio could not yet conceive a concrete embodiment of his political dream of renewal. Indeed, in the course of the story, Cantelmo proceeds to mythicize the figures of the three virgin princesses, transforming them into the embodiments of three symbolic aspects of femininity (*'una cosa naturale vista in un grande specchio'* says the quotation at the beginning of the novel). Subsequently, reality breaks into the story thanks to Princess Anatolia, who reveals to Cantelmo the tragedy of her family, thus disrupting his dream to marry her, and ultimately, his project to generate the future ruler of Italy with a spouse from the nobility. The conclusion of the novel is somewhat suspended, as Cantelmo leaves behind the three princesses, composing their image in his memory like a painting, and nothing is told about his future plans. However, the final line announces: *'Qui finisce il libro delle Vergini e incomincia il libro della Grazia'*, letting the reader imagine the accomplishment of this mission of renewal in another story.

The sense of incompleteness runs through the story of *Le Vergini*. In her study, *Fascist virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology and Social Fantasy in Italy*, Barbara Spackman explains the fundamental failure of Cantelmo's political project through a 'split reading' of the story. In other words, in *Le Vergini* two opposite tendencies collide, ultimately making the novel implode: the knowledge (of a political ideal, the intellectual aristocracy in power) and the disavowal of that knowledge (Spackman *Fascist Virilities* 90). 'If we read together (read as a fetishistic splitting), we get an ideological fantasy that imagines not the totalitarian leader, whose rule is legitimized through underlining the defetishization of social relations, but rather a king whose rule is possible only without subjects. The Duce, on the other hand, insistently and throughout the regime presents himself as the embodiment and conduit of the people's will' (*ibidem* 90). The combination of knowledge and disavowal of knowledge leads to the

failure of D'Annunzio's project, at this stage being only a political fantasy with no real content.

My analysis of *Le Vergini* focuses on the central image of the garden contained in it. While finding himself at the crossroad between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* D'Annunzio portrays the garden as the quintessential space of aesthetic contemplation. I also read this image as a metaphor for that 'decadence'³⁰, which D'Annunzio saw first as the expression of the modern self, and subsequently as a pathological condition.

In the garden of *Le Vergini*, D'Annunzio depicts the condition of the decadent artist, stuck in the contemplation of Beauty and in sterile introspection and self-scrutiny, and thus unable to offer a solution to the crisis of Italy. This reading allows me to connect this image of the garden with the one in the *Proemio* of *Il Convito*, thereby strengthening the ties between the journal and its ideology, and the novel that was published in the pages of its first issue.

The image of the garden lends itself to a 'split' reading, in the sense that it represents both D'Annunzio's condemnation of decadence and his fascination with it. Indeed, in *Le Vergini* the garden symbolizes everything that is inimical to the 'Spring-time Nietzschean life-values of Claudio Cantelmo' (Woodward 14). At the same time, the protagonist is attracted by the atmosphere of melancholy and decay surrounding the three sisters and by the tempting beauty of the garden in which they live. Claudio's visit to the garden of the princesses, their

³⁰ In talking about decadence I am referring to a category that emerged in the context of late nineteenth century Italian criticism, that is, a cultural discourse that was created at the same time of the literary works to which it applied. As Mario Moroni points out, in Italy the notion of 'decadence' was immediately construed as a morbid condition, or as the literary expression of the neurotic aspects of the modern self (Moroni *Sensuous Maladies* 68). For instance, critics such as Vittorio Pica, while reviewing J.K. Huysmann's *A rebours*, emphasized the theme of degeneration over the critique of the increasingly technological and bourgeois society present in this work (*ibidem* 69). In other words, the concept of decadence in Italy was understood as a pathological deviation from the positivistic model of sanity and normality. In the case of D'Annunzio, his critique of the decadent canon is not framed in these terms. In fact, his position is that of one who has overcome both sides of the opposition between the bourgeois, 'healthy' crowd and the pure aesthetes. In D'Annunzio's *Le Vergini*, a third solution is at the horizon, that is, a *vita activa* in which aesthetic values underpin political engagement.

hortus conclusus, represents for him a ‘descent to Hell’ (Baldi 222), through which he purifies and exorcises himself from his penchant for aestheticism. My task in this part of the chapter is to flesh out the implication of the use of the garden as a metaphor for aesthetic contemplation. In particular, I highlight those elements of the metaphor that indicate D’Annunzio’s demonization of ‘decadence’, while at the same time showing the fascination and the similarities that the author—through his alter ego Cantelmo—still finds in this *Weltanschauung*. Furthermore, I establish that the metaphor of decadence is constructed through a double semantic level, one referring to space and the other to gender. Specifically, D’Annunzio associates decadence with the idea of ‘sinking’ and with enclosure, as opposed to the highness of the ‘ascending life’ and the openness of the world to conquest. Not only that, but the opposition between the decadent artist and the new ‘active’ man is also conveyed as the opposition between feminine and masculine, respectively.

The representation of the garden is spatially connoted as being a closed and remote environment. In fact, the garden of the ancient palace of the Montaga is surrounded by a wall and is described as a cloister: ‘*Alla sommità apparve l’antico palazzo col suo giardino murato che discendeva sul declivio opposto sino al piano dando imagine d’un vasto claustro pieno di cose obliate and estinte*’ (II, 59). The image of the cloister, the *claustro* or *chiostro* is clouded with ambiguity: on the one hand it evokes the purity and sanctity—etymologically intended as ‘separateness’—of religious and monastic life, but on the other it suggests confinement, seclusion, claustrophobia. These feelings are voiced by Oddo, one of the brother princes, as he affirms: ‘*Una delle nostre pene ...è questo spazio che ci dà una specie di smarrimento continuo e quasi un senso di diminuzione umiliante*’ (II, 75).

At the beginning of the novel, Claudio announces that he is about to penetrate into a ‘closed garden’: ‘*Io era per penetrare un giardino chiuso*’ (II, 5). The theme of the *hortus*

conclusus is full of symbolic implications. As an epithet of the Virgin Mary it alludes to the purity of her untouched womb³¹. A similar sexual hint colours this passage of *Le Vergini*, as here Claudio envisions himself as the bridegroom coming to take possession of the virgin bride: ‘*E ciascuna forse nel suo cuore segreto aspettava lo Sposo*’ (*ibidem*). The bridegroom is an outsider, as he enters the closed space of the garden to take his bride away: ‘*...non aveva forse ciascuna veduto apparire la forma giovanile e ardente dello Sposo che doveva toglierla all’oscura consunzione e sollevarla d’improvviso in un turbine di allegrezze?*’ (*ibidem*). The first opposition that the idea of closeness suggests is that between the purity of the inside, and the strength and passion of the outsider bridegroom coming to inflame this icy virginity with the warmth of his love.

The other opposition that emerges from the idea of the closed garden of *Le Vergini* is that between the sterility of the inner space and the fertility of the outside space. The same ambivalence between purity and sterility is present in other texts by D’Annunzio, significantly in the sections of poems in *Poema Paradisiaco* (1892–93) entitled *Hortus Conclusus* and *Hortus Larvarum*. Here D’Annunzio the garden represents either a woman who is said to be ‘untouched’ and ‘untouchable’ (in the poems *Hortus Conclusus* and *Il Giogo*, *Versi d’Amore* I, 610–612 and 617–619), or one who sees her youth fade, remembering a past and unfruitful love (as in the poem *Aprile*, *ibidem* 635–36). In *Le Vergini*, the destiny of the three sisters to consume their youth in the closed garden is foreshadowed from the very beginning of the novel by the following passage: ‘*Così ciascuna, nel suo chiuso giardino, aspettava con inquietudine colui che doveva conoscerla per*

³¹ The first mention of this epithet is in the *Vulgata*, in the *Song of Songs*: ‘*Hortus conclusus, soror mea, sponsa, hortus conclusus, fons signatus*’ (*Canticum* 4, 12–13, 643). The term *Hortus conclusus* actually indicates a secret garden, or a garden within a garden. In practice the enclosed garden was often a rose-garden with fountains, walks and arbors (*The Oxford Companion to Gardens* 261). In *Le Vergini*, the garden is portrayed exactly like a *hortus conclusus*, with a wall around it and a fountain in the middle.

deluderla e per vederla perire senza possederla’ (*Prose di Romanzi* II, 5).

The enclosed garden can also be read as a metaphor for introspection and self-knowledge. This idea intertwines with the representation of the garden as a *claustrum*, a place for religious contemplation and prayer. Cantelmo himself makes this association explicit as he quotes a passage from Saint Catherine’s *Lettere* to princess Massimilla: ‘*Ella è possente in contemplazione e azione...Perciò io la prediligo, perchè ella possiede un Giardino, una Casa e una Cella del conoscimento di sé*’ (*ibidem* II, 141). This notion of the ‘garden’ and the ‘cell’ of self-knowledge recalls the passage of *Il Proemio* of *Il Convito* where D’Annunzio blames the intellectuals who have withdrawn into the ‘garden of their sadness’ and into their own cell to ‘concentrate on their soul and to dry it’ (*Scritti Giornalistici* II, 285).

The negative side of introspection is represented in *Le Vergini* by the image of the palace of the princesses as a labyrinth. In fact, the garden of the *Montaga* is not only a *hortus conclusus* of purity and beauty, but it also contains a palace, which is built as a labyrinth full of mirrors and *trompe-l’oeil*: ‘*Il gran numero degli specchi, ond’erano coperte intere pareti, moltiplicava lo spazio all’infinito. E nulla era più triste di quei pallidi abissi illusori che sembravano schiudersi in un mondo soprannaturale e allo sguardo dei viventi promettere d’attimo in attimo apparizioni funeree*’ (*Prose di Romanzi* II, 75). The palace is described as a closed claustrophobic space, where the illusory openings of the mirrors seem to lead the spectator into an unreal world of apparitions and ghosts. Furthermore, the palace is haunted by the presence of the demented mother of the three sisters, Princess Aldoina, who wanders around the *Montaga* residence and whose random appearances terrify her family. She is said to be ‘the custodian’ of the palace: ‘*Non era forse ella la vera custode dell’abitazione oscura?*’ (*ibidem* 66) and to fill the house with her disquieting presence: ‘*Certi giorni tutta la casa è piena di lei*’ (*ibidem*). At one point the sudden apparition of princess Aldoina in the

garden turns the scene into a moment of fright and discomfort, as the face of the mad woman appears from the curtains of the sedan-chair in which she travels: *‘E quella enormità pallida e inerte mi risuscitò nell’immaginazione non so qual figura sognata di vecchia imperatrice bisantina, al tempo d’un Niceforo o d’un Basilio, pingue ad ambigua come un eunuco, distesa in fondo alla sua lettiga d’oro’* (II, 115). Aldoina, as ‘the monster of the labyrinth’ is also particularly terrifying as her destiny prophesizes that of her children: *‘Imaginai il suono reale di quella voce, in quel silenzio: il dialogo tra quei figli devoti a un sacrificio inumano e quella madre trapassata per la follia in un altro mondo ov’ella doveva attrarli inevitabilmente l’uno dopo l’altro’* (II, 116). The other side to the idea of self-knowledge and inner contemplation, as associated to the garden, is that this attitude can be exasperated and lead one to be excessively self-absorbed and ultimately to madness. The character of Aldoina acts as an invisible matrix—a mater-matrix—which on the outside produces the beauty of the garden, but which also indicates that such beauty is rooted in madness.

The closed garden can be read as a metaphor for the relationship between the decadent artists and society. First of all, its separateness alludes to the estrangement of the decadent artist from society, which D’Annunzio criticizes in the *Proemio* of *Il Convito*. Secondly, the ambivalence of purity and sterility that D’Annunzio casts on his representation of the *hortus conclusus* express his views on the art of the decadents, which on the one hand is informed by the principle of beauty for beauty’s sake and often attains formal perfection, but on the other proves to be sterile as it does not have any impact on society. Furthermore, the image of Aldoina as a Byzantine empress is a clear allusion to the preference of decadent artists for Late Antiquity as a time of decline similar to their own³².

³² *‘Je suis l’Empire à la fin de la décadence./ Qui regarde passer les grands Barbares blancs/ En composant des acrostiches indolents/ D’un style d’or où la langueur du soleil’* (Verlaine, *Langueur, Jadis et Naguère* 130).

Finally, through Cantelmo D'Annunzio portrays the fascination for the decadent canon, while at same time warning against its dangers. In speaking about Claudio's fascination for the three princesses, his *demonico* affirms, '*V'è nelle loro congiunture e nelle loro attenenze un linguaggio straordinario che tu già comprendi come se tu medesimo lo avessi inventato...Elle sembrano darti la gioia del continuo creare e del continuo scoprire, ed aiutarti a compiere la tua unione con una parte di te medesimo rivelata inaspettatamente*' (II, 119). However, the moments in which Claudio enjoys the voluptuous beauty of the garden are immediately followed by ones in which he feels oppressed by the atmosphere of decay that he feels there: '*Così subitamente mi si rivelava nella sua atrocità il supplizio a cui il destino aveva condannato quegli ultimi superstiti di una stirpe caduta*' (II, 67).

The other significant spatial connotation in the metaphor of the garden is the opposition between low and high. In fact, the garden is situated in a valley and is surrounded by a chain of mountains: '*Ma di là dal claustro si apriva l'immensa corona di rocce foggiate dal fuoco primordiale*' (II, 158). Furthermore, the landscape changes dramatically from the valley of the garden to the surrounding mountains, inasmuch as the former is green and luscious and the latter are rocky and dry. The height of the mountains makes the garden look even more isolated and encapsulated in the depth of the valley. The garden itself is described as full of holes and sinking into the ground: '*E mi condusse per un viale compreso tra pareti di bosso indebolite dalla vecchiezza, sparse di radure profonde come buche, donde sembravami escissero freschi odori d'invisibili violette, strani come aliti giovenili in bocche deformi*' (II, 60).

On the other hand, the mountains are depicted as high and peaked: '*La catena*

See also Joris-Karl Huysmanns' observation on the similarities between the end of the nineteenth century and the Late Antiquity: '*Les queues du siècle se ressemblent. Toutes vacillent et sont troublées*' (Praz 305).

montuosa con le sue cime frastagliate e aguzze piegava a destra, lambita dal Saurgo serpentino, sollevandosi a grado a grado verso il massimo culmine del monte Corace che scintillava al sole come un elmetto' (II, 50).

The opposition between high and low is not only a trait of the setting of *Le Vergini*, but also embodies the difference between Cantelmo and the Montaga family. Indeed, the decay of these people and their demure resignation contrasts strikingly with Cantelmo's fervent aspirations to redeem the destiny of Italy. From the very beginning of the novel, the prospected marriage of the protagonist with one of the Montaga princesses is portrayed as an ascent for the chosen bride: *'...non aveva ciascuna veduto apparire la forma giovanile e ardente dello Sposo che doveva toglierla all'oscura consunzione e sollevarla d'improvviso in un turbine di allegrezze?'* (II, 5).

Like in a fairy tale³³, the selection of Cantelmo's bride is portrayed as a test, in which the three princesses have to climb the mountain through a path, led by the young man himself. Only the one who is not overwhelmed by the effort will prove to be a worthy companion for the ambitious Cantelmo: *'Violante e Massimilla apparivano affaticate; e Oddo non riusciva ancora a calmare il suo ansito. Ma Anatolia andava cogliendo nelle fenditure i piccoli fiori'* (II, 175). Princess Anatolia is the only one who is able to climb with Cantelmo without showing any sign of exhaustion. In fact, her suitability to marrying him had already been suggested in the preface of the novel, when, in Cantelmo's imagination, the princesses present themselves and their qualities. On this occasion Anatolia says about herself: *'Io potrei assumere un'anima virile alla zona eccelsa, là dove il valore dell'atto e lo*

³³ In her article, "D'Annunzio's Novel *Le Vergini delle Rocce*: Una Cosa Naturale Vista in un Grande Specchio", Lucia Re argues that Cantelmo's bride selection in *Le Vergini* is structurally similar to the scene of the three suitors in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (which is based on various European folktales).

splendore del sogno convergono in un medesimo apice' (II, 9). Therefore it is not surprising that Cantelmo indicates his choice to Anatolia by inviting her to climb all the way to the top of the mountain with him, a metaphor for his request to spend her life with him: '*Giacché non siete stanca, Anatolia, volete salire con me fino alla cima?*' (II, 177).

The opposition between high and low, as depicted in *Le Vergini*, can be read as the contrast between the new Nietzschean values that D'Annunzio embraced in the mid-eighteen-nineties and the 'negative' morality of Decadentism. In the article 'La morale di Emilio Zola', published in *La Tribuna* in 1893, D'Annunzio defined modernity as 'an epoch of descending life', opposed to the harmony and strength expressed by men in other historical times:

Ora dunque la mancanza di equilibrio è il principal carattere dell'uomo moderno. Secondo la formula di Federico Nietzsche, l'uomo moderno rappresenta 'un sistema eterogeneo di valori morali'. Tutti, senza saperlo, senza volerlo, abbiamo dentro di noi una grande quantità di elementi di origine opposta; e inoltre apparteniamo ad un'epoca di vita discendente (D'Annunzio *Scritti Giornalistici* II, 252)

The philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche embodied for D'Annunzio an escape route from the seemingly stagnant condition of the modern man. In 'Il Caso Wagner' (*La Tribuna* 1893), D'Annunzio declares that Nietzsche opposed Wagner as the most representative example of the 'decadent' mentality: '*Il Nietzsche dunque – che, come abbiamo veduto, ha un'ideale di vita ascendente – riconosce e combatte in Riccardo Wagner il tipo esemplare dell'artista decadente; riconosce ed abomina in lui tutte le debolezze e tutte le infermità del secolo*' (D'Annunzio *Scritti Giornalistici* II, 237). In Wagner, Nietzsche (and through the philosopher, D'Annunzio) sees modernity as best embodied by the term 'decadent': '*Figlio del secolo ciò è decadente*' (*ibidem* 243).

At the time of 'Il caso Wagner', D'Annunzio is still on the side of Wagner and an

enthusiastic admirer of his music (248)³⁴. D'Annunzio criticizes Nietzsche for the incoherency of his attack on Wagner and for the animosity that runs through Nietzsche's *The Case of Wagner* (1888), which he sees as no more than a strange pamphlet, a '*bizzarro libello*' (249). However, D'Annunzio acknowledges that Nietzsche has had a few insights into the truth, in particular in his analysis of modernity: '*E pur tuttavia vi sono frequentissimi i bei lampi di verità e ardire; e, certo, alcuni tra i principali caratteri della Decadenza vi son descritti con sicura precisione*' (249). In the years preceding *Le Vergini*, D'Annunzio adheres more and more to Nietzsche's philosophy and incorporates his critique of contemporary society, in particular of the contemplative and disengaged attitude of art and the modern tendency to sterile self scrutiny and introspection. In the *Vergini*, he re-uses the distinction between 'descending' and 'ascending' life, which is scattered through his writings on the concept of decadence. Here this opposition is recast in the symbolic connotation of space, and in the idea of 'elevation' that characterizes Cantelmo's utopias of political renewal.

In *Le Vergini*, Cantelmo chooses Anatolia as his bride, as the princess proved capable of sharing with him 'the ascending life'. Anatolia, with her almost virile strength, her generosity and her capacity for care, represents for Cantelmo the ideal spouse and, more importantly, the most suited mother to the future king. However, the choice of Anatolia is not as straightforward as one might think. In the course of the novel, Cantelmo devotes much more time to the other two princesses, Massimilla and Violante, and almost never talks to Anatolia. He seems fascinated both by Massimilla's virginal purity and by Violante's sensual beauty and Medusa-like appearance. Specifically, the relationship with Violante is

³⁴ D'Annunzio's admiration for Wagner continues in the years after *Le Vergini*. For instance, in *Il Fuoco* Stelio Effrena is fascinated by *Parsifal*. However, Stelio's appreciation of this masterpiece does not concern the content of its story or the theme of redemption contained in it, but rather Wagner's ability to emotionally engaging his audience.

characterized by an intense physical attraction and by the admiration for her perfect features. Violante is, in Cantelmo imagination, the perfect form, the embodiment of the Platonic idea of Beauty that artists have sought and worshipped throughout the centuries: *‘Poiché la natura aveva manifestato per mezzo di tale forma una sua idea di perfezione somma, sembravami che ogni altra idea racchiusa in ogni altro naturale involucro dovesse necessariamente servire come segno per condurre lo spirito del contemplatore a comprendere quella altissima e unica’* (D’Annunzio *Prose di Romanzi* II, 74–5). In other words, the truly aesthetic nature of Cantelmo is attracted by the two stereotypical and opposite images of female beauty in the Decadent canon, the virgin and the prostitute, the Madonna and Medusa. Only for the sake of the future king will he choose the woman in her capacity as a mother, although he shows no attraction for her. In particular, the Medusa type embodies all the characteristics of the *Ewig-Weibliches* worshipped by decadent artists, as well as being a hypostasis for Nature itself, with her enigmas, her cruelty and her beauty, which calls for awe and contemplation. By tracing Cantelmo’s ambiguous attraction for Violante and Massimilla, and by making him choose Anatolia, D’Annunzio portrays the fundamental ambivalence of his relationship to decadence.

The metaphor of the garden is constructed through the semantics of gender. In fact, the garden of the Montaga family is portrayed as the space of femininity, as opposed to the patent masculinity of Claudio Cantelmo. Besides the allusion to the enclosed womb of the *hortus conclusus*, the garden is also seen as a projection of the body of the three princesses. When the three sisters lead Cantelmo to see their garden, he thinks: *‘Mi pareva che parlassero di loro intime cose e, come la vergine di Fontebranda, intendessero: “Noi siamo un giardino”’* (II, 100–101). During a walk through the garden, Cantelmo fantasizes about ‘tasting’ the souls of the three girls just like he would taste the fruits of the garden (II, 102). Secondly, the

garden is sweet, green and luscious as opposed to the arid, yellow-reddish rocky mountains, thereby embodying the centuries-old Aristotelian juxtaposition of female and male characteristics: curve/straight, unstable/stable, soft/hard/ apparent/true (Aristotle *Metaphysica* 986a, 28).

As the garden is a quintessentially feminine space, it also emasculates those who inhabit it. The two brother princes are described as being effeminate and fragile, especially in comparison with Cantelmo's strong and virile attitude: '*Avevano gli stessi occhi chiari, la stessa barba rada e fine, le stesse mani pallide nervose e inquiete come quelle delle isteriche*' (II, 47). Specifically, the emasculation of the two princes seems to be connoted as hysteria, a disease that at the time was considered to affect only women and which manifests itself in nervousness, irritability, and anxiety: '*Mi sembravano entrambi tenuti da un'agitazione strana, quasi febrile; avevano i gesti disordinati e un po' convulsi, la parola rapida e quasi ansiosa: l'aspetto di due prigionieri infermicci, esciti allora allora dal carcere come da un sogno opprimente, turbati e smarriti e quasi ebri nel primo contatto con la vita estranea*' (II, 46).

In the late nineteenth century, the circulation of the hysteria concept in various discursive fields affected not only the construction of the feminine but also that of the decadent artist. According to Barbara Spackman, the male artist of the late nineteenth century perceived himself both as affected by nervous pathologies and as more feminine, in the sense that he claimed to have an increased sensitivity and tendency toward sensuousness and imagination: eviration and feminization are constitutive elements of the decadent rhetoric of sickness (Spackman viii).

In spite of its luscious and verdant beauty, and in spite of its feminine connotations, the garden represents the space of sterility. Two of the three princesses, Violante and Massimilla,

are destined to remain barren, the former because of her Medusean beauty, which is alien to any idea of maternity, and the latter because of her decision to become a nun. Observing Violante, Cantelmo affirms: *‘Pure ogni suo moto rivela ch’ella è fatta per l’amore; ma per l’amore sterile, per la voluttà che non crea. Giammai le sue viscere porteranno il peso difformante; giammai l’onda del latte sforzerà il puro contorno del suo seno’* (*Prose di Romanzi* II, 64). As for Massimilla, in her description the narrator deploys the stereotype of the virginal, sickish and fragile woman: *‘E parve risvegliare in fondo alla mia anima qualche cosa di quella tenera compassione da me provata nel tempo lontano verso la piccola inferma visitata da mia madre; poiché la sua mano era tanto gracile e soave che mi diede imagine d’uno di quei fini gigli, chiamati emerocali, fiorenti per un giorno nelle arene calde’* (II, 69). The garden itself is depicted as the space of *voluptas*, the sterile pleasure that in decadent literature is often indissolubly connected to death, as announced by one of the inscriptions sculpted on the fountain of the palace: *‘Qui la Voluttà e la Morte si mirarono congiunte; e i loro due volti facevano un volto solo’* (II, 107).

The space of femininity is also that of sterility and decay. Conversely, it is the man who is ‘fertile’, and therefore in charge of procreation, as well as of taking action for renewal of the Italian race. In fact, it is Cantelmo who possesses the precious biological heritage which is meant to instill fresh blood and fresh energies in the future ruling class of Italy. Intriguingly, Anatolia—the only princess that appears to be ‘fertile’, and whom Cantelmo chooses as his bride—is portrayed as having somewhat masculine traits: *‘Il suo gesto aveva una franchezza virile; e la sua mano nel contatto parve comunicarmi quasi direi un senso di forza generosa e di bontà efficace, parve d’improvviso infondere nel mio spirito una specie di confidenza fraterna’* (II, 65). In *Le Vergini delle Rocce*, femininity represents sterility, madness, and physical and moral decay, whereas masculinity is charged with all the opposite

and positive qualities. In fact, Cantelmo seems to be only preoccupied with the paternal line of his ancestry and offspring, inasmuch as he fantasizes of a ‘male-to-male’ generation, which transmits the biological and spiritual heritage of his forefather Alessandro directly to his future son, thereby ignoring the contribution of the woman. In Cantelmo’s imagination, the mother is only a custodian and guardian rather than a biological parent, as is shown in the following passage where he envisions Anatolia as the mother of his son: *‘Ella era il simbolo vivente della sicurezza, era la Vegliante e la Tutelare...E io la vidi un’altra volta – nel mio sogno- vegliare con la pura fronte raggianti di presagi sul figlio del mio sangue e della mia anima’* (II, 159). In this passage, Cantelmo affirms that the son is his, in blood and soul, and the mother is only the caretaker and nurturer of the precious offspring. This is even clearer in another passage, where Cantelmo uses a metaphor taken from vegetal reproduction: *‘V’era in lei una virtù che avrebbe potuto produrre un frutto portentoso. La sua sostanza avrebbe potuto nutrire un germe sovrumano’* (II, 147).

In *Le Vergini*, the man entirely appropriates the task of procreation and excludes the woman from it. This is visible in the many allusions to ‘fertilization’ associated to Claudio Cantelmo. For instance, in the first part of the novel, the metaphor of fertilization is expanded to signify the political situation of Italy at the turn of the century. Within this context, Rome embodies the woman, who is sterile and awaits the plough that can fertilize her, that is, a capable ruler that can restore her glory: *‘La mia sterilità è fatta di ceneri sovrapposte, preziose o vili. E non è anche escito dalla montagna il ferro per l’aratro che dovrà solcarmi’* (I, 20). Furthermore, in the second part of the book, Cantelmo’s internal voice—his *demonico*—praises man’s maturity and fertility with a metaphor that is partially shaped on the idea of male reproduction and partially on the idea of female reproduction:

La felice rivelazione ti viene dal bisogno che provi, subitaneo, di versare la tua dovizia,

di spanderla, di prodigarla senza misura. Tu ti senti inesauribile, capace di alimentare mille esistenze. E' ben questo il premio dei tuoi assidui sforzi: – ora tu possiedi l'impetuosa fecondità delle terre profondamente lavorate. Goditi dunque la tua primavera; rimani aperto a tutti i soffii; lasciati penetrare da tutti i germi..' (II, 57)

In the passage above, on the one hand Cantelmo is seen as the bearer of seed, that is, as a father, but on the other he is also the rich mother-earth that has to be impregnated and penetrated by 'germs'. Therefore, he is responsible for the entire process of procreation, as he is the only 'fertile' element.

In depicting the garden as the space of femininity and sterility, D'Annunzio repudiates the paradigm of the decadent artist as emasculated and incapable of generating an art that can have an impact on the world. According to the Cesare Lombroso and nineteenth century science, the view of genius includes sterility as an important degenerative feature, as the hypertrophy of brain and nerves provokes nature into abolishing fecundity (Spackman 20–21). Most of the male protagonists of D'Annunzio's previous novels are portrayed as excessively sensitive and cerebral, and alien to fatherhood. Conversely, he celebrates the virility of the new artist, who has all creativity within himself and who does not need to identify with the woman to produce his art. In fact the *demonico* warns Cantelmo not be enticed by the beauty of the princesses and their garden but rather to dominate his impulses completely in order to make the image of the three girls the dispassionate object of poetry. Furthermore, in this novel the woman is considered qualitatively 'inferior' to the man, who is the only active contributor to the process of procreation representing, metaphorically, the act of artistic creation. In contrast, for the protagonists of D'Annunzio's previous novels, the possibility of artistic fertility was deeply dependent from the presence of the woman (see for instance the relation between Andrea Sprerelli's affairs and his creativity in *Il Piacere*) or, as Spackman has argued, from the incorporation of female attributes into their personality (60–

63).

Le Vergini delle Rocce represents a milestone in D'Annunzio's artistic evolution. This novel inaugurates D'Annunzio's detachment for the ideal of art as pure contemplation of Beauty, whether female or in nature. By contrast, in *Le Vergini* D'Annunzio introduces the idea of the active role of the artist in forging reality and in continuing the work of Nature. After all, the whole novel is nothing but Cantelmo's transfiguration of the almost veristic story of the decline of a Bourbon family into an idealized portrait of the three aspects of femininity, the Virgin, The Lover, and the Mother. In other words, the story is '*una cosa naturale vista in un grande specchio*' with an emphasis placed on the sublimating power of art as a transforming mirror for reality. Furthermore, as Jared Becker observes, while the other male protagonists of D'Annunzio's novels were entangled with a woman, whom they needed for their creativity, but who would sap their energies and who were to blame for their lack of willpower, Cantemo prefigures Stelio Effrena, a man who can act decisively and dominate the influence of his female partner (Becker *Nationalism* 159–60). In *Le Vergini*, the woman is relegated to a subordinate position and excluded by the process of artistic creation, which belongs completely to the man. With *Le Vergini*, D'Annunzio begins the process of liberation of the male hero from the trap of the woman and from the emasculation that the decadent paradigm for the artist implied. At the same time, he progresses towards the ideal of man's independence from woman, which we see in *Forse che sì, forse che no*, and towards the proto-fascist cult of virility.

The sexual imagery adopted by D'Annunzio in *Le Vergini delle Rocce* plays an important role in the poet's rhetoric of nationalism. In the years of *Le Vergini*, D'Annunzio began to establish the equation between femininity and the political (as well as artistic) decadence of the nation. Conversely, he associated virility with political renewal and strong

leadership. In particular, already in *Le Vergini* the idea of the effeminacy of the male and of the female sex gone amok or completely sterile—as represented by the brother princes, Aldoina, and the three sisters—is compared to the democratic and socialistic policies debilitating the nation. At the same time Claudio Cantelmo's boasted male prowess and incredible potency represent the hope of a renaissance for Italy. In the first book of the novel, Rome, the capital of the newly unified Italy, is compared to a sterile woman (II, 20). Moreover, the *demonico* assimilates the confusion generated in Cantelmo by the sight of the crowd to the deceitful seduction operated by the woman on the man:

A giudicarne dalla qualità dei tuoi pensieri, tu sembri contaminato dalla folla o preso da una femmina. Per avere attraversato la folla che ti guardava, ecco, tu già ti senti diminuito dinnanzi a te medesimo. Non vedi tu gli uomini che la frequentano divenire infecondi come muli?Non t'indugiare; non ti lasciar contaminare dalla folla, né ti lasciar prendere da una femmina (D'Annunzio Prose di Romanzi II, 41)

In this passage the crowd, in which we have to see the new democratic mass society, acts on the man like a woman provoking base sexual attraction, and therefore deterring him from higher and nobler purposes. Furthermore, the union with the crowd is said to 'make men sterile', that is, to deplete and deprive them of their best energies. It is interesting to recall that in the *Proemio* of *Il Convito*, together with the artists in the lonely garden of their sadness, D'Annunzio also condemns those who 'prostitute themselves to the crowd' (D'Annunzio *Scritti Giornalistici* 285).

D'Annunzio's use of sexual imagery in the context of a political discourse is not new, but it constitutes an element of many other examples of anti-democratic and nationalistic propaganda (Becker 164). Here, the mass is seen as a woman, whose sexuality is perverse and afar from the respectable model of motherhood praised by the conservative party and the bourgeoisie. As Becker suggests, 'fears about the political volatility of the urban proletariat

are displaced onto the sexual field, so that those who threaten the established political order are also portrayed as violators of sexual conventions' (*ibidem*). However, the critique of parliamentary democracy and to its foundation, mass society, is also part of D'Annunzio's early 'decadent' phase, inasmuch as characters such as Andrea Sperelli or Tullio Aurispa express an aristocratic disdain towards the crowd. In the mid-eighteen-nineties, D'Annunzio extended his critique of decadent art, portraying it as a receptacle for sexual deviations and as the cause of the weakening of the nation. Intriguingly, in his juvenile work, D'Annunzio himself had toyed with the idea of feminization and bisexuality, devoting attention to female characters in his novels and writing poems like *L'Androgino* (in *La Chimera* 1890). At the time of *Le Vergini* and *Il Convito* both the crowd and decadent artists are on the same side of the opposition between degeneration and regeneration, which is translated metaphorically as the difference between the sexes. The pole of regeneration is represented by masculinity, which, within the context of the political powers at play in *fin-de-siècle* Italy, embodies a new *tertium*, the rising nationalism. As to the other two, one is obviously socialism and the constitutional government of democratic Italy, as an expression of the universal vote, while the other is the aristocracy, with which Decadentism claimed at least a spiritual affinity and a similarity of attitudes. In the novel, more clearly, D'Annunzio depicts the decline of a noble family, which he hopes to resurrect and rejuvenate, but whose physical and spiritual decay are too advanced for any redemption.

In spite of D'Annunzio's exaltation of virility in *Le Vergini delle Rocce* and in his subsequent novels, it is possible to trace in the former a certain ambiguity as to the sexual identity of the protagonist. Once again, Becker's insightful analysis has unveiled the latent homoerotic tendencies present in the fascist exaltation of male warriors and in the rituals of male bonding mixed in with the cult of virility, which D'Annunzio begins to portray

precisely with *Le Vergini* (Becker 166–167). In *Le Vergini*, this is visible in Cantelmo's initial nostalgic remembrance of the relationship between Socrates and his disciples, a picture that contains clear allusions to the Greek practice of *pederasteia*:

Poiché era seduto sul letto e accanto a lui sopra uno sgabello basso era Fedone pose egli la mano sul capo del discepolo e gli accarezzò e gli premette i capelli sul collo, avendo già consuetudine di scherzare così con le dita in quella ricca selva giovanile. ..Non mai la capellatura del giovinetto d'Elide aveva avuto per lui un pregio tanto sublime. (Prose di Romanzi II, 17)

Here Cantelmo fantasizes of a male-only society devoted to the cult of the *logos* and the perfection of their soul through an almost ascetic discipline. The woman is purposefully excluded, and so is every explicit allusion to sexuality: '*E mi commuoveva la sorte di quel giovinetto eleo Fedone bellissimo che, fatto prigioniero di guerra nella sua patria e venduto ad un tenitor di postriboli, dal luogo di vergogna erasene fuggito a Socrate e aveva ottenuto per opera di lui il riscatto e partecipato alle feste del puro pensiero*' (II, 14).

The image of Phaedo's hair, which occupies a central place in the episode of Socrates' last night, reveals interesting implications. In the scene imagined by Cantelmo, Phaedo's hair is the object of Socrates' desire, and the physical detail that conveys the idea of the beauty of living things. Similarly, when Cantelmo sees Violante he is attracted by her extraordinary and voluminous hair: '*Su la sua fronte breve era visibile il riflesso della corona ideale ch'ella portava in sommo de' suoi pensieri; e i suoi capelli, costretti su la nuca in un gran nodo, parevano avere obbedito al ritmo che regola i riposi del mare*' (II, 68). Violante's hair (like that of many other women in D'Annunzio's prose and poetry) are the external sign of her sexuality, which appears constrained by conventions and respectability—just as her locks are tied up in a knot—but which threatens to set itself loose at any moment. Whereas Phaedo's hair represents the reassuring symbol of a male-to-male Platonic relationship, where beauty is a step in the ladder to the elevation of one's soul, Violante's long tresses, as well as her soft,

cat-like, and yet haughty attitude, embody the threat of female sexuality which threatens to go wild. In other words, with *Le Vergini* D'Annunzio initiates the process of substituting the relationship of the artist and the Medusean woman by a society of males, bound by a common purpose and intent. The antagonism with women that was already fully displayed in *Il Trionfo della Morte* begins to be resolved, insofar as the male protagonist resists the charms of the female sex and prefers the company of men. This process culminates in the novel *Forse che sì, forse che no*, where the female character Isabella is portrayed as sexually deviant and insane, and the male protagonist Paolo moves away from her by dedicating himself to manly activities and heroic pursuits. In *Le Vergini*, Cantelmo is split between the duty towards 'colui che deve venire', the future king he must father, and his attraction for Violante, the sterile and beautiful princess. In the end he chooses the more masculine Anatolia, therefore heading towards the idea of the male-to-male genealogy. However, throughout the novel the figure of Violante continues to haunt his fantasies, and she almost seems to come to substitute Anatolia.

Although with *Le Vergini* D'Annunzio declares that his time of contemplating of beauty as an end unto itself and of decadent *Weltanschauung* is over, the protagonist Cantelmo is still a decadent aesthete. This is evident mostly in his relationship and spiritual affinity with Violante and Massimilla, the two princesses that best embody the feminine ideal of the decadent canon. As we have already seen, Violante represents not only the Medusean type, but also Beauty in the Platonic sense, as the supreme formal perfection to which all beautiful things bear a faint resemblance.

Anche una volta ella m'appariva isolata ed intangibile, furi della vita comune, piuttosto simile ad una finzione dell'arte che ad una creatura di nostra specie.... Segrete affinità, non intelligibili, congiungevano al suo essere le cose più diverse, rapportavano i circostanti misteri al suo mistero. Poiché la natura aveva manifestato per mezzo di tal forma umana una sua idea di perfezione somma, sembravami che ogni

altra idea racchiusa in ogni altro naturale involucro dovesse necessariamente servire come un segno per condurre lo spirito del contemplatore a comprendere quella altissima ed unica. (II, 74–75)

As such, Violante embodies the supreme ideal of art, especially of decadent art, which is devoted to the cult of Beauty as exquisiteness of form. Violante is ‘pure form’: in fact, according to the legend surrounding her birth, her features do not take after her parents, but after the portrait of a perfect profile on a cameo:

L’opera sottile era d’artefice antico, non indegna di Pirgotele o di Dioscoride; ma il divino lineamento meduseo, rilevato sul campo sanguigno del sardonio, corrispondeva con tanta perfezione alla sembianza della creatura superba che io pensai: ‘Veramente ella dunque illuminò l’arte delle età scomparse e da tempo immemorabile conferì alle materie durevoli il privilegio di perpetuare l’Idea ch’ella oggi incarna!’. – *La madre, quando incinse di lei, portava quest’anello – soggiunse il principe col medesimo sorriso dolce – e lo guardava sempre. (II, 77)*

Furthermore, Violante is particularly keen on collecting perfumes, which are periodically sent to her as a present by the Bourbon queen Maria Sofia (II, 88). However, Violante’s perfumes seem to be more than simple floral essences for her, insofar as, in Anatolia’s words, ‘she dies of them’ (II, 89). In the best tradition of decadent literature, princess Violante is addicted to narcotics, or poisonous substances that will slowly kill her, so that her beauty will not be corrupted by the passing of time: ‘*Violante si uccide coi profumi...*’ *O creatura sovrana, sentendoti perfetta tu senti la necessità della morte. Tu senti che la morte sola può preservarti da ogni ingiuria vile; e, poiché tutto in te è nobile, tu mediti di offerire alla custode solenne un corpo regalmente impregnato di profumi*’ (II, 80).

Cantelmo is attracted to Violante in many ways. First of all, Violante is the stereotypical *belle dame sans merci* of decadent literature (Praz 195–207). Secondly, Violante’s perfect features, her *effigie*, attracts Cantelmo inasmuch he is looking to perfect his own self-image through strict moral discipline and to ‘bring to the highest expression the

Latin type' (II, 50), so that he could fulfill his dream of eugenics by fathering the future leader of Italy. Intriguingly, the image of the *effigie* in D'Annunzio's works travels from the aesthetic dimension to the political one, from contemplation to action. In the context of fin-de-siècle Aestheticism *effigie* has to be intended as a Platonic term indicating the universal form. In fact Beauty is nothing but the perfection of form that can be glimpsed at through the imperfection in the veil of reality and that can be reached through aesthetic contemplation. When D'Annunzio configures his political project of renewal for his country, he describes it in terms of a restoration of Italy's pristine beauty: '*ritrovare l'effigie dell'Italia bella*' (D'Annunzio *Prose di Ricerca* II, 2214). In other words, *Le Vergini* shows how D'Annunzio forges new concepts in the mold of previous ideas, in between aestheticism and his newfound philosophy of action.

The garden is repeatedly connoted as the space of death. First, the legend of Pantea's death in the fountain casts a shadow on the beauty of the place. Secondly, this legend foreshadows another death in the garden, that of Simonetto, Massimilla's betrothed. Simonetto was a botanist, and it was precisely his passion for plants that caused his death, as he was poisoned by a mysterious herb. The peaceful, apparently innocuous activity of botany proves to be deadly and the garden a space of invisible dangers. Once more, the texts that we need to read in parallel with this episode of *Le Vergini* is Rousseau's *Rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire* and his other writings on botany, where this activity is said to be similar to contemplation, inasmuch as it prevents the tumult of the passions and confers serenity to the soul (Rousseau *Botanical Writings* 156; 173). Through botany Rousseau exalts contemplation as abstinence from action and as a way of rejuvenating one's soul through closeness with nature and lack of commerce with people. Rousseau's text creates a connection between nature and contemplation on the one hand, and botany as a way of praising the beauty of

nature and happiness and morality on the other. Thus, on his way to conceive a philosophy of action, D'Annunzio reverses Rousseau's paradigm by showing that lingering in the garden of contemplation ultimately signifies, for the artist, the death of his creativity.

Le Vergini delle Rocce intersects D'Annunzio's turn from contemplation to action. Through the image of the garden in the novel he portrays the dark side of contemplation, and at the same he tries to distance himself from a code of values which he had shared and by which he was still deeply influenced. In *Le Vergini*, D'Annunzio also denounces the inertia of the intellectuals of his time, caught in a stasis that prevents them from regenerating themselves and their country. Indeed, the crisis of the intellectual's role at the turn of the twentieth century parallels that of Italy. According to D'Annunzio, the discourse of decadence needs to be overcome, in order to adapt art to the new reality of modern society. However, at the time of *Le Vergini* the aesthetic code still informed D'Annunzio's political views, as no real ideological content substitutes it. The development of a nationalistic wave in the early twentieth century offered D'Annunzio the possibility of channeling his aspirations to engagement into an actual political ideology. Nonetheless, *Le Vergini* shows that the Italian intellectuals' adhesion to nationalism is deeply rooted in their previous critique of post-unification Italy, which revolved around the 'decadent' theme of beauty.

3.3 Contemplation in the Garden of Poetry. The Garden in Giovanni Pascoli's Works.

Flowers, plants and other botanical images abound in Pascoli's poetry. Here we find not only references to the cultivation of flowers but also to that of the less illustrious vegetables and edible plants, as Pascoli's poems are often situated in a rural setting, specifically in the countryside of central Italy. In fact, the poet displays his knowledge of all the species of flora that are likely to grow in the garden of a rural villa, and gives each its proper name with the technical precision that characterizes what Gianfranco Contini has called Pascoli's 'post-

grammatical language' (Contini 224). The garden occupies a special place in Pascoli's poetry, as it is the enclosed space where the poet can enjoy the sight of natural beauty and that also sustains him with its products. As such, Pascoli's garden is not the luxurious park of a mansion, like in D'Annunzio's novels and poems, but it is rather a *hortus* in the Latin sense, which translates into Italian both as *giardino* (grounds laid out with flowers and trees used for recreation and display) and as *orto* (a plot of land devoted to the cultivation of fruits, vegetables, and herbs). Moreover, as opposed to D'Annunzio's gardens, full of roses and box-trees, Pascoli prefers a humble backyard of wild flowers and shrubs. This representation of the garden alludes to Pascoli's idea of how poetry should be. In fact, as I will show in these pages, the garden is not only a protagonist of many of Pascoli's poems, but it is also the quintessential metaphor for poetry.

Scholarship on Pascoli has devoted much attention to the botanical images in his poetry. In particular, Giorgio Barberi Squarotti has analyzed specific images such as those of the *siepe* (the hedgerow) (*Simboli* 21) and of the various trees and flowers in the section *Alberi e Fiori* from *Myricae* (Squarotti *La Poesia* 262). Squarotti reads the images referring to an enclosed space, such as those of the hedgerow and the nest, and, as a consequence, that of the garden, as symbols of Pascoli's regression to the wholeness of childhood and as refuges from his traumatic experience of reality (270). Closed spaces express Pascoli's neurotic refusal to live an adult life and his withdrawal from society and history into a world of consolatory beauty, although such a world is also connoted as suffocating and haunted by the memory of his dead family. Indeed, as Rosa Maria Truglio has argued, the nest, and by extrapolation, the garden, is fraught with ambivalence, as it 'desired, comforting and homey, and at the same time threatening and dangerous' (Truglio 7). Furthermore, Squarotti claims that the flowers and trees of *Myricae* serve to express Pascoli's discourse on the nature of

poetry (Squarotti *La poesia* 268.). In fact, for Pascoli poetry, like flowers, is apparently purposeless, as it does not have any external goal. In addition, just wild plants can grow even under harsh conditions, so may poetry, which is the product of meditation on one's existential pain.

While building upon Squarotti's analysis of botanical symbols in Pascoli's poetry, my approach to his use of the image of garden takes a different direction. Specifically, I show that Pascoli employs this image to elaborate the *pars construens* of his argument on the function of poetry. In other words, although the garden often refers to Pascoli's regression to infancy and withdrawal from the active life, it also serves to reveal poetry's ultimate benefit to mankind, which is the peace and tranquility deriving from contemplation. Contemplation and poetry are indissolubly associated, as in order to be poetic one must suspend the relentless desire that drives us to see the world only from the perspective of our needs and aspirations. Contemplation and poetry both ultimately stem from a disinterested gaze on the world, as Pascoli explains in *Il Fanciullino* (1903): '*Ma quindi noi cresciamo, ed egli resta piccolo; noi accendiamo negli occhi un nuovo desiderare, ed egli vi tiene fissa la sua antica serena meraviglia*' (Pascoli *Poesie e Prose* 935). This disinterested gaze is very important, inasmuch as it entails quiescence of desire, which, in Pascoli's view, is the root of authentic morality. Here I examine several texts in which Pascoli makes the garden the locus of poetry, and consequently, the space of contemplation and morality. However, another path departs from this reading, which leads us deep into Pascoli's ideas of desire and its relationship to contemplation. The garden as the space that allows one to annul one's desires is also, paradoxically, the space where the ultimate desire is fulfilled, that is, the nostalgia for the lost happiness of childhood. As Truglio points out, for Pascoli the social function of the poet is to teach people to subdue their desires, precisely because in reality poetry involves the

satisfaction of another desire, the wholeness of being ‘at one’ with the world (Truglio 51). Thus, ‘the garden of poetry’ serves as a compensation for the sense of lack instilled into the poet by reality. In some of Pascoli’s poems this satisfaction is seen as being unattainable in this world, even through poetry, and is therefore displaced onto the realm of pure fantasy.

Before proceeding to analyze Pascoli’s treatment of the image of the garden, it is necessary to clarify which objects in the poet’s texts belong to the category of ‘garden’ and what he actually means by this word. As I have mentioned before, Pascoli plays on the ambiguity of the Latin word for garden, *hortus*, so that in his poetry the garden is both a ground of flowers and a plot of land cultivated with edible plants. This is particularly clear in a passage of *Il Fanciullino*, where Pascoli compares the poet to a gardener:

L’ideale del poeta è quel vecchietto Cilice, trapiantato dalla sua patria nei dintorni di Taranto. Aveva avuto pochi iugeri di terra non buona né a grano né a prato né a vigna: una grillaia, uno scopiccio. Ebbene il bravo vecchietto ne aveva fatto un orto, non con solo i suoi cavoli, ma anche con gigli e rose, e alberi da frutta, e bugni d’ape e vivai di piante. (Pascoli *Poesie e Prose* 956)

In the passage above the garden is a plot of land that is not suited to major cultivation, such as that of vines or wheat. However, the wise gardener has made the most of it and has transformed into both a locus of pleasure (with lilies and roses) and a source of frugal sustenance for himself, thanks to the cultivation of products such as cauliflower, fruit, and honeycombs. All of these plants significantly recur in Pascoli’s poems, where they are specifically evoked to express the humbleness of poetry, and yet its capability to give one the necessary for survival, thereby also teaching contentment and peace of heart.

Pascoli’s garden is actually more of an *orto* than a *giardino*. The poet himself stresses the opposition between the aristocratic gardens of *fin de siècle* poetry and the rustic and domestic backyard of his villa in the countryside. In the poem *Rosa di macchia* (1894)

Pascoli juxtaposes the wild rose to the more noble garden rose, inasmuch as the latter is immediately picked up for decoration, whereas the former is allowed to fructify and its deep red berries cover its thorns in the winter:

*Rosa di macchia, che dall'irta rama
ridi non vista a quella montanina
che stornellando passa e che ti chiama
rosa canina;
se sottil mano i fiori tuoi non coglie
non ti dolere della tua fortuna:
le invidiate rose centofoglie
colgano a una
a una: al freddo sibilar del vento
che l'arse foglie a una a una stacca,
irto il rosaio dondolerà lento
senza una bacca;
ma tu di bacche brillerai nel lutto
del grigio inverno;...
(Pascoli *Myrica* 272–73)*

In this poem it is possible to read an allusion to the rose as a century-long protagonist of poetry, especially in the line ‘*se sottil mano*’ where the poet refers to the many images of women picking flowers in *fin-de-siècle* literature, as for instance in D’Annunzio’s *Il Piacere* (1889), whose opening chapter portrays the beautiful Elena Muti spreading rose petals on her carpet. In Pascoli’s poetry the wild rose, as a symbol of poetry, has the consolatory function of providing joy during hard times. In the poem *Il Lauro* (1894) the garden is called both a *verziere* (Pascoli *Poesie e Prose* I, 996, 1) and an *orto* (*ibidem* 4) and it contains a laurel, but also a plot of cauliflowers, whose existence is more important than that of the illustrious tree celebrated by Petrarch. Lastly, in the poem *L’oliveta e l’orto* in *Primi Poemetti* (1900) the garden is laid out with humble plants and flowers, cauliflowers, chicory, onions, violets, and sunflowers (Pascoli *Poesie e Prose* II, 111–13).

Pascoli’s garden is not only portrayed as a place of domestic peace, but it also has a

more disquieting connotation. In fact, if the garden is the locus of poetry, and poetry stems from existential pain (Squarotti *La Poesia* 268) then for Pascoli the garden is also the place that is haunted by the ghosts of his dead loved ones. Or, in other words, the garden is also a graveyard. Indeed, it is not a coincidence that Pascoli imagines an encounter with his dead mother precisely in the garden of their former house. In the poem *Casa mia* (1903) the mother appears at the gate and enters the garden, welcomed by the poet:

*Mia madre era al cancello.
Che pianto fu! Quante ore!
lì, sotto il verde ombrello
della mimosa in fiore!*

....

*S'udivano sussurri
cupi di macroglosse
su le peonie rosse
e sui giaggioli azzurri.*

(*Poesie e Prose* II, 874, 1–4; 21–24)

Moreover, Pascoli devotes the *Canti di Castelvecchio* to the memory of his mother. In the preface to this work, the poet explicitly compares the poems contained there to flowers growing around the tomb of his mother:

*Crescano e fioriscano intorno all'antica tomba della mia giovane madre queste myricae (diciamo cesti o stipe) autunnali. ...Mettano queste poesie i loro rosei calicetti (che l'inverno poi inaridisce senza farli cadere) intorno alla memoria di mia madre che fu così umile, e pur così forte, sebbene al dolore non sapesse resistere se non poco più di un anno. (Pascoli *Poesie Prose* II, 710).*

The graveyard becomes the fertile ground from which poetry can bloom. Conversely, the poems, like flowers, turn the graveyard into a place of spiritual growth. Interestingly, at the end of this preface, Pascoli states that the goal of his poems is to deter people from doing evil, and that if this happened he would credit his loved ones, who died unavenged, and to whom he devotes his works (*ibidem*). Furthermore, the graveyard is similar to a garden also

because Pascoli sees the process of death and rebirth enacted in it, inasmuch as from the remnants of death something new can be born again, as he narrates in the poem *I Due Cugini* (1896): ‘*Ma l’altro non crebbe. Dal mite/ suo cuore, ora senza perché/ fioriscono le margherite/ e i non-ti-scordar-di me*’ (*Myricae* 253–55). Indeed for Pascoli, the garden fills the gap left by death as it represents a source of life.

In many of Pascoli’s texts the garden is represented as the preferred locus of poetry. Poetry is only possible in a state of contemplation, which constitutes the necessary condition for the poetic gaze. In the preface to *Canti di Castelveccchio* Pascoli connects poetry and contemplation: ‘*Io sento che a lei [to his mother] devo la mia attitudine contemplativa, cioè, qual ch’ella sia, la mia attitudine poetica*’ (*Poesie e Prose* II, 710). On the other hand, for Pascoli, who was familiar with some of the major texts of Buddhism³⁵, contemplation is nothing but the annihilation of every desire, and as such it is not only the root of poetry but also the basis for morality. In his poems Pascoli thus portrays the garden as the symbol of this morality grounded on the serene contemplation of beauty and on the contentment that comes from the annulment of desire. While on one hand Pascoli revisits the classic and Oratian *topos* of the *locus amoenus* as embodying the ideal of the *aurea mediocritas* (especially in his Latin works), on the other hand he infuses the image of the garden with his idea of the suppression of the desire, in particular of the erotic one. Indeed, into the image of the garden Pascoli transposes the tension between inside and outside that Squarotti has highlighted in his *Simboli e Strutture nella Poesia del Pascoli* (Squarotti *Simboli* 9–11). Here the outside is represented by desire, intended as love and ambition (‘*le cose che vogliono che ami e che*

³⁵ As Massimo Castoldi has shown, Pascoli derived his knowledge of Buddhist texts mainly from Arthur Schopenhauer and from Emile Caro’s article “*La maladie du pessimisme au dix-neuvième siècle. Un précurseur de Schopenhauer, Leopardi*”, published in *La Revue des Deux Mondes* in November 1877 (year XLVII, volume XXIV) (Castoldi 98).

vada' in *Nebbia*), or, in other words, by what fuels the active life. The inside, or the enclosed space of the garden, represents contemplation, or the quiescence of the aforementioned desires that prevent the 'wholeness of womb' (Truglio 51) to install itself within the poet's soul.

The poem *Il Lauro*, first published in the 1894 edition of *Myricae*, constitutes a clear example of the opposition between the garden and erotic desire. In the text the poet remembers his garden in Massa, Tuscany, where a laurel grew, and how the sight of this tree used to make him daydream of a blond-haired girl: '*Io sognava: una corsa lungo il puro/ Frigido, l'oro di capelli sparsi,/ una fanciulla... ancora al vecchio muro/ tremava il lauro che pareva slanciarsi*' (*Poesie e Prose* I, 997, 17–20) The image of the girl is highly stylized, and more than a real person, it seems to evoke Laura, the blond woman celebrated by Petrarch and the quintessential symbol of love poetry, also given her assimilation to the laurel tree in the medieval poet's texts. However, the 'tree of love' in Pascoli's garden is short-lived because one day the poet finds that his gardener has cut off the laurel, as its persistent shadow prevented the cauliflowers from growing: '*...Sarchiava lì vicino/ Fiore, un ragazzo pieno di bontà./ Gli domandai del lauro; e Fiore, chino/ sopra il sarchiello: Faceva ombra, sa./ E m'accennavi a un campo glauco, o Fiore,/ di cavolo cappuccio e cavolfiore.*' (27–32).

Elio Gioanola's analysis of *Il Lauro* has shown that a mechanism of displacement is at work in this text, inasmuch as the poet identifies his dream of love with a fictional persona, the imaginary girl in the poem (Gioanola 84). The dream of love, according to Gioanola, is only possible in the realm of literature. Reality, symbolized by the twittering of the sparrows that interrupt the poet's daydreaming, reveals the poet's voluntary castration, represented by the cutting of the laurel (*ibidem* 86). Indeed, Gioanola argues that the reconstruction of the family's 'nest', that is, Pascoli's cohabitation with his two sisters implied for the poet a self-

imposed prohibition against having a love life.

My reading of this poem focuses instead on the tension between erotic desire, embodied by the laurel, and the safeguarding of the space of poetry, the garden. Firstly, the garden of the house in Massa is filled with many of the elements that Pascoli deploys elsewhere in his poems to indicate poetry: the smell of flowers, the beating wings and the singing of the birds and the violets (*‘un odorato e lucido verziere/pieno di frulli, pieno di sussurri,/ pieno de’ flauti de le capinere’* 4–6³⁶ ; *‘Intorno era un odore, sottil, vecchio, e forse di viole’* 15–16³⁷). On the other hand, the laurel, as the symbol of the erotic desire, seems to want to escape from the garden: *‘Slanciato avanti, sopra il muro, al sole/ dava la chioma’* (14–15). The laurel, and the girl into which it turns (a reference to the myth of Daphne), are characterized by movement. The girl is imagined as running and the laurel is seen as trembling and stretching outside the wall of the garden: *‘... ancora al vecchio muro/ tremava il lauro che pareva slanciarsi’* (19–20). The tension to reach out, which connotes the tree in this poem, is one of the ways in which Pascoli depicts the physical manifestation of desire³⁸.

The awakening of the poet and the realization that the laurel has been cut off bring back into the picture the elements that symbolize poetry, the birds’ chirrup and the violets:

‘Un’alba – si sentì di due fringuelli/ chiaro il francesco mio: la capinera/ già desta

³⁶ The same images occurs in another poem, entitled *Il Mago*, in the section *Le gioie del poeta*, in which the joys of poetry are symbolized precisely by the perfume of flowers and the singing of the birds: *“Rose al verziere, rondini al verone!”/Dice, e l’aria alle sue dolci parole/ sibila d’ali, e l’irta siepe fiora./ Altro il savio potrebbe: altro non vuole:/ pago se il ciel gli canta e il suol gli odora.’* (*Myricae* 127–28, 1–5).

³⁷ In Pascoli’s poetry, violets represent the consolation that poetry offers against pain, as for instance in the poem *Viole d’Inverno* from the section *Alberi e Fiori* in *Myricae*: *‘Ché sempre, se ti agghiaccia la sventura,/ se l’odio altrui ti spoglia e ti desola, spunta, al tepor dell’anima tua pura,/ qualche viola’* (*Myricae* 279, 17–20).

³⁸ In *L’Assiuolo* (1897) the two trees, *il mandorlo e il melo*, seem to stretch out for the desire to see the moon. (Pascoli *Poesie e Prose* I, 1228) In other poems, such as *Alexandros* (1903), the adjective *anelo*, etymologically, ‘running after something’, ‘trying to reach something’ expresses the driving force of desire (*ibidem* II, 1179).

squittinìa di tra i piselli – / tu più non c’eri, o vergine fugace:/ netto il pedale era tagliato: v’era/ quel vecchio odore e quella vecchia pace;’ (21–26). Finally, as opposed to the attractiveness of the laurel and of the girl, the value that emerges from the concluding lines of the poem is that of goodness: the gardener boy is ‘*pieno di bontà*’ (28) and his motivation for cutting the tree is to safeguard the plot of cauliflowers. Cauliflowers always embody, in Pascoli’s poetry, the ideal of contentment and frugality, like for instance in the poem *La vite e il cavolo*: ‘*Ma nobil vite, alcuna gloria è spesso/ più di quel gramo, se per lui l’oscuro/ paiol borbotta con suo lieve scrollo;/ e il core allegra al pio villan, che d’esso/ trova odorato il tiepido abituro,/ mentre ai fumanti buoi libera il collo*’ (*Myricae* 133–135, 13–19).

The preservation of poetry and of morality, both deriving from contemplation, is obtained at the expenses of the erotic desire. In *Il Lauro* the tension between contentment and desire is still strong, if we consider that this poem is included in the section of *Myricae* entitled *Le pene del poeta*. In other poems Pascoli has already forcefully expelled desire from the garden of poetry, and the former is represented like a dark force, threatening to perturb the poet. Conversely, the latter progressively becomes an idealized space of beauty and eternal youth, although, following Pascoli’s association between childhood and old age, the garden is sometimes populated by the elderly alter ego of the poet.

Let us consider the Latin poem *Veianius* (1891), which presents a similar structure to *Il Lauro*. The poem narrates the story of the ex-gladiator Veianius, who has moved to the countryside, having retired from his violent profession. Interestingly, here Pascoli chooses to split the usual alter ego of his poems in two different characters, one being Veianus and the other the poet Oratius, who has also retired to a villa, which happens to be adjacent to that of the ex-gladiator. This split reveals on the one hand Pascoli’s idea that the peace of contemplation is attainable for everybody, regardless of their background, and on the other it

presents the reader with both a character ‘in progress’ on the way to achieving inner peace, and with one who has already obtained it. In fact, in the poem *Veianius* falls asleep while resting in his garden (a condition similar to the daydreaming of the lyrical I of *Il Lauro*) and has a nightmare in which he is still fighting in the arena. The narrative structure of the Latin poem follows the three steps also present in *Il Lauro*. Firstly, we see *Veianius* admiring the beauty of his garden, which, like many gardens in Pascoli’s poems, is surrounded by a hedgerow: ‘*Tandem ubi densa suis saepes praetenditur arvis/ hirta rubo, clymeni spirans serpentis odorem,/ venerat, et secum tacitus modo visa recenset:/ hortumque arbustumque virens et pinguis olivae/ exiguos flores et laetum melle salictum*’³⁹ (*Poesie e Prose* I, 812, 25–29). Secondly, *Veianius* falls asleep and dreams of being in the arena again, facing a gladiator whom he had killed long before, while the crowd applauds and shouts his name: ‘*tardis Veianous errat/ luminibus circumspiciens et milia cernit/ multa in se demens oculorum fixa crepantesque/ attonitus media palmas exaudit arena*’⁴⁰ (58–61). In this poem, desire is not eroticism but rather ambition, or the aspiration for worldly glory, which Pascoli discusses in *Il Fanciullino* and in his Dantean writings as being the cause of all evil: ‘*Oh, se la gloria è ombra di vanità, se è vaporazione di nulla, non è però così vana nulla cosa il desiderio di essa. È un desiderio di sopraffare, è un desiderio di deprimere e avvilitare altrui*’ (Pascoli, *Prose* II, 4). In *Il Fanciullino* the desire for glory is described as a ‘*morbo*’ (*Poesie e Prose* II, 973), and in the moral discourse Pascoli traces there, this ambition represents an attitude that is most alien to the poet-child. In *Veianius*, therefore, this desire haunts the protagonist with its mixture of violence and the sense of triumph, which are the elements which according to

³⁹ ‘*Giunge finalmente presso la fitta siepe di rovi e odorosa di caprifoglio che si stende intorno al podere; e ripensa assorto a tutte le cose viste da poco: e all’orto, e ai giovani alberi verdeggianti, e ai lievi fiori del pingue ulivo, e al salceto ricco di miele*’ (transl. by Salvatore Quasimodo, *Poesie e Prose* I, 813)

⁴⁰ *Veianio si alza vacillando, lentamente volge intorno lo sguardo e, come folle, sente migliaia di occhi che lo fissano, e ode attonito un applauso salire clamoroso dal mezzo dell’arena*’ (ibidem 815)

Pascoli constitute ambition: ‘*Non c’è forse sentimento al mondo, nemmeno l’avidità del guadagno, che sia tanto contrario all’ingenuità del poeta, quanto questa gola di gloriola, che si risolve in un desiderio di sopraffazione!*’ (*Poesie e Prose* II, 973). Lastly, Veianius’s awakening from his dream is accompanied and triggered by the singing of birds in his garden: ‘*Vicinae forte cupresso/ turba loquax avium densis insederat alis./ Sibila populeas frondes super incutit aurea*’⁴¹ (*Poesie e Prose* I, 814, 84–86). In other words, poetry rescues once again the poet from his desire for glory, which would kill in him the serenity and peace that he strives to achieve. Indeed, it is not a coincidence that the poem ends with the poet Oratius welcoming Veianius back to reality.

In other poems, the desire that Pascoli chastises and excludes from the garden of poetry is specifically the erotic one. For instance, in the first of the *Poemi Conviviali* (1904), *Solon*, Pascoli clearly illustrates the antithesis between eros and poetry. In this poem the protagonist is Sappho, as an alter ego of the poet himself, who is invited to sing at Solon’s banquet (representing, in Pascoli’s intentions, the journal *Il Convito* in which so many of the *Conviviali* were published). Sappho sings two songs, one of love and one of death. The first song begins with the image of a garden: ‘*Splende al plenilunio l’orto; il melo/ trema appena d’un tremolio d’argento*’ (Pascoli *Poemi Conviviali* 80, 41–42). However, already in the following lines the peacefulness of this image finds a striking opposition in the representation of the wild force of love, which perturbs the lover’s soul: ‘*Mugghia il vento, strepita tra le forre/ su le quercie gettasi...Il mio non sembra/ che un tremore, ma è l’amore, e corre/ sposa le membra!*’ (*ibidem* 81, 45–49). Once again, like in the poem *Il Lauro*, Pascoli here juxtaposes the immobility of the garden with the frenetic movement engendered by erotic

⁴¹ ‘*Proprio allora uno stormo canoro di uccelli dalle folte ali si era posato su un cipresso vicino, e il soffio del vento agitava le foglie del pioppo*’ (*ibidem*).

desire, as love ‘runs’ and shakes the lover’s soul and body. Such is the devastating effect of eroticism that it leads to self-annihilation: in the following stanzas of *Solon*, Sappho expresses her desire to die for the sake of love. Furthermore, when asked which of the two promised songs she has just sung, she affirms that it was the song of Death.

The poem that best summarizes Pascoli’s ideology of poetry as contemplation and suppression of desire is *Nebbia*, first published in 1899 in the journal *Flegrea*, and subsequently included in *Canti di Castelvecchio* (1903). Here we find again the opposition between the closed garden of poetry and desire, which calls for action and involvement. Most of the scholars who have commented on this poem have pointed out the theme of the poet’s withdrawal into the comforting and idealized family nest, which keeps out the awareness of death, and rescues one from the vertigo of an empty and infinite universe (see for instance Squarotti, *Simboli e Strutture* 10 and Getto 37). These interpretations, in particular Squarotti’s reading of *Nebbia*, are supported by the lines in which the poet calls for the mist to hide ‘*quello che è morto*’ and ‘*le cose ebbre di pianto*’ from him (*Poesie e Prose* II, 724, 8; 14). However, a closer reading shows that amongst the things that Pascoli wants to keep out of his sight there are also the passions and the involvement of the *vita activa* (‘*Nascondimi le cose lontane/ che vogliono ch’ami e che vada.... Nascondi le cose lontane,/ nascondile, involale al volo/ del cuore!*’ *ibidem* 19–20; 25–27). According to Carlo Monti, *Nebbia* is a refashioning of the ideology of *Il Fanciullino*, in which Pascoli states that the life of the poet should be one of contemplation (Monti 6). In fact, in his Dantean writings, thanks to his identification with Dante, Pascoli establishes that the road to poetry passes through the abandonment of the *vita activa*, with its desires and ambitions, towards the achievement of the *vita contemplativa*.

In *Nebbia* we find the same opposition between inside and outside that runs through

many of Pascoli's poems. Here the inside is represented by the garden, surrounded by a hedgerow and a wall: *'Ch'io veda soltanto la siepe/ dell'orto,/ la mura ch'ha piene le crepe/ di valeriane'* (7–12). In the garden there are once positive symbols of poetry, in particular the fruit trees and honey, as the poet is often compared to a bee: *'Ch'io veda i due peschi, i due meli,/ soltanto,/ che danno i soavi lor mieli/ pel nero mio pane'* (15–18). The mist represents not only the poet's wish to withdraw into the secure space of poetry, but also the limit against desire. Within this limit, the full enjoyment of poetry and the morality of contentment are possible. Furthermore, the mist does not prevent awareness of death in general, but only of death by violence, which is what Pascoli experienced in the outside world: *'Ch'io veda là solo quel bianco/ di strada,/ che un giorno ho da fare tra stanco/ don don di campane...'* (21–24).

Pascoli envisions death as a final end to one's existence, and this awareness should actually foster a sense of brotherhood amongst mankind. Indeed, after the failure of religion to provide faith in the afterlife, the awareness of our frailty and mortality is what, according to Pascoli, should teach us to be more compassionate towards each other, as he affirms in his speech *l'Era Nuova* (1899):

*Questa è la luce. La scienza in ciò è benefica, in cui si proclama fallita. Essa ha confermata la sanzione della morte. Ha risuggellate le tombe. Ha trovato, credo, che non si può libare il nettare della vita con Giove in cielo. Il rimprovero che le si fa, è il suo vanto. O meglio sarà, quando da questa negazione il poeta sacerdote avrà tratta l'affermazione morale: il poeta, cioè il fanciullo, che d'ora innanzi veda, con la sua profonda stupefazione, non più la parvenza, ma l'essenza. Chi sa immaginare le parole per le quali noi sentiremo di girare nello spazio? per le quali noi sentiremo di essere mortali? Perché noi sappiamo e questo e quello; non lo sentiamo. Il giorno che lo sentiremo... saremo più buoni. (Pascoli *L'Era Nuova* 127)*

In the texts I have analyzed so far, we can already distinguish the elements that characterize Pascoli's philosophy of contemplation. Firstly, the suppression of desire and the regressive

attitude that appear in many of his poems also reveal Pascoli's effort to rationalize such tendencies into a *Weltanschauung*, the idea of contentment as a solution to the presence of evil in the world. Indeed, such a view of the world is reinforced by Schopenhauerean underpinnings, by the diffusion of Eastern philosophies preaching detachment from the turmoil of the world, and by the idea of the contemplation of beauty as a pure and disinterested moment, as opposed to the practicality of real life. Within this context, Pascoli's personal issues are transcended into a philosophy of life, which involves also the function of poetry as a major means for the achievement of inner peace. As contemplation excludes desire, it also automatically expels violence, which, in Pascoli's view, is the product of ambition and greed. In fact, Pascoli marks out a rather utopian ethical project for poetry, which is the return of people's inner and universal essence, the *fanciullino* within everybody's soul—a solution to the inequality and conflict of the real world. Poetry and contemplation can provide a refuge from the ruthlessness that characterizes the human struggle for survival. Therefore, the garden of poetry is secluded and inaccessible from the outside, but reachable through a process of inner purification.

The sacrifice of desire that contemplation involves is compensated for by the satisfaction of another desire, the return to the sense of wholeness typical of childhood. Such a satisfaction is located outside the productive world, and also outside the rules that govern us as species and drive us to maintain ourselves and reproduce. In other words, the joy of the garden of poetry does not come as a reward for any of the activities characterizing the *vita active*, inasmuch as it is neither political and productive, nor biological and sexual. When Pascoli describes the figure of the *fanciullino*, what he has in mind is the pleasure of being at one with the world, the wholeness of childhood.

In her book, *Beyond the Family Romance: The Legend of Pascoli*, Rosa Maria Truglio

draws an interesting comparison between the concept of childhood in Pascoli and in the contemporary psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud. In fact, in spite of their differences, both authors ‘privilege childhood in order to universalize the relevance of their own discourse’ (Truglio 107). Specifically, both see childhood as a time of wholeness and pleasure. In fact, for Freud childhood eroticism explains adult sexuality as a desire to repeat the pleasurable experiences of infancy, in particular the child’s satisfaction when a biological need is met (Truglio 122). Similarly, Pascoli identifies poetry as a return to the inborn rhythm in the soul of a suckling baby or a carefree urchin: *‘Fai come tutti i bambini i quali non solo, quando sono un po’ sollevati, giocano e cantano con certe loro cantilene ben ritmate, ma quando sono ancora poppanti, e fanno la boschereccia, con misura e cadenza balbettano tra sé e sé le loro file di pa pa e ma ma’* (Pascoli *Poesie e Prose* II, 947). As Truglio explains, ‘the nursing infant, in both accounts, becomes the arrival point in the process of regression that seeks to locate an original moment of wholeness and satisfaction. Both poetry and sexuality, then, find their source in an infantile experience that is neither poetic nor sexual but relational and dependent upon another for the fullness of the self’ (Truglio 123).

As opposed to the sense of fusion with the world which poetry seeks to restore, reality is marked by lack and, consequently, by desire. According to Jacques Lacan, desire is strictly related to the lack and to the longing for an image of wholeness that the child perceives in the mirror phase (Fink 54). In Pascoli’s poem, the search for wholeness manifests itself in the idealization of the garden as the locus of lost happiness and the fullness that makes up for the gap imposed by reality. This is particularly visible in two very similar poems, *Orfano* and *Fides*, both from *Myricae*.

The first was published in 1890 in the journal *Vita Nuova*, the third of a group of nine *myricae* with the same title of *Fides*. In 1891, it appeared in *Myricae* with the title of *Neve*,

which in the 1897 edition of this collection changes to *Orfano*.

*Lenta la neve fiocca, fiocca, fiocca:
senti: una zana dondola pian piano.
Un bimbo piange, il piccol dito in bocca;
canta una vecchia, il mento sulla mano.
La vecchia canta: Intorno al tuo lettino
c'è, rose e gigli, tutto un bel giardino.
Nel bel giardino il bimbo s'addormenta.
La neve fiocca, lenta, lenta, lenta. (Pascoli Poesie e Prose I, 727)*

The poem is structured in a circular form, the first line being almost exactly repeated in the last one. The rocking of the cradle in the second line suggests that the poem contains a lullaby, which is, in fact, what the old woman sings to the child. The child is described as crying and sucking his thumb, thereby calling for his needs to be met. The child is the *alter ego* of the poet, suffering from a lack (the poem is called 'orphan') and seeking consolation. The old woman placates the child by singing him a song in which they find themselves not surrounded by snow, but in a garden. The striking opposition between the real and the imaginary landscape fleshes out the compensatory and consolatory nature of the latter. Furthermore, as Cesare Garboli points out, the description of the garden is highly stylized and 'we are far away from the botanic precision which makes Pascoli accuse Leopardi of vagueness in *Il Sabato*' (Garboli in *Poesie e Prose* 728). The vision of the garden finally lulls the child to sleep, as it provides him with the warmth and consolation that he misses in reality. Garboli also observes that the collocation of this poem between *Morto* (in which death is called 'the great sleep') and *Abbandonato* (whose last line describes a child who 'goes to Heaven') suggests that the child of *Orfano* might actually be dying (Garboli *ibidem* 726). This hypothesis finds support in the image of the old woman, which may represent death (as for instance in *La Figlia Maggiore*, death is represented as an old man). Within this context, the garden represents a consolation that is unattainable in reality and that coincides

with death. The coexistence of the consolatory, the homey, and the radically 'other' is what Truglio has called the Pascolian 'uncanny' (Truglio 7). In other words, Pascoli's longing for the 'nest', an act of compensation and regression to the wholeness of the womb brings him to a place which is homey on the one hand but disquieting and unfriendly on the other. Truglio's reading of *L'Ultimo Viaggio* reveals the twofold nature of the 'nest', as Ulysses's return to the well-known route of his past adventures leads him also to death (71).

The poem *Fides* has a very similar structure to *Orfano*. In *Fides* a mother narrates a bed-time story to her child, in which she envisions a garden of golden trees. The vision of the golden garden remains in the child's dream, while the poem ends with the image of a violent storm occurring in reality.

*Quando brillava il vespero vermiglio
e il cipresso pareva oro, oro fino,
la madre disse al piccoletto figlio:
Così fatto è tutto un giardino.
Il bimbo dorme, e sogna i rami d'oro,
gli alberi d'oro, le foreste d'oro;
mentre il cipresso nella notte nera
scagliasi al vento, piange alla bufera.* (Pascoli *Poesie e Prose* I, 719)

Fides presents the same sharp contrast between dream and reality that we have seen in *Orfano*. Here the poet juxtaposes the gold of the imaginary garden to the black and stormy night of the real world. However, while in *Orfano* the garden was completely different from the landscape the child was observing, in *Fides* the mother takes inspiration for her story from the illusory golden color that the sunset projects onto the cypress tree that both she and her child can see. The real world bears a reflection of the imaginary garden, whose beauty lulls the child to sleep. Or, in other words, beauty creates an illusion that temporarily relieves the pain of existence.

The title *Fides* already suggests the meaning of the poem. Specifically, the poem should

be read in the context of Pascoli's ideas on the function of religion and poetry, as discussed in his speech *L'Era Nuova*. Here Pascoli argues that primitive and pre-modern people used to deny the reality of death by inventing religions and myths which narrated the survival of the soul of the deceased. Religion and poetry provided compensation for the loss created in reality by death:

O infinitamente soavi poeti dell'illusione, quale scopritore di mondi, quale banditore di verità, quale inventore di farmachi può all'uomo fare beneficio che pareggi e compensi quello che voi recaste al figlio che aveva perduto la madre, alla madre che aveva perduto il figlio.... Ma voi, o infinitamente benefici, non me la facevate morire, me la facevate vivere e per sempre, sia pure intangibilmente. (Pascoli *L'Era Nuova* 124–125).

Poetry and religion used to extrapolate from ordinary phenomena the existence of an afterlife and a benign divine being which would keep our souls alive forever. For instance, as Pascoli recounts, the illusion of a 'split' between our body and our soul, such as in the experience of dreams, would create the idea of an independent life for our most immaterial part (*ibidem* 123). Similarly in the poem, the imaginary garden derives from an incorrect observation, the golden rays of the sun on the cypress. The consolation provided by faith, *fides*, is effective only inasmuch as it is contained in the realm of illusion or dream.

Pascoli's positivistic upbringing involved a refusal of religion as an illusion. On the other hand religion, if it were to be believed, would provide a solution to the gap instilled by reality, that is, the awareness of death. Beauty acts the same way, providing but temporary relief to the pain of the human condition. As a result, the garden in Pascoli's poetry embodies both the displacement of wholeness onto an illusory Eden, and the reflex of that Eden on earth, which one reaches through poetry.

It is important to read Pascoli's philosophy of contemplation, as fleshed out by the image of the garden, in the context of the reflection on the role of art and literature of the late

nineteenth century. Pascoli was attuned to Angelo Conti and the circle of *Il Marzocco*, as he also attributed a moral value to the practice of contemplation. The latter is indeed a way of freeing oneself from pain and desire, and Pascoli considered art to be at one with contemplation in reaching such goals. Hence Pascoli did not incorporate the critique of bourgeois society or the revolutionary aspect of the decadent discourse. At the same time, he did not strive to renew the code of aesthetic values by inserting it into a political context, as D'Annunzio did. For D'Annunzio the decadent discourse was stagnant. In fact, once it had exhausted its poignancy as a critique of the bourgeois mentality, it could only be seen as an expression of the neurotic aspects of the modern self. Therefore D'Annunzio turned to the *vita activa* with the intention of resolving both his own personal conflict and that of the *Zeitgeist* of *fin-de-siècle* Italy. On the contrary, Pascoli was politically conservative and never strived to change the status quo. His struggle is all internal, between the tyranny of passions and his desire for peace. Hence, contemplation is already 'active' inasmuch as it works towards the achievement of Pascoli's ultimate goal—inner peace and the restored wholeness of childhood.

CHAPTER 4

HOMO FABER. LITERATURE, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY IN THE FIN DE SIECLE

What we plant in the soil of contemplation we shall reap in the harvest of action.
Meister Eckhart

In the previous chapters I have dealt with the notion of the *vita activa* as involving mainly political action. In this chapter I will instead explore the *vita activa* in the sense of 'work', that is, the human activity that produces an artificial world of things that are meant to enhance and provide a durable structure to the existence of mankind on this earth, and ultimately to outlast it (Arendt 7). Work produces not only tools and artifacts, or in other words, technological devices, but also art and literature. In fact, 'because of their outstanding permanence, works of art are the most intensely worldly of all tangible things; their durability is almost untouched by the corroding effect of natural processes' (*ibidem* 167). Even poetry and literature, although they are technically speaking immaterial, are durable objects, as they are handed down from generation to generation, and therefore they belong to the imperishable constructions of the human mind (170). Indeed, the Greek word *téchne*, from which 'technology' originates, encompasses both the meaning of handicraft and art. In this chapter I analyze the relationship between these two divisions of the *vita activa*, technology and art, and between late nineteenth century intellectuals and modernization, in the form of scientific and technological advancement.

This new aspect of the *vita activa* opens a new perspective on the position of intellectuals in society. An investigation of the intellectuals' perception of scientific and technological modernization serves to illustrate their relationship with the political

institutions of *fin de siècle* Italy. Indeed, both their critique and subsequent endorsement of technological modernization can be seen as an opposition to the establishment.

The comparison between the poet and the *homo faber*, as a major theme in late nineteenth century culture, reveals the anxiety of the man of letters to find a role for literature and poetry in modern society. Indeed, if knowledge can only be attained by the scientific method of verifiable hypotheses, the validity and purpose of humanistic culture is put into question. Therefore, poets and artists were faced with the challenge of carving out a role for poetry outside the scientific paradigm of knowledge.

In the late nineteenth century the opposition between science and technology on the one hand, and the humanistic culture on the other was understood and framed through the categories of action and contemplation. Such a framework lent to the dilemma a moral dimension. Indeed, both Pascoli's and D'Annunzio's choice either to oppose or to side with technological modernization is not only political and epistemological, but involves a reflection on the evolution of morality in modernity.

In the first part of this chapter I describe the discussion on science and literature as it occurred in the nineteenth century, with a view to highlighting the political and epistemological dimension of this debate. In the second part I illustrate Pascoli's position on science and technology, which is informed by the distinction between contemplative disciplines, such as poetry and theoretical science, and the 'blind' and relentless activity of technology. In the last part, I discuss D'Annunzio's enthusiastic adhesion to technological modernization and his proto-futurist exaltation of the machine. In D'Annunzio's view, the machine is not only a new source of inspiration for literature and poetry, but also a way of healing the ruptured self of the modern man.

4.1. Art and Science in The Nineteenth Century.

Before the advent of modernity the artist was essentially regarded as a *homo faber*, especially in the case of painting and sculpture, the most material of all arts. The position of the poet and of the man of letters was more ambiguous, as on the one hand they exhibited the studiousness and dedication to knowledge typical of contemplative and theoretical disciplines such as philosophy, but on the other poetry and literature are about the creation - *poiesis*- of fictional realities which entertain or move the readers' emotions and passions, or else educate the audience by conveying a moral or political message. In other words, poetry and literature can be used as means for political action or moral edification. As I have previously shown, Pascoli exemplifies poetry's 'hybrid' position in his interpretation of the Dantean figure of Matelda, which he interprets as a metaphor for art, as she is located in between action and contemplation. Indeed, in modernity the position of the poet switches constantly from the *vita activa* to the *vita contemplativa*⁴².

In the course of the nineteenth century the figure of the scientist and the engineer as *homines fabri* threatened to overshadow that of the artist and the poet. As Hannah Arendt points out, during the modern age the only possible knowledge becomes that which is achieved by 'testing' and 'doing', or in other words, by a science in which the understanding of a phenomenon equals its reproducibility (Arendt 290). In fact, the only reliable and valuable activity is the 'doing' of science and technology, where knowledge of the object becomes the very process by which the object is made. Hence only the statements produced by science are accepted, as they are testable and disprovable.

⁴² As Antonella d'Aquino observes, the active or contemplative life has always been a dichotomy adopted to distinguish intellectuals in general but Antonio Gramsci's writings have made it a compulsory device of identification for the modern intellectual (D'Aquino ii).

According to Ivor Richards, in his essay entitled *Science and Poetry*, poetry cannot produce true statements and yet 'it has constantly the air of making statements and important ones' (Richards 56). Evidently, poetry is not concerned with the falsifiability principle that dominates the sciences. However, continues Richards, in the modern age, where the primitive and magical view of the world has been completely replaced by the scientific one, poetry has begun its downfall (*ibidem* 47). For the English critic, the only task left to poetry and literature is that to describe emotional states, a task that will be completely taken over by psychology once this discipline has developed from its infant stage (45). In conclusion, modernity presents itself as the 'era of disenchantment', to use Max Weber's well-known category, (Whimster 274), where every phenomenon, be it psychological or belonging to the natural world, is explained by means of calculation and rationalization.

The debate on the role of art and science was a prominent issue of late nineteenth century European culture. For instance, in England this topic inspired the controversy between Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895), a fervent supporter of Charles Darwin and of the superiority of the scientific method over any other approach, and Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), a literary critic and a poet. Arnold responded to Huxley's attack to the humanities by saying that literature and poetry should incorporate the scientific truth and transform it into a cognitive experience and human knowledge. Interestingly, Arnold's argument much resembles Pascoli's in *L'Era Nuova*.

In Italy the debate between art and science had a strong political connotation. Indeed, nineteenth century scientism and Positivism was associated with the mentality of the bourgeoisie ruling Italy after its unification. Therefore, the so-called 'bankruptcy of science', that is, the collapse of the Positivistic faith in the infallibility of science, became part of the intellectual's critique to the establishment. By the same token, contemplation, as an

alternative way to gain knowledge of the world, became an epistemological notion, to counteract the paradigm of the scientific method. On the other hand, during the first decade of the twentieth century, intellectuals embraced technological modernization not only as a source of creativity, but also in order to express their discontent with the backwardness and political stagnation of Italian society.

As I have discussed in the first chapter, the controversy of art versus science figures prominently in the pages of *Il Marzocco* from 1896 to 1900. The writers of this journal saw the two disciplines as being antithetical and expressed this dichotomy through the opposition of action and contemplation. On the one hand art was linked with contemplation and on the other science and technology were nothing but blind 'action' that was not able to penetrate the mystery of reality. Amongst the contributors of *Il Marzocco* Giuseppe Saverio Gargano and Angelo Conti were the most fervent supporters of the incompatibility of art and science. For instance, Angelo Conti believed that technological development had increased the needs of mankind and therefore contributed to its misery, whereas art could deliver them from the pain of desire (Abate Storti 171).

In her article entitled "Arte e Scienza tra Ottocento e Novecento: *Il Marzocco*", Anna Abate Storti points out that the writers of *Il Marzocco* were in fact quite unaware of the actual scientific discoveries of their time, and even of the discussion on science and literature that was happening abroad (Abate Storti 164). The *marzocchini* were mostly interested in opposing the widespread scientism of late nineteenth century Italy and the naive trust in the infinite progress of science that characterized the Positivistic mentality of that time. Specifically, they opposed the idea that the scientific method could be applied to the understanding of the work of art. Furthermore, they reacted fiercely against the view that one could reduce artistic creation to a definable process, to a reaction triggered by a chemical

imbalance in the brain and to neurological pathologies in particular individuals. In other words, they opposed the modern *forma mentis* of the scientist, according to whom knowledge is a 'know how' (Arendt 290). In fact, only a few decades before the publication of *Il Marzocco* Francesco De Sanctis had theorized the influence of biological sciences on literature: '*Non vogliamo vedere il formato ma la formazione e allora noi cominciamo a seguire i passi di quella che si chiama evoluzione naturale e che diviene evoluzione artistica, e quindi noi si va di forma in forma, col presentimento in ciascuna di una forma ulteriore*' (De Sanctis *L'Arte* 447). Even in literature the representation of characters and human passions followed the paradigm of the scientific experiment, which illuminates the process by which things come to being and that can be indefinitely reproduced.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century the Positivistic faith in science received a serious blow from a series of controversies between scientists, philosophers and academics from all over Europe. The same decade that saw radically new discoveries in the fields of radioactivity, atomic theory, physiology and psychology also witnessed the greatest disillusionment towards the scientific method and the collapse of the ideals of the scientific Enlightenment (MacLeod 362). This controversy was labeled 'the bankruptcy' of science, a term invented by Ferdinand Brunetière in 1892. The simplicity of his argument summarizes well the main points of this controversy. According to Brunetière, science had promised to solve the supreme mysteries of the universe, but it had failed to reveal anything meaningful on human nature and on the rules of moral behavior (*ibidem* 374). Therefore, the influence of science on disciplines such as ethics, philosophy and the humanities in general was undesirable. Interestingly, the collapse of the scientific faith coincided, in Brunetière's France as well as in Italy, with the failure of the ideology mostly associated with Positivism,

socialism, and with a deep distrust of the establishments that had supported scientism and Naturalism.

From this controversy science came out with a new 'modesty', which limited the 'belligerent crusades of the church of militant science' (378). Henri Poincaré, in his talk given in 1900 at the Universal Expo in Paris, praised the virtue of humility in front of his audience of scientists. Physicists, he claimed, do not decipher the mysteries of nature, but are the 'librarians and classifiers of experience' (cited by MacLeod 378). Intriguingly, faith in science as a means to knowledge was replaced by a view of science as an instrument of 'doing'. Science was invested with new values, practicality, efficiency and usefulness (362). In other words, this controversy culminated with science fully adapting to the *forma mentis* of the *homo faber*, who ceases to investigate the ultimate truths of nature and soothes his or her gnoseological despair with a redoubled activity (Arendt 293).

The 'bankruptcy' of science of the late nineteenth century was only partial. In fact, it did not hinder technological development, which was already unstoppable, neither did it affect the fact that some of the most important scientific discoveries (for example, ether, X-rays) happened at that time. Instead, as Marina Marcolini observes, the 'bankruptcy' consisted mainly in the rejection of science as the only *episteme* (as the only absolute and meta-historical paradigm of knowledge) and in the re-evaluation of the humanities (Marcolini 374).

The crisis of the scientific credo had repercussions on how artists, writers and intellectuals perceived their role against the cultural background of their time. In the eighteen-seventies writers fully embraced the experimental paradigm offered by the biological sciences, whereas in the late eighties and nineties artists and intellectuals started proclaiming the independence of art from the influence of science. As I have previously shown, the contemplation of beauty became the key concept around which intellectuals

constructed their views on the essence, the function and the value of art. However, the generation of intellectuals that were active in the first decade of the twentieth century returned to science, although they were mainly interested in the technological application of scientific knowledge. Indeed, intellectuals like Mario Morasso or Enrico Corradini, and even D'Annunzio, let alone the young Futurists, were interested in understanding, possibly incorporating and certainly facing the challenge posed to the artist by technology and its unprecedented and rapid development. As opposed to the writers of *Il Marzocco*, for instance, which had created the ideal of contemplation as an alternative model to the predominance of science in society, the new generation plunged into the *vita activa* and competed with technological reality in order to endow their creations with the same prestige and effectiveness.

This ideological transformation at the beginning of the twentieth century was linked with the socioeconomic changes occurring in Italy at that time, specifically the development of industry and the slow process of modernization affecting the infrastructures of the new nation. Such changes triggered a shocked reaction amongst the generation of young intellectuals of the early twentieth century. Caught between the new reality of modernization and industrialization and the mediocre middle class constituting the ruling class of Italy, intellectuals allied with the former, as it constituted the most viable channel for art to survive in the modern world. As Roberto Tessari explains, art, for fear of disappearing, allied with the industrial spirit and with technological dynamism' (Tessari 47). Intriguingly, it is within this context that intellectuals of the early twentieth century formulated the opposition between the 'laziness' of the bourgeois spirit (significantly symbolized by the image of the

swamp⁴³) and the 'active' power of the industrial spirit (*ibidem* 60). The figure of the *intellettuale*, which we find amongst the contributors of *Leonardo*, *Hermes* and other journals of the first decade of the twentieth century, combined in his or her ideal of the *vita activa* both political engagement and a new interest for the reality of technological modernization.

4.2. *Homo Faber* and *Homo Humanus*. Pascoli on Science and Technology.

Giovanni Pascoli belongs to the generation that saw the diffusion of Positivism and the penetration of the scientific paradigm in all disciplines. He himself was very interested in science, and relatively knowledgeable about it. In fact, as several studies have shown⁴⁴, the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin and Ernst Haeckel's theory of recapitulation are at the root of Pascoli's poetic *Weltanschauung*. Indeed, as Linda Dalrymple Henderson points out, before the early twentieth century science was widely read and popularized and much more within the reach of the layman than it became later, when the scientific knowledge turned into the restricted domain of a few, highly qualified specialists (Henderson 383). Furthermore, the syncretism of science and the humanities was a distinctive feature of nineteenth century Positivistic culture, which avoided specialization and combined laboratory research with broader theoretical speculations. During these years knowledge was regarded as being profoundly interdisciplinary and it was not uncommon for scholars to create social and anthropological theories based on the physical study of the human body (Marcolini 364).

In spite of his being deeply rooted in the Positivistic culture of his time, Pascoli cannot be easily located within the debate on science and literature that occurred during the *fin de siècle*. Indeed, Pascoli did not at all share at the Positivistic enthusiasm for the

⁴³ The image of the swamp, as a metaphor for the stagnant and corrupted bourgeois spirit, can be found in the pages of the last issue of *Il Regno*: '*In alto e in basso non pulsa rapida la vita: siamo nella palude livida, simbolo di morte e decadenza*' (*La Cultura Italiana del '900 attraverso le Riviste*, I, 540).

⁴⁴ See for instance Maurizio's Perugi's preface to *Il Fanciullino*, in Pascoli's *Opere* 1637-41.

supposedly infinite progress brought about by science and technology. However, he also drew back from supporting the irrationalism and anti-scientism of the intellectuals who proclaimed the bankruptcy of science, nor did he welcome the so-called resurgence of mysticism and the return to religion that characterized the last decade of the nineteenth century. In fact, his most famous speech regarding science, *L'Era Nuova* (1899) can be read as a direct response to Brunetière's claims that science had failed. At the same time, Pascoli did not join the younger generation of artists such as Tommaso Marinetti and even D'Annunzio in their interest in the prodigies of technology. For Pascoli technology is mankind's ultimate form of alienation and a dangerous illusion of immortality.

Reading Pascoli's attitude towards science and technology through the categories of action and contemplation allows one to understand this poet's ambivalent relationship with these two important phenomena of modernity. For Pascoli science has two faces, a contemplative one, which provides mankind with an insight into their position in the cosmos and which constitutes a cognitive as well as a moral experience, and an active one, its technological application, which alienates men from their humanness as it gives them the illusion of being almighty. Furthermore, the modern scientific worldview can be combined with poetry, inasmuch as the latter serves as the mediator between the scientific truth and people's consciousness. Within this framework, Pascoli carves out a crucial role for poetry as the foundation of a modern religion based on science. The main texts by Pascoli concerning science and technology are the speeches *L'Era Nuova* (1899), *L'Avvento* (1901) and *La Messa D'Oro* (1905). Moreover, his views on this topic can also be reconstructed through the analysis of his poetic production and of his Dantean writings.

When Pascoli reflects upon the nature of the scientific process, he goes back to the pre-modern notion of science as pure *thaumazein*, or wonder when one is faced with the

mysteries of nature. As Arendt reminds us, *thaumazein*, 'the shocked wonder at the miracle of Being, is the beginning of all philosophy' (Arendt 302). Or in other words, it is the beginning of contemplation as well, as such is the state of the man absorbed in speechless awe at the sight of natural phenomena⁴⁵. *Theoria*, the Greek word for contemplation, 'is only another word for *thaumazein*: the contemplation of the essence of things at which the philosopher ultimately arrives is the philosophically purified speechless wonder with which he began' (*ibidem*). On the contrary, nineteenth century culture is dominated by the fascination with the reproducibility of natural phenomena through experiment and with the application of scientific knowledge to the creation of technological devices.

In Pascoli's view it is the very act of contemplating that the poet and the scientist share, as both science and poetry are embedded in the experience of the sublime -the sight of the beauty and might of Nature. Indeed, Pascoli's portrayal of the poet is often that of a stargazer. The contemplation of the starry sky and of the celestial vault is a tremendous sight, as it reveals to the observer the incommensurability of a universe deprived of God in which earth is but one of the innumerable planets. However, the task of the poet is to re-compose the trauma of man's loss of centrality by making it a poetic experience and transcribing it into verses, although this 'dark night of the soul'⁴⁶ is often recounted as the impossibility of

⁴⁵ At the origins of both science and poetry there is the sense of awe one feels when faced with the beauty and the mysteries of the universe. In fact, much of the ancient religious poetry is rooted in myth, or in other words, in a first attempt to explain natural phenomena and the coming to being of all things (Graf 39). On the other hand, science originates from the same feeling of wonder, which gives way to the curiosity of unveiling the secret functioning of nature. According to Aristotle the habit of dwelling in the delightful observation of the immutable celestial bodies, or even of the many life forms of our earth was called *theoria* (Aristotle *Metaphysics* 982b, 11). A life devoted to the observation and study of nature was called *bios theoretikos*, as opposed to *bios praktikos*, or the life spent in political activity and in good deeds for the community. Aristotle's distinction between the two lives constitutes the source of all future debate on the *vita activa* or *contemplativa*. However, at this very early stage, the life of contemplation does not yet have any specific religious meaning, but it rather entails the awe-inspiring experience of beholding a natural world that is beautiful and orderly, and as such, divine.

⁴⁶ This phrase derives from San Juan de la Cruz's poem and accompanying treatise (1585-86) and has become a common metaphor in Christian literature for spiritual dryness and for the experience of God's absence.

comprehending the ultimate mystery of reality. For instance, in the poem *I due fuchi* (1887), contained in *Myricae*, the poet is portrayed as contemplating the impenetrable universe and transforming this uncanny vision into poetry: '*Tu poeta, nel torbido universo/ t'affisi, tu per noi lo cogli e chiudi/ in lucida parola e dolce verso*' (Pascoli *poesie e Prose* 632). The same image is present in another poem of the same collection, *Morte e Sole* (1894): '*Fissa la morte; costellazione/ lugubre che in un cielo nero brilla:/ breve parola, chiara visione:/ leggi, o pupilla./ Non puoi*' (Pascoli *Myricae* 149). In the *poema conviviale* *La Buona Novella* (1900) Pascoli re-elaborates the images of the shepherd-poet of Giacomo Leopardi's *Canto di un Pastore Errante dell'Asia*. In Pascoli's poem the *alter ego* of the poet, the shepherd, contemplates a distant sky, and juxtaposes the frailty of the human condition as opposed to the intangibility of the celestial bodies: '*O tu che mai poni il tuo vincastro,/ e che pari dall'alto/ le taciturne costellazioni,/ Dio! che la nostra vita cader d'alto/ fai, come pietra, dalla tua fionda...*' (Pascoli, *Poemi Conviviali* 264). Furthermore, *Il Ciocco* (1903) revolves around the contemplation of the movements of the planets in the sky and the image of a final conflagration leading to the death of the universe. Finally, in *La Cometa di Halley*, in *Odi e Inni* (1910), the stargazer Dante Alighieri contemplates the sky and takes inspiration for his portrayal of the Underworld in *Comedy*. It is interesting to observe that in this poem Dante, unlike the modern poet, is able to derive a sense from the universe and to compose it in a clearly defined and monolithic moral system, guaranteed by the existence of the Christian God.

When the modern poet looks at the sky he or she does not see the *cosmos* of the Aristotelian *theoretikos* philosopher, that is, a beautiful and harmonious system ruled by a divine order but attainable for the human mind through contemplation and mathematical thinking. The modern poet sees an infinite progression of solar systems and galaxies in a

universe deprived of any possible sense. Not only is this universe completely indifferent to the destiny of mankind, but the very grasping of the concept of infinity is denied to the human mind, and the contemplation of the sky becomes a vertigo which leaves the observer speechless and frightened:

*Cielo, e non altro: il cupo cielo, pieno
di grandi stelle: il cielo, in cui sommerso
mi parve quanto mi pareva terreno.
E la Terra sentii nell'Universo.*

*Sentii, fremendo, ch'è nel cielo anch'ella.
E mi vidi quaggiù piccolo e sperso
errare, tra le stelle, in una stella.
(Pascoli *Il Bolide, Poesie e Prose* 913).*

The modern poet is still a contemplator but sees the universe through the eyes of the scientist, who has unveiled the insignificance of the earth and announced the death of God⁴⁷. According to philosopher Charles Taylor, 'the last two centuries have seen the effacing of this consciousness of the cosmos which has been replaced by the universe. This latter is vast, without imaginable limits, and does not immediately present itself as resting on a plan. If there is a structure, it would seem rather denuded of moral relevance. This universe seems above all indifferent to human life and its little drama that unfolds on the surface of a little planet, around an average star, situated in a galaxy like thousands of others' (Taylor 6). Furthermore, as Hannah Arendt points out, it is precisely the notion of an infinite universe that triggers the beginning of modern introspection: 'the escape into the mind of the man himself is closed if it turns out that the modern physical universe is not only beyond presentation, which is a matter of course under the assumption that nature and Being do not

⁴⁷ This view of the universe and of humans' place in it began to penetrate the general consciousness after the diffusion of the Copernican revolution. Already for Isaac Newton space, and therefore the universe was infinite. During the eighteenth and nineteenth century scientists knew of the existence of *nebulae*, which were thought to be clouds of gases from which galaxies like our own originated (Bowler 278).

reveal themselves to the senses, but it is unconceivable in terms of pure reasoning as well' (Arendt 289).

According to Arendt, the discovery of the infinite universe is also the source of modern despair and to redoubled activity, inasmuch as the only thing that man can know for sure is what man has made himself (*ibidem* 293). For the German-Jewish philosopher this phenomenon of modernity coincides with the reversal of action and contemplation (289). However, if contemplation in the sense of beholding the beautiful order of the cosmos, is no longer meaningful in modern science, the awareness of the incomprehensibility of the universe leads to a sort of 'negative theology'⁴⁸, or the admission of the mystery and to a renewed experience of awe. In fact, as Taylor observes, modern science 'moves also in another direction to the extent that it reintroduces mystery into the world' (Taylor 6). In other words, when the *homo faber* leaves for a moment the certainty of his or her experiment he or she is faced with the re-emergence of a great mystery, the limitless universe that escapes human comprehension. It is within this modern opening onto mystery (Barca 4) that poetry and science find themselves once again reunited.

Mystery is the foundation of Pascoli's metaphysical poetry. For the modern poet contemplation turns into a gaze into the abyss and into the unexplainable whose only outcome is the denial of every consolatory illusion, such as religion, and the acceptance of death as the only certainty. The poem *Il Libro* (1896) exemplifies perfectly Pascoli's views on the contemplation of the mystery of nature. The central image of this poem is that of a man flipping through the pages of an ancient book and apparently reading them without understanding their content, as the night falls upon him. The *topos* of nature as a book is a

⁴⁸ By negative, or apophatic theology, I intend a theology which arguably originates from the writings of Plotinus (204-70 A.D.) and which attempts to define God by negation, that is, in terms of what may not be said about His perfection.

medieval one (Curtius 319-26). However, if in the Middle Ages the book of nature was written in symbols clearly signifying the Christian truth, in the modern era this book has become incomprehensible. However, this does not interrupt man's constant quest for meaning and truth: '*Sosta... Trovò? Non gemono le porte/ più; tutto oscilla in un silenzio austero./ Lègge?... Un istante; e volta le contorte/ pagine e torna ad inseguire il vero.*' (Pascoli, *Poesie e Prose* I, 1372). To the figure of the reading man, Pascoli juxtaposes some of the eeriest images of his poetry: chimeras, chanting of mermaids and wandering voices (*ibidem* 1373). Furthermore, the image of the book is paralleled, and literally mirrored, by that of the starry sky, another symbol of mystery: '*sotto le stelle, il libro del mistero*'. (*ibidem*), as if the undecipherable words on the pages reflected the celestial asterisks of the sky⁴⁹.

It is interesting to compare this poem with *La Cometa di Halley*. Here Dante is portrayed as the *peregrino del Mistero* (Pascoli *Poesie* II, 789). However, for Dante *il mistero* is the vision of the Christian underworld and the abyss is not the void of the modern universe, but the inferno where sinners are punished: '*Vide l'abisso con racchiusi i venti,/ le fiamme e il gelo, e la perpetua romba/ delle grandi acque, e lo stridor dei denti./ Udì l'alto silenzio che rimbomba/ eternamente; e il lume del sentiero/ scorse, ch'è tra le stelle e la gran tomba*' (*ibidem*). While the medieval poet sees in the sky the divine order and the just retribution of the souls, the modern poet contemplates what Charles Taylor has called 'the eclipse of God' (Taylor 8), brought about by a scientific shift in the view of the universe and man's place within it.

Although science has revealed the decentralization of the earth and the absence of a divine order in the universe, this by no means implies the death of poetry. On the contrary, as

⁴⁹ According to Lisa Barca, the symbol of the asterisk, as found in Emily Dickinson's poetic fragment 1673, signifies the loss of transcendence in the modern world and the opening onto mystery that derives from it (Barca 7).

shown previously, Pascoli's poetry is nurtured by this eclipse of the transcendent dimension opening up the possibility for a modern poetic *mythos*. This new poetry employs what Lisa Barca has called 'referential openness', (Barca 3), or, in other words, 'the encounter between poetic presence and divine absence' (*ibidem*), the tension between saying and unsaying that characterizes, for instance, negative theological writings (Sells 8). As Giovanni Getto points out, for Pascoli the transition from the traditional and Romantic sky to the disquieting sky of science paves the way to the creation of a modern and exquisitely contemplative metaphysical poetry (Getto 37). For Pascoli science and poetry are allied in the revelation and contemplation of mystery. In fact, as Barca has convincingly shown, Pascoli never makes use of the astronomical terminology for clarity purposes, or to avoid the poetic indeterminacy of which Giacomo Leopardi had been accused, but rather to obscure the unknown by highlighting its unknowability and to create referential openness (Barca 8). Through its fleeting capture of the mystery modern metaphysical poetry bridges the gap between the unspeakable reality envisioned by science and the very tool of human expression, language.

The two major philosophical themes that Pascoli derived from modern science were the infinity of the universe and the decentralized position of earth within it, to which he also ascribed the collapse of the faith in God and in life after death. Within this context the philosophical contemplation of reality turns into an experience of the void, brought about both by the idea of infinity and by the awareness of death as the end of all sensorial perceptions:

Ma questa è la luce? Oh! La morte, a fissarla, abbarbaglia. Meglio la penombra nella quale si stende il pianoro Elisio, più utile l'ombra nella quale stridono le Eumenidi. (...) Se io sapessi descrivervi la sensazione del nulla, io sarei un poeta di quelli non ancor nati o non ancor parlanti. Non so, non so descriverla; perchè nè anche la mia coscienza (confesso) si è arresa alla scienza.(...). Ma ricordo qualche oscuro e fuggevole momento, nelle tenebre della notte: il vertiginoso sprofondamento

in un gorgo infinito, senza più peso, senza più alito, senza più essere... (Pascoli L'Era Nuova 128).

According to Pascoli, these two main discoveries, infinity and mortality, will inform modern poetry, like myth and the primitive and rudimental observation of nature had inspired the poets of the Antiquity: *'Il sole era uno, era sempre quello. Come dunque poteva trovarsi all'alba pronto ad alzarsi al punto opposto a quello donde era disceso la sera? Nella notte certo viaggiava su una conca, che doveva sprizzare raggi trascorrendo rapida l'oscurità dell'oceano che è sotto i nostri piedi' (ibidem 123).* Pascoli himself feels that he is not yet a poet of modernity, that is, a poet whose work reflects the new worldview brought about by science: *'l'emanazione poetica di questa nuova era del genere umano è cominciata? Non pare, non credo. (...) Io sono dei vecchi anch'io!'* (122). However, he aligns himself with Giacomo Leopardi and Edgar Allan Poe as poets for which the contemplation of the sky is no longer a comforting sight of beauty but rather a cosmic vertigo:

Ricordo un punto sul quale si esercita la poesia: la infinita piccolezza nostra a confronto dell'infinita grandezza e moltitudine degli astri. Ricordo il Leopardi e il Poe, e potrei ricordare molti altri. Tuttavia sulle nostre anime quella spaventevole proporzione, non ostante che i poeti nuovi fossero aiutati, nel segnalarla allo spirito, dai poeti della prima era, quella spaventevole sproporzione non è ancora entrata nella nostra coscienza (126).

The views of modern science caused the collapse of faith and of certainty in the centrality of man in the universe. Against these conclusions the supporters late nineteenth century wave of anti-positivism raged and announced the bankruptcy of science. As Pascoli reports, they proclaimed the failure of science precisely because science had not fulfilled its promise to eradicate death and substitute religion with another truth: *'Il morire doveva essere tolto dalla scienza; ed ella non l'ha tolto. A morte dunque la scienza! Noi torniamo alla fede che (è verità? è solo illusione? ma illusione, a ogni modo, che ci vale per verità) che non solo ha*

abolita la morte, ma nella morte ha collocata la vita e la felicità indistruttibile!' (119).

However, for Pascoli, precisely this so called failure of science constitutes the basis for his argument on the moral value of the scientific discoveries of the modern era. In fact, if science has failed in defeating death, it has, on the other hand, gotten rid of all the illusions that stood between us and the full awareness of our position in nature and our mortality: *'Questa è la luce. La scienza in ciò è benefica, in cui si proclama fallita. Essa ha confermata la sanzione della morte. Ha risuggellate le tombe. Ha trovato, credo, che non si può libare il nettare della vita con Giove in cielo. Il rimprovero che le si fa è il suo vanto'* (129).

Pascoli's discussion on the moral value of the modern scientific worldview is based on the crucial role of poetry as a mediator between vision and awareness and between knowledge and consciousness (*scienza* and *coscienza*, in Pascoli's words). As ancient poets (*'i poeti della prima era'* 129) imbued their verses with the their magical and mythical vision of the world and made it so familiar to us that it entered common language, so the modern poet has the task of reforging our perception and our understanding of reality by means of his or her poetry. While contemplation is the perfect and speechless state of purified wonder, poetry transforms such a vision into language and brings it closer to understanding. As I have previously explained, for Pascoli poetry lies in between pure contemplation and action, inasmuch as it is an act of 'making' which takes its inspiration from a vision. While poetry has no ideological agenda or practical purpose, its effect is beneficial as it soothes the passions and quenches desire. Within the context of science, poetry shares with the former the original awe when faced with the mysteries of nature. However, poetry channels this experience into words, thus transforming into a full cognitive experience. Furthermore, poetry can make us accustomed to the cruel reality of death unveiled by science and help us lay the foundation of a new morality based on the brotherhood that the awareness of mortality may inspire to men:

Chi sa immaginare le parole per le quali noi sentiremo di girare per lo spazio? per le quali noi sentiremo di essere mortali? Perchè noi sappiamo e questo e quello; non lo sentiamo. Il giorno che lo sentiremo... saremo più buoni (...). Uomo, abbraccia il tuo destino! Uomo, rassegnati ad essere uomo! (...) pensiamo dunque, sempre, in tutto, e siamo pur mesti. Ma saremo tutti più mesti. E riconosceremo, a questo segno, a quest'aria di famiglia, a questa traccia di dolore immedicabile, i nostri fratelli per nostri fratelli. E non saremo pazzi di perseguire una gioia, che ridondi a dolore del nostro simile, e che non diminuisca d'una linea il dolor nostro. E i mali che ora ci appaiono come fatali, la lotta delle classi e la guerra dei popoli, saranno tolti. (129-130)

The awareness of our mortality will complete the evolution of mankind towards its last stage, which Pascoli called the *homo humanus*. The *homo humanus* will have incorporated the sense of kinship and compassion towards his fellow men and abandoned every greedy impulse because ultimately every desire of prevarication disappears when one faces the certainty of our death (130). The *homo humanus* follows the current stage, that of the *homo sapiens*: '*Ma tutti, tutti portiamo in noi lo squilibrio della fatale ascensione, per cui dal pitecanthropos alalus si svolse l'homo sapiens, e dall'homo sapiens o ragionevole si svolge l'homo che io dirò humanus* (156). What characterizes the *homo sapiens* is the gift of reason and cognition, which allow him to manipulate nature to suit his own needs. However, from the point of view of the moral evolution of mankind, the *homo sapiens* lacks the capacity to master his desires and ambitions and to refrain from violence. According to Pascoli this is due to the unprecedented technological development of modernity, which gives people the impression of being almighty:

Per le scoperte geografiche e specialmente per le applicazioni delle forze del vapore e dell'elettricità, l'uomo si ritrova ora come novello in un mondo novello. Ha ricominciato, in certa guisa, la sua evoluzione. È risorto l'atavico egoismo. S'è svegliato il bruto primordiale, oh! non nelle caverne e nelle foreste, ma nelle splendide Babilonie; e s'è trovato sotto mano oh! ben altro che le frecce e le scuri di selce! (187)

As we read in this passage, according to Pascoli technological development delays the moral evolution of mankind, inasmuch as the augmented power in the hands of the *homo sapiens* corrupts him. Furthermore, such an incredible progress in man's mastery of nature has generated an illusory faith that the ultimate enemy, death, will be defeated. Indeed, in *L'Era Nuova* Pascoli criticizes the Positivistic exaltation of the infinite progress of technology by reversing the argument of the bankruptcy of science. In fact, the epistemological revision that science underwent in the late nineteenth century has put a limit to the unjustified enthusiasm and blind faith in progress that characterized positivistic culture.

It is interesting to observe that Pascoli builds his philosophical idea of the moral evolution of man by intertwining Charles Darwin's theory with his own exegesis of the *Divine Comedy*⁵⁰. The syncretism between his Dantean criticism and his scientific culture is at the root of his reflection on the nature and destiny of mankind. As Vittorio Roda has noticed, in the symbiotic union between Darwin and Dante we can see a new anthropology, which, due to its lack of a proper terminology, relies on a pre-existing one, treating it as a way of conveying meaning, but also receiving meaning from it (Roda *Homo Duplex* 193). Within this context, the Dantean journey represents not only the story of the individual, but also the paradigm for the evolution of mankind. Actually, as I have mentioned in Chapter 2, Ernst Haeckel's theory of recapitulation serves to Pascoli as the scientific support for his three-layered interpretation of the Dantean poem: the story of himself, but also of the stages of the life of every individual, which summarize the development of his or her entire species.

⁵⁰ *Dante credeva ad una Grazia misteriosa, pari ad una luna che fosse piena nella nostra notte, e pur non fosse veduta, la quale faceva uscir l'uomo dal suo fatale aggrovigliamento vegetativo, risvegliandone nel suo torpor di pianta la volontà. Ora la scienza non ci dichiara come l'uomo sia diventato uomo se non con una parola, "evoluzione", che ripete la domanda e non le risponde; con una parola misteriosa quanto la Grazia... Dante spiegava la nostra ascensione come la spieghiamo noi: ossia non la spiegava, ossia non la dichiarava spiegabile* (Pascoli *Prose* 3,770).

Pascoli sees the evolution of mankind as a *Bildungsroman* characterized by progressive stages. The way man evolves heads towards the abandonment of passions and instinct in favor of rationality, symbolized by the achievement of the *vita contemplativa* in Pascoli's own exegesis of the *Divine Comedy*. Within this context, it is clear that science, in the sense of the pure observation of phenomena, has the function of leading towards a clearer vision of reality, inasmuch as the scientific worldview sweeps away all the illusions concerning the place of man in the universe. However, according to Pascoli, mankind finds itself still in the phase of the *homo sapiens*, that is, a place where 'cold reason' (Pascoli *L'Era Nuova* 158) and intelligence are employed only to increase man's power on earth, thus serving greed and ambition.

In the context of the Dantean and Darwinian anthropology that Pascoli elaborates, the phase of the *homo sapiens* corresponds to the *vita activa*, where impulses are not completely out of control, like in childhood, but they are channeled into the mastery of nature and in the construction of tools, permanent objects and social structures. In other words, we are still under the domain of instinct, which leads us to enhance our condition on earth in order to increase our chances of survival, like it does for all animals:

*E' un vecchio concetto, codesto, e non vero, che sia l'intelligenza che distingue l'uomo dal bruto. Non è vero: le case le edifica anche la rondine, e di fango impastato, come noi; e la lucciola ha saputo, con lunga esperienza, scegliere tali sostanze con cui aver luce nelle sue notti, e con lunga esperienza ha saputo l'ape scegliere tale cibo con cui fare il miele e la cera; e le formiche hanno i loro granai, e i castori hanno le loro città. L'intelligenza e la conservazione della vita sono tra loro in tal nesso, che se chiamate istinto naturale quest'ultima, dovete chiamare istinto anche quella. E istinto vuol dire qualcosa a cui non possiamo sottrarci e che s'impone come necessità. E non c'è mirabile opera umana, non c'è traforo di monti, non c'è navigazione di mari, non c'è volo tra le nubi, non c'è asservimento di forze cieche e libere, che, considerati da esseri più perfetti, i quali dimorino in altri pianeti, non facessero loro pensare che noi abbiamo ubbidito, con ciò, alla stessa necessità a cui i conigli, che so io, gli uccelli e gli insetti alati, le lucciole e i ragni. (Pascoli *ibidem* 157).*

The passage above is of fundamental importance in order to understand Pascoli's views on the technological development of the nineteenth century. According to this poet, such a development is not an indication of real progress, in the sense of the evolution of mankind towards the stage of the *homo humanus*. On the contrary, the intelligence of the *homo sapiens* (which can be also seen as that of the *homo faber* in Hannah Arendt's description of the *vita activa*) is nothing but a refined form of instinct and in no way does it better the inner nature of mankind: '*la trogloditica scimmia di allora sa maneggiare la folgore*' (187). Furthermore, the frenetic activity characterizing the new technological and materialistic society is ultimately driven by the individuals' will to power: '*si affaccia ai nostri tempi l'orrenda battaglia universale, che sarà la catastrofe di quello che si chiama i materialismo e potrebbe chiamarsi il bestialismo storico*' (185). In fact, if we consider the moral scheme of the *Divine Comedy* elaborated by Pascoli, we see that here the engagement in the *vita activa* betrays both for Dante and for the poet their secret desire for worldly glory.

As opposed to instinct, which is a conditioned reaction to the environment that we share with other animals (157), morality, as the distinctive mark of the *homo humanus*, derives from an act of free will, which is what distinguishes us from other species. Another feature of the human kind is the ability to reflect on the self and to consciously decide to override our natural impulses, after becoming fully aware of their existence: '*un uomo, o un popolo è forte in quanto non già domina, ma si domina, in quanto odia, non già ama il suo esclusivo interesse*' (185). Being human, Pascoli affirms, is to transcend oneself. On the other hand, the activity of the *homo faber* is fully entrenched in the instinctual part of our nature. Intriguingly, according to Pascoli, even the social structures built in our modern world, such as justice and the regulation of behavior, are not strictly speaking moral, inasmuch as they are meant to preserve us as species and they are not informed by love or compassion: '*la giustizia*

non è che a mano a mano la moralizzazione del nostro egoismo' (161). Furthermore, the enhancement of our instinct of survival brought about by the positive impact of technology on our lives, blinds us from the reality of death and from the awareness of our insignificant position in the universe.

The delusional aspect of technology is one of the core themes of Pascoli's *L'Era Nuova*. Here the blind faith in a merely material progress is portrayed as an intoxication or a consciously induced dizziness allowing mankind to forget what their doom⁵¹:

Perchè fu quella, per usare una parola cara a uno degli ultimi e più soavi poeti della fede, fu quella la vostra ascensione; un'ascensione che, com'è il fatto di tali parole, non sapremmo dire se fu per il su o per il giù; vi trovaste sopra i bruti per il pensiero, e sotto per la felicità. Oh, voi aspiraste a discendere; e sempre, a quando a quando, avete richiamato a terra il vostro pensiero fuggitivo, come sciame d'api dall'arnia, col suon dei cembali e dei timpani dei vostri bacchanali. Oh, voi voleste dimenticare l'infelice scoperta; e sempre ad ora ad ora vi stordite e dimenticate e nell'oblio della morte date la morte. (115-16)

The idea of the *stordimento*, dizziness, and of the oblivion induced by the faith in technological progress remind us of Sigmund's Freud's categorization of 'deflections'⁵² that mankind deploys in order to cope with the hardships of reality (Freud 23). However, for

⁵¹ It is interesting to read Pascoli's reflections on the nature of science and technology in the light of Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* (1929), in which the Viennese author discusses mankind's escape routes from the pain of existence. According to Freud, religion, art and science are different ways in which man tries to compensate for, forget and fight the hardship of life, respectively. In various degrees, these three ways are more or less powerful 'auxiliary constructions' (Freud 23) thanks to which we sustain the offense that nature itself and other men inflict upon us. According to Freud these auxiliary constructions are mainly three: 'powerful deflections, which cause us to make light of our misery; substitutive satisfactions, which diminish it; and intoxicating substances, which make us insensitive to it' (*ibidem*). Within this context, science is an efficacious measure of reducing pain, as it allows one to fight back the attack of nature against us, especially when it is implemented to create tools and instruments that master and subdue the hostile environment (26).

⁵² Both Pascoli and Freud elaborate upon this notion of technological advancement as a 'deflection'. Specifically, Pascoli's argument is that technology is delusional, whereas for Freud this deflection is the 'healthiest', as it involves an active and full-fledged engagement of the human intelligence. However, in both cases technology is seen as a 'distraction' that allows mankind to temporarily forget their frailty and mortality. As Rosa Maria Truglio has observed 'both writers posit their own discourse (poetry, psychoanalysis) as the bearer of a sober truth, in contrast to the comforting illusions offered by religion' (Truglio 132). In this regard, for Pascoli poetry allies with science in revealing the truth to mankind, whereas religion and technology in different ways perpetuate man's narcissism of believing in his immortality.

Pascoli technology works the same way as Freud's third deflection, drugs, whereas for the Viennese author applied science, of all deflections, it is the only one which offers a healthy alternative to the more 'passive' solutions, intoxication, compensation and abstention (*ibidem* 25-26). In Pascoli's text the delusion of technology is portrayed as a bacchanal, where the awareness of death is temporarily removed thanks to inebriation and intoxication. Specifically, the images that Pascoli deploys are that of the orgiastic frenzy of unchained desires and that of the acoustic dizziness (the sound of cymbals and tympani). Both images recur in those poems in Pascoli's lyrical production where he deals with the theme of technological modernization.

There are indeed very few instances in Pascoli's poetry where the subject of technology appears. In his essays *La Folgore Mansuefatta* and *Letteratura tra Due Secoli. Studi Pascoliani e Altri Studi Tra Otto e Novecento* Vittorio Roda provides an interesting analysis of Pascoli's 'technological' poems. A small number of recurring images dominate these poems, of which that of the train and of the modern city with its crowds and its new technological devices are the most prominent. According to Roda, in Pascoli's poems modernity always appears as a disruption of an order that is perceived as familiar and homey, and which is associated with the rhythms and structures of pre-industrial, agrarian society (Roda *La Folgore Mansuefatta* 32-33). Thus, the juxtaposition between rural environment and modern devices embodies the contrast between *Heimliches* and *Unheimliches* (*ibidem* 34), where technology represents the most perturbing form of modernity. Ultimately, this juxtaposition has the function of 'correcting' the disruptive power of modernity by inserting the technological element within the frame of a traditional element, such as a natural landscape. For instance in *In Viaggio* from *Canti di Castelvecchio*, the noise of the steam train fades into the sound of the bells chiming the *Ave Maria* (Pascoli *Canti di Castelvecchio*

291). Moreover, another form of 'correction' of modernity is the technique of dressing the phenomena of modernity in the language of Greek mythology, thus bestowing upon the 'unknown' the blessing of the tradition (81), as Pascoli does for instance in *Inno a Roma* and *Inno a Torino*.

It is interesting to remark that the image of the train is connoted by the element of the acoustic dizziness that we have seen in the passage from *L'Era Nuova*. For instance in *La Via Ferrata* (1892), in *Myricae*, the passing of the train is compared to a wailing lament: *Qual di gemiti e d'ululi rombando/ cresce e dilegua femminil lamento?* (Pascoli *Myricae* 177). Moreover, in *In Capannello*, from the same section of *Myricae* (*ibidem* 183) the chattering of the farmers'wives is interrupted by the deafening noise of the passing train: *'Nero avanti a quegli occhi indifferenti/ il traino con fragore di tuono passa'* (*ibidem*). In these poems the train interrupts the quiet and silence of a rural landscape with a disquieting noise. Intriguingly, when Pascoli talks about the remnants of our animalistic origins within us, he depicts it in terms of *gemiti ed ululati*:

...né io ho racchiuso nella mia natura tanti bestiali émpiti e bramiti, e non posso farne carico a loro, né essi ai loro; ma non perciò io sento meno i loro strepito, che giunge dai lontanissimi primordi sino a me, perché è in me, e si compone di tutti i gridi, dal gorgogliare del batraco allo squittire del piteco, dal grugnito del ciacco al ruggito del leone e all'ululo del lupo. (Pascoli *L'Era Nuova* 181-82)

In other words, the semantic occurrence of the noise, whether it is embedded in the metaphor of the orgy, or in the deafening clang of the new mechanical portents, reminds us of Pascoli's association between technology and moral regression, that is a regress towards the animalistic stage.

The other image, that of the frenzy, appears in the representation of the modern city. In the poem *Solitudine* from *Myricae*, the poet contemplates the wires of the telegraph connecting one city to another:

*Sono città che parlano tra loro,
città nell'aria cerula lontane;
tumultuanti d'un vocìo sonoro,
di rote ferree e querule campane.
Là genti vanno irrequiete e stanche,
cui falla il tempo, cui l'amore avanza
per lungi e l'odio. Qui, quell'eco ed anche
quel polverio di ditteri, che danza.
Parlano dell'azzurra lontananza
nei giorni afosi, nelle vitree sere;
e sono mute grida di speranza
e di dolore, e gemiti e preghiere....
(Pascoli *Myricae* 215-16)*

We find again in this poem the element of the noise of modernity, which fades into an echo from the remote position of the narrating voice: '*Da questo greppio solitario io miro*' (*ibidem*). The attitude of the poet in this work is one of distant and silent contemplativeness⁵³. On the contrary, the far away cities are characterized by the relentless movement of its inhabitants. In Pascoli's poem, the city becomes the symbol of one of the malaises of modernity, the constant activity that betrays existential despair. Furthermore, from the modern city rises the choir of the many and different desires that relentlessly drive and exhaust its inhabitants. In fact, in this poem the telegraph, rather than being seen as a way of conveying useful information, is used to voice the multitude of desires of the people. As Roda has noticed, in the 'nervous life'⁵⁴ of modern cities, even the natural rhythm of

⁵³ As Elio Gioanola has observed, often the position of the modern poet is often that of a contemplator, who looks at something from afar or fantasizes about it (Gioanola 29).

⁵⁴ The idea of the 'nervousness' of modernity, as exemplified by the frenetic life of the modern city, derives from an essay by Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903). Here Simmel discusses the impact of urban life on the psychological mindset of the individual, claiming that the modern city provides a much more

consumption is disrupted and accelerated, thus generating a much faster cycle of desire and satisfaction (Roda *La Folgore* 63)⁵⁵. In Pascoli's view the choir of desires and hopes is an alternative and equivalent representation of the mass of bestial cries, calling out for the satisfaction of instinct.

In conclusion, Pascoli views the poet and the *homo faber* as diametrically opposed. In fact, the latter is completely entrenched in the *vita activa*, whereas the former shares with the philosopher and with the pure scientist a contemplative attitude. Furthermore, the *homo poeticus* paves the way to the advent of the *homo humanus*, like in Pascoli's reading of the *Comedy* Matelda introduces Dante to Beatrice. In fact, poetry is the means by which philosophical, cultural and scientific worldviews penetrate our consciousness and become familiar to the layman. Not only, but Pascoli sees poetry as the religion of modernity, inasmuch as the collective consciousness of our mortality, introduced by science and filtered by the poetic experience, will provide mankind with a new morality. Such a morality is deprived of the consolatory illusion of traditional religion, but fosters compassion and solidarity amongst men.

Ultimately, Pascoli's relationship with modernity is an ambiguous one. On the one hand his attitude in the face of technological advancement is one of shock and bewilderment, as he sees the new urban and industrialized reality sweep away the millenary structures of agricultural society. In this regard, Pascoli can be viewed as conservative, as he expresses the anguish of the middle-class towards the urban proletariat and the changes occurring in the

intense nervous stimulation than the rural environment: 'The psychological basis of the metroplitan type of individuality consists in the intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli' (Simmel 409-10).

⁵⁵ Interestingly, the same idea of the moderncity as the space where desires are exacerbated returns in Mario Morasso's 1905 text *La Nuova Arma: La Macchina*: 'Talché a misura che noi ascendiamo la maggior quantità di desideri che noi possiamo soddisfare va a giacere presso di quelli che già ci infastidiscono, mentre di nuovi e sempre più vasti, grandiosi e più numerosi pullulano nel nostro essere, accrescendo la nostra incontentabilità e la nostra smania (Morasso 12).

Italian society at that time. On the other hand, both in his theoretical writings and in his lyrical production Pascoli anticipates and puts into play the modern 'hole in the paper sky'⁵⁶, which he ascribes to the diffusion of the new scientific discoveries. For this reason, Pascoli's 'cosmological' poetry enters the modernist canon, as it suits the description of the center-less and indifferent universe that characterizes modernity.

4.3. The Centaur of Modernity. Poetry, Technology and The *Vita Activa* in D'Annunzio's Writings.

Following the scientific revolutions of the nineteenth century- Darwinism in particular - and the unprecedented technological development occurring at that time, two main themes irrupted into cultural debate in the early twentieth century: the beast and the machine. As a consequence, a redefinition of what it means to be human was in order, as the Darwinian paradigm challenged the very concept of humanness and, on the other hand, the machine introduced the idea of a perfected organism with increased powers that might supplement and even substitute the human body.

These new and crucial themes of modernity had a profound impact upon reflection on the role of art and literature. Indeed, in the nineteenth century artists and writers had embraced the anthropological paradigm introduced by Charles Darwin and had delved into the idea of degeneration, as popularized by the large wave of sociological studies following the diffusion of evolutionary theory⁵⁷. On the contrary, the new reality of machines and other

⁵⁶ This expression derives from Luigi Pirandello's 1904 *Il Fu Mattia Pascal* and it is currently used in critical language to express the modern awareness of the loss of centrality of mankind in the universe and the consequent collapse of traditional and religious values.

⁵⁷ The term 'evolutionism' in the context of nineteenth century Italy does not specifically refer to Darwin's ideas, but it is rather a general label for all the pre- and post-Darwin theories dealing with the development of humans and their place in the animal kingdom that were circulating at that time. Moreover, evolutionary ideas influenced the social sciences and even literary studies as they became the starting point for the elaboration of anthropological and societal models, as well as a perspective from which to construct and analyze characters in books.

technological prodigies posed a new challenge to the arts, as on the one hand it presented artists with a possible expansion of themes and topics but on the other the sudden and radical novelty of technology threatened to make the traditional subjects of literature obsolete.

As I have previously shown, for Pascoli the theme of technology, that of evolution and the role of the arts are deeply intertwined. This poet sees technological modernization as the ultimate form of *imbestiamento*, that is, as a return to our bestial nature. On the contrary, the function of poetry is to lead towards a progressive 'humanization' of mankind, which he calls the stage of the *homo humanus*. By contrast, the younger poet Gabriele D'Annunzio's views on technology are antipodal to those of Pascoli. In fact, D'Annunzio sees technological modernization, and in particular the development of increasingly sophisticated machines, as a way of progressively freeing mankind from the limitation of their bodies. Firstly, the machine, as a perfected organism with powers that far outreach those of the human body, enables mankind to attain complete dominion over nature. Secondly, in D'Annunzio's view the machine will replace the human body, thus achieving the complete elimination of our animalistic remnants. With the machine as a prosthesis of the body, men will overcome the pain induced both by our weakness as species but also by the tyranny of instinct and the passions. Within this framework, D'Annunzio sees engagement with modernization as the only way to overcome the despair generated by modernity itself, or in other words, as a way of healing the rupture in the self that characterizes the modern *Weltanschauung* (Ceserani 54.).

On the subject of the function and nature of art and literature in the modern world D'Annunzio's views are also antithetical to Pascoli's. In fact, D'Annunzio does not create an opposition between the poet and the *homo faber*, the man of letters and the scientist or the

engineer. On the contrary, these two figures share two important features, creativity and intuition as D'Annunzio affirms in an interview with Ugo Ojetti⁵⁸. Furthermore, both the artist and the scientist do not simply imitate nature, but rather re-produce it and continue the incessant work of creation that occurs in the natural world (D'Annunzio *Scritti Giornalistici* II, 19-20). Indeed, the continuation of nature as the main task of the man of letters is one of D'Annunzio's recurring ideas in his discussion of the function of artistic creation. This becomes increasingly frequent as D'Annunzio progressively elaborates his ideal of the *vita activa*. Indeed, in D'Annunzio's philosophy of action, which became prominent at the turn of the twentieth century, the poetic word is effective inasmuch as it is a *gesto*, and has a performative function. From this perspective, scientific discoveries and technological inventions are increasingly equated to the work of the poet, as they also have an impact upon reality and actually re-shape our perception of the world.

In this part of the chapter I explore D'Annunzio's idea of the *vita activa* as the poet's engagement with technological modernization. This involves a philosophical speculation on the nature of modern man, who finds himself in a liminal position between the ghost of his bestial nature and the model of the machine as a perfected body. It is interesting to remark that D'Annunzio's conversion to the *vita activa*, as shown by his enthusiastic support of technological modernization, science and political engagement, is predicated not only on categories belonging to the sphere of action but also on contemplative ones. In fact, on the one hand for D'Annunzio the *vita activa* involves reversing the paradigm of the decadent artist, stuck in the contemplation of beauty and isolated in the ivory tower of literature.

⁵⁸ 'Così, pur tenendo conto delle differenze, Omero, Guglielmo Shakespeare, e lo Schiller, e il Goethe sono veramente gli eguali dei più alti esploratori della Natura; perocché la facoltà intellettuale che muove il poeta e l'artista sia la medesima da cui derivano le intenzioni e i progressi della scienza' (D'Annunzio *Interviste a D'Annunzio* 52).

Indeed, D'Annunzio's newfound interest for politics and his engagement with the new realities of mass society and technological modernization show his incorporation of a new model of intellectual. On the other, however, one of the reasons behind D'Annunzio's choice of *the vita activa* is that this life liberates him from the dominion of his overwhelming desire. In other words, here the goal of the *vita activa* becomes one that had been traditionally within the mission of the *vita contemplativa*, that is, the achievement of mastery over one's passions. The intertwining of these two models of life, and the role of the machine as a means of liberation from the weakness of the body is the main theme of D'Annunzio's novel *Forse che Si Forse che No* (1910).

In a brief text published in *Il Corriere Della Sera* (1907), entitled "La Resurrezione del Centauro", D'Annunzio provides one of his most striking metaphors of the human condition in modernity. Here the modern man is represented as a centaur, half-human and half-horse:

Mezzo uomo mezzo cavallo ma non mostro appariva l'ospite della selva estiva; ch  in quella parte ove l'uomo era connesso al cavallo un miracolo assiduo di vita si compieva senza discordanza, con la perfezione dell'innesto superando la bellezza dell'una e dell'altra forma distinte. E dalla coda alla scapola, dal gomito al garetto, dallo zoccolo alla fronte una sola volont  di rapina e di conoscenza animava coi ritmi della folgore quella compagnia carnale d'istinti e di pensieri. Fraterna tra tutte le creature generate dal suolo mitico! Nessuna ci tocca, anche oggi, pi  da dentro; nessuna ci sembra meglio rappresentare la pi  recente delle aspirazioni umane, meglio significare il nuovo aspetto della vita terrestre, poich  l'uomo moderno non   se non un centauro storpio e mutilato il quale ricostituisce il mito primitivo riconnettendo indissolubilmente il suo genio all'energia atroce della Natura. (D'Annunzio Prose di Ricerca II, 1576-77)

According to D'Annunzio's description, the modern man is radically split between two natures, the bestial and the human one⁵⁹. Therefore, the mythological Centaur is chosen to depict this ambivalent condition, inasmuch as the equine legs of this creature represent the instinctual, earth-grounded component of humanness, whereas the upper torso and the face allude to its intellectual part. At first this description of the Centaur reveals a harmonious unity of these two parts, as the creature is not a monster but a perfectly shaped being. Furthermore in the centaur the desire for *rapina* (hunt) and for knowledge are one thing and so are instincts and thoughts (*ibidem* 1556). As Vittorio Roda has shown, the search for unity between the two opposing components of the human constitution, body and intellect, is one of the main themes of D'Annunzio's writings, in which he employs what Roda calls 'the strategy of totality', or a series of literary techniques aimed at healing the fracture characterizing his characters. At a closer look, the representation of the Centaur reveals that here unity is achieved by superimposing the intellectual part over the instinctual one.

In the following lines of "La Resurrezione del Centauro" D'Annunzio describes the human part of the Centaur as being characterized by a strong desire for higher knowledge:

Un'insaziabile fame di conoscenza lo incita a misurare tutti gli spazi, a trascendere ogni confine, a respingere sempre verso gli orizzonti i limiti dei suoi domini che il desiderio supera sempre in grandezza. Emulo del nembo, della folgore e dell'anima sua stessa, egli s'inebria di rapidità, s'affranca dalla triste legge del peso, moltiplica le virtù dei suoi sensi; poiché la rapidità sola dà alla creatura dalla mano breve l'illusione di sentire quasi palpabile la forma consecutiva della terra immensa. Ora eccolo su la cresta di un'alpe, di contro all'azzurro, dopo la più furibonda delle sue corse. (ibidem 1577).

The quintessentially human part of the Centaur represents the ulysean man, or, in other words, the man who seeks knowledge beyond the limits imposed upon him by his own

⁵⁹ For instance, in *Il Secondo Amante di Lucrezia Buti* (1907) D'Annunzio portrays his own inner rupture as the conflict between the monster and the archangel: 'l'immagine della lotta empia e sacra non mai intermessa tra l'angelo che io sono e il mostro ch'io sono!' (D'Annunzio *Prose di Ricerca* 1302).

nature⁶⁰. More specifically, behind the image of the Centaur and its rapid run, one must see D'Annunzio's fascination with the technological achievements that allow men to overcome their own physical limitations, the most spectacular of which is the conquest of the sky due to the invention of the plane. In this short passage images belonging to the semantic area of flight accumulate: the horizon, the clouds and the lightning, and peak of the mountain. Last, but not least, here we see portrayed one of the major themes of the Futuristic movement, which is much indebted to D'Annunzio's early twentieth century's production: the myth of velocity.

In the subsequent paragraph it becomes evident how it is the human part of the Centaur that rescues the animal one, thus guaranteeing a harmonious unity for the creature:

I tendini vibrano ancora nelle quattro zampe piantate sul sasso, l'ugne sono lorde di loto e di foglie calpeste, i fianchi equini pulsano intricati di vene, il sudore schiumeggia e cola in rivoli per la groppa calorosa; ma il volto umano si volge pacato a considerar sotto di sé il fremito della forza ferina, ma l'unico cuore sente in sé affluire le musiche del mondo, ma la bocca severa s'inarca a proferire la sentenza della saggezza o l'invocazione della poesia. Non è raffigurata da quell'attitudine la specie tragica e ascetica dell'uomo nuovo che, avendo impresso alla sua propria vita i più terribili impulsi degli Elementi, solleva in sommo il suo spirito per signoreggiare l'eccesso di quella veemenza pronta a travolgerlo e ad annientarlo s'egli per un attimo interrompa la sua disciplina o allenti il suo volere? (1577-78).

D'Annunzio juxtaposes the description of the Centaur's feral nature with an assertion of its humanity. He emphasizes the latter through the anaphora of *ma*, which strongly opposes what he has said before on the bestiality of the Centaur. In other words, although the Centaur has an animalistic side, it is the rational part that gives unity to this creature by giving conscious expression to its desires and to the impressions that come from the external world.

⁶⁰ D'Annunzio starts elaborating his own interpretation of Ulysses after his trip to Greece in 1895. In D'Annunzio's view, Ulysses represents the Mediterranean version of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Uebermensch*, that is, the man that overcomes himself and his limitations to achieve a superior status.

Furthermore, it is the *spirito* that masters the violence of the instinct through a constant discipline of the will.

The idea of discipline intended as the control of the rational part of the human nature over the instinctual part is present in one of the texts that inspired D'Annunzio to write *Forse Che Si Forse Che No*, Morasso's *La Nuova Arma: La Macchina*, where it is actually described as one of the psychological consequences of the use of the machine⁶¹. According to Morasso not only does the machine provide men with a source of formidable energy, but it is precisely the mastery of such a force that teaches us how to dominate our own internal drives, our passions:

E così è; il giovine moderno che è al contatto con questa forza bruta e gigantesca, che la soggioga e la guida, che ha acquistato l'esperienza di questi impeti formidabili di corsa e che in mezzo a tale follia dello spazio e delle cose mantiene la sua via dritta fermamente, ha avuto una scuola di volontà e di energia più efficace di qualsiasi altra; tale via egli non smarrirà e la meta raggiungerà anche in altre corse pazze, quelle della passione, o in mezzo agli odi e agli amori ove altri uomini periscono. Un po' del suo cuore egli ha dato al mostro di metallo e di fuoco, ma il mostro lo ha ricambiato con un po' della sua possa e della sua durezza. (Morasso 38)

The technological products of human rationality are not only useful instruments but they are able to impart discipline on that part of the human constitution that is still unruly, the instinctual one. In other words, here, and in D'Annunzio's *Forse Che Si Forse Che No*, the machine enters and perfects the human body that created it, repairing the last remnants of the bestial origins. In the text of the *Centaur* it is the very part of the mythological creature that strives itself to overcome its physical limitations -through the creation of technological devices- that is called to rule and master the instincts of its animal half.

⁶¹ The first chapters of Morasso's book are devoted to the idea of velocity as the new rhythm of life brought about by the invention of the steam engine and the new powerful machines of modernity. Morasso establishes a connection between velocity and happiness. Indeed, the augmented velocity of modern life gives people the impression of being able to achieve their goals faster, thus increasing the urge of their desires and ambitions.

In the novel *Forse Che Sì Forse Che No*, published in 1910, D'Annunzio, marks the end of his adhesion to the canons of the symbolistic and psychological novel, which had informed his previous works. As Anna Maria Andreoli and Niva Lorenzini have pointed out, during the temporal gap that divides *Il Fuoco* (1900) and *Forse Che Sì Forse Che No* D'Annunzio became acquainted with the idea of life as *élan*, and of the consciousness as action, which informed the French literary and cultural debate of those years (1315). According to Albert Thibaudet, 'in those years the debate was on energy and action, both themes which the generations of writers between 1900-1910 could not ignore' (Thibaudet 188).

The consecration to the *vita activa* is a main theme in *Forse Che Sì Forse Che No*. In this novel D'Annunzio sees the *vita activa* both as the true and authentic engagement with modernity and as the healthiest way of dealing with the experience of the split self that characterizes his production, and that he epitomizes in the text of the *Centaur*. In *Forse Che Sì Forse Che No* he ruptures the self, which D'Annunzio experiences as the separation between spirit and body, and between freedom from sexual desire and dependence on it, can be healed by the engagement with the *vita activa* and with the products of technological modernization. Here the *vita activa* switches from indicating political action, as in D'Annunzio's *Le Vergini delle Rocce* or *Il Fuoco* to express the relationship of the protagonist with the machine. As I will show, in this novel the commerce with the machine has an ascetic value, inasmuch as it involves the quiescence of desire. Thus, the *vita activa* to some extent replaces the *vita contemplativa* as far its ultimate goal, tranquillity, is concerned. In fact, the function of the machine is to disembody, thereby eliminating or suppressing those instincts that cause sufferance. Furthermore, In *Forse Che Sì Forse Che No* D'Annunzio completes the process of expulsion both of the woman and of the paradigm of the decadent artist, which he

had begun with *Le Vergini delle Rocce*. In fact, the female protagonist of *Forse Che Sì Forse Che No* embodies both the characteristics of the decadent artist and those of the carnal temptress of *Il Trionfo Della Morte*.

For the first time in D'Annunzio's novelistic production, the male protagonist of *Forse Che Sì Forse Che No* is neither a poet nor a writer, like Stelio Effrena in *Il Fuoco*, nor does he have a penchant for literature and poetry, such as Andrea Sperelli of *Il Piacere*, Claudio Cantelmo of *Le Vergini delle Rocce* or Giorgio Aurispa in *Il Trionfo della Morte*. Paolo Tarsis is portrayed as a man of action, an adventurer and a soldier (D'Annunzio *Forse Che Sì* 568-569). Initially, Paolo and his friend Giulio meet during their military service and subsequently they leave for a trip to the Far East together, which D'Annunzio modeled on actual explorers' diaries and on travel literature (Lorenzini 1321).

Paolo Tarsis' psychological portrayal also greatly differs from the other male characters of D'Annunzio's novels. He is courageous and virile and has a '*volontà militante*' (D'Annunzio *Forse Che Sì* 622), which leads him to engage himself in acts of bravery and in bold enterprises. His goal in life is not to create or celebrate beauty, and not even to become a political leader, but rather to expand the limits of human experience thanks to the mastery of the newest technological discoveries. A truly ulysean man, Paolo Tarsis is possessed by a desire to overachieve, and to push himself to go where no other man has gone before. He shares his ambitions with his friend Giulio Cambiaso, and their virile friendship is cemented by the common passion for the construction of a machine, the airplane, that will conquer the last frontier denied to man, the sky.

Paolo Tarsis perfectly embodies the Centaur of modernity that D'Annunzio depicted in the article quoted above. Indeed, his ambition to challenge the limits of human attainment is supported by the use of the machine and his life is a celebration of the ulysean intelligence

that subdues nature: *'il nuovo strumento sembra esaltare l'uomo sopra il suo fato, dotarlo non solo di un nuovo dominio, ma di un altro senso'* (D'Annunzio *ibidem* 566). Moreover, in the course of the novel he lives the tragedy of the split self that characterizes the Centaur, inasmuch as he is temporarily held prisoner by his lustful love for Isabella Inghirami. The conclusion of the novel, in which Paolo Tarsis abandons Isabella after she has gone insane, marks the liberation of the protagonist from his lust thanks to the return to the machine. In fact, in the last scene Paolo flies once again with his airplane, and in the heights of the sky he feels finally free from the chains of his lust.

In the depiction of Paolo Tarsis D'Annunzio is once more deeply indebted to Mario Morasso's *La Nuova Arma: La Macchina*. The descriptions of Paolo's exploits with his race car remind the reader of Morasso's exaltation of the pilots as the new heroes of modernity, inasmuch as their velocity represents an almost epic victory and a renewed dominion of man over matter: *'[La corsa in macchina] è il solo modo in cui egli [l'uomo moderno] possa spiegare le sue tendenze di conquista e di dominio ed esaltare il suo eroismo, compresso com'è egli oggi da ogni parte, e riacquistare le qualità quasi smarrite del dominatore e dell'eroe'* (Morasso *La Nuova Arma* 205). More importantly, D'Annunzio shares with Morasso the idea that the machine expands and perfects the human body and it represents the ultimate attempt of mankind to apply their rationality to organize and subdue the brutal and disordered forces of Nature:

Si deve dire alto e forte che la macchina non è affatto un ordigno di morte, ma un'immensa moltiplicazione di vita, che essa rappresenta un ordine mirabile e il trionfo della logica sulla incoerenza delle forze naturali, un'armonia della materia creata dall'uomo e per l'uomo in un impero vergine infinito, una scuola efficacissima per riacquistare una nuova e gagliarda giovinezza, rifarsi una volontà ed ampliare sontuosamente la propria bramosia di dominio. (Morasso *ibidem* 203)

As a result, In *Forse Che Si Forse Che No* D'Annunzio intertwines the concept of the machine as a way of perfecting the body with his idea of the modern (and his own) split self, divided between high rationality and lower instincts.

Ascetic traits characterize the way Paolo Tarsis' adventurous life and his relationship with Giulio Cambiaso are portrayed. As Jared Becker has noticed, in *Forse Che Si Forse Che No* D'Annunzio re-employs one of the themes that have recurred in his production since the eighteen-nineties: the cult of virility as part of the nationalistic propaganda of 'healthiness' and strength, although such an idea is also characterized by homoerotic tendencies (Becker *Nationalism and Culture* 169). This exaltation of maleness implies a rejection and a demonization of the woman as being weak and despicable. Firstly, a misogynistic attitude colours the relationship between the two men, which also develops into an utter rejection of love and of sex as being nothing more than a bodily need. Secondly, the act of flying is seen as a voyage towards an ideal world, above the misery and weaknesses of the earth: '*Fratello, fratello, siamo solitari, siamo liberi, siamo lontani dalla terra tormentosa*' (D'Annunzio *Forse Che Si* 587).

In the relationship between Paolo and Giulio women are completely excluded. As Giulio affirms, the only possible commerce with the woman is a rapid sexual encounter to satisfy a temporary impulse. Lust, he affirms, should not possess one's soul, and much like the other instincts, should be subdued: '*Così io faccio della bestia oscura che cresceva dentro di me e minacciava di soverchiarmi. La lego e la sollevo, e poi la marchio per la sua servitù. E mi scrollo, e ti do la mano, e ce ne andiamo per la nostra conquista liberi*' (D'Annunzio *Forse che Si* 578). The sexual drive is metaphorically indicated as 'the beast within me', thus echoing Darwinian notions of the animalistic remnant in humans. When Paolo considers his

attraction to Isabella, he wishes that it was similar to an appetite that one can satiate and quickly forget and calls her body 'a dangerous burden':

E l'uomo nel rigoglio della virilità esperto d'ogni rischio e d'ogni meta, immune da ogni paura e da ogni abitudine, armato di diffidenza e di dispregio, che aveva conosciuto giorni innumerevoli in cui la disciplina della sua virtù piantata su le due calcagna gli bastava a vivere, guardò il periglioso ingombro del corpo ormai promesso e oppose al presentimento della sciagura l'immagine dell'orgia liberatrice che, memore del marinaio disceso nel porto per ripartir più leggero domani verso l'oceano; e gli gonfiò le vene l'impazienza di saziarsi. (ibidem 545).

In the passage above we can recognize the occurrence of an ascetic- Gnostic vocabulary⁶² concerning the body. Firstly, the body itself and its necessities are regarded with contempt, although the real danger is constituted by the spiritual attachment that lust generates towards its very object. Secondly in the text we find once more the theme of virtue and discipline, as the capacity of overcoming the weaknesses of the human body and endure all hardships in order to live up to a higher ideal. The departure for the ocean is a metaphor for the unlimited horizon that is open for man to explore, lest he be bound by his or her physical limitations. Paolo's desire to sate himself represents his attempt to quickly get rid of the necessities of the body in order to experience the superior freedom of his adventurous life.

In the novel *Forse Che Si Forse Che No* the upper part of the Centaur, the one that represents intellect and rationality, but also the adventurous and entrepreneurial aspect of human nature is metaphorically condensed in the experience of flight. The flight of the newly invented airplane represents not only the ultimate achievement of human intelligence and technological skillfulness but also the ascension towards a world of pure ideal, peace and

⁶² Hans Jonas, in his phenomenological study on the Gnostic thought and imagery, reports that the body is often represented as a burdensome 'garment' that contains the soul, and from which the soul will once be liberated (Jonas 60).

tranquility. When talking about the experience of the flight both Paolo Tarsis and Giulio Cambiaso employ a vocabulary that is deeply embedded in the semantics of asceticism and quietism: *'Egli lasciava dietro di sé la turbolenza della sua passione, il riso agitante d'Isabella... Ritrovava il suo silenzio, il suo deserto, il suo compito'* (*ibidem* 587). Moreover, when he dreams of flying Paolo recounts his experience as being the perfect quiescence of internal trouble in the mastery of the external movement of the plane: *'Nessun turbamento, nessun mutamento. Tutto è tranquillo dentro di me.'* (666). When Paolo returns to his airplane after Isabella has been interned in the mental hospital, the experience is connoted in religious and mystical terms: *'Allora parve a Paolo Tarsis che l'aria ripalpitasse d'un'ansietà religiosa come nell'attesa del miracolo'* (834).

In this novel carnal love represents exactly the opposite of the experience of the flight. Lust is the *imbestiamento* that chains the protagonist to his body and its instinct- and to the body of the woman, which is seen as the ultimate trap. The most striking example of this is to be found in the episode of the lovers in the seaside villa. After lovemaking, Paolo feels especially nauseated and sick of the indolent life he is leading during the holiday with his woman. He dreams of flying again, and the body of the Isabella lying on him feels especially heavy, almost suffocating him, although she is slim and light: *'Egli non s'era mai accorto che tanto ella pesasse: pesava come il marmo, gli schiacciava le costole'*. The excess of lust and self-indulgence leads Paolo to long for the adventurous and bold life he led before meeting Isabella (who, interestingly enough, takes hold of him only after Giulio Cambiaso is dead). It is only when he decides to fly again, and when Isabella accepts to share this experience with him, that it seems that her body has lost its weight: *'Ella cedette tutte le membra, fu fresca e leggera come una manciata di foglie'* (671). Thus, weight is a metaphor for the carnal

entrapment that holds back the spiritual part of the man, and prevents him from devoting himself to higher achievements.

The metaphor of weight⁶³ as associated with the instinctual part of the human nature, and, more specifically, with the woman, also appears in the episode of Giulio Cambiaso's last flight. Vana, Isabella's younger sister, is drawn to him and before his flight she offers him a rose, so that he can bring it with him up in the air (583). Giulio graciously accepts her flower: *'E' la prima volta che porto un fiore nel cielo. Crede che sia leggero? Forse pesa quanto un doppio destino'* (585). The joking words of Giulio about the weight of the rose actually reveal to be prophetic, as later on, during that very same flight, he is wounded, falls down and dies immediately (597-98). Subsequently, the devastated Vana feels guilty about her gift, fearing that it may have brought bad luck to the pilot: *'E' la prima volta che porto un fiore nel cielo. Crede che sia leggero? Forse pesa quanto un doppio destino. Lo porterò in alto in alto... Non era egli stato ucciso dalla rosa di Madura?'* (601-02).

The episode of Giulio Cambiaso's death foreshadows Paolo's entrapment with Isabella, both because the latter remains alone and more vulnerable to the charms of his lover and because it shows the deadly danger of sexuality and its incompatibility with the *vita activa* of men. The contamination of the machine with a clear symbol of sexuality -the feminine rose- leads to the death of one of the male characters of the book. Exceptionally, the woman is admitted into the life of men, but only if her sexuality is annulled. Indeed, during the funeral veil of Giulio, Paolo accepts the company of Vana, who asks to pay her respects to the dead man, but only because she is a virgin: *'Ella sentiva che ogni sua lacrima, ogni suo*

⁶³ The opposition of low and high, and the metaphor of gravity associated with the effect of the woman on the man, reminds us once again of the Gnostic *Weltaanschauung*, inasmuch as the earthly condition of mankind is seen as a 'fall' from the sky, which leads to an entrapment of the soul into the body (Jonas 62-65).

gesto erano dolci al dolore virile, e che la sua verginità la faceva degna di accostarsi alla morte' (618).

The love affair of Paolo and Isabella can be seen as a re-narration of the story of Alcina and Ruggiero in *Orlando Furioso*, (Canto VII) inasmuch as the woman is seen as being responsible for retaining the hero in her dominion, thus keeping him away from his glory. In Ludovico Ariosto's poem, the hero is rescued by a *deus ex machina*, the sorceress Melissa, who reveals the enchantment of Alcina and lets Ruggiero escape from the magic island. In D'Annunzio's version it is the vision of the flight, through the memory of his friend Giulio, which temporarily frees Paolo from his lustful entanglement with Isabella -who is significantly called *la lusingatrice* (665)-

E gli risonò all'improvviso nel centro dell'anima la voce del buon compagno che determinava la rotta (...) E rivisse i giorni della gran febbre operosa, e l'ardore delle speranze, e l'audacia dei sogni, e la grandezza del sogno più disperato. (...) E il mondo era pieno d'un'altra gloria, e d'ogni parte salivano gl'inni, e le nazioni credevano già aboliti i confini e santificate erano le ali d'Icaro vittorioso! Che faceva egli su quel tappeto d'Aremme ove la voluttà pareva regolata dal flauto d'Amar? (669)

What Paolo hears is the call of the *vita activa*, which vividly opposes the languid, Oriental atmosphere of the holiday with Isabella, entirely devoted to pleasure and beauty.

It is clear from the analysis conducted so far that D'Annunzio re-enacts in *Forse Che Si Forse Che No* the conflict between spirit and flesh that can be found in many of his other novels⁶⁴. Indeed, here the temptation of sensuality is embodied by the woman, with her quintessentially instinctual and earthly body, which lacks the spiritual part present in men. However, the novelty of the book lies in the fact that here the spiritual/rational part

⁶⁴ For instance in *Il Trionfo della Morte* the male protagonist fights with his lustful desire induced by the sensual beauty of 'la Nemica'. In *Il Piacere* Andrea Sperelli's convalescence and artistic rebirth is induced by the disappearance of the sensuous Elena Muti. Furthermore, the opposition between flesh and spirit plays an important part in D'Annunzio's lyrical production, especially in *Poema Paradisiaco*.

counteracting the instinctual one is deeply embedded in the commerce with modernization and with technology. In fact, as I will show, the novel offers a solution to the conflict between spirit and flesh, that is, the ideal substitution of the weak male body with the machine.

The exchange between the semantic area of the body with that of the machine occurs very frequently throughout the text of *Forse Che Si Forse Che No*. D'Annunzio seems to have incorporated Morasso's notion on the effect that the machine has on the human body, which is not only to potentiate it but also to discipline and improve it. In the novel one can observe a shift in the equation body/machine, which goes from the superiority of the former over the latter to the reversal of such hierarchy, passing through the assimilation of one with the other.

In one of the first scenes Paolo and Isabella are driving together in his race car, and the man, besotted by her beauty, longs to make love to her. As he glances at the woman, he marvels at the perfection of her body:

Ah perché d'improvviso quell'opera delicata e misteriosa come il lavoro dei liutai, fatta di pazienza di passione di coraggio, e di eterno sogno e di antica favola, perché era divenuta un'incerta carcassa al paragone della somma di vita accorsa da tutti i punti dell'Universo e adunata maravigliosamente su quel volto quasi esangue i cui súbiti rossori commovevano come gli accenti sublimi dell'eloquenza e come le grida dei fanciulli? Quanto ingegno teso e ostinato quanta accortezza e destrezza quante prove e riprove nel trovare i modi delle legature, delle giunture degli innesti! E per quale segreto, ad un tratto, ecco, le fragili falangi di quelle dita ripiegate all'angolo di quella bocca potevano assumere un valore che aboliva tutto l'acume della ricerca e tutta la gioia dell'invenzione? (526-27)

The body of the woman is compared to the mechanism of a machine but the mystery of her beauty far outdoes even the most perfect of engines. And during the journey Paolo is so caught by his desire for Isabella, who for her part still denies herself to him, that while driving, the control over the car becomes in his mind the carnal possession of the woman:

'egli sentiva sotto le sue mani nella potenza dell'impulso grandeggiare il palpito della creatura amata' (523). In other words, in the first part of the novel, the machine acts as a substitute for the body of the woman, and the complexity of the mechanical inventions still cannot compare to the unexplicable charm of Isabella, which many times surprises and intrigues Paolo. Furthermore, when talking about his own body Paolo calls it '*la macchina fida e infida*' (531), thereby implying that the carnal aspect of his nature can betray him far more than a mechanical engine can, whose functioning is the product of a rational invention.

In the many scenes devoted to the adventure of the flight it is possible to observe the celebration of the assimilation between the human body and the machine. For instance, when Giulio Cambiaso begins his flight he feels a perfect symbiosis between himself and his plane:

Giulio Cambiaso non aveva mai sentita così piena la concordanza fra la sua macchina e il suo scheletro, fra la sua volontà addestrata e quella forza congegnata, tra il suo moto istintivo e quello meccanico. Dalla pala all'elica al taglio del governale, tutta la membratura volante gli era come un prolungamento e un ampliamento della sua stessa vita. Quando si curvava sulla leva a manovrare contro un colpo un salto un buffo; quando inchinava il corpo verso l'interno del circolo nel veleaggio rotante, per muovere con la pressione dell'anca il congegno inteso a riflettere la velatura estrema; quando nell'andare all'orza manteneva l'equilibrio con un bilanciamento infallibile intorno al centro di stabilità, e trovava a volta a volta il modi di trasporre l'asse del volo, egli credeva esser congiunto ai suoi due bianchi trapezii con nessi vivi come i muscoli pettorali degli avvoltoi che aveva veduto piombarsi dalle rocce di Mokattam, o aggirarsi su l'acquitrino di Sakha. (587)

In the passage above we see the perfect sincronization of the mechanical body with the human one. As in Morasso's text, the symbiosis between the two entities enhances both, and the result is an organism with ample powers and with a stronger determination.

In the conclusion of the book the theme of the liberation from pain and weakness that the machine offers to the human body reaches its climax. After the confinement of Isabella, Paolo attempts to fly again, this time on a more dangerous mission, the flight over the Thyrranian sea to the Sardinian coast. As he prepares for this enterprise, he is aware that he

may well die. However, the atmosphere in these pages is pervaded by a sense of liberation and mystical union with the universe. In fact, the flight is symbolically preceded by the liberation of a heron, which can be interpreted as the soul freed from the cage of the body. Here the theme of death is intertwined with that of the liberation from lust, which is seen as a mortal embrace: *'Tutto era nuziale. Il mare le spiagge le valli i poggi i monti erano quali Canente li guardò con i suoi occhi limpidi e li incantò con i suoi carmi leni, prima del dolore, prima del pianto e del sangue, prima che la figlia crudele del Sole dicesse al principe saturnio studioso di cavalli: "O bellissimo, e non ti riavrà colei che canta"'* (864).

As Paolo flies over the sea his body becomes more and more at one with his plane, and by extension with the whole Universe. The assimilation with the machine provides him with a sense of mystical union with the sky and the sea, and at the same time, with a great sense of peace. His body is free from the burdensome chains of its earthly nature, just as he is now above the earth:

Il volatore non vedeva più se non acque acque acque in una infinita chiara solitudine senza turbamento senza mutamento, in cui gli pareva essere sospeso e immobile su le sue ali adeguate. Era la grande serenità alcionia come nei giorni favolosi del solstizio iemale; era l'albasia mattutina senza soffio senza flutto. Come quella quiete aboliva la rapidità così quel silenzio aboliva il romore. Il moto dei congegni non aveva risonanza ma era simile al moto del cuore e delle arterie, che l'uomo non ode quando egli è in armonia con sé e con l'Universo. (...) ed egli aveva persa la memoria della riva di giù, ma non di quel viaggio, ch  egli si ricordava di averlo compiuto. (865-66)

In the lines above we can notice two phenomena. The first is the interpenetration of man and machine, which gives Paolo the sense that he is to overcome his human nature: *'il giorno d'immolazione divenire giorno di trasfigurazione?'* (867). The second is the occurrence of a Gnostic theme, that of the abandonment of the earthly prison in favour of the return to the 'true' homeland, the sky, of which humans have memory and for which they feel a constant

longing (Jonas 65). In the Gnostic myth the earthly prison is represented by the mortal body, from which death can deliver us. Here the theme of death as a way of salvation is replaced by the idea of the disembodiment and transfiguration operated by the machine upon the body.

This process of transfiguration is evident in the very last lines of the novel. The male protagonist Paolo manages to land on the coast of Sardinia, thanks to his renewed mastery of the piloting skills. As he touches ground, the atmosphere surrounding him is one of awe and celebration of the enterprise that has set him higher than any other mortal:

Non clamore, non tuono di trionfo; non moltitudine pallida di facce, irta di mani. Silenzio selvaggio, erma gloria; e il mattino ancor fresco; e il respiro del mare fanciullo che le braccia piegate della terra blandivano; e la parola della segreta nutrice che sa la vita e la morte, e ciò che deve nascere e ciò che non può morire, e il tempo di tutto. Figlio non v'è dio se non sei tu quello". (869-70)

The last paragraphs of the novel celebrate Paolo Tarsis' overcoming of the boundaries set to human experience through the experience of the flight. Paolo has pushed beyond the limits of human nature and has thus attained the rank of divinity. The atmosphere of the passage is full of sacrality, as Paolo has abandoned the burden of his human flesh with its uncontrollable desires and has overcome himself. Ultimately this achievement is obtained through the disembodiment of Paolo thanks to his identification with the machine.

The difference between the perfected body obtained by the assimilation with the machine and the human flesh appears clearly in the last scene. When Paolo dismounts from the plane on the shore to reach the land on foot, he immediately starts feeling the pain caused by an injury he had received during the flight, whereas he had not paid attention to it before: '*Ecco che la sua carne ridiventava miserabile: non si poteva più esprimere se non col soffio lamentevole non udito da alcuno, chiedendo il sollievo d'un attimo a quella piaga empia che novamente costringeva e imbestiava la volontà vittoriosa* (870).

The passage above is fundamental in order to understand D'Annunzio's view on the dichotomy body/machine. When Paolo feels the pain, his flesh becomes again ('*ridiventa*') miserable, as it was before the sacred experience of the last flight, and in particular during the relationship with Isabella. In the following lines the pain caused by the injury is compared to sexual desire, inasmuch as in both cases the flesh, just like when Paolo desired Isabella, called for instant relief (576). Furthermore, the frailty of the flesh constrains once more Paolo's victorious will into the limits set by his human body, or, as D'Annunzio puts it, by his animal body (*imbestiava*). In other words, the Centaur of modernity is freed by his animalistic part by the mechanical prosthesis allowing him to fulfill the ambitions of his rational part, which is the same one that produced the machine. On the other hand, as soon as the prosthesis is removed, his animalistic nature reveals itself in all of its frailty, pains and desires, reminding the Centaur of his weaknesses and mortality.

Forse Che Si Forse Che No concludes the process of evolution of the male protagonist from the paradigm of the decadent artist and the contemplative man to the man of action. This process is completed by the full-fledged engagement of the male protagonist in the *vita activa*, represented in D'Annunzio's last novel by the involvement with technology. Furthermore, as I have observed before, the abandonment of the model of the contemplative man also coincides with the rejection of the woman as a source of inspiration for the deeds of the male protagonist and her progressive acquisition of the characteristics of the decadent artist. As I have previously shown in Chapter 3, such mechanism was already at play in *Le Vergini delle Rocce*, where the garden of the princesses, as the space of sterility and feminization, embodies the condition of the decadent artist. In *Forse Che Si Forse Che No* the male protagonist is far from resembling the decadent artist portrayed by Andrea Sperelli of *Il Piacere* and the woman is not an inspiration, but rather an obstacle for his

accomplishments. Moreover, it is she who plays out the decadent code of values and that embodies the characteristics of the *fin de siècle* male artist.

The figure of Isabella incorporates some of the aspects characterizing the image of the decadent artist, as portrayed by the critical literature of the late nineteenth century and by D'Annunzio himself in his novels and lyrical production. Firstly, although she is a fully-grown woman, at times she displays a child-like attitude, especially with regards to the enjoyment of natural beauty. Secondly, in her description D'Annunzio often refers to her hermaphrodite traits. Thirdly, Isabella shows the same attraction of the exotic East that inspires nineteenth century Orientalism. Lastly, in the first part of the novel *Forse Che Si Forse Che No* there is an allusion to the garden as the space of decadence and the metaphor for the body of Isabella herself.

The childishness of Isabella is an important component of her womanly charms. When she wishes to enter the palace of Isabella d'Este her capriciousness is irresistible because it has a child-like quality: '*Lasciate che entriamo, per un'occhiata almeno! Mi chiamo Isabella!*' (529). Furthermore, the child-like attitude is what allows her to perceive the beauty of the world with a renewed and enhanced sensitivity, which leaves Paolo speechless with admiration: '*Paolo rideva, rapito tuttavia da quella vitalità volubile, da quella diversità di aspetti e di accenti, da quell'ardore e da quel tumulto che del luogo ov'era ella sembravano fare il punto più sensibile dell'"Universo"*' (534). As opposed to D'Annunzio's previous novels, where the male protagonist is invested with poetic sensitivity, here it is Isabella who seems to be more inclined to the contemplation of beauty and more receptive to the sensorial impressions of the world: '*Non vi farò mai tanto male quanto ne fa a me la più piccola di quelle foglie, e tutto questo cielo!*' (529).

Isabella's enhanced sensitivity and poetic attitude remind the reader of the late nineteenth century paradigm of the child as the one who is able to capture reality in a series of vivid and unusual impressions, as theorized, for instance, by Pascoli in *Il Fanciullino*. In fact, as Barbara Spackman has convincingly shown, within this context the child is nothing but a transposition of the nervous sensitivity of the modern artist, or, in Charles Baudelaire's words, 'the man of genius': *'J'affirme que l'inspiration a quelque rapport avec la congestion, et que toute pensée sublime est accompagnée d'une secousse nerveuse, plus ou moins forte, qui retentit jusque dans le cervelet... Mais le génie n'est que l'enfance retrouvée à volonté...'* (Baudelaire 888) (quoted by Spackman 59). In *Forse Che Si Forse Che No* the extraordinary receptiveness is displaced from the 'man' of genius onto the woman, whereas the male protagonist seems to be immune from such an attitude.

However strange it may seem that the main feature of the contemplative man is now embodied by a woman, we need not forget that the decadent artist itself was portrayed by nineteenth century culture as the opposite of the model of healthy masculinity imposed by bourgeois mentality. According to Spackman, 'the intimation of castration suggests that the return to childhood is a euphemism for feminization' (Spackman 61). Thus, the stigma of degeneration becomes that of 'degenderation' (*ibidem* 30). Intriguingly such a sexual ambiguity remains in the description of Isabella, who is at times portrayed as having masculine and boyish traits: *'Anche il corpo di lei era ingannevole, quasi duplice, come dissimulato e rivelato in una perpetua vicenda. Ecco, ella saliva di grado in grado con una pieghevolezza che pareva allungarle ancora più le gambe, attenuarle i fianchi, assottigliarle la cintura: era magra snella veloce come un giovinetto allenato alla corsa'* (D'Annunzio *Prose di Romanzi* 535) Furthermore, Isabella is also sexually deviant, as she commits incest with her own brother Aldo. In *Isabella* D'Annunzio replicates the image of the decadent artist,

not only as he himself had often imagined (see for instance in the 1885 poem *L'Androgine* in *La Chimera* in *Versi d'Amore e Gloria* 496) but also as the nineteenth century bourgeois criticism had depicted it, thereby creating the very concept of 'decadence'⁶⁵.

In one of the central chapters of the novels *Isabella*, dressed up like an odalisque, entertains her lover Paolo with imagined stories and fantasies of the Near East. Her fantasy is filled with pomegranate flowers, exotic music and young people with liquid black eyes. The atmosphere that her words conjure up is that of indolent sensuality and rich voluptuosness (*Prose di Romanzi* 649-651). More than the real account of a Morroccan holiday, what *Isabella* artfully creates is a picture that seems directly taken from the Orientalist literature of nineteenth century Europe, especially from the writings of Gustave Flaubert and Gerard de Nerval (Said 181-87)⁶⁶. Such an image of the Orient as a place of forbidden pleasures and untamed sexuality spread to the writers of the late nineteenth century who formed the canon of 'decadent literature':

Nerval and Flaubert belonged to that community of thought and feeling described by Mario Praz in *The Romantic Agony*, a community for which the imagery of exotic places, the cultivation of sadomasochistic tastes (...), a fascination with the macabre, with the notion of a Fatal Woman, with secrecy and occultism, all combined to enable literary work of the sort produced by Gautier (...), Swinburne, Baudelaire and Huysmans. (Said 180)

Indeed, during his 'decadent' phase D'Annunzio often toyed with Orientalism, under the influence of the French literature that he was imbibing in large doses: Victor Hugo's *Les Orientales*, Flaubert's *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* and *Salambô* (Becker *Nationalism and Culture* 76). As Becker observed, 'D'Annunzio steadily cultivated an Orientalizing art that

⁶⁵ See for instance Mario Moroni's essay "Sensuous Maladies: The Construction of Italian Decadentism", in which the author reconstructs decadence as a cultural discourse which developed according to strategies of reappropriation and rearticulation of the notion within different cultural projects. The essay is in the book *Italian Modernism: Italian Culture between Decadence and Avant-Garde*, 65-85.

⁶⁶ Indeed, the character of the Morroccan boy evoked by *Isabella* is called Aini, possibly reminding the reader of one of Flaubert's Orientalist travel diaries, which reported the locality of Kasr-el-Aini (Said 186).

shied away from Carduccian nation building and its goal of injecting strength and purpose into the new Italian state' (*ibidem* 77).

In the late eighties, however, D'Annunzio joined the cause of *Italianità*, not only in the sense of the exaltation of his country, but also as the motto of an imperialistic and colonialistic propaganda. Thus, as Becker has shown, his Orientalizing taste was reshaped to fit his new political ideal (86). The Byzantine effeminacy that colored some his early poems became, in his later works, the Orient's 'feminine penetrability', which justified the Western countries' imperialistic conquest (78).

In *Forse Che Si Forse Che No* the orientalizing tendencies of D'Annunzio's previous identity as a decadent artist are projected onto the female character of Isabella. In the episode of the lovers at the seaside villa, Isabella is the weaver of an Orientalistic fairy-tale, similar in spirit to D'Annunzio's early poems, whereas Paolo is the Westerner, whose solid and straightforward mind is befuddled by the woman's intoxicating sensuality. On the one hand with the projection of his early self onto the woman D'Annunzio continues the project of imperialistic propaganda, according to which the Easterners are 'feminine' and as such in need of guidance and domination. On the other, the attribution of Orientalistic tendencies to Isabella allows D'Annunzio to warn himself off the spectrum of an identity that he no longer wanted to share.

The image of the garden as the metaphor for decadence, as we have found it in *Le Vergini delle Rocce* appears also in the first chapters of *Forse Che Si Forse Che No*. When Isabella and Paolo visit the palace of Isabella d'Este, with whom Isabella likes to identify, the two of them look for the secret garden hidden inside the walls of the residence. As they look for it, the atmosphere becomes increasingly suffocating and full of unexplicable melancholy, affecting Paolo's mood: '*l'angustia di quella stanza e quelle immagini e quelle morbidezze*

lo soffocavano (551). On the contrary, Isabella seems to thrive in this atmosphere, as it actually enhances her sensuality: *'Non ignara del piacere e bisognosa di gioire soffrendo, smaniosa di sporgersi all'orlo della tentazioni più ripide, con un cuore temente e te la donna aspirava intorno a sé l'ardore delle anime simile all'odore sulfureo dell'uragano; ...covava la sua astuzia e la sua lussuria nel suo calore più profondo* (546). Finally, Isabella's garden appears, hidden deep inside the courtyards of the palace:

Anche il giardino era intorpidito, quasi imbiutato d'un silenzio pingue come il miele come la cera come la gomma .Era un abbandono e una tristezza come si consumavano in un profumo tardo. Gli spiriti dell'olio si sprigionavano nel cocciore dello spigo e del rosmarino; le albicocche pendevano mezze nella fronda floscia, qualcuna sfatta, aperta sul nocciolo, stillante; i rosai non potati avevano sproccchi tanto lunghi e teneri che s'incurvavano sotto una rosa scempi; e la pallida palude vergiliana appariva di là dagli alti gigli tanto ricchi di polline che n'eran lordi.(9546-47)

The description of the garden is filled with literary echoes. The most important one is certainly Armida's island in *Gerusalemme Liberata* (X), which is also a retelling of Alcina's episode in *Orlando Furioso*. The direct relationship with this text is evident in the element of the rotten fruits and flowers (X, 14, 438). More importantly, here, like in Ariosto's story, the garden is the visual representation of feminine beauty, sensual and yet deceitful⁶⁷.

The second literary echo is the garden of the princesses of *Le Vergini delle Rocce*. Indeed, in both texts we find the same combination of beauty and corruption: the atmosphere is languid, saturated with sadness and a sense of inarrestable decay. As in *Le Vergini*, here D'Annunzio embeds his images in the semantic field of claustrophobia, (the garden is deeply

⁶⁷ In fact, in Armida's story, the sorceress turns out to be nothing but a painted whore. Furthermore, the image of the garden of Armida constitutes a *mise en abîme* on the part of D'Annunzio, as *Forse Che Si Forse Che No* can be read as a retelling of the story of the male hero that is kept prisoner by the beautiful seductress. Interestingly, as Barbara Spackman has observed, the image of the garden of Alcina was used by the late nineteenth and early twentieth literary criticism to define the concept of decadence, as opposed to the 'island of normalcy' (Spackman 26-27). Specifically, Spackman quotes Benedetto Croce as the one who specifically used the gardens of Alcina to define D'Annunzio's excessive sensuality of his decadent phase (*ibidem* 26).

enclosed within the palace), immobility (the garden is torpid, nearby there is a swamp, the thickness of the air which is compared to viscous materials such as honey or wax) and overripeness (the rotten fruits, the pollen-saturated flowers). All of these images serve as visual representations and metaphors for the concept of decadence, from which D'Annunzio distances himself, thus deploying the same rhetoric devices that were used by the supporters of the 'island of normalcy'. Indeed, these images contrast strikingly with the purity of the metaphors surrounding the experience of flight: sanctity, liberation and open skies. At the same time, while in the passages devoted to the flight, D'Annunzio celebrates the power of the body-machine and the achievements of the Centaur when freed from his earthly and animalistic component, in the image of the garden the author describes the body of Isabella, a body that is 'bestial': *pesava sul ritmo de' suoi ginocchi la divina bestialità del suo corpo*' (D'Annunzio *Forse Che Si* 546). Therefore, in the images of the garden D'Annunzio infuses both the metaphor of the decadent artist and the bestial component of the human constitution, which is responsible for the tyranny of instincts.

In conclusion, in *Forse Che Forse Che No* D'Annunzio has completed his process of adhesion to the *vita activa*, which is characterized not only by his political engagement but also by his involvement with modernization and its products. In fact, this novel shares the theme of the transformation of the body into a machine with Futurist works such as Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *Ma farka*, which was written and published in the same years. Furthermore, D'Annunzio's interest in technological modernization has also an exquisitely political aspect, inasmuch as in these years the rapid industrialization of Italy and the investments in engineering research coincided with the wave of imperialistic expansionism characterizing the culture of the early twentieth century. Indeed, the same political groups

nurturing Italy's colonialistic aspirations were also the active supporters of technological modernization (Tessari 48).

As I have previously mentioned, for D'Annunzio the choice of the *vita activa* represents an alternative solution to the same problem that in his previous works was resolved thanks to contemplation, that is, the problem of desire. In other words, in the eighteen-eighties and nineties D'Annunzio had posited that aesthetic contemplation could resolve the problem of desire and the rupture of the self between its different components, which he saw as affecting a whole generation of artists, as he explains in the three articles entitled "La Morale di Emilio Zola" (1893): '*Ora appunto la mancanza di equilibrio è la principale caratteristica dell'uomo moderno....tutti senza saperlo, senza volerlo, abbiamo dentro di noi una gran quantità di elementi di origine opposta*' (D'Annunzio *Scritti Giornalistici* II, 232). In *Forse Che Sì Forse Che No* desire is sublimated into action thanks to the disembodiment of individual effected by the machine. However, the ascetic traits characterizing the representation of such a disembodiment reveal that the choice of the *vita activa* is still made within the contextual framework of the *vita contemplativa*.

Conclusions.

This dissertation has investigated the significance of the categories of action and contemplation in the context of the debate on the intellectual's engagement, which took place in Italy at the turn of the twentieth century. These categories helped define the position of the man of letters in the increasingly modern society of post-unification Italy and his or her relationship with the political establishment of the new Italian nation. Through an analysis of the concepts of action and contemplation, my account fleshes out the sociopolitical and cultural changes occurring at that crucial time in the history of Italy and how they affected the idea of humanistic knowledge and its importance in society.

This study set out to determine firstly in which way the ideals of the *vita activa* and *contemplativa* shaped the way intellectuals perceived their role in modern Italy and the nature and function of art and literature. Secondly, I argued that the reason the intellectuals restaged the ancient dilemma of action and contemplation was that these concepts enabled them to view the issue of their political engagement from a multifaceted perspective, inasmuch as within this framework the problem had ethical and aesthetic implications. Lastly, I have shown that an investigation of how intellectuals, in particular Giovanni Pascoli and Gabriele D'Annunzio, interpreted the categories of action and contemplation reveals their similarities, rather than their opposition, thus opening a new perspective on the relationship between fin de siècle Aestheticism and early twentieth century nationalism. Returning now to the hypotheses stated at the beginning, it is now possible to state that the critical categories of action and contemplation provide an invaluable perspective for understanding the problem of the function of art and literature in the context of the cultural and political turmoil in *fin de siècle* Italy and of the seemingly opposing ideological trends followed by intellectuals seeking to carve out a role for themselves in a rapidly transforming world.

It has emerged from our analysis that the ethical and aesthetic idea of contemplation is evoked to express the intellectuals' disavowal of the political situation of post-unification Italy and to overcome of their disappointment at their exclusion from the public sphere after their involvement during the *Risorgimento*. The idea of setting art above historical contingencies, to make it a source of morality and inner contentment, helped intellectuals respond to the Benjaminian 'loss of the aura' that involved the humanities with the advent of modernity and with the overthrowing of speculative disciplines in favor of technical and scientific knowledge. This is particularly clear in the debate in the pages of *Il Marzocco*, in which intellectuals stated the superiority of art for art's sake over the trend of engaged literature that had dominated the *Risorgimento*, as a way to criticize the political class that vested itself with the glory of the Risorgimental fathers. Furthermore, the moral function of the contemplation of beauty characterizes Pascoli's reflection on the nature of poetry, as it appears from his interpretation of the figure of Dante and his treatment of the metaphor of the garden as the locus of art. Both Dante's abandonment of the *vita activa* in Pascoli's exegesis of the *Divine Comedy* and the garden as a space of withdrawal from public life reveal that the poets has set a higher goal for himself, that of being the new priest of modernity.

When *fin de siècle* aesthetes conjured up the concept of contemplation they opposed what they saw as the pragmatic and therefore 'active' mentality of the ruling class with its ideological background of propagandistic literature and Positivistic worldview. However, at the turn of the century the ideal of political engagement was revived and action became the key word of the counter-discourse to decadence. Indeed, artists and writers criticized the sterility and inactivity of the generation of aesthetes immediately preceding theirs and embraced the *vita activa* as a way to engage with modernity and to avoid being relegated to the past. One can see this ideological change in D'Annunzio's critique to decadence, which he

inscribes in the image of the garden of *Le Vergini delle Rocce*. In addition, D'Annunzio's philosophy of action tackles the reality of modernization while at the same time drawing from the Risorgimental tradition of the poet as the spiritual guide of the nation. This is visible on the one hand in his proto-Futuristic insertion of the machine into his lyrical and prose production, and on the other in his revival of the Risorgimental cult of Dante, who becomes for him the model of the *poeta vate*.

As I have previously mentioned, the way Italian intellectuals restaged the dilemma of action and contemplation shows that these two categories not only oppose but also intersect. Indeed, the new philosophy of action is steeped in the idea of beauty, as within this context poets and artists could still find a role for themselves. The idea of Italy as embodying the idea of Beauty merged the Neoplatonic and Schopenhauerean background of the aesthetes with the emerging cult of the nation, which was based on myths and symbols. The cases of Giovanni Pascoli and Gabriele D'Annunzio are clear examples of the overlap between the life of action and the life of contemplation. Indeed, as I have shown, Pascoli's withdrawal from the public sphere and his disavowal of technological modernization are predicated on the assumption that the poet has another, more useful goal, that of teaching morality through the sensory pleasures of poetry and through the spiritual fulfillment that the contemplation of beauty can instill in the soul. On the other hand, as Alfredo Bonadeo also suggested in his study *D'Annunzio and The Great War*, the Abruzzese poet's enthusiastic adoption of a political and even military career expresses his will to extinguish his ever-present desire on the ascetic premises of contemplation. Indeed, for D'Annunzio merging with technology is one of the ways of solving the dilemma of the ruptured self caused by modernity, which previously he had attempted to recompose through the contemplation of beauty and and asceticism.

The investigation of the sociopolitical and cultural situation of *fin de siècle* Italy conducted through the lenses of action and contemplation adds to a growing body of literature dealing with Italy as a laboratory for the political movements of modernity, in particular modern nationalism. My contribution firstly highlights the continuity and disruption between Risorgimental and modern nationalism through the historical relationship between intellectuals and political institutions. Secondly, my dissertation enhances our understanding of the relationship between the two 'crowns' of *fin de siècle* Italy, Pascoli and D'Annunzio and the contemporary discourses on decadence, modernization, politics and science, thus placing my research on the same path as Rosa Maria Truglio, Jared Becker and Barbara Spackman.

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