

KNOWLEDGE THROUGH THINGS: A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON CREPUSCULAR AND  
FUTURIST AVANT-GARDE

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## **ABSTRACT**

Danila Cannamela: Knowledge Through Things: A New Perspective on Crepuscular and Futurist Avant-Garde  
(Under the direction of Prof. Federico Luisetti)

This dissertation provides a first systematic English-language study on Crepuscularism. Challenging the common critical understanding that reduces Crepuscularism to a pre-modern poetic regression while identifying Futurism with Marinetti's hymn to technological progress, I argue that these two Avant-Gardes share similar reactions to the modern bourgeois paradigm, both at a cognitive and ontological level.

Overcoming the ghettoization of Crepuscularism as a provincial Italian phenomenon, the first chapter maps the historical and cultural setting of this movement, illustrating its intersection with philosophy, visual arts, and mysticism. In the subsequent chapter, I borrow from Bruno Latour's thesis that modernity encounters its limits in dealing with cross-category relationships such as nature-culture and human-thing. Crepuscularism expresses its Avant-Garde role by ushering in an anti-modern discourse on hybridization that Futurism inherits and further develops. The third chapter explores how the two currents envision cognition as immediate intuition and participative immersion that entails also ignorance, understood as maximum freedom of knowing. In chapter four, I enter the field of "thing theory", using categories introduced by Bill Brown and Remo Bodei, to analyze how the Crepuscular and Futurist "poetics of things" express a pan-animism of matter. Chapter five adopts key-concepts from Julia

Kristeva's essay *Powers of Horrors*, to explore how Crepuscularism and Futurism open the boundaries of the ego to the realm of things, experimenting with new anthropotecnics, characterized by fluid constructions of body and gender. I dedicate the last section to the analysis of relational cognition, understood as a form of uncodified communication, such as Crepuscular silence and Futurist noise.

To Michael and Felicità

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

I would like to thank Professor Luisetti, my adviser, for his insightful academic guidance and enthusiasm for this research project. I am also very grateful to Professor Villa and Professor Farinelli of Università Cattolica di Milano, for sharing their deep knowledge of Crepuscularism with me. A sincere thanks goes also to Professor Novelli, my Bachelors and Masters adviser, who inspired my interest in early twentieth-century poetry. I would like to extend my gratitude to the members of my committee for their fruitful comments on my work. In addition, I wish to thank UNC Graduate School for awarding the off-campus Fellowship that gave me the possibility to conduct on-site research in Italian libraries and archives. Finally, I would like to thank Michael, my family, and Feli for their infinite support during these years of study.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>ABSTRACT</b> .....  | <b>III</b> |
| <b>ACKNOWLEDGMENT</b> .....  | <b>VI</b>  |
| <b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b> .....   | <b>VII</b> |
| <b>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</b> .....   | <b>X</b>   |
| <b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....  | <b>1</b>   |
| <b>CHAPTER ONE LOCATING CREPUSCULAR POETRY IN THE EARLY<br/>TWENTIETH-CENTURY ITALIAN SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT</b> ..... | <b>14</b>  |
| 1.1 Introduction.....  | 14         |
| 1.2 Crepuscularism in its Socio-historical Context: The Giolittian Era Rising of Nationalistic<br>Ferment .....        | 16         |
| 1.3 The Cultural Ground of Crepuscularism: Latin Renaissance and Neo-Idealism.....                                     | 24         |
| 1.4 Crepuscularism: What is Behind a “Critical Label”? .....   | 34         |
| 1.5 Sergio Corazzini and Guido Gozzano: The Two Souls of Crepuscularism .....  | 44         |
| 1.6 From Crepuscular Retreat to the Crepuscular Openness .....   | 55         |
| <b>CHAPTER TWO A MATTER OF THINGS: MODERNITY, MODERNISM, AVANT-<br/>GARDE</b> .....                                    | <b>61</b>  |
| 2.1 Introduction.....  | 61         |
| 2.2 The Crepuscular Dissidence Against Modernity .....   | 62         |
| 2.3 Italian Modernism as Modern Religious Crisis .....   | 72         |
| 2.4 To What Extent Was Crepuscularism Modernist? .....   | 76         |
| 2.5 Crepuscularism and Futurism(s): Anti-Positivist Resounding Voices .....  | 85         |

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| 2.6 “Shouted” Versus “Quiet” Avant-Garde .....   | 98         |
| <b>CHAPTER THREE AVANT-GARDE INTUITION AND ANTIRATIONAL KNOWLEDGE .....</b>  | <b>110</b> |
| 3.1 Introduction.....  | 110        |
| 3.2 Defining the Notion of Knowledge in Crepuscular and Futurist Works .....   | 111        |
| 3.3 Passive and Active Creative Destructions .....   | 128        |
| 3.4 Ignorance Is the New Knowledge.....  | 141        |
| <b>CHAPTER FOUR KNOWING THROUGH “THINGS”: MATERIALITY IN THE CREPUSCULAR AND FUTURIST UNIVERSE.....</b>                | <b>157</b> |
| 4.1 Introduction.....  | 157        |
| 4.2 From the Poetics of Nature to the Poetics of Things: Crepuscular and Futurist Material Landscapes.....             | 158        |
| 4.3 The Invasion of Useless and Dysfunctional Objects .....  | 167        |
| 4.4 Representing Things: Deceptive Realism and Subtle Animism.....   | 183        |
| 4.5 The Agency of Modern Objects: From Subject to <i>Subjected</i> .....   | 193        |
| <b>CHAPTER FIVE EXPLORING NEW EGOS: SELF-KNOWLEDGE AS BIO-SOCIAL INVESTIGATION.....</b>                                | <b>202</b> |
| 5.1 Introduction.....  | 202        |
| 5.2 Overcoming the “Flesh and Soul” Individual: Towards New Modes of the Ego.....                                      | 203        |
| 5.3 Being a Sick, Deformed, and Masked Body.....   | 214        |
| 5.4 Chameleonic and Fluid Genders.....   | 227        |
| 5.5 Ego as a Traumatic Social Construction: Anti-Promethean Protagonists, Regressive Figures, and Modern Hermits ..... | 236        |
| <b>CHAPTER SIX KNOWING “THE OTHER”: FUTURIST AND CREPUSCULAR RELATIONAL COGNITION.....</b>                             | <b>249</b> |
| 6.1 Introduction.....  | 249        |
| 6.2 Fighting the Limits of Bourgeois Relational Knowledge: Empty Dialogues and “Passatist” Love .....                  | 250        |



|  |            |
|--|------------|
| 6.3 Noisy Communication .....  | 269        |
| 6.4 Relationality and Cognition of “The Other” as Silence and Synthesis..... | 277        |
| <b>CONCLUSION .....</b>  | <b>286</b> |
| <b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>  | <b>298</b> |

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

*F*<sup>1</sup> Rainey, Lawrence, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman, eds. *Futurism. An Anthology*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2009.

*M* Marinetti, Fausto Tommaso. *Mafarka il Futurista*. Ed. Luigi Ballerini. Milano: Mondadori, 2003.

*MF* Marinetti, Fausto Tommaso. *Mafarka the futurist: An African novel*. Trans. Carol Diethe and Steve Cox. London: Middlesex University Press, 1998.

*MDF* Birolli, Viviana, ed. *Manifesti del Futurismo*. Milano: Abscondita, 2008.

*O* Corazzini, Sergio. *Opere poesie e prose*. Ed. Angela Ida Villa. Pisa, Roma: Istituti Poligrafici Editoriali, 1999.

*P* Govoni, Corrado. *Poesie (1903-1958)*. Ed. Gino Tellini. Milano: Mondadori, 2000.

*PF* Altomare Libero, et al. *Poeti futuristi*. Milano: Edizioni di Poesia, 1912.

*SE*<sup>2</sup> Corazzini, Sergio. *Sunday evening. Selected Poems of Sergio Corazzini*. Trans. Michael Palma. Stony Brook, New York: Gradiva, 1977.

*TIF* Marinetti, Fausto Tommaso. *Teoria e invenzione futurista*. Ed. Luciano De Maria. Milano: Mondadori, 1968.

*TM* Gozzano, Guido. *The man I pretend to be: The Colloquies and selected poems of Guido Gozzano*. Ed. And Trans. Michael Palma. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981.

*TLP* Moretti, Marino. *Tutte le poesie*. Milano: Mondadori, 1966.

*TP* Gozzano, Guido. *Tutte le poesie*. Ed. Andrea Rocca. Milano: Mondadori, 1980.

*TTP* Palazzeschi, Aldo. *Tutte le poesie*. Ed. Adele Dei. Milano: Mondadori, 2002.

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<sup>1</sup> I mostly adopted this source for the translation of Futurist texts. For some occurrences, I preferred to use *Futurist Manifestos*, a translated collection edited by Umbro Apollonio. In a few cases, I found, though, that the consulted translations did not reflect the ambiguity of the Italian original. Only in those cases and for Futurist works that have not been translated in English, translation is mine.

<sup>2</sup> For the Crepuscular works of Corazzini and Gozzano, I generally used Michael Palma's translation. However, since only a small selection of Crepuscular texts have been translated in English, when not otherwise specified, translation is mine.

UGA Vallini, Carlo. *Un giorno e altre poesie*. Ed. Edoardo Sanguineti. Torino: Einaudi,  
1967.

## INTRODUCTION

When thinking of Italian Avant-Garde, Futurism immediately comes to mind, with its bold and aggressive manifestos. The figure of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in particular remains impressed upon the collective imaginary as a symbol of loud provocation and violent attack against tradition, during an epoch that saw radical changes in the socio-economic system, such as the consolidation of a centralized political apparatus, the rise of the bourgeoisie, and the spread of the Technological Revolution. Yet, being now ensconced in history as “historical Avant-Garde” after more than a century, Futurism has lost its original, iconoclastic verve, becoming instead a museum piece that stands out as the early twentieth-century flagship of techno-modernity and speed. Ironically, the Founding manifesto, calling for the demolition of “museums-cemeteries”, was recently inscribed on the wall of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, where it was placed for the occasion of the first American exhibition entirely dedicated to the movement. With similar irony, some of the most representative works of Futurist artists, such as Balla, Boccioni, and Carrà, are permanently housed at the Museo del Novecento in Milan.

The process of aesthetic canonization of Futurism testifies to the fact that this movement has been officially put on a pedestal as *the* Italian Avant-Garde, and identified with its hymn of hyper-modernity and technological progress. This work targets these two assumptions and questions the benchmark function of the iconic 1909 manifesto, published on the front page of *Le Figaro*, as the starting point of an intellectual revolution. Moving from this inquiry, this study turns the position of the critical mainstream on Futurism into a query: Does Marinetti’s founding

proclamation actually coincide with the beginning of Italian Avant-Garde? Debunking this myth, my research illustrates the limits of simplistic generalizations like “Futurism equals historical Italian Avant-Garde”, and its corollary: “Marinetti equals Futurism.” It would be more accurate to consider the 1909 declaration of rupture with tradition as the tip of the iceberg, hiding a subterranean counter-culture that the Crepuscular “outlaw” poets had been ushering in since the beginning of the twentieth century. Criticizing the identification of the Avant-Garde with a certain “booming Futurism”, this dissertation introduces Crepuscularism, an early-twentieth century literary movement, to the Anglophone audience, presenting its pioneering, pre-Futurist function. This research also illustrates the cultural richness of this movement, showing the connections of Crepuscularism with all the Futurist branches and with broader cultural phenomena—from French Symbolism to American Transcendentalism and beyond to Nietzsche’s reflections on the role of the “irrational.”

In the Italian context, Crepuscular poetry has been interpreted for decades as the provincial singing of malady, literary disempowerment, and the sweet boredom of Sunday afternoons, whose main “fathers” were two poets affected by tuberculosis: Sergio Corazzini and Guido Gozzano. Two major critics, Luciano Anceschi and Edoardo Sanguineti, re-evaluated this movement in the 1960s, highlighting its role in overthrowing the hegemonic aesthetic and civic models of poetry, embodied by Gabriele D’Annunzio and Giovanni Pascoli. In response to this literary tradition, Crepuscularism created a poetics of the object that deeply influenced the prolific “Crepuscular line” of twentieth-century poetry, from Eugenio Montale on. Later critics, like Giuseppe Farinelli and, more recently, Angela Ida Villa, have analyzed Crepuscularism in depth, providing a complete overview of this articulated movement and analyzing, for the first time, its philosophical roots and mystical components. Yet, it seems that these two trends of

research—the Marxist approach and the more “existential” one—have never found a point of intersection. Thus, the literary class struggle, as testified to by the subaltern “poetics of things” of Crepuscularism, has remained separated from the cultural horizon of spiritual search, which in those years gave birth to the religious movement of Modernism and countless exoteric trends. Overseas, the Crepuscular phenomenon has been virtually ignored. In America, Corazzini and Gozzano are barely mentioned in literary surveys and only a small selection of Crepuscular texts are available in English translation. Even more recent and all-encompassing approaches, like Luca Somigli’s openness to the global debate on Modernism, do not recognize the trailblazing function of Crepuscularism. My proposal is to reach a wider and more cross-disciplinary understanding of this early twentieth-century trend, both within the framework of the Avant-Garde movement and beyond the boundaries of Italian literature.

The relegation of Crepuscular poetry to the ghetto of minor literature has generated a domino effect, creating other misconceptions of this phenomenon. The niche-approach has isolated Crepuscularism, drawing an artificial dividing line with Futurism. This popularized view sets the two movements in opposition, as diametrically divergent reactions to the rise of modernity: On one side, the Crepuscular melancholic regression to an unrecoverable past; on the other, the Futurist dynamic sprint towards an enhanced “modernity-to-come.” Fostering this dichotomistic perspective, critics have never highlighted the “proto-Futurist” side of Crepuscularism, to emphasize the separation of the two movements as complementary responses to an epoch of change. Literature has also tried to reject or minimize the dual Crepuscular-Futurist identity of various authors, such as Aldo Palazzeschi and Corrado Govoni, denying that their deep affiliation to both movements is indeed the root of the idiosyncrasy of their writing. It is also virtually unknown that artists like Gino Severini, Giacomo Balla, and Umberto Boccioni

were related to Corazzini's circle in Rome before their adhesion to Marinetti's Avant-Garde. All these overlooked clues undermine the critical position that Crepuscularism occupies a subaltern role to Futurism, and suggests alternative interpretative paths. In this respect, the goal of my research is to read Crepuscularism as *the other* face of Italian Avant-Garde, and explain Futurism in tandem with this antecedent movement.

Analyzing these two cultural phenomena in parallel, this dissertation overcomes a further popularized view of the Avant-Garde, namely its identification with linguistic and stylistic iconoclasm. A nodal point, which literary studies have often ignored, is that both the Crepuscular and Futurist aesthetics are cultural weapons against the socio-political apparatus of modernity. The reconstruction of the universe that the Avant-Garde inaugurates entails a challenge to the rational and moral order of late nineteenth-century Positivism. The modern order, as Bruno Latour highlighted, is based on the illusory attempt to regulate and structure the world using binary oppositions—culture versus nature, human versus nonhuman. Borrowing from this position, I propose a rereading of Crepuscularism and Futurism as similar reactions to the paradigm of modernity, which find their common denominator in breaking the confines between the perceiving subject and the perceived object. This rupture implies two fundamental consequences: At an epistemological level, it rejects the rational implications of the *cogito ergo sum*; at an ontological level, it allows for the proliferation of hybrids of quasi-human and quasi-things that reshape the notion “of being” itself. Under the guise of self-debased and humble poetry, Crepuscularism hides a message of destabilization of the bourgeois order, undermining the role of the Kantian rational and ethical *ego-cataloguer*. Futurism later magnifies this understated polemic, translating the subtle, Crepuscular sabotage into an explosive, regenerating destruction of the twentieth-century cultural universe.

To widen the horizons of Italian culture, this research adopts an eclectic methodological approach. Broadly speaking, my contribution is set in the framework of Modernist and Avant-Garde studies, which provides an open platform and a fertile terrain for debate, rather than a set of rigid critical categories. An essential component of this work has been to enter into dialogue with relevant theories in the field—such as those of Renato Poggioli, Peter Bürger, Astradur Eysteinnsson, and Marshall Berman—to argue the *sui generis* Avant-Garde status of Crepuscularism. Unlike Futurism, the characteristic trait of the Crepuscular experience cannot be found in a radical distortion of language. Crepuscularism acts in a less obvious manner, performing a subversive cracking of the egotism that, in different ways, informs Romantic and Modernist literary personas. This turning point anticipates the Futurist demolition of the “I” in literature and opens the ground for a deeper reflection on the human function in a world enhanced by technology. Crepuscular poetry raises questions still relevant in our society: What is the agency of material and virtual objects in human life? What does it mean to know the surrounding things? What are the boundaries between being a living thing and being inert matter?

Considering Crepuscularism and Futurism from the perspective of these unsolved questions allows an intertwining of the literary dimensions of their attacks against tradition, with broader inquiries that span other fields of knowledge, such as epistemology, gender studies, thing theory, and eco-criticism. This research investigates the Avant-Garde as a 360-degree phenomenon that ties Italian literature with a transnational and cross-disciplinary discourse. Crepuscularism and Futurism make the cognitive gap visible in a human ego, who presumes to be the sovereign of ordinary reality, while being nothing more than a thing among things. Recalling the title of an essay by Martin Heidegger, *What is a thing?* is indeed one of the key-



questions that both movements formulate. Crepuscularism and Futurism preempt some reflections of the German philosopher on the impossibility of trapping “things” under universal laws, as “things” hang in the balance of being a given, and being that given in a particular time and space. This Copernican material revolution sets the ground for a redefinition of a modern universe in which the proliferation of technology and quotidian “little things” has overcome cognitive and ontological anthropocentrism for good. Avant-Garde foresees debates that are essential in the twentieth- and twentieth-first-century reflection on the role of man as the maker of objects, but also on the human dependency on things, for and beyond their usability. Adopting the latest contribution of Remo Bodei’s philosophical inquiry on the “life of things” and Bill Brown’s application of Thing Theory to literary texts, one of the focuses of my research is on showing how Crepuscularism and Futurism substitute the traditional poetics of the ego for the poetics of things. This transition involves a redefinition of the body and delineates a discourse that extends to the field of gender studies. Conceiving the body as a malleable, living thing leads these two Avant-Gardes to revise the standardized bourgeois ethos. They introduce transgressive models of prosthetic bodies and neutral genders that put into crisis any traditional vision of corporeality. Being ahead of their times, Crepuscularism and Futurism originate inquiries that continue to be central in the later twentieth-century debates on individuality and gender identity, relevant to the application of the theories of Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva, Félix Guattari, Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick, to name a few.

In an attempt to overcome the isolation of Crepuscularism as a provincial Italian phenomenon, I devote my first chapter to map the cultural setting of this movement, illustrating its intersection with philosophy, visual arts, and mysticism. Although Crepuscularism is a decentralized movement, it is possible to geographically locate two main souls, the mystic and the

ironic “schools”, respectively in Rome and Turin. Reconstructing the socio-cultural history of these groups offers a more detailed portrait of Italy in the Belle Époque: a recently unified country, still suffering from political “gattopardismo”; undergoing socio-economic changes, during Giolitti’s administration; while facing a process of industrialization accelerated by the Great War. The political panorama mirrors a cultural context, characterized by opposing trends: the rising of a fervid nationalistic spirit and the fascination with exoticism and xenophilia. In this magmatic panorama, the Crepuscular poetic circles shared anti-Positivist positions, fostering their interest in irrational thought, Nietzsche’s philosophy, and exotericism. They developed a poetic line that, while exhibiting a prosaic and humble tone, undermined the literary canon and parodied both the classic magniloquence of D’Annunzio and the domestic sentiment of Pascoli. Through their focus on ordinary life and quotidian objects, Crepuscular poetry expresses the most visible but ineffable aspects of a life that remains mysterious, while being placed daily in front of our eyes. Crepuscularism marks the need for a poetics of things that acknowledges the materiality of the object, and yet sublimates it, highlighting the symbolic *je ne sais quoi* embedded in each “little thing.” In bringing attention to the enigmatic dimension of materiality, this movement initiates one of the most prolific lineages of Italian poetry, which can be extended from Montale to poets such as Caproni, Giudici, and Raboni, and beyond to the hyper-realism of 1990’s Neo-Avant-Garde phenomena.

In the second chapter, I examine where Crepuscularism and Futurism stand in relation to the categories of modernity, Modernism, and Avant-Garde. My analysis is based on the criticism that modernity, as a socio-political apparatus, encounters its limits in dealing with cross-category relationships that hybridize the human and nonhuman. On one hand, the modern paradigm tries to keep sharply separated these two spheres; on the other, it cannot help but to allow for the

intertwining of these two categories, generating phenomena—such as pressing environmental issues and their political impact—in which nature and culture, objects and human action, interplay. Although Crepuscularism does not fit in the “canonical” identikit of the Avant-Garde, the movement assumes an experimental role, ushering in an anti-modern discourse that fosters a master narrative of hybridization. In this respect, Crepuscularism reveals, even more than Futurism, a hidden trait of Avant-Garde culture: The schism with nineteenth-century literature and visual arts constitutes more of a cognitive and ontological question than a linguistic issue. The Crepuscular “degradation” of man to a thing, which recurs in both Corazzini and Gozzano’s work, might not be a degradation at all. Rather, it expresses a dramatic break with the Modernist literary model that, although being innovative, still maintains a steady grip on the ego. For Modernism, the order of “things” can be (or has to be) altered and confused, but the ontological separation between ego and reality remains in place. Crepuscularism and Futurism deviate from this compromising model that does not completely remove the privileged position of the *rex cogitans* on the *rex extensa*. They both explore, in depth, the question of what “thingness” means, proposing an anti-modern and post-human view of materiality as “vibrant matter”—borrowing Jane Bennett’s definition—and as an original, pre-linguistic site of knowledge. Via this path, Crepuscularism introduces questions about materiality that will be central to Futurism’s dynamic vitalism and other Avant-Garde (material) experiences, such as Dadaism and Cubism.

Moving from the premise that Crepuscularism and Futurism attack the notions of monolithic being and knowing, the third chapter investigates how this reaction shapes new cognitive approaches. The rejection of the human *cogito* as a unifying classifier and rational interpreter of phenomena signifies, for these two Avant-Gardes, the denial of the traditional idea

of cognition as an act of thinking. Crepuscularism and Futurism launch analogous challenges, teasing their audience with this provocation: Can we conceive knowledge as a journey into an irrational dimension that may even arrive at its presumed negation, ignorance? If reason is a limiting agent, entering the realm of ignorance opens the way for a potentially unlimited cognition. This articulated reflection finds a synthesis in Ardengo Soffici's borderline proposal. Ideally, fusing the Crepuscular skeptic and ironic tone with the more aggressive Futurist and ludic attitudes, he affirms:

Allontaniamo da ogni ergotismo, il badalucco della ragione, abbandoniamoci solo alla frenesia delle invenzioni provocatrici di meraviglia. Divertiamoci in questo splendore di festa sgargiante. Il significato occulto di queste buffonate sarà il substrato stesso metafisico, scettico (scetticismo attivo) e ironico dell'opera futurista. (*Primi principi di un'estetica futurista* 54)<sup>3</sup>

The statement contains, *in nuce*, the innovative perspective of Avant-Garde cognition.

Both Crepuscularism and Futurism test the possibilities of obtaining a knowledge of “the beyond”, while dismissing the traditional models of rational inquiry.

In chapter four, I illustrate the criticism both Avant-Gardes direct at the traditional view of things as objects of knowledge, dominated by an *ego-connoisseur*. The purpose of the chapter is to investigate how the Crepuscular and Futurist “poetics of things” revolutionize the concept of inorganic, inert matter. At the peak of the technological revolution, these two movements look, almost simultaneously, at the invasion of objects that *make* human life—from shiny new machines to forgotten old antiquities, life runs on things. They recognize the power that the nonhuman realm exercises on the human and seems to revert to ancient hylozoistic positions, according to which “the thing” is the ontological *arche*—the irreducible essence of being that

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<sup>3</sup> Let's get away from any intoxication, the teasing of reason, let's abandon ourselves only to the excitement of the provocative inventions of wonder. Let's enjoy ourselves in this splendor of a vivid party. The occult meaning of these buffooneries will be the metaphysical, skeptic (active skepticism) and ironic substratum of the Futurist work.

pervades everything. The Crepuscular and Futurist rediscovery of things nourishes an anti-modern spirit that sets the notion of participative matter in opposition to the modern paradigm of the *homo faber*, supreme maker and ruler of materiality. In expanding this fundamental inquiry, my analysis ranges from the account of objects that actually enter into the Crepuscular and Futurist poetic universe, to the cognitive role that things play in creating bridges with the *material whole*, where human life is invisibly merged.

Chapter five explores the bodily space as a locus of self-investigation and the place of encounter for cognition and thingness. Conducting a journey that links psychoanalytical theories on developmental stages to current debates on gender identity, Crepuscularism and Futurism search for alternative corporeal experiences that allow for the self to deny the limiting cage of the body in terms of perception and self-perception. The goal of the Avant-Garde is to overcome the “flesh-and-soul” model focused on the framing function of a harmonic, beautiful, and gendered body. What if the body were a porous connecting tissue exchanging energy with “the outside” and experiencing a continuous process of metamorphosis? What if the body were an assemblage of scattered organic and inorganic pieces that could be infinitely recombined or reproduced? Foreseeing the frontiers of genetic engineering and bio-ethics, Crepuscularism and Futurism push the limits of the body, fusing its parts into mechanical gears or dismembering it into Kristevan “abject” pulp and fluids. Sick, deformed, and hybrid bodies stand out in Avant-Garde works as the only possible way to experience a liminal cognitive terrain, where the human is almost forbidden and virtually trespasses into the non-being, glimpsing *another life*. In a similar way, both movements overcome the determinative boundaries of sex and gender, offering ephobic or androgynous (anti)models. The questions raised by Crepuscularism and Futurism in the early twentieth century foretell later critical contributions, like Mario Perniola’s reflection on

things, as bearers of alternative forms of sex appeal and sexual satisfaction beyond the traditional concept of intercourse. The fascination with the inorganic triggers the Crepuscular and Futurist exploration and re-appropriation of the body as a “feeling thing” in communion with the universe, rather than as a socially negotiated corporeality, determined by the strict division between masculinity and femininity. At a social level, the popularized notion of the disempowered, Crepuscular female figures or the Futurist contempt for women open alternative views, expressing a strong polemic message against the fixed gendered roles, such as the female mother-caretaker model and the iconic *femme fatale*.

In the sixth chapter, I examine how Crepuscularism and Futurism face the relational side of the cognitive process. If knowledge is always knowledge of something—of “the other” (thing)—what kind of relationality derives from this encounter? The two movements explore a series of missed possibilities—from conversations to love relationships—for entering into contact with “the other.” In delineating a “relational identikit”, the two movements distance themselves from the traditional dialogic “you”, in search of a totalizing entity that can express a less limiting form of interaction. The issue for the Avant-Garde is surpassing a “you” that is just as empty and static, like the nineteenth-century hero-puppets. Facing this challenge leads both Crepuscularism and Futurism towards a “pan-other”, in front of whom even the notion of ego becomes meaningless. The encounter with alterity becomes a moment of primal recognition, approached in similar ways by Corazzini’s regressive crying, Gozzano’s infantile lullabies, and the return of Marinetti to his “maternal ditch.” The two movements launch the provocative idea that otherness implies the thrilling, yet frightening, experience of perceiving a filling void or an empty plenitude that recalls mystical experiences of rapture and self-annihilation into the divine. In this respect, Crepuscularism shows an extraordinary, but overlooked, similarity with the

reflections of the *Pattuglia Azzurra* (Azure Patrol), which represents the most exoteric branch of Futurism. Fusing aesthetics with exotericism, Crepuscularism and Futurism venture on extreme paths of immediate, non-verbal communication, which nullify the common idea of human relationality to foster experimental languages and media, such as Crepuscular silence and Futurist noise.

In presenting this research to my audience, my general goal is to provide the readers with a more complete and more problematic understanding of the Avant-Garde. The main proposition is to relativize the assumption that the season of Italian Avant-Garde coincides with the so-called “heroic phase” of Futurism, roughly from 1909 to 1918. Cultural ferment was already in the air; when Marinetti launched his attack against the *status quo*, the Roman Crepuscular circle had already fought its own battles against stagnating culture, although the premature death of Corazzini left the project at the embryonic level of the unanswered question: “Are we going to win?” that the Crepuscular leader asked in a letter to Marino Moretti.

Crepuscularism offers an alternative, “quiet” voice to the cultural revolution associated with Futurism, conducting a clandestine erosion of the Positivist mindset and dominant paradigms. This research investigates Crepuscularism as the tiptoeing *other Avant-Garde* and advances the critical hypothesis that the Crepuscular movement can be visualized as a web connecting, at a thematic and stylistic level, the Italian Avant-Garde phenomenon with disparate experiences—from Symbolism to Transcendentalism and beyond, to the narrative and quotidian tone of later twentieth-century poetry. Rereading Crepuscularism as the beginning of a lineage, rather than as a closed and local experience, enriches the contemporary knowledge of the intellectual panorama of the Belle Époque. Moreover, it links the literary horizon of the past to broader cultural questions of the present, illustrating the relevance of the Avant-Garde in relation

to current phenomena—the problematic polymorphism of materiality, the notion of post-humanism, the encounter with diversity, and the environmental implications of the trade-off between *techne* and nature.

Through their poetics at the breaking point, Crepuscularism and Futurism bring to light the unconfessed discomfort of modern bourgeois society in its vain attempt to conceal any doubts and uncertainties with the pretense of knowing a world made of “little things” and “big machines.” The open challenge is, thus, to propose a new path of inquiry for the Avant-Garde: to analyze this phenomenon not as a pure aesthetic insurgency, but as a deep questioning of the experience of being human.



## Chapter One

### Locating Crepuscular Poetry in the Early Twentieth-Century Italian Socio-cultural Context

Dal dolce stil nuovo non era avvenuto,  
nella lirica italiana, un movimento così importante.  
(Palazzeschi, Introduzione, *Vita e poesia di Sergio Corazzini*)<sup>4</sup>

#### 1.1 Introduction

When introducing *Crepuscolarismo* [Crepuscularism], an Italian cultural phenomenon developed in the first quarter of the twentieth century, it is necessary to start by saying that the movement acquired an artificial, unified identity primarily through the work of the critics. In its original form, the “movement” was neither organized into an out-and-out poetic school, nor formalized by an actual manifesto. It is more appropriate to find in Crepuscularism an exemplary case of fluid poetics that, borrowing from Alberto Asor Rosa’s definition, gave birth to scattered “vortici periferici” [peripheral vortices] sustaining precarious relations between themselves and seeking a gravitational center that they could never reach nor maintain (1271). Testifying to a typical characteristic of Italian intellectuals of the early twentieth century, Crepuscular literature was affected by a geo-cultural rarefaction in small circles flourishing across the peninsula, focused around three main urban areas—Rome, Turin, and later Florence—and two major figures: Sergio Corazzini, father of the Mystical Crepuscularism, and Guido Gozzano, spokesman of what Marziano Guglielminetti named “scuola dell’ironia” [school of irony]

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<sup>4</sup> Since Dolce Stil Novo there has never been such an important movement, in Italian poetry.

(*Gozzano e i vicini* 93). Other key-personalities of the group are Marino Moretti, Fausto Maria Martini, Carlo Vallini, and Carlo Chiaves, to mention a few. Among the pseudo-Crepuscular are Corrado Govoni and Aldo Palazzeschi—initially affiliated with Corazzini’s circle and then involved with Futurism.

In its brief but intense poetic experience, Crepuscularism illuminated various aspects of this motley period, while setting trends that later influenced the development of modern Italian literature. Although the movement exhibited a certain detachment from its temporal coordinates, a closer reading reveals deep connections with the atmosphere at the turn of the century, spanning socio-economic dynamics, philosophical thought, literary influences, and artistic phenomena that characterized Western culture on both sides of the Atlantic. This chapter provides an overview of the socio-historical and cultural context of Crepuscularism, delineating the key traits of the movement, its major personalities, and the main features of their poetics. Going beyond the standard interpretations of Crepuscular poetry, the last section proposes a reading of this intellectual phenomenon as a symptomatic expression of the epistemological crisis of nineteenth-century bourgeois *weltanschauung*. Undoubtedly, Crepuscular poetry can be linked to the reaction against both Positivist theories and Romantic ideals, yet its message does not linger on a passive acceptance of a lost “faith.” While undergoing an epoch of the “twilights of gods”, Crepuscularism discovers and explores new possible routes that the fall of nineteenth-century certainties opened.

## 1.2 Crepuscularism in its Socio-historical Context: The Giolittian Era Rising of Nationalistic Ferment

The Crepuscular movement spans a chronological arch that ideally goes from the early years of the twentieth century—when a few poems by Corazzini began to appear in local newspapers and Govoni had already published *Le fiale* (1903)—to the Great War—which none of the major personalities of the movement survived.<sup>5</sup> This was a very controversial epoch, rich in binary oppositions that lead to major tensions. It was the time of French xenophilia and orientalism, but also the season of the rise of nationalistic sentiments; it was the epoch of mysticism but also of neo-paganism and magic; it was the epoch of bourgeois ascent, but also the decline of its most solid nineteenth-century cultural faiths—the blind trust in the Romantic ideals and the absolute confidence in the *truth* of science. All these contrasts reflect themselves in the golden image of the Belle Époque: a period of peace, prosperity, and technological innovations that ended with World War I.

This apparent balance incubating latent conflicts is also explained by the socio-political situation of Italy at the time. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Italian Kingdom was a relatively young state, unified in 1861 under the Savoy House and annexing Rome in 1870. After the first decades of political precariousness and struggles with regional heterogeneity and resistance by old local powers, in 1903 Italy began a new political era, guided by Giovanni Giolitti.<sup>6</sup> Although he ruled over Italian politics until the early 1920s, the years before War

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<sup>5</sup> Corazzini died in 1907, Guido Gozzano in 1916, Nino Oxilia in 1918, Carlo Chiaves in 1919, and Carlo Vallini in 1920. The figures who continued their literary activity after the war, such as Aldo Palazzeschi, Marino Moretti, and Govoni, developed different poetic veins.

<sup>6</sup> Giolitti's first government lasted only a year, from 1892 to 1893, due to the economic scandal of the Banca Romana and the opposition of powerful Italian industrialists and landlords. After his first experience as Prime Minister, Giolitti had another four terms, from 1903 to 1921.

World I were later labeled the “Giolittian era”, as this political strategist directly and indirectly shaped and controlled Italian socio-political life during the pre-war epoch. Giolitti gained his power through a masterly game of shifting alliances across right and left coalitions (the so-called *trasformismo*), and established a quasi-liberal proto-welfare state. The Giolitti government maintained a neutral position on the disagreements between workers and industry, while promoting laws to regulate working conditions, nationalizing railways and insurance, passing financial reforms, extending the right to vote for all male citizens, and adopting measures in favor of the south. Yet, during his long career, Italian intellectuals harshly criticized Giolitti for his corruption, political patronage, and opportunistic strategy of shifting alliances.<sup>7</sup> In an article from 1909, Giuseppe Prezzolini, the director of the journal *La voce*, touched on two main points of the failure of democracy, under Giolitti’s system: “it ended by producing [...] a reaction on the conservative side called nationalism, and on the opposing side called revolutionary socialism” (De Grand 161-62).

A milestone of Giolitti’s foreign policies was the colonial campaign in Libya, in 1911. The Italian socio-political situation had created an extremely fertile ground for war that could channel diverse positions into an imperialistic dream: the nationalistic revanchism for the “unredeemed lands”,<sup>8</sup> the economic need for new markets, industrial growth, and the violent

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<sup>7</sup> In 1910 Gaetano Salvemini accused Giolitti of being a dictator, involved with the local “malavita” [gangland], in the pamphlet *Il ministro della malavita*. Salvemini also suggested that only “a radical break with the Giolittian system and the introduction of sweeping and substantial reform would lay the foundation for a democratic Italy” (De Grand 161). Similarly, the journal *La Voce* showed an anti-Giolittian spirit, and its editor, Giovanni Prezzolini declared that “The present democracy [...] represents by now only the decline of all standards...all the interests of the most greedy and aggressive are served” (De Grand 161).

<sup>8</sup> After the third war of independence against the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Trentino and Venezia-Giulia, as well as the town of Fiume and the region of Dalmatia, remained under the Austro-Hungarian control, but were reclaimed as Italian territories.

Sorelian syndicalist fringe. In this respect, the journal *Il Regno*, founded by Enrico Corradini in 1903, exerted a strong force in shaping common opinion toward an aggressive nationalist ideology. In particular, Corradini was able to create a shared goal for nationalists and socialists, popularizing the myth of a proletarian Italy, founded on an “imperialismo operaio” [working class imperialism]. The majority of the intellectual class supported the colonial plan:

D’Annunzio emphasized the possibility of rescuing Italy from its miserable condition as “museo e affittacamere dell’Europa spendereccia” [museum and landlady of the spendthrift Europe], the Futurists in their Founding manifesto celebrated war as the sole cleanser of the world and as a form of “regenerative violence” (Berghaus, “Violence, War, Revolution” 33), and even Giovanni Pascoli, who was a socialist sympathizing with the anarchists, hailed war as a heroic enterprise for Italian emigrants in his famous speech “La grande proletaria si è mossa” [The great proletarian stirs].

In 1912 the war ended with a new Italian colonial dominion; the campaign contributed to fueling nationalistic tendencies, shifting the political focus from domestic to foreign policies. Furthermore, it broke the dialogue between Giolitti and the socialist reformers, while the revolutionary left gained power. For this reason, Giolitti changed his alliances, looking to the right wing and the Catholics. His government, which had been strongly secular and anticlerical, made a move toward the Unione Elettorale Cattolica Italiana, and eventually came to an agreement with them in 1913 (which went down in Italian history as “patto Gentiloni”).<sup>9</sup> The

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<sup>9</sup> The Catholics also economically supported the Libyan war through the Catholic-led Banco di Roma, which later represented the Italian interests in Libya (De Grand 170). Two years later, through the agreement with Gentiloni, Giolitti linked the Catholic electors, which had recently freed from the political ban of the *Non expedit!*, to his liberal party.

colonial wars, along with the Balkan crisis that emerged in 1912, exacerbated nationalist and anti-Austrian sentiments, creating the pre-conditions for World War I.

From a socio-economic point of view, during the first decade of the twentieth century, Italy faced a general period of economic growth, industrialization, and social improvement, but also saw an explosion of political contrasts and social issues, such as workers' rights and immigration. More than a real economic miracle, the industrial expansion of 1896-1908, with the development of hydro-electricity, represented a first, remarkable spurt of growth. Nevertheless, as Martin Clark remarks: "Italy in 1914 was still '*Italietta*,' an agricultural economy, and her most important industry was still cotton; it was the First World War that provided the real stimulus to the engineering industries" (145). To support this argument, it is worth recalling that in the first quarter of twentieth century, about 150,000 emigrants left Italy each year, and about 1.5 million Italians never moved back (Clark 198-99).

Although Crepuscularism is generally regarded as a movement not engaged with social issues, the actual experience of immigration provided the core topic for Fausto Maria Martini's novel *Si sbarca a New York*. The book offers an original literary re-elaboration of the loss of the charismatic figure of Corazzini, while developing a *bildungsroman* that marks a passage from youth to adulthood, but also an escape from the Italian "death" to the American "new life." In its main plot, the novel is an account of the immigration experience in the United States of three young Crepuscular writers—the first person narrator Martini, along with Gino Calza-Bini and Alfredo Tusti. Narrating immigration from a peculiar perspective—the sudden passage from a bourgeois existence in Rome to a working class life in New York City—Martini describes, in this passage, his fall from "traduttore del grande Mallarmé" [translator of the great Mallarmé]

(193) to housekeeper in a filthy hostel, responsible for the daily grocery shopping at the market of Hester:

Là, tra i banchi della verdure e delle frutta, tra il vociare dei venditori e degli acquirenti, ciascuno con la sua sporta al braccio come me, mi ripagavo dell'umiliante fatica, durata fino allora, di passare la granata su e giù per le stanze insudiciate, taluna delle quali era ridotta in condizioni da sembrare una latrina pubblica da periferia di paese; e un cesto colmo di aranci o di lattuga, se appena io posassi le mani su quell'oro o quel verde facendo le viste di cercare la merce migliore, bastava a compensarmi dell'atmosfera graveolente che stagnava nelle camere, dove tre o quattro uomini avevano dormito insieme in quelle affocate notti d'estate, e al mattino mi restava come rappresa alla carne. (234)<sup>10</sup>

The novel expresses the feeling that somewhere, even before reaching Coney Island, the privileged time of youth and poetry has sped up into the consumable time of goods and things—into that American notion that “*Time is money*”,<sup>11</sup> as Gino reminds Fausto, who is slowly returning home from the local market (235).

The rise of bourgeois economic and bio-political power, which the immigration experience made even more visible, was becoming evident in the Italian context, gradually substituting the distinction of the ancient regime between landed aristocracy and farm hands with the contrast between bourgeois ownerships and proletarian labor. Once the high expectations of the Risorgimento had vanished, the shift in socio-political agency translated, at a literary level, into the passage from the servitude to a well-known patron to the servitude to an unknown. Provocatively unmasking D'annunzio's factory of premium bourgeois myth and his bio-aesthetic marketing strategy of the “vita inimitabile” [inimitable life], Crepuscular authors call for a

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<sup>10</sup> There, among the market stands of fruits and vegetables, the shouting of vendors and customers, each one with his bag on his arm like me, I was repaying myself for the humiliating effort, which had lasted until then, of sweeping up and down through the filthy rooms, some of them reduced to such conditions as to look like a public outhouse in the outskirts of the village; and a basket filled with oranges and lettuce, only putting my hands on that golden or that green, pretending to look for the best products, was enough to compensate for the graveolent atmosphere that was stagnating in the rooms, where three or four men had slept close to each other in those burning hot nights, and in the morning it remained thick on my skin.

<sup>11</sup> In English in the text.

provocatively average, petty-bourgeois, imitable life, ruled by mechanical routine. In this respect, Crepuscular works reveal a *sui generis* veristic side, focused on the “travestimento” [travesty]—to borrow a term by Edoardo Sanguineti—of changing D’Annunzio’s unique personas into ordinary people, who candidly unveil the illusory mechanism behind a set of sellable mythologems.<sup>12</sup>

Guido Gozzano’s poetry and Nino Oxilia’s theatre portray stereotypical characters that stand for the Dannunzian canon of inimitability, reverting to a varied inventory of clones—former noble men now decayed, the avid parvenus, average petty-bourgeois people, middle-class intellectuals without any particular talent, servants, maids, and seamstresses. Bourgeois life, in its conformity and boredom, rises as one of the polemic targets of Crepuscular poetry, but is also the cultural terrain of the Crepuscular poets, who were, themselves, bourgeois.<sup>13</sup>

From a socio-linguistic perspective, the plain style of Crepuscularism mirrors the unsatisfied and unquiet petty bourgeois that did not find full recognition in the recently formed Italian State, and reflects the changes in the concrete use of the Italian national language (Tedesco 58). As a bourgeois intellectual movement, this cultural phenomenon engages, on one side, in a passive revolution against an elitist conception of literature, as the space of aesthetic purity and artifice. On the other side, it attacks the narrow-minded bourgeois judgment and

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<sup>12</sup> On Sanguineti’s theatrical practice of the “travestimento”, see *Sanguineti e il teatro della scrittura. La pratica del travestimento da Dante a Dürer* by Niva Lorenzini (2011), and *Parola e travestimento nella poetica teatrale di Edoardo Sanguineti* by Mariafrancesca Venturo (2007).

<sup>13</sup> Both Corazzini and Gozzano, for instance, came from well-off families that experienced economic crises. Corazzini’s father was employed by the Registry of the Papal Datary (Dataria Pontificia), and then responsible for bookkeeping of “Casa del Drago.” He later opened a tobacco, wine, and perfume shop, but experienced economic problems. For this reason, Corazzini had to leave school and find a job at an insurance company (“La Prussiana”). Gozzano’s family was from the rich bourgeois of Turin. Yet, after the death of his father, the family faced economic difficulties, and in 1909 they had to sell some properties, like the Villa in Agliè Canavese, to find a cheaper accommodation.



interpretation of reality, without finding a real escape from that bourgeoisie obsessed and consumed by “il microbo della virtù” [the microbe of virtue] (Chiaves 138). The conflict, which Chiaves described in the poem “Maldicenze” [Malicious gossips], relies on criticizing the hypocritical nature of bourgeois relationships, while remaining an insider. The poetic I condemns the gossipy *entourage*, but addresses those people as friends (“E i miei cari amici borghesi, / pettegoli e senza mercé” [And my bourgeois friends, / gossip and merciless] (138). He is one of them, although they believe he is a “cattivo soggetto” [a bad person] and he has to laugh at them, exhibiting intellectual superiority: “Ma Carlo ne ride, non crede...” [But Carlo laughs at it, doesn’t believe...] (139). In some respects, the Crepuscular social polemic vein prefigures Alberto Moravia’s censorious position toward the bourgeois world, a world that he was able to criticize from within in his prose works, but could never abandon or fully betray. As Gozzano frankly admits in a letter to Amalia Guglielminetti:

Io mi sento ogni giorno più borghese e primitivo. Forse è il metodo di vita e l’ambiente al quale sono condannato da tanti mesi (e sarò per tanti ancora) forse è un naturale fenomeno inesplicabile della mia sostanza psichica, il fatto si è che mi sento diventare piccolo come il ricevitore del registro in un borgo di montagna. E sia pure se «questo deve essere». (*Lettere d’amore* 61)<sup>14</sup>

Crepuscularism did not show direct political engagement, even though some members of the Roman Crepuscular circle, such as Alberto Tarchiani and Antonello Caprino, later assumed political posts.<sup>15</sup> By and large, Crepusculars never explicitly alluded to pressing socio-political

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<sup>14</sup> I feel more bourgeois and primitive every day. Maybe it is the way of life and the environment in which I have been condemned for many months (and I will be for many more), maybe it is a natural phenomenon of my psychical substance; the fact is that I feel I am becoming the collector of the registrar’s office in a village in the mountain. Whatever...if “this has to be.”

<sup>15</sup> Tarchiani was journalist and earnest anti-fascist. He exercised a strong anti-fascist action, especially during War World II. He became part of the first government, after the war, and later started a diplomatic career, being Italian ambassador in the United States. Caprino was editor for the newspaper *L’idea Nazionale*; he took part in the Nationalist movement, which in 1923 merged in the Fascist party. He was an active member in Fascist politics and, after World War II, was imprisoned for his affiliation with Mussolini’s party.

issues, such as the question of national identity. This detachment was a common response of many early twentieth-century intellectuals to express the feeling that the political tradition was a rhetorical script from the past and that the relationship between poetry and national identity had been broken (Menci 55). Crepuscular poetry develops in an epoch in which the political inspiration of Risorgimento and the Romantic idealization of the nation had exhausted its mythopoeic function, insomuch that Gozzano, in “Pioggia d’Agosto” [August rain] crams the three main pillars of the nineteenth-century political engagement into the space of a verse, as words empty of value: “la Patria, Dio, l’umanità? Parole/ che i retori t’han fatto nauseose!” [Humanity, God, Country? Rhetoricians / have mouthed the words so much they’ve made them / nauseous!] (*TP* 215, *TM* 161).

A similar perspective appears in Moretti’s “Ada Kaleh”, whose title comes from an isle in the middle of the Danube, on the border of Hungary, Romania, and Serbia. Ada Kaleh is a geopolitical non-place, forgotten even in the Treaty of Berlin.<sup>16</sup> Yet this tiny piece of land, in which anybody is free to rest in peace without needing patriotic glory, provides the poet with a place for reflection on the notion of Country: “La Patria! Chi è costei? Ha un cuore, un volto? / Sa quel che sono? Sa quello che fui?” [The Nation! Who is she? Has she a heart, a face? / Does she know who I am? Does she know who I was?”] (*TLP* 157). Devaluing the political tradition constitutes a further rebellion against D’Annunzio’s imperialistic Roman rhetoric of the great Latin spirit, as

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<sup>16</sup> Moretti refers to the treatise of Berlin in a note on the poem. In this treatise, stipulated in 1878 as a revision of the Treaty of San Stefano, the major European political authorities agreed on new sovereignties and areas of political influence in the Balkan Peninsula. In particular, the treaty established the principalities of Romania, Serbia, and Montenegro, and recognized the independency of Bulgaria, although under the control of the Ottoman Empire rather than of Russia.

Palazzeschi argued going back to the cause of World War I and adducing it to the *Vate*'s bragging:<sup>17</sup>

La Guerra d'Italia come fu fatta non è altro che una spaconata dannunziana senza senso, senza abilità e senza profitto. E ve l'ha guarnita per tutti i suoi giorni, infiorata, incoccardata, di inni e canzone, orazioni, invocazioni, imprecazioni, inaugurazioni, commemorazioni e avventure d'ogni specie; sulla terra e per l'aria sotto e sopra l'acqua, come se si fosse trattato di una grande partita di ginnastica... (Menci 58)<sup>18</sup>

### 1.3 The Cultural Ground of Crepuscularism: Latin Renaissance and Neo-Idealism

It would be inaccurate to assume that the political detachment of the languid and melancholic Crepuscular poetry was born from a “pacifist” approach towards international affairs. When the interventionist debate became more urgent, the Crepuscular Roman circle had already faded, as Corazzini had died long before the start of the Great War, and Gozzano was exempted due to tuberculosis, but expressed sympathetic feelings for the military enterprise. As Angela Villa highlights, the Roman Crepuscular circles had shown a nationalist sentiment, teeming with the Italo-centric and pan-Latin positions, diffused through periodicals, such as *Il Regno* and *Cronache della Civiltà Elleno-Latina* (*Il crepuscolarismo* 35). Corazzini's nationalism emerges in an early poem, written in Roman vernacular, published in the satiric newspaper *Il Marforio* in 1904. The text, entitled “La geografia” [Geography], is divided into three sections (Italy, France, and Spain) and begins singing the praises of Italy in a jocular, blustering tone—“L'Italia? Ma l'Italia, sor Cremente, / è la mejo nazione che ce sia!” [Italy? But

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<sup>17</sup> Gabriele D'Annunzio was named “il Vate” [the prophet-poet] for his admirable ability to interpret and express the sensibility of his epoch.

<sup>18</sup> The Italian war, as they waged it, was nothing more than a meaningless, unskilled, and unprofitable boasting of D'Annunzio. And he garnished it for as long as it lasted, adorned, decorated it for you, with hymns, odes, and songs, prayers, invocations, imprecations, inaugurations, commemorations, and adventures of any sort; on earth and by air, under and above water, as if it were a great gymnastic game...

Italy, sir Clemente, / is the best nation that exists] (*O* 220). The poem proceeds, comparing the beauty of Rome to Paris, humiliating France in the comparison, and concludes by mocking Spain for its brutal tradition of the *corrida*. Although the text is a facetious satire, it reveals a substratum of nationalistic rivalries that were preparing the atmosphere for the later rise of Fascism. In the same year, Corazzini returns to the topic in a serious tone, with the article “Il mal Franzese” [The French disease], published in *Roma Flamma* in July 1904. In this piece, Corazzini laments the lack of Italian literary patriotism, attacking, in particular, the “French-mania” that was spreading in Italy and causing a massive diffusion of French books, to the detriment of Italian works. He defines Italy as the “Nazione-Albergo” [Hotel-Nation] and the “Nazione-Cocotte” [Prostitute-Nation] that hosts and gives herself to everybody without showing soul or spirit (*O* 248). The Roman poet blames not only the Italian authors, but also their public, which blindly followed editorial marketing trends; thus, Italian books required a French brand to be sold, as if they were shoes or clothes (*O* 248). He vigorously concludes his article, calling for a “santa e giusta ribellione” [holy and righteous rebellion] that would allow authors to realize their literary hopes, despite the idiotic and nasty Italian public (*O* 249). In an article from 1913, Gozzano expresses similar nationalistic feelings, confessing his conversion to loving Italy. That Italian nation that he had labeled as an empty exercise of rhetoric becomes, some years later, far more cordial: “Io ho trovato la Patria, una cosa come un'altra, alla quale voler bene” [I found the Country, a thing like another to love].<sup>19</sup> Yet, the position is not ironic, as it is supported by other reflections from Gozzano’s journey to India, collected in the posthumous work *Viaggio verso la*

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<sup>19</sup> Cfr. Menci, cit., p. 58. The quotation is from an article published on *La Stampa* in 1913.

*cuna del mondo*.<sup>20</sup> Persuaded of the superiority of Western culture, the Turinese author cannot help but justify European colonialism as a process of civilization for savage people. Gozzano was in favor of white dominance, based on economic inequality and racial hierarchy, blaming, in the article “Jim Crow”, published in *Il Momento* in 1912, the romantic and sentimental movement that wanted to raise the black brain to the level of the white one, despite being late in the evolution of the spirit (*Poesie e Prose* 1127, 1129). As Roberto Carnero states, Gozzano’s journeys in India express a fundamental cultural incompatibility between this “true child of our modern times” and a culture that, although intriguing as a dream, could not be understood in terms of a real experience (*Gozzano esotico* 116-17).

It is hard to reconcile Corazzini’s harsh criticism of French xenophilia and Gozzano’s orientalism with the interest in foreign cultures that shaped their works, from the passion for Symbolist literature to the fascination with Buddhism and Eastern philosophy. Corazzini’s critique sounds hypocritical, considering that he was a voracious reader of French literature and never concealed his interest in French works. Other authors, like Gozzano, Moretti and Palazzeschi, denied their affiliation with the Francophone literary world; nevertheless, it is highly unlikely they had not been exposed to or influenced by Symbolism.<sup>21</sup> In a controversial way, French culture represents, for Corazzini and the Crepusculars in general, a magnetic muse

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<sup>20</sup> The chronology and the itinerary of the book does not reflect the actual journey of Gozzano. On this topic, see Roberto Carnero, *Gozzano esotico*, cit.

<sup>21</sup> Iole Soldateschi refers that Moretti removed any references to Maurice Maeterlinck and Francis Jammes from *Via Laura*; Gozzano, whereas, kept his admiration for French authors secret (7). In his introduction to Donini’s biography of Corazzini, Palazzeschi declared: “io non conoscevo quei poeti nemmeno per sentito dire” [I didn’t know those poets, I hadn’t even heard of them] (xiii). However, Corazzini himself saw the Crepuscular vein of Palazzeschi in the works of Maeterlinck and Jammes, stating that: “*I cavalli bianchi* di Aldo Palazzeschi ci fanno conoscere un dolce e triste amante di quella poesia che Maeterlinck e Jammes ha per vivide stelle” [*I cavalli bianchi* by Aldo Palazzeschi let us know a sweet and sad lover of that poetry that has Maeterlinck and Jammes as its vivid stars] (O 259).

with whom they could not help to fall shamefully in love. In their collective imaginary, France becomes the place where “il sentimento estetico è molto più giovine e acuto del nostro”, [the aesthetic sentiment is much younger and more acute than ours] (*O* 249) and where being “abnormal” is actually a sign of artistic vocation, as Corazzini argues while defending his friend, Corrado Govoni, in the name of Stéphane Mallarmé. Like the Parisian author, Govoni rises as the model of foolishness and poetic genius, and Corazzini does not even try to defend him from the accusation of a mental disorder that some critics had proposed. According to his Roman friend, Govoni was mentally abnormal, otherwise he would have been a grocer instead of a poet (“Per un poeta”, *O* 249).

Sharing this French artistic sensibility as a common base, Crepuscularism is a close—though geographically dislocated—“interpretative community”, based on similar cultural constructions and values, such as a new musicality of verse; an anti-celebratory and anti-realistic function of poetry; an elusive, mysterious, and analogic *correspondance* between signified and signifier; an ironic detachment from the ephemeral and fleeting modern life; and a fascination with settings that can express a symbiotic and empathic relationship between the I and the landscape.

The reputation of Crepusculars as xenophile poets finds further confirmation in a review by Moretti of Palazzeschi’s poetic collection *La lanterna*. This article from 1907, published in *Faro Romagnolo*, gathers the Crepuscular poets under the label of “poeti esotici” [exotic poets], remarking that their artistic aspirational models do not find any connection with Italian tradition. In light of this affirmation, it is difficult to reconcile Moretti’s xenophilic figure of Corazzini and the later “exotic Gozzano” of Carnero’s essay with the criticisms that the two authors addressed

to foreign culture.<sup>22</sup> A way to circumvent this impasse is recognizing this love-hate attitude toward French and “exotic” cultures as a common trait among early twentieth-century intellectuals. For the Crepusculars, this conflicting relationship with Francophone models hides a question of authenticity that Moretti faces in his portrait of Gozzano. Undoubtedly, the Piedmontese poet heavily borrowed from French Symbolists, most prominently Francis Jammes, as well as from Italians, like D’Annunzio, Lorenzo Stecchetti, and even Petrarch. Yet, according to Moretti, what Gozzano owes these models is nothing, compared to what he owes himself “perché Gozzano è ben gozzaniano” [because Gozzano is very Gozzanian indeed] (*Tutti i ricordi* 1026).

This tautological argument touches on the kernel of a theoretical issue that is particularly relevant for the Crepusculars: Is literary creation ever an actual invention, or is it rather inevitably a creative patchwork? Paolo Valesio answers this apparent puzzle, affirming that Francophone influences, and even bilingualism, actually represent the emblem of the complex historical climate of the early twentieth century (150). D’Annunzio himself, who was regarded as the highest model of Italian poetry, was “the first writer to use Italian/French bilingualism as a real political weapon, leading the whole movement for Italian intervention side by side with France in World War I” (Valesio, 161 n5). Italian intellectuals suffered from a subaltern position in relation to French linguistic “imperialism”, but found innovative, expressive means to launch an Italian counter-discourse. Being the official lingua franca of the epoch, French played a central intellectual role in spreading cultural ideas globally, acting as an ideological network of new thoughts without Italian’s linguistic risk of isolation. For instance, Corazzini acquired a

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<sup>22</sup> It is worth highlighting the fact that Carnero’s title is purposefully controversial, as Gozzano’s exoticism shows both an attraction and a deep resistance to foreign cultures.

broad European and North American autodidact education through French mediation. It is highly likely that the Roman poet learned of the philosophical position of Ralph Waldo Emerson through the essays of the Belgian Maurice Maeterlinck. Corazzini probably also became acquainted with Walt Whitman's poetry through Whitman's success in France, which came much earlier than his Italian notoriety.<sup>23</sup> "The good gray poet", as the Crepuscular writer addresses him, had captured Corazzini's attention for his impetuous epic lyrics, and rebellion against metrical rules and rhyme schemes. Thus, it is not paradoxical that, within the span of a couple of months, Corazzini passes from criticizing the French literary fashion to defending Govoni via a comparison to Mallarmé; or that Gozzano copies and translates many Symbolist texts in his private notebooks, but rushes to hide them from other people to keep his French literary sin private.<sup>24</sup> This dichotomist approach between nationalistic pride and fascination with foreign models was embedded in other fields of culture, constituting an international, cultural thread in the early twentieth century.

The binary contraposition that shapes the turn-of-the-century Western *weltanschauung* sets in opposition two main trends, which, in the Italian context, can be identified as Neo-Idealistic Mysticism and Latin Renaissance. These broad paradigms occupy the extreme poles of a common anti-Positivist reaction: Nordic Spiritualism, on one side, and the proud rediscovery of

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<sup>23</sup> About Whitman's first introduction to Italian readers, see McCain, Rea. "Walt Whitman in Italy." *Italica*, 20.1 (Mar. 1943). 4-16. According to the article "the presentation of Walt Whitman to Italy in the last third of the nineteenth century was a very different enterprise from the boosting of a new author in America of the twentieth century" (4). Whitman's reception in Italy was mediated by the French journal *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, which in 1872 hosted an article on the American poet entitled "Un poète Américain." This article by Theresa Bentzon first captured the attention of some Italian intellectuals (Ragusa-Moleti and Nencioni, who wrote about Whitman on *Il fanfulla della domenica*). Nevertheless, the figure of Whitman became popular in Italy only after 1882, thanks to an article by Angelo De Gubernatis, who claimed to have "discovered" the American writer.

<sup>24</sup> Marino Moretti narrates this episode in *Tutti i ricordi* (1026-27).



Latin inheritance, on the other. Both cultural trends were born from the crisis of the Positivist system; while the former drew from a Nordic sensibility, focused on the dark side of a mysterious and sick nature, the latter emphasized an energetic and *superomistico* [typical of D'Annunzio's *superuomo*] approach towards life.

Contrary to most historiographical generalizations, these movements did not suddenly erase Positivism, but rather coexisted with its residue, creating a magmatic and frantic context, in which antinomian thoughts survived and influenced each other reciprocally. The decline of Positivism generated hybrid positions, such as naturalistic Positivism and “Ideal-Positivism”, more than it delineated clear ideological barriers (Garin 1271-74). In literature, the assimilation of the remains of *fin de siècle* thought into the irrational wave of the early twentieth century emerges, for instance, in the peculiar interest in materiality that Crepuscularism, and subsequently Futurism, maintained. For Crepuscularism, the Positivist legacy shines through a Lilliputian realism that lingers, with fussiness, on objects and meaningless details of home decor, domestic spaces, and pieces of clothing. The Positivist matrix of Futurism shows through in the invasive presence of technology and mechanics, even though re-elaborated from a vitalistic viewpoint. In both movements, though, “things” are not simply inert materiality but participate in the universal living breath of matter, suggesting a total change in the cognition of the subject and in the understanding of the traditional relationality between the ego and the other.

In order to contextualize the irrational literary and cultural trends of the twentieth century, it is fundamental to link them to the dominant positions of Benedetto Croce's philosophy. Croce opposed Positivistic materialism with a holistic notion of History, conceived as the manifestation of the human spirit. From a literary perspective, Croce exerted a preeminent role, setting a critical aesthetic canon based on the supremacy of creative intuition over theoretical reflection.

In his *Estetica*, the philosopher defined art as a form of the spirit, tightly connected with individual creativity and understood as pure lyricism. Croce found the “master of poetic form” in Giosué Carducci, who “came to represent the bard of a high poetry characterized simultaneously by the phrase of beauty and the passion for national ideals and glory” (Somigli and Moroni 17). The Italian idealist did not appreciate D’Annunzio’s emphatic sensuality, and generally rejected Decadentism and the Avant-Garde as phenomena that could not express their artistic content in balanced and harmonious ways. Thus, it is possible to affirm that the mine of the early twentieth-century Avant-Gardes, to which Crepuscularism is strictly tied, developed in a cultural underworld delimited, on one side, by a fading Positivism and, on the other, by the pleas of anti-rational thought that Croce taxed with the etiquette of “false idealism” or “irrational idealism” (*Rigoglio di cultura* 256).

The hectic activity of journals, such as *Leonardo* (1903), *Il Regno* (1903), and *Hermes* (1904), represented a central diffuser of the irrational movements at all levels of culture. In Italy, the spread of the new spiritualistic trends passed through both high profile and more popular, common publications that, without any critical perspective or depth, contributed to a radical change in taste among very different groups of writers and readers. This multifarious audience did not often share a common platform, but rather was often unified by common hatreds, as Giuseppe Prezzolini explains in the first issue of *Leonardo*, listing the main targets of the journal: “Positivism, erudition, verist art, historical method, materialism, bourgeois and collectivist supporters of democracy” (“Alle sorgenti dello spirito” [To the sources of the spirit]). Animated by a similar anti-Positivist spirit, early twentieth-century Italian journals syncretically fused a wide variety of positions that shaped the theoretical frameworks of the pioneering Crepuscular poetry and the later Futurist Avant-Garde. In this intellectual melting pot, some

thoughts stand out particularly: Pragmatism—in a revised version from the original thoughts of the American thinkers William James and Charles Peirce—Henri Bergson’s Intuitionism, Idealism, irrational Spiritualism, Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy, magic, and esotericism. Among these philosophical and theoretical influences, Nietzsche played a binding role in early twentieth-century culture, inasmuch that, in “La signorina Felicita” [Felicity], Gozzano ironizes how meditating on Nietzsche was *the* distinction between intellectuals and illiterates:

*Tu non fai versi. Tagli le camicie  
per tuo padre. Hai fatto la seconda  
classe, t’han detto che la Terra è tonda,  
ma tu non credi.... E non mediti Nietzsche.... (TP 178)*<sup>25</sup>

The German philosopher exercised an extraordinary influence on both the Latin Renaissance and the neo-mystic wave, as both movements found fertile ground in antithetic readings and cultural exploitation of his thought. The Latin Renaissance tended to interpret Nietzsche’s writings from the perspective of the *superuomo* —Dannunzio’s literary interpretation of the *übermensch*—, and celebrated the German philosopher as a champion of the will of power, understood as a will for dominance of superior nations over inferior people, whereas the Mystics generally oriented their reading of Nietzsche’s works—and especially *Thus spoke Zarathustra*—toward a modern asceticism. Thus, “their Nietzsche” embodied the figure of a spiritual master that Corazzini paired with Saint Francis, in his epigraph to the poetic prose “Esortazione al fratello” [Exhortation to the brother].

A cosmopolitan spirit characterized many spiritualistic and irrational trends, as they developed under a general re-discovery of Idealism and mysticism, which originated in France,

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<sup>25</sup> You don’t make verse. You mend your father’s britches. / You went to the local school for a year or two, / they told you that the World is round, but you / don’t believe it... You don’t read those books of / Nietzsche’s... (TM 88)

England, and Germany. These thoughts incorporated many culturally related, but sometimes incompatible, experiences, such as Symbolism, neo-Catholicism, Western and Eastern neo-spiritualism, mystic aesthetics, and occult practices. Overall, as Villa highlights, the idealistic wave promoted “un risveglio spiritualistico contro il materialismo” [a spiritualistic reawakening against materialism] and a return to subjects that Positivism had previously eschewed: interest in divine or occult aspects, and attention to introspection, emotions, and moral questions (*Neoidealismo e Rinascenza Latina* 30). Conversely, the Latin Renaissance had nationalistic roots and encompassed various cultural phenomena that found their common denominator in the reaction to the somberness of Decadentism and Symbolism. Through the activity of journals such as *Hermes*, *Il Marzocco*, *L’Anthologie-Revue*, *Il Regno*, *La Rassegna Latina*, the movement advocated for the project of recovering the “authentic, autochthonous ‘Latin cultural values’” and reconnecting “with a tradition from which Symbolism represented a deviation” (Somigli, *The mirror of modernity* 331). The Latin Renaissance also called for a restoration of the social function of intellectuals, promoting an organic and eclectic figure capable of recomposing and re-elaborating the cultural gaps and the antinomian relations of fields such as “science and art, analysis and synthesis, sentiment and thought” (Somigli 331). In Italy, this movement generally called for a pan-Latin rescue of the “Latin genius” from the Northern European cultural invasion, fueling nationalistic sentiment, colonial ambition, and exacerbation of latent hostilities with foreign countries.

#### 1.4 Crepuscularism: What is Behind a “Critical Label”?

Providing a new reading of Crepuscularism implies challenging the weight of a critical label that has unified groups of intellectuals, geographically dislocated and not always connected, under a common poetic mantle. The arbitrary nature of the Crepuscular etiquette stands out even more, taking into account that it is highly likely that the two main figures of the movement, Corazzini and Gozzano, never knew each other, although they were idealistically linked through an indirect intellectual network. As Moretti stated, looking back at his literary journey from 1905 to 1915, the assigned nomenclature of Crepuscularism did not benefit any of the interested parties and was only an “-ism”, which easily spread (*Dal 1905 al 1915, TLP* 1127). Yet, how did this manufactured label establish itself? And what made “The Crepusculars” crepuscular? The history goes back to September 10, 1910, when Antonio Borgese’s article “Poesia Crepuscolare” [Crepuscular poetry] appeared in the newspaper *La Stampa*. Borgese connected the poetic lineage of authors like Chiaves, Martini, and Moretti to the twilight of the glorious Italian literary tradition, which began with Giuseppe Parini’s civic-mindedness and ended with D’Annunzio’s sensuality (150).<sup>26</sup> The critic also compared the Crepusculars to gleaners, who came after the finest harvest of Italian poetry, and could only linger at the margin of the raped field, collecting the leftovers of Romanticism and the dross of Classicism (159). According to Borgese, these poets have nothing left but to sing airy-fairy fantasies; nevertheless, they still feel an authentic need to sing and soothe themselves with “quisquillie, [...] fiori di carta od [...] cose buffe e malinconiche ch’erano di moda cinquanta o settant’anni fa” [trifles, paper

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<sup>26</sup> Borgese’s article was a review of three collections of poetry published in 1910 and exemplary of the Crepuscular poetics: *Sogno e ironia* [Dream and irony] by Chiaves, *Poesie provinciali* [Provincial poems] by Martini, and *Poesie scritte col lapis* [Poems written with the pencil] by Moretti.

flowers, or funny or melancholic things that were fashionable fifty or seventy years ago] (159). Although Borgese did not fully grasp the ideological shift of the poetic movement that he had named, he was able to identify two fundamental traits of the Crepuscular lineage: the recovery of a world of buried things, and the substitution for a poetry of strong ideals and passions with the singing of a cognitive *non se quoi*—“la torpida e limacciosa malinconia di non avere nulla da dire e da fare” [the torpid and muddy melancholy of having nothing to say and to do] (150).

After Borgese’s milestone article, the adjective Crepuscular imposed itself to unify early twentieth-century poetic groups that shared similar stylistic and thematic choices, oriented toward prosaicness, lexical reduction, and a general preference for provincial settings and melancholic tones. Only later studies have recognized two main sub-branches within the movement: the mystic Crepuscularism—rife with unorthodox religious images—was based in Rome and had Sergio Corazzini as its “founder father”, whereas the so-called “school of irony”—characterized by its merciless representation of bourgeois conformism and banality—was active in Turin and found its spokesman in Guido Gozzano. Overall, Crepuscular groups endorsed anti-Positivistic positions, fostering an irrational orientation that ran through the entire movement in different forms, such as hedonistic Franciscanism, Animism, Neo-Idealism, and Spiritualism. The Crepusculars also shared a similar anti-academic attitude, and an opposition to any form of cerebral and aureate poetry. Crepuscular poetry was conscious of its cognitive challenges and unafraid to exhibit its powerless voice, eschewing the poetic tradition and its laurel crown. The high poetic ideal is debased to the rank of *clownerie*, or to a leisure or amateur activity, like gardening, while the poet can even be compared to a blind donkey, and the Muse is degraded to the role of prostitute and beggar:

*...il poeta che si mostra*

*su un cavallo della giostra*

*sembra il pagliaccio che egli è  
(Moretti, “La giostra”, TLP 51)<sup>27</sup>*

*Io non sono un giardiniere e nemmeno forse un poeta  
(Moretti, “Il giardino dei frutti”, TLP 235)<sup>28</sup>*

*Come l’asino cieco noi, poeti.  
Giriamo intorno al nostro cuore, chimere  
traendo perché il mondo si disseti.  
(Oxilia, “Gli orti”, Poesie 103)<sup>29</sup>*

*O dolce musa, non sei stanca  
d’essere segnata a dito per le vie  
come una prostituta...?  
(Govoni, “Alla musa”, P 97)<sup>30</sup>*

The denial of the poetic function and the declaration of having nothing meaningful to say are also common Crepuscular strategies. In this case, the Crepusculars’ polemic target is the celebrative poetic mainstream that, from Classicism to Romanticism, had elevated the poet to the rank of a master of virtuosity or powerful guide. To grasp the message of the Crepusculars, one only needs to consider the great Italian models in vogue at the *tournant du siècle*—Carducci’s patriotic “poeta artiere” [poet craftsman] embodies a proud and strong artisan-demiurge, able to mold and create poetry from “gli elementi de l’amore e del pensiero /... e le memorie / e le glorie / de’ suoi padre e di sua gente” [the elements of love, and thought /...and the memories / and the glories of his father and his people] (“Congedo”); D’Annunzio’s “ragno” [spider] refers to a poet capable of weaving words like webs, knotting human and natural life in a mythical pandean

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<sup>27</sup> ...the poet that shows himself / on a carousel horse / looks like the clown that he is. (Moretti, “The carousel”)

<sup>28</sup> I am not a gardener and perhaps not even a poet. (Moretti, “The garden of the fruits”)

<sup>29</sup> Like the blind donkey, us poets. / Go around our heart, chimeras / pulling so the world quenches its thirst. (Oxilia, “The orchards”)

<sup>30</sup> O sweet Muse, aren’t you tired / of being pointed at in the streets / like a prostitute...? (Govoni, “To the muse”)

fusion (“Le stirpi canore”); Pascoli’s “poeta lampada” [poet lamp] (“La poesia”) has the comforting function of helping anybody, providing guidance in the difficult and mysterious life journey (Tedesco 50). The Crepuscular personas represent a sharp antithesis to these powerful figures, mocking Carducci’s contra-examples of poets: “Il poeta, o vulgo sciocco, / un pitocco / non è già [...] / E nemmeno è un perdigiorno / [...] e nè meno è un giardiniere” [The poet, silly populace, / is neither a beggar [...] / nor a dawdler / (...) nor a gardener] (“Congedo”).

Crepuscularism purposefully proposes disturbing images of weak egos that deconstruct the myth of the vigorous, forceful, or thaumaturgic poetry:

*Perché tu mi dici: poeta?*

*Io non sono un poeta. Io non sono che un piccolo fanciullo che piange (Corazzini, “Desolazione del povero poeta sentimentale”, O 144)<sup>31</sup>*

*Io mi vergogno,*

*sì, mi vergogno d’essere un poeta!*

*(Gozzano, “Signorina Felicita”, TP 306-7)<sup>32</sup>*

*Son forse un poeta?*

*No, certo.*

*[...]*

*Chi sono?*

*Il saltimbanco dell’anima mia*

*(Palazzeschi, “Chi sono”, TTP 71)<sup>33</sup>*

*Ed io son l’unico al mondo*

*che non ha niente da dire.*

*(Moretti, “Io non ho nulla da dire”, TLP 258)<sup>34</sup>*

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<sup>31</sup> Why do you call me a poet? / I’m not a poet. / I’m only a crying little boy. (“Desolation of the poor sentimental poet”, SE 31)

<sup>32</sup> (...) I am ashamed to be— / yes, I confess, I am ashamed to be a poet! (“Felicity”, TM 89)

<sup>33</sup> Am I perhaps a poet? / Not at all. / [...] / Who am I? / The acrobat of my soul (“Who am I”)

<sup>34</sup> And I am the only one in the world / that has nothing to say. (“I don’t have anything to say”)



These lines have become the basis for the argument in favor of the Crepuscular sincere profession of literary humility and retreat. Yet, the refusal of the poetic investiture hides a polemic approach towards a literary world that Crepuscularism sabotages through an almost invisible work of reuse, assemblage, and re-echoing of Italian and foreign text. As Idolina Landolfi notes, Corazzini most likely borrowed the motif of crying from Pascoli and the *larmes* of Francis Jammes and Albert Samain (15). François Livi further explains that the genesis of the *topos* of the poetic denial is documented in a letter in which Corazzini quoted Jammes: “Penser cela, est-ce être poète? / Je ne sais pas. Qu’est-ce que je sais? / Est ce que je vis? Est-ce que je rêve?” [I think so, is this to be a poet? / I don’t know. What do I know? Do I live? Do I dream?] (185-86). Furthermore, the motif of refusal, as well as the Gozzanian claim “Ed io non voglio essere più io” [And I don’t want to be myself anymore!] evolves into Luigi Pirandello’s notion of the mask and is widely adopted by other European authors, such as Juan Ramon Jimenez and Fernando Pessoa, opening a transcultural literary discourse. Rather than addressing the Crepuscular poetics in terms of debasement, it is more accurate to borrow Jole Soldateschi’s notion of “umiltà polemica” [polemic humility] (2). The pretense of not being a poet—while actually composing verses—cannot be interpreted literally; Crepusculars were conscious of their poetic vocation, thus this refusal assumes the value of a subtle rhetoric. The denial is a studied apophasis that negates the profession of Crepuscular humble and prosaic “non-poetry”, while aiming to *reverse* the traditional canon of Italian poetry, which was the undisputed dominion of Carducci’s civic engagement, D’Annunzio’s lustful aestheticism, and Pascoli’s moralizing domestic Symbolism.

The French halo was embedded in the cultural atmosphere of the time and testifies to the extraordinary openness and receptiveness of the Crepuscular group to Nordic and transalpine

European culture. From a stylistic point of view, adopting a repetitive, quotidian lexicon, which avoids linguistic virtuosity and nearly derides the poetic function of language, was the most outstanding expressive conquest of the movement. Their modest style—in Gozzano’s words, “lo stile d’uno scolare corretto da una serva” [the style of a schoolboy corrected by a servant] (“L’altro” [The other], *TP* 309)—is polemically conceived as an alternative to the verbosity and formal perfection *à la mode* of the early twentieth century. As Vallini ironically declares, these are his wishes when making poetry:

*Vorrei pure scrivere, senza  
fatica, dei versi: ma sparsi  
a spizzico, da giudicarsi  
con bonaria indulgenza:  
dei versi bizzarri, rimati  
secondo la mia prosodia,  
con molta malinconia  
e quasi niente grammatica. (“Alcuni desideri”, UGA 93)<sup>35</sup>*

In their subversion of the poetic horizon, Crepusculars saturate the possibilities of prosaic syntax, using frantic and dry parataxis, as the incipit of Moretti’s “A Cesena” [In Cesena] exemplifies: “Piove. È mercoledì. Sono a Cesena”, [It rains. It’s Wednesday. I’m in Cesena.] (*TLP* 288). Going beyond narrative poetry, they arrive at “listing poetry”, which assembles people, things, and emotions as interchangeable pieces of a litany. Crepuscular poets experiment with textual montage, making verses out of nouns and figures in repetition, to express the boredom and the inescapable cyclical nature of provincial life, as in Govoni’s “Le cose che fanno la domenica” [Things that make Sunday]. The poem proceeds through an extemporaneous

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<sup>35</sup> I would also like to write, without / an effort, a few verses, scattered / and nibbled, to be judged / with kind benevolence: / a few bizarre verses, rhymed / according to my prosody, / with great melancholy / and almost no grammar. (“A few wishes”)

association of objects related to Sunday, which exerts a hypnotizing power, while rendering an ordinary tedium that can be virtually touched, as demonstrated in the following lines:

*L'odore caldo del pane che si cuoce caldo dentro il forno.  
Il canto del gallo del pollaio  
[...]  
La tovaglia nuova nella tavola.  
Gli specchi nelle camere.  
I fiori nei bicchieri. (P 115)<sup>36</sup>*

The Crepuscular *modus poetandi* also overturns D'Annunzio's poetological statement of the divine beauty of the world and of its intrinsic musicality communicated in each line—"Il verso è tutto" [The verse is everything] he emphatically affirmed in a line from the "Isotteo." Conversely, the Crepuscular poetic "arte povera" [frugal art] adopted "provocative" metric choices. Their experimentation resulted in two dramatically different strategies: the use of free verse—very noticeable in Corazzini and Govoni—and the parodic recovery of old-fashioned meters, prevalent in Gozzano.<sup>37</sup>

It is commonly accepted that Crepuscularism finds its usual setting in provincial locations: bourgeois villas and houses, sanatoria, old churches, small streets, etc. Undeniably, Crepusculars did not devote particular attention to urban life, but, from a strictly mimetic point of view, Crepuscular texts offer neither urban nor pastoral representations. Places are often "made from" things. They are assembled through objects and merged in an evanescent time-space, located in a dusty past or fairy-tale setting. Using different strategies, Crepuscular poetry does not realistically describe any provincial place; rather, it creates the suggestion of a

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<sup>36</sup> The warm smell of bread that cooks warm in the oven. / The singing of the rooster in the hen house. / [...] / The new tablecloth on the table. / The mirrors in the rooms. / The flowers in the glasses.

<sup>37</sup> On the Crepuscular metrical experimentation, see Giovannetti, *Metrica del verso libero*, ch. 2.2; 4.2. On Corazzini's free verse, see also the doctoral dissertation of Patrick Cherif: *Le strategie versoliberistiche di Sergio Corazzini. Studio del versoliberismo corazziniano in relazione all'orizzonte d'attesa metrico primo novecentesco* (Università di Cagliari).

claustrophobic feeling that looms over quickly sketched spaces, filled with objects. In this respect, it is possible to distinguish two polarities in the group. There is a minimalistic tendency, which dilutes the space, turning it into watercolor blots, hinting at the inexistence of the landscape outside the poetic world. In these lines, Aldo Palazzeschi transforms a quotidian setting into an imaginary chessboard, where the black and white nouns becomes pawns of a literary game:

*Le piccole chiese al crepuscolo s'aprono  
ne sortono leste le suore ed infilano il ponte;  
nel mezzo s'incontran,  
s'inchinan, le bianche e le nere, ("Il passo de le Nazarene", TTP 39)<sup>38</sup>*

At the opposite pole, there is a “baroque Crepuscularism” that over-represents fussy details of daily décor, over-filling the space of the “poetic canvas” with pointless objects and knick-knacks, which parody the bourgeois greedy attachment to possessions. This trends stands out particularly in Gozzano’s incipit of “L’amica di Nonna Speranza” [Grandmother Speranza’s Friend], an actual inventory of those “things of bad taste” that create a certain ineffable, and yet *objectively* perceivable, bourgeois feature. The interest in objects and material life in general is a pivotal, yet overlooked, theme for both the mystic group and the school of irony. Crepusculars offer a “still life poetry” that goes beyond the mere admission of everyday objects into the realm of poetry. The English expression “still life”, rather than the Italian “natura morta”—literally “death nature”—hits the mark of the Crepuscular Copernican revolution regarding the perception and conception of materiality. Although seemingly inert or asleep, things are alive and participate in the spiritual movement of the universe, as much as humans do, especially because

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<sup>38</sup> The little churches, at the crepuscule, open, / the nuns go out quick and take the bridge; / meet in the middle, / curtsey, the white and black nuns, (The passage of the Nazarenes)

humans are ultimately nothing more than a “cosa vivente” [living thing], recalling a line by Gozzano (“La via del rifugio” [The road to the shelter], *TP* 70).

The term “still life” also brings to mind the artistic, anti-Positivist language of Art Nouveau and its influences on Crepuscular poetry. As an all-encompassing style, which spread simultaneously throughout Western Europe and America, Art Nouveau had a great impact as a “break-away from the ‘historical’ style that preceded it” (Barilli 9). It expressed a violent opposition to Naturalism, which had been the dominant artistic school in nineteenth-century art, finding inspiration in styles of remote times and exotic spaces (9-10). Art Nouveau promoted an anti-academic eclecticism and provided a unifying language that could “encapsulate modernity and tradition, anxiety and confidence, decadence and progress, conservative national identities and radical internationalism” (Escritt 11). This versatile artistic movement became popular all over Europe, and, in Italy, bore the name of “Stile Floreale” and then “Stile Liberty.” After reaching its apex in France, during the 1900 Parisian “Exposition Universelle”, Art Nouveau found its Italian center in Turin, with the “Esposizione internazionale d’arte decorative moderna” in 1902. It is no surprise, thus, that Gozzano proposes a comparison between Art Nouveau poets and Art Nouveau painters, in his article “Misticismo moderno” [Modern mysticism], arguing that as the modern floral decoration recalls medieval and primitive frescos, so too does contemporary poetry draw its inspiration from figures of the past such as Dante, Petrarch, Botticelli, and Da Vinci (*Poesie e prose* 990).

Crepuscular poetry re-echoes, at various levels, several Liberty techniques and motifs, such as the elegant floral décor, the exoticism, the use of quotidian materials and art crafts, and the fascination with the Middle Ages. Furthermore, Crepuscularism was not immune to D’Annunzio’s poetic transposition of Pre-Raphaelite art. While D’Annunzio recovered only

some formal aspects—for instance, the sensual and languid poses, typical of Pre-Raphaelite paintings—Crepusculars show a deeper connection with the fundamental focus of the movement, namely the return to the fourteenth-century “primitive art” as opposed to the academic style of the sixteenth-century artists. Crepuscularism expressed, in poetry, the same anti-academic protest, proposing an anti-classical return to the time of “cultural infancy”, and mimicking a simple and prosaic poetry.<sup>39</sup> Although the movement did not develop an out-and-out artistic school, the Roman circle attracted many artists and *Cronache Latine* published articles on both literary and visual languages. For example, Guglielmo Genua wrote a reflection on the centrality of color in painting, which appeared in the last issue of the journal (January 15<sup>th</sup>, 1906) and seems to anticipate the later declarations of the Futurist *Giornale*. The painter envisions the possibility of musical chromatism, quoting from the British aesthete Walter Pater: “all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music” (7). Genua concludes his hymn to the semantic and symbolic potentiality of color, calling for a new chromatic painting that draws from Hans Memling, Gérard David, Roger Van der Weiden, and the Pre-Raphaelites:

Noi oggi, pur con mutati ideali, con anima più fiera e non più religiosa, con pensiero più audace e non più servile, perché non dovremmo far sì che dalle nostre mani esperte fiorissero su le tele anche con soli accordi cromatici, rivelazioni nuove d'un'arte non costretta né pur da esigenze logiche, e non fatta per adornare gli uffici di bottegai moderati e benpensanti o i profumati *boudoirs* di vereconde puttanelle cattoliche e intellettuali? (9)<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> This return to thirteenth-century models is very evident in Palazzeschi's poetry too. As Adele Dei notes, later in his career, the author stressed his initial choice of going back to “i primi vagiti della poesia” [the first crying of poetry] (“Giocare col fuoco”, *TTP*, xii).

<sup>40</sup> Today, although with renovated ideals, with a fiercer soul and no longer religious, with a more audacious thought and no longer servile, why wouldn't we make it possible that from our expert hands bloomed on our canvases, even only through chromatic accords, new revelations of an art that is not even constrained by logic needs, that is not made to decorate the offices of moderate and prig shopkeepers, or the perfumed boudoirs of catholic and intellectual modest little tarts?

## 1.5 Sergio Corazzini and Guido Gozzano: The Two Souls of Crepuscularism

Sergio Corazzini and Guido Gozzano are the most relevant figures of Crepuscularism and exemplify the different roots of the movement—the mystic and the ironic. Palazzeschi explains this internal division of the group, without concealing his admiration for the Roman circle: “mentre con Sergio Corazzini, e con gli altri crepuscolari, abbiamo un ritorno al misticismo dei primitivi, Gozzano introduce nella lirica italiana la banalità borghese” [While with Corazzini, and the other Crepusculars, we have a return to the mysticism of the Primitives, Gozzano introduces the bourgeois banality in the Italian lyric] (Introduzione xii). Oddly enough, the names of the two “founding fathers” do not appear in the article by Borgese that named Crepuscularism; yet the critic Emilio Cecchi had already associated the two poets, even before the canonization of their literary movement. In 1909, in a review of Gozzano’s collection *La via del rifugio*, which appeared on *La Voce*, Cecchi designated Gozzano as the “poeta major” [major poet] of the Crepuscular group, and Corazzini as his poetic John the Baptist (113). Cecchi found the common denominator of these “sad new poets” in a general loss of ideals, which he translated into a succinct “negative manifesto”: “non crediamo nella vita, nè nell’amore, nè nello spirito, tanto meno nel Padre Eterno” [We believe neither in life, nor in love, nor in the Spirit, and least of all in God] (112). This and similar assumptions rely on a (selective) biographical reading of Corazzini and Gozzano’s works that labeled them as the lament of youth undermined by pulmonary tuberculosis. Over-emphasizing the image of the resigned, terminally ill poets, some critics concealed other aspects of Corazzini and Gozzano’s lives, such as their dandyism and their self-perception of representing the new wave of Italian poetry.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the

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<sup>41</sup> In this instance, Moretti provides an interesting memory of his meeting with Corazzini, describing him as a young, elegant dandy, even a few days before his death: “Sergio entrò elegantissimo, un po’ con l’aria di entrare in scena

theme of malady and death as an existential condition of ungraspable mystery, morbid pleasure, and inescapable end had already been a central element of Italian Decadentism and French *maudit* literature, two cultural movements that strongly influenced the Crepusculars.<sup>42</sup>

Addressing both the lineages of Corazzini and Gozzano's poetry—autobiographical references and purposeful dandyism—Moretti underlines the knot that ties their poetry together: exhibiting an ingenuous and delicate soul, like a child, but refined and corrupted like that of a decadent poet (*Tutti i ricordi* 1015).

Sergio Corazzini (1886-1907) started as a poet when he was still sixteen, with a poem in the Roman dialect, “Na bella idea” [A beautiful idea], published in 1902 in the local satirical newspaper *Il pasquino di Roma* (which was later renamed *Marforio*). Corazzini then abandoned licentious, provincial poetry, and became the main personality of Roman Crepuscularism, with a more intimate and spiritual tone. The group included many young intellectuals, such as the poets Corrado Govoni, Alberto Tarchiani, Antonello Caprino, Fausto Maria Martini, Alfredo Tusti, and Donello Zarlatti. Among the occasional attendees of the meetings, there was also the painter

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[...]. Giovane d'appena vent'anni, bello, prestante, aitante e tuttavia con qualcosa di vecchio nella figura e negli sguardi errabondi, candido e insieme letterario nell'espressione [...]. Aveva già la febbre alta, confidava che stave per morire con una leggera effervescenza letteraria, sì che non pareva, dopo tutto, ch'egli dicesse e facesse sul serio” [Sergio entered very elegant, looking as if he were coming on stage (...). Young, he was only twenty, handsome, robust, stocky, and yet with something old in his figure and in his wondering looks, with something candid and also literary in his expression (...). He had already a very high fever, confessed that he was going to die with a light literary excitement, insomuch that it did not seem, after all, that he was speaking and acting seriously] (*Tutti i ricordi* 1019-20). In a similar fashion, Carlo Carlucci describes Gozzano's life of *gran viveur*: “Umanamente, in particolare sotto l'aspetto sensuale, nulla egli aveva voluto precludersi: aveva voluto vivere *la bella vita dalle mille offerte*, non essere di meno da nessuno nella voluttà, nei disordini, fin anche nel cinismo; ed era andato oltre *Il Piacere* stesso” [Humanly, in particularly regarding love affairs, he did not want to miss anything: he wanted to live *the beautiful life of one thousand offers*, not to be second to anybody in pleasures, troubles, and even cynism; and he went beyond *Il Piacere* itself] (Soldateschi 15).

<sup>42</sup> The negative perception, imbedded in the adjective “crepuscolare”, produced a denial of this categorization even in the poets that were part of the group. In his detailed biography of Corazzini, Filippo Donini sharply divides the truly authentic Crepuscular poets (first among them Corazzini), from authors who experienced different influences in their literary careers (such as Palazzeschi, Govoni, Moretti).



Guglielmo Genua, the engraver Raoul Dal Molin Ferenzona, and the intellectual Giuseppe Vannicola.<sup>43</sup> In addition, the Roman circle had epistolary relations and connections with a smaller Florentine group, in which Marino Moretti and Aldo Palezzeschi were the most representative personalities. The Roman Crepusculars constituted a literary circle, with its own culture and “rituals.” The members of the circle would meet at Caffè Sartoris and, after 1906, at Caffè Aragno, which was a popular gathering place for the city’s intellectuals. They founded a literary journal, *Cronache Latine*, to convey their innovative vision of literature, were fond readers of the French Symbolists, and had a passion for walking at night around the old churches of Rome, which provided one of the most recurrent settings for their poetry.

Overall, Corazzini represented a cult figure for his circle. His poetic voice was identified with the pure singing of a *fanciullo* [young boy]. Corazzini thus embodied a Messianic ideal of poetry for a new literary era, which Martini pre-announced in the article “I ribelli” [The Rebels] (Villa, *Il crepuscolarismo* 37). Beyond any fictional addition, Corazzini’s intellectual purity—understood as absolute independence from the classicist tradition—has a true basis, as the young Roman poet did not complete high school and was, for the most part, an autodidact.<sup>44</sup> Corazzini’s mythologized identity as elected poet emerges, in particular, in the novel *Si sbarca a New York*,

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<sup>43</sup> In her very detailed account of the Roman circle, Villa mentions other names: Giorgio Lais, Mario Zarlatti, Guido Milelli, Beniamino De Ritis, Remo Mannoni, Stefano Cesare Chiappa, Alessandro Benedetti, Guido Ruberti, Cesare Giulio Viola, and Ricciotto Canudo (*Il Crepuscolarismo* 75). Corazzini’s group was also related with other Roman poetic circles inspired by a similar desire for literary innovation, such as the circle of via Principe Amedeo and the Ellenic-Latin group of Federico De Maria, Tito Marrone, Giuseppe Piazza, Carlo Basilici, and Yosto Rondaccio (cfr. *Il Crepuscolarismo* 86-89).

<sup>44</sup> Corazzini only attended the first two years of *liceo classico* (a type of high school centered on classical education). Yet, as Antonello Caprino notes, Corazzini did not have any knowledge of Latin and Greek (Donini 9). Nevertheless, in the article “La morte di Tantalo nell’ ‘ultima Thule,’” Villa argues that Corazzini was taking private classes of Classic languages and culture from a friend, P.F. Giordani and thus had a certain acquaintance with Latin and Greek (119). Overall, like many poets of his generation, Corazzini based his culture on Italian middle-age lyric, and nineteenth-century Italian and French literature (especially “modern classics” such as D’Annunzio and Pascoli, Verist writers, Scapigliati, Hugo, Zola, and Symbolist poets).

in which Martini provides a divinized description of young Sergio as an actual demi-god, answering the question “Chi era Sergio per noi?” [Who was Sergio for us?] (103):

l'angelo in esiglio per le vie della terra, il semidio, della cui vicinanza ciascuno di noi s'inorgoglia e che avremmo voluto additare continuamente agli uomini frettolosi ed ignari, i quali ci passavano accanto e non s'accorgevano di lui né mostravano di sapere chi fosse il prodigioso fanciullo che camminava in mezzo a noi; (106)<sup>45</sup>

In a similar fashion, Giovanni Papini, in his collections of memories *Passato remoto* [Remote past], re-proposes the iconography of the innocent and gifted “fanciullo-poeta”, who calls for a radically new poetry, which overthrows the poetic tradition through its disarming yet powerful simplicity:

scriveva poesie dove una disperata tristezza sapeva esprimersi con semplicità fanciullesca, in pieno contrasto con la poesia sontuosa e pretenziosa dei carducciani e dei dannunziani. Era una voce sommessa, mesta, patetica, talvolta quasi puerile ma che saliva spontaneamente dal cuore di quel giovanissimo che si sapeva condannato a una morte imminente. (206-7)<sup>46</sup>

Beyond his literary reconstruction as a poetic idol, Corazzini represented the heart of the Roman group, and, after his death in 1907, the group itself dispersed. In later years, his friends organized public readings of Corazzini's poems to keep his memory alive and took charge of collecting and publishing his work in its first complete edition, *Le liriche*, in 1909.<sup>47</sup> During his brief literary career, Corazzini published five collections (*Dolcezza*, *L'amaro calice*, *Le aureole*, *Piccolo libro inutile*, *Libro per la sera della domenica*), individual poems in journals (especially in the Roman dialect), poetic prose (*Soliloquio delle cose*, *Esortazione al fratello*), and a stage

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<sup>45</sup> The angel in exile through the streets of earth, the demi-god whose closeness each of us prided himself in and whom we would have liked to point at continuously to the rushed and unaware men, who passed by us and neither noticed him, nor showed knowledge of who the prodigious young man that walked amongst us was.

<sup>46</sup> He used to write poems in which a desperate sadness could express itself with childish simplicity, completely in contrast with the sumptuous and pretentious poetry of D'Annunzio and Carducci's followers. His voice was hushed, melancholy, pathetic, sometimes almost childlike, but it was spontaneously rising from the heart of that very young man that, as everybody knew, was condemned to an imminent death.

<sup>47</sup> The 1909 edition did not contain all the poems by Corazzini, but only a selection that his friends chose.

play (*Il traguardo*). He actively contributed to the organ of the Roman Crepuscular group, *Cronache Latine*, which published only three issues between 1905 and 1906. He also wrote in several journals, such as *Il Marforio*, *Roma Flamma*, and *La vita letteraria*.

The Crepuscularism of Corazzini and his group, as Villa has showed through her research, has a fundamentally irrational and nondenominational mystical nature, which Antonello Caprino defined as neither Christian allegory nor Tolstoy's evangelical quietness, but rather a "sensualismo di idealizzazioni religiose" [a sensuality of religious idealizations] (*O* 28). This hybrid form of mysticism relied on the aesthetic deformation of devotional objects and religious practices, a literary strategy that was in vogue at the time and emerges, for instance, in D'Annunzio's *Poema Paradisiaco* and *Le vergini delle rocce*, as well as in the work of Jammes, Samain, Maeterlinck, and Georges Rodenbach. Although these literary models must have played a role in the development of Roman Crepuscularism, mysticism is not simply a style, but reveals a deeper intimate involvement with historical mystical figures, such as Saint Francis, Saint Teresa of Avila, and Maria de Agreda.<sup>48</sup> Corazzini embraced his own life and literary experience as a form of self-inflicted martyrdom, understood as both an *imitatio-Christi* and a vertiginous aesthetic abandonment in a mysterious "Beyond." This fascination with literature as an ultimate and excessive form of religiosity can be ascribed to the orientation of Decadent and medieval religiosity towards ecstasy and sensual corruption of the sacred on one side, and annihilation of the flesh through the suffering body on the other.

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<sup>48</sup> In a letter to Palazzeschi, Corazzini shows his awareness of mysticism as a poetic style that was slowly fading, but still associates this style with a greater spiritual enjoyment. Commenting on Palazzeschi's *Lanterna*, the Roman poet writes: "E il tuo poema, a malgrado che il misticismo in poesia cominci lentamente a decadere, e Fausto Salvatori non ha fatto che aggiungere una spinta per la scesa, e il tuo poema, dicevo è precisamente di quelli che danno il perfetto godimento dell' Anima." [And your poem, although mysticism in poetry has slowly started to decline, and Fausto Salvatori hasn't done anything other than adding a further push to the descending movement, and your poem, I was saying, is exactly of those which give the perfect enjoyment of the Soul] (*O* 299).

Guido Gozzano (1883-1916) represents the other key personality of Crepuscularism, even though his membership in the movement has been the object of debate. Some critics, such as Giuseppe De Robertis and Antonio Baldini, deny he belonged to the movement, presenting as proof his references to the nineteenth-century parodic poetry of Vittorio Betteloni, Olindo Guerrini,<sup>49</sup> and Domenico Gnoli, or to the poetry of Pascoli. Some others, like Paolo Trompeo and Pietro Pancrazi, reject Gozzano's Crepuscular affiliation, as the polyhedral character of his work cannot be reduced solely to Crepuscular poetics. François Livi finds a compromise solution, suggesting that, although Gozzano's poetry does not linger on many traditional Crepuscular *topoi*—such as Barberia hand-organs, sick people, and hospital settings—Gozzano reveals a Crepuscular nature in the fundamental inability of his poetic ego to participate in life, seeking refuge in an ungraspable and unreal dimension (236).

The *querelle* to determine whether Gozzano is the last poet of the nineteenth century or the first of the twentieth century is quite purposeless, as his poetry fundamentally relies on a magisterial eclecticism and a sharp irony that crosses Romanticism, Decadentism, and, of course, Crepuscularism. In this respect, the most encompassing definition of Gozzano's poetic is Marziano's Guglielminetti canonization of the Turinese poet as the father of the Crepuscular "school of irony", which includes Carlo Vallini, Marino Moretti, Carlo Chiaves, Ernesto Ragazzoni, and Nino Oxilia.<sup>50</sup> Even though the late Corazzini opened his poetry to a certain

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<sup>49</sup> Literary pseudonym of the poet Lorenzo Stecchetti.

<sup>50</sup> Guglielminetti gathers together these authors in his essay *Gozzano and i viciniori*. While Vallini, Ragazzoni, and Oxilia geographically shared the same cultural entourage of Gozzano, Moretti only had epistolary contact with him, as well as with Corazzini. In his analysis of the relations between Gozzano and Moretti, Guglielminetti investigates the literary evolution of Moretti toward an ironic poetry and ascribes him to the "school of irony." Another poet that can be ascribed to the Turinese group is Giulio Gianelli, who moved to Rome in 1908. His works do not share the ironic vein of Gozzano's group and, from a thematic point of view, are closer to Roman Crepuscularism, especially for the marked religiosity.

veiled irony, Gozzano's ability to switch from melancholic tones to elegant humor and beyond to grotesque "realism" constitutes the idiosyncrasy and the topicality of his poetic. Compared to Corazzini's emphasized religiosity, the mystic component of Gozzano's Crepuscularism is quite shaded in his poetic works, but was definitely a part of his literary journey. At the beginning of his career, Gozzano was influenced by the mystic literary style of the epoch. This tendency—which clearly marks Gozzano and Corazzini's initial Dannuntian proselytism—is present in some scattered poems, in which religious references play on ambiguous meanings, or hint at sensual or morbid contexts.<sup>51</sup> The poetological explanation for this style is traceable in Gozzano's letter about the ordination of his friend Fausto Graziani in 1903. In this letter, the young poet professes his atheist artistic fascination with the ancient works of Mystics such as Saint Catherine of Siena, and Saint Francis and Saint Clare of Assisi. He also adds that D'Annunzio, the author of the *Piacere*, infused a mystic sense in his soul through lust and depravation (*Poesie e prose* 1233-34).<sup>52</sup> Gozzano's initial interest in mysticism falls within the so-called Liberty mysticism, understood as a literary style that can create a pure artistic evasion of quotidian life, translating genuine faith into an insincere and sensual new "faith." As Gozzano himself declares, in "Il misticismo moderno e la rievocazione del Serafico," this kind of religious

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<sup>51</sup> The literary "sensual-mysticism" is present, in particular, in the following scattered poems by Gozzano: "Laus Matris" (1903), which fuses Saint Francis's *Canticle of the Sun* with D'Annunzio elegant sensuality; "Parabola dei frutti" (1904), which has an epigraph from the *Immaculate Conception Psalm* and mixes in a veiled manner religious and sexual lexicon; and "La falce" (1904), which assimilates the image of the coming of the Messiah with erotic and sacred allusions.

<sup>52</sup> In this respect, Edoardo Sanguineti argues that Gozzano's mystic inspiration of the letter to Graziani was not filtered through the direct reading of the mystic writers that the poet cites, but through D'Annunzio novel *Le vergini delle rocce* (more than through *Il Piacere*). He provides detailed textual references between passages from the letter and similar passages in D'Annunzio's book (*Guido Gozzano* 78-85). This interpretation does not exclude, though, that Gozzano had actually read some mystic writers.

abandonment nourishes itself on a polished and artificial recreation of medieval mysticism, acting as a balm or a “narcotic of the soul”:

Questo misticismo, va detto subito, non è sincero. Mai, infatti, come ora il dubbio ha tenuto le anime, ma appunto per questo forse lo spirito come refrigerio alla sua miseria, cerca di velare le ambascie della dura realtà con stili armonici, che blandiscano dolcemente l’orecchio o intorpidiscano la mente in un languore morboso non dissimile dai sonni artificiosi conseguiti con i cloroformi, con le morfine, con le droghe oppiche preziose dell’Estremo oriente. (*Poesie e Prose* 991)<sup>53</sup>

Although this interpretative hypothesis does not exhaust the complexity of the mystical influence on Crepuscular writers, Gozzano’s metaphor of the “narcotic” illuminates an obscure dimension of spiritual ecstasy, directly related to the psychosomatic effects of malady, as Corazzini writes to Palazzeschi: “Quel poco che compongo è causa di un delirio fittizio che provoco al mio cervello con delle strane bevande. [...] Io penso ogni giorno a morire come, aprendo la finestra, si pensa al sole” (*O* 296).<sup>54</sup>

Broadly speaking, in Crepuscular poetry, mysticism represents the cryptic language that embraces diverse experiences—from auto-divinization to a morbid literary fascination—whose common denominator is a magnetic attraction to the most sensual and irrational sides of Christian religion. Gozzano, as well as Corazzini, partially inherited the Dannunzian sensuality of mysticism and his literary projection of the gendered, hysterical, and uterine component associated with women’s mystic experiences. As Francesco Flora states, D’Annunzio was able to find in mysticism its animal instinct that sexually consumes purity and chastity, and to reverse in a pagan style the spiritual yearning of Saint Catherine or Saint Theresa (12). Moreover, both

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<sup>53</sup> This Mysticism, it must be said immediately, is not sincere. Never, in fact, like nowadays the doubt has occupied the souls, but perhaps for this reason, indeed, the spirit seeks, as a balm to its misery, to conceal the anguish of hard reality though harmonic styles, which sweetly flatter the ear or narcotize the mind in a morbid languor, not very different from artificial sleeping, obtained through chloroform, morphine, and the precious opiates from the Far East.

<sup>54</sup> That little that I compose is due to a fictitious delirium that I provoke to my brain with strange beverages. [...] I think of dying every day like, opening the window, one thinks about the sun.

Corazzini and Gozzano borrowed the dualism between spiritual elevation and bodily pain from medieval mysticism, insisting on their feeling “different”—sick, foolish, extraneous—as an inherently spiritual mark on their flesh. Thus, their mysticism was a literary spirituality of the sick body that is going to die and that temporarily occupies the crossroads of life, death, and vegetative material existence. In its essence of deviation from the norm, corporal suffering legitimizes and ensures a privileged access to an abnormal dimension, which translates into an elected spiritual and literary status of total comprehension, rather than cognition. Yet, unlike Corazzini’s spirituality, Gozzano exhibits a more literary use of mysticism, and alternates a fascination with a broad, cross-cultural notion of the divine and an ironic use of the Christian religious lexicon and prayer. In the scattered poem “L’altro” [The other], he provocatively plays with a rhyme and thanks God for making him a poor, simple “guidogozzano” and not “gabrieldannunziano;” whereas in the poem “Nell’Abbazia di San Giuliano” [In the abbey of Saint Julian], he professes his atheism, addressing a God in which he does not believe and that does not exist: “Buon Dio al quale non credo, buon Dio che non esisti” [Good Lord in which I do not believe, good Lord that does not exist].<sup>55</sup>

Gozzano was very involved in the cultural life of Turin; he began his literary affiliation attending the lectures of Arturo Graf at the University of Turin, developing connections with many other young intellectuals in his home city.<sup>56</sup> He moved in the fashionable circles of the

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<sup>55</sup> As Giorgio Barberi Squarotti explains in a footnote to his edition of Gozzano’s poems, the project of writing similar fake prayers is documented in Gozzano’s notebook (the *Albo dell’Officina*), in which the author took notes about many possible prayers to the “Buon Gesù” (“Good Jesus”) that he never actually composed (349 n1).

<sup>56</sup> Although his real vocation was literature, Gozzano studied Law at the University of Turin, without graduating. Among the intellectuals attending Graf’s lectures, there were also Giulio Bertoni, Attilio Momigliano, Enrico Thovez, Massimo Bontempelli, Giulio Giannelli, Carlo Vallini, and Carlo Calcaterra.

Turinese high society and also participated in the meetings of the “Società della cultura.”<sup>57</sup>

Gozzano contributed to various newspapers and magazines, such as *La stampa*, *Il Momento*, *La gazzetta del popolo*, *Donna*, *La Lettura*, *La Rassegna latina*, and *L'illustrazione italiana*.

His eclectic activities encompassed many fields of knowledge and artistic languages: from literature to journalism, from poetry to fairy tales, from Eastern spiritualism to exoticism, and from cinema to entomology.<sup>58</sup> As a poet, Gozzano published two main collections: *La via del rifugio*, in 1907, and *I colloqui*, in 1911. Borrowing from Eugenio Montale's fortunate expression, his poetry can be read as an “attraversamento” [crossing] of D'Annunzio's poetic experience, which opens the way for a free and autonomous experimentation in a new poetic language (*Gozzano dopo trent'anni* 62). Other than for its caustic irony, Gozzano's poetry stands out for a storytelling tone that combines a narrative trend with dialogical inserts. From a lexical point of view, his poetry mixes quotidian vocabulary—kitchen tools, names of plants, furniture, objects of the house—with dignified terms, or references to the poetic tradition (from Dante and Petrarch to Leopardi), “facendo cozzare l'aulico con il prosaico” [clashing solemn language with

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<sup>57</sup> This association was conceived as a lending library with the most recent publications and as a place for cultural exchange. Among the regulars of the “Società della cultura” there were important literary critics, writers, journalists, and philosophers (to mention a few names: Enrico Thovez, Giovanni CenaCarola Prosperi, Gustavo Balsamo Crivelli, Zino Zini, and Achille Loria).

<sup>58</sup> Beyond being a journalist and a poet, Gozzano wrote novels and fairy tales (such as *I tre talismani* and *La principessa si sposa*). He was fascinated with Eastern philosophy and spirituality, and, according to some (partially denied) accounts, he even converted to Buddhism (see Guglielminetti, “Scuola e non Avanguardia” and Villa, *Il Crepuscolarismo*). Yet, in his memoirs from his journey to India he did not conceal a strong criticism of Eastern religious practices, condemning the idolatry and the fetishism of some cults (Carnero, *Gozzano esotico* 105). After the trip, he wrote articles related to this experience on the newspaper *La Stampa* and various magazines; eighteen of these proses were later collected in the volume *Viaggio verso la cuna del mondo. Lettere dall'India (1912-1913)*. He also worked as a screenwriter; among his works, there is the screenplay for a documentary from 1911 about butterflies (*La vita delle farfalle* by Roberto Omegna). During his last years, he was involved in the project of a movie on Saint Francis (which was never realized, due to the war). Gozzano had a strong passion for entomology, and was a cultivator of larvae and collector of butterflies. This strong interest is artistically documented in his uncompleted long poem, entitled *Le farfalle* [The butterflies].



prosaic language] (Montale, *Gozzano dopo trent'anni* 57). Gozzano also purposefully plays with archaic words, inserting them in the linguistic weave of his hyper-literary game and within the frame of old and rigid strophic schemes, creating an extraordinary *pastiche*, between tradition and parody of tradition.

*La via del rifugio* and *I colloqui* do not share the languid melancholy of mystic Crepuscularism. The similarity with some of Corazzini's themes—malady, death, boredom, sense of inevitability, regret for a lost past—appears almost ungraspable, due to the different atmospheres that suffuse the two poetic styles and their reading experiences. Corazzini's reader is absorbed in a process of initiation, whereas Gozzano's reader is constantly pricked by a potentially unreliable narrator. Yet, the question is more about where Corazzini and Gozzano were leading their bourgeois audience on these poetic paths. Answering this fundamental issue, Giuseppe Farinelli underscores that even Borgese, with his severe reservations on the aesthetic value of Crepuscularism, recognized that this movement was tracing one of the future directions of Italian poetry (15). Borgese's reference to Crepuscular poets as youth who do not have anything to sing about grazes the pivotal point of Corazzini and Gozzano's poetic experiences. Admitting that there is nothing to sing about is not a submissive, poetic self-defeat, but the recognition of an epistemological issue: How could the poet know what to sing without revealing his lack of knowledge? And, above all, why should poetry know something about the world? Why could the poet and poetry not simply be part of the *being*, experiencing the grade-zero status of being a *bare thing*? Carducci's vigorous political verses or D'Annunzio's formal preciousness represent models of assertive poetry that the Crepusculars reject as outdated, while waiting for "il prossimo avvento della nuova poesia e del novissimo poeta" [the coming of the new poetry and of the newest poet] (*O* 296)—which is purposefully unassertive. Beneath the

naïve style and thematic reduction, Crepuscular poetry hides the complex task of defining the new cognitive experience of the twentieth-century individual at the beginning of the era of mechanical reproducibility. In other terms, Crepuscularism is the first Italian twentieth-century movement to rebel against the paradigm of the dominant subject, rethinking, at a cognitive level, the distinction between human and thing. The flat Crepuscular existence, with the cyclical repetition of weekdays and dull Sundays, inevitably produces a sense of alienation from the world, creating a cognitive gap between the ego and materiality. Thus, materiality becomes suddenly more evident, incumbent, obsessively present—in its constitutional form of “Thing”, that ineffable Real, which according to Lacan has been lost with the acquisition of language. From this feeling of living trapped in mechanical repetition, in which humans are frozen egos, Crepuscular poetry provides the ideal conditions for in vitro poetic experiments, aimed at exploring how to escape the cognitive impasse of bourgeois society, addressing the question of what knowing really means in the epoch of things.

### **1.6 From Crepuscular Retreat to the Crepuscular Openness**

Crepuscularism achieved its first milestone recognition in the anthology *Poeti d'oggi*, edited by Pietro Pancrazi and Giovanni Papini and published in 1920. This collection of poetry marked the entrance of Corazzini and Gozzano into the anthological canon of twentieth-century poetry and contributed to the codification of the term Crepuscular as both a critical and editorial category.<sup>59</sup> Yet, as literary history is always a history of dominant interpretations, from the initial

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<sup>59</sup> For the genesis of this anthological work and the selective process of the texts, see the correspondence between Pancrazi and Papini, *Le ombre di Parnaso*. The diffusion of the Crepuscular critical category, as a determinate group in the Italian cultural context, emerges in this 1917 letter from Pancrazi to Papini, regarding the project of the

reviews, the critique commented on a certain selection of Crepuscular texts supporting the thesis that these “new poets” were eager to retract, occupy little space, pine away, self-humiliate, and “self-simplify” (Cecchi 113). This tendency can be partially explained by the influence of the Crocean paradigm “life-art.” As Aldo Vallone notes, in the first decades of the twentieth century, literary critics maintained an approach that focused on content and aesthetics, stigmatizing the Crepuscular movement for its formal sloppiness and the negativity of its moral message (15-16). In particular, the overused bibliographical critical approach produced the widespread opinion of Crepuscularism as an unfiltered and sincere confession, or even as a poetic documentary about bourgeois life in the provinces (11).

A common trait in the critique of Crepuscularism has been a focus on the ambivalent meaning of the term *crepuscolare*, which can refer to both the soft light of the sunset and sunrise. Borgese alludes to this linguistic ambiguity, stating that Italian poetry slowly extinguishes in a mild and long *crepuscolo*, which perhaps will not be followed by the night (121). Several critics later referenced the crepuscular chromatic metaphor to reevaluate the movement, reversing the popular association of Crepuscular poetry and the twilight of the nineteenth century with the new image of the dawn of the twentieth century.<sup>60</sup> However, adopting the accepted meaning of the

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anthology: “Caro Papini, allora va tutto bene. E comincerò a rileggere e a scrivere - a chi c'è da scrivere. Comincerò coi crepuscolari: Corazzini, Gozzano e Moretti.” [Dear Papini, so everything is fine. And I am going to start to reread and write – to whom we need to write. I will start from the Crepusculars: Corazzini, Gozzano, and Moretti] (*Le Ombre di Parnaso* 62).

<sup>60</sup> The proposal of speaking about Crepuscular dawn appears already in Donini (264). The position has more recently been argued by Villa (*O* 66). She explains that Crepuscularism proposed an auroral poetry as it opposed the Positivism with a renaissance of mysticism and neo-Idealism (*Il Crepuscolarismo* 153). To support her argument, she quotes Corazzini's dedication of *Piccolo libro inutile* to Marino Moretti, which explicitly recalls the image of dawn: “A Marino Moretti queste piccolo pallide stelle de l'alba” [To Marino Moretti, these little pale dawn stars] (*O* 307). Guglielminetti, in his essay “Scuola e non avanguardia”, ironically comments on the latest trend of the critique of turning the Crepuscular twilight into a dawn: “Un'aurora, dunque, e non più un crepuscolo, come una pigra consuetudine manualistica tende a farci credere? O non sempre di etichette è questione, che, una volta inventate vedono fiorire intorno a sé una vegetazione critica parassitaria e ripetitiva.” [A dawn, indeed, and no longer a

sunrise and renaming these poets “poeti aurorali” [auroral poets] has become the ultimate cliché regarding Crepuscularism and appears more as a title of courtesy than an objective critical re-categorization of the movement. The issue is not simply “rebranding” the Crepusculars or not, but understanding why and in which respect they have been indeed auroral. Undeniably, the twilight is a fitting figurative representation for the state of the Crepuscular poetic mind; the sunset metaphor catches the fundamental aspects of these poetics: the mild melancholy of the day’s end, the indefinite colors of the sky at dusk, the passivity of being a spectator to the sunset, and the inescapable repetitiveness and mysterious wonder of this daily event. Rather than denying the “twilight component” of Crepuscular poetry, it is worth investigating how authors such as Corazzini and Gozzano explore the epistemological crisis of the twentieth century, recognizing that the continuous becoming of life remains unknowable, but the self can engage in an endless process of creation and active determination of *his own* truth (Cacciari 63-64).

Proposing a rereading of Crepuscular poetry, I rework and combine, from a new perspective, the two main critical trends of this movement—the leftist or “Marxist objectual” perspective of Anceschi and Sanguineti, and the “theory of thought”, which links the reflections of Tedesco, Farinelli, and Villa, among many others. My objection to this binary opposition is that both these approaches cannot give a complete account of the movement on their own. Considering the reflection on materiality as the key to the Crepuscular rebellion against the bourgeois socio-cultural Dannunzian model does not explain the animism of objects and their clear references to an extra-sensorial realm. Conversely, the history solely of ideas does not illustrate why Crepuscularism found its mystical search on an irrational, borderline theistic

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twilight, as a lazy manualistic habit does want us to believe? Is it not always a matter of labels, which, once invented, see flourish around them a parasitic and repetitive critic vegetation?] (*La scuola dell'ironia* 152).

concept of a beyond, embedded within matter. The combined approach contributes to rethinking Crepuscular provincialism, identifying this attention to the claustrophobic space of ordinary life as a link with European and American literature, rather than the stigma of isolation and mediocrity of some “poeti provincialeschi.”<sup>61</sup>

Provincialism was very *à la mode* in the European literature of the time, and constitutes a fundamental topic in the representation of bourgeois life (Farinelli 22). From Symbolism to Decadentism, and beyond Europe, to American bourgeois novelist traditions, all these movements offered a similar representation of petty-bourgeois society and its repetitive and tedious existential condition.<sup>62</sup> On the base of a similar provincialism, Sanguineti connects Gozzano and Flaubert, briefly comparing Gozzano’s alter ego Totò Merumeni (the resigned provincial intellectual of the homonymous poem) with Flaubert’s Madame Bovary. According to Sanguineti, Gozzano provides an exemplary analysis of the very delicate mechanism of provincial dreams that Flaubert revealed in his novel (*Tra Liberty e Crepuscolarismo* 60). This path leads to a reconsideration of Crepuscularism as a transnational category that embraces what Luciano Anceschi called “disposizione nuova dell’animo” [the new state of the soul] (xxii) of

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<sup>61</sup> The Crocean critic Francesco Flora canonized the provincial etiquette in 1921, unifying Corazzini and Gozzano, along with other Crepuscular poets. His word choice is very peculiar as the suffix *-esco* in the adjective *provincialeschi* implies a soft nuance, like the English “provincialish”, or “somewhat provincial.” Flora ties Crepuscular provincialism solely with the Italian cultural context, as a form of ironic detachment from both D’Annunzio’s carnal and pandean sensuality and Pascoli’s domestic sentimentalism (20).

<sup>62</sup> In the introductory chapter of his monograph, Giuseppe Farinelli highlights that even though *Crepuscolarismo* presents an immediate provincial poetic reference (“provinciale semmai è nel crepuscolarismo l’elenco, il dato visibile dell’argomento poetico” 22), the provincial content is a careful choice of poetics that the movement adopts as an opening to European lyric, and to reassert its “anti-D’Annunziano” style (22).

twentieth-century literature—a new state that is principally a state of cognitive search through and beyond a stratified notion of materiality, conceived as thingness, body, and original *chora*.<sup>63</sup>

Crepuscular provincialism becomes “il modo d’essere” [the mode of being] of a man that no longer knows who he is, why he exists, and what position he occupies in the universe (Farinelli 22), but also the frontier—the dawn—from which to engage in the search for a possible paradigm. As a wider notion, the adjective *crepuscolare* designates, according to Natale Tedesco, an existential condition, based on a state of ambiguity and anguish of Kierkegaardian origin (10-11). This status recalls Scipio Slataper’s definition of “perplexità crepuscolare” [Crepuscular perplexity]: “perplexità. Parola dell’epoca democratica che s’è ribellata alla tradizione e all’ordine, e non sa rinascere compatta in una fede” [perplexity. A word of the democratic epoch that rebelled against tradition and order, and cannot be born again, united in a faith] (66). Beside his personal judgment on the weakness and closure of this new poetry, Slataper finds in the Crepuscular movement a pervasive feeling of doubtful wonder that becomes “incomprensione fantastica” [fantastic incomprehension] (66) in Corazzini, and “cozzo umano, dei mille dubbi” [human clash of thousands of doubts] in Gozzano (68). Perplexity arises as the cognitive state of Crepuscular provincialism, understood as an existential condition that traps humanity in numbness, wonder, and mystery. However, this overwhelming perplexity does not exhaust itself in its *pars destruens*, but rather sketches a—tortuous and often precarious—path of escape from the provincial cognitive experience to a new form of knowledge, completely untouched, unregulated, and unlimited. Reflecting on the sense of cognition and on the value of “things”, Crepuscularism ushers in a literary, epistemological, and ontological revolution that

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<sup>63</sup> Chora is a term adopted by Julia Kristeva to designate the earliest stage of child psychosexual development, dominated by a chaotic mix of perceptions, feelings, and needs.

sets the ground for Futurism. When Marinetti spoke up, launching the intellectual bomb of his manifesto, he was not making a radical new war, but was rather launching the last attack on a paradigm that Crepuscularism had already sabotaged.

## Chapter Two

### A Matter of Things: Modernity, Modernism, Avant-Garde

Addietro, nottoloni, nell'ombra! Noi andiamo verso l'avvenire.  
(Basilici, "Due critici di Giulio Orsini")<sup>64</sup>

#### 2.1 Introduction

Crepuscularism does not constitute an isolated, local Italian phenomenon; it is a tile in the cultural mosaic of the Belle Époque that has yet to be appropriately located. Re-contextualizing the Crepuscular movement involves considering it within a broader network, in which two main points come into play: the socio-political notion of modernity, and the rise of aesthetic reactions against the modern paradigm, namely the interrelated phenomena of Modernism and the Avant-Garde. These critical categories do not represent fixed points, but function as markers in an ongoing debate, which has progressively expanded its geographical and cultural boundaries, casting doubts on what being modern means.

This chapter provides an overview of the role of Crepuscularism in the early twentieth-century wave of anti-traditionalism and defines its pioneering function in preparing the cultural humus for the Futurist manifestos. Borrowing from Bruno Latour's provocative thesis that "we have never been modern", I argue that by rejecting the mechanisms typical of modernity and

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<sup>64</sup> "Go back, fer-owls! We go towards the future." Although Carlo Basilici was not a proper member of Corazzini's group, his calling for a poetic radical renovation reflects a shared sentiment in early twentieth-century Rome that anticipated the Futurist blast. On Basilici's literary activism, see Daniele Comberciati, *Nessuna città d'Italia è più crepuscolare di Roma*, and Villa, *Il Crepuscolarismo*, cit.



being polemically pre-modern, Crepusculars declare their fully Avant-Garde spirit, constituting the “auroral” flame of the Futurists’ destroying fire. Delineating the novelty of the Crepuscular literary discourse, my analysis adopts the dual categories of religious and literary Modernism to show how Crepuscularism crosses and overcomes modernist language, developing its own *sui generis* voice of “quiet” Avant-Garde. While classic Modernism focuses on a crisis of the subject, but under a law of a centralized perceiving ego, Crepuscularism moves forward, embracing a new notion of immersive cognition and a fluid body, in which the ego participates in the life of things. From this *comprehension* of the material world, Crepuscular literature can be considered a precursor of Marinetti’s violent techno-universalism, as well as of the material animism of the Florentine second Futurism.

## **2.2 The Crepuscular Dissidence Against Modernity**

Literary modernity constitutes a cross-cultural category used to designate the historical phase that began at the end of nineteenth century.<sup>65</sup> From a socio-cultural perspective in the Italian context, this term refers to the shift that occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century from aristocratic literary regimes, largely based on the patronage of arts, to the bourgeois system, encompassing a wider and less homogenous public, and regulated by the laws of supply and demand. This sociological transformation reflects a radical change in the literary audience—

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<sup>65</sup> This periodization is based on the assumption that literary modernity reflects the socio-economic changes that occurred after the first and the second industrialization, in relation to the progressive rise of the bourgeoisie as the new hegemonic social class. Other views, though, date “literary modernity” back to the sixteenth century, as the invention and diffusion of printing dramatically changed the literary panorama. Yet, even though the introduction of printing modified the consumption and distribution of literature, the sixteenth-century publishing market was still structured on an aristocratic socio-economic system, largely regulated by the patronage of arts typical of the ancient regime.

a variegated group that Vittorio Spinazzola labels “popolo borghese” [bourgeois people] (9)—and a parallel change in the consumption and perception of the aesthetic experience. In this new epoch, largely influenced by the diffusion of non-verbal languages (such as cinema and photography), literature, music, and traditional visual arts lose what Walter Benjamin defined as a sacred aura, to become a mass experience, accessible and available to anyone. Modernity creates a customizable sublime, which is objective, thing-like, and reproducible, but still dreams of attaining a distinctive symbolic experience, purified of any material residue.

To explain the impact of this dramatic cultural change ushered in by modernity, in her analysis of the bourgeois novel culture, Giovanna Rosa quotes the incipit of *Tom Jones* by Henry Fielding. The British novelist uses an effective metaphor to illustrate the shift in the relationship between author and reader, a new situation that would become noticeable in Italy a century later. Opening his book, Fielding states that “an author ought to consider himself, not as a gentlemen who gives a private or eleemosynary treat, but rather as one who keeps a public ordinary, at which all persons are welcome for their money” (1). Thus, the job of the “author-restaurateur” is to provide his various customers—regulars, new, or even occasional clients—with dishes that can satisfy their tastes. In the introductory “Bill of fare to the feast”, Fielding pleases them, placing his menu in plain sight, so people can immediately choose to stay and dine, or go somewhere else. In this dining-metaphor, the “menu” is a clear narrative agreement between author and reader that offers a list of immediately recognizable and usable “products.” According to Fielding, the only way for authors to cope with the rules of an expanding editorial market, dominated by unpredictable needs and desires, is to establish a straightforward communication with their readers by setting their horizon of expectations from the outset.

Welcoming the socio-cultural paradigm of modernity, the British novelist constructs an analogy founded on objects—a menu, items, dishes. The adoption of objects, which could be easily overlooked, says something fundamental about modernity: modernity is an epoch in which the overflowing power of materiality fully emerges, as the agency of things over human life becomes exponentially visible. Yet, Fielding, as any modern writer, stresses the regulating function of the menu, a quasi-object that arises as a medium between human rationality and the overwhelming and chaotic clutter of the matter. Adopting Bruno Latour’s terminology from his essay *We have never been modern*, the menu guarantees the maintenance of the paradox on which modernity rests: allowing for a growing process of mediation between humans and nonhumans, while still prescribing their strict separation. In Fielding’s perspective, literature functions *like a thing*—a good to exchange with a consumer—; literature is indeed *a thing*, and the author pretends to have control of it, through a menu (one more object). Falling into the modern paradox, Fielding is the author and the victim of a short circuit where humans creates laws to rule over objects, but objects have already overtaken humans. His modern hypothesis depends on objective metaphors and fosters the *thingification* of literature itself; and yet, it claims to offer freedom to both the writer and the reader, exhibiting a paradigm based on the “knowledge of objects”, while being strictly controlled by a process of hybridization with the nonhuman dimension—the objects, the market, and the laws imbedded in goods.

Fielding asserts human cognitive supremacy on the realm of things, applying the bourgeois system of supply and demand to the literary system. Yet, what if literature purposefully declared that there are no humans but *in* things and *per* things? If only we stop to consider it, humans constantly transfer their symbolic and moral order on objects, making them things, dense with meaning; therefore humans cannot be abstracted from their material

environment without losing some of their “humanity.” What if the menu challenged the tastes of the customers, demonstrating that their supposed cognitive superiority was a carefully fabricated illusion? This “anti-menu” or “non-menu” puts into questions all the (mis-)conceptions about being human, acknowledging hybridization as the new cognitive and ontological path of an epoch in which “things seem slightly human and humans seem slightly thing-like” but this quasi metamorphosis is not “fully explained by the so-called reifying effects of a society permeated by the commodity form” (Brown, *A sense of things* 13).

In the early twentieth-century global panorama, Crepuscularism shares the vocation of those artistic experiences that polemically address, criticize, or deconstruct a modern cultural model, based on an easily readable “menu” anticipating the expectations of the average bourgeois customer. As a critical response to the bill of fare literature and its fake distinction between inanimate objects and human subjects, Crepuscular poetry can be considered a “cultural phenomenon which, though located within the ambit of modernity, is post- or even anti-modern in ideological terms” (Giles 181).

Two texts are emblematic of the Crepuscular unveiling of the modern paradigm of the “author-restaurateur”, based on a subject *subjected* to things, who is still pretending to be the ruling entity. In Corazzini’s poem “Bando” [Announcement], the poetic persona debases Fielding’s host to a street vendor trying to sell his own ideas: “Avanti! Chi le vuole? / Idee originali / A prezzi normali.” [Come on! Who wants to buy? Original thoughts / at not much over cost.] (*O* 168, *SE* 61). Nevertheless, he suddenly adds an explanation that controverts the initial economic perspective: He does not sell to make money, but to get rid of his thoughts, curl up in the sun, as a cat, and sleep until the end of time. He sells to trade his human nature for a vegetative life, which allows him to overthrow the economic mechanisms that rule the bourgeois

literary system: To make literature a good, while trying to conceal its commercialization, under the claim of aesthetic independence.

A similar *subject(ed)* to modernity is Gozzano's Totò Merùmeni. From the incipit, the text hints at its fictionality, breaking the fourth wall illusion by hinting at the materiality of literature—at its being a book, pages, and paper in denial:

*Col suo giardino incolto, le sale vaste, i bei  
balconi secentisti guarniti di verzura,  
la villa sembra tolta da certi versi miei,  
sembra la villa-tipo, del Libro di Lettura.... (TP 197)<sup>66</sup>*

This paper villa is the house of Totò, a provincial intellectual and “vero figlio del tempo nostro” [true child of these our modern time] (TP 197). As the prototypical good man that Nietzsche fooled, he was also too inept to become a “word-vendor” or to capture a prestigious job in the literary arena. Thus, Totò has turned into the modern parody of the exiled intellectual—nothing more than a forgotten object, a waste of the grandiose literary empyrean, exiled in the realm of the nonhuman: “I suoi compagni sono: una ghiandaia rôca, / un micio, una bertuccia che ha nome Makakita...” [And these companions of his are three: a screeching jay, / a tom-cat, a Barbary ape whose name is Little Margot...] (TP 198, TM 127). Yet, through this *ingaglioffimento*—to borrow a Machiavellian term—Totò rediscovers the more practical, but less mercantilist, value of his literary education: helping children with compositions or writing letters of reference for emigrants. Living like a thing, which “one day was born. One day will die”, Totò actually gains a new cognition of literature, and reacquires the pleasure of poetry, being “almost happy” (TP 197-99).

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<sup>66</sup> With its garden growing wild, with its seventeenth-century / balconies decked with green, with its huge rooms, it looks / like a villa taken from some piece of my poetry, / like a typical villa from the children's Lesson-Books... (TM 125)

The question of things constitutes the dominant, although concealed, inquiry of modernity and provides the grounds for the modernist reconsideration of the material, beyond the cultural logic of production-consumption, which inspired early capitalism. As Bill Brown highlights, “insofar literary modernism structures the doubleness of objects by the inside/outside dichotomy—‘no ideas but in things’—it illuminates the material specificity of reading, of engaging with things—books—that have ideas in them” (*A sense of things* 9). This dual perspective about things emerges in the peculiar role of Crepusculars within the era of literary modernity. On one side, they benefited from a centrifugal push that extended the number of potential readers and “democratized” the literary domain; on the other side, they were attracted by a centripetal force that tried to restore a pre-modern notion of literary autonomy and the hierarchical relationship between author and reader. The conflicting relationship with bourgeois society vividly emerges in a letter by Corazzini, dated June 1906. The poet confesses his acrimony for the bourgeoisie, which is born from a mutual lack of communication:

Tutti questi borghesi inutili e felici mi fanno ribrezzo, e li fuggo con gioia. Sono con essi aspro e monotono come il sentiero d’un monte, ed è perciò naturale in loro una certa avversione ai miei brevi e secchi ragionamenti. (*O* 287)<sup>67</sup>

As Jochen Shulte-Sasse stresses in his preface to Peter Bürger’s *Theory of Avant-Garde*, the widening of the literary audience produced a “confrontation between writer and commercialism, [...] between autonomous ‘high’ literature and a literature given over to the ideological reproduction of society” (9). Exhibiting loathing for his bourgeois audience in a later letter from September 1906, Corazzini declares that the public only deserves the works from

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<sup>67</sup> All these useless and happy bourgeois people disgust me, and I delightfully avoid them. I am harsh and monotonous with them, as the path to a mountain, and it is, thus, natural in them a certain aversion for my short and curt reasoning.

which he wishes to make a profit, but can completely ignore his purest writing (*O* 293).

Although attacking the impasse of modernity in the division between human and Nature (understood as generic matter), Corazzini cannot help but to fall, at times, into the same paradox, criticizing the bourgeois literary system for its hybrid commercialism, in the name of an artificial “artistic purity” with which the author has been *naturally* gifted.

Compared to Corazzini, Gozzano reveals a much more developed expertise and awareness of the editorial market and its mechanisms of mediation between *ideas* and *things*. Publishing Gozzano’s letters to his friend Vallini, Giorgio De Rienzo defines the epistolary collection as “carteggio d’affari” [business correspondence] (11), and proposes reading it as a testimony of Gozzano’s attention to the needs of the cultural market. A conscious reflection on the marketing components emerges from the letters: planning the launch of the editorial product, choosing the most effective material “packaging”, developing the best advertising strategy to reach the audience, and creating alliances with critics and reviewers. For instance, in this passage from a letter dated December 1907, Gozzano gives a lecture in his *ars* of mediation, illustrating the networking game behind his review of *Il giorno* by Vallini, in the Genoese daily newspaper *Il Caffaro*:

Ti prego, ti prego, non essermi riconoscente! Sono riconoscente io a te, che mi hai dato il pretesto per contropelare un po’ questi signori. E non essermi riconoscente, anche, perché la critica che t’ho fatto, potrà benissimo non piacere. Prima di tutto non è una critica: è un articolo piuttosto lungo, tra il letterario e il borghese, che potrà certo fruttarti molti acquirenti (le copie le hai firmate?) perché a Genova in fatto di «letture», signore, signorine, giovanotti eleganti stanno a quanto «n’u l’ha ditto u’ Caffaru». E comperano. Per questo ho intitolato il tuo articolo «*Filosofia che diverte*». (51-52)<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> I beg you, I beg you; do not be grateful to me! I am grateful to you, ’cause you gave me the pretext to rub these gentlemen the wrong way a little bit. And do not be grateful to me, because people could, conceivably, not like the critical piece that I wrote for you. First of all, it isn’t a piece of criticism: it is a rather long article, between literary and bourgeois, that could win you many customers (did you sign the copies?) as in Genoa, regarding readings, ladies, young ladies, elegant young men conform to “what Caffaru said” [in dialect in the original]. And they buy. For this reason I titled the article about you “Philosophy that entertains.”

Gozzano reveals his ability to move deftly through disappointment, obstacles, and scheming within an intricate literary world in which the purest literary inspiration melts under economic and personal issues, as he admits in an outburst: “Oh! Mio caro e povero amico! La stampa, i letterati, i critici, le ambizioni, la poesia, merda, merda, merda!” [Oh! My dear and poor friend! Press, intellectuals, critics, ambitions, poetry, shit, shit, shit!] (*Lettere a Vallini* 50). Literature itself is fecal residue, the lowest and deepest form of encounter between human and nonhuman: something that has been expelled from the body, but in its being an “outside” still retains the most ineffable and abject form of intimate otherness. Thus, it is no surprise that in a later letter to Vallini, Gozzano rejects the materiality of literature, declaring his fear of seeing his name published:

Eppure—lo crederesti—io non ho affatto piacere di vedervi il mio nome! O per meglio dire il piacere è molto inferiore al panico che mi dà l’idea di essere giudicato da una falange di lettori malevoli. (60)<sup>69</sup>

Gozzano’s letters highlight the drama of the independence of *pure* literature: In a free market, literature finally has the *material* possibility of speaking any language, reaching everybody, and yet being heard by no one. The classical ideal of literature as an eternal value clashes with the transient and precarious materiality of a market in which the only truly “conceded form of arrivisme” is a contemptuous isolation that implies a self-condemnation to silence (60). Crepusculars were aware that to ride the wave of the moment, they had to provide their readers with literary *material* that could continue to build and nurture the Italian bourgeois modern epic and fabricate a collective national identity. Not by chance, literary modernity in

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<sup>69</sup> Though—would you believe it?—I am not pleased at all to see my name on it. Or better, the pleasure is much inferior to the fear that I have of the idea of being judged by a phalanx of malevolent readers.



Italy finds its elective genres in historic novels and *bildungsroman*. These two formulas provided a master narrative that:

evaluates both a protagonist and the field of possibilities in which he or she acquires a social identity on the basis of whether they further or frustrate such a synthesis. This standard and its disciplinary rhetoric are what we generally mean by the term bourgeois morality [...]. Often suspicious of pleasure, unconcerned with profit, and heedless of life's little necessities, bourgeois morality appears the assertion of pure individuality. (Armstrong 349)

Tailoring a dream of individuality, purged of any contact with the realm of the nonhuman, was indeed the mission of the modern epopee. On the contrary, Crepuscularism, sharing a common characteristic with Modernist literature, muddies the modern process of purification, invoking, as Astradur Eystensson notes, “the bourgeois subject [...] more through negation than affirmation. Hence [it] can be seen as the negative-other of capitalist-bourgeois ideology and of the ideological space of harmony demarcated for the bourgeois subject” (*The Concept of Modernism* 37). That space is indeed a cage. This is the message of “Cocotte” by Gozzano, in which the gate acts as a powerful objective correlative of feeling trapped in the claustrophobia of the bourgeois subject. The poem recalls the memory of an odd episode, which happened to the author when, as a little boy, he was spending a vacation at the beach with his family. A prostitute, who lived next to their house, encroached on the territory of bourgeois morality, stretching her arm through the dividing gate to hand a piece of candy to him. His mother immediately felt the urge to explain the status of that “dangerous woman”, according to the bourgeois moral code:

«Una cocotte!...»  
«Che vuol dire mamma?»  
«Vuol dire una cattiva signorina:  
non bisogna parlare alla vicina» (TP 191)<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> “A cocotte!...” / “Mamma, what does that word mean?” / “It means a wicked lady who lives in sin: / I don’t want you to talk to her again!” (TM 117)

The parental figure rises as a sudden personification of the class Law of the Father blocking the infantile fantasies of the boy, who finds the word *cocotte* fascinating for its Parisian sound, which combines the image of an egg and a hen.<sup>71</sup> Yet, the little boy takes his own revenge in the literary field, allowing for the disruption of that guarded cage and for the contamination of the bourgeois subject, with an infinite world of things, opened by the piece of candy offered by the *cocotte*.

Rather than offering a clear and plain narrative agreement with the audience, Crepuscular authors tease and disorient the reader, substituting the realistic, linear consequentiality of the nineteenth-century bourgeois novel with a modernist “deformed fiction” that, according to Peter Nicholls, does not provide metaphysical reassurance but “present[s] a ‘history’ in which human purpose and intention are no longer legible” (21-22). From this viewpoint, Renato Poggioli’s challenging statement that “the genuine art of a bourgeois society can be only anti-bourgeois” (120) makes actual sense, as it highlights the heart of the criticism of intellectuals about the mechanisms of their own world. Crepuscularism, thus, attacks the hidden ambiguity of modernity in its attempt at mediating the encounter of human and nonhuman, while trying to separate these two realms. In its polemic vocation, Crepuscularism could not exist without modernity, as its pre-modern or “unmodern” poetic becomes Avant-Garde only by promoting a cognitive approach that asserts things as the ultimate frontier of knowledge. Things become the true sphinx of modernity, by trapping in material that human essence that humans cannot isolate, not even in their body. Only by knocking down the monolithic pretense that being human means

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<sup>71</sup> In this respect, it is worth remembering that Gozzano’s father died when Guido was still a child, and the mother, Diodata, was the only parental figure with whom the poet grew up.

being different from things can literature suggest new ways to approach materiality and the human *je-ne-sais-quoi* imbedded in it.

### 2.3 Italian Modernism as Modern Religious Crisis

In discussing literary modernity, the dominion of Modernism is unavoidable. Modernism is a critical term that has only become familiar in Italian culture in recent years. In the 2007 introduction to a collection of essays, entitled *Italian Modernism*, the editors Luca Somigli and Mario Moroni felt the need to point out that “the issue is not that Italian culture has not gone through a ‘modernist’ phase [...] but rather that the word [Modernism], if not the phenomenon itself, has until recently had very little purchase in Italian arts and letters” (3). Nevertheless, the term “Modernismo” is not unfamiliar to Catholic historiography, as it was coined in the context of a religious debate and refers to a movement, banned as heretical in 1907 by Pope Pius X through the encyclical *Pascendi dominis gregis*.<sup>72</sup> Somigli and Moroni briefly mention that the religious trend can be culturally linked to a coeval cultural ferment, generally visible in “the spiritual meditation of several writers of the period preceding the First World War, who saw both the necessity for a spiritual renewal after the crisis of nineteenth-century positivism and the loss of faith in the power of positivist science” (5). I argue that the connection between the religious crisis and the new literary movements is deeper than a cultural contiguity and can provide a strong argument for the wide adoption of the term “Modernism” in the Italian literary field. The

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<sup>72</sup> In a footnote, Daniele Rolando refers that, according to the historian of Modernism, Albert Houtin, the origin of the name dates at 1904, when Mgr. Benigni used this term in a pejorative acceptance; then, in 1905, the term made its first appearance in official ecclesiastic documents, condemning the Bishops of Turin and Vercelli (7, n2).

term actually highlights the common cross-cultural eagerness to amend traditions perceived as limiting or constraining.

Religious Modernism was a global phenomenon, inspired by a fervor for reform, which spread through Western culture at the beginning of the twentieth century. As Paolo Marangon explains, the Modernist movement had already developed in Germany (“Reformkatholizismus”) and in the United States (“Americanismo”), before exploding in Italy and France (55). The diffusion of these reformatory thoughts finds its common root in a genuine attempt to renew the Roman Church from the inside, updating its cultural backwardness and opening Catholicism to the latest scientific and philosophical positions. It is possible to find a “proto-Modernism” in the theories of Cardinal Henri Newman, a former Evangelical priest, who was a central academic figure in Ireland in the mid-nineteenth century. Newman was an advocate of religious ecumenism and dialogue between the Church and science. Along with other borderline orthodox ideas, he drew from Charles Darwin’s theories to formulate his notion of the evolution of dogma and conceived “natural religion” as a form of intuitive knowledge of God that any individual can comprehend without the rational or theoretical mediation of Catholic doctrine.

Italian Modernism was not a schismatic group, but collected the dissatisfaction against the old-fashioned views of the Roman Church. In *Il cattolicesimo rosso*, which appeared in 1908, Prezzolini provides harsh criticism of Catholicism, comparing the Church to a political government that is more interested in external obedience than intimate consensus (30). From the perspective of closeness and blind submission to a set of practices, the “good Catholic” is one who no longer thinks, and refrains from any differing ideas to avoid heretical or “dangerous” messages (30). Prezzolini offers an effective representation of the Catholic situation in the early twentieth century, dividing Catholics into two groups: the old-fashioned and autocratic blacks

versus the democratic reds. The interesting aspect of the red Catholics is their connection to a general notion of modernity, understood as both sincere religious enthusiasm and *naïve* excitement for radical change:

Ma ciò che sta proprio a cuore dei giovani cattolici è la loro modernità. Con questa sperano di servire a rieccitare la vita del Cattolicesimo minacciato di tabe senile e di rimetterlo in contatto con i tempi. (282)

La smania di novità non è soltanto intellettuale: i nuovi cattolici sono assai contenti dei vescovi americani che adottano i mezzi moderni di locomozione o di réclame, che vanno al Vaticano in carrozza da nolo e magari in tram, che non apprezzano più come i latini cerimoniali fastosi. (283)<sup>73</sup>

The fundamental points of this enthusiastic search for renewal, which spread not only through the action of the Modernist clergy, but also due to writers and intellectuals, can be found in *Lettere di un preta modernista* by Ernesto Bonaiuti, one of the major representatives of this religious reformism. His letters endorse the idea of religious sentiment as a subjective and individual experience that can elevate any man to the rank of Messiah (142). In addition, Bonaiuti promotes an optimistic view of Christianity, unmediated by theological speculation, which he identifies with the religious ardor of the first Christians, and interprets religiosity as an instinctive need of the soul for hope and salvation.

In 1907, the encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis* collected and rejected all reformist theories, under the label of “Modernismo.” According to this official ecclesiastic document, Modernism was a heresy based on an immanent explanation of God and religious faith, as expressions of an unconscious and innate need of human nature. The anti-transcendentalism of the Modernist positions was influenced by a theological adaptation of American Pragmatism; in

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<sup>73</sup> What lies at the heart of the young Catholics is their modernity. Through this they hope to help re-excite the life of Catholicism, which has been threatened from senile tabes.

The itch for novelties is not only intellectual: the new Catholics are very happy with the American bishops, who use modern means of transportation or communication, who go to the Vatican by hackney carriage and even by tram, who no longer appreciate the sumptuous ceremonials, as Latins still do.

this revised version of Pragmatic theory, God can be found inside man, and the divine is concretely actuated in human actions and creations. From this perspective, religiosity becomes a form of human energies in its more primitive and spontaneous expressions (Rolando 32). The diffusion of these positions generated a variety of pseudo-doctrines that predicated the possibility of discovering God in human nature, and saw humanity pervaded and animated by divine spirit, as Prezzolini explains in his work *Che cos'è il modernismo*:

Il pensiero dell'immanenza non considera più Dio come estraneo all'uomo [...] ma va sempre più scoprendo Dio nell'uomo e la rivelazione in tutte le rivelazioni, e la giustizia e la bontà e la verità non in un canone o in un catechismo, ma nella creazione fantastica e filosofica dell'uomo. (202)<sup>74</sup>

The application of Pragmatist philosophy to the religious sphere is also visible in Papini's speculation on the fusion between man and God. In his essay *Pragmatismo*, he argues that the idea of "Uomo-Dio" [Man-God] has three meanings: the Christian dogma of incarnation; the mystic idea of divine fusion and participation of the individual soul in the universal being; and the magic notion of imitation, understood as a divinization of the soul, namely "l'uomo che s'india" [the man that divinizes himself] (61-62). The search for coexistence of humanity and divinity is also related to mystical movements that conceived religious sentiment as an individual rediscovery and a psychological experience of religious sentiment. As Laura Wittman highlights, the common aspect of Modernism "is the typical mystical tension in redefining old paradigms through experience and asserting that experience itself is the new paradigm" (Somigli and Moroni 135).

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<sup>74</sup> The thought of immanence no longer considers God as extraneous to man [...] but is discovering more and more God in man and the revelation in all the revelations, and is finding justice, and goodness, and truth not in a canon or in a catechism, but in the fantastic and philosophical creation of man.

Although the Crepuscular inclination towards mysticism is not directly connected with the religious Modernist experience, it is possible to note some general aspects of cultural closeness, as well as similar targets. Modernism and Crepuscularism demonstrate an analogous search for intimacy that, far from being a form of debasement, becomes a privileged path towards the encounter with the divine. Modernism was open to admitting a certain degree of immanence in God, a theme that becomes pivotal in the Crepuscular “poetics of things”, which is a *sui generis* mysticism of materiality. Another nodal link between religious Modernism and Crepuscularism relies on attacking the pomposity of the canon by proposing language that is modern but also purposefully “primitive” and, in a way, “pre-modern.” Both Modernist and Crepuscular anti-traditionalism recovers a heritage that is perceived as remote and authentic, to define a new and provocative paradigm. Like religious Modernism, Crepuscularism rediscovers the faith of the early Christians as a form of unmediated intuition of the divine through the body. Crepuscular poetry returns to the theme of the sacrifice of the flesh and borrows from the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century lyric the *topos* of love as a malady. Poetry can express its transcendental message only by grasping the spirituality embedded in materiality—that corporeal and immanent residue of transcendence.

#### **2.4 To What Extent Was Crepuscularism Modernist?**

In Italy, Modernism represents a mistreated category, chronologically squeezed between Romanticism and the 1930s’ movements inspired by a return to order, critically lost in a plethora of specific literary-isms, and linguistically interchanged with the religious movement and a vague idea of literary modernity. As Ulrich Schulz-Buschhaus explains, the distinction between

modern, modernity, and Modernism has always suffered from a certain ambiguity, due to the polysemy imbedded in these concepts in various national cultures. For instance, in German culture, the concept of “modern” refers to Jürgen Habermas’ idea of the uncompleted project, which conceives modernity as an ongoing project of emancipation. In the Anglo-Saxon context, Modernism designates a literary epoch, marked by authors such as Thoms Eliot, Viginia Woolf, and Ezra Pound. In the Iberic culture, the category of Modernism includes authors like Félix Rubén Darío or Ramón María de Valle-Iclán, who are closer to D’Annunzio than to the Anglo-Saxon Modernist writers (33-34). One of the limits of Modernism, and yet one of its strengths, is that it offers a wide critical paradigm inspired by a critical vocation toward inclusiveness and openness. The paradigm is still not exempt from theoretical frustration and Fredric Jameson has even suggested that “it might be better to admit that the notions that cluster around the word ‘modern’ are as unavoidable as they are unacceptable” (*A Singular Modernity* 13).

Due to the chameleonic nature of the Modernist macro-category, Italian scholars have traditionally shown certain reservations in adopting the term in their critical language. Nevertheless, blaming the broad scope of Modernist studies would not explain the Italian resistance. The principal reason Modernism was never popularized in Italian literature was the success of Postmodernism. Instead of marking an era beyond Modernism, this gigantic framework has represented, for decades, *the* passe-partout critical tool, dilating to the point of erasing its chronological boundaries, and phagocytizing its own Modernist origins. The lack of a Modernist theory in Italy has produced an extreme situation in which Postmodernism is a category that speaks for itself, even though, as Giampaolo Biasin sharply noted in an article from 1991, in Italy, “nobody ever spoke of modernism” (173). This provocative statement can explain, for instance, why Giuseppe Zaccaria has recently provided a Postmodernist reading of



Gozzano's work, but no Italian scholar has ever called Gozzano, or any Crepuscular writer, Modernist. Yet, in the late years, Modernism has gradually entered the Italian critical discourse and scholars like Raffaele Donnarumma, Romano Luperini, and Massimiliano Tortora have adopted this critical category as a locus of encounter and assimilation of contrasting tendencies.

Modernism constitutes an ideal intersection between the crisis of Positivism and the rise of new positions, such as Nietzschean and Bersonian philosophy, and Freud's psychoanalysis. It also creates a bridge that connects the epistemological breaking point with the nineteenth-century literary tradition, creating the foundation for the later development of the Avant-Garde. In this prospect of continuity that assimilates the past while pre-visioning the future, the influence of French models on Crepuscular poetry assumes a value that goes beyond a search for emulation. It is difficult, and relatively unfruitful, to demonstrate a direct filiation between Symbolism and Crepuscularism. As Livi explains in his detailed comparative analysis of the two movements, the simple fact that some French books or journals were found in the Crepusculars' private libraries or are quoted in their notebooks is not sufficient evidence of the impact that these works had on Crepuscular authors. Similarly, chronological data cannot determine the Crepusculars' actual exposure to Symbolist literature and circumscribe their exact readings (21).<sup>75</sup> Thus, Crepuscularism cannot be considered the Italian surrogate of French Symbolism, nor can it be equated with a depowered Dannunzianism, or interpreted as the passive-aggressive protest of a group of young poets against their acclaimed Italian literary fathers. Crepuscular experimentation goes beyond xenophilic epigonism or a *scapigliata* juvenile search for new expressive languages. Although the movement has been read as a negative voice or as "what it is not", I would like to

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<sup>75</sup> For an analytic account of the analogies between French Symbolism and Italian Crepuscularism, reference François Livi, *Dai Simbolisti ai Crepuscolari*, cit.

propose an apophantic critical language for this phenomenon, which currently occupies a marginal, virgin territory on the border of French Symbolism, Italian Decadentism, Scapigliatura, and the early Avant-Garde. The inquiry starts with considering whether Modernism can provide a suitable framework for Crepuscular poetry. Can we speak of Crepuscularism as Italian Modernism, and, if yes, to what extent?

Including the Crepuscular movement in the Modernist discourse introduces the preliminary question of a critical framework, on which the debate has been very prolific, bringing about many interesting and at times contrasting views on the topic. As an artistic reflection on the unfinished (or non-existent) project of modernity, Modernism presents the same constitutional characteristic of being a work in progress. The open plan is to link different cultures and languages, under the common experience of having elaborated a response to the encounter with modernity—conceived either as an actual paradigm or a paradoxical pretense. The polymorphic nature of Modernism has produced a broad cultural basis and a dialogic platform for various artistic phenomena that developed from the second half of the nineteenth century through the first few decades of the twentieth century. Yet, some of these phenomena seem to share a peculiar “degree” of programmatic violence in their encounter with modernity, and as such they cannot be classified as Modernism, but rather Avant-Garde.

Addressing this ambiguity, in the article “Revisiting the Concepts of Modernism and Avant-Garde”, Astraduran Eysteinnsson argues that, despite the innumerable theories on the nature of Modernism and Avant-Garde, there is no clear dividing line between these two cultural tendencies, but rather a “fluid difference” that “often takes the form of reciprocity and dialogue” (33). Crepuscularism, with its quiet voice of rebellion, presents an idiosyncratic form of Modernism at the threshold of the Avant-Garde that subsumes a passive-aggressive nature,

“making them rub against one another” (33) the insurrectionary intention of the authors, with their resigned and melancholic *modus operandi*. This dual nature is hard to pigeonhole, as Crepuscularism occupies a border area, in which anti-traditionalism does not challenge the intelligibility of language, maintaining the cover of observing the past, while tilling the terrain of tradition to revert, parodize, and weaken its canon. In his reflection on Modernism, Eysteinnsson, though aware of the limitations and risks of any rigid mapping and classification, proposes the following list of key elements that constitute Avant-Garde modernism and “classical modernism”—the former understood as a more radical form of Modernism, the latter as a more moderate movement:

**Parameters of avant-garde modernism (the avant-garde)**

- Radical experimentation/the “shock” of the new
- Experiments/the unfinished work/foregrounding of work-in-progress
- The movement element/group activity
- The anti-aesthetic/the anti-art/iconoclastic representation, radicalized to the point of erasing the border of art and other activities
- Revolt against art institutions (including literary institutions)
- Performance, both in the sense of live appearances and the focus on performative aspects in various genres and works
- Play (in the full ambiguity of that word), change, disorder, chaos
- Revolution/utopian references (often parodic)
- Poetic representation/attacks on political institutions, dominant ideologies and discourses (32)

**Parameters of ‘classical’ modernism**

- Making its new/tradition as problematic, renegotiated skeptically but often enthusiastically
- Modern form, something fragmentary, open, porous
- Aesthetics subverting historical and social representation and symbolic order
- Upheaval of language/discourse, manifested e.g. in linguistic excess/superabundance or minimalism of language or the medium/genre concerned

- Crisis of the subject (including crisis of sexuality, gender, race)
- The inward turn (“invironment” vs. environment in realist texts)/exploration of consciousness and the subconscious
- Modern landscapes, the urban, technological world (but often via “invironment”)
- Negativity, anti-rationality (questioning premises of “common” sense; modern rationality runs into its “other”, into primitivism, myth...)
- Hermeticism, obscurity (33).

In his list of characteristics, Eysteinsson touches upon the notion of “invironment”, without developing how this concept provides the transitional path from Classical modernism to the Avant-Garde. Though facing the crisis of the subject and stating the question of things, as Brown indicates, Modernism resolves the conflict of “ego versus nature/society”, imploding the latter into the inward vortex of an I who consumes, absorbs, and internalize *everything*. In his irrational wondering through scattered thoughts, fragmented memories, and subconscious voices, this tentacular ego is annihilating any division between inside and outside to create the all-encompassing dimension of “invironment.” In this respect, the Proustian madeleine stands out as the most iconic object of Modernism: real and thing-like, the tea biscuit serves the ego as a trigger to release a flow of lost memories from childhood. The madeleine is the medium of a process that, although stressing the function of things beyond their utility, still maintains the primacy of the ego as the perceiver who *subjectivizes* them. The title itself of Marcel Proust’s work, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, stresses the individual’s will to find and make his own memories, while the English translation, *Remembrance of Things Past*, highlights the cognitive gap between the remembering subject, namely the cognitive agent, and the remembered objects, the outcome of this search.

If, as Luperini and Tortora state, Modernism crumbles the paradigm of objectivity (7), the Avant-Garde radicalizes this collapse, creating an alternative approach to the object as a *quid* that overcomes the factual and that cannot be exhausted by the cannibal action of the ego. This tendency opens further considerations on the Avant-Garde erosion of the border between art and other activities. It could be affirmed that Modernism trespasses into the Avant-Garde when purposefully contaminating the purity of art with its unartistic residuals to the point of a chaotic art-non-art, neither artifact, nor quotidian object. The Avant-Garde breaks the boundaries between the human sublime fabricated by an artist-demiurge and the nonhuman “unsublime”, made of raw life and its forms. In other words, the Avant-Garde works to reduce and deny the artificial filter between the world of inanimate objects and the dimension of human subjectivity. Thus, while “modernism’s own ‘discourse of things’ [...] is far from consistent in what it reveals as the source of their animation” (Brown, *A Sense of Things* 12),<sup>76</sup> the Avant-Garde fills in the gap and *performs* the integration of humans and things in a single, assimilating paradigm. Adopting a wide range of strategies and languages, Avant-Garde experiences are connected by the common recreation of a primitive Pangea, in which the territories of human and nonhuman are unified in the universal space of things.

In the Italian cultural panorama, Crepuscularism testifies to a middle ground in which Modernism overflows into the Avant-Garde, illustrating a gradual passage from “the poetics of the things of the ego” to “the poetics of the ego of things”, which will later reach its acme in Futurism. Within the paradigm of Modernism, Crepuscular poetry can be reread as a

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<sup>76</sup> In elaborating his theory of things, Brown borrows from Benjamin’s reflection on materiality, arguing that the philosopher had realized that Avant-Garde worked to make it known that the world is full of “quasi-objects” and “quasi-subjects” (12).

“fluctuating” literary experiment, transitioning from classical Modernism to the Avant-Garde. Through its skeptical, ironic, and melancholic voice, Crepuscular poetry crosses and invalidates the nineteenth-century’s cognitive models of relationship between humans and things—Giovanni Verga’s estranged and impersonal observer, the Dannunzian panicked absorption of ego and nature, the Symbolist *correspondances*, and Pascoli’s poetics of domestic objects as symbols of a lost familial nest.

This transition is particularly visible in some key texts, including “Il mio cuore”, the introductory poem of Corazzini’s first collection, *Dolcezza*. The text expresses an ultimate attempt to align with a poetics of things as objects-state of mind, which make the correspondence between the ego’s inaccessible feelings and the outside world visible. Corazzini compares his bleeding heart to the ink that nourishes his poetry: “Il mio cuore è una rossa / macchia di sangue dove / io bagno senza possa / la penna” [My heart is a red / stain of blood where / I restless dip / my pen] (*O* 100). Establishing the identification between the act of writing and the locus of intuitive thinking and passion—the heart—the author remains fully within the Modernist projective paradigm where objects, like the pen, are emanations of the human subject. In his third collection, *Piccolo libro inutile* [Little useless book], Corazzini’s Crepuscularism evolves from intuitive thinking that translates objects into the ideas and emotions of the poetic persona, to a symbiotic cognition. From this new perspective, the Modernist system of correspondence between subject and object evolves from an analogic language to an actual desire for self-objectification, to feel the mental and corporal sensations of an inert body—the redeeming will of Corazzini’s little child being forgotten by humans, becoming prey, sold, beaten.

Mixing the dominion of the object with that of the human subject, the Crepuscular negative egotism demolishes both Rationalist-Cartesian egocentrism and the Romantic cult of

the hero, while progressively dismissing the Modernist motif of the crisis of the ego.

Anticipating the drastic Futurist claim “Distuggere nella letteratura l’«io»” [destroying the ego in literature] (*TIF* 50), Crepuscularism revisits the concept of the ego in a state of flux, in which human psychology fuses the energies released by matter, overcoming the boundaries of individuality. Although not definitely erasing the ego, Crepusculars explore possible alternatives to the nineteenth-century model of subject, gradually moving from the unifying ideal of humanity to the connective tissue provided by the notion of human “thing-ness” as a nexus between human and material life. The negation and dissolution of the perceiving ego emerges very strongly within the “school of irony.” Gozzano talks about his poetic persona using the ironic self-epithet “cosa vivente” [living thing], whereas Vallini, in the poem “La morte” [The Death] addresses the ego as the actual polemic target of Crepuscular rebellion: “l’io per ciascuna persona / è come un’amante noiosa / che stanca sopra ogni cosa / ma che tuttavia non si dona” [The ego, for each person / is like an annoying lover / that exhausts a ton / but you cannot win her over] (*UGA* 97).

From a stylist point of view, the abolition of the analogy typical of Avant-Garde language is visible in the verbal minimalism of Crepuscular poetry, in which chains of nouns flow through a virtually automated writing of lists of things. More generally, through these sequences of objects, the Crepuscular aesthetic aims to subvert the *status quo*, allowing the ordinary, the kitsch, the grotesque, the camp, the ridiculous, the paradoxical, and the (proto)surrealist to invade and take over the literary field and its arbitrary boundaries. An effective example of this strategy is “Crepuscolo” by Govoni, a poem based on the idea of contaminating and deconstructing the sublime image of twilight. The poem flows in a series of pounding anaphoras

that seem to demolish the romantic imagery of the twilight scenery, turning it into a quotidian, vulgar, poverished, but, in its way, heartbreaking “sublime”:

*È l'ora in cui le meretrici fumano le pipe puzzolenti alle finestre*  
[...]  
*È l'ora in cui i pazzi dentro i manicomi cantano.*  
[...]  
*È l'ora in cui la luna al suo balcone s'affaccia simile a una principessa.*  
[...]  
*È l'ora in cui le viscide tristezze escono dai tetti muffidi dell'anima come pipistrelli (P 111)<sup>77</sup>*

This new cognitive attitude towards things, understood as visible signs of the ungraspable beyond on which life depends, shows the irrational, extraordinary side of quotidian life, the “vita tranquilla” and “meschina” [tranquil and petty life] that Vallini sings of as a distortion of the bourgeois norm (*UGA*, “Alcuni desideri” 92).

## 2.5 Crepuscularism and Futurism(s): Anti-Positivist Reechoing Voices

The common notion of the Italian Avant-Garde is transfixed on Futurism. Marinetti’s movement is conceived as a compact group that acted for a radical, pan-artistic reinvention of the entire cultural panorama—from literature to visual arts, from cinema to theater, from music to gastronomy—in accordance with an innovative paradigm based on speed, dynamism, and energetic violence. In this over-simplification, Crepuscularism, with its passive attitude, offers an opposing method to the same cultural ideals, namely the search for an original expressive path that could escape the two great Italian models—D’Annunzio and Pascoli—and the slavish

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<sup>77</sup> It’s the time when the strumpets smoke pipes at the windows. / [...] / It’s the time when mad people in nuthouses sing. / [...] / It’s the time when the moon looks out from her balcony like a princess. / [...] / It’s the time when the slimy sadnesses leave the molded roofs of the soul like bats.



imitation of French Symbolists. Walter Binni, in 1936, originated an explanation of Futurism and Crepuscularism as two sides of the same coin, linked by an analogous matrix:

I crepuscolari e i futuristi significano, dopo l'estetismo dannunziano e il pascolianesimo, una risoluzione dei due grandi poeti in una diffusa civiltà, una prosecuzione esasperata delle loro poetiche, e insieme come un aggiornamento della loro sensibilità su quella tipicamente decadente europea. (152)

I crepuscolari hanno per loro vicini immediati i futuristi, da cui, ad un esame superficiale sembra dividerli un abisso. In realtà futuristi e crepuscolari non sono che uno stesso momento spirituale svolto in due maniere psicologicamente diverse: da una parte, poetica delle piccole cose quotidiane, e quindi scoratezza e rinunzia; dall'altra, poetica del dinamismo, del violento, prepotente accettazione della realtà: predominio in ambedue i casi della più grezza psicologia, tentativo sentimentale, volitivo, e solo mediamente artistico. (165)<sup>78</sup>

Binni's binary opposition, which has guided critics for decades, has the undoubted advantage of linking the Crepuscular and Futurist experiences to the same cultural roots. Nevertheless, his explanation unites while dividing. Both phenomena are unified under the idea of a gauche and rushed departure from the masters of Italian poetry, yet the two "pseudo-artistic reactions" seem to radically diverge in their literary outcomes. The question is if the abyss that separates Crepuscularism and Futurism ever existed or, as my reading suggests, is the product of the critical work of selection and interpretation, creating then dividing the Crepuscular passive lament from the Futurist boosted modernolatriy.

The relationships between Crepusculars and Futurists are historically documented and prove that the threshold between the movements was more of a gradient. In 1910, Federico De

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<sup>78</sup> Crepusculars and Futurists mean, after Dannunzian estheticism and Pascoli's artistic experience, a resolution of these two great poets in a popularized culture, an exasperated prosecution of their two poetics, and also a kind of update to their sensibility in relation to the typically Decadent European sensibility.

Crepusculars are the Futurists' closest neighbors, even though, from a superficial examination, an abyss seems to divide the two. Actually, Futurists and Crepusculars are nothing more than the same spiritual phenomenon, developed in two different psychological ways: from one side, the poetics of the little quotidian things, and indeed discouragement and resignation; on the other side, the poetics of dynamism, of violent, aggressive acceptance of reality: in both cases [they show] the predominance of the roughest psychology, a sentimental, determined attempt, and only relatively artistic.

Maria, a poet close to Corazzini, expressly stated the precursor role of Crepuscularism, affirming that, since 1902, his group had launched a vibrant artistic program that anticipated “quel futurismo che adesso impazza” [that Futurism that now in in full swing] (Villa, *Il Crepuscularismo* 88). The Futurist “conversion” of poets and artists linked to the Roman circle, such as Govoni and Palazzeschi, further testify that these two poetic sensibilities were twin souls, rather than manifestations of distinct characteristics. The incompatibility between the two movements was never as stressed as is commonly assumed; calling himself a “mezzo figliol prodigo” [half prodigal son], Govoni, in a letter to Marinetti from October 1910, even affirmed:

Io sono sempre stato (e tu te ne sarai certamente accorto) poco futurista, almeno nell'intenzione; sono sempre stato riluttante nell'accettare certe tue idee e massime che non mi sembravano del tutto confacenti alla mia indole e cozzanti con la mia educazione. (*Lettere a F.T. Marinetti* 54)<sup>79</sup>

Moreover, it is barely mentioned that artists like Severini, Balla, and Boccioni were familiar with the Roman Crepuscular group, before joining Marinetti's movement.<sup>80</sup> This relation emerges, for instance, in Corazzini's dedications of his collections to the painter Gino Severini, who the Crepuscular leader defined as a “fratello nel puro ideale” [brother in the pure ideal] and encourages to proceed in his coming artistic battles (*O* 308). Reciprocally, in his memoir, the Futurist painter recalled his friendship with Corazzini and highlights the Avant-gardism of the young and sick poet:

Un altro scrittore che veniva spesso con noi, ma non di notte a causa della sua fragile salute, era il giovane poeta Sergio Corazzini, legato da profonda amicizia soprattutto con me. Morì un anno dopo la mia partenza da Roma, nel 1907, a ventun anni. Mi ricordo sempre questo gentilissimo amico con profondo rammarico per la sua fine prematura.

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<sup>79</sup> I have always been (and you must surely have realized it) a little of a futurist, at least in my intention; I have always been reluctant in accepting some of your ideas and maxims that did not seem entirely suitable to my character and clashing with my education.

<sup>80</sup> Cfr. Gino Severini. *La vita di un pittore*, Milano, Edizioni di Comunità, 1965, p. 27. Severini provides further information on the artistic relations between Ferenzona and Boccioni and Balla, in *Ricordi romani e parigini. Tra «neo» e «pre» coerenza di Ciacelli*.

Era un poeta di estrema sensibilità. Come noi per gli impressionisti, egli aveva la più ardente curiosità e la più profonda ammirazione per i simbolisti francesi, in particolare Rimbaud, Laforgue. Verso il 1905-6 aveva già pubblicato tre volumetti di versi: *Dolcezza*, *L'amaro calice*, e *Le aureole*, che erano più che promesse, forse anticipazioni vere e proprie, come fu riconosciuto più tardi. La sua morte mi addolorò profondamente. (*Vita di un pittore* 28)<sup>81</sup>

To reference other cases of overlapping between Crepuscularism and Futurism, Oxilia, declared in “Addio ai poeti crepuscolari” [Farewell to the Crepuscular poets]: “morto è il Passato e con le baionette / stiamo uccidendo il Presente / per mettere in trono il Futuro” [the Past is dead and with the bayonets / we are killing the Present / to put the Future on the throne], but always maintained a double Crepuscular-Futurist identity (*Poesie* 187). Similarly, in the iconoclast anthology *I poeti futuristi* [Futurist poets], Govoni published a poem, “Notte” [Night] “Alla memoria dell’amico indimenticabile Sergio Corazzini” [To the memory of the unforgettable friend Sergio Corazzini] (267). The text revisits, in a Futurist light, Crepuscular topics and settings, such as the poor tabernacle with a plaster Mary and paper flowers in a tomato can, suddenly setting in opposition the terrestrial squalor of the twilight, with a dynamic, interstellar life:

*O via su una cometa automobile  
dal lungo strascico di madreperla,  
[...]  
Lungo la via lattea  
a sollevare polvere di mondi...  
[...]  
O stelle qual' è il vostro scopo?  
Qual è la vostra vita?  
Siete voi la sublime prova,*

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<sup>81</sup> Another writer who often used to come with us, but not at night due to his weak health, was the young poet Sergio Corazzini, linked by an intimate friendship, especially with me. He died after my departure from Rome, in 1907, when he was twenty-one. I always remember this very kind friend with deep regret for his premature end.

He was a poet of extreme sensibility. Like as with the Impressionists, he had the most ardent curiosity and the deepest admiration for the French Symbolists, in particular Rimbaud, Laforgue. Around 1905-06, he had already published three little books of verses: *Dolcezza*, *L'amaro calice*, e *Le aureole*, which were more than promises, perhaps out-and-out anticipations, as it was acknowledged only later.

His death made me deeply sad.

*d'una ricchezza soprannaturale,  
d'una gioia superterrestre? (PF 269)*<sup>82</sup>

Marinetti himself, before 1909, revolved around Symbolist and esoteric circles, meeting artists, like the dandy musician Giuseppe Vannicola, who was later in the *entourage* of Corazzini's group.<sup>83</sup> The Futurist founder provides the most iconic example of shifting from late Symbolism to the heated Futurist attack, and testifies to what Cinzia Sartini Blum defines as “a paroxysmal development, both sclerotic and hypertrophic, of the symbolist style and of the decadent pursuit of extreme experiences and sensations” (7). Marinetti's early production in French functions as an ideal bridge between Symbolism and Crepuscularism. Marinetti experienced the influence of Jammes and, as Paolo Valesio underscores, the initial poetic vein of the leader of Futurism vividly recalls Crepuscular poetry. The following lines from “Les vieux marins” illustrate Marinetti's use of “crepuscular” colors and images to represent a melancholic, twilight marine scene:

*Un soir qu'il faisait rouge  
En un port glauque, fleurant le musc et les embruns,  
Le vieux couchant meurtri  
Traînant au fond des bouges son angoisse senile,  
En son sang purulait  
Tragiquement, au couer des vitres mortes.  
—Un soir qu'il faisait rouge... (Selected Poems 169)*<sup>84</sup>

After founding Futurism, Marinetti drastically rejected his Symbolist past, and his defense of Palazzeschi against accusations of not being a true Futurist provides one of the

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<sup>82</sup> Let's go on a comet-car / With a long mother-of-pearl trail, / [...] / Through the Milky Way / To raise power of worlds... / [...] / Oh stars what is your purpose? / What is your life? / Are you the sublime evidence, / of a supernatural richness, / of an extra-terrestrial joy?

<sup>83</sup> Emanuele Bardazzi refers that Marinetti met Vannicola in Milan, when the musician worked as first violinist at La Scala Theater. Vannicola used to perform in private esoteric meeting that Marinetti attended, while in Milan (22).

<sup>84</sup> One night when it was red / In a sea-green port, flowering musk and spray, / The old battered sunset / Dragged its senile agony down in the shacks, / and its blood oozed / Tragically, through the dead windows' heart / —One night when it was red... (Selected Poems 3)

fiercest Futurist anti-Symbolist manifestos. Marinetti's main argument is that Palazzeschi dismissed all the typical Romantic, and later Symbolist, *topoi, loci*—cemeteries, hospitals, cloisters, alleys of death towns...—and “sacri custodi” [sacred keepers]—Lamartine, Leopardi, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rodembach, and Maeterlinck—with an ironic laugh (*Il poeta futurista Aldo Palazzeschi, TIF 63*).<sup>85</sup> According to Marinetti, his friend created a parody of Romanticism and, with the apparent thoughtlessness of a child, taught Italy to merrily deride academic professors, disregarding all stylistic and linguistic prohibitions (*TIF 64*). Yet, Marinetti seems to purposefully overlook Palazzeschi's Crepuscular past. He prefers to mention *en passant* French authors, representative of old Romantic sentimentalism, rather than acknowledging Palazzeschi's affiliation with Corazzini's Roman group, which had adopted some of those “sacred motives of Romanticism”, Death and Mysticism. Palazzeschi's ironic and proto-surrealist vein—the basis of Marinetti's argument—was already present in the fairy-tale setting of his first (and most Crepuscular) collection, *I cavalli bianchi*. Ironic treatment of strong Romantic ideals, directed at quotidian objects and concerns, was already a component of Crepuscularism, and represented a primary tool of its polemic message. Contrary to what Marinetti attempts to demonstrate, irony does not mark Palazzeschi's detachment from a Symbolist-Crepuscular sensibility, but rather constitutes one of the threads that link Crepuscularism to Futurism.

The strongest *trait d'union* between Crepuscularism and Futurism stands out in the proposal of a new cognitive paradigm that puts into crisis the rational principles of bourgeois society, suggesting new intuitive, spiritual, and irrational approaches to knowledge, originating

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<sup>85</sup> Marinetti does not adopt the term “Symbolist.” Later, in his argument, he speak of the “sacred motives of Romanticism: Love, Death, Cult of the ideal woman, Mysticism” (*TIF 64*). It seems, though, that Marinetti uses Romanticism as a broader category, which incorporates Symbolism, as his list of authors shows. (*TIF 63*)

in those same objects that Positivism pretended to explain through scientific and mathematical language. Even though Marinetti announces that “la mitologia e l’ideale mistico sono superati” [mythology and the mystic ideal have been superseded] (*TIF* 8, *F* 49) in the Founding Manifesto, he was actually constructing the basis for a self-mythicizing mysticism of pure energy and techno-animal impetus, which borrows the Christian symbolic imagery of death and resurrection to describe the birth of Futurism.<sup>86</sup> The exoteric side of Futurism constitutes a point of connection with Crepuscularism, but also provides a common thread connecting Futurist groups, which should not be identified solely with the Marinettian circle. The original group, based in Milan, gave birth to the first or “heroic” phase of Futurism, which stretches from its foundation in 1909 to the end of the Great War. Futurism was more than its founder and was decentralized and fragmented, like Crepuscularism; as Geert Buelens and Monica Jansen boldly remark: “There is no such thing as ‘Futurism.’ Any definition of the futurist movement should try to take into account its diverse goals and results in space and time. Futurism is always in the plural” (1). The so-called “second Futurism”,<sup>87</sup> which began in Florence and developed several autonomous identities, gathers together groups that generally shared the Futurist platform. One of the Florentine circles found its organ in the journal *Lacerba* and its spokesmen in Giovanni Papini and Ardengo Soffici, who in 1915 formally separated from the “Marinettiani” (Marinetti’s followers). The “second Florentine Futurism”, also known as “Pattuglia azzurra” [Azure Patrol], developed around the journals *Il centauro*, *La Rivista*, and later *Italia Futurista* (1916-1918), and

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<sup>86</sup> “Io mi stesi sulla mia macchina come un cadavere nella bara, ma subito risuscitai sotto il volante, lama di ghigliottina che minacciava il mio stomaco” [I stretched out on my car like a corpse on its coffin, but revived at once under the steering wheel, a guillotine blade that menaced my stomach] (*TIF* 8, *F* 49).

<sup>87</sup> The second term of Futurism can also refer to a longer period (until Marinetti’s death in 1944), in which the Futurist movement lost the initial Avant-Garde impetus of its heroic start and went through a phase of standardization and political affiliation with Fascism.

had as its members artists and intellectuals, such as the Ginanni Corradini brothers (artistic pseudonyms Ginna and Corra), Achille Lega, Lucio Venna, the Nannetti brothers, Antonio Bruno Trilucci, Giulio Spina, and included women Maria Crisi, Rosa Rosà, and Irma Valeria. Although unified by a common aversion to passatism, the different Futurist groups exhibited a common interest in experimental over-knowledge, detached from traditional theology, but often affiliated with Theosophical and occult practices, which provided a further rebellious message against the bourgeois “cult” of the normal and the canonized. Looking at Futurism as scattered groups unified by a similar interest in extrasensorial reality provides an unexplored path towards a new understanding of Futurism(s) and Crepuscularism(s) as complementary redefinitions of the Symbolist poetics of things, understood as a poetic of correspondences.

Crepuscularism and Futurism move from the paradigm of cognition through analogy to a mystical (using the original Greek meaning: “hidden”) cognition, in which objects open access to form a “relationship with a hidden God” (De Certeau 13). Both Crepuscular and Futurist episteme aim to explore reality beyond sensorial perception, following parallel paths that can be schematically individuated via the Crepuscular quiet animism of things, and the Futurist vital energy of material life. According to these epistemological perspectives, total immersion in living matter can intuitively provide access to extrasensorial dimensions. The Crepuscular and Futurist cognitive paradigm of “immersive cognition” entails a hybrid ontological and epistemological category, in which *being* means being in osmotic participation with an original matter—variously named as the Unknown, Mystery, Silence, or Void—bearer of over-knowledge.

As Simona Cigliana explains, the search for extrasensory sensibility had already appeared, *in nuce*, in the first Futurism, but became more and more predominant in the Futurist

sub-groups, specifically in the “Pattuglia azzurra” (271). This group, according to Lucia Collarile, realized a “psychological Futurism” that opposed Marinetti’s ban on psychologism with an intimistic vocation and a vivid interest in occultism (24), which could be defined as “post-Crepuscular.” This trend is particularly visible in the artistic activity of the brothers Arnaldo Ginna and Bruno Corra, as well as in the work of Maria Ginanni (Arnaldo’s former wife). These representative personalities of the “Pattuglia azzurra” experimented with a peculiar mix of journal entries, quotations, manifestos, and precepts, and proposed an initiation to a new form of harmonic humanism, in which human will is intellectually, physically, and spiritually balanced with the whole universe.

The Crepuscular and Futurist shared search for knowledge beyond rationality and empirical evidence reveals a fascination with primitivism and regression, which seems to clash with the Avant-Garde nature of these two experiences. By closely reading the Futurist hypermodern provocation, it is possible to see how Marinetti’s anthropotechnique relies on the fusion of pre-modern animal instincts with advanced technology. Not by chance, the Futurist leader must return and fall into a “fossato materno” [maternal ditch] to give birth to the Founding Manifesto. In this primordial space, which reminds him of his Sudanese wet-nurse’s breast, Marinetti—still dirty as a newborn—declaims the articles of the Manifesto. The founder of Futurism reinforces the centrality of regression, declaring, in the sixth point, the necessity for any author to increase “the enthusiastic fervor of the primordial elements” (*TIF* 10, *F* 51). Umberto Boccioni restates this ancestral need to go back to the sincere faith of the Primitives in the “Manifesto tecnico della pittura futurista” [Technical manifesto of Futurist painting], affirming the status of the Futurists as “Primitivi di una nuova sensibilità completamente



trasformata”: “We are the Primitives of a new sensibility that has been utterly transformed”  
(*MDF* 33, *F* 67).

While Futurism was making its loud statements about primitivism, Crepuscular poetry had already realized its own return to literary primitivism, which took the form of an anachronistic recovery of medieval and early-modern *topoi*, such as the motif of the unfulfilled love, the presence of a (parodic) dedicatory lady, and the theme of love as a sickness. Like Futurism, Crepuscularism presents a regressive tendency that abstracts the poetic personas from modern reality and throws them back into an infantile limbo, between dream and memory, where time is suspended in a primordial and regressive time-space. Gozzano opens his first collection, *La via del rifugio*, with a nonsensical childish chant, used to determine the seeker in a game of hide-and-peek (*Poesie* 61 n2): “Trenta quaranta, / Tutto il Mondo canta / canta lo gallo / risponde la gallina...” [Thirty forty, / The whole World sings / sings the rooster / answers the hen...] (*TP* 69). The poetic I lies on the grass watching his nieces play, and the rhyme of the children leads him to an oneiric, nihilistic eternity where capitalist, bourgeois logic is substituted with an Orientalizing contemplative beatitude, understood as lack of any worldly desire: “Un desiderio? Sto / supino nel trifoglio / e vedo un quadrifoglio / che non raccoglierò” [A wish? I stay / supine on the clover / and see a four-leaf clover / that I won’t pick] (*TP* 74).

Far from providing a mimetic representation of twentieth-century urban culture, Futurism deforms modern machines into vitalized or ferine objects, to grasp the “ossessione lirica della materia” [lyrical obsession of matter], conceived as a living mix of engineered instincts, as Marinetti states: “Noi vogliamo dare, in letteratura, la vita del motore, nuovo animale istintivo

del quale conosceremo il nuovo istinto generale allorché avremo conosciuto gl'istinti delle diverse forze che lo compongono” (*TIF* 51).<sup>88</sup>

The first issue of *L'Italia Futurista*, published in July 1916, returns with emphasis on this concept; in the article “Vulcanizziamo le grandi città” [Let’s vulcanize big cities] Mario Carli writes:

Noi giovani, noi artisti, noi futuristi, noi soldati italiani vogliamo che le nostre città siano dei vulcani, le vogliamo pericolose, fosforescenti, febbricitanti, infernalmente rumoristiche e maliziose, smontabili e disgregabili, le vogliamo veder vivere di vita magica e camaleontica, sprofondarsi e rinascere, cambiar forma e riflessi nelle diverse ore del giorno e della notte, contenere tutti gli istinti i capricci le fantasticherie e le ferocie di una immensa macchina pensante e robusta, sirena di carne di pietra di legno a<sup>89</sup> [sic] d'acciaio deliziosamente promettente e perfidamente ingannevole, formidabile impasto cosciente di umanità, di fuoco, di mare, di belva e di nitroglicerina. (2)<sup>90</sup>

Timothy Campbell comments on the ferine aspect of Futurist technology, affirming that it “offers the possibility of vitalizing by animalizing” (158); Futurist (anti-)modernity is strictly intertwined with the most ancestral form of animal energy, understood as bare, brutal ferocity. In the Futurist techno-horizon, the most external, ephemeral, and flashy aspects of technological culture are fused with the pre-modern “promethean impulse” of attacking the old divinities (De Maria 53). The notion of a disruptive-generative impulse to return to primordial and brutish force allows for erasing the past and opening the space for the Futurist proto cyber-animal. This idea crosses all the sub-branches of the movement, and appears in *Proposte* [Propositions], a

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<sup>88</sup> We want to literature to render the life of a motor, a new instinctive animal, whose guiding principles we will recognize when we have come to know the instincts of all the various forces that compose it. (*F* 122)

<sup>89</sup> Considering that this is a list, “a” is likely to be a typo; the correct word should be “e” [and].

<sup>90</sup> We young people, we artists, we Futurists, we Italian soldiers, we want our cities to be volcanos, we want them dangerous, phosphorescent, feverish, infernally noisy and malicious, able to be disassembled and broken apart, we want to see them live out of magical and chameleonic life, sink and be born again, change shape and reflexes in the different hours of day and night, contain all the instincts the whims the fantasies and the ferocities of an immense thinking and robust machine, siren of flesh rock wood and steel, deliciously promising and perfidy misleading, formidable conscious mix of humanity, fire, sea, beast and nitroglycerine.

collection of notes and proposals by Corra, in which the writer clarifies his position on the concept of creative disruption:

Molte volte il distruggere è altrettanto proficuo che il creare—Chi distrugge le idee false dell'oggi fa opera grande: prepara il terreno alla creazione di domani—Tagliar via la cancrena.

Chiedetene ai chirurghi. (100)<sup>91</sup>

Animalism and primitive fusion between feral and mechanical elements become central elements in the poem “Contraddizione” [Contradiction], a text by the eclectic writer Nino Oxilia, who represents the most exemplary case of creative fusion of Crepuscular and Futurist motives. Hanging in the balance between the belligerent techno-primitivism of Futurism and the sabotaging Crepuscular sensibility of things, Oxilia depicts the idiosyncratic status of twentieth-century man as a set of living contradictions, assembled as a cluster of sperm, hands, clay, and eyes that is indeed not a poet:

*Io maschio ben costruito  
per l'amore ed avvezzo agli sportivi  
giochi fisici, io, l'uomo dai lascivi  
impeti, l'uomo in cui l'istinto è tutto,  
io sono triste.*

*Io fecondo animale  
che non conosco il rispetto  
dell'altalena sociale,  
e mi compiaccio dando lo sgambetto  
alle dottrine dell'intelligenza,  
saltando di piè pari sopra il petto  
della menzogna detta convenienza,  
io sono triste.*

*Io che passeggio sul puritanismo  
a torso nudo come un gladiatore,  
che sputo su Loyola con furore  
e prendo a calci l'indeterminismo,*

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<sup>91</sup> Many times destroying is as productive as creating—Who destroys the false ideas of today does a great work: preparing the ground for the creation of tomorrow—Chopping off the gangrene.

Ask the surgeons.

*io che il metodo aborro e il sillogismo  
e il fato greco e il mistico fervore,  
io che son sperma e mani e occhi e creta  
ma che non son poeta,  
io sono triste.*

*Io che ò la penna in mano e fumo e stono  
come un treno diretto,  
che sono tutto in marcia, testa, petto,  
gambe, riso, bestemmie, urla, perdono,  
io sono triste... (178)<sup>92</sup>*

Another pre-modern space in both Crepuscular and Futurist works is the mysterious locus of death. In Crepuscularism, the obsession with dying, as returning to the original matter is pervasive. Ironically wrapped in morbid religiosity, death hovers over Crepuscular personas and landscapes as a purposeless, mysterious, and anti-heroic end. Playing on the innocence of a child in “Desolazione del povero poeta sentimentale”, Corazzini’s disempowered hero dissolves the Romantic dichotomy of Love-Death, declaring his desire to die through an apparent profession of ineptitude and lethargy, finally reaching a dreamed state of thingification: “Io voglio morire, solamente, perché sono stanco; / [...] solamente perché, io sono, oramai, / rassegnato come uno specchio, / come un povero specchio malinconico.” [I want to die, only because I’m tired; / [...] only because, I am, by now, / I’m resigned like a mirror, / like a poor melancholy mirror] (*O* 144, *SE* 31). In the Founding Manifesto, “Death” thrills life, providing a magnetic power that attracts vital energies and magnifies them. As in a medieval bestiary, the animalized death, with dark fur spotted with pale crosses (*TIF* 8), challenges the fearless Futurists to a car race. Futurists chase

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<sup>92</sup> I, male, built well / for love and accustomed to the athletic / physical games, I, the man with lustful / impetus, the man in which instinct is all, / I am sad. // I prolific animal / I who don’t know the respect / of the social swing, / and pride tripping / the doctrines of intelligence, / skipping over the chest / of mendacity named convenience, / I am sad. // I who walk on puritanism / bare-chested as a gladiator, / I who spit on Loyola with furor / and kick the indeterminism, / I who abhor the method and the syllogism / and the Greek fate and the Mystic fervor, / I who am sperm and hands and eyes and clay / but I am not a poet / I am sad. // I who have the pen in hands and smoke and sing out of tune / Like a direct train / who I am all on the march, head, chest, / legs, smile, curse, scream, forgiveness, / I am sad...

Death as lions, endorsing bravery to create “a certain kind of life [...] that incorporates within it the possibility of death”, a life “powered or strengthened by the threat of death brought on by speed” (Campbell, *Vital Matters* 162).

## 2.6 “Shouted” Versus “Quiet” Avant-Garde

An umbilical cord drawing lymph from the same anti-Positivism substratum ties together Crepuscularism and Futurism. Both movements attack the illusory paradigm of modernity, advocating for a progressive techno-humanism, which is paradoxically unable to conjugate its two constitutive elements—humans and things—without separating them. In response, Crepuscularism and Futurism express a common rejection of modern tradition and move forward by returning to the original “matter” where humans recover that primal status of thingness. My argument is that, since this central point about the *liaison* between Crepuscularism and Futurism has always been missed or overshadowed, the dominant approaches to the Avant-Garde have promoted a separation of the two movements, based on a reductive selection of texts and formalistic analysis. Among the myths about Futurism, there is the exclusive association of the movement with Marinetti’s manifesto style and the attempt to break the canonic relation between the sign and the signified. These critical approaches overlook the fact that even a collection like *I poeti Futuristi*, as well as many works produced by both Milanese and Florentine Futurism, rests outside the poetics of words in freedom and the Futurist synthetic tables. Moreover, the rebellious, Futurist program has been opposed to Crepuscular quiet passivism. Yet, this assumption is defensible only by omitting *another* Crepuscularism that exhibited a strong rebellious nature and surprisingly proves to be very close to Futurism.

In order to propose a categorization of Crepuscularism as a proto-Futurist Avant-Garde, it is worth clarifying that the notion of Avant-Garde itself is hard to conceptualize and has been the object of debates, adjustments, and continuous reformulations. This intrinsic difficulty has to do with the attempt of systematizing a phenomenon that rises from a transgressive reaction against the classificatory cages of the critique and its “verminario di glossatori” [flea pit of commentators] (*TIF* 266), as Marinetti states:

Il Futurismo non ammette né leggi, né codici, né magistrati, né poliziotti, né lenoni, né eunuchi moralisti. Il Futurismo è una frusta colla quale noi rinsanguiamo quotidianamente il viso dei vigliacchi d’Italia. Il Futurismo è una dinamite crepitante sotto le rovine del passato. (*TIF* 266)<sup>93</sup>

In this passage, Marinetti compares his movement to dynamite set to demolish the past; yet Futurism would not have been able to preserve its outpost for long. The Avant-Garde bases itself on an element of surprise; thus, from the perspective of reception, its aporia consists of the impossibility of preserving its resource of unpredictability (Schulz-Buschhaus 42).

Consequentially, the first fundamental feature of Avant-Garde is its transient nature—a characteristic that Crepuscularism perfectly embodies, due both to the brevity of its experience and to Corazzini and Gozzano’s awareness of writing from death’s door. The Avant-Garde chronological *brevitas* is associated with the idea of acting to subvert the norm, by introducing anti-canonic linguistic forms and expressions. The Avant-Garde falls within what Marshall Berman has defined as “unending permanent revolution against the totality of modern existence” (*All that is solid melts into air*). This project of unending revolution constitutes the unrealistic scope of the Avant-Garde as, in its concrete realization, each Avant-Garde is a temporary

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<sup>93</sup> Futurism allows neither laws, nor codes, nor judges, nor police officers, nor pimps, nor moralisteunuchs. Futurism is a whip through which we infuse blood into the face of the cowards of Italy. Futurism is crackling dynamite under the ruins of the past.

subversion with a predictable end, which ideally results in a self-consuming process of artistic renovation. In his inquiry into the notion of Avant-Garde, Berman collects and summarizes various contributions: The Avant-Garde is “‘a tradition of overthrowing tradition’ (Harold Rosenberg), an ‘adversary culture’ (Lionel Trilling), a ‘culture of negation’ (Renato Poggioli)” (30). All these interpretations look at the Avant-Garde from the perspective of its end, as the idea itself of establishing a tradition implies overcoming the disorder with a new sense of normal. From this brief overview, it is possible to affirm that the Avant-Garde is an unbalanced, vivid, and somewhat violent desire for radical renovation that presents an overwhelming *pars destruens*. This tendency often reaches the paradoxical point of a self-reflective discourse, in which destroying significances and deconstructing language becomes the only *pars construens* of the Avant-Garde. It has been explained, using Peter Bürger’s Hegelian model, that the Avant-Garde is the breaking point of the principle of aesthetic autonomy, typical of bourgeois art. This theory, which has been dominant for decades, finds its limitation in postulating the autonomy of art from its socio-political context. The Avant-Garde, in fact, creates a hyper-art that absorbs, tantalizes, and dramatizes every aspect of life, without losing its aesthetic character. The question that I answer is to what degree this “Avant-Garde voice”, so strong and aggressive in Futurism, can be found in the Crepuscular movement.

The collection of Futurist manifestos can be read as a scattered plan to destroy all traditional notions and functions of art—as pure aesthetic evasion, as educative medium, or as mimetic and immediately intelligible representation—to create an art that dynamically and violently merges with life in its broadest and most participative sense. The Founding Futurist Manifesto was pivotal in shaping the rebellious nature of the movement. Marinetti, in fact, played the role of “saboteur” of bourgeois culture’s *status quo* when he succeeded in reinventing

the artistic paradigm on the front page of *Le Figaro*, the French conservative, bourgeois cultural organ.<sup>94</sup> In the Founding Manifesto, Marinetti highlights the birth of a new (anti-)language and (anti-)morality based on violence, primordial energy, and feverish dynamism. From this perspective, art takes on an aggressive role with a disturbing purpose; in Marinetti's words: "L'arte, infatti, non può essere che violenza, crudeltà ed ingiustizia" [Arts, in fact, can be nothing if not violence, cruelty and injustice] (*TIF* 13, *F* 53). Overall, Futurism stands out for its strong programmatic spirit, and for creating groups of artists linked by the idea of being arsonist brothers:<sup>95</sup> siblings in the name of the most energetic matter—a burning fire. Through this image, Futurism expresses all the traits of its Avant-Garde action: transience, programmatic creative destruction, and the proposition of a new cognitive and ontological dimension, in which the human and nonhuman co-exist in terms of continuity rather than as separate dominions.

From a formal point of view, the categorization of Crepuscularism as Avant-Garde is more complex than Futurism, especially in dealing with critical positions based on the assumption that the manifesto represents the "very content of futurism" and its "central genre" (Puncher 75). If manifestos are the kernel of the Futurist Avant-Garde, if they are indeed the Avant-Garde, how is it possible to explain a phenomenon such as Crepuscularism, which had no out-and-out founding manifesto, nor a constitutive act, nor a clear program? Distinguishing the Avant-Garde on the basis of the genre of its programmatic, revolutionary message is quite risky, especially because this critical position oxymoronically clashes with the demolition and

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<sup>94</sup> In his foreword to *Mafarka il Futurista*, Luigi Ballerini provides details on how Marinetti used the daughter of a shareholder of *Le Figaro* to publish the Futurist Manifesto in the newspaper (8).

<sup>95</sup> Marinetti addresses the members of his group as: "grandi poeti incendiari, fratelli miei futuristi!" [great incendiary poets, my Futurist friends!] (*TIF* 14), listing their names—"Paolo Buzzi, Palazzeschi, Cavacchioli, Govoni, Altomare, Folgore, Boccioni, Carrà, Russolo, Balla, Severini, Pratella, D'Alba, Mazza" (14).



hybridization of the formalistic cage of genre proposed by Futurism. The same could be said for a movement like Crepuscularism, which, though not showing the same meta-literary moment of theoretical self-reflection and promotion, similarly treated the notion of genre as problematic, challenging codified norms of the poetic genre from a metric, stylistic, and content level. Yet, Crepuscularism presents other issues for categorization, as it did not construct a unified group but only scattered circles, not always related, nor did it have journal, apart from the brief experiment of *Cronache latine*. Overcoming these classificatory questions, Marziano Guglielminetti proposes the adoption of the term “scuola” [school] to unify and label the various activities of the Crepuscular movement. He individuates the geographical tandem of this new school into Rome and Turin, under the leadership of Corazzini and Gozzano respectively. These two centers were at the margin of the other cultural capitals: Milan, the Futurist main center, and Florence, the seat of the Italian philosophical debate on Pragmatism and Idealism (153). “School”, though, was not an extraneous term to Avant-Garde culture. Marinetti, himself, defines Futurism as a very peculiar school, in the flier *Il poeta futurista Aldo Palazzeschi*:

*Scuola, se volete, ma scuola nella quale s’insegna a ribellarsi, a essere originali, indipendenti. Una scuola che mi fa pensare a una certa caverna di Belgrado, dove vidi un capo Macedone dare quotidianamente delle lezioni di lancio di bombe. (TIF 63)*<sup>96</sup>

In Marinetti’s definition, the pedagogical purpose of the “Futurist school” was to “un-teach” the old academic precepts and replace them with how to launch “intellectual bombs” at the residual *passatismo* and sentimentalism. Crepuscularism could be considered a decentralized Avant-Garde school. Angela Villa comments that Crepuscularism was indeed an Avant-Garde

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<sup>96</sup> School, if you wish, but a school in which one is taught to rebel, be original, be independent. A school that reminds me of a certain cave in Belgrade, where I saw a Macedonian leader giving daily classes on how to launch bombs.

school, but she adopts a broad notion of Avant-Garde, generally understood as synonymous with innovation. It is important to highlight that, although Crepuscularism is not well known for its manifestos, it is possible to find “Futurist” declarations written by Crepuscular intellectuals, which have been virtually ignored by critics. A “niche document” of extraordinary interest is a text by Raoul Dal Molin Ferenzona, an artist and poet who was a close friend of Corazzini.<sup>97</sup> In this “manifesto” that closes *La ghirlanda di stelle* [The garland of stars], a unique neo-Alexandrian work mixing sincretically figurative and verbal languages, Ferenzona celebrates the end of literary tradition with a vehement and violent tone:

*O funebre scheletro del romanticismo, col nostro piede sprezzante calpestiamo la tua polvere!  
Noi non piangiamo più!  
Via le stampelle della tradizione e della speranza!  
Beviamo al calice, che il presente ci offre, di un sorso rapido! (195)*<sup>98</sup>

It is significant that Corazzini is one of the “fratelli d’arte” [brothers in art]—the other being Domenico Baccarini—to which Ferenzona dedicates a work that climaxes in the *maudit* singing of hate for the highest nineteenth-century masters and ends proposing to cover Leopardi’s tomb with bloody poetic crows and rejoices at his end (195). In his dedication Ferenzona identifies Corazzini as the mystic figure of the “poeta dolente” [poet in grief] and reinforces the messianic image of the young writer as *the new poet*, chosen by Heaven.<sup>99</sup> The

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<sup>97</sup> *La ghirlanda di stelle* was published in 1912 and had limited circulation. The book collects texts composed from 1904 to 1912. The quoted “Commiato” [Valediction] is undated and could have been composed even before Marinetti’s Founding Manifesto.

<sup>98</sup> Oh funereal skeleton of Romanticism, with our scornful foot we step on your dust! / We no longer cry! / Go away crutches of tradition and hope! / Let’s drink up at the cup that the present offers to us!

<sup>99</sup> The dedication recites: “Sulle tombe dei miei fratelli più veri e più cari fratelli d’arte: SERGIO CORAZZINI il poeta dolente dell’Aureole e dell’Amaro Calice e DOMENICO BACCARINI il profondo disegnatore della “Pavonessa” della “Giovinetta incinta” morti ambedue in piena primavera e perciò cari al Cielo come una ghirlanda di semprevivi depongo questo libro con gaio gesto. “Resurgam!” [on the graves of my most truthful and dear brothers in art: SERGIO CORAZZINI the poet in grief of the Aureole (The Halos) and the Amaro Calice (The Bitter Cup) and DOMENICO BACCARINI the intense drawer of the “Pavonessa” (female peacock) and the “Giovinetta

dedication to Corazzini is not surprising, considering that the Roman poet, although later flattened by the critique of the debased figure of the humble little boy, often explained the nature of his literary rebellion in his private writing. In a letter to Antonello Caprino, dated August 1905, Corazzini explicitly assumes the role of the rebel, finding his literary double in Enjolras, the beautiful young character from *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, who becomes the spokesperson for the identification between rebellious freedom and death, as the maximum expression of the Ideal. From a perspective of *intencio auctoris*, the idea of conceiving his poetic mission as a fight against tradition becomes even more evident in the letter, dated April 1907, in which Corazzini defines his group as those “che comprendono interamente certe arti «fuori della legge» e se ne deliziano” [who can fully understand some “outlaw” arts and are delighted by them] (*O* 299). The letter emphasizes the cohesion of a poetic circle, foretelling the Futurist theme of brotherhood and intimacy; it also stresses the commitment of the Roman Crepuscular group to purposefully making “outlawed art.” The perspective of fighting a war against an old and unacceptable canon returns in a letter to Marino Moretti, from December 4<sup>th</sup> 1906. Corazzini openly adopts a belligerent metaphor and reveals his determination to hold out against enemies, hoping for a victory that is still uncertain: “Vinceremo? Io nel l.p.l.s.d.d. [Libro per la sera della domenica] rompo le dighe e atterro molte case vecchie...Potrei annegare anch’io! Ho molti nemici. E ne avremo insieme, moltissimi!” (*O* 304).<sup>100</sup>

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incinta” (Pregnant girl), both dead in full Spring and therefore beloved to Heaven, like a garland of evergreens I depose this book with an happy gesture. I shall rise again!].

<sup>100</sup>Are we going to win? In *Libro per la sera della domenica*, I break the dams and knock-down many old houses...I could drown, myself! I have many enemies. And, together, we will have many of them!

The theme of the rebellious war is a main thread that crosses the literary reflection of Corazzini and his group. In the scattered poem “L’ascesa” [The ascent], the poet defined himself “*novo reziario*” [new retiarius], namely a new rebellious Spartacus. Fausto Martini maintained the same parallel between rebellion and poetry, in the manifesto article “I ribelli” [The rebels], announcing the messianic advent of a new poet (probably Corazzini himself), founder of the poetry to come (Villa, *Il crepuscolarismo* 37).

While the Roman Crepuscularism conducted a literary reflection that adopts the language of an actual rebellion, Gozzano’s “school” revolted against the socio-cultural *status quo*, using irony as its most powerful weapon. Yet, the bellicose attitude towards modernity is not foreign to Gozzano. In his private notebook, in a proto-Marinettian tone, he writes:

*La società moderna non ha il tempo  
di rialzare il soldato caduto a mezza via,  
le idee sono in cammino, avanti; la pietà  
si attarda e ritarda: l’ora è passata del buon Samaritano. (Albo dell’officina 96)*<sup>101</sup>

Re-elaborating on Nietzschean readings, on a later page of the same notebook, Gozzano returns to the theme of artistic cruelty—which Futurism later adopts—stating that the true wise man must be cruel with himself as well as with other people (100). Being able to suffer is a task that even women and slaves can master, but being able to inflict a great sufferance and understand the scream of that pain is indeed the greatest and most sublime act. Yet, this Gozzanian-Nietzschean, (anti-)modern, cruel intellectual must show in all life’s accidents “*la serenità del buon giocatore, l’innocenza gaia del fanciullo che si diverte, la grazia sorridente del danzatore*” [the serenity of the skillful player, the happy innocence of the boy that enjoys

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<sup>101</sup> Modern society does not have any time / to pull up the soldier who fell in the middle of the street, /the ideas are on their way, ahead; pity / delays and is delayed; the time of the good Samaritan has passed.

himself, the smiling grace of the dancer] (100).<sup>102</sup> The enjoyment in front of the burning tradition also appears in the poem “Tra le ceneri” [In the ashes] by Carlo Chiaves. Anticipating with a milder tone the Futurist image of the destructive fire, the poet portrays an old fireplace that has collected memories and fairy tales from the past. Yet now the author feels the urge to express the unstoppable need for the new that prods his generation:

*O nuova vita che fervi!  
O irrefrenabile e triste  
sete di nuove conquiste  
che ci trascini e ci asservi!*

*Che, infaticabile assillo,  
pungi la nostra ragione,  
che spegni la tradizione  
del focolare tranquillo, (Sogno e ironia 57)<sup>103</sup>*

The awareness of challenging modernity from an Avant-Garde position that could have only been misunderstood provides a further point of connection between Crepuscularism and Futurism. Unlike Futurism, which created a poly-artistic language and later took part in politics, Crepuscularism never acquired a publically recognized status. The Crepuscular attack on tradition remained in the limited circuit of intellectuals and critics and never fully reached the mass public, proudly refusing to contaminate the elitist ideas of the group with malevolent, backward-looking peers and the obtuse public, as it emerges in this letter by Corazzini to Moretti:

Permettetevi che io vi faccia notare come Roma, città di letterati, è vero, ma di letterati schernitori e maligni, non sia e non possa essere la sede di un cenacolo, anche improvviso, che voglia, *rivelarsi pubblicamente*. Mentre un convegno di poeti, immaginato in *un'intimità infrangibile*, evocatore di canzoni

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<sup>102</sup> As a note of the *Albo dell'officina* explains, according to Franco Contorbia, this passage exhibits a mix of Nietzschean motives, particularly from *The Dawn*, *So spoke Zarathustra*, *Beyond good and evil*, and *Genealogy of Morals* (101, endnote referring to lines 1-15).

<sup>103</sup> Oh new life that is burning! / Oh unstoppable and sad / thirst for new conquests / that drag and enslave us! // That, tireless obsession, / pricks our reason, / that extinguish tradition / of the calm fireplace.

per il meraviglioso Agro o lungo i viali di una villa muta, sarebbe, in verità, una assai bella e dolce figurazione. Vi sembra? Non io dico ciò perché tema o voglia fuggire, come uno Zaratustra sedicenne, il lezzo della folla, no! Io semplicemente, avanzo una che mi par miglior proposta a più bel soddisfacimento dell'animo nostro. (*O* 302)<sup>104</sup>

Conversely, Futurism challenges that same “obtuse audience” — that “animalaccio instintivo” [instinctive ugly beast] (Boccioni, *Scritti editi e inediti* 99) — feeding it with the modern media that the public was eager for and enjoying the pleasure of being booted. The movement provides a model of mass and viral communication *ante litteram* that rapidly branched out, conquering the new languages of modernity—above all, cinema and radio. In particular, Futurism revealed its groundbreaking nature, highlighting, with extraordinary clairvoyance, the hidden psychological power that modern technology and media would exert on people:

Coloro che usano oggi del telegrafo, del telefono e del grammofono, del treno, della bicicletta, della motocicletta, dell'automobile, del transatlantico, del dirigibile, dell'areoplano, del cinematografo, del grande quotidiano (sintesi del giornale del mondo) non pensano che queste diverse forme di comunicazione, di trasporto e di informazione esercitano sulla loro psiche una decisiva influenza. (“Distruzione della sintassi. Immaginazione senza fili. Parole in libertà”, *TIF* 65-6)<sup>105</sup>

Many times, in his literary manifestos, Marinetti provocatively addresses his readers as the target of his intellectual revolution. The founder of Futurism establishes an aggressive relationship with his audience, which is focused on shaking the reader from his numbness and re-educating his taste through a traumatic reading experience that implies an encounter with

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<sup>104</sup> Let me make you note, as Rome, city of intellectuals, this is true, but of mocking and wicked intellectuals, is not and cannot be the location of a circle, even improvised, that wants to publicly reveal itself. Whereas a meeting of poets, imagined in *an infrangible intimacy*, summoner of poetic songs alongside the wonderful Pontin Marshes or alongside the boulevards of a silent villa, would be, in all truth, a very beautiful and sweet depiction. Don't you think so? I don't say this because I am scared or I want to escape, as a sixteen-years-old Zarathustra, the stink of the crowd, not at all! I simply advance something that seems to me a better proposition for a better satisfaction of our souls.

<sup>105</sup> Those people who today make use of the telegraph, the telephone, the gramophone, the train, the bicycle, the motorcycle, the car, the ocean liner, the dirigible, the airplane, the cinema, the great newspaper (synthesis of a day in the world's life) are not aware of the decisive influence that these various forms of communication, transportation, and information have on their psyches. (“Destruction of syntax. Radio Imagination. Words-in-freedom”, *F* 143)

ugliness, disharmony, and misunderstanding. Referring to graceful, traditional stylistic choices, Marinetti states: “voglio anzi afferrarle brutalmente e scagliarle in petto al lettore” [I want to seize them brutally and fling them in the reader’s face] (*TIF* 77, *F* 150). The goal of the Futurist strategy is to erase the traditional notion of meaning and push analogies to the limit of intelligibility. Marinetti’s idea of “immaginazione senza fili” [wireless imagination] aims at an essential art that can suppress all the first elements of its analogies, to provide only an uninterrupted continuum of second terms (*TIF* 53). As he explains in the “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature”: “Bisognerà, per questo, rinunciare ad essere compresi. Essere compresi, non è necessario” [To achieve this, it will be necessary to forgo being being understood. It isn’t necessary to be understood] (*TIF* 53, *F* 123-24).

Crepuscularism expresses similar reflections on the topic of intelligibility and the unimportance of not being understood, according to the laws of bourgeois communication. This idea is exemplified by the obscure and masochistic game of misunderstandings in “Desolazione del povero poeta sentimentale.” Corazzini’s little boy, after confessing his pains to a mysterious interlocutor, affirms: “Ma tu non comprendi e sorridi” [but you do not understand me and you smile] (*O* 145, *SE* 33). This serves as a double of Zarathustra—the crying boy is paraphrasing a central Nietzschean motif: the descent of prophet “among the sleepers” and their refusal of his message: “When Zarathustra had spoken [...] all the people laughed at Zarathustra” (7). The concept of enjoying incomprehensibility as the only form of actual understanding in bourgeois society returns, in an ironic context, in Gozzano’s “La signorina Felicita”:

*Tu ignori questo male che s'apprende  
in noi. Tu vivi i tuoi giorni modesti,  
tutta beata nelle tue faccende.  
Mi piaci. Penso che leggendo questi*

*miei versi tuoi, non mi comprenderesti,  
ed a me piace chi non mi comprende (TP 178)*<sup>106</sup>

While Futurism adopts the Avant-Garde strategy of a direct and frontal attack, preannounced by the 1909 Manifesto's "declaration of war", Crepuscularism uses more subtle tools that weakened the bourgeois self-celebratory style and eroded its epistemological pillars from the within. Neither Futurism nor Crepuscularism have ever greeted or phrased modernity as the final human victory over nature and materiality, but as mere technological progress. Crepuscularism sings, in a low voice, of "quiet Avant-Garde": the lullaby of an unrecoverable past, recovering useless memories, futile objects, and bizarre thing-like characters. Proposing a senseless material life, outside the logic of mercantilism and human progress, the movement illuminates the inconsistency of the Positivist modern human-type in control of *everything*, and conducts a deep journey that highlights the indissoluble bond between material flesh and extrasensorial thingness. Adopting a parallel path, Futurism rides the wave of technological progress, but aggressively drives modern society into the collision of a techno-primitive palingenesis, in which a speeding car encounters, clash, and fuses with the primal mud of a ditch. Although the two movements do not share the same violent scream for change, the Crepuscular whispering conveys and anticipates the same subversive Avant-Garde ideology: challenging the paradoxes of modernity through the proposition of an irrational and unmediated cognitive approach and foreseeing a new ontological status of things, beyond their utility.

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<sup>106</sup> You're ignorant of this malignancy / that eats at us. You live your modest days, / tending to household business happily. / You please me. If you read these lines in praise / of you, you wouldn't understand my ways, / and who misunderstand me pleases me. (TM 89)



## Chapter Three

### Avant-Garde Intuition and Antirational Knowledge

*Voglio tendere la rete  
sopra tutte le assemblee  
e pescare la sapienza per gettarla ai cani.  
(Oxilia, "La canzone folle", Poesie 128)<sup>107</sup>*

#### 3.1 Introduction

For both Crepuscularism and Futurism, moving from a human paradigm centered on the thinking ego to a cognitive model focused on the living thing entails exploring an alternative epistemological pattern that questions the limits and possibilities of the bourgeois standard of empirical knowledge. The two Avant-Garde phenomena share the dominant epistemological nature of modernist fiction, conducting cognitive interrogatives from a radical perspective, rooted in Baudelaire's interrogative of the "Madrigal triste" [Sad Madrigal] in the *Flowers of Evil*: "Que m'importe que tu sois sage? / Sois belle! Et sois triste!" [What do I care if you be wise? / Be lovely and be sad!] (336-37). This area of inquiry extends to other Modernist works, becoming the common ground for the development of a series of questions:

What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?; How does the object of knowledge change as it passes from knower to knower?; What are the limits of the knowable? (Mc Hale 9)<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> I want to pull my net / on all the assemblies / and fish the wisdom / to throw it to the dogs. ("The foolish song")

<sup>108</sup> Brian Mc Hale cites the questions posed by Dick Higgins in *A Dialectic of Centuries: Notes toward a Theory of the New Arts*. New York: Printed Editions, 1978.

Crepuscularism and Futurism challenge the notion of object of knowledge, demolishing the Positivist method based on observable evidence, proven and accepted as universally valid scientific law. They propose a new notion of participative cognition, envisioning a fusion of subject and object in an undifferentiated primordial soup. This participative model nullifies the need to distinguish between the cognitive agent and the object of knowledge.

This chapter analyzes the Crepuscular and Futurist poetics of cognition, through a selection of key works, examining in detail three aspects: the role of intuition in their paradigms of knowledge, the revaluation of ignorance as a cognitive tool, and the proposal of new possible forms of *sophia*.

### **3.2 Defining the Notion of Knowledge in Crepuscular and Futurist Works**

Crepuscularism and Futurism test the idols of Positivist and Idealist culture to reveal their inconsistency, translating Nietzsche's idea of "philosophizing with the hammer" into poetry. Rejecting any wisdom from the past, the two movements endorse parallel epistemological models founded on intuitive knowledge and reversion to primitive and irrational impulses, which subvert bourgeois logic and its social apparatus. Crepuscularism overcomes modern rationalism, embracing a mystical yearning for transcendence, which is often expressed through the desire for annihilation and a return to the indeterminate whole of matter. In his poetry, Vallini openly states the rejection of both modern man, who rides the wave of progress and "il bene in un'indagine ripone" [places the good in an investigation] ("I sonetti della casa.V", *UGA* 47), and the modernist character, who responds to modernity by internalizing it into spleen—which is still a "prodotto moderno / come l'elettricità" [a product of modernity, / like electricity] ("Alcuni desideri", *UGA* 94). The desire of Vallini's poetic persona is to exchange his useless human life

for the lethargic existence of a sleeping dog, under the sun.<sup>109</sup> The metamorphosis continues from animal to vegetal matter, denying humanity its exclusivity regarding rational intellect:

*O come darei le parole  
unitili e l'opre vane  
dell'uomo, per essere un cane  
che dorma placido al sole!  
Per essere la foglia o l'insetto  
o l'albero o il gufo o il leone,  
per non avere la ragione,  
per non aver l'intelletto, ("Alcuni desideri", UGA 94)<sup>110</sup>*

In a similar fashion, Futurists subdue intellectual reflection to a form of intuition, in which thought, feeling, and action are fully assimilated in an energetic substance. They figuratively explain their vitalistic compound in the Founding Manifesto, using crisp images: “Noi vogliamo esaltare il movimento aggressivo, l'insonnia febbrile, il passo di corsa, il salto mortale, lo schiaffo e il pugno” [We intend to exalt movement and aggression, feverish insomnia, the racer's stride, the mortal leap, the slap and the punch] (*TIF* 10, *F* 51). The Crepuscular and Futurist rejection of Positivist objectivity and scientific truth also entails a strong opposition to the Kantian attempt to combine Rationalism and Empiricism into the model of a categorizing, transcendental ego, trapped within the notion of limits—namely the assumption that human knowledge is finite, since the intellect cannot grasp the noumenon. The Avant-Garde cognitive challenge also rejects the all-encompassing teleological model provided by Idealist philosophy, which identifies Reason with the living Spirit that informs the modern State. Challenging any philosophy that fuses human cognition with phenomenal reality or rational

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<sup>109</sup> Vallini's recalls Corazzini's desire of turning into a lazy cat (see “Bando”, O 168).

<sup>110</sup> Oh I would give the useless / words and the works, so vain, / of man to be a dog without pain / sleeping under the sun! / To be the leaf or the insect / or the tree or the owl or the lion, / so that I wouldn't have reason, / so that I wouldn't have intellect, (“A few wishes”)

elaboration, the two movements offer an antithetical perspective, in which overcoming perceivable or intellectual knowledge is the only way to witness the mysterious essence of life.

Shaping their notions of knowledge, Crepuscularism and Futurism exhibit the influence of Nietzsche, who is the spokesman for reworking truth and wisdom as stale notions to disintegrate, relativize, and deride. For Crepuscularism, the German philosopher provides the path towards a cognition that aims beyond phenomena, to grasp the thing itself. The mystical nihilistic approach of Crepuscularism echoes Nietzsche's declaration of being a mystic and not believing in anything. This irrational "fulfilling deprivation" allows the possibility of knowing through a loss of individual consciousness, falling into the dimension of the "Es spricht" [It speaks]—the cognitive locus in which a "nonsubject (stranger to all individual subjectivity) demystifies consciousness, its clear surface muddied by the stirred waters of the deeps" (De Certeau, *Mysticism* 22). Futurism borrows from the destructive side of the Nietzschean message, demolishing the past for the coming of its mechanical overman. Yet, as for Bergson, the Futurist reception of Nietzsche is filtered through indirect sources, such as the works by Mario Morasso, an Italian writer and journalist who initially adhered to Symbolism but constructed a more modern, violent mythography, exalting speed, racing cars, extreme nationalism, and egotist individualism. Crepusculars and Futurists, through their works, reinforce Nietzsche's position regarding the three "errors" made by scientific knowledge, namely: thinking that science could promote a human understanding of God; believing in the connection between knowledge, morality and happiness; and loving science as a disinterested, peaceful, and self-sufficient form of knowledge (*Gay Science* 88). Overcoming the scientific "will of truth" that, according to the German thinker, is ultimately a moral need to avoid cheating and being cheated and a concealed

form of metaphysical faith (*Gay Science* 254), the two Avant-Garde movements welcome Life in its polytrophic, contradictory, and rationally meaningless nature.

The notion of intuition also plays a central role in shaping Crepuscular and Futurist “theories of knowledge.” For Crepuscularism, intuitive thinking primarily derives from late Romantic motifs, such as the *topos* of the heart, conceived as the seat of emotional cognition. Through Romanticism and early thirteenth-century lyric, Crepusculars also recover medieval optical theories where vision is a way to imprinting cognition directly into the body; knowing was, thus, more a practice of corporal absorption, rather than a mental process. Intuition was one of the cornerstones of Croce’s Idealist aesthetic, published in 1902, and must have been a concept with which Crepuscular intellectuals were accustomed. In his masterwork, the Italian Idealist philosopher distinguishes between logical knowledge as an outcome of science and logic, and intuitive knowledge as a result of art. While the former generates concepts, only the latter can create a peculiar intuitive cognition, which can immediately express artistic forms.

The notion of intuition that informs Crepuscular and Futurist thought may recall the philosophy of Henry Bergson. Yet, linking the intuitionism of the French thinker too tightly to the Italian Avant-Garde would be a generalization and a chronological stretch, especially for Crepuscularism.<sup>111</sup> As Norberto Bobbio notes, Papini and Prezolini, who were the first to publicize Bergson’s thought in Italy, heavily influenced the early reception of his theories, transforming the French philosopher into a champion of irrationalism and a defender of the primacy of intimate life and mystic individualism over scientific and practical knowledge (43).

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<sup>111</sup> From a chronological perspective, it is important to note that drawing a strict connection between Bergson and Crepuscularism would be inaccurate, as the Crepuscular movement preceded some of Bergson’s theories (*Creative Evolution* was first published in 1907).

In his work *Ventiquattro cervelli* [Twenty-four brains], Papini praises the innovation of Bergson's method, opposing it to “i carabinieri della Ragione” [the police of Reason] (339). In Papini's view, Bergson succeeded in explaining that intelligence can only explain a part of reality, as it is limited to the field of necessary activities, finalities, and geometrical and mathematical rules. To understand the “world of life and spirit”, a different type of knowledge is needed: intuition (345); only intuition—which is not pure instinct, but is more similar to instinct than to geometric intelligence (347)—leads to an empathic identification with what we are exploring. Following this line of thought, Papini reaches a conclusion that the Crepuscular and Futurist poetics fully embrace: Only the deep and direct possession of the most quotidian reality can open the way to grasp the Absolute (346).

Papini's mediation represents only one of the secondary sources through which Bergsonism became popular in Italy. Zeno Birolli explains this peculiar intertwining and stratification of influences, commenting on some pseudo-Bergsonian use of the term “intuition” in the “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting” (published in 1910). In the Manifesto, the word “intuition” does not directly appear, and, even though Bergsonism was known in the Futurist environment and there are visible references to his theories, Boccioni's artistic reflection began as an optical interpretation of bodily movement and as a further development of Medardo Rosso's impressionist legacy (430). Explaining his extreme notion of “hate for intelligence”, in “A Response to Objections” (raised by the Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature in 1912), Marinetti himself claims the originality of his ideas, over the direct influence of Bergson's philosophy (even though he does not explicitly negate this influence). Exhibiting a certain incoherence, the Futurist Founder rejects his filiation from the French philosopher, going back to his Symbolist period and referring to two non-Futurist literary sources: the epigraphy of “La

Conquête des Étoiles”—in which Marinetti quoted Dante’s Paradise, Canto II—and Poe’s “Colloquy of Monos and Una”, which stated the primacy of Analogy, “whose eloquence [...] says nothing to weak and solitary reason.” (*TIF* 55, *F* 125)

The intuitive, irrational, and ultra-phenomenal nature of Crepuscular and Futurist knowledge reveals their striking similarity, as seen when comparing two apparently divergent texts: Corazzini’s “Il mio cuore” [My heart] and Marinetti’s Founding Manifesto. This programmatic text of Roman Crepuscularism is well known for presenting the cognitive dyad of heart-soul as the dominion of emotional and intuitive cognition. The critique did not highlight the same binary structure in Marinetti’s first manifesto, where the shining souls and the heart are in a front-line position:

Avevamo vegliato tutta la notte—i miei amici ed io—sotto lampade di moschea dalle cupole di ottone traforato, stellate come le nostre anime, perché come queste irradiate dal fulgore di un cuore elettrico. (*TIF* 7)<sup>112</sup>

The two texts share the introductory motif of heart-and-soul as the icon of a passionate knowledge that comes from within and is unmediated by the intellect. Yet, there are other unexpected resemblances between “Il mio cuore” and the first Futurist manifesto. Corazzini, at the beginning of his career, revives a classic Romantic image of the poet that takes inspiration from his heart, writing with his own blood: “E la penna si muove / e la carta s’arrossa” [And the pen moves / and the paper turns red] (*O* 100). Marinetti advances this traditional *topos*, proposing the image of the Futurist souls irradiated by an electrically pumping heart, which

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<sup>112</sup> We had stayed up all night—my friends and I—beneath mosque lamps hanging from ceiling. Their brass domes were filigreed, starred like our souls; just as, again like our souls, they were illuminated by the imprisoned brilliance of an electric heart (*F* 49).

brings to mind Walt Whitman's singing of "the body electric".<sup>113</sup> As in the still traditional Crepuscular text, Futurist writing is associated with an interruption of logical thinking and frenetic activity that stains paper, turning white into black:

Avevamo lungamente calpestata su opulenti tappeti orientali la nostra atavica accidia, discutendo davanti ai confini estremi della logica ed annerendo molta carta di frenetiche scritte (TIF 7)<sup>114</sup>

In his early collections—*Dolcezza*, *L'amaro calice* and *Le aureole*—Corazzini elaborates a cognitive horizon in which heart and soul constitute the center, but also the tautological binomial of a solipsistic and morbid emotional intelligence. Crepuscular knowledge inhabits a heart in pain that *lives* in the condition and in the cognition that corporal suffering is a form of mystical knowledge. Flesh and soul participate in the experiences of sickness and martyrdom, speaking the language of incarnation and mystical revelation, as these two passages from "Dolore" [Pain] and "Invito" [Invitation] show:

[...] vedi la mia  
anima è nel mio cuore,  
il cuore è nella mia

anima, e se dolore  
l'anima un poco sente  
soffre un poco anche il cuore,

bimbo, quietamente (O 106)<sup>115</sup>

Anima pura come un'alba pura  
anima triste per i suoi destini  
anima prigioniera nei confini  
[...]  
Luce degli occhi, cuore del mio cuore,

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<sup>113</sup> Futurism shows opposite opinions about the American poet. Marinetti, in *Guerra sola igiene del mondo*, lists Whitman among the Futurist precursors (TIF 305); yet, in the "manifesto-sintesi" of Futurist anti-tradition, Guillaume Apollinaire includes the name of Whitman under the column "Merda ai" [Shit to] (F 154).

<sup>114</sup> On the opulent oriental rugs, we had crushed our ancestral lethargy, arguing all the way to the final frontiers of logic and blackening reams of paper with delirious scribbling (F 49).

<sup>115</sup> ...you see / my soul is in my heart, / my heart is in my // soul, and if pain / the soul a little feels / suffers a little the heart too, // little boy, quietly.



*tenerezza, sorella nel dolore,  
rondine affranta nel mio stesso cielo,  
[...]  
vieni, sorella, il tuo martirio è il mio. (O 118)<sup>116</sup>*

Corazzini elaborates a model of feverish delirium and irrational intuition that falls into a non-doctrinal version of the fideist claim: *credo quia absurdum est* [I believe in what is unbelievable].<sup>117</sup> The possibility of believing and knowing even the absurd derives from the Crepuscular re-elaboration of Neoplatonic theories, according to which ideas are not individually produced, but derive from the innate ability of the soul to grasp and assimilate the ultra-sensorial reality of the *anima mundi*. This transcendental immanentism recalls Ralph Waldo Emerson's notion of the individual soul as a temporary embodiment of the "over-soul." Emerson's thought had great diffusion in Italy. Corazzini's poetics hew to the belief that the soul is something infinite that transcends the human being, and cannot be rationally acknowledged, as "our being is descending into us from we know not whence" (*The Over-Soul* 155). The American writer explains this mysterious force in these terms:

that Unity, that Over-soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with other; that common heart, of which all sincere conversation is the worship, to which all right action is submission; that overpowering reality which confuses our tricks and talents, and constraints everyone to pass for what he is, and to speak from his character and not from his tongue, and which evermore tends to pass into our thought and hand, and become wisdom, and virtue, and power, and beauty. We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. (155-56)

Consequently, from a cognitive perspective, the soul is not *tabula rasa* but is imbued with primogenital ideas and is open to remember and (re-)grasp new knowledge, while escaping the cage that Positivism tries to impose. Affirming the dominance of unruléd, springing ideas

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<sup>116</sup> Soul, pure as a pure dawn / soul, sad for its destinies / soul, prisoner in the boundaries / [...] / Light of the eyes, heart of my heart, / tenderness, sister in the pain, / broken-hearted swallow in my same sky / [...] / come, sister, your martyrdom is mine.

<sup>117</sup> On the mystical vision of Corazzini, see also *Il traguardo* [The finish line], a theatrical piece that dramatizes the clash between atheist Positivism and irrational mysticism.

over empirical, verified data, Crepuscularism proclaims “morte stecchite, le idee di una volta” [stone dead, the ideas from the past] (“Dai «soliloquî di un pazzo»”, *O* 136). Not by chance, the same poem closes with the image of an empty skull, symbolizing the deadly consumption of the Cartesian cogito, buried with its pretenses of basing humanity on the ability of rational thinking. The motif of the skull returns in Gozzano, as a parodic remake of the *cogito ergo sum*:

*Socchiudo gli occhi, estranio  
ai casi della vita.  
Sento fra le mie dita  
La forma del mio cranio...  
Ma dunque esisto? O strano!  
Vive tra il Tutto e il Niente  
questa cosa vivente  
detta guidogozzano! (TP 70)<sup>118</sup>*

From the physical perception of his cranium’s shape, the ego has a surprising realization that overthrows his supposed primacy as a rational human being; he is nothing more than an existing piece of living matter, scattered between everything and nothing. He can only grasp the common denominator of this randomness, namely his status of being a living thing. As with Corazzini, rational knowledge is banished and a glimpse of intuition is the only cognitive tool that allows for temporary understanding of the hidden meaning of reality. Yet, the knowledge of this Crepuscular poetic ego remains vague, ephemeral, and frozen in the time-space of brief epiphanies. Thus, Corazzini’s persona proceeds toward the bitter admission of living in an entropic world, in which he is condemned to not be understood, experiencing futility and lack of sense, as these *adynata* from “Rime dal cuore morto” [Rhymes from the dead heart] describe:

*Ma l’amore onde il cuor morto si gela,  
fu vano e ignoto sempre, ignoto e vano!  
Come un’antenna fu il mio cuore umano,  
antenna che non seppe mai la vela.*

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<sup>118</sup> I half-close my eyes, extraneous / to the cases of life. / I feel among my fingers / the shape of my skull... / So I exist?! So strange! / Between Everything and Nothing / lives this living thing / said guidogozzano!

*Fu come un sole immenso senza cielo  
e senza terra e senza mare, acceso  
solo per sé, solo per sé sospeso  
nello spazio. Bruciava e parve gelo. (O 118)*<sup>119</sup>

In this poem, the details slip away and the cognitive experience, lost between unrecoverable memories, tests the boundaries of the “human heart.” The admission of the failure of memory as a filter for intimate knowledge marks a fundamental difference with Bergson’s later theory of knowledge. For the French philosopher, intuition is a sympathetic and immediate experience of the continuous, inner flow of *duration*, filtered and sewn together through memory. In the Crepuscular world, memory has lost its ability to sew; it can barely recover and provides no meaning for the ego. This status of ineluctable loss is condensed in the space of Toblack, the sanatorium of the homonymous poem by Corazzini. As a tragic reinvention of Ludovico Ariosto’s moon—the land of lost objects<sup>120</sup>—Toblack is a wasteland of groundless hopes and memories, inhabited by the “anime che hanno sete ma non sanno bere” [thirsty souls that cannot drink] (O 123). The sanatorium becomes a subversive metaphor for the inanity of the Positivist Law and its attempt to hide the unintelligible “Thing” that animates life, beneath the pretense of an ever-valid ruling norm. In this land that moves “To Black”—towards the blackness of death—the need for a verifiable scientific method and glorious human ideals loses all meaning. What is human cognition under the dominion of senseless death? This is the question that Corazzini purposefully leaves unsolved and that Vallini, in his poem “La morte” [The Death], echoes, portraying death as the extreme land of intuitive thought. In this borderline

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<sup>119</sup> But love for which the dead heart freezes / was useless and unknown, unknown and useless! / Like a lateen yard was my human heart, / a lateen yard that never knew the sail. / Was like an immense sun without sky / and without land and sea, lighted / only for itself, only for itself suspended / in the space. Burnt and looking like frost.

<sup>120</sup> Cfr. the episode of Astolfo and the moon narrated in Ariosto’s *L’Orlando furioso*.

territory, in which human thinking can abruptly become senseless lingering, is it finally possible to perceive the confusing roar of the world with a “senso inumano” [inhuman sense] of detachment. Becoming the prey of Nothingness and entering a realm that makes all men equal—the ignorant and the know-it-all—highlights the inanity of these differentiating attempts. Rationality stops at the threshold of death, where matter finally releases its effort to stay together and is set free to be a “uomo mutatosi in cosa” [man mutated into thing] (*UGA* 96).

In the Founding Manifesto of Futurism, intuition, understood as immediate knowledge, is the cognitive key in Marinetti’s revolution. Yet, before defining the traits of Futurist intuition, Marinetti and his followers feel the urgency of despising, rejecting, and eradicating knowledge from the past, understood as stagnant and immobile thought. The idea of being an opposing culture becomes the matrix of the Futurist Avant-Garde action, which relies on a binary opposition between young rebellion—symbol of vital rebirth—and old *status quo*—image of dormant imitation. This dichotomy emerges very clearly in the scream of protest of the “Manifesto of Futurist Painters”:

Noi vogliamo combattere accanitamente la religione fanatica, incosciente e snobistica del passato, alimentata dall’esistenza nefasta dei musei. Ci ribelliamo alla supina ammirazione delle vecchie tele, delle vecchie statue, degli oggetti vecchi e all’entusiasmo per tutto ciò che è tarlato, sudicio, corroso dal tempo, e giudichiamo ingiusto, delittuoso, l’abituale disdegno per tutto ciò che è giovane, nuovo e palpitante di vita (*MDF* 27)<sup>121</sup>

Looking back to traditional knowledge in search of answers or models constitutes the erroneous cognitive approach that Futurists aim to dismiss and revert. Wisdom is the anti-value

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<sup>121</sup> We want to fight implacably against the mindless, snobbish, and fanatical religion of the past, religion nurtured by the pernicious existence of museums. We rebel against the spineless admiration of old canvases, old statues and old objects, and against the enthusiasm for everything worm-eaten, grimy, or corroded by time; and we deem it unjust and criminal that people habitually disdain whatever is young, new and trembling with life. (*F* 62)

par excellence, nothing more than an old set of paralyzed preconceptions, which have been embedded for centuries in human minds (*TIF* 16):

Usciamo dalla saggezza come da un orribile guscio, e gettiamoci, come frutti pigmentati d'orgoglio, entro la bocca immense e tôrta del vento!... Diciamoci in pasto all'Ignoto, non già per disperazione, ma soltanto per colmare i profondi pozzi dell'Assurdo! (*TIF* 9)<sup>122</sup>

Once the previous cognitive paradigm has been knocked down, the mind is opened to experiment with an intuitive “cognitive method”, based on immediate associations. The Futurist “stile analogico” [analogical style] (*TIF* 48, *F* 121) marks the evolution of a man that has altered and potentiated his cognitive faculties through the most recent aeronautical progress: “Siccome la velocità aerea ha moltiplicato la nostra conoscenza del mondo, la percezione per analogia diventa sempre più naturale per l'uomo” [Just as aerial speed has multiplied our experience of the world, perception by analogy is becoming more natural for man] (*TIF* 47, *F* 120). According to the founder of Futurism, analogy is a type of deep love that connects things that are apparently distant, different, or even hostile. In this flow, which abolishes any similitude or comparison, barriers disappear and cognition loses its rational categorizations to incorporate things in their fast, ineffable fusion, giving a whole image “in iscorcio mediante una sola parola essenziale” [in a glimpse, through one only essential word] (*TIF* 47).

Teaching his peers to hate rational thinking, Marinetti celebrates the “divina intuizione, dono caratteristico delle razze latine” [divine intuition, the characteristic gift of the Latin races] (*TIF* 54, *F* 124) that let humans trespass their cognitive frontiers, as well as their corporeal limitations through art— “l'arte, questo prolungamento della foresta delle nostre vene, che si

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<sup>122</sup> ‘Let’s break out of wisdom, as if out of a horrible shell; and let’s fling ourselves, like fruits swollen with pride, into the wind’s vast and contorted mouth!...Let’s throw ourselves, like food, into the Unknown, not in desperation but to fill up the deep wells of the Absurd.’ (*F* 50)

effonde, fuori dal corpo, nell'infinito dello spazio e del tempo" [art, which is a prolongation of the forest of our arteries, prolongation which flows beyond the body and extends into the infinity of space and time] (*TIF* 54, *F* 124).

Fast and alogical thinking becomes the new irrational faith fighting the syllogism of "solitary and infirm reason" (*TIF* 55) with the generative power of intuitive analogies. This velocity-induced and frenzied status of abandonment rises, in Futurism, as a form of anti-theologic mysticism. In a manifesto from 1916, Marinetti names this cult "nuova religione-morale della velocità" [new religion-morality of Speed], declaring that, in opposition to Christian morality, Futurist morality will defend man from the decomposition caused by slowness, routine, and analytical and introspective thought (*TIF* 130). According to Jeffrey Schnapp, speed is the back-end concept that allows for the Futurist appropriation and further development of ideas that were spreading at the time, like Mario Morasso's "velocimania" [speed-mania]. Drawing from these reflections and from themes that were present in Classical and Christian religions—such as the winged feet of Hermes, or the doctrine of transubstantiation—Futurism assembles a comprehensive counter-theology "that couples mental to somatic speed in the name of a new fast-paced, anti-contemplative model of intelligence, [and] relocates the supernatural in everyday within the framework of a sort of molecular animism" (*Modernitalia* 12). Yet, in the paradigm of the religion-morality of Speed, knowing, like with Corazzini, implies a search for and a fusion with the divine that inhabits man and things, as Marinetti states: "L'Ebbrezza delle grandi velocità in automobile non è che la gioia di sentirsi fusi con l'unica divinità" [The Inebriation of great speeds in cars is simply the joy of feeling oneself merged with the only divinity] (*TIF* 133, *F* 226). Cognition becomes the sensation of losing oneself in the intuition of a divinized body

that is in continuous motion: “correre correre correre volare volare” [to hurry to hurry to hurry to fly to fly] (*TIF* 135, *F* 227).

Intuition interweaves the invisible thread that connects human and matter. Proceeding through analogic cognition, Futurism aims at a total immersion of human impulses and feelings within the all-embracing psychology of living matter—the “psicologia intuitiva della materia” [intuitive psychology of matter] (*TIF* 52). Futurists, as well as Crepusculars, do not aim to erase the psychological dimension of life, but rather to expand it. The attack on psychology can be read as an attempt to extend the dominion of feelings and emotions to a broader and virtually infinite “living base.” This point emerges in a passage from the “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting”, in which Boccioni states the revolution of the Futurist epistemological approach; man is no longer at the center of a perceivable universe. The cognitive power of the thing is the new frontier of knowledge, in order to “better serve the material needs” of the time and “reenter into life” (*F* 65):

La nostra nuova coscienza non ci fa più considerare l’uomo come centro della vita universale. Il dolore di un uomo è interessante, per noi, quanto quello di una lampada elettrica, che soffre, e spasima, e grida con le più strazianti espressioni di dolore (*Scritti editi e inediti* 9)<sup>123</sup>

Intuition becomes the tool to “put the spectator in the center of the painting” (*F* 65) and fathom the emotional meaning of art, in its vivifying encounter with human and nonhuman life. In the trilogy of paintings entitled *State of Minds*—“The Farewells”, “Those who stay”, and “Those who go”—Boccioni realizes what he calls “pittura degli stati d’animo” [painting of the state of minds], namely a visual language that allows for the expression of complex emotions and

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<sup>123</sup> Our renewed consciousness does not permit us to look upon man as the center of universal life. The suffering of a man is of the same interest for us as the suffering of an electric lamp, which can feel pain, suffer tremors, and shriek with the most heartrending expressions of torment. (*F* 65)

feeling, through the “plastic dynamism” of lines and colors. Once again, intuition is the key to capture the dynamic force of life in its all-encompassing whole, as the co-signatories of the

Preface to the catalogue of the first Futurist exhibition explain:

È quasi impossibile esprimere con parole i valori essenziali della pittura. Il pubblico deve dunque convincersi che per comprendere delle sensazioni estetiche alle quali non è abituato, deve dimenticarsi completamente la propria cultura intellettuale, non per *impadronirsi* dell’opera d’arte, ma per *abbandonarsi* a questa [...]. Noi creiamo così, in qualche modo, un ambiente emotivo, cercando a colpi d’intuizione le simpatie e gli attaccamenti che esistono tra la scena esterna (concreta) e l’emozione interna (astratta). Quelle linee, quelle macchie, quelle zone di colore apparentemente illogiche e inesplicabili sono appunto le chiavi misteriose dei nostri quadri. (*Scritti editi e inediti* 20)<sup>124</sup>

Boccioni’s notion of art as a form of immediate, emotional communication in which humans lose their cognitive power and the object imposes its agency before their eyes, had already appeared in the artistic reflections of Arnaldo Ginna and Bruno Corra.<sup>125</sup> In their work *Arte dell’avvenire*, the two Futurist brothers even arrive at the conception of the possibility of immediately expressing ideas, feelings, and states of mind through colors, as if they were sounds. Ginna experimented with paintings of pure colors and also with poems of pure sound [poesie fonetiche], in which the phonetics of the text imposes itself as new semantics.<sup>126</sup> This

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<sup>124</sup> It is practically impossible to express in words the essential values of the painting. The public must also be convinced that in order to understand aesthetic sensations to which one is not accustomed, it is necessary to forget entirely one’s intellectual culture, not in order to assimilate the work of art, but to deliver one’s self up to it heat and soul. [...]. We thus create a sort of emotional ambience, seeking by intuition the affinities and the links which exist between the exterior (concrete) scene and the interior (abstract) emotion. Those lines, those spots, those zones of color, apparently illogical and meaningless, are actually the mysterious keys of our pictures. (*F* 108)

<sup>125</sup> The hypothesis has been advanced that Boccioni got his ideas about the “state of minds” from the essay *Arte dell’avvenire* by Ginna and Corra, and from a meeting with these two native Romagna painters in 1911. Ginna had already come to similar conclusions in 1910. To support this position, Mariastella Margozi refers to a document in which Ginna comments on the plastic dynamism of the Futurists and on their inability to abandon geometric shapes to express pure colors and forms (34). According to Ginna’s testimony, this was the topic of the first meeting that he and his brothers had with the Futurists Marinetti, Boccioni, Carrà, and Russolo in 1912. While Carrà and Russolo strongly disagreed with Ginna and Corra’s propositions, Marinetti and Boccioni showed a vivid interest in the concept of “chromatic music” free from geometric forms.

<sup>126</sup> This text, entitled “Gioia di vivere” [Joy of living] is exemplary of Ginna’s experimentation with phonetic poetry: “Ginnà lamp lampit / Corra far berit / Ginna, Ginnà, corr lampit / Fat / Lampit / Vitamot / Vivraromit” (*Manifesti futuristi e scritti teorici* 258).



investigation of the communicative potentiality of sounds is the linguistic outcome of Ginna's peculiar artistic experimentation, between proto-Abstractism and Futurism. As he writes in a journal entry, abstract art is about reconstructing with new words. Cognition is thus not an act of processing information according to a shared code, but a moment of reconstruction of spiritual states beyond the dimension of rational understanding. Art can provide an immersion into occult forces through the exclusive use of sound or color, realizing a perfect fusion of shades, music, and feelings, as Ginna illustrates in a later memoir:

Mentre oggi quasi sempre il quadro astrattista *non* esprime un sentimento od uno stato d'animo umano spirituale, il quadro di musica cromatica esprime uno stato d'animo caratterizzato e profondo. Anche Kandinsky non ha potuto liberarsi del gioco dei colori, dell'effetto *decorativo* semplice e non ha potuto *decidersi* per l'espressività di uno stato d'animo dato dai colori. (*Manifesti futuristi e scritti teorici* 262)<sup>127</sup>

For Ginna, rendering states of mind through color ultimately overcomes the barrier that divided matter from the spirit, expressing through the sensorial language of colors an extra-phenomenal dimension (Margozzi 34). In their approach to artistic experimentation as an alternative cognitive path to logic, Corra declares, in the short novel *Sam Dunn è morto* [Sam Dunn died] that it is necessary to overcome the safe but suffocating barriers of logic in order to “understand” life:

la nuova realtà che Sam Dunn ci ha rivelata saprà bene domani [...] mettere alla porta tutta la vecchia scienza idiotamente presuntuosa che sino ad oggi ha preteso di incarcerarci in una tutela da minorenni ai quali si proibisce di lanciarsi nell'orgia di possibilità che l'ignoto offre. (16)<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> While nowadays the abstract painting *doesn't* usually express a feeling or a spiritual human state of mind, the painting of chromatic music expresses a characterized and deep state of mind. Kandisky, too, was not able to liberate himself from the game of colors, from the simple *decorative* effect, and wasn't able to make up his mind as to a state of mind given through colors.

<sup>128</sup> The new reality that Sam Dunn revealed to us, tomorrow will be well capable of [...] giving the boot to the foolishly presumptuous old science that until now has pretended to imprison us in a custody of minors who are forbidden to launch themselves into the orgy of possibilities that the unknown offers to us.

For Ginna, Corra, and the members of their circle, these “possibilities” lead to forms of occult spirituality, akin to Theosophy.<sup>129</sup> Second Futurism conceives artists as special individuals, able to penetrate matter, fishing “nel lontano substrato universale” [in the far away foundations of the universe] (*Manifesti futuristi e scritti teorici* 200). This occult perspective admits the presence of other worlds, which permeate our world and can be experienced through a state of “subcoscienza cosciente” [conscious sub-consciousness] (201). Affirming the strategic function of the soul as locus of transcendent cognition, however, Ginna admits the limitation of this cognitive dimension, namely the impossibility for him to establish it if the psyche creates the “forms” of his visions or if these forms comes to his mind from the outside when he opens “the windows of his soul” (201). This venue of Futurism intertwines artistic experience with an esoteric, pre-conscious “knowledge”, attainable only through experiences of trance and temporary exit from the body-mind physical space. In particular, female writers like Maria Ginanni and Irma Valeria created a virtually automatic and pre-surrealist language, which transcribes the journey of the soul through *other* mysterious lands of the mind, where knowing is leaving the self to embrace universal wisdom, beyond the absurd logic, “filettata dalla bava di migliaia di lumache sapienti” [threaded with the slime of thousands of wise snails] (Valeria, *Morbidezze in agguato* 15). As Ginanni writes, the cognitive challenge is a question of capability, as both volumetric capacity and learning ability:

Essere *capaci* di comprendere sempre di più, vedere sempre di più, sentire sempre di più.

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<sup>129</sup> Both Ginna and Corra were involved in spiritualistic movements, and their works are strictly connected with their interest in ultra-phenomenal life. Ginna, for instance, was captured by Rudolf Steiner’s concept of the extrasensorial dimension of the color, defined as “colori liberamente aleggianti” [freely waving colors] (Margozzi 34).

Allargare la propria orbita interna almeno di qualche millimetro ogni giorno, aumentare ogni giorno la porosità della propria anima, non essere mai contenti della propria grandezza. (*Il poema dello spazio* 73)<sup>130</sup>

This common yearning for a total revelatory cognition, which seeks to trespass on the boundaries of human nature, is one of the strongest threads linking Crepuscularism and Futurism. From the assumption that human, rational knowledge is *too* human and limited, both movements move towards an epistemology of the Beyond. Thus, Corazzini's claim, in a tone that recalls the Nietzschean Zarathustra, that: "L'anima è morta ed io ne son sicuro" [The soul is dead and I am sure of it] (*O* 137), sounds like the bold announcement of the death of the trapped, individual soul. Overcoming the inner prison that traps humanity is the mission that Crepuscularism and Futurism undertake, celebrating the value of intuition as a way toward cognitive freedom.

### 3.3 Passive and Active Creative Destructions

The Crepuscular and Futurist cognitive paradigms share the same urge to redefine knowledge, beyond the boundaries of rational thought and scientific verifiability. Yet, by experiencing new cognitive approaches based on intuition and irrational impulses, they take divergent routes. Schematizing, Crepuscular poets conduct a war of attrition against the bourgeois system of knowledge, accepting even passive self-destruction, in order to show the inherent precariousness of the modern apparatus. By contrast, Futurism performs a frontal attack on a ground that has already been eroded, accelerating the pace of destruction through new, cognitive, war-like *action*.

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<sup>130</sup> Having the *capacity* to comprehend more, to seeing more, to feel more. To widen one's orbit at least some millimeters every day, increase every day the porosity of one's soul, not ever be content of one's greatness.

Mocking the Positivist model of a “knowledge in progress”, which is continuously under a theoretical and practical process of formulation and verification, Crepuscularism proposes two complementary models of passive knowledge: contemplative mysticism and intellectual ataraxia. Combining these tendencies, Corazzini’s poetics of cognition focuses on showing that, as the most quotidian things are the most enigmatic, the ego accesses their mystery only when lingering in a status of passive osmosis with surrounding matter. Thus, reverting the traditional cognitive patterns, Crepuscular persona do not engage in the action of knowing, but *are known* by things and infused with their meaning. This process of “participative revelation” finds a linguistic reflection in the peculiar use of *sapere* in Roman Crepuscularism. The verb usually appears in negative utterances that deny the possibility of an active, positive cognition. Knowledge is, in a Socratic venue, awareness of not knowing. In the Crepuscular poetic *parole*, *sapere* strays from the semantic field of “to know”, or to have a certain practical know-how, and trespasses on semantics of the verb *conoscere*, meaning to be acquainted with somebody, usually within the field of human relationships. By blending the knowledge of people and things, Crepuscularism adds another shade, playing with the Latin root of *sapere*, the verb *sapio*, “to taste of” or “to have the flavor of” and only figuratively “to discern.” “To know” implies a direct assimilation of an external matter, which is tasted, swallowed, and absorbed by the body, while the brain simply detects its flavor. The external thing becomes the body, through a directly incarnated form of cognition, assimilated and secured into the body. This particular use is exemplified, for instance, in the poem “Dai «Soliloquî di un pazzo»” [From the soliloquies of a fool], in which, reversing the expected order of the ego-object cognitive process, Corazzini describes Christ’s cross as: “I chiodi terribili che sanno / le ossa dell’uomo e il legno della croce” [The terrible nails that know / the bones of the man and the wood of the cross] (*O* 136). The hermetic verse intertwines with all

the shades of the verb *sapere*, as the cross never understood Jesus's divine nature, yet physically penetrated his human flesh and soaked itself with Christ's martyrdom, becoming a synecdoche of the passion itself. This model of incarnated revelation is the kernel of Corazzini's gradual elaboration of intuitive knowledge as messianic cognition. Crepuscular knowledge is a waiting for the final disclosure of a meaning that is unintelligible and only graspable through instantaneous epiphanies, in which mind and body are pervaded by a vague sense of inexplicable plenitude.

In the last two collections, *Piccolo libro inutile* [Little useless book] and *Libro per la sera della domenica* [Book for Sunday Evening] Corazzini explores messianic cognition, illustrating a type of mystical knowledge that lies in what Giorgio Agamben defines as "the limit concept of religious experience in general, the point in which religious experience passes beyond itself and calls itself into question insofar as it is law" (*Homo Sacer* 39). Crepuscular mystic cognition is an annihilation of the rational will that allows for a totalizing experience, in which the ego projects itself in an over-dimension beyond life, death, and physical constrictions. In a letter to Antonello Caprino, dated August 1905, Corazzini expresses his desire to dissolve his human materiality in a suspension of his existence that signals a revelatory encounter with a mysterious *non se quoi*, which he has always half-seen:

La dedizione del mio corpo al *Nulla* o al *Tutto*, secondo l'ora che passa, s'intensifica in un desiderio così folle e così enorme come se nella cessazione della mia esistenza io intravedessi ciò che tiene gli occhi del prigioniero, rimasto per un caso, privo di sorveglianza. (O 284)<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> The dedication of my body to the *Nothing* or to the *Everything* depends on the time, intensifies in such a foolish and enormous desire, as if in the end of my existence I glimpsed what captures the eyes of the prisoner who happened to remain without surveillance.

From a cognitive perspective, both the intensification of life through extreme forms of spiritualism and the anticipation of death, as the moment of access to a potentiated knowledge, imply a lingering in a cognitive limbo, suspended, waiting for the messianic revelation. While calling for his death and the advent of a new cognitive era, Corazzini subtly constructs a self-divinization through identification between his autobiographical, suffering poetic ego and the coming Messiah. Through a careful dissemination of biblical hints, the *fanciullo poeta* surpasses his terrestrial passion to elect the destiny of a divine figure, who syncretically intertwines Dionysian and Christological themes of redemptive martyrdom and the copresence of the human and divine.<sup>132</sup> This call for self-divinization also emerges in Corazzini's private writing; in a letter to Giuseppe Caruso, from August 1906, he confesses his perverse dream of elevation:

Qualcosa di soprannaturale è in me. Io mi sento, oggi, buono e casto come Gesù. Potrei predicare alle turbe, *potrei salire al cielo come S. Francesco*. Io credo essere divenuto anima. Ho un sorriso e una pietà per tutti. Vorrei baciare i moribondi di ogni ospedale. Io credo, inoltre, che tanta bontà non può essere che perversità camuffata. Oggi, come dice Maupassant, ho veramente l'impressione dello spuntare delle ali alle spalle. (O 292)<sup>133</sup>

Corazzini himself admits that extreme forms of *agape* and *pietas* could hide something wicked, alluding to the fact that under his pretense of self-debasement he is aspiring to the unlimited cognition of the *übermensch*. He seeks to gain access to a superior form of life at an ontological level, namely to a life that represents the key to the divine dimension (Villa, Introduction 52). The divinization of Corazzini's poetic persona and the consequent acquisition

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<sup>132</sup> As Massimo Fusillo explains in his monograph *Il dio ibrido. Dioniso e le "Baccanti" nel Novecento*, the association between Dionysus and Christ had already been a motif in German Romanticism, which spread in Modernist culture with Nietzsche's *The birth of tragedy* (9).

<sup>133</sup> Something otherworldly is in me. I feel, today, good and chaste like Jesus. I could preach to the crowd, *I could ascend to the sky like Saint Francis*. I believe that I became soul. I have a smile and pity for everybody. I would like to kiss the moribund people in any hospital. I also believe that so much goodness cannot be anything other than concealed perversity. Today, as Maupassant says, I really have the impression that wings are coming out of my shoulders.

of a new cognitive capacity shines through one of his final poems, not included in any collection, “Alberto, se, meravigliosamente” [Alberto, if marvellously]. The poem preannounces the ascent of the poetic ego to Heaven as an elected figure, splendidly appearing as a vision to a friend, “Alberto, se, meravigliosamente / io mi salissi a la celeste sfera / e intorno ai miei capelli una raggiera / lucesse e ti ridesse nella mente” [Alberto, if, marvellously, / I would ascend to the celestial sphere / and around my hair a halo / shined and smiled to you in your mind] (O 213).

Corazzini takes a further step in his literary testament, “La morte di Tantalo” [The death of Tantalus], which can be read as the manifesto of the Crepuscular cognitive rebellion. Retelling the *Genesis*’ myth, the poet combines the biblical banishment with the mythological punishment of Tantalus,<sup>134</sup> the poem emphasizing the act of eating the “forbidden fruit” from the tree of knowledge—the grapes of the golden vineyard—as a moment of acquiring nonhuman cognitive power. When the man and the woman decide to nourish themselves with those grapes, they choose to impose their own judgment over traditional but senseless law:

*Noi morivamo tutti i giorni  
cercando una causa divina [...]  
Ma quel giorno già vania  
e la causa della nostra morte  
non era stata rinvenuta (O 231)<sup>135</sup>*

Only when they dare break that cognitive prohibition, eating the golden grapes and drinking the golden water, do they embrace self-divinizing life and disclose the revelation: Embracing knowledge as the creative, pure possibility of being, beyond laws and ontological

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<sup>134</sup> Tantalus was a demigod who killed his son Pelops during a banquet, as a sacrifice to the gods. The gods refused the offer and Tantalus’s punishment for his act was to stand in a pool of water under a fruit tree with low branches, unable either to drink the water or to pick the fruit.

<sup>135</sup> We were dying all our days / seeking a divine cause [...] // But that day was already vanishing / and still the cause of our death / had not been found. (SE 65)

prescriptions. Theirs is a “story of superior individuals who have been able to create and to justify themselves on their own” (Vattimo 10), like primordial matter imposing its meaning on future human life.

In Gozzano’s poetry, there is a strong, contemplative attitude toward knowledge that ranges from the spiritualistic abandonment of the first collection (*La via del rifugio*) to the hyper-intellectualism of *I colloqui*. As with Corazzini, Gozzano’s poetic world reveals a rich complexity beneath its quotidian and colloquial appearance. The problem of reading Gozzano lies primarily in the ironic tone of his poetry, which often creates a “cognitive barrier” for the reader, making it purposefully impossible to discern where parody ends and a more sympathetic voice arises. This trait is further accentuated in his first collection, as its episodic trend and the lack of a narrative development do not allow for an all-encompassing interpretation. The embedded complexity of *La via del rifugio* casts doubts on recent interpretations of this work as a path toward the contemplative nirvana of Buddhism and a celebration of a new ideological conscience focused on Buddhism, egotism, and nihilism (Villa, *Il Crepuscolarismo* 123). In the introductory poem of the collection, the poetic persona exhibits a spiritual abandonment and declares his passive cognitive attitude towards the hustle and bustle of life: “Non agogno / cha la virtù del sogno: / l’inconsapevolezza.” [I don’t desire / anything else other than the virtue of dream / unawareness] (*TP* 70). Yet, this status of absence of any cognitive goad never achieves the mystical climax of Corazzini’s poetry. In Gozzano’s poetic reflection, the desire for spiritual annihilation is always contrasted with the lucid awareness of needing an answer that neither the dying Positivism of the nineteenth century nor the rising Mysticism can fully provide. At this fork, Gozzano’s poetry explores a third route: the dimension of doubt, as he suggests in this letter to Candida Bolognino dated Bombay [Mumbai], April 8 1912:



Amo la religione buddista. Si potessi vivere qui, mi farei buddista, allora imparerei a disprezzare questo fragile corpo che solo vi dà delle noie e delle malinconie.  
Oh, questa vita di pura contemplazione, questo solo sogno di vita ultraterrena, come deve essere dolce!  
Lei mi disse un giorno che era uno scettico! Ride ancora di me, del mio scetticismo? Ora vorrei farmi buddista. Sarebbe bello diventare asceta. Forse finirò la mia vita in completo ascetismo. Sarà la religione di Buddha che mi avrà portato a ciò?<sup>136</sup>

Although exalting this contemplative lifestyle, the author interjects his yearning for asceticism with hypothetical constructions that sound far from an actual plan for conversion. Undoubtedly, Gozzano nourished certain interests in Eastern spiritualism, but other passages from *Verso la cuna del mondo* reveal a superficial adherence to Buddhist spirituality and a deep inability to let go of the occidental perspective. Commenting on the Silva-lingam, an apotropaic symbol seen in an Indian temple, Gozzano openly expresses the “doubts of his occidental, profane mind” (*Journey* 12) about a religion that uses an emblem of fertility, but regards not being born as the supreme good. Furthermore, in a passage from “Natale a Ceylon” (Christmas at Ceylon), the writer admits to being homesick and definitely removes his orientalist mask, stating that “one can deceive himself to be a Robison Crusoe, or a Buddhist cenobite” but it is impossible to negate a European essence, based on “thousands of years of [...] evolution and twenty centuries of Christianity” (*Journey* 49).

*La via del rifugio*'s references to concepts that recall the Buddhist cyclic cosmology of death and rebirth might be a visible influence of the poetry and lectures of Arturo Graf—a writer and professor of Italian Literature at the University of Turin, who exercised a great influence on Gozzano and other young intellectuals. His poetry, hung between Positivism and an ascendant

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<sup>136</sup> These excerpts from the letter to Mrs. Bolognino are quoted by Vincenzo Faraci (cfr. cit. article). I love Buddhist religion. If I could live here, I would become Buddhist, I would then learn to despise this fragile body that only gives you annoyances and melancholies. Oh, this life of pure contemplation, this only dream of afterlife, how it must be sweet! One day you told me that I was a skeptic! Do you still laugh at me, at my skepticism? Now I would like to become Buddhist. It would be nice to become an ascetic. Maybe I will end my life in complete asceticism, and I believe that Buddha's religion would lead me to that.

religious inspiration, offers a model for Gozzano's split attitude between atheism and visceral attachment to a mysterious otherness. Graf's poetry testifies to the collapse of the Positivist pillars and the emergence of a new, doubtful cognitive approach towards existence that the young generation inherited. Gozzano borrows the attitude of "trapping" very broad concepts of human and cosmic life—"il Tutto e il Niente", "il Tempo e lo Spazio" [the Whole and the Nothing, the Time and the Space]—in easy verses (Guglielminetti, Introduzione xv) from his master. Contemplating these notions, Gozzano remains at the threshold of the "too human fable of a God" (TP 79) and the irrational need to find an answer beyond that fable. "Corrupting" Positivism with his spiritualist search, Gozzano envisions the natural cyclical transformation of energies as a form of metempsychosis. Thus, even the Positivist evolutionary model expressed by the old housekeeper of "L'analfabeta" [The illiterate] opens the space for a syncretic conception of knowledge as a continuous migration of energies from one form of life to another. Cognition passively moves and regenerates, as in a retelling of the phoenix myth, which is far from a poetic expression of Positivist positions, although the protagonist of the poems is the spokesman for a rustic pseudo-Positivism, learnt from direct contact with Nature:<sup>137</sup>

*Dice: «Ritorna il fiore e la bisavola.  
Tutto ritorna vita e vita in polve:  
ritorneremo, poiché tutto evolve  
nella vicenda d'un'eterna favola». (TP 78-79)<sup>138</sup>*

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<sup>137</sup> It is possible to see Graf's influence when comparing Gozzano's verses with this text from *Le rime della selva*: "Niente dura o soggiorna / Tutto in brev'ora è distrutto; / Ma nulla s'annulla, e tutto, / O prima o dopo, ritorna." [Nothing lasts or stays; / Everything in a little is destroyed; / But anything nullifies, and everything, Sooner or later, returns] ("*Tutto? Niente.*" 19).

<sup>138</sup> The flower and the ancestor are able / to come back. All come back, all turn to dust. / We'll come back. Everything, just as it must, / evolve in the whirling of an eternal fable. (TM 179)

It is also fundamental that Gozzano uses an old, illiterate man to explain the principles of conservation of mass and energy, as if, in a general crisis of “faiths”, even scientific laws were a faith among other fairy tales and myths in which Gozzano’s generation no longer believes but have yet to be completely replaced. To the eyes of the young man, who speaks with the eighty-year-old servant, this old atheist becomes the symbol of a solemn and mystical wisdom. Thus, at the end of the poem, through a flashback that carries the poetic I back to his childhood, Positivist wisdom, which was firmly anchored in reality and the Risorgimento history, is merged with infantile, exotic images and mythopoeic reconstructions: wars and alien lands vividly fire up a child’s mind.

In *La via del rifugio*, Gozzano symbolically burns the Positivist faith, but still passively accepts that literature and love can provide reassuring certainties, or at least “sheltering” illusions that protect from a real cognition of life. In *I colloqui* Gozzano retells the cognitive crisis of *La via del rifugio*, adopting the voice of an ironic and lonely sophist who exhibits a certain detachment from any Idealist or Positivist position. This practical wisdom is a form of passive contemplation of the life that has passed by, never understood or lived, but only “read” and filtered through books. In his second collection, Gozzano develops the awareness of having lived in a proto-Truman Show, in which his life and cognition has always been projected on an imaginary screen; it has always been meta-life and cognition. As he admits in the opening poem of the collection, that was not life:

*Ma un bel romanzo che non fu vissuto da me  
che io vidi vivere da quello  
che mi seguì, dal mio fratello muto. (TP 138)*<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> But a lovely novel I could never be / the hero of: I looked on while another / lived it, my silent brother following me. (TM 7)

He has been his own cognitive spectator, watching life exhaust its meaning, while being known, lived, and cannibalized by his own literary projection. Unlike Corazzini, Gozzano's provocative cognitive passivity never evolves into mystic nihilism. It turns into an ironically debased, skeptic pragmatism of a "petty and bourgeois life", which is finally embraced in its quotidian and elusive banality. Although feigning intellectual detachment and acceptance of bourgeois inanity, Gozzano's persona remains intrigued with the idea that beyond this routine nonsense a pure form of cognition is still achievable. That type of cognition, which leads Gozzano's "entomological" poetics of *Le farfalle* [Butterflies], derives from Nature, an ineffable force, bearer of unspoken, absolute truth ("Pioggia d'Agosto", *TP* 216). Through Nature, human cognition can contemplate the dimension of being as an open project, opposed to the idea of bourgeois finalism. It can comprehend and experience the ineffable pure "projectuality" that a larva in the cocoon embodies—"the intermediate form [...] where *not being* and *not being yet* coincide" (Guglielminetti, Introduction xli).

Unlike Crepuscular cognitive lingering, the Futurist palingenesis pursues a cognitive scorched earth strategy. To demolish the previous system of knowledge and establish a virgin cognitive horizon, Futurists call for a translation of violent thinking into violent action. This pragmatic attitude finds its root in the thoughts of the American philosopher William James, whose ideas circulated in Italy through the journal *Leonardo*. The reception of Pragmatism was not univocal and generated a debate on different views of this thought, which split the contributors of *Leonardo* into two camps: Giovanni Vailati and Mario Calderoni's "logical Pragmatism", and Papini and Prezzolini's "magical Pragmatism." The latter tendency was to a mystic exaltation of action for action's sake, which nourished activism with occultism (Bobbio 44), leading to theories that diverged from its American origins. As Laura Schram Pighi

illustrates, *Leonardo* presented James's theories as an application of Bergson's philosophy on the field of praxis (74). This view, though generally acceptable, implied manipulations and simplifications of the French thinker's notions in order to prioritize the dichotomy of will-action over free will and deliberation. In the pragmatic *vulgata* that the Italian journal popularized, action and intuition are fused, as Papini states: "poiché vivere è agire, e agire è possedere, e l'intuizione è possessione immediata del reale, il ritorno all'intuizione significa ritorno all'azione." [as living is acting, and acting is possessing, and the intuition is immediate possession of reality, the return to intuition is a return to action.] (*Leonardo* 34)

Futurism drew from the ongoing Italian debate about Pragmatism and its vocation of pure action as the most effective weapon against backwardness. Nevertheless, Marinetti's praise of a form of praxis, in which reflection is erased in the name of immediate action, is neither unique to Futurism nor to Italian Pragmatism, but developed as a re-elaboration of various theories, spanning the anarcho-syndicalist positions of Nietzsche, Bergson, and Morasso. Marinetti assimilates the concepts of *élan vital* and rejuvenating violence as drivers for the formation of a new world. Futurism, as Günter Berghaus states, "promulgated the positive energy of war and revolution as a precondition of progress", and only by assembling and reformulating previous positions could it develop the bold claim and pervasive message of "war, the sole cleanser of the world" ("Violence, War, Revolution" 29). In *Guerra sola igiene del mondo*, Marinetti traces the history of Futurism back to the realization, in 1908, that literature, on its own, was not enough to revive the dying genius of Italy: "Bisognava assolutamente cambiare metodo, scendere nelle vie, dar l'assato ai teatri e introdurre il pugno nella lotta artistica" [It was absolutely necessary to change method, go down in the streets, assault theaters, and introduce the fist in the artistic fight] (*TIF* 235). Specifically, he explains that, unlike Anarchism, Futurism has a cognitive mission; it

aims to tear off and burn the roots of the “social tree”: “quelle piantante nel cervello dell’uomo” [those roots planted in the human brain] that lead to cowardly quietism, love for anything old, need for laws, and fear of total freedom (*TIF* 291).

The model of this exaltation of violence as a new cognitive action appears in *Mafarka il futurista*. The novel endorses a form of vitalism nourished by different forms of violence, from sexual assault to belligerence.<sup>140</sup> The introduction of *Mafarka il futurista*—later included in *Guerra sola igiene del mondo*, along with other excerpts from the novel—is a violent critical attack on the cultural inertia that stops the “incalculable becoming” of man (5). The recurrent image of war as a festive and revitalizing occasion, along with the regenerative *topos* of fire as the most radical creative destruction, translates into the pressing urge to break the moral chains of the bourgeois cognitive horizon, renewing the perspective on “good” and “evil”. In the incipit of the novel, Marinetti directly addresses his Futurist arsonist brothers: “Non la difendete [la mia opera]: guardatela, piuttosto, rimbalzare scoppiando, come una granata ben carica, sulle teste spaccate dei nostri contemporanei, e poi ballate, ballate un ballo guerresco.” [Don’t defend it: just watch it bounce and burst like a loaded grenade over our contemporaries’ crackled skulls, and then dance, dance in the war-dance] (*M* 3, *MF* 1). After the first Futurist Manifesto’s “declaration of war”, *Mafarka* is a “grenade” launched against the obtuseness, static nature, and languor of the contemporary period. Adopting the rhetoric of a leader, Marinetti exhorts his cohort to share the reading of the novel as a spiritual experience and as an epic war between the repetitive “litanies of wisdom” and the vitalistic energy of the future: “Io vi annuncio che lo spirito dell’uomo è un’ovaia inesercitata... E noi lo fecondiamo per la prima volta!” [I tell you

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<sup>140</sup> The novel subsequently faced a trial for moral issues and decency outrage that ended with Marinetti’s absolution.

that the mind of man is an unpracticed ovary... It is we who are the first to impregnate it!] (*M 5*, *MF 3*).

The belligerent approach of Futurism shapes its notion of knowledge as a peculiar form of social negotiation. Futurists exhibit the cognitive habitus of conquerors who can conceive of any object of inquiry as prey. Once again, *Mafarka il futurista* provides a suitable example: The novel is set in a fantasy version of Africa, the unknown and virgin land par excellence, and opens with the mass rape of black women slaves. Africa represents the specular opposite of the urban, educated bourgeois space; in the metaphorical corporal scene of rape, violence becomes the “cognitive” tool to penetrate, fully explore, and carnally possess a wild space, as Barbara Spackman notes, justifying the dream of a “bourgeois empire” under the myth of instinctive attack against the Unknown (76). Nevertheless, Futurist cognitive violence does not exhaust itself in the brutal action of conquest, in which the idea itself of movement and continuous discovery overcomes the need for speculation and further elaboration. There is violence embedded in the contemplative attitude of Florentine Futurism that, although diverging from Marinetti’s “cognitive action”, confirms the main idea of substituting “to do” for “to know.” Inflicting violence on and with the body, to the point of envisioning it as a powder keg exploding through the cosmos, becomes an alternate way to obtain new cognition. This attitude of the Azure Patrol shines through some of Fulvia Giuliani’s hermetic passages, in which the young female writer describes a peculiar cognitive process: her soul escaping from her body and releasing energies that magnetically attract any lively force in the street, creating an “intreccio bislacco” [odd twist] that erases the division between external phenomena and internal appropriation of meanings:

Io vorrò; ed io comanderò che l'enorme condensamento di suoni si illumini di luci proprie, si accenda di spasimi, e irradi di elettricità violette l'intreccio bislacco dei mille motivi, così per tutta una notte invernale la mia anima assorbirà le più fantastiche, vibranti caloriche ispirazioni, venutemi ipnoticamente dalla fame e dal dolore che spinse mille ignoti suonatori girovaghi a gettare rabbiosamente al cielo tetro le loro melodie strane e malefiche. (Salaris, *Le futuriste*, 85-6; originally published in *L'Italia Futurista*, 2.20, July 1, 1917)<sup>141</sup>

These lines seem to fall into the canon of the Modernist ego-knower, trying to absorb reality from a subjective perspective, yet Giuliani envisions a further cognitive step in which, like in Corazzini and Vallini, her poetic I turns into a pet, nestled in a bed, waiting for the sun. In that moment, she sets her will free from the magnetic grip and the mix that had filled her soul instantaneously vanishes into atoms and intermixes with cosmic dust its “polvere vivificante di concetti musicali ultrapotenti sapenti d'amarrezza, di gioia, di sonno” [vivifying powder of superpowerful musical concepts tasting like bitterness, joy, dream] (86). From a linguistic point of view, this passage reflects on the ambiguous nuance of the verb *sapere*, highlighted in Corazzini's work. Knowledge acts as an intrusive powder that pervades the air and connects all sensorial experiences of the body to an atomic universal truth.

### 3.4 Ignorance Is the New Knowledge

*Chi troppo studia e poi matto diventa!  
Giova il sapere al corpo che ti langue?  
Vale ben meglio un'oncia di buon sangue  
che tutta la saggezza sonnolenta. (TP 78)*<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> I will want; and I will command that the enormous condensation of sounds will illuminate with its own lights, will light up of pangs, and irradiate of violet electricity, the odd twist of a thousand patterns; in this way for all the winter night my soul will absorb the more fantastic, vibrant caloric inspirations, which came to me hypnotically due to the hunger and pain that drove one thousand wanderer musicians to throw their malefic melodies to the sky with rage.

<sup>142</sup> “Study too much and soon you'll fry your brains. / What's learning when the body starts to fall? / Better one ounce of good red blood than all / the drowsy wisdom that the words contains.” (TM 179)



In this quatrain, Gozzano's old illiterate proposes an early, vulgar version of Marinetti's anathema against obsolete wisdom that, according to the founder of Futurism, is a horrible shield preventing men from conquering a totally new cognitive domain. The proposal of the octogenarian is to eschew books and learn from direct adherence to life, returning to that primitive significance that modern life has concealed. In order to recover this primal, unmediated cognition, it is necessary to recover the ignorance of childhood, enjoying the potentiality of the absence of any knowledge. Gozzano expresses this concept in a passage from *Verso la cuna del mondo*: "Ancora una volta penso che i nostri sentimenti di fronte alle cose non sono che la magra fioritura di pochi semi disposti dal caso nel nostro povero cervello umano, nell'infanzia prima." [Once more, I muse that our feelings towards things are nothing more than the poor offshoots of a of a few seeds planted by chance in our pitiful brains during early childhood] (42-43, *Journey* 77).

One of the extreme challenges that both Crepuscularism and Futurism propose at a cognitive level is overturning the general notions of wisdom and ignorance, understood as intellectual achievement and lack of cognition respectively. Exiting from a past wisdom to achieve liberating ignorance is the foundational step of both these Avant-Garde cognitive models. They call into question positive and assertive knowledge that relies on a process of scientific "distillation" of what is provable from what is not; in response, they conceive of ignorance as the possibility of facing the untouched abyss of the Unknown. The Crepuscular and Futurist notions of ignorance are articulated; they assemble and renew many previous concepts, simultaneously implying total closure and infinite openness to any truth. Early twentieth-century "ignorance" traces back to the Romantic counter-discourse against academicism, recovering the myth of the noble savage. Yet, there is also the nineteenth-century attraction for bohemian

dichotomies—according to the model of the Italian Scapigliatura, French Symbolists, and Nietzsche's *The birth of tragedy*—between the logical (Apollonian rationality) and illogical (Dionysian instinctual creativity). Finally, there is the Pascolian fascination with regression into infantile and childish figures, which become the symbols of ignorance as unlimited, pre-logical, and creative cognitive power.

For Crepuscularism, childhood signifies the possibility of ignoring the limits and impositions of traditional wisdom, achieving the privileged status of pre-knowledge, as Corazzini explains in a letter to Giuseppe Caruso. The author represents an oneiric vision of early youth as the golden age of ignorance: “Imagina che essi [i fanciulli] siano dei piccoli angeli mortali sulle cui bocche fiorisca il più divino inno, quello dell'ignoranza. Essi non sanno e amano.” [Imagine children being little mortal angels, on whose mouths would blossom the most divine hymn, ignorance. They don't know, and love] (*O* 290).

This lost bliss that only children, as superior, angelic creatures, have, becomes the key to abandoning terrestrial (false) knowledge and ascending mystically. Recovering infantile pre-logical and anti-logical thinking leads the poet towards an intuitive writing of the soul, through which he can recover the “riso di gioia e d'inconscienza” [laugh of joy and unconsciousness] that only children possess (*O* 290). This position recalls Pascoli's poetics of the “fanciullino” [little child] who lives within us and has “his own tears and his own joy” (*La Valva* 3). Pascoli's little child is able to see everything with a sense of wonder, and detect details that adults cannot perceive. He knows nothing, but can grasp analogic links between things through his wonder:

Egli scopre nelle cose le somiglianze e relazioni più ingegnose. Egli adatta il nome della cosa più grande alla più piccola, e al contrario. E a ciò lo spinge meglio stupore che ignoranza, e curiosità meglio che loquacità: impicciolisce per poter vedere, ingrandisce per poter ammirare. (La Valva 14)<sup>143</sup>

Pascoli's little child is not ignorant; this creative and sunny figure, animated by inextinguishable curiosity, is an active creator of unusual associations that, through his innocent and pure voice, speaks the universal language of positive family and social values. When the "child" dictates verses, he is "an inspirer of good and civil customs, of love of country, family and mankind" (La Valva 39). By contrast, Corazzini's child is not a tiny moralist demiurge who transmits social values; the Crepuscular figure of the *puer* represents the sacrificial lamb of society. The innocent victim is *ignorant* of the reason for his sacrifice, as the sacrificial Law is outside the realm of logic and requires a complete abandonment of reason. The Crepuscular child symbolizes the drama of a modern knowledge that attempts to attain its project of purified scientific progress by expelling the mystery from life. For Corazzini's iconic, sick child of "Desolazione del povero poeta sentimentale", the drama of knowledge lies in an unfillable gap between his inadequate cognition of life, according to the modern paradigm of healthy human development, and the expectations of his interlocutor. "Ma tu non comprendi e sorridi" [But you don't understand me and you smile] (*O* 145, *SE* 33), the child sadly admits, addressing an undefined "you" behind whose silence it would be possible to glimpse Pascoli's fanciullino-moral messenger. The "you", thus, is unable to accept that poetry can express a lack of understanding, rather than providing fullness of meaning.

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<sup>143</sup> He discovers the most ingenious similarities and relations among things. He adapts the name of the bigger thing to the smaller and vice-versa. And he is moved to do this by wonder, rather than by ignorance, and by curiosity, rather than mere loquacity: he makes things small in order to see them, he makes things big in order to admire them. (La Valva 15)

This new attitude towards knowledge overcomes the general notion of the poet as the depository of truth. For Corazzini, the only way to cope with life is by being grounded in the protective shell of his own “ignorance”, as if it were the only immunization from the bourgeois contaminated, false knowledge. Yet, when the Roman poet professes “self-ignorance”, declaring “Io non so più nulla di me” [I no longer know anything about myself] (O 290), Corazzini is not renouncing the cognitive function of poetry, but is definitely rejecting the humanistic notion of poetry as the voice of civic knowledge. In the letter to Caruso, Corazzini envisions the potentiality of ignorance as a total erasure of cognitive norms. In this subversion of rational boundaries, the Roman poet sees himself as a new solitary Jesus praying in the Gethsemane, and, in delirious prose, “screams” his will of crying so much to wet his feet with tears and then smiling at the invisible angels that exist but cannot be seen through the eyes of learned cognition. Depicting a *naïve*, Franciscan surrealist scene, Corazzini proceeds, confessing his desire to talk with trees and stars while travelling from village to village, telling fairy tales to a group of “chosen” young boys. Paraphrasing the evangelical statement, unless men change and become little children, they will never enter the kingdom of Heaven (Matt. 18. 1-5), Corazzini fantasizes about a return to childhood, understood as the only entry to the dominion of poetry: “Solamente i fanciulli sono degni della nostra anima. L’anima del poeta abita nell’anima del fanciullo” [Only children are worthy of our soul. The soul of a poet inhabits the soul of a child] (O 290).

Corazzini’s *topos* of ignorance, so related to religious themes, also refers to the archetypal *topos* of ignorance in *Genesis*, symbolizing the privileged connection with God. Thus, in “La morte di Tantalo”, breaking the divine ban is an act of cognitive hubris that does not aspire to attaining a potentiated human knowledge, but to conquering ignorance of human boundaries. Divine knowledge, like God’s mind, is unlimited because it does not conceive of the

idea of an end. This is why, after eating the fruit, the man and the woman can go through life, wandering and erring forever; they have acquired the prelapsarian ignorance of good and evil as unawareness of human limits. Ignorance is exalted as the possibility of knowing and being everything in a continuum where alpha and the omega coexist.

Gozzano adopts the *topos* of blissful ignorance to conduct a reflection on bourgeois cognition in an ironic and parodic guise. Exploring his corrupted bourgeois world, he tries to define the essence of knowledge, experimenting with Socratic irony and the method of maieutics. In a *sui generis* “rewriting” of Plato’s *Theaetetus*, Gozzano’s poetic personas and alter egos interact with a rich sample of bourgeois characters, conducting an epistemological investigation that is wrapped in the meanderings of aporetic conclusions. Gozzano’s reader faces the disarming Socratic statement that it is silly to search for a univocal definition of knowledge, as “knowledge is neither perception nor true judgment, nor an account added to true judgment” (*Theaetetus* 92). Gozzano’s “theory of bourgeois knowledge” remains open, but relies on a fundamental paradox: wisdom and ignorance overlap, both among the hypocritical bourgeois and the genuine, illiterate people. While Gozzano’s intellectual is trapped in his unsatisfied state of being aware of not knowing, the average bourgeois experiences the bliss of pretending to know everything on the basis of its appearance, or of being able to count on popular beliefs and myths. In Gozzano’s flat and obtuse bourgeois world, knowledge relies on an ontological identity: to be is to own. Bourgeois knowledge is reduced to the arid account of material possessions; knowing means having (or rather pretending to have) control over things, calculating properties, and making detailed inventories of possessions, like the account of debts and lost goods that Felicita’s father lists to Guido, the lawyer:

*Mi parlava dell’uve e del massaio,*

*mi confidava certo antico guaio  
 notarile, con somma deferenza.  
 [...]  
 «Senta, avvocato...»  
 [...]  
 «...La marchesa fuggì...Le spese cieche...»  
 da quel parato a ghirlandette, a greche...  
 «dell'ottocento dieci, ma il catasto...»  
 da quel tic-tac dell'orologio guasto...  
 «...l'ipotecario è morto, e l'ipoteche...» (TP 170)<sup>144</sup>*

Knowledge is nothing more than pretense, artificially created with money and power. In its more illiterate, accepted meaning, it becomes the only “profane beatitude” that can open the door of true happiness. Ignorant people can be wise and happy because they can experience detachment from bourgeois “material knowledge” and, at the same time, they do not share the existential anguish that threatens the intellectual’s life. The old illiterate and Felicita—the iconic ignorant characters of Gozzano’s poetic universe—have been saved from the literary tabes and exhibit a “sorriso immune dal contagio” [a smile immune from the contagious malady] (TP 77) that infects the erudite world. Yet, they can maintain their healthy illiteracy only if they remain in their micro-cosmos: the octogenarian as the keeper of the villa, and Felicita as the daughter-servant of her father. Nevertheless, the poetic ego admires the old man for his freedom to ignore any written language and the chance to speak “la parola non costretta / di quegli che non sa leggere e scrivere” [unforced streams/ of words from him who cannot read or write] (TP 78, TM 177). Only in the presence of the octogenarian, tutelary deity of a pure “ignorant cognition” *learnt* from the “gran Libro sublime” [the sublime Book of Nature], is the poetic ego able to put

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<sup>144</sup> To talk about all the grapes he’d harvested, / To tell me about the woe that filled his head / on a point of law, with the height of deference. / [...] / “Say, counselor...” / [...] / “...the Marchesa ran away...she’d spent it as...” / the curtains garlanded like a Greek vase... / “from 1810, but the tax-rolls in the town...” / The tick-tock of the old clock running down... / “...the mortgages holder’s dead, and the mortgages...” (TM 71)

aside the aridity of his mind and hear “la voce delle cose prime” [the voice of primal things] (*TP* 76).

Guido secretly envies Felicita, too. This female version of the Volterrian *Candide* can enjoy the bliss and foolishness of her pure ignorance: not believing that the earth is spherical, knowing nothing about the most popular philosophers, and still being able to dream about romance.<sup>145</sup> Commenting on this work in progress, in a letter to Amalia Guglielminetti, Gozzano declares his cerebral fascination with an adorable provincial creature who is still honest, pure, and healthy in her quotidian, domestic life (61). Merged with the grotesque, but somewhat reassuring bourgeois environment of the decayed “Villa Amarena”, the lawyer lives his parodic drama of knowledge. He foresees his fate as a renewed Pinocchio (*TP* 172) who would like to follow the wise advice of his “bourgeois moralist cricket”, but ends up lying to himself and others in the impasse of enjoying that modest life and escaping from its destiny. The protagonist dreams of marrying Felicita, simply to conquer a more realistic understanding of life and trade his literary fantasies with rustic reality:

*«Tutto mi spiace che piacque innanzi!  
Ah! Rimanere qui, sempre, al suo fianco,  
terminare la vita che m'avanzi  
tra questo verde e questo lino bianco!  
Se Lei sapesse come sono stanco  
delle donne rifatte sui romanzi! (TP 176)<sup>146</sup>*

Yet, while dreaming of his conversion to “bourgeois ignorance”, the lawyer institutes a pedagogical mission for Felicita, turning her into a master of Love who could educate him in this

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<sup>145</sup> The reflection on the theme of knowledge is the generating motif of the text, which was originally entitled “La signorina domestica ovvero la moglie del saggio” [Miss maid, namely the wife of the wise man]. This title appears in a postcard that Gozzano sent to Amalia Guglielminetti in July 1908, with a stanza of the poem.

<sup>146</sup> “All that once pleased me pleases me no more. / Ah, to stay here forever, at your side, / to end what’s left of my life amid this pure / white linen and this bright green countryside. / If you knew how tired I am, how glassy-eyed / from all those women dressed in literature. (TM 85)

“tender miracle.”<sup>147</sup> Once again, the relationship between characters is constructed and reconstructed on the dichotomy of knowledge-ignorance, and on the continuous renegotiation of its meaning. After hinting at the possibility of a peaceful country life with a faithful lifelong companion, Gozzano negates the bourgeois happy ending and re-establishes the intellectual gap between the protagonist and Felicita. Fantasizing about a melodramatic scene of leaving the beloved woman, which is purposefully jarring against the pettiness of the context, the poetic I restages the last scene of this bourgeois romance, adopting, once again, the intellectual’s point of view. Felicita becomes a parody of the broken-hearted lady “from Prati’s lyrics” and the protagonist is a mocked version of the “splendid sentimental young romantic” (*TM* 97). As Giuseppe Zaccaria notes, Felicita represents a hypothesis of freedom—from knowledge—and quiet happiness, which remains unfulfillable and unfulfilled, even on paper (33). In a Leopardian fashion, the easy-minded Felicita, despite her name, can only be happy for the time in which her illusion and her desire for romance last. Being trapped in Villa Amarena—the prison of critical thinking—Felicita is nothing more than chattel that her father is planning on trading through marriage. She is the quintessence of bourgeois domestic industry and gauche moralism, nourished on Romantic ideals, and represents a drowsy mind, which makes quotidian life bearable and unquestionable. Unlike the octogenarian of Gozzano’s poem “L’illettrato”, who recovers the Socratic paradox that virtue is knowledge, for Felicita, illiteracy represents the bliss necessary to survive in her role as the mocked heroine of a decayed, bourgeois mansion.

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<sup>147</sup> The centrality of the verb “educare” (educate) is overshadowed in Palma’s English translation, which, reasonably, prefers to maintain the musicality and the rhyme scheme over the exact fidelity to Gozzano’s lexical choices.



The question that has not been investigated is whether, beyond its bitter humor, Gozzano's "school of irony" suggests a possible model of wisdom in its poetic world. Is wisdom even conceivable in a bourgeois society, in which—as Vallini admits—people no longer wonder about living? ("La folla", *UGA* 79) Is wisdom indeed possible in a bourgeois society, made by a "folla" [crowd] that "si chiede di raro, / per non far brutta figura, il gran perché della vita" [rarely asks itself, / not to make a bad impression, the great why of life] (79)? In a note from his journal, Gozzano seems to answer this question, writing that the key to wisdom is "danzare al di là di noi stessi: vivere al di là di noi stessi" [to dance beyond ourselves: to live beyond ourselves] (*Albo dell'officina* 100). The author then cites the Nietzschean concept of eternal return, explaining that each individual is like an hourglass, eternally turned and re-turned, as each existence is separated from the other by the time it takes for the same cognitive and ontological conditions to reappear. From this cyclical cognitive perspective, knowledge in the present is an encounter with the other that involves finding one's own self in any suffering, joy, friend, enemy, hope, mistake, blade of grass, or ray of sun (102). Knowing means allowing for the discovery of the participative existence of the ego in anything. This concept returns in some notes about the incomplete poem *Le farfalle*. In their metamorphosis, butterflies experience the spasm of the Unknown (*Albo dell'officina* 160). They cannot help but to exit from their old selves, to know and become new creatures, able to fly and escape their limits.

In the "Founding Manifesto of Futurism", ignorance acquires contrasting meanings, spanning from an irrational cult of the Unknown to a cognitive audacity that targets the Unknown as a Herculean task to conquer. In the idiosyncratic, bipolar way of the Futurist Avant-Garde, these opposing reactions embody two parallel motives within the movement: the electrifying enthusiasm for a hidden, bubbling reservoir of creativity, and the uncontainable

eagerness to participate in that magmatic activity, acquiring its intensity. In a passage from *Montagne trasparenti* [Transparent mountains], Maria Ginanni voices these coexisting, conflicting tendencies, expressing the purpose of her writing as an awareness of the mystery of Life that becomes a process of creatively penetrating the mystery:

Urlo di creazione disperata: dare nuove pazzie all'universo, scompigliare le leggi esistenti, attaccare fulmini di poesia penetranti a zig-zag nell'anima della vita, sparpagliare la mia anima nei suoi atomi più essenziali per avere la potenza di costruire un nuovo universo. (70-71)<sup>148</sup>

Futurism does not seek balance between the “cervello analitico” [analytic brain] and the “spirito entusiasta” [enthusiast spirit];<sup>149</sup> rather, it explores the cognitive routes of not knowing. Ignorance becomes openness to “unhealthy” forms of artistic cognition that the physician and social critic Max Nordeau expelled from the bourgeois apparatus in 1892 as forms of sick impulses, in his work *Entartung* [Degeneration]. Futurism draws from the well of degenerative thought to shape a new episteme under the tutelary divinities of regression, infantilism, and praise of folly. The themes constitute the basis for a renovated approach towards society and civilization, which Ardengo Soffici powerfully captures in the poem “Mattina” [Morning], declaring: “E a un tratto capisco questa verità / Ogni nuova civilizzazione esce dal riso dei bambini.” [And suddenly I grasp this truth / Every new civilization comes out from the laugh of children] (*Simultaneità* 56). This idea appears also in Marinetti’s *Uccidiamo il chiaro di luna* [Let’s kill the moonlight], which praises the liberating dimension of foolishness as the purest form of intellectual energy that can sweep the gloomy ants of wisdom from the human brain (*TIF* 19). The praise of folly is actively celebrated through the siege of Paralysis, a town ruled by

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<sup>148</sup> Scream of desperate creation: to give new foolishness to the universe, to disarrange the existing laws, to attach lightning strikes of poetry, penetrating zigzag into the soul of life, to disperse my soul in her most essential atoms in order to have the potency to build a new universe.

<sup>149</sup> Ginanni uses this terminology in *Il poema dello spazio* [The poem of space] (41).

stagnant, normative, and commonly accepted ideas. It is fundamental that Marinetti and his Futurist army attack Paralysis with the help of raving mad escapees from a mental asylum. The liberation by mad people constructs a strong symbolic opposition between paralyzed norms and fast moving thought, born from ignorance of any inhibiting factor: “Dalle porte spalancate, pazzi e pazze scamiciati, seminude, eruppero a migliaia, torrenzialmente, così da ringiovanire e ricolorare il volto rugoso della Terra.” [From the wide-open doors, madman and women poured out by the thousands, shirtless madmen and half-naked, a torrent, enough to rejuvenate and give new color the Earth’s wrinkled face] (*TIF* 19, *F* 57).

A key point in this passage is the reference to the process of rejuvenation, triggered by the awakening of pre-logical action-thinking. In this context of revitalization, Enrico Cavacchioli, one of the Futurist “arsonist brothers” mentioned in this manifesto, experiences an abrupt metamorphosis that brings him back to infantile freedom: “Io sento ringiovanire il mio corpo ventenne!... Io ritorno, d’un passo sempre più infantile, verso la mia culla... Presto, rientrerò nel ventre di mia madre!... Tutto, dunque, mi è lecito! [I feel my twenty-year-old body growing younger!... I’m returning, with ever more infantile steps, to the cradle... Soon, I’ll reenter my mother’s womb! Everything, then, is permitted! (*TIF* 18, *F* 56).

The association between unlimited infantile power and overcoming the chains of intellect also appears in a poem by Cavacchioli, entitled “Danza della pazzia” [Dance of foolishness]. In this text, which references orgiastic, Dionysian dances, the mind itself celebrates the euphoria of triumph over reason. Foolishness is the ultimate dance that, before death, can reveal the *vision* that the intellect has always obscured, due to its restrictive control:

*noi danzeremo una danza infinita: prima di morire.  
E sarà l’ultima ebbrezza  
quella che canterà a martello nelle tempie sensibili  
i riti inesprimibili della ragione! e l’anima ci fa male, tanto male*

*perché la nostra pazzia  
vede più della Ragione che ci abbandona! (PF 199)<sup>150</sup>*

The motif of the return to childhood bounds Crepuscularism with Futurism. In an early poem from 1903, originally written in French, Marinetti invokes the sea, declaring: “La mia anima è puerile / e strilla e si dibatte per avere un giocattolo” [my soul is childish / and screams and flounders to get a toy] (PF 333). The theme is present in Ginanni’s works, as well, revealing a stronger similarity with the obsessive regression to infancy of Corazzini. For the female Futurist writer, the childish figure is a moment of awareness of the fragility and ignorance imbedded in the sheer act of being. In relation to an unknowable Infinite, Ginanni finds it necessary to feel diminutive, like the Crepuscular crying boy, in order to become one with Life:

*Mi sento così bambina, così ingenua stasera in questo punto proiezione del mio filo infinito. Accanto alla mia sorellina ho sentito, stasera, di essere ancora più bimba di lei: desiderio di piangere sulle sue mani per intenerimento della mia infantilità. (Poema dello spazio 33)<sup>151</sup>*

Rather than a definite stage in human development, childhood is a cognitive channel that allows for an immediate dissolution of the constrictions of adult thinking, as Ginanni, describes in the passage “Come una danza” [Like a dance]: “Attraverso i pori delicatissimi dell’aria mi sono immerse nel filtro profumatamente titanico con le mie ansie, le mie complicatezze di donna e ne sono uscita bambina.” [Through the extremely delicate pores of the air. I merged the handsomely titanic filter with my anxieties, my complications as a woman, and I came out a little girl] (*Montagne trasparenti* 113). Infancy is also the space of innocent unawareness of those scientific truths that have imposed solid stocks on the impatient human feet. It is the time,

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<sup>150</sup> we will dance an infinite dance: before dying. / And it will be the last exaltation / that one that will sing pounding in the sensitive temples / the ineffable rites of reason! And the soul hurts us so badly / because our madness / sees more than that the Reason that leaves us.

<sup>151</sup> I feel such a little girl, so ingenuous tonight in this projection-point of my infinite thread. Tonight, near my little sister, I felt as if I were littler than her: desiring to cry on her hands for the softening of my infantilism.

according to Irma Valeria, to experience the thrilling ignorance of the “ineffabile e paurosa ebbrezza di un mondo fantastico e divino” [ineffable and fearful ecstasy of a fantastic and divine world] (“Mendicanti d’azzurro”, Salaris, *Le futuriste* 75; F 470).

The Futurist cognitive earthquake reaches its greatest magnitude in Palazzeschi’s *Il controdolore*. This Futurist Manifesto from 1914 reverses the common opinion that the superiority of the human race relies on rationality, declaring that the real privilege of men was the gifted of “divine laughter” (1224). In Palazzeschi’s new concept, seriousness becomes a disvalue, whereas irony represents the cognitive strategy to overcome the “chronic Romanticism, the monstrous affectivity, and the pitiful sentimentalism” (1230). With this view, knowledge is paradoxically reshaped on the basis of a new ethic of laughter, which reveals its “pedagogical” value through its freeing power. Irony and the grotesque become key tools to explore and understand reality in its most atrocious and extreme situations, such as malady or death. In this topsy-turvy world, mental asylums are transformed into “scuole di perfezionamento” [training schools] (1232), as more authentic knowledge will be born from the embrace of the infinite cognitive potentiality of “deformity;” as Palazzeschi states: “Non vi fermate a nessun grado del deforme, del vecchio, essi non hanno come il bello e il giovane un limite; essi sono infiniti.” [Do not stop at any degree of deformity, of age, they do not have a limit, like beauty and youth; they are infinite] (1229).

Palazzeschi’s manifesto represents a maximum degree of cognitive provocation, bordering on absurdity, which provides an ideal link between Crepuscular and Futurist poetics of knowledge. Proposing disturbing models, contradicting the traditional value of wisdom and erudition, both movements rethink knowledge as the admission of a lack, a void, a wound. Actual knowledge, namely the barely accessible knowledge of the Beyond, is that disturbing

feeling of something missing. Knowledge is only graspable through ignorance. Through a negation of any pre-imposed cultural or social status, the two movements deny the intellectual's function as both guarantor of bourgeois epopee and *arbiter elegantiae*. They envision a role for the poet as the "prophet" of a knowledge to come, which will never be a (provable) point of arrival, but a never-ending process of interrogation. In Crepuscular circles, this attitude ranges from Corazzini's erroneous wandering—"...andremo per la vita / errando per sempre" [we will go wandering / through life forever] (*O* 213, *SE* 65)—to Gozzano's precarious condition of continued vagrancy: "«Dove andrò! Non so...Viaggio, / viaggio per fuggire altro viaggio...»" [Where will you go?" "I don't know where I'm going...I have to journey, / I journey to escape another journey...] (*TP* 181, *TM* 95). In Futurism, meanwhile, it spans from Marinettian speed, conceived as the impossibility of capturing detail while fast-forwarding towards an always impeding novelty, to the cognitive abandonment of Second Futurism in a universal *cupio dissolvi* of the mind.

In Crepuscularism and Futurism, the production of destructive beliefs functions to address the shortcomings of a tradition that can survive only by substituting ancient divinities with the mirage of an ideal modern ego, in control of matter through its technologic know-how. Yet, how is it possible to justify the modern episteme of the unlimited possibilities of scientific progress when scientific truth proceeds by narrowing down possibilities to verifiable law? Facing the paradox of the modern cognitive paradigm, which promises human emancipation while stealing away its infinite potential, Crepuscularism and Futurism respond by laying siege to modern rationality and exasperating the irrational side of cognition. Everything worth knowing, according to these two movements, inhabits the lands of the Unknown, inaccessible to reason.

Borrowing some reflections on mysticism by Michel de Certeau, it is possible to affirm that Corazzini's mystic poetry, as well as the esoteric Futurist fringe, operate "a process whereby the objects of meaning vanish, beginning with God himself; it is as though the function of mysticism were to bring a religious episteme to a close and erase it at the same time, to produce the night of the subject while marking the twilight of culture" (*Heterologies* 37). In a similar way, Gozzano's "school of irony" and Marinettian Futurism attack the claims of a society that has founded its supposed modernity on a set of credible beliefs and general truths, insomuch that "the transmission of knowledge takes the route of a corruption that is recognized and allows for the institution to remain the same" (*Heterologies* 45). Unmasking the mechanism of limited knowledge that is advertised as a boundless ground for human evolution, Crepuscularism and Futurism reshape cognition as the problematic awareness of being part of an obscure, moving thing. Only in the encounter with the mysterious *je ne sais quoi* that things daily remind can humans comprehend more about themselves and abandon an illusory cognitive paradigm founded on the exclusive privilege of their mind.

## Chapter Four

### Knowing through “Things”: Materiality in the Crepuscular and Futurist Universe

*Io amo la vita semplice delle cose*  
(Corazzini, “Desolazione del povero poeta sentimentale”, O 145)<sup>152</sup>

#### 4.1 Introduction

As Massimo Fusillo states, since Baudelaire, poetry has tended towards the nonhuman or the anti-human, focusing on objects that oscillate between the materiality of the body and the ungraspability of the living matter, as they are loaded with sacred and epiphanic values or imbedded with ambiguous enigmaticity (*Feticci* 160). This critical framework leads to a preliminary clarification on the use of the word *thing*. Although the term embraces the referential horizon of the word *object*, producing a certain semantic overlap, a thing is unreducible to an object, understood as perceivable material physicality. While the object remains anchored to the phenomenal surface and to the functional side of being a tool, the thing goes deep to the root of existence, expressing the common ground of living—the bare act of being. The thing spreads an aura that conveys a perception of impenetrability and an intrinsic surplus of meaning; thus, although deploying contents and significance for its users, a thing remains inexhaustible in its depth (Bodei 49).

Working from this premise, it is possible to observe that the Crepuscular and Futurist interest in materiality has mainly been studied from the perspective of the mere object. It is a

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<sup>152</sup> I love the simple life of things. (“Desolation of the poor sentimental poet”)



well-established notion that Crepuscularism put in verses a micro-cosmos of “piccole cose” [little things] and that Futurism opened the doors of literary and visual culture to the dominion of cars, machines, armor, and weapons. Yet, it has never been highlighted that, in order to sing “new things”, Futurism felt the preliminary need to empty its literary attic of the Crepuscular chaff and still never managed to completely get rid of it. Where did those useless objects end up in the world of “the mechanical man made of interchangeable parts”? Stacking the Crepuscular objects in a forgotten pile of useless items has left the question of their obsessive recurrence unsolved. As material phantoms, these obsolete and dusty things are neither mimetic references nor plain symbols; they are rather the visible manifestation of the conundrum that lingers on the statute of materiality itself, spanning the concepts of usability, fetishism, and animism.

Focusing on the ontological, cognitive, and relational value of things, this chapter investigates the multifaceted, and at times contradictory, role that materiality plays in the Crepuscular and Futurist universes, addressing, specifically, three areas of inquiry: What are Crepuscular and Futurist things? What is their function? And what forms of agency do they exercise on the poetic ego?

#### **4.2 From the Poetics of Nature to the Poetics of Things: Crepuscular and Futurist Material Landscapes**

“L’alba è una chicchera pel thè / in cui dei draghi inseguono con gli occhi / un serrato triangolo di gru” [the dawn is a teacup / in which dragons chase with their eyes / a crowded triangle of cranes] (“Interno” *P* 7). In these lines from “Ventagli giapponesi” [Japanese fans], Govoni sets into verse the exotic beauty of a landscape made of Asian “trinkets.” Using the technique of ekphrasis, he shapes an artificial meta-nature, engraved on a piece of china.

Govoni's strategy is exemplary of a main trait in the Crepuscular and Futurist poetics of things: to reject both the *naïveté* and the sublime allure of the "unnatural" Romantic landscape, to deeply rethink the conceptualization itself of what nature is. Following the quite predictable Avant-Garde script of demolition and destructive reconstruction, both movements move from the denunciation of the deformation that tradition has attained in the representation of landscapes. Bringing to the extreme the unnatural side of the literary anamorphosis of nature, Crepuscularism creates a minimalistic environment, merged into overly fake enchanted settings that recur like liberty-style decorative patterns: sleeping gardens filled with flowers, rose bushes, dormant rivers, and melancholic nordic landscapes. In Corazzini's work, these places often function as a theatrical setting or removable installation, denouncing the meta-literary attempt at creating a "natural" background. "La finestra aperta sul mare" [The window opened on the sea] dramatizes the conversion of nature into a painted canvas, as it suddenly appears to the poetic ego:

*Ma non so né dove, né quando,  
mi apparve [...] / [...] Era  
la finestra di una torre in mezzo al mare, desolata  
terribile nel crepuscolo,  
triste cancellatura  
nella chiarezza dell'alba. (O 134)<sup>153</sup>*

Only for "the school of irony" does nature have a more complex symbolic value. Playing with the Leopardian personification of nature as a blind principle that drives an endless process of production and destruction, Vallini retells the myth of creation, emphasizing how ridiculous and artificial the human feeling of controlling nature is:

*Natura, che imponi la vita  
e ridi curvandoci sotto*

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<sup>153</sup> Yet I neither know where, nor when, / it appeared to me [...] / [...] It was / the window of a tower in the middle of the sea, desolated / terrible in the crepuscule, / sad deletion / in the clarity of the dawn.

*quest'obbligo, tu non ascolti  
 se un uomo ti si rivolti  
 [...]  
 L'ignoto te lo imprigiona  
 per sempre: tu stessa finisci  
 per esser con lui quasi buona;  
 diventi materna; lo lisci  
 finch'egli sia quasi quieto,  
 lo rendi dabbene e discreto,  
 gl'insegni che certe domande  
 non son più da uomo grande,  
 gli parli d'ingegno e d'onore  
 finché gli si vada imbiancando  
 la barba: ed infine, allorquando  
 diventa commendatore,  
 il nostro brav'uomo deterso  
 d'ogni impurità, veramente  
 comprende la Vita e si sente  
 il re dell'immenso Universo. ("L'ironia", UGA 100)<sup>154</sup>*

In a similar ironic venue, Gozzano shapes a benevolent Mother Nature in his little bourgeois garden, affirming: "Ah! La Natura non è sorda e muta; / se interrogo il lichène ed il macigno / essa parla del suo fine benigno..." [Ah! Nature isn't deaf, she isn't mute. / If I puzzle the lichen and the sandstone here / she breathes her good intent into my ear...] ("Pioggia d'agosto" [August Rain] TP 216, TM 163). While bourgeois society requires more sophisticated and concealed forms of interaction, nature represents the Eden of absolute truth, untouched by human intervention:

*Nata di sé medesima, assoluta,  
 unica verità non convenuta,  
 dinanzi a lei s'arresta il mio sogghigno. (TP 216)<sup>155</sup>*

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<sup>154</sup> Nature, you who impose life / and laugh bending us / under this duty, you don't listen to / if a man rebels against you. / [...] // The unknown imprisons him to you / for good: even you end up / being almost nice with him; / you become maternal; you pet him / until he is almost quiet, / you make him nice and good, / you teach him that certain questions / are no longer of a grown up man / you talk to him of genius and honor / until his beard gets whiter and / whiter: and lastly, when / he becomes commendatore / our good man cleaned up / from any impurity, he actually / understands Life and feels / to be the king of the immense Universe. ("Irony")

<sup>155</sup> Born of her very self, and absolute, / The only truth that isn't made to suit— / I stand before her and let go my sneer. (TM 163)

Yet, filtered through the emotional perception of the ego and deformed into an anthropomorphized projection of the poetic I's missed relationships, this benevolent nature does not escape deformation. Gozzano readapts the Romantic poetics of the landscape's state of mind, creating a cognitive last resort in which humanized plants and flowers are symbolic *idola theatri* of relational correspondence:

*e l'achenio del cardo che s'invola,  
la selce, l'orbettino, il macaone,  
sono tutti per me come personae,  
hanno tutti per me qualche parola... (TP 216)<sup>156</sup>*

Thus, while blaming society for having distorted the naturalness of relationships, the bourgeois “veteran” cannot help to denature nature, converting the garden into a *hortus conclusus* ruled by the *do ut des* bourgeois logic. The cognitive relationship with this personified nature is based on a tacit agreement; as Gozzano states, the “Ancient Sorceress” rewards those who investigate her mysteries, disclosing the only truth worth knowing. Once again, the Gozzanian world proves its constitutional ambiguity, leaving the reader to wonder if the truthfulness of nature that inhabits a bourgeois garden is another untrustworthy joke.

The game of making nature unknowable, unless through artifice or distortion, reaches its apotheosis in *Mafarka il futurista*'s bizarre representation of Africa. Far from any geographical realism, Marinetti's exotic setting is both a dysphoric and euphoric chronotope, with the muddy swamp of the brutal mass rape existing in a gorgeous enchanted land that recalls the atmosphere of the Arabian nights. The African landscape presents a feature that is central in Marinetti's later poetics of things; the nature of *Mafarka il futurista* is an energy field that captures all of life's

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<sup>156</sup> The dandelion blown so carelessly, / the swallowtail, the blindworm, and the stone, / each of them has a character of its own, / each of them has some words to say to me... (TM 163)

principles, continually transforming them into a pantheistic or hylozoistic setting (Savona 16). In this fantastic reconstruction, Africa becomes a non-place that Marinetti overloads, exhausting the poetics of the relationship between symbols and signifiers into an overflowing germination of images without correspondent meaning. Liberating Futurist language from the traditional pattern of natural analogies, Marinetti adopts a final symbolic image at end of the novel: The sky through which Gazurmah flies expresses the detachment from poetry anchored to the division between human and natural rhythms, and the embracement of all the possibilities of hybridization and interaction that mechanical flight allows.

The idea of breaking terrestrial chains appears even more violently in the poem “Volando sul cuore dell’Italia” [Flying over the heart of Italy] in which Marinetti compares himself to a large rebellious tree that launches its fronds against the wind in order to fly, affirming that he is a thing—a “finestra aperta, innamorata del sole! / che verso il sole s’invola” [an open window in love with the sun! / that flies off towards the sun] (*PF* 352).

From this “open concept” of thing, understood as the essence of material life that goes beyond inert materiality, both Crepuscularism and Futurism overthrow the modern poetics of nature, erasing the anthropocentric division between human culture and a heavily anthropomorphized, yet nonhuman, nature. Both movements envision a notion of vital materiality that nullifies the modern split while promoting a materialism that acknowledges “the existence of correlations and symmetries in the field of existence, and thus subvert the previous illusions about the nature of reality as a field of separately existing elements” (Opperman 43). These reactions against the presumed imitation of nature move towards the proposition of a new living platform, conceived as the space where all the elements exist as equal actors, connected,

entangled, and mutually intertwined in a material-semiotic network of relations.<sup>157</sup> Fortunato Depero describes this non-hierarchical dimension of a melting-pot, in a passage from *Spezzature*, representing his existence as a hybrid space of human, natural, and material interlacing:

...quest'è la mia esistenza, la mia solitaria, nuda di esteriori, tutta densa di penetrazioni e incarnazioni. Cellule e atomi di tutti e tutto. Anima mia succhiatoio, assorbitoio ad alta tensione. Pompa elettrica a moto perpetuo. Camino enorme ad imbuto, nel quale precipitano tutte le piogge, le tempeste, gli uragani. Il mio cervello per brevi istanti mi pare il centro di gravitazione degli universi circolanti a gran vertigini e parabolici negli spazi... e sono un nulla, un niente materiale che si stiracchia bighellonando per ogni dove. ("Quest'è la mia esistenza", *Pestavo anch'io sul palcoscenico dei ribelli* 22)<sup>158</sup>

Negating the possibility of modern natural representation, both Crepuscularism and Futurism do not deny nature—as commonly believed—but incorporate it within a broader concept of intrinsically animated “vibrant matter”, which foresees the twenty-first-century trends on vital materialism, while still maintaining an irrational and esoteric perspective.<sup>159</sup> Breaking the walls between human and (natural-)nonhuman allows for both movements to overcome the passatist view of background, decorative nature, conceived as an external frame. The Crepuscular “retreat” to the dimension of quotidian materiality and the provocative statement of the “Manifesto of Futurist Painters” to throw out Lake Painters and Mountain Painters sounds as similar, revolutionary attempts to dissolve the traditional, antagonistic view of nature into the surrounding matter, which acts as an incorporating, binding agent. From this holistic perspective, nature loses its oppositive, fictional role to become, like humans, simply “a thing among other

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<sup>157</sup> On the notion of network and actor-network theory see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor–Network Theory*, cit.

<sup>158</sup> ...this is my existence, my solitary [existence], nude of exteriors, all dense of penetrations and embodiments. Cells and atoms of anybody and anything. Soul of mine, sucker, high tension absorbing place. Electrical pump at perpetual motion. Enormous funnel-chimney, in which all the rains, the storms, the hurricanes fall. For brief instants, my brain seems to me the center of gravity of universes going around with great vertigos and parables in the spaces...and I am nothing, a material nothing that stretches wandering everywhere.

<sup>159</sup> Cfr. the distinction that Jane Bennett makes on the vital materialism that calls for a “‘life force’ added to the matter” and her material perspective that equates affect with materiality (Preface, *Vibrant matter*, xviii).

things”, made of invisible corpuscles and atoms. This position emerges in an article by Giuseppe Vannicola, an intellectual who was close to Corazzini’s group and had a strong influence on its mystical orientation:

Lo stile moderno non potendo rinunciare alla rappresentazione della natura la esagera e crea paesaggi o puramente psicologici abitati da flore e da faune mostruose, osservati nel momento supremo in cui il colore agonizza e la forma si disperde. (“Modern Style”)<sup>160</sup>

Crepuscularism explores indeed this moment of “dissolvimento” [dissolvement]—a notion that Vannicola borrows from music—in which nature leaves its pre-imposed form and overflows, dispersing into matter. As Vannicola had already explained in the article “Vagamente”, published in *Cronache Latine* in 1906, music is indeed the “fluid” that binds together human and nonhuman in a cohesive melody:

La musica, questa fluidità di tutte le arti, non esprimerebbe forse la vera presenza nascosta, l’eucarestia simboleggiante l’occlusione del Dio, *claritas caritas*, eterno archetipo del ritmo interiore in tutte le cose? Ogni fremito di melodia è un altare su cui il visibile parla segretamente con l’invisibile e si ciba della divina transustanziazione. (5)<sup>161</sup>

Through a more elusive concept of the divine, Vannicola recalls Dante’s literary elaboration of the doctrine of God the First Mover by Saint Thomas. Human and material things are merged in a spiritual melody that allows them to participate in the invisible. The Roman Crepuscularism reflection on things trespasses on the rational structure of the *Summa Theologica*, fully embracing irrational neo-Platonic positions, oriented to a pantheistic vision of nature in which knowledge is an immersion into nature. Mystic naturalism, for instance, relies on the theory of *mens insita omnibus*, namely on the presence of a divine soul found in material

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<sup>160</sup> As it cannot renounce the representation of nature, modern style exaggerates it and creates purely psychological landscapes or landscapes that are inhabited by monstrous flora and fauna, observed in the supreme moment in which the color agonizes and the form vanishes.

<sup>161</sup> Music, this fluidity of all the arts, wouldn’t perhaps express the actual hidden presence, the Eucharist symbolizing the occlusion of God, *claritas caritas*, eternal archetype of the inner rhythm of all things? Each thrill of melody is an altar on which the visible secretly speaks to the invisible and feeds itself with divine transubstantiation.

life.<sup>162</sup> From this perspective, the myth of Actaeon by Giordano Bruno provides an interesting connection to understand the Crepuscular reflection on things as relational bridges. After looking at Diana nude, Actaeon is transformed into a deer, as the ultimate degree of philosophical contemplation is reaching a magic communion with nature, through a moment of over-human inebriation and identification with the universe. The Crepuscular immersion in things is a twentieth-century form of Brunian naturalism in which material things replace nature. As in Bruno, the Crepuscularism encounter with other humans—and in particular the carnal union with a woman—does not satisfy the thirst for knowledge. Only the identification with the material essence of nature, revised as “little things”, can provide access to the ultimate experience of being the whole universe.

Being “tangible transcendence”, Avant-Garde materiality stands for nature, repositing the intrinsic dynamics between *natura naturans*, the perpetual generative action of matter, and *natura naturata*, the static and passive substance of created matter. The mission for both Crepuscularism and Futurism is to stop separating nature from things, and search for the *common nature* that unify all things, to prove that “l’uomo [è] una parte del Tutto, [...] che ignora un mistero / di cui egli stesso fa parte” [man (is) a part of the Everything that ignore a mystery in which he himself takes part] (Vallini, “Il teschio fiorito” [The bloomed skull], *UGA* 72). As Maria Ginanni explains, this mystery pervades each single atom, as any individual organism of the living network “*deve dare alla totalità vibrante dell’universo il ritmo della propria pulsazione isolata*” [must give the rhythm of its isolated pulsation to the vibrant totality of the universe] (*Il poema dello spazio* 24).

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<sup>162</sup> This position is stated by Giordano Bruno in *Anima del cosmo*.



This implies a radical rethinking of *nature as a thing* in a broader hylozoistic and discursive framework, according to which even the most inert, inorganic matter is alive and animated by an original impulse of biopoiesis. Borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari, Crepuscularism finds in *the thing* the rhizomatic entity that synthesizes, thickens, and connects in its form the polarities of being and becoming, organic and inorganic, identity and alterity, verbal and visual language. The Crepuscular “agonia misteriosa delle cose” [mysterious agony of things] (*O* 191) grasps the quintessential hybrid *nature of things*—their immobile and silent suffering from an overflow of life, their being “natura morta” and yet breathing materiality.

Adopting a more vitalistic approach, Futurism finds in things the elements that can reconnect the artificial division between figure and environment. “È vitale soltanto quell’arte che trova i propri elementi nell’ambiente che la circonda.” [The only living art is that which finds its distinctive features within the environment] (*MDF* 27, *F* 62)—with this slogan the “Manifesto of the Futurist Painters” call for an artistic expression that is deeply connected with the tangible “miracles of contemporary life”, and turns upside down the “antiquated concepts” of the isolation of a figure from its background, to search for simultaneity and interpenetration of planes; as the “Manifesto of sculpture” later proclaims: “Spalanchiamo la figura e chiudiamo in essa l’ambiente” [Let’s open up the figure and let it enclose the environment] (*MDF* 55, *F* 117). From this point of view, Boccioni’s declaration of the Futurist hate for “il campestre, la pace del bosco, il mormorio del ruscello” [the rural, the peace in the wood, the murmur of the brook] cannot be simply interpreted with the eclipsing of nature under the techno-industrial dominion. His anathema against the traditional landscape, which welcomes “i grandi caseggiati popolari, i rumori metallici, il ruggito delle folle” [the big working-class blocks, the metal noises, the

roaring of the masses] (*Scritti editi e inediti* 83), implies a redefinition of environment as a multi-faced arena in which *physis* and *techne* co-exist as participative agents:

Noi possiamo studiare — cioè amare — una macchina, una rotativa qualsiasi e servirci dei suoi piani, dei suoi profili, delle sue cavità, dei suoi moti come di *elementi naturali*<sup>163</sup> per la costruzione del nostro paesaggio. (87)<sup>164</sup>

As humans, exploring things thus means to co-sign this material alliance, recognizing what it is to live in a mechanical, post-human epoch, in which it is finally time to admit the autonomy of the machine and face the “question of things”, addressing their agency and their potential in creating an environment that human bodies share rather than fully dominate. The first step in this process is to identify material life beyond its passive status of objects designed and controlled by humans. Crepuscularism prepares the ground for the Avant-Garde material revolution of Futurism, insisting on the function of things as the actual creators of an environment that is nonhuman as much as human.

#### 4.3 The Invasion of Useless and Dysfunctional Objects

The pervading atmosphere of spleen in which Crepuscular characters are merged is *made of* quotidian objects. In its compulsive need to accumulate clutter that remains unused and forgotten, Crepuscularism is affected by an out-and-out hoarding disorder: From devotional objects to kitchen tools, from home décor to cheap ornaments, a deluge of items overflow the poetic space, staring at humans with “occhi aperti smisuratamente nell’ombra terribile” [wide-open eyes in the terrible shadow] (“Soliloquio delle cose” [Soliloquy of things], *O* 233). What do

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<sup>163</sup> In italic in the original text.

<sup>164</sup> We can study—that is to love—a machine, any rotary press, and use its planes, its profiles, its cavity, its motes like natural elements for the construction of our landscape.

these silent witnesses know and why are humans unable to get rid of their accusatory eyes?

Corazzini's poetry faces these questions, entering abandoned chapels, where rosaries, missals, reliquaries, statues, crowns of thorns, votive candles, and vessels lay dusty and untouched. After the departure of the divine, deconsecrated churches have become the realm of de-functionalized objects, as Corazzini explains in a letter to Aldo Palazzeschi:

Santa Prassede, convegno di beghine tristissime, Santa Sabina, adornata di muschio e di orto, meravigliosamente, San Clemente, lungo una strada di conventi e di piccoli pensioni cristiane! E poi tante ancora, sacre a un nome ignoto, perduto nel suburbio, sconsacrate e riconsacrate per delle umili funzioni annue, povere, che ti senti morire entrando, antiche e abbandonate senza pianto (*O* 298)<sup>165</sup>

A similar inventory, which likewise mixes the sacred and profane, human and nonhuman, in a list of things appears in a letter from Govoni to Gian Piero Lucini (*Il verso libero* 650):

Ho sempre amato le cose tristi, la musica girovaga, i canti d'amore cantati dai vecchi delle osterie, le preghiere delle suore, i mendicanti pittorescamente stracciati e malati, i convalescenti, gli alunni malinconici pieni di addii, le primavere nei collegi quasi timorose, le campagne magnetiche, le chiese dove piangono indifferentemente i ceri, le rose che si sfogliano su gli altarini nei canti delle vie deserte in cui cresce l'erba: tutte le cose tristi della religione, le cose tristi dell'amore, le cose tristi del lavoro, le cose tristi delle miserie.<sup>166</sup>

The Crepuscular “sad things of religion” inhabit *loci* of decay and consumption: an ambiguous limbo of the quasi-sacred, where religion becomes the illogical adoration of the bare materiality that has been left behind. This feeling is very vivid in Corazzini's poem “Chiesa abbandonata” [Abandoned church]:

*Corone d'oro, manti di broccato,  
cuori trafitti, bocche dolorose,  
occhi con occhi in adorazione,*

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<sup>165</sup> Saint Praxedes, gathering of very sad beguines, Saint Sabina, adorned with musk and orchard, marvelously, Saint Clement, along a street of convents and little Christian hostels! And many other churches, sacred to an unknown name, lost in the suburb, deconsecrated and reconsecrated for humble yearly functions, poor churches—that you feel you are about to die entering—ancient and abandoned without crying.

<sup>166</sup> I have always loved sad things, the music of the wonderers, the love songs sung by old people in the taverns, the prayers of the nuns, the beggars tattered and sick in a picturesque way, the convalescents, the melancholic pupils full of farewells, the almost timid springs in the boarding schools, the churches where the candles cry indifferently, the roses that fade on the little roadside memorials at the corners of deserted streets in which the grass grows: all the sad things of religion, all the sad things of love, the sad things of work, the sad things in the miseries.

*oh nulla, nulla sopravvisse al fato  
ne la tetra rovina de le cose,  
Santa Maria de la Concezione. (O 107)<sup>167</sup>*

Empty churches and former convents frame the Crepuscular devotional objects within the boundaries of a fading traditional faith, whose principles are “ammonimenti scolorati” [discolored admonitions] covered in spider webs (Govoni, “Nell’ex convento del corpus Domini” [In the Corpus Domini ex-convent], *P* 57). This irrational need to preserve a sentiment that is slipping away, petrifying it into materiality, emerges in the poem “Il giorno dei morti.” Adopting a strict impersonal style, Govoni describes a cemetery on the Day of the Dead, making visible the conflict between a desire for commemoration—objectified by new flowers, pictures, and inscriptions—and the natural process of consumption that these objects inevitably succumb to while preserving a decaying memory:

*Si raddrizzano le croci reclinate  
che già s’incominciavano a guastare,  
si rinnovan l’iscrizioni tombali*

*e le fotografie dissanguate;  
e gli avelli diventano un altare  
di lampade e fiori artificiali.*

[...]

*Un’acquerugiola che pare ranno  
al lutto delle cose dà un convegno  
e tra i veli di nera tarlatana,*

*nei portici le cere si disfanno  
dai candelabri di tarlato legno  
su le rose di gialla porcellana. (P 62)<sup>168</sup>*

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<sup>167</sup> Golden crowns, brocade mantles, / stabbed hearts, agonizing mouths, / eyes with eyes in adoration, // oh nothing, nothing survived the fate / in the dusky ruin of things, / Saint Mary of Conception.

<sup>168</sup> Reclined crosses are straightened up / ’cause they have already started to fall, / the inscriptions on the headstones are renewed / and the ruined pictures; / and the tombs become an altar / of lamps and artificial flowers. // [...] / A drizzle that looks like lye / meets the mourning of things / and among the veils of tarlatan, // in the porches the wax is consumed / from the worm-holed wood candlesticks /over roses of yellow porcelain.

Corazzini hints at a similar sentiment of loss and irrational need for material acknowledgement in “Cappella in campagna” [Countryside chapel], describing a statue of Our Lady of Sorrows in a solitary chapel. This Madonna is the sad housekeeper of “i voti / de gli umili, de i buoni senza nome / ch’ebbero ancora fede nel dolore” [the vows / of the humble, the good people without name / who still had faith in pain] (*O* 121). Devotional objects testify to the grieving process of an unrecoverable true religious sentiment, which is forever lost, like the names of “those good people.” Nevertheless, the materiality of the vows remains, filling in for the cognitive lack that comes from being alone in a world where God is dead and the time of glorious humanism has passed, leaving neither Promethean demi-gods nor heroes. As another of Corazzini’s Madonnas declares: “Qui sono sola ed assai lunge è Dio! / Qui sono sola, assai lunge è il mortale” [I am alone here and very far is God! / I am alone here, very far is the mortal] (“La madonna e il suo lampioncello” [The Madonna and her lamppost], *O* 102).

In this Crepuscular universe in which Mary is a helpless crying statue, the calcified religion absolves the function of a potent mythologem. Faith in death generates fetishes, namely things that continue to be irrationally venerated, not for what they signify, but for their material mystery—for being completely accessible to the senses while still providing the evidence of a pervading and inaccessible unknown. For instance: What does a statue of Mary in an abandoned church mean? Is there a truly sacred image in a deconsecrated space? Does that statue only signify its own material or is there still something else? Behind its passive and melancholic appearance, Crepuscular materiality silently collects all these questions as the synesthesia of a visible, frozen scream: The bold declaration that objects are the space where humanity clashes with its inability to understand what its own fetishes mean.

Raising obsolete, desecrated objects to simulacra of lost sacredness, Roman Crepuscularism reveals how humanity relies on material avatars of meaning and, therefore, needs materiality as a form of epistemological and ontological reassurance. Man creates things to exemplify, prove, and justify his own agency in the world and his detachment from the nonhuman. Unveiling this logical contradiction, Crepuscularism shows a series of useless, forgotten objects that escape from human control. In their ability to stand inert, contemplate, and internalize the mystery of life, these things hint at an alternative mode of being: Shattering human individuality to generate an oceanic flux of creativity through the dispersion and annihilation of arbitrary boundaries in the process of being. Crepuscular fetishes express, thus, the reifying power of things in giving material substance to an “as-if world”, or to a world that is there but exceeds its sensorial perception. This mechanism of symbolic substitution leads humans to embrace life in its tangible unintelligibility. In “La madonna e il suo lampioncello” by Corazzini, a helpless Virgin Mary prays to a little red lamppost to make light as she is frightened by the dark. The divine supplicates to materiality, in search of what is missing—a truth that can illuminate and erase her fear of the dark and the storm. Yet, the lamppost denies Mary, answering “Non posso” [I cannot] to her request. When, after twice refusing, the lamppost eventually decides to illuminate, Mary is no longer there to take advantage of it. She is gone. Although her departure could be easily interpreted as an impeding ban that rules over human lives, another reading is possible. Leaving her fetish behind, the Madonna becomes a prefiguration of the couple in “La morte di Tantalò.” She has rediscovered her own divinity to create an alternative existence in which she will face darkness, being her own light—being nothing more than a thing.

Through a jumble of decorative objects, Gozzano illustrates a complementary side to the Crepuscular denunciation of the modern compensation mechanism for a lost self-reassurance. Recovering that umbilical attachment to nineteenth-century culture and values, in “L’amica di nonna Speranza” [Grandmother Speranza’s friend] Gozzano’s poetic ego travels through time and “rinascere” [is reborn] in a bourgeois parlor in 1850. As if in a modernized fairy-tale, the return to the time of his grandmother’s youth is made possible by a magic object: a picture, explained in the epigraph of the text. Indulging the pathological bourgeois urge to collect objects “of bad taste”, Gozzano reveals how the neurotic accumulation of goods becomes a substitutive language to prove wealth and social worth:

*Loreto impagliato e il busto d’Alfieri, di Napoleone  
i fiori in cornice (le buone cose di pessimo gusto!)  
il caminetto un po’ tetro, le scatole senza confetti,  
i frutti di marmo protetti dalle campane di vetro,  
un qualche raro balocco, gli scrigni fatti di valve,  
gli oggetti col monito salve, ricordo, le noci di cocco,  
Venezia ritratta a mosaici, gli acquarelli un po’ scialbi,  
le stampe, i cofani, gli albi dipinti d’anemoni arcaici,  
le tele di Massimo d’Azeglio, le miniature,  
i dagherotipi: figure sognanti in perplessità,  
il gran lampadario vetusto che pende a mezzo il salone  
e immilla nel quarzo le buone cose di pessimo gusto,  
il cùcu dell’ore che canta, le sedie parate a damasco  
chermisi... rinasco, rinasco nel mille ottocento cinquanta! (TP 183)<sup>169</sup>*

This chain of tchotchkes conveys the pretentious, yet beloved, atmosphere of luxury that cannot conceal cheapness and illiteracy. The catalogue of furniture and collectibles resurrects,

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<sup>169</sup> Pol parrot stuffed and the bust of Napoleon, of Alfieri, / the flowery moldings (the very good things in terrible taste), / the dark fireplace, the collection of boxes without any candy, / the clusters of marble fruit standing under the bell jars’ / protection, / the odd toy, the coconuts there, the box made of seashells, / the warning, / of Pray or Remember adorning the keepsakes that lie / everywhere, / the album with painted archaic wildflowers, an engraving or / two, the pale watercolors, the view of Venice done all in mosaic, / the miniatures there in profusion, painting or two by / D’Azeglio, / daguerreotypes (just a bit yellow) with figures in dreamy / confusion, / the splendid old chandelier placed in the center, above the / great hall: / a thousand reflections of all the good things of horrible taste, / the red damasked chairs, in the corner, the cuckoo clock... / all of them lift me / out of myself: I’m reborn in the year eighteen hundred and / fifty! (TM 99-100)

bringing back for an instant a material and spiritual world that is gone for good, with its ideals and spokesmen—the Risorgimento and the wars for Independence, Verdi, Mazzini, Foscolo, and the *Novelliere Illustrato*. This bourgeois parlor of mismatched ornaments and mediocre, exotic souvenirs hides the poetic ego’s irrational need to recover those objects from the past, to revive its strong ideals. Recalling Sanguineti’s position of *Tra Liberty e Crepuscolarismo*, the ironic Crepuscular detachment from the Romantic sublime through a poetics of quotidian objects implies the acceptance of the loss of the imperfect, inspiring, and breath-taking beauty that the picture brings back temporarily. Holding the portrait, the poetic I cannot help but to fall under the spell of grandmother Speranza’s friend, Carlotta, captured in a moment of Romantic ecstasy looking towards the sky. Immortalizing the fascinating allure of the past in a picture marks Gozzano’s “final renunciation” of that tempting literary siren, and the embrace of the aesthetics of quotidian things, which can even reduce a pair of blue eyes to average “tableware-blue” (*TP* 171).

The Crepuscular mourning for a material inheritance that cannot be easily abandoned evolves in the Futurist draconian dismissal of an agoraphobic world imprisoned by nostalgia. The question is why, behind its rhetoric of the new, Futurism cannot help to return to a material universe made of old and useless things. Under the disguise of getting rid of them, Futurist texts swarm with Crepuscular whatnots, obsessively facing their uncanny, static presence, which challenges the hectic ebullience of the present time. The text that renders explicit the Futurist “imperfect” shift to techno-materiality is “Il saluto ai poeti crepuscolari” [Goodbye to the Crepuscular poets] by Nino Oxilia. In this poem, which plays entirely on the contrast between objects, the Turinese writer addresses Corazzini and Gozzano as those who died without seeing the “flame over the world” and were, thus, unable to sing the future. Oxilia’s farewell proceeds



through a visual evocation of the things that *made* Crepuscularism: melancholic Sundays, puppets, bells, worm-eaten furniture, daguerreotypes, coaches, and crinolines. The author concretizes the excitement at abandoning the past, imagining the enjoyment in listening to the out-of-tune sounds of a piano playing a Gozzanian gavotte from 1860.<sup>170</sup> Yet, what really clashes in Oxilia's farewell is the visceral need to remember a material past in order to announce a future that, in 1918, Futurism should have already embraced.<sup>171</sup> Why are those things coming back? Why do they need to be remembered, if "Domani le piccole cose / saranno per sempre sepolte" [tomorrow the little things / will be buried for good]? (*Poesie* 188) One may wonder if the vertiginous run "in un mondo / più vasto; in un ciel più profondo, / dentro a un più profondo mare" [in a wider / world; in a deeper sky / in a deeper sea] (187) is rather a retelling of Orfeo's run to rescue Eurydice, which can only succeed if he does not turn back. While running after Death, Futurists do linger to look back at those passatist, useless things. Although they are waste products, old, Crepuscular, useless objects still inhabit the Futurist realm. Many of the poems, collected in the first Futurist anthology, *Poeti Futuristi* [Futurist poets], show an obsessive need to possess, although through violence and denigration, "passatist things."<sup>172</sup> This trait highlights an overlooked side of this movement: its magnetic, deadly attraction for a world of junk, old

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<sup>170</sup> "volgevo la testa e udivo / il milleottocentosessanta / suonare la gavotta sul pianoforte a coda / con l'aria di chi goda se qualche corda è rotta..." [I turned my head and heard / the eighteen-sixty / play the gavotte on a grand piano / and I looked like one who enjoys if some string was broken...] (*Poesie* 189). Paraphrasing from Gozzano's "L'amica di nonna Speranza", Oxilia writes 1860 instead of 1850. It might have gone by memory when quoting from Gozzano, or he might have purposefully decided to corrupt the original text, mocking the same style of the year in letters at the end of a verse.

<sup>171</sup> The poem was published posthumous in 1918 in the collection *Gli orti* [The orchards], which gathers texts that the author composed from about 1909 to 1918.

<sup>172</sup> Only to mention a few examples: cfr. "Il passato" by Libero Altomare, "Inno alla poesia nuova" by Paolo Buzzi, "Il piccolo re" by Auro D'Alba, "Fascino" by Corrado Govoni, "Le beghine" by Aldo Palazzeschi.

carillons, paper flowers, and even “poltrone a dondolo per cretini” [rocking chairs for cretins] (*TIF* 34, *F* 67) that subtly acts as a *memento mori* for the new, roaring machines.

This reflection opens the space for further considerations on the practical function of Crepuscular and Futurist materiality. How does this massive presence of useless things correspond to the bourgeois mythology of the *homo faber* and to the dream of a future enhanced by technology? Undoubtedly, Crepuscular things, though idolized, also mirror the socio-cultural changes that the bourgeois ascent provoked at the beginning of twentieth century in the Italian panorama. The social passage of the bourgeoisie from a subaltern to a dominant class involves, as Pierre Bourdieu argues in *The Distinction*, a parallel passage from the ethic of duty to the ethic of fun, raising the need for “symbolic goods” that can testify to position on the social ladder. Buying and collecting “useless” things becomes a legitimizing social strategy, as owning objects that were once exclusive to the aristocracy marks a symbolic affirmation of the new power of material opulence over blue-blooded legacy. In this respect, Crepuscular poetry investigates a novel aspect of the bourgeois relation with objects: the cognitive possibility of being bored with them. As much as objects can guarantee a comfortable lifestyle, the overwhelming presence of items loses any attractiveness for the twentieth-century man, translating into “l’orribile / la dozzinale / noia / di tutto ciò” [the horrible / cheap / boredom/ with all of this] (Dal Molin Ferenzona, “Invernale” [Wintry scene], 44).

Challenging the ethic of *labor*, Crepuscular poetry examines the dimension of non-usage, namely the intriguing, new space where things depart from their original scope, overflowing the boundaries of *zuhandenheit*, which for Martin Heidegger is the modality of utility. “Inutilità” [inutility] is the (dis)value the Vallini sings, proclaiming:

*Inutilità! Se la fatua*

*credulità delle masse  
umane non me lo vietasse,  
vorrei farti fare una statua. ("La noia", UGA 87)<sup>173</sup>*

In the Crepuscular universe, abandoned or useless objects are, thus, orphans of meaning and free to produce new functions against the impositions of bourgeois society. More than an unconscious return of the repressed, as Francesco Orlando argued (8), Crepuscular objects are rebellious weapons, purposefully displayed to controvert the social order and its rational, moral, and functional imperative of utility. They are the visible residue of practical usage, the uncomfortable leftovers that cannot be cognitively “recycled” and fully escape from human agency. One of the primary targets of Crepuscular anti-functionalism is the book’s material sacredness, beyond the “loss of the aura” in the conversion of books from objects of elitist distinction to items of mass distribution and enjoyment. For the imaginary bourgeois collective, owning books and practicing silent reading was perceived as a privileged, “sacred” moment of delectation and self-education through an aesthetic experience. This explains why, in late nineteenth century, European visual art is rich in works portraying bourgeoisie (especially women) in the act of private reading. The variety of poses and pictorial languages is broad, from the intimate reading of a novel captured candidly to the habitual reading of the newspaper while drinking morning coffee. In particular, the visual representation of the act of reading takes into account the expansion of the educated female public and the socio-cultural emancipation produced by the conquest of genres, like the novel, that were initially banned due to moral

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<sup>173</sup> Inutility! If the fatuous / credulity of the human / masses didn’t forbid me, / I’d like for you to have a statue. (“The boredom”)

taboos.<sup>174</sup> To a bourgeois world that was seeking cultural empowerment through the practice of reading and owning private libraries, the Crepusculars promise a mediocre, if not totally depriving, reading experience, at which the titles of their collections hint: *Piccolo libro inutile* [Little useless book] (1906) by Corazzini, *Gli aborti* [The abortions] by Govoni (1907), *La rinunzia* [The renunciation] (1907) by Vallini, *Poesie scritte col lapis* [Poems written with the pencil] (1910) and *Poesie di tutti i giorni* [Everyday poems] (1911) by Moretti, *Poesie provinciali* [Provincial poems] (1910) by Martini.

According to Vittorio Spinazzola, in modern times, “the qualification of reader can be attributed to anybody who freely decides to read a written work, with the goal of gaining some advantage from this experience” (*La teoria della lettura* 47). Crepuscular poetry challenges the horizon of expectations that associates books with objects of leisure, intellectual enjoyment, and fantastic evasion, proposing an ironic dream of literature, which is free to produce worthless objects and pointless books. An example of this polemic adoption of useless books is Corazzini’s image of the forgotten volume in the church of the suicidal sacristan. The open book, which nobody is reading, becomes the only witness to this macabre moment:

*Il libro dimenticato  
aperto, è l'unica bocca che parli  
nella chiesa silenziosa  
è l'unico occhio che veda,  
nella chiesa oscura,  
la morte della creatura (“La chiesa venne riconsacrata”, O 126)<sup>175</sup>*

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<sup>174</sup> To give only a brief account of the Italian paintings on this subject at the end of nineteenth century, we can mention: Gioacchino Toma’s *Donna che legge sdraiata* (uncertain dating), Federico Faruffini’s *La lettrice* (1864), Francesco Netti’s *La lettrice* (1873) Daniele Ranzoni’s *La lettura* (1878-80), Silvestro Lega’s *La lezione* (1880-81).

<sup>175</sup> The open forgotten / book, is the only mouth that speaks / in the silent church / is the only eye that sees / in the dark church, / the death of the creature. (“The church was reconsacrated”)

The useless book abandons its reading function to be reduced to a random MacGuffin. Being a “nothing at all” object, the book is simply a deceptive tool, mentioned *an passant*, just before the narrative climax of the close-up of the hanging sacristan. A similar idea appears in Moretti’s poem “Orario ferroviario” [Train schedule]. The poetic I disregards all the fancy volumes on the shelves of a bookstore to pick a booklet with the train schedule, the “unico libro che ora io cerchi e apprezzo” [the only book that now I’d search for and appreciate] (TLP 131). Compared to high literature, the modest book succeeds in satisfying the need of the protagonist and of any random traveler through simple practical information. From its wise and “useless” perspective, the humble train schedule poses an interrogative to the poet:

*E a me dici: “Poeta, a che t’indugi  
fra le tue carte e il tuo cuor che non sa  
se nemmeno nei piccoli rifugi  
s’appiatta e ride la felicità?” (TLP 132)<sup>176</sup>*

The question of the goal of poetic lingering is solved in a time-travelling poem by Carlo Chiaves. In twenty-third century, the epoch in which the poetic narration takes place, a child, rummaging in a very deserted, useless collection of books, finds the last copy of a book by some poet. The child does not even know what the word “poets” means; his father explains: “O figlio, vuol dire una razza inquieta / di gente, che è scomparsa da quasi un’eternità” [Oh son, it means a restless race / of people, who disappeared almost an eternity ago] (“Nel secolo duemila trecento” [In the twenty-third century], 13). The boy does not fully understand why people used to write about fantasies; he grabs the book, pierces and threads it, and makes a toy out of that senseless object in order to play with a cat. The book is destroyed, but at least has served a purpose:

*Indi, disperse, laceri, i fogli, e calpesti, nel foco*

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<sup>176</sup> And you say to me: “Poet, why do you linger / on your papers and your heart that doesn’t know / if not even in the little shelters / happiness crouches and laughs?”

*consumerai, più presto di quanto saremo già noi  
in terra consumati, poeti inutili o eroi,  
tu che un istante almeno avrai servito ad un gioco. (14)<sup>177</sup>*

A similar polemic vein against “useless books”, conceived as a “mezzo passatista di conservare e comunicare il pensiero” [a passatist tool to save and communicate the thought] (*TIF* 138) appears in Futurism through the powerful claim of a desire to burn volumes, destroying their library catacombs and reliquaries. As Soffici affirms, looking at a collections of volumes: “queste centinaia di libri in fila / ripugnano come cadaveri di vecchi amici” [These hundreds of books in a row / are repugnant like corpses of old friends] (“Atelier”, *Simultaneità* 45). Giving books to flames is even a way to save poetic inspiration from an inevitable process of commodification; as Buzzi affirms in “Le paure” [Fears], the only certainty about his soul is that:

*[...] domani, se muori, i tuoi fratelli  
piuttosto che bruciarla,  
la venderanno al chilo  
come carta. (Aeroplani 156)<sup>178</sup>*

In the Founding Manifesto, the Futurist arsonists present themselves in the act of warming their hands by the fires of books, before leaving on their airplanes (*TIF* 13). The contrast between the volumes—old things that passively burn—and new “trepidanti” [trepidant] flying machines is central to the definition of usability in Marinetti’s movement. The usable things of Futurism are the techno-ferine machines that the movement aim to sing:

il vibrante fervore notturno degli arsenali e dei cantieri incendiati da violente lune elettriche; le stazioni ingorde, divoratrici di serpi che fumano; le officine appese alle nuvole pei contorti fili dei loro fumi; i ponti simili a ginnasti giganti che scavalcano i fiumi, balenanti al sole con un luccichio di coltelli; i piroscafi avventurosi che fiutano l’orizzonte, le locomotive dall’ampio petto, che scalpitano sulle rotaie, come

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<sup>177</sup> Thus, dispersed, ripped apart, trodden papers, in the fire / you will be consumed, sooner than we will be already / consumed on earth, us useless poets and heroes, / you that for an instant will at least have served a game.

<sup>178</sup> [...]tomorrow, if you die, your brothers / rather than burn it, / will sell it at the pound / like paper.

enormi cavalli d' acciaio imbrigliati di tubi, e il volo scivolante degli aeroplani, la cui elica garrisce al vento come una bandiera e sembra applaudire come una folla entusiasta. (*TIF* 11)<sup>179</sup>

“Things that *make* war”, paraphrasing an expression by Govoni, are another fundamental material component in Futurist poetry. War provides a huge reservoir of all kinds of objects, mixed and smashed together by the violence of the conflict, as in the medley of *Battaglia Peso+Odore*. In this sequence of weapons, food, board games, animals, planes, and random items of all sorts, the identity of things, contained in any single world, spill over, creating an undefined energetic war-heap. While this uncontrollable flux flattens anything to a basic material status, it also makes each item decisive and crucial, such as the drop of water in the drought warning “serba-questa-goccia-d’acqua” [save-this-drop-of-water], or the three centimeters to climb in order to survive to twenty grams of sands and 3000 grams of darkness (*TIF* 62).

A common view of the unifying thread that links together Futurist things is locating them in the context of techno-pragmatism, in which new civilian and military machines constitute the tools of modern man, and his inexhaustible source of poetic inspiration. As Paolo Buzzi triumphantly declares: “La Lira è la macchina oggi” [Today the Lyre is the machine] and the new poetic era is illuminated by machines: “Fu fatta vendemmia di stelle. / Il mostro elettrico / inonda di fuoco la terra dei nuovi Demoni.” [A grape harvest of stars was done. / The electrical monster / inundates the land of the new Demons with fire.] (*PF* 107). Yet, this position opens itself to criticism. The excited acknowledgement of technological, animated things in the literary space was not a Futurist idea; it was rather an “innovation” of the harshly attacked, backward

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<sup>179</sup> the vibrating nocturnal fervor of factories and shipyards burning under violent electrical moons; bloated railroad stations that devour smoking serpents; factories hanging from the sky by the twisting threads of spiraling smoke; bridges like gigantic gymnasts who span rivers, flashing at the sun with the gleam of a knife; adventurous steamships that scent the horizon, locomotives with their swollen chest, pawing the tracks like massive steel horses bridled with pipes, and the oscillating flight of airplanes, whose propeller flaps at the wind like a flag and seems to applaud like a delirious crowd. (*F* 52)

nineteenth-century tradition. The ode to mechanical progress had already found its singer in 1863, when Carducci, with a strong anticlerical tone, greeted the rebellious vindictive force of the train, pictured as Satan “Un bello e orribile / mostro si sferra, / corre gli oceani, / corre la terra” [A beautiful and horrible / monster launches itself / runs the oceans / runs the land] (“Inno a Satana”). D’Annunzio equally praised machines, building part of his personal mythography on the self-celebrating experience of flying and on the cult of the “velivolo”, a word for plane, which he introduced in *Forse che sì forse che no* and diffused through his public speeches and war endeavors. Fostering the ideal of the Latin man’s heroic destiny, the *vate* drew from a world of old myths, reshaping them into new myths without distancing them from the classic-humanistic line (Pignatari vi). He renovated the ancient dream of Icarus’ flight into a new possibility of success for the Latin man equipped with flying machines.

Undoubtedly, the Futurist techno-poetics partially inherited the boastful Dannunzian modernized mythology. Nevertheless, while the *vate* eternalizes things as new cult objects, Futurism celebrates machines subjected to a necessary cycle of creative disruption, complementing the Crepuscular song of “the useless.” Futurist things are new, fast, and aggressive: speeding monoplanes, cars-fuming beasts, roaring engines, trains-snakes. Yet, in order to accompany or even become prosthesis for the “possente e invincibile” [powerful and invincible] Futurist humanity, these things need to be removed from the domain of time (*PF* 381), to never experience the tragedy of aging (*TIF* 301). In other words, they must be new and young forever to live in the reign of divine speed (*TIF* 133). The paradox of Futurist things, which ironically reflects the paradox of the Avant-Garde itself, is that, to preserve their novelty, these machines should live suspended in the frozen instant of potential usage, which negates their practicality. Yet, only used and old things can nourish the Futurist fire with nostalgic



objects, and its spiral of eternal destruction-renovation. An explicative text of this contrast is “Sottomarino” [Submarine] by Luciano Folgore, a poem celebrating a worn submarine, sunk, like a black cadaver, on the sea floor:

*Non ronzano più le eliche  
divoratrici dei moti,  
non gira più il timone,  
non lancia più la prora l'acuto sperone  
ma il sottomarino si stende  
sul letto viscido e intorno  
una moltitudine di ignoti pesci,  
d'ignoti coralli e meduse  
ne tenta le chiuse aperture. (PF 235)<sup>180</sup>*

The poetic ego expresses its desire to memorialize the submarine, depicting it as a ghost machine piloted by the strength of the brave men, though he can already envision the “new brothers” that will come in the future to continue the battle against the thrilling Futurist death—“questo mistero feroce / che si ostina pazzamente a precluderci / le porte della Natura” [this ferocious mystery / that insanely persists in blocking / the doors of Nature] (PF 237, F 449). Striving for a continuous regeneration of “the new” throughout an endless, violent process of destruction, Futurist “cose violente” [violent things], as defined by Libero Altomare in “Canto futurista” [Futurist song] (PF 53), are animated by a Darwinian instinct for survival that clashes with the fast, destructive-reproductive biorhythm of war, cleanser of the world. With their love for the extreme, Futurists do not conceive of compromise, even volunteering themselves as the first victims of obsolescence:

I più anziani fra noi, hanno trent'anni [...]. Quando avremo quarant'anni, altri uomini più giovani e validi di noi, ci gettino pure nel cestino come manoscritti inutili—Noi lo desideriamo! (TIF 13)<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> The devouring propellers of speed / no longer buzz, / the prow no longer pushes forth its sharp ram, / the submarine lies down / on its viscous bed and all around / a multitude of strange / fish, unknown corals and jellyfish / attack its sealed apertures. (F 447)

While Crepuscular objects linger abandoned and piled up because they cannot be discarded, Futurist things die or are replaced by new things, in an unstoppable cycle of modernization that can only accelerate. If, as Sanguineti reminds us, poets are imbued with the qualities of their times,<sup>181</sup> Crepusculars can be nothing more than useless objects blocking the presumed agency of humans over things, whereas Futurists are designed to be “mechanical men with exchangeable parts”, whose “electric hearts” beat faster and faster to keep up with the speed of constant renovation.

#### 4.4 Representing Things: Deceptive Realism and Subtle Animism

Borrowing an expression from Karen Pinkus, it is possible to affirm that the technological development and expansion of markets during the Belle Époque and the development of the heavy industry in World War I make this historical moment a “period of materialization” (63). The overabundance of small Crepuscular trinkets and giant Futurist machines seems to reflect a growing material world, responding to the need of incorporating new socio-economical phenomena and increasingly acknowledging objects from real life. Nevertheless, this visible interest in everyday facts, things, and places—a vocation that, according to Luciano Anceschi, connects a century of Italian poetry: “Realisti, Scapigliati, Gozzano, Montale, Sereni, Novissimi” (*Da Ungaretti a D’Annunzio* 58)—acquires an anti-

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<sup>181</sup> The oldest of us is thirty: so we have at least a decade left to fulfill our task. When we are forty, others who are younger and stronger will throw us into the wastebasket, like useless manuscripts. —We want it to happen! (*F* 23)

<sup>182</sup> In the first section of *Laborintus* Sanguineti writes “noi che riceviamo la qualità dai tempi” [we who receive the quality from our times], echoing a line from “La chioma di Berenice” in which Ugo Foscolo refers to the poets. For a more detailed explanation of Sanguineti’s adoption of this line, cfr. Edoardo Sanguineti. *Laborintus di Edoardo Sanguineti*. Ed. Erminio Risso. San Cesario di Lecce: Manni, 2006: 74 n4.

materialist and anti-realist relevance in Crepuscularism and Futurism. When depicting objects, both movements aim to know what passes *through* them and what is *beyond* them, creating an illusory Realism that, pretending to be anchored to concrete things, conveys “l’espressione dell’immateriale e dell’inesprimibile” [the expression of the immaterial and the inexpressible] (Vannicola, “Modern Style”). Crepuscularism and Futurism present real objects to trespass their materiality; this attitude pertains to the evanescent things of Corazzini’s mystical circle and of the Azure Patrol, but surprisingly characterizes also the hyper-detailed “things of bad taste of Gozzano” and the Marinettian Futurist machines with nuanced differences.

Corazzini’s *Soliloquio delle cose* is the “manifesto” of the Crepuscular deceptive quotidian Realism. This lyric prose stages a monologue in which the common objects in the room of a mysterious character lament his departure, due to the death of his “piccola e bianca sorella” [his little, white sister] (*O* 232).<sup>183</sup> Constructing a vicarious narrative for a poetic persona *in absentia*, Corazzini’s text recalls the strategy of Cavalcanti’s “Noi siàn le triste penne isbigotite, le cesoiuzze e ’l coltellin dolente.” The thirteenth-century sonnet opens with a declaration of intent, in which the animated objects introduce themselves and explain their mission, to become an offering of the dying poet to his beloved lady—“Or vi preghiàn quanto possiàn più forte / che non sdegn[i]ate di tenerci noi” [We pray you then, with all the strength we have: / Do not disdain to keep us] (40-41). By contrast, in Corazzini’s reinvention of the Cavalcantian motif, the speaking things name other objects in the house—windows, doors, a corridor, a bed, a lamp, some flowers, and curtains—but never reveal who they are and what

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<sup>183</sup> In Corazzini’s poetry, the term *sorella* cannot simply be intended as the English sister. The poet often plays with the homophone *sorella* as the appellative for a nun, but also alludes to a sentimental closeness that does not involve any physical relationship.

their goal is. These bodiless objects are only materialized through their own voice, which temporarily pulls them out from “nothingness” and shadow, as they declare: “Noi non siamo che cose in una cosa: imagine terribilmente perfetta del Nulla” [We are nothing more than things in a thing: terribly perfect image of the Nothing] (*O* 232). In the monologue, the “povere piccole cose” [poor little things] constantly compare themselves to powerless witnesses: “Noi non dormiamo; noi siamo le eterne ascoltatrici, noi siamo il silenzio che vede e che ascolta: il visibile silenzio” [We do not sleep; we are the eternal listeners, we are the silent that see and listen: the visible silent] (*O* 232). Although their materiality keeps them in a space of domestic seclusion, these things are a tangible, silent reminder of what is beyond them. The key to this confinement is the sibylline sentence that their “friend” used to tell them, but they have never understood: “Una porta chiusa è figurazione di gran gioia” [A closed door is a prefiguration of great joy] (*O* 233). The mysterious door might be interpreted as a prelude to the “grande felicità ignota” [great unknown happiness] (*O* 162) that Corazzini envisions in his final collection. Things are indeed the doors that must be opened and entered to pass from phenomenal perception to material annulment in the all-encompassing matter. Not by chance, the Roman author opens this lyrical prose, quoting Hugo: “Les choses ont leur terrible: ‘non possumus’” [Things have their terrible: “non possumus”]; only by trespassing the limitations of perceptible materiality, it is possible to turn that “non possumus” into a possibility of freedom.

This position connects Corazzini with the parallel experience of his friend, the artist Raoul Dal Molin Ferenzona, who may have introduced the Roman poet to exotericism and contributed to the development of the Roman poet’s anti-Positivist, mystic nihilism. Ferenzona’s artistic journey reflects a contrast between two polarities: an excited and visionary creation of legendary, oneiric, allegoric materiality, and a will towards self-annihilation into the beauty of

these artifacts. As Mario Quesada explains, this latter tendency implies a loss of the self to God, understood, in Joséphin Péladan's terms, as aesthetic perfection. Influencing Corazzini, Ferenzona seeks an escape from the human into the artistic nonhuman, to experience a superior, original harmony imbedded in the divine matter (18).

Beyond the realist coverage of fully embracing the technological advancement of the early twentieth century, Futurist machines reflect a vivid interest in “dematerializing” nature into matter and matter into pure energy—its basic “spiritual” component. The Futurist purpose is “concepire e delimitare in una forma la relazione plastica che esiste tra la *conoscenza* dell’oggetto e la sua *apparizione*” [to conceive and delimit in a form the plastic relation that exists between the *knowledge* of the object and its *apparition*] (*Pittura, scultura futuriste* 107). According to Boccioni, this does not mean dissolving the form; rather, it means creating an “oggetto-ambiente” [object-environment], namely making the object a “nucleo di direzioni che appaiono come forma” [a nucleus of directions that appear as a form] (111). Far from being realistic, the Futurist object becomes a center for dynamic impressions and deformations, directly correlated with the intuition of the magmatic flow of life into forms in movement. This perspective also appears in Marinetti's affirmation of the absurdity of imposing human feelings on matter, while the ultimate frontier for Futurism is grasping the “natural” impulses and forces that act within materiality:

i suoi differenti impulsi direttivi, le sue forze di compressione, di dilatazione, di coesione, e di disgregazione, le sue torme di molecole in massa o i suoi turbini di elettroni. Non si tratta di rendere i drammi della materia umanizzata. È la solidità di una lastra d'acciaio, che c'interessa per sé stessa, cioè l'alleanza incomprensibile e inumana delle sue molecole o dei suoi elettroni, che si oppongono, per esempio, alla penetrazione di un obice. Il calore di un pezzo di ferro o di legno è ormai più appassionante, per noi, del sorriso o delle lagrime di una donna. (“Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista”, *TIF* 50)<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Its different governing impulses, its forces of compression, dilation, cohesion, disintegration, its heaps of molecules massed together or its electrons whirling like turbines. There is no point in creating a drama of matter that

The fascination with materiality moves from the assumption that feelings are not an exclusive human prerogative; as the Futurist artists state in “The Exhibitors to the Public” in 1912:

nessuno si accorge che tutti gli oggetti cosiddetti inanimati rivelano, nelle loro linee, della calma o della follia, della tristezza o della gaiezza. Queste tendenze diverse danno alle linee di cui sono formati un sentimento e un carattere di stabilità pesante o di leggerezza aerea. Ogni oggetto rivela, per mezzo delle sue linee, come si scomporrebbe secondo le tendenze delle sue forze.

Questa scomposizione non è guidata da leggi fisse ma varia secondo la personalità caratteristica dell'oggetto che è poi la sua psicologia e l'emozione di colui che lo guarda. (*Scritti editi e inediti* 15)<sup>185</sup>

At a literary level, Marinetti transposes these theories in his experimental theater, through which the audience can feel the life that domestic tools and furniture emanate. For instance, in the “dramma di oggetti” [drama of objects] entitled *Vengono* [They're coming], the Futurist founder creates a synthesis of animated objects to show how eight chairs and a big armchair, going through spatial rearrangements to receive the people who are coming, express their disappointment to the trembling servants, projecting on them “ombre spiccatissime” [very vivid shadows] (*Teatro futurista sintetico* 165). Yet, Crepuscular and Futurist things are alive not through a process of anthropomorphization, but by being endowed with a soul or animated by living energy. In this perspective of vitalist materialism, things serve as *the* modality of the fluid Avant-Garde “nomadic Subject”—to recall Rosi Braidotti’s definition—which has been extrapolated from the cage of human individuality and imbues a self-organized and relational

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has been humanized. It is the solidity of a steel plate which interests us as something in itself, with its incomprehensible and inhuman cohesion of molecules or electrons which can resist penetration by a howitzer. The heat of a piece of iron or wood leaves us more impassioned than the smile or tears of a woman. (“Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature”, *F* 122)

<sup>185</sup> What is overlooked is that all inanimate objects display, by their lines, calmness or frenzy, sadness or gaiety. These various tendencies lend to the lines of which they are formed a sense and character of weighty stability or airy lightness. Every object reveals, by its lines, how it would resolve itself were it to follow the tendencies of its forces. This decomposition is not governed by fixed laws but it varies according to the characteristic personality of the object and the emotions of the onlooker. (Apollonio 48)

matter. As Corazzini show in one of his early, scattered poems, “La tipografia abbandonata” [The deserted print shop], things live independently from human action. In this text, the “oggetti umili” [humble objects] of an abandoned printing-house suddenly come to life when illuminated by a ray of sun filtering through a small opening. Triumphant over the spell of dust and spider webs, the letters shudder, animated by joy, and begin to work, without any human intervention:

*nel silenzio le lettere si unirono,  
composero parole, versi, canti  
interi, per quel sole tanto bello  
e tanto buono, per quel sol che i pianti  
d'una lunga tristezza, avea asciugato  
col suo raggio divino  
col suo raggio infuocato. (O 181)<sup>186</sup>*

As part of their being, objects are a tangible and active part of the Mystery that is within and around us, providing secret paths to invisible other worlds. Inverting the usual anthropocentric approach, Crepuscularism arrives to envision a dimension in which humans are the static spectators of acting things. A short story by Antonello Caprino, entitled “La favola del mare” [The fable of the sea] and published on *La settimana* in 1907, exemplifies this trend; the brief narration proceeds through the eyes of a “still-life boy” who is the witness to the extraordinary and mysterious vitality of the things that he sees from the window of his house:

Nini era l'unico testimone della vita di quelle cose e di quelle apparizioni fugaci e quelle cose avevano, come quegli esseri viventi, un'espressione diversa e mutevole; avevano anche il loro mistero profondo.<sup>187</sup>

The fascination with the mysterious life of materiality, ushered in by Crepuscularism and noticeable in Marinettian Futurism, intensifies in the Florentine group. Maria Ginanni's writing

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<sup>186</sup> in the silence the letters came together, / composed themselves in words and lines and whole / songs, thanks to the sun so beautiful / and so good, thanks to the sun that dried away / the tears of a long sadness of the soul / with its heavenly ray / with its burning ray. (SE 13)

<sup>187</sup> Nini was the only witness of the life of those things and of those fleeting apparitions, and those things had, like those living beings, a diverse and changeable expression; they also had their deep mystery.

offers a clear example of this vocation towards the anti-material nature of things. In her writing she searches for “i ponti delle cose” [the bridges of things]; things, conceived as porous, transparent, and evaporating entities, allow for a journey that turns materiality into its essence, showing, as the female writer affirms, “non la creazione ma l’atto della creazione, la purezza della purezza, l’amore dell’amore” [not the creation, but the act of creation, the purity of purity, the love of love] (*Montagne trasparenti* 137). Although the presence of objects in Ginanni’s works conveys a rejection of the realistic outside world, this approach does not trigger a total eclipse of the world, but rather a reshaping of the spatial idea of environment and a redefinition of the related notions of inside and outside.

The more real things seem, the more they acquire the status of dematerialized sensation; for instance, the female author lists tiny realistic details of a grand hotel, defining them as ineffable and evanescent sensations of “sinuosità...impalpabili” [impalpable sinuosities] (*Il poema dello spazio* 131): “quel poco di seta nella calza della sartina di cui l’altra metà è filo, il lucido delle scarpe mattutine, la bruma delle prime ore di lavoro” [that little bit of silk in the stockings of the seamstress, whose other half is cotton thread, the shoe polish of the morning shoes, the dim of the early hours of work]. Even hyper-realistic “little things”, which seem to come from grandmother Speranza’s house, take part in Ginanni’s lyric prose, transfiguring the ego’s awareness of the world. In “Condensazione” [Condensation], she resurrects the memory of a knick-knack from China and observes how that figurine, received as a gift, has become almost a divine amulet. This small Chinese statue embodies a new cognitive approach that substitutes an irrational abandonment to the flowing, nonhuman life for the pretense of understanding it or being separated from it. As Ginanni declares in a purposefully obscure sentence: “in questo piccolo uomo giallo” [in this little yellow man] the human fury for knowing realizes its rational



limitation and “è trasformata [...] in uno scalpello aghiforme che insinua la sua intensità in profondità prodigiose perché non profonde” [is transformed into (...) a needle-shaped chisel that insinuates its intensity in depths that are prodigious because they are not deep] (*Il poema dello spazio* 128-29). The mystery of life overflows onto objects, making them scattered fragments of an existence that is difficult to recompose and reorder, and in which, using Ginanni’s figurative comparison, we randomly let things fall into a chaos of dust, facts, confusion, and forgotten logical relations every day (*Il poema dello spazio* 104).

As Ginanni explains, in the preface to this book, revealing once again her closeness to Roman Crepuscularism, the synthesis between material and immaterial things played a core function in her literary reflection, although it never reached an exhaustive understanding. Her aphoristic writing aims to grasp “rarefazioni e tremiti che pervadono con equilibri ed intuizioni campi d’incertezza e di incoscienza: l’ignoto spiritual ed universale” [rarefactions and tremors that pervade fields of uncertainty and unconsciousness with equilibriums and intuitions: the spiritual and universal unknown]. In her works, she also adopts the suggestive expression “oggetti-anima” [soul-objects] to designate the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle where things, feelings, psychological statuses, and emotions are interchangeable. At a stylistic level, this perspective becomes a personal reinterpretation of Marinetti’s words in freedom; Ginanni creates a double of each word, hyphenating pairs of nouns in which one refers to a material object and the other to an abstract image.

Considering Gozzano’s kitsch objects in antirealist terms is not obvious, as the poet provides such hyper-detailed descriptions that one could easily sketch the living room of Carlotta’s family or Felicita’s mansion. The representation is so vivid that the reader can even

perceive the unmistakable “odore di passato” [smell of the past] that emanates from these pieces of furniture and mismatched décor at Villa Amarena:

*Penso l'arredo—che malinconia!—  
penso l'arredo squallido e severo,  
antico e nuovo: la pirografia  
sui divani corinzi dell'Impero,  
la cartolina della Bella Otero  
alle specchiere... Che malinconia! (TP 169)<sup>188</sup>*

However, Gozzano's unmerciful magnifying glass discloses a less realistic side. The cluster of objects in the incipits of both “La signorina Felicita” and “L'amica di nonna Speranza” are peculiar poetic ready-mades. In his own way, Gozzano puts into poetry the intuition that Duchamp had had almost simultaneously: to randomly remove quotidian objects from their functional settings and reassemble them in a work that, according to the French artist, was “technically” not a work of art. Gozzano scattered and reassembled pieces of furniture as objects “borrowed” from bourgeois houses; they have been extrapolated from their setting to be included in an extraneous context—a written page—that alters the “reader-spectator's” perception of them. By being rearranged, “violated” of their domestic privacy, and inserted into poetry, these things become “things of bad taste;” they are no longer real pieces of furniture but, at the same time, they are not quite art in a traditional aesthetic sense. Because of their provocative thingness Gozzano's objects also “refuse to be assimilated to the mechanisms of representation and stand as something in between, occupying the interval between everyday objects and artworks” (Luisetti, “Reflections on Duchamp” 79). A similar, extreme form of realistic anti-Realism appears in Govoni's “thing-mania.” Gradually trespassing on Futurism without ever abandoning

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<sup>188</sup> I think of the furniture—what melancholy!— / I think of the furniture austere and mean, / old and new: Empire sofas with frilly / Corinthian designs burned in the grain, / The postcard of La Belle Otero in / The frame of the looking glass... What melancholy... (TM 69)

his Crepuscular vein, in *Fuochi d'artificio* [Fireworks] Govoni creates a crackling enchanted land of disorder, in which objects are finally freed from any pretense of man's agency. The collection was originally conceived as an odd book printed in "verde-veleno" [green-poison] and had this eccentric dedication:

Al mio caro Barbagianni che si chiama Buffone, alla trinità vergine e luminosa delle mie buone sorelle— cercatele!—ed alla tenera custodia della mia grande campana di vetro che cova la bellezza variopinta d'un mazzo smodato di fiori di cera in un canestro per la cui anima di legno gira un tarlo. (7)<sup>189</sup>

Except for the bird and the virgin sisters, who are a pure joke, these lines list only objects, marking a provocative threshold between the artificial world of modern humanism and a poetic hallucinatory universe on fire, in which things put into crisis, contaminate, poison, and ultimately "dematerialize" a fake human order. Things suddenly lose their material identity, to fuse in what Soffici defines "un'amalgama di luce forte e viva" [a mix of strong and lively light] ("Correnti" [Currents], *Simultaneità* 52), where everything live in a dimension of contiguity. The poet expresses this status of (in)material simultaneity using a Crepuscular listing-style-continuum that abolishes syntactic and semantic rules:

*Tavolozza degli anni paesi pensieri  
Della bicicletta all'amore segnalazioni inter-  
planetari di cose e spirito  
È tutta una chimica e il mondo ubriaco fra-  
dicio oscilla fra un binario e l'altro  
Non ci sono più stazioni (49)<sup>190</sup>*

From this point of view, it appears clear why the manifesto "La cinematografia futurista" [Manifesto of Futurist cinema] touts the ability of this new art to reach a simultaneous synopsis

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<sup>189</sup> To my dear barn owl named Buffoon, to the virgin and luminous trinity of my good sisters—you guys, look for them!—and to the tender custody of my big glass bell that broods the colorful beauty of an excessive bunch of wax flowers in a basket through whose wood soul a wood-worm wanders.

<sup>190</sup> Palette of years countries' thoughts / Of bicycle to love inter-/ planetarium signals of things and spirit / It's all chemistry and the dead- / drunk world oscillates between a track / and another / There are no longer stations

of various elements into “un accozzo di oggetti e realtà caotizzata” [a clash of objects and realities thrown together at random] (*TIF* 140, *F* 231). In its eclecticism, cinema develops a visual language in which objects in motion reflect the invisible dynamism of matter, that inexhaustible physiological electricity that permeates everything, from human being to “inanimate” objects.<sup>191</sup> Cinema can thus create:

**Drammi d’oggetti cinematografati.** (oggetti animati, umanizzati, truccati, vestiti, passionalizzati, civilizzati, danzati. Oggetti tolti dal loro ambiente abituale e posti in una condizione anormale che, per contrasto, mette in risalto la loro stupefacente costruzione e vita non umana.) (*TIF* 143)<sup>192</sup>

Futurist cinematographic experimentation allowed spectators to see objects from another perspective, revealing a non-human life that challenges fixed materiality and throws open new frontiers of space and temporality, such as simultaneity, synchronism, and duration. Through this media, Futurism opened a “mysterious fourth-dimension”, as defined by Della Vacche, in which “science and magic, positivism and spiritualism fought over” a new and more fluid definition of subject and object, their mode of being, and mutual relationships (114).

#### 4.5 The Agency of Modern Objects: From Subject to *Subjected*

Breaking the hierarchical division between subject and object, the Avant-Garde also conducts a criticism on a society in which the solipsistic Romantic heroes, driven by strong passions, are transformed into consumer-characters, *subjected* to the agency of objects. In an

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<sup>191</sup> From a spiritual perspective, the celebration of speed reveals an esoteric link between material and immaterial dimensions that are particularly visible when taking into account the extra-sensorial nature of electricity. Electrical energy informs Futurist materiality with its dynamism, becoming a manifestation of that inexhaustible energy that permeates everything, from human being to “inanimate” objects. On the esoteric implication of matter and electricity, see Cigliana, *Futurismo esoterico*, cit.

<sup>192</sup> **Filmed dramas of objects.** (Objects animated, humanized, wearing make-up, dressed up, impassioned, civilized, dancing—objects taken out of their usual surroundings and put into an abnormal state that, by contrast, throws into relief their amazing construction and nonhuman life.) (*F* 232)

epoch that, borrowing from Anceschi's definition, struggled with understanding itself (*Lirica del novecento*, xxix), objects are not simply goods; they provide a concrete anchor and a source of commodified reassurance. It is not ironic serendipity if Palazzeschi's man of smoke lands on earth wearing a pair of shoes. For the king's guards, who first meet him, that pair of boots is the only thing that identifies the strange creature as a man: "Voi siete poco un uomo, di uomo mi sembra non abbiate che le scarpe" [You, sir, are very little a man, it seems to me that of a man you have nothing else than the shoes] (139).<sup>193</sup>

This grotesque encounter highlights the apparent absurdity of two men needing a pair of shoes to determine that Perelà is human. The man of smoke's boots bring to mind the peasant shoes in the painting by Van Gogh that Heidegger uses in his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art." As the philosopher argues, those boots go far beyond their utility and the notion of artistic mimesis; they can reveal a web of relations to human existence. From this perspective, what are Perelà's boots in actuality and what do they disclose about the society that made them? These questions offer a further theme for reflection on the meaning of Crepuscular and Futurist things, and their polemic participation in the consumerist aesthetic of "the transitory, the fugitive, [and] the contingent" (Baudelaire, *The painter of the modern life*).

A preliminary task for both Crepuscularism and Futurism is to face the contraposition between the set of meanings that society has already negotiated for "modern objects" and the new possible cognitive and relational paths that things can open. Through its placid, hypnotizing carillon, Crepuscular poetry lets objects be consumed by a passive view and boredom, as things

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<sup>193</sup> The quotations from Palazzeschi's "Il codice di Perelà" (*The code of Perelà*) are based on the first edition of the novel, published in 1911, as this version was composed in the early phase of Futurism. Palazzeschi later published other two versions of the novel, with some variations (one in 1920 and one in 1954).

without a purpose. Yet, it also quietly allows objects to dominate the written page, making the subtle “filling-power” of things evident. In “La passeggiata” [The walk], Palazzeschi puts the monopoly of objects over human relations into verse. The walk of an unnamed, average couple passes from being a private moment with a partner to a shared experience of spectatorship of a live performance of random things in the street. From line 3 to line 141, the text is a confusing parade of goods in shop windows, promotional claims, and advertising on billboards:

*Avviso importante alle signore!*  
*La beltà del viso,*  
*seno d'avorio*  
*pelle di velluto.*  
*Grandi tumulti a Montecitorio.*  
*Il presidente pronunciò fiere parole,*  
*tumulto a sinistra, tumulto a destra.*  
*Il gran Sultano di Turchia aspetta.*  
*La pasticca del Re Sole.*  
*Si getta dalla finestra per amore.*  
*Insuperabile sapone alla violetta.*  
*Orologeria di precisione.*  
93  
*Lotteria del milione. (TTP 295)<sup>194</sup>*

Things invade the relational space, becoming the only tangible grip in a fast moving world; they have names or can be easily determined, whereas the couple remains in shadow throughout the entire poem. While things speak on their behalf, the only words that the two people exchange are the initial invitation to go for a walk (“– Andiamo? – Andiamo pure.” [– Shall we go? – Sure, let’s go.]) and a final request to go back, modulated on the same standard formulas (“Torniamo? – Torniamo pure.” [– Shall we go back? – Let’s go back.]) (TTP 295, 297). Palazzeschi’s walk through a path of invading things counterbalances the enthusiastic

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<sup>194</sup> Important announcement for the ladies! / The beauty of the face, / Ivory breast / velvety skin. / Great tumults at Montecitorio. / The president pronounced proud words, / tumult to the left, tumult to the right. / The Great Sultan of Turkey is waiting. / The Re Sole cough drops / Throws himself from the window for love. / Incomparable violet soap. / Precision clock-making. / 93 / Lottery of the million.

representation of objects seen in the street and elected by Boccioni as new sources of inspiration: “Le affiches gialle, rosse, verdi, le grandi lettere nere bianche e bleu, le insegne sfacciate e grottesche dei negozi, dei bazar, delle ‘LIQUIDAZIONI’...” [The yellow, red, green *affiches*, the big black white and blue letters, the insolent and grotesque signs of shops, bazars, “LIQUIDATION”...] (*Scritti editi e inediti* 88-89).

Nevertheless, even the more technological fringe of Futurism warns against mistaking the bourgeois *doxa* regarding modern things with the radical change that the movement fosters through its renovating machines. In this respect, Marinetti mocks the attitude of bourgeois people who cultivate the illusion of being “modern” by following the latest market trends and buying new appliances to replace the old-fashioned Empire-style furniture:

Ecco un Parigino ricchissimo. Egli è moderno, tutto quello che c'è di più moderno. Circola soltanto in automobile, fa copiare le sue lettere con la macchina da scrivere, ha un cameriere inglese, va a vedere tutte le sfide di boxe, dà del voi a sua moglie, giuoca al bridge, ecc. Andate a casa sua: casa nuova, con calorifero, ascensore, luce elettrica, telefono.... Evidentemente, questo borghese, non disprezza il progresso. Va col suo tempo: fra poco, si recherà al suo circolo in aeroplano e comunicherà col suo maggiordomo mediante il telegrafo senza fili.... (*PF* 38)<sup>195</sup>

Even though Marinetti's rich Parisian can escape the sentiment of “borghesia rattrappita / che s'avvolge in pellicce che non potrà pagare” [shrunk bourgeoisie / wrapping itself in fur coats that he cannot afford], which Cavacchioli presents in “Sia maledetta la luna” [Cursed the moon] (*PF* 210), he is still unable to see beyond the functionality or symbolic social distinction that the technology provides. The Parisian “modern man” pretends to know objects from a logical finalism, while actually being passively subjected to them. Challenging the bourgeois notion of

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<sup>195</sup> Here a very rich Parisian. He is modern, all that is modern. Goes around only by car, makes copies of his letter only by typewriter, has an English servant, goes to see all the boxing matches, addresses his wife with “you”, plays bridge, etc. You go to his house: new house, with heating system, elevator, electrical light, telephone...Evidently, this bourgeois man does not despair of progress. He goes along with his time: soon, he will go around by plane and will communicate with his butler through wireless telegraph...

modern commodities, the two movements accept their “active” dependency on materiality and treat things as relational media towards a new form of *aletheia*, understood as a process of disclosure and opening of other possible meanings, truths, and cognitive universes.

Adopting his idiosyncratic expressionist stile, Buzzi opens the poem “Al porto di Amburgo” [At the port of Hamburg] by declaring his need to inject the electric lymph of life into his veins. The frenzied activity of the port, stressed by a dogged series of verbs—“appaiono, arrivano, sostano, partono, dileguano” [appear, arrive, stop, leave, disappear] (PF 166)—becomes a metaphor of vital energy flowing through the unstoppable traffic of goods. In their living materiality, these loaded and unloaded things carry a melting pot of stories, smells, music, passions, hopes, and death from the entire world. In this place of junction and dispersion, the poetic persona elaborates its longing to fill his soul through an unending process of direct assimilation:

*cantieri e docks ho l'anima transoceanica  
che vi comprende; tutti i miei nervi  
non sono di minugia di lira  
si bene del fil di ferro  
che trasporta i milioni di volts a distanza. (PF 169)<sup>196</sup>*

Knowledge of the world passes through a relational osmosis and empathic comprehension of things, which is unattainable if mediated by human communication. While the rich multitude of objects—sugar, coffee, carracks, wool, leather, saltpeter, machines, and knickknacks—passes in front of him, the poetic persona remains immobile, absorbing the whole in his inner “phosphoric cosmos.” The port of Hamburg, heart of everything, rises as a space of cognition, in which the ego finds “i frastuoni degli altri Mondi / che soli i Poeti ascoltano, soli tra

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<sup>196</sup> shipyards and docks I have the transoceanic soul / that comprehends you all; all my nerves / are not made of lyre catgut / but rather of wire / that transports millions of volts at a distance.



gli umani” [the uproars of other Worlds / that only the Poets hear, the only ones among humans] (PF 169).

Buzzi’s topological reference to new cognitive docks recalls a motif that was quite popular in Mystic intellectual circles, at the *fin de siècle* and in the following decade: the myth of the isle of Thule. According to legend, the sea, as a symbolic path towards the Unknown, preserved a mysterious island named Thule in the thick fog of the North.<sup>197</sup> This isle, to which Gozzano hints in “La più bella” [The most beautiful] when referring to the “non-trovata” [not-found] fabulous land, is an apt metaphor for Crepuscular and Futurist things. Thule was believed to be the final reachable piece of land before losing cognition and falling into a rational darkness; similarly, Crepuscular and Futurist materiality marks the boundary between what is visible but still preserves an unpenetrated mystery.

Moreover, the motif of the isle of Thule was a notion, widely circulated in intellectual circles in Europe and across the Atlantic, demonstrating partially unexplored connections between Italian movements and parallel foreign cultural phenomena. The image of the mysterious island appears, for instance, in the introduction to a 1905 English translation of Maeterlinck’s *The Treasure of the Humble*, a cult book among the Crepuscular groups. The collection of mystical essays resembles a “philosophical Ultima Thule”, a “borderland of human thought and far across the Arctic circle of the spirit”, a place where “those who arrive without having trained their minds to new perceptions” will only find the dark and cold (x). In his essays, Maeterlinck proposes an approach to quotidian things as if they were in Thule, where “the intelligence, the reason, will not suffice of themselves” (x). This collection by the Belgian poet

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<sup>197</sup> For a more exhaustive treatment of the motif of Thule in Crepuscular literature, see Villa “‘La morte di Tantalo’ nell’‘ultima Thule’.”

was diffused along with Emerson's theories of Transcendentalism, which exerted an influence on the quietism imbedded in Crepuscular "little things." Some passages from Maeterlinck's pages on Emerson illuminate the divine longing that animates even the most passive, humble Crepuscular things. The core thread that carries from American Transcendentalism to French Symbolism is the notion of living in the grace of a transcendental being "whose actions and thoughts only momentarily pierce the envelopment that surrounds us", as well as the recognition that it is not worth abandoning the humble and familiar in search of the extraordinary "because the glacier, the sea, the eternal snows, the palace, the stable, the cheerless hearth of the poor, and the cot of the sick—all are found beneath the same heaven, purified by the same stars, and subjected to the same Infinite powers" (*On Emerson* 36, 45). In different ways, and through very different language, the transcendental bridges of things represent the core of the cognitive search that Crepuscular and Futurist personas conduct, becoming, as Irma Valeria affirms, "beggars" of the unknown answers that materiality enshrines:

Se ci potessimo fermare ad ogni albero, per capire ciò che significano le sue vecchie rughe imbottite di muschio, ad ogni porta, per intuire il mistero ch'essa nasconde, ad ogni filo d'erba eretto e felice, per conoscere i legami invisibili, che irradiano il substrato della terra, ad ogni piuma brillante, per sentirla parlare delle sue ebbrezze ricche d'azzurro, noi certo non saremmo che dei mendicanti, ma dei mendicanti di soavità sconosciute. (76)<sup>198</sup>

Begging for an unknown universe is indeed what moves Crepusculars and Futurists towards a "still-life world" that promises a journey towards the Unknown while providing a tactile presence. For the two movements, materiality is equally close to the quotidian reality and to its ineffable mystery. Moretti captures this dual aspect in a poem about a walk in Florence

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<sup>198</sup> If we could stop at every tree, to understand the meaning of its old wrinkles filled with moss, and at every door, to intuit the mystery it hides, and at every erect and happy blade of grass, to know the invisible ties that irradiate beneath the earth, and at every shiny feather, to hear it speak of its ecstasy rich with azure, we would be nothing but beggars of course, but beggars of an unknown suaveness. (*F* 470)

with Palazzeschi, set in an unrecoverable, dreamed past. The poet envisions a joy “made of things”—resurrected ephemeral memories—that suddenly fade away, infusing its quotidian “reality” into poetry:

*D'una felicità fatta di cose  
randage, di brevi atti di passanti,  
di ritornelli facili, di pose  
vecchie di innamorati interessanti;*

*d'una felicità colta tra il verde  
d'un giardinetto pubblico nell'ora  
in cui la vita a poco a poco perde  
il suo valore di cosa e si scolora. (“A Firenze con Palazzeschi”, TLP 125)<sup>199</sup>*

The dual aspect of thingness as materiality and spiritual search is a key element in the later development of Futurism, after its heroic phase. In 1921, Futurism re-elaborated its initial material vocation for violent dynamism in the manifesto of Tactilism, which responded to a need to perfect human spiritual communication through a potentiated sense of touch. As Marinetti affirms, relating an anecdote in the manifesto, his first “tavola tattile” [tactile table] was a little boat, but a boat able to bring the human spirit “verso paraggi sconosciuti” [to unknown shores] (*TIF* 58, *F* 265).

In rethinking the role of materiality, the pioneering positions of Crepuscularism rely on the realization that, even in their most passive still-life poses, things are not passive receptacles and are important “precisely because we do not ‘see’ them” (Miller 5). Projecting its feeble poetic light on things, which lay somewhere between useless or forgotten, Crepuscularism offers a true reflection on the intriguing self-evidence of materiality. Translating the metaphor of things to the literary field, unnamed dormant objects symbolize the stagnating poetic status quo. Yet,

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<sup>199</sup> A happiness made out of stray / things, of quick actions of pedestrians, / of easy refrains, of old / poses of interesting lovers; // A happiness grasped through the green / of a public garden at the time / when life little by little loses / its value as a thing and fades. (“In Florence with Palazzeschi”)

when those useless objects sitting in the room suddenly acquire a name, “making” or invading poetry, they immediately are perceived as disturbing and unacceptable. The revolutionary potential of Crepuscular little things relies on activating a mechanism of material consciousness in the reader, anticipating the invisible potential and agency of things in modern life, far before the birth of virtual intelligence or the post-human spring of new materialism. Overcoming the realistic representation of things and yet not denying it, Crepuscularism and Futurism propose two approaches to the question of the object, whose outcome Guido Oldani incisively summarized:

*Crepuscularismo*—more than an actual confrontation—represented for Futurism a banana peel. Probably *Crepuscularismo* will leave a trace, for example of intimism, that will not perhaps die; but the love for the crackling objects of the futurists will install itself in our little human hearts forever. There remains of *Crepuscularismo* also the copious resource of irony, successively left almost totally unattended, today finally capable of the only fully unyielding revolutionary force. (301)

In this comparison, Crepuscularism and Futurism trade places, insomuch that forgotten, little things impart a lesson of irony to triumphant and effervescent machines, which are made dustier and more unusable museum pieces and knickknacks of questionable taste via accelerating technology. Although with opposing messages, both movements move towards a Realism that we could call “terminal”, to borrow Oldani’s label. Avant-Garde “Realism” is terminal, as both Crepuscularism and Futurism objects never exhaust their material shells; instead, they are a reservoir for continuous interrelation, embodying the dimension of “a given which is also a giving” (De Certeau 44). Materiality becomes the space where the most obvious reality leads “from the *obvious* to the *abvius*” (Bodei 35), from everyday routine to beyond the human norm, overthrowing traditional anthropocentric common sense, to hint at new possible ways to be in the world.

## Chapter Five

### Exploring New Egos: Self-Knowledge as Bio-social Investigation

E se fosse vero?  
Se veramente noi non fossimo il Re dell'Universo come la nostra religione ci promette?  
Se veramente il verme, il cane, l'uomo non fossero che gradazioni varie  
dello spirito, della stessa forza immanente che palpita ovunque,  
esitando incerta verso una mèta che ignoriamo  
e che non è forse se non la pace dell'Increato?  
(Gozzano, *Verso la cuna del mondo* 263)<sup>200</sup>

#### 5.1 Introduction

The Crepuscular and Futurist rejection of knowledge as a fixed concept involves a 360-degree process of inquiry that deeply affects the egos shaped by the two movements. Futurism and Crepuscularism overcome the centripetal model of feeling and thinking subjects to embrace the centrifugal paradigm of *open subjects* projecting outwards in search of new bio-social dimensions. In their redefinition of the ego, the body defines a crucial and polyhedral perceptive space, simultaneously the locus of inner life, vegetative matter, and encounter with other worlds.

This chapter examines the development of this reconstruction of the ego, illustrating how Crepuscular and Futurist personas embody, perceive, and experience their corporeal and psychological subjectivity. Challenging the traditional “flesh and soul” paradigm, Crepuscularism and Futurism experiment with fictional genetic anthropotechnic approaches,

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<sup>200</sup> What if this were true? If we were truly not the master of creation, as our religion promises? If indeed the worm, the dog, and man are nothing but different gradations of the spirit, of the same immanent force that pulsates everywhere, hesitantly moving toward an unpredictable goal of which we are ignorant and that is perhaps nothing more than the peace of the Uncreated? (*Journey* 99)

creating peculiar “heroes” that cast doubts on the notion of being human and define alternative models to modern bourgeois humanity. As it is typical of the Avant-Garde, this discourse on the bodily ego falls into a self-contradictory dichotomy: to emphasize the most material aspects of the body while searching for immateriality and dispersion via cosmic forces. This conflicting topic is illustrated through the analysis of three fundamental inquiries: how Crepuscularism and Futurism picture the psychosomatic status of their characters, how they represent gender identity, and what types of social roles Crepuscular and Futurist personas perform in bourgeois society.

## **5.2 Overcoming the “Flesh and Soul” Individual: Towards New Modes of the Ego**

The characterization of nineteenth-century Italian fictional personas, from historical and bildungsroman novels to Decadent poetry, relies on a tacit agreement: The reader, based on a process of identification, is willing to develop an antithetic or sympathetic relationship with the characters. This automatic reader response of envisioning a character as a corporeal entity endowed with physical and psychological traits was imbedded in the horizon of expectations of the early twentieth-century bourgeois public. Crepuscular and Futurist works dramatically erode this model, showing that the nineteenth-century literary ego is nothing more than a meaningless, silly totem. The emblem of this ego-simulacrum can be found in Palazzeschi’s parrot, a silent, enchanted bird that roosts on a window, watching people passing by for centuries, becoming a nonsensical attraction:

*Su quella finestra egli sta da cent’anni  
guardando passare la gente.  
Non parla e non canta.  
La gente passando si ferma a guardarlo,  
si ferma parlando fischiando cantando,*

*ei guarda tacendo. ("Il pappagallo", TTP 13)<sup>201</sup>*

In response to this senseless, stuffed animal, Crepuscularism and Futurism introduce new disorienting bio-dimensions that reexamine the boundaries of the ego and its corporeal space. This revolution in characterization offers an early twentieth-century view into topics that are still subject to debate, such as to what extent personal identity is derived from biological individuality, and where a dividing line can be traced between the substantial individual ("person") and the functional individual (biological/physiological entity). Crepuscularism and Futurism approach questions of identity, proposing broad and loose notions of persona: a biological entity, individually recognizable, but merged with and connected to an invisible, folding matter. The new concept signals an attack on the imprisonment of the subject within the narrow category of ego, squeezing together a corporal, emotional, and thinking self. In "La pietà" [The pity], Vallini illustrates this criticism through an ironic recollection of the origin of humanity:

*L'uomo era un po' di materia  
che nulla vedeva e sentiva:  
un soffio improvviso l'avviva  
ed eccoti l'Uomo-Miseria:  
s'abbranca —il perché non lo sa—  
a un lembo rotondo d'ignoto,  
e via che parte nel vuoto  
a tutta velocità:  
il tempo di dire: —Son qui—  
senza capire ciò che dice  
e di gridar ch'è infelice...  
poi, zitto. Tutto finì. (UGA 86)<sup>202</sup>*

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<sup>201</sup> On that window he has been for one hundred years / looking at the people passing by. / He does not speak and does not sing. / The people passing by stop to look at him, / stop and speak whistle sing, / he looks on in silence. ("The parrot")

<sup>202</sup> Man was a little bit of matter / that saw nor felt nothing: / a sudden breath vivifies him / and here you have Man-Misery: / he clings —doesn't know why— / to a round hem of unknown, / and there he goes in the void / at great speed: / the time of saying: —I'm here— / without understanding what he's saying / and of screaming that he's unhappy... / then, silent. Everything ended.

Both movements break with the rationalist and empiricist tradition of considering a human being as a perceiving and thinking animal equipped with moral agency. As Maria Ginanni declares; yes, we talk about humanity all the times, but: “Chi conosce le radici del nostro senso di umanità?” [Who knows the roots of our sense of humanity?] (*Il poema dello spazio* 31). Conversely, in their ontological and epistemological redefinitions, the Avant-Garde highlights undiscovered sides of humanity, such as the fluid condition of the mutant. Rather than being one, the subject is a mobile, multiplying principle, constantly evolving, transforming itself into something different, and even completely *de-subjectifying*. Being an “I” is actually impossible, as the body is the container of clandestine others sharing the same corporal and inner experience:

C'è sempre dentro di noi un estraneo che si muove ed agita per proprio conto, sentiamo il tormento del nostro “io” sottoposto alle mosse sbilenche e rovescianti di “un altro.” (Ginanni, *Il poema dello spazio* 69)<sup>203</sup>

This position seems to echo a letter from Gozzano to Giulio Frenzi, in which the poet, commenting on the gradually consumption of his body, due to tuberculosis, declares that this process has inspired him with a new type of poetry —the poetry of the one who “si sente svanire a poco a poco, serenamente, e sente il suo io diventare *gli altri*.” [feels to vanish little by little, peacefully, and feels his “I” becoming *the others*] (*Poesie e prose* 1255). The idea of the body as the pure potential of infinite becoming finds its spokesman in Prince Zarlino, the voice of madness for the sake of madness, in *Il codice di Perelà* by Palazzeschi. The fool-prince has overcome the idea of being something for good, to live in a *hic et nunc*, yet endless, process of

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<sup>203</sup> There is always, inside us, a stranger who moves and agitates on his own; we feel the torment of our “I” subjected to the lopsided and overthrowing moves of “another.”



self-transformation; he continuously changes from human to nonhuman identities, laying his naked body bare, *being and becoming* in the moment:

Mi piace di spogliarmi nudo innanzi a tutti, poi sono re, sono fabbro, sono ragno, sono tavola, sono il sole, sono la luna sono tutto quello che mi fa piacere. Una notte io fui cometa [...] e mi sentii veramente cometa, io non fui più uomo, nulla, io fui astro. [...] Raccolsi tanto di sensazioni che sono nella mia mente come un poema che si intitola: La Cometa. (*Il codice di Perelà* 264-65)<sup>204</sup>

For Zarlino, the body is nothing more than modeling clay, which can be continuously molded into new entities. Fostering the concept of the body as “potentially everything”, the Prince’s bold statement seems incompatible with the definition of bodily consciousness as a set of properties that allow an individual to have subjective awareness about the surroundings, and self-reflecting awareness about self-consciousness (Wilson 112). Zarlino, indeed, nullifies any idea of surroundings or boundaries, achieving a completely absorbing and metamorphic corporeal experience. If Palazzeschi’s prince represents the extreme rejection of the traditional “flesh and soul” individual, it is possible to affirm that both Crepuscularism and Futurism move towards the exploration of symbiotic forms of participative being. Negating human limits, both movements anticipate Bataille’s aphoristic affirmation that: “man is only man: to be nothing but man, not to emerge from this—is suffocation, burdensome ignorance, the intolerable” (35).

Crepuscularism and Futurism are fascinated with the possibility of experiencing—in Deleuzian terms—the “transcendental empiricism” of the body-living-thing, which is connected and open to the vibrating potential of becoming. Manipulating the traditional model of persona, the two Avant-Gardes shape more suitable spaces for an ego that can no longer be contained within the asphyxiating space of its body and soul. As Gozzano states in the poem “Ah! Difettivi

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<sup>204</sup> I like to get undressed until bare naked, in front of everybody, then I am king, I am blacksmith, I am spider, I am table, I am the sun, I am the moon, I am everything that pleases me. One night I was a comet [...] and I felt to really be a comet, I was no longer a man, not at all, I was a celestial body [...] I collected so many sensations that are stored in my mind as a poem entitled: The Comet.

sillogismi!” [Ah! Defective syllogisms]: “Come pensare senz’abbrividire / Tutta l’eternità chiusa nell’io / in questo angusto carcere terreno? [How to think without shivering / all eternity closes within the I / in this narrow terrestrial prison?] (TP 319). Escaping this eternal imprisonment implies acknowledging the faulty syllogism that blindly supports the indefinable concept of the ego and its corporeal cage:

*Ohimè! L’essenza che rivibra in noi  
non può per intelletto essere compresa  
da poi che l’io solo con se stesso,  
soggetto, oggetto della conoscenza,  
come uno specchio vano si moltiplica  
inutilmente ed infinitamente  
e nel riflesso è prigioniero il raggio che l’occhio non discerne. (TP 320)<sup>205</sup>*

The same evasion of the body reoccurs in the Futurist group of the *Pattuglia Azzurra*, in this passage by Irma Valeria, which recalls a similar desire for the soul to set itself free by consuming and dissolving the body, in *Morbidezze in agguato* [Softnesses in ambush]:

*Io voglio questo: questa diabolica logica cosa, che tutti chiameranno assurdità o pazzia; che la mia stessa anima roda lentamente, segretamente, con tragica volontà, i ferri della sua arrugginita prigione, ed evada in silenzio nei liberissimi spazi interstellari, preparati dalla sua attesa magnetica. (61)<sup>206</sup>*

These positions find an earlier model in Corazzini’s rejection of the traditional notion of human life as distinct from inorganic matter. Perceiving the ego as an object, the spokesman of Roman Crepuscularism equates the slow death of his body to the decay of things: “E muoio, un poco ogni giorno / Vedi: come le cose.” [And I die, a little bit, each day. / You see: just like things] (“Desolazione del povero poeta sentimentale”, *O* 145, *SE* 35).

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<sup>205</sup> Dear me! The essence that reverberates in us / cannot be understood through the intellect / as the I alone with himself, / subject, object of knowledge, / like a vain mirror multiplies / uselessly and infinitely / and in the reflection the ray that the eye does not discern as prisoner.

<sup>206</sup> I want this: this diabolic logical thing, which everyone will call absurdity or foolishness; that my own soul would erode slowly, secretly, with tragic will, the iron bars of its rusty prison, and evade in silence in the very free interstellar spaces, prepared by its magnetic waiting.

Corazzini borrows a mystical vision of the body that harkens back to medieval forms of mortification of the flesh and corporal penitence, which ambiguously degrade the body while raising it as medium of divinization, through extreme suffering and ecstatic estrangement. Flesh is nothing more than a terrestrial shell of the soul during its earthly martyrdom, waiting for that “bella vita” [beautiful life] after the “chiara morte” [bright death] (“Elegia”, *O* 156). Suspended between being inert like a thing and suffering like a man, Corazzini’s little boy can express the spirituality of his flesh at the limit of being a human sacrifice, treated as an object which can be moved, sold, hit, and even forgotten:

*Questa notte ho dormito con le mani in croce.  
Mi sembrò di essere un piccolo e dolce fanciullo  
dimenticato da tutti gli umani,  
povera tenera preda del primo venuto;  
e desiderai di essere venduto  
di essere battuto (O 145)<sup>207</sup>*

A similar search for life that barely loses its vital qualities and reaches a mysterious, divine paralysis of the body shines through the motif of the mirror. This reflecting surface provides another neutral space in which, at an optical level, it is impossible to separate the projected (human) image from the nonhuman facet that reflects it. To live resigned, like a melancholic mirror, is one of the passive, metamorphic statuses of Corazzini’s little boy; a similar image is also present in Govoni’s poetry, in which mirrors “chiudono gli occhi lucidi” [close their crystal clear eyes] (*P* 110) saving memories of their dead reflections on their surfaces. They become the reliquaries of the ephemeral, preserved *in aeternum*.

The fusion of the dynamic glimpse, grasped by the mirror, and the static matter, trapped in its surface, offers the most suitable objective correlative for the Crepuscular ego, conveying

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<sup>207</sup> Tonight I slept with my hands crossed. / It seemed to me that I was a sweet little child / forgotten by everyone, / poor tender prey of whoever might appear; / and I wanted to be sold; / to be beaten (SE133)

immediately the “mobile-immobility” of a subject, frozen in the hybrid status of living within a body while wanting to experience its dissolution into universal matter. This oxymoronic motif springs up vividly in the image of the fetus in Moretti’s “Il ricordo più lontano” [The furthest memory]. The poem portrays the developing body as an unknown aggregation of cells and an unconscious, forming ego:

*Io mi formavo senza il mio selvaggio  
impeto, non sapendo esser l'ignoto  
atteso che faceva lento viaggio  
per giungere alla sua meta nel vuoto;*

*io mi formavo senza una parola  
della mia stessa arcana volontà,  
ero come la docile bestiola  
che nulla teme e nulla cerca e sa. (TLP 103-104)<sup>208</sup>*

In Crepuscular terms, the status of fetal life, with its peculiar indistinctiveness and participative being, is a cognitive and existential privilege, which stops with the emergence from the “carne che dolera” [flesh in pain] (104). The fetus is the point at which life does not fully know individuality and can experience the dimension of existence inside “the other” without being separated from it. Adopting Agamben’s distinction between *bios*, political life, and *zoē*, “bare life”, it is possible to picture the Crepuscular fetal body experiencing *zoē* as the transitional, corporeal cognition of “the simple fact of living common to all living beings” (*Homo Sacer* 1). Conversely, the Futurist body expresses an extreme attempt at mending the tear between political and instinctual life by injecting techno-animalistic *zōē* into the intellectual and artistic domain. In this respect, *Mafarka il futurista* can be read as the Futurist manifesto on genetic experimentation. From a literary perspective, the text itself is difficult to label, due to its

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<sup>208</sup> I was developing without my savage / impetus, not knowing to be the waited / unknown that was making a slow journey / to reach his destination in the void;/I was developing without a word / Of my own arcane will, / I was like a docile beast / that nothing fears and nothing searches for and knows.

hybridization of the genre and style of classic epos, historical novel, and fantastic dystopia.

*Mafarka ilfuturista* stands out as a campy novel, whose quintessential structural feature resides in a “love for the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (Sontang 275). Through a melting pot of the techno-sublime, Marinetti reinvents the bourgeois literary and human body, causing “a technological shock against the old syntax of the bourgeois subject, its culture, experience, and sense” (Foster 121). In its primary plot, the novel tells the story of a new Doctor Frankenstein, the king Mafarka, who brings to life a unique crossbreed between an anthropomorphic flying creature and a machine in his secret genetic laboratory. Mafarka’s son, Gazurmah, exemplifies an anthropotecnic experiment, from which a new type of humankind is born:

Dopo il regno animale, ecco iniziarsi il regno meccanico. Con la conoscenza e l’amicizia della materia, della quale gli scienziati non possono conoscere che le reazioni fisico-chimiche, noi prepariamo la creazione dell’**uomo meccanico dalle parti cambiabili**. Noi lo libereremo dall’idea della morte, e quindi dalla morte stessa, suprema definizione dell’intelligenza logica. (“Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista”, *TIF* 54)<sup>209</sup>

The dream of the Futurist proto-cyborg assimilates two antipodes, primal ferocity and advanced technology, creating a mutual exchange of energies. Only through identification with an engine can man combine intuition and instinct with “disciplina metallica” [metallic discipline] (*TIF* 299), adding animal force to the mechanical perfection and universalism of the machine. Joining the human and the mechanical, Futurism fills the abyss that Nietzsche mentions in his definition of man as “a rope fastened between animal and overman—rope over an abyss” (*Thus spoke Zarathustra* 7). To cross this chasm, the Futurist Avant-Garde envisions a technological chimera that rises as the symbol of prosthetic empowerment—a fundamental aspect in

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<sup>209</sup> After the animal kingdom, here behold the beginning of the reign of the machine. Through growing familiarity and friendship with matter, which scientists can know only in its physical and chemical reactions, we are preparing the creation of the **mechanical man with changeable parts**. We will liberate man from the idea of death, and hence from death itself, the supreme definition of the logical mind. (*F* 125)

Marinetti's reinvention of the human body. The Futurist (over)man-machine is a post-human artifact assembled in a modern Hephestian forge, as Marinetti illustrates, describing himself as the fusion between the animal masculinity of the aviator and the mechanical force of the plane: "Son fuso con il mio monoplano, / sono il trapano enorme ronzante / che sforza la scorza pietrificata della notte" [I am fused with my monoplane / I am the enormous buzzing drill / that forces the petrified zest of the night] ("Volando sul nuovo cuore dell'Italia", *PF* 359).

Beyond Marinetti's "genetic experimentation," the future of humankind pictured by Futurism stands out for its artificially emphasized body language, which acquires ironic nuances. Stressing the ludic side of a fantasized theatrical world, Fortunato Depero turns the theme of mechanical humanity into a robotic circus of identical dancing marionettes. For the artist, the highest expression of art is the creation of "l'essere vivente artificiale" [the artificial living being], which is indeed "la più avanzata scoperta umana" [the most advanced human discovery]:

CONGEGNO GRANDIOSAMENTE GENIALE VIVENTE NELLO SPAZIO VITALISSIMA FUSIONE  
ARTE + SCIENZA  
Pirotecnica varia improvvisa trucchi meccanici fisici chimici RUMOREGGIATORI ESSERI  
AUTOMATICAMENTE GRIIDANTI DANZANTI COMICAMENTE TRASFORMANTISI (58) <sup>210</sup>

Futurism tears the nineteenth-century notion of the unique "flesh and soul" subject to pieces, envisioning the Futurist "uomo dalle radici tagliate" [man of cut roots] (*TIF* 304), who is able to adapt to the bio-rhythm of speed. This perspective entails a relation of inter-corporeality between human and nonhuman *bodies*, which abandons the rigidity of their boundaries to discover new, fluid directions, as the "Manifesto of Futurist Painters" states:

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<sup>210</sup> GRANDIOUSLY BRILLIANT DEVICE LIVING IN THE SPACE VERY VITAL FUSION

ART+SCIENCE

Various sudden Pyrothecnics physical chemical mechanic tricks NOISEMAKER BEING SCREEEMING  
AUTOMATICALLY FUNNY DANCING TRANSFORMING.

I nostri corpi entrano nei divani su cui ci sediamo, e i divani entrano in noi, così come il tram che passa entra nelle case, le quali alla lor volta si scaraventano sul tram e con esso si amalgamano. (*MDF* 31)<sup>211</sup>

Futurist poetic and figurative language proposes a self-regenerating mobile ego that disassembles and reassembles itself in a state of self-generating dynamism—namely, “l’io integrale cantato, dipinto, scolpito indefinitamente nel suo perpetuo divenire” [The whole “I” sung, painted, and sculpted indefinitely in perpetual becoming] (*TIF* 305, *F* 95). Dismantling the unity of the body to immortalize speed is a process that Maria Ginanni interiorizes in her lyric prose. Through a combination of Futurist techno-language, corporeal images, and spiritual references, the female author of *L’Italia Futurista* describes the gap between the “corsa-lomotiva” [run-locomotive] of her soul, launched towards the infinite, and her own body, anchored to earth (*Montagne trasparenti* 52). She imagines detaching her head and disassembling her limbs via the restless activity of her brain: “Stanotte la mia testa staccatasi dal mio corpo è restata per lunghe ore sul mio cuore agglomerando con le sue vertigini di pensiero universi innumerevoli.” [Tonight my head, detached from my body, remained for long hours on my heart, agglomerating countless universes with its vertigos of thought] (53).

Ginanni sees her body as an “utensile rimasto quasi invariato” [a tool that barely changed] through all ages and societies that must be cut into pieces and reassembled in order to become more functional (*Sica* 342). This progressive vivisection reaches the point, in *Il poema dello spazio*, of reducing the body to a living atom that gives its pulse to the vibrant totality of the universe (24). Ginanni also envisions corporeal dissolution into a pure moving transparency; from being impalpable powder, the body fully vaporizes: “Il mio corpo si è totalmente

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<sup>211</sup> Our bodies penetrate the sofas upon which we sit, and the sofas penetrate our bodies, just as the tram rushes into the houses which it passes, and in their turn the houses throw themselves upon the tram and are merged with it. (*F* 65).

trasformato in respiro” [My body has totally turned into breath] (*Montagne trasparenti* 115). Her statement recalls Corazzini’s letter to Giuseppe Caruso, in which the Roman poet affirms: “Io credo di essere divenuto anima” [I believe I have become soul] (*O* 292). The idea of dematerializing the ego while keeping the impalpable trace of its bodily essence finds another example in Palazzeschi’s man of smoke:

– Fui ammassato e composto da quella spira di fumo, cellula per cellula, come le pietre di un edificio? In maniera che tutto il prodotto di quel fuoco fosse usato tutto per la mia costruzione... (*Il codice di Perelà* 148)<sup>212</sup>

Perelà is a dashed, divine incarnation, gravitationally incompatible with terrestrial life. Yet, he is still something; he is at least smoke. The ultimate step in the decomposition of the flesh-and-soul ego is its translation into a numerical formula. The I can simply be equated to zero; this is what Alfio Beretta’s *Autoequazione* proves. Beretta’s “logical hall of mirrors”, as Jeffrey Schnapp defines it, dematerializes the human persona through mathematical language, demonstrating that “the square root of the square root of I whose kinetic energy is multiplied thanks to an erotic triangle involving a *him* on the bottom of a *her* on top equivalent to zero... is zero” (*The Statistical Sublime* 107). Beretta’s equation does not simply exhaust itself in its logical inconsistency; by the use of invalidating mathematical language to mock any rational explanation of the ego, it also nullifies any Positivist attempt to formalize the self. Under the pretense of calculating the human being through a reassuring equation that proves to be nothing but a joke, Beretta provides a playful answer to Moretti’s question “Who are you? Who am I?” which echoes unresolved:

[...] *chi sei?*  
....

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<sup>212</sup> – Was I amassed and composed by that spiral of smoke, cell after cell, like the stones of a building? So that all the product of that fire was used entirely for my construction... (Perelà’s code)



*ma quando ascolto il suono  
tristissimo al cuore mio  
solo e tremante anch'io,  
dico e ridico: chi sono? (TLP 25)<sup>213</sup>*

Casting doubt on the possibility of defining the ego within a unique body and soul, Crepuscularism and Futurism find the I in its continuous metamorphosis and dissolving contamination with nonhuman matter. Both movements open the way for the development of an entropic poetry that cannot be in charge of universal formulas, but can universalize humans in matter, reaching an ideal human-nonhuman interpenetration — in Vallini's words: “esser l'uomo scomposto nella materia; / non essere più l'universo / nell'universo, ma un fiato / imponderabile, un atomo / labile in aria disperso” [to be the man disassembled in matter / not to be the universe, / in the universe, but a weightless / breath, a labile / atom dispersed in the air] (“Lo scoglio”, *UGA* 72).

### **5.3 Being a Sick, Deformed, and Masked Body**

The Crepuscular and Futurist propositions of anti-traditional human dimensions provide the basis for new bodily aesthetics. Having demolished the cult of canonized beauty, both movements exhibit a disregard for harmonic bodies, as if they were nothing more than meaningless simulacra from the past, like Gozzano's anachronistic statues of gods and heroes on the façade of Villa Amarena or Marinetti's static Victories of Samothrace. Penetrating and sacking the sanctuary of the perfect body acknowledges a human side that art has tried to conceal behind beauty, reaching the limit of aestheticizing bodily decay. Crepuscularism and Futurism

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<sup>213</sup> [...] who are you? / .... / but when I listen to the sound / very sad to my heart / lonely and trembling / I say and resay too: who am I?

develop a magnetic attraction to abnormal corporeality in all its shades—malady, physical deformity, mutilation, and over-consumption of the body.

It could be said that Crepuscularism is obsessed with sick bodies; this position is strengthened by Moretti's shameless admission about the centrality of malady as a unifying motif for both the sick and healthy members of the group: "Confessiamolo che siamo stati tutti malati, dolcissimamente malati, malati, come si conviene, di *non si sa bene che cosa*." [Let's confess that we were all sick, very sweetly sick, sick, conveniently sick, from what one does not really know] (*Via Laura* 8).

A similar position on the poetic and existential value of malady appears in a line by Vallini that addresses a peculiar type of modern disease, the "tubercolosi cronica del sentimento" [chronic tuberculosis of sentiment] ("L'amore", *UGA* 84). This twentieth-century plague becomes a fundamental tool of self-awareness, as well as an attack against a social body that pretends to be healthy, while being deeply affected by the malady of modern progress. Sickness rises as the sole possible surrogate for a collective subjectivity that the Crepuscular poetic personas embody and make visible through the experience of disease. Yet, in this dystopian world, malady and suffering potentiates the body while consuming it, recalling archaic rituals that once again challenge the paradigms of modernity. In ancient shamanic cultures, suffering is the primary tool in testing the power of the shaman; during his initiation and afterwards, he accepts bodily pain and consequently gains the status of wise person—the wounded healer. In a similar way, the Crepuscular "wounded" characters are bearers of peculiar forms of physical, mystical knowledge marked on their suffering bodies. Sick bodies acquire the peculiar cognition of those who live at the threshold of terrestrial life and mysterious eternity, where the body experiences a status of corporeal, universal porousness during the eternally rewinding time of a

messianic wait for death. This theme appears in Corazzini's works and private writings, in which sick flesh becomes the frontier land between the spiritual wish to die and the instinct for bodily preservation. In "Toblack", a poem titled after a sanatorium in northern Italy, the infirm people, relegated to this modernized city of Dis, are both besieged by death and still, illogically, dying to survive:

*anche se dal tuo cielo piova, senza  
tregua, dietro i vetri lacrimosi  
tiene i lividi tuoi tubercolosi  
un desiderio di convalescenza (O 124)*<sup>214</sup>

Mimicking the human weakness of Christ at Calvary (Luke 22, 39-46), in his letters Corazzini plays at joining the desire to die ("Io penso ogni giorno a morire" [I think every day about dying] (O 296) with a will to live as the wounded healer—when writing to Palazzeschi, he admits: "Se resisterò ti dirò quello che sto soffrendo. [...] Perché, non vorrei morire, ancora..." [If I resist, I will tell you what I am suffering [...] Because, I would not want to die, yet...] (O 299). This conflicted status returns in Gozzano's writing. In "Alle soglie", the poetic I addresses his naughty heart, imprisoned inside a sick body, laughing at the therapeutic persistence of the doctors who deprive him of any remaining pleasure: no more smoking, nor women, nor writing in the dead of night. Hence, the poetic I wonders what the purpose of all these cures is, besides paying the medical bills for having his body violated, as he makes vividly clear in these lines that describe the invasive X-ray screening (for the first time in poetry):

*Un fluido investe il torace, frugando il men peggio e il peggiore,  
trascorre, e senza dolore disegna su sfondo di braccia  
e l'ossa e gli organi grammi, al modo che un lampo nel fosco  
disegna il profilo d'un bosco, con minimi intrichi dei rami. (TP 158)*<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> even if it rains from your sky, without / break, behind the tearful glasses / a desire for convalescence, / keeps your livid tuberculars.

In Crepuscular poetry, self-perception is often achieved through a form of bodily suffering or violation; the I recognizes his own body-in-pain, because s/he embodies the perception of occupying (and thus *being*) a space under siege. The theme of bodily knowledge as the automatic response to a form of violence migrates from Crepuscularism to Futurism, becoming, for instance, the *leitmotif* of the chapter “Il the” [The tea] in *Il codice di Perelà*. In this section, the man of smoke meets the ladies of the court for a tea, and during the meeting each woman tells him a private story. Corporal abuse and sexual nonconformity constitute the common thread of this series of *mise en abyme*—the countess Cloe is a nymphomaniac, donna Giacomina has been repudiated due to a deformity of her feminine organs, countess Rosa must observe her marital duties after being forced to leave a convent, baroness Gelasia has to spend her youth having sex with her old and repulsive husband, princess Bianca causes the death of her sick beloved during her only sexual encounter with him, and, finally, the violinist of the court hints at her lesbian liaison with an actress. Interpreted in Foucauldian terms, this grotesque, rakish harem of “respectable ladies” shows the actual proliferation of the discourse about sex, under the guise of a repression (*The History of Sexuality* 12). Channeling their desire through restrictions, the women turn sexual taboos into perverse voyeurism of their profane “confessions of the flesh” to the improvised confessor Perelà. Pretending to carefully avoid the supposed prohibition regarding “healthy” bodily urges, the group’s interests diverge in an *ars erotica* of sexual pathologies and *mirabilia*, narrated in a feuilleton style, as in this description by countess Carmen:

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<sup>215</sup> Through my thorax a fluid unrolls, through the less malign and the malign, / without sorrow it starts to design on a background of hot glowing coals / all the pitiful organs, the bones, lightning across a dark night / outlining a forest with tight tiny branches and twigs overgrown. (TM 45)

Un'aspettativa bestiale, feroce, di dieci anni, una lacerazione lunga, interminabile, occulta di tutto il mio spirito, che si chiuse all'ultimo grido di dolore alla lacerazione della mia carne, con disgusto supremo di tutti i miei sensi. (*Il codice di Perelà* 180)<sup>216</sup>

The motif of the abnormal body becomes a reflection on the re-appropriation of identity in *Ventre di donna* [Woman womb] by Enif Robert. In a combination of diary and epistolary style, the female writer tells the psychosomatic drama of a woman who suffers from an unknown disease that has affected her womb, requiring invasive medical procedures. The novel pictures the female body as tortured flesh, surgically martyred to attain a new symbolic value. The woman's womb is a stigmata for an ideal female body that no longer exists:

Penso che dal mio ventre sia colato tutto quel sangue, formando una pozza smisurata. Laggiù, quelle montagne impallidiscono, come la mia carne sotto il terrore di una nuova incisione (27).<sup>217</sup>

It is only through a painful detachment from a beautiful body, via Marinetti's healing words, that the protagonist acquires a new mutilated bodily identity, conceived as "un'energetica cura di coraggio e verità" [an energetic cure of courage and truth] (Introduction xi); namely the courage to embody the wound of a missing ideal self.

Although the aesthetic of the repulsive was not novel to the literary *Bohème* of the nineteenth century—from French Symbolism to Italian Scapigliatura—for Crepuscularism and Futurism, unsightliness, in a variety of forms, becomes *the* new bodily aesthetic. Martyred flesh, unattractive feminine figures, and even revolting organic residues can be ascribed to a common project of creating the ugly in literature; in Futurist terms: "**Facciamo coraggiosamente 'il brutto' in letteratura**" [We bravely make "the ugly" in literature] ("Manifesto tecnico della

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<sup>216</sup> A bestial, ferocious expectation of ten years, a long, endless, occult laceration of my whole spirit, which closed itself to the last scream of pain for the laceration of my flesh, with supreme repugnance of all my senses. (Perelà's code)

<sup>217</sup> I think that from my womb all that blood dripped, forming an immense puddle. Down there, those mountains turn pale, like my flesh under the terror of a new incision.

letteratura futurista”, *TIF* 53). In *Mystical Crepuscularism*, physical aberration becomes a source of redemption, as the “abjection of self” is turned “into the ultimate proof of humility before God” (Kristeva 14). Embracing this principle and borrowing from hagiographic texts, Corazzini proposes a series of poetic counter-figures that embody a model of divine election achieved through defacement.<sup>218</sup> In his last collection, *Libro per la sera della domenica*, he borrows the figure of the leper from the Gospels to highlight the irrational contiguity between stigma of the flesh and spiritual beatitude. Recalling Auerbach’s typological interpretation of the *Divine Comedy* (*Figura*), it is possible to see in the little boy who cries a prefiguration of the later “piccolo vecchio lebbroso” [little old leper], who discloses the meaning of martyrdom in his revelatory dream:

*Piccolo vecchio lebbroso  
tu sogni, le mani sul ventre,  
nell’ombra della via suburbana  
odorata di gelsomini  
sogni  
che ti hanno incoronato re dei re. (“Elemosina del sonno”, O 161)<sup>219</sup>*

A similar aesthetic subversion that equates bodily abnormality with prodigious knowledge and beatitude appears in the grotesque setting of Corra’s novel *Sam Dunn è morto* [Sam Dunn is dead]. Peppona, the wife of the owner of the hotel Portorosa, is nothing more than an obese idiot:

Essa aveva una grossa faccia da beduina scoppiante di salute, felicissima di essere completamente idiota e portava in giro con beata disinvoltura i suoi ottantaquattro chili di carne salda e sana. (88)<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Although there is not yet a study of Corazzini’s mystical readings and the influences on his writing, primary and secondary sources lead us to believe that the Roman poet had direct knowledge of the Bible, which he regarded as the greatest lyric to exist, as he writes in a letter to Giuseppe Caruso (*O* 292). The author was also familiar with the lives and writings of Saint Frances, Saint Theresa, and Maria de Àgreda.

<sup>219</sup> Little old leper you dream, your hands on your belly, / in the shade of the suburban street / perfumed with jasmine / you dream / hat they crowned you king of the kings. (“Handout of sleep”)

Yet, this gigantic blob of flesh has been gifted with miraculous healing powers in the most deformed part of her monstrous body, her enormous posterior—“la parte più autenticamente *mascolte* della padrona di casa” [the most authentic *mascolt* of the hostess] (88). Her prodigious deformity becomes a hub of happiness and vital occult energies; the guests of the hotel seek to benefit from its thaumaturgic effect, which spreads to become a “frenesia pepponica” [Pepponic frenzy] (75), namely the unstoppable urge to randomly pinch other people’s posteriors:

Bastava sfiorare con la mano quella magica carnosità per sentirsi subito più leggeri e più ottimisti, bastava pizzicarla appena con due dita per guarire da qualunque malessere e non vi era *guigne* che non venisse istantaneamente dissipata da un buon colpo dato con la mano aperta. (89)<sup>221</sup>

The emphasis on the repulsive culminates in the vivisection of a body, which is defunctionalized into scattered parts and organic residues. At a metaphorical level, fluids, drops, and excrements become the raw material to create a new poetic organism, recycling and reassembling what canonized tradition has thrown away. This “matter out of place”, understood as bodily substances that are no longer contained within the body, symbolizes indeed things that are outside the social order (Jansen and Dresen 218). Removing fluids and residuals from the bourgeois forbidden Pandora’s box, Crepuscularism and Futurism once again subvert the socio-cultural apparatus, providing a close-up on the most visceral, uterine, and “material” side of modernity—that dark, primitive side that modern enlightenment sought to erase for good. In Crepuscular poetry, “matter out of place” often takes the disturbing form of the miscarriage. The

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<sup>220</sup> She had the big face of a Bedouin bursting with health; very happy being a complete idiot and she brought around, with blissful confidence, her eighty-four kilos of sound and healthy flesh.

<sup>221</sup> It was sufficient to brush with the hand that magic carnosity to feel immediately lighter and more optimistic, it was sufficient to pinch with just two fingers to heal any malaise; there was no *guigne* that was not instantly dissipated by a good hit given with the open hand.

image of embryonic life that has prematurely fallen to death is a recurring theme in Govoni's poetry and provides the title of one of his collections, *Gli aborti*. In "Alla musa" [To the muse], the poet inserts the perturbing image of the miscarriage in a context of extreme degradation. The muse, a dirty beggar, mocked as a prostitute, has been abandoned with her abortions in the street. The miscarriages symbolize a quasi-life that cannot be denied, becoming a crude metaphor for all the most scandalous, impure, and feral aspects of humanity with which poetry must dirty itself in order to be universally human:

*...anche se la gente se ne scandalizzerà  
tu i tuoi miseri aborti  
non costumi gettarli dentro le latrine  
o rinvolti in un sudicio giornale  
nasconderli nell'immondizie. (P 99)<sup>222</sup>*

Poetry connects with the most repulsive and shameful bodily functions, contaminating its immaculate sanctuary. The organic residues from abortions mark in bloody red the void of a fantastic, modern I who was never born. Govoni's peculiar impersonal style arrives at the extreme, expelling the ego from the poetic uterus, and reducing it to creepy "aborti nelle fiale, / rachitici e verdastrì" [abortions in the phials, / scrawny and greenish] ("Il Palazzo dell'anima" [The Palace of the soul] P 101). The motif of the miscarriage returns in Moretti's "Piccola storia scandalosa" [Little scandalous story]. Through a flashback, the voice of a child tells about his mother's interrupted pregnancy and the shocking discovery of the word "abortito" [aborted], which designated that tiny piece of abandoned life. Yet, many years after that episode, the adult ego catches himself envying the sort of the "piccolo feto nel vasetto trasparente" [little embryo in

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<sup>222</sup> ...even if people will be scandalized / you, your miserable abortions, / are not used to throwing them in the latrines / or wrapped in dirty newspapers / to hiding them in the garbage.



the see-through vial] and its brief, larva-like existence, stopped when it was still possible to be unaware flesh (*Poesie scritte col lapis* 113-14).

A much more sadistic pleasure emerges in Futurist portraits of bodies abandoning their organic functionality and becoming elastic units that live and die within an instant. In this passage from *Zang Tumb Tumb*, Marinetti reconstructs the rapid violence of the Battle of Adrianople, reducing human flesh to undefined martial mush: “**Patatraaaaaak zumb-tumb** obice turco sul ponte turbine polvere-fango-legno-odio-spavento-sangue-carne-mitraglia-visceri” [Patatraaaaaak zumb-tumb Turkish howitzer on the bridge whirl dust-mud-wood-hate-fear-blood-flesh-machine gun-viscera] (*TIF* 739). A stronger fascination with the dismembered body also emerges in the chapter “Il ventre della balena” [The womb of the whale] in *Mafarka il futurista*, which presents a graphic description of torture for the sake of macabre enjoyment. Marinetti pictures the torment that Mafarka inflicts on his enemies to affirm his regal supremacy through their corporal suffering and annihilation. The victims are wrapped and thrown, still alive, into an aquarium to either drown or be immediately devoured by famished sharks, while the king and his guests enjoy the view:

Il più forte dei tre si accaniva contro Gandakatale, a cui addentò il ventre enorme, con tanta violenza che per un momento fu sommerso dall'erompere delle viscere [...]. Aciaca seguì suo padre da vicino. Lo si vide stendersi su un fianco, affondando, con la bocca spalancata e con le gambe inghiottite dal secondo pescecane [...] il crano di Aciaca di ruppe come un uovo contro il cristallo. (*M* 110-11)<sup>223</sup>

Adopting Elaine Scarry's theory, torture acts on Mafarka's victims as an “annihilating negation” (36) in which the presence of pain, accentuated by the suffocating agency of water, monopolizes language to the point of destruction. The language *is* the speechless body torn apart

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<sup>223</sup> The most powerful of the three ripped into Gandakatale, savaging his huge belly so violently that for a moment it was submerged in a stream of intestines [...]. Acacia followed close behind his father. They saw him lying sideways as he dived, his mouth wide open and with his legs swallowed by the second shark [...] Acacia's skull burst open like an egg against the glass. (*MF* 98)

in the aquarium. Breaking the barrier of the skin, torture allows the wounded bodies to be open to the penetration of the external world—the water and the sharks—showing the vulnerability of human life in the overwhelming encounter with its most animalistic, wordless side.

Deformed corpses become the source of self-discovery and confrontation with a repugnant and primal cognitive land. From this perspective, it is possible to read Palazzeschi's degraded Comare Coletta beyond its desecration of the nineteenth-century notion of feminine beauty. Although Coletta is a repugnant, tattered monster, her repulsive body exercises a cognitive magnetism on people:

*Ricurva, sciancata,  
provandosi ancora di reggere alla piroetta,  
s'aggira per fame la vecchia fangosa;  
trascina la logora veste pendente a brandelli,  
le cade a pennecci di capo il capecchio  
fra il lazzo e le risa,  
la rabbia le serra la bocca  
di rughe ormai fossa bavosa. (TTP 439)<sup>224</sup>*

The passers-by cannot help to stop and look at Coletta, assailing her with jokes and insults. Yet, those offenses and maledictions sound like the modern, grotesque actualization of ancient apotropaic rites, which betray a visceral need to acknowledge the hag as a mythical primal goddess. Through her unstoppable and eternal twirling and dancing, that “vecchiaccia d’inferno” [hag from Hell] guides people over the threshold of abjection to keep their puritan, but equally aberrant, bourgeois bodies alive. This tempting, and yet condemning, attraction for degraded, bleeding, or rotten flesh deeply affects the cognitive experience, placing in front of the poetic I an object of knowledge that, as Julia Kristeva explains, is neither an easily namable or

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<sup>224</sup> Round-shouldered, crippled / still trying to hold the pirouette, / begs out of hunger the muddy old lady; / drags around her filthy and shredded loose dress, / her shaggy hair falls in plumes from her head / among mocking and laughing, / the anger tightens her mouth / with wrinkles by now a dribbling ditch.

imaginable *ob-ject*, nor an *ob-jest*, namely “an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire” (10). It is rather an “abject”, something whose knowledge lies outside and beyond the cognitive “rules of the game”, maintaining an unclassifiable and loathsome status of uncanniness. Crepuscularism and Futurism push the representation of the body to the limit of recognition, presenting extreme corporeal statuses—such as the experience of the fetus or of the moribund—in which the subject is immortalized in its confrontation with death and with the fear of falling back into the original pre-linguistic and chaotic stage of the *chora*. Nevertheless, this repulsive flesh exudes a fascinating cognitive allure, exercising a pre-logical power on Crepuscular and Futurist egos. Marking the ultimate borderline experience, which triggers rejection and expulsion, the “abject” provides the I with a unique occasion for self-recognition, acting as the cognitive tool that asserts the ego as a corporal entity, acknowledged from that “border where I am not and which permits me to be” (12). Through the fetus in the vial the plagued skin, the scattered limbs on the battlefield, and the devoured bodies in the aquarium, the characters achieve an understanding of their condition as living bodies burdened by their human skin, but driven by instinct and aspirations that trespass those limits.

This desire to go beyond the boundaries of the human persona ultimately involves the rejection of the univocal correspondence between body and subject, causing a multiplication and camouflage of the I among a crowd of clones. The loss of the Ptolemaic centrality of the ego-subject causes the body to become an anonymous thing that can be infinitely reproduced, as the principle of causality has disappeared (Tellini xx). Under the autobiographical scarecrows that still resist in Corazzini and Gozzano’s works, a kaleidoscopic ego continually reflects iridescent images while its true profile remains mysterious and blurred. The ego is everywhere, dispersed in a series of counter-figures, and yet nowhere to be found. The Crepuscular characters maintain the

flesh and soul model as only fixed roles and ritual masks. Yet, the mask denounces its own presence, revealing the inauthenticity of old models and their body-types. This critique is visible in Govoni's trio of modern masks, in which Pierrot is a tubercular man, Colombina a prostitute, and Arlecchino a beggar. Traditional characters have over-used their bodies and consumed themselves in a degraded, collective Carnival that the poet describes in "La gran mascherata" [The big masquerade]:

*Un carro che conducono degli uomoni truccati da buoi  
chiude il corteo, pien di puttane che si scoprono le natiche  
da cui pendono tanti grappoli di cuori di cartone. (P 93)<sup>225</sup>*

Mafarka, the greatest Futurist body-type, ends as a dissolving farce of classical corporal perfection—a puppet-hero that Marinetti deforms, inflates, and exaggerates to the breaking point. The exaltation of primitive and mythological human force is evident in the initial physical description of the king, who appears as an invincible Homeric hero, perfectly in line with the aesthetic and ethical paradigm of *kalokagathia*, namely the coexistence of external beauty and moral goodness, or rightfulness:<sup>226</sup>

*Egli aveva la disinvoltura e la robustezza di un giovane atleta invincibile, armato per mordere, per strangolare e per atterrare. Il suo corpo troppo compatto, troppo vivo e quasi frenetico sotto una peluria fulva e una pelle chiazzata, come di serpente, sembrava dipinto coi colori della fortuna, al pari dello scafo di una bella nave. E la luce lo adorava certo appassionatamente, poiché non cessava di accarezzargli i pettorali ampi, tutti a groppi d'impazienti radici, e i bicipiti che parevan di quercia, e la muscolatura inquietante delle gambe, alla quale il sudore dava luccicori esplosivi. (M 10)<sup>227</sup>*

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<sup>225</sup> A float that men dressed up like bulls lead / closes the parade, full of whores that reveal their butts / from which many bunches of paper hearts hang down.

<sup>226</sup> Like the Homeric heroes, Mafarka, although committing cruel acts and massacres, is always presented as the righteous hero, who fights for a personal and universal cause.

<sup>227</sup> He had the ease and broad shoulders of an invincible young athlete built to bite, choke and fell. His body—too compact, too lively and almost frenetic under a tawny down and snakish patterning—seemed to be painted in the colours of good fortune and victory, like the hull of a fine ship. And the light adored him madly, no doubt, for it never ceased to caress his pectoral knotted with impatient roots, his oaken biceps and the disturbing musculature of his legs, explosively highlighted by sweat. (MF 8)

Working this similarity with the Homeric Ulysses, Lorenza Miretti proposes to analyze Mafarka as an Avant-Garde Ulysses (163), though the comparison between the *Odyssey* and its Futurist incarnation breaks down at the different values the two narratives attribute to the body. In the *Odyssey*, the true agnition of Ulysses does not occur due to his cunning or resourcefulness, but through the recognition of his body. Even though he is dressed as a beggar, the dog Argos looks at him and, using body language—dropping his ears and wagging his tail—identifies his master. In a similar way, his old wet nurse, Eurycleia, recognizes Ulysses when, while giving him a bath, she sees the scar that he got as a child, hunting boar. It is his body that allows for the recognition of Ulysses and opens the way to the recovery of his family, with the cooperation of his son Telemachus, the only one to whom Ulysses declares his identity. Conversely, through Gazurmah's missed acknowledgment of his father, Marinetti stresses the fact that Mafarka's corporal model lays outside the realm of the Futurist, ferine cyber-body. The novel stages the destruction of the king's body as a symbolic rite of passage—a macabre, patricidal sacrifice—that marks the rise of a new hero-type, equipped with an animal-artificial body: Soon after his birth, Gazurmah, acting as an “infuriated bull”, throws his father on a rock and kills him: “Mafarka piombò inerte sulla roccia, schiacciandovisi come un panno bagnato...” [Mafarka fell motionless on the rock, and sprawled there like a damp cloth] (*M* 219, *MF* 197). The king's end is strictly tied with the degradation and despair of his body, reduced to a bloody heap; the patricide symbolizes a biological break from a body model that is grotesquely old and incompatible with the ultimate techno-animalism that Futurism envisioned. *Kalokagathia* falls apart under the force of a furious, merciless Avant-Garde Minotaur or under the threatening of weak, pallid phantasms, opening new aesthetic horizons that deeply destabilize the characterization of the traditional hero.

## 5.4 Chameleonic and Fluid Genders

Breaking the unifying “flesh and soul” model implies that Crepuscular and Futurist loose bodies are unable to fit in any gendered *gnōthi seauton* [know thyself] formula. As Valentine de Saint-Points claims in the *Manifeste de la Femme Futuriste*, “*Il est absurde de diviser l’humanité en femmes et en hommes.*”<sup>228</sup> Elle n’est composée que de *féminité* et de *masculinité*.” [It is absurd to divide humanity into men and women. It is composed only of femininity and masculinity] (8). Rethinking gender identities in terms of thresholds, Crepuscularism and Futurism call for a transgressive statute of difference<sup>229</sup> between the masculine and feminine, beyond biological determination, creating characters that experience gender as a chameleonic state of being. The two movements usher in an inquiry into sexual identity, questioning the dualistic distinction between feminine and masculine as an artificial, socially imposed boundary. Pushing the conventional limits of heteronormativity, both movements create characters that defy any binary division exclusively based on sex or gender, assimilating multiple sexual orientations and social behaviors in one body.

Crepuscularism challenges the proto-type of the masculine hero, exploring the vulnerability of the male-body-in-pain. Languor and fragility become the weapons of passive resistance to the bourgeois male chauvinist message of the Latin Renaissance and its literary and political awakening of masculinity. Crepuscular authors adapt to literature an approach that Pre-Raphaelites had experimented with in art, namely the use of ambiguous virginal and

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<sup>228</sup> Italics in the French text.

<sup>229</sup> In *Fascist Virilities*, Barbara Spackman borrows this notion from Christine Buci-Glucksmann to develop her argument on the virile homosexualization of values attained by Marinetti, p. 23.

androgynous characters, who put into crisis the possibility and the need itself of distinguishing between masculine and feminine. This tendency towards gender ambiguity emerges most noticeably in Corazzini's poetry and can be compared to the iconography of painters like Edward Coley Burne-Jones (in "Phyllis and Demophoon" and "The Golden Stairs") and William Morris (in "The Bathers"). Evoking a similar Pre-Raphaelite imagery, the Roman poet plays on gender equivocality, creating characters with delicate and languid features, who stand as symbols of immature beauty and morbid anguish. In the poem "Il fanciullo" [The boy], an ephobic figure, similar to the later young man of "Desolazione del povero poeta sentimentale", declares his wish to die through an oneiric fantasy; crowned as a pagan god, reassembling Dionysus, the boy abandons this world and leaves a group of virgin sisters who endlessly search for him:

*Tu vuoi morire, ecco, tu vuoi dormire,  
solo, per sempre, con le tue corone  
sfiorite e chiudi le pupille buone,  
dolce, così, che sembra ti vanisca  
l'anima, desolato pellegrino.  
E sogni... e nella tua casa in un tetro  
crepuscolo, le pallide sorelle  
vanno inquiete per l'assente, il loro  
dolce fanciullo che le consolava  
con l'innocenza delle sue parole,  
e ti cercano e guardano le stelle. (O 137)<sup>230</sup>*

The similarity of the main character of the poem with Dionysus is pivotal to the argument for the possibility of including the ambiguous figure of the *fanciullo* amongst the uncategorized inclusiveness of the queer gender. The Greek god is known for his mysterious, polymorphous nature, which embraced the possibility of experiencing a wide spectrum of identities and sexualities. As Dionysus Zagreus, the god appears as a boy under the age of puberty, killed by

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<sup>230</sup> You want to die, indeed, you want to sleep, / alone, forever, with your faded / crowns and close your good pupils, / sweet, so that you seem as if your soul / is vanishing, you desolated pilgrim. / And you dream... in your house a gloomy / twilight, the pale sisters / restless are looking for you absent, their / sweet little boy that used to console / them with the innocence of his words, / and they look for you and at the stars.

the Titans while still a child. Yet, Dionysus, in his more popular form, was the nocturnal hunter and the foolish inspirer of orgiastic and cruel rites. In *The Bacchantes*, the god uses gender ambiguity to trick Pentheus into a scandalous death, as the king did not recognize Dionysus' divinity. Pentheus is killed by his possessed mother while he is dressed as a woman to spy on the Maenads' horrific activities. Borrowing the iconography of Dionysus as the crowned wanderer, who emanates gender chaos, Corazzini underscores a fascination with childhood, adolescence, and malady as a peculiar state of indefinite sexuality and transition. In his poetry, young boys and girls live in an androgynous status of primordial completeness, embodying a Dionysian articulated spectrum of sexualities, through which the body assumes the form of chameleonic clothing "made of many fabrics juxtaposed and interwoven among themselves" (Perniola 10). In a similar way, Ketty, Gozzano's "vergine folle" [foolish virgin]—parodic reference to D'Annunzio's novel—lives as if her body were a thing that does not belong to her: "... come una cosa / non sua concede l'agile persona..." [... like not her thing / gives her agile body] (*TP* 316). "Miss Ketty", the masculine American girl, met on a trip to the Orient, falls under the articulated definition of "signorina", described in a letter from Gozzano to Amalia Guglielminetti:

Signorina: figura triste; o che inconsapevole della sua miseria, vive beata, intellettualmente impoverita dalla secolare mentalità borghese, o che, cosciente rivoltandosi alla "saggezza di antiche norme": cerchi per sé un sentiero di salute, o che, più ribelle ancora, voglia rivendicarsi in libertà e contendere la sorte agli uomini derisori, o che si strugga nel sogno di un'attesa vana. (*Lettere d'amore* 30)<sup>231</sup>

Ketty is the foil of Felicita; similarly "ugly-ish" and ignorant, yet expressing a brief rebellion through the impetus of her anti-feminine body: "Cerulo-bionda, le mammelle assenti, / ma forte come un giovanetto forte" ["A blue-eyed blonde, her breasts too slight to mention / but

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<sup>231</sup> Unmarried young lady: sad character; either unconscious of her misery, she lives blissed, intellectually impoverished by the secular bourgeois mentality, or consciously rebelling against the "wisdom of ancient norms": may find for herself a healthy path, or, even more rebellious, may want to vindicate herself in freedom, and contend the destiny to the men who mock her, or pine away in the dream of vane waiting.



spunky as a boy at any rate”] (*TP* 314, *Palma TM* 237). Nevertheless, this “figlia della cifra e del clamore” [daughter of ledgers and the scandal sheet] (*TP* 316, *TM* 241) is a short-term sexual libertine who uses her body to explore a world that a respectable marriage with her cousin in Baltimore will soon close to her. The icon of a repressed body that seeks rebellion, Ketty is an ideal bridge to a deeper understanding of the loud Futurist claim of wanting to glorify the contempt for women. Pushing the association of femininity and feminization with a “pathological renunciation towards reality” (Sartini Blum 32), Marinetti generally equates women who have a disempowering sickness and literary obsession with the tyranny of love and the abused leitmotiv of adultery. As Claudia Salaris clarifies, the notion of the inferiority of women was largely shared in the cultural panorama of the epoch, and intellectuals from various fields, such as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Moebius<sup>232</sup>, and Weininger, made similar statements (24). Yet, unlike other misogynist voices, Futurism addresses the social constraints and influences that had created a distorted, gendered image of women, as Valentine de Saint Point argues in a letter to Marinetti:

la société contraint les femmes à se transformer d’êtres supérieurs en personnages languissants et sentimentaux que je déteste autant que vous, tout comme je déteste ces rôles d’ouvrières anonymes que les féministes tiennent tant à promouvoir. (Richard De la Fuente 125)<sup>233</sup>

In this more complex context, the Futurist aversion to women should be read as a more general attack against the middle-class, gendered order, based on the family as a “nest of love

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<sup>232</sup> Salaris uses a less popular spelling for the name of Paul Julius Möbius, a German scientist who wrote an essay on the mental inferiority of women, *Über den physiologische Schwachsinn des Weibes*. His study was translated and published in Italy in 1904, with the title *L’inferiorità mentale della donna*.

<sup>233</sup> Society forces women to transform themselves into superior beings and languishing and sentimental characters, which I hate as much as you do, just as I hate those roles of anonymous workers that the feminists try so hard to promote. The letter, quoted in the study by Richard De la Fuente belongs to the *Correspondances Marinetti-Saint Point* (private collection).

and restorative domesticity”, whose tutelary goddess was a good wife and caring mother (Wilson 8). The Futurist issue with women is more of a social issue, which could be rephrased in these terms: Why cannot Ketty maintain her masculine behavior? Why can she only evade her gendered destiny during the trip? Marinetti’s provocative statement is, indeed, an attempt to solve “Ketty’s question”, dissociating the slippery notions of “chromosomal sex” from the social construction of gender (Sedgwick 27). This disconnection, though, does not escape a new “performative” gender-paradigm founded on the concept of virility, understood as a beastly and brutal katabolic force that men and women embody and enact. Reshaping the traditional opposition of feminine and masculine in terms of various degrees of co-existence between the two polarities challenges the socially accepted, bourgeois roles of *mater* and *pater familias* and their procreative function. Futurism arrives, thus, at the extreme of questioning the copulating act that joins men and women, envisioning new reproductive possibilities:

In nome dell’Orgoglio umano che adoriamo, io vi annuncio prossima l’ora in cui uomini dalle tempie d’acciaio figlieranno prodigiosamente, solo con uno sforzo della loro volontà esorbitata, dei giganti dai gesti infallibili.<sup>234</sup> (*TIF* 255)

Oddly enough, *Mafarka il futurista*, the novel that seems to most emphasize masculinity, is also the Futurist work that most dilutes and corrupts the male social role, reaching the extreme of depicting maternity for a warrior king. The novel opens with a brutal episode of heterosexual violence that affirms the idea of masculinity as dominative power over surrendered feminine bodies. In its development, the plot exaggeratedly insists on Marfarka’s virility, which is regarded as the primary driving force of his regal power. As a long *mise en abyme* reveals, when

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<sup>234</sup> In the name of the human pride that we adore, I tell you that the hour is near when men with broad foreheads and chins of steel will give birth prodigiously, by one effort of flaring will, to giants infallible in action... (*MF* 3). This passage was originally part of the preface of *Mafarka il futurista* and then included in *Guerra sola igiene del mondo*.

the king was still a horse trader, the devil tricked him into eating the *zeb* [penis] of a marvelously well-endowed horse; after that magic meal Mafarka acquires the sexual strength of the animal, growing an eleven-meter-long member and an uncontrollable desire to copulate with all women. Yet, the *zeb* also opens the way for homoerotic advances; after Mafarka arrives in the kingdom of Boubassa, Boubassa asks to experience the prodigious, virile organ. Mafarka takes advantage of the weakness of the king—in a prone position—stealing his scepter and usurping his reign. However, this is not the novel’s only sexual deviance from the canonic, bourgeois masculine-type; the narration reaches its climax when Mafarka obtains procreative self-sufficiency that borders on the territory of homoeroticism, giving birth to a son without intercourse or need for female organs. The entire novel thus focuses on the exceptional birth of the over-man in which copulation as a life-making moment is proudly negated, and substituted with a homoerotic, incestuous kiss between Mafarka and his son:

Gazourmah! Gazourmah! Gazourmah! ... Eccoti la mia anima! ... Tendimi le labbra e apri la bocca al mio bacio!...  
E saltò al collo di suo figlio, e premette la propria bocca sulla bocca scolpita.  
Il formidabile corpo di Gazurmah sussultò subito violentemente, e le sue ali possenti scattarono, infrangendo le pareti della gabbia... (M 218)<sup>235</sup>

Paradoxically this hyper-virile Futurist narrative becomes exemplary of ambiguous transgendered masculinity, as Mafarka “performs” in a male body but aspires to conceive a son and be a mother. *Mafarka il futurista* pictures a case of a male-mother, who ultimately gives up his virile warrior nature and lets his son kill him. In the novel, the contrast between Mafarka’s

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<sup>235</sup> Gazourmah! Gazourmah! Gazourmah! ... Here is my soul! ...Offer me your lips and open your mouth for my kiss!

He jumped on his son’s neck, and pressed his lips to the sculptured mouth.

At once, Gazourmah’s formidable body gave a violent start, and his powerful wings unfurled, bursting the walls of the cage... (MF 196)

social role of king and warrior and his vocation to maternity remains unsolved and deliberately open: Mafarka is the prototype of male masculinity, which can equally seduce men and women, but he also represents the dreams of embodying maternal femininity by becoming a caring male-mother. Reaching its saturation point, the novel implicitly highlights the Futurist gender masquerade and the deep incoherence of attaining virility to the point of self-annihilation.

A general characteristic of Crepuscular poetry, strongly visible in the Roman group, is the proposal of chaste or de-sexualized characters. Males are rarely virile figures and females are fragile young girls or faded actualizations of the *mater dolorosa*. Gender liminality in Crepuscularism involves a process of de-sexualization that leads the characters to a status of self-inflicted neutrality or chastity. Yet, this renunciation of the pleasures of the flesh also implies the elevation of carnal desire to an object of sacrifice, needed to attain the spiritual sublimation of terrestrial passion. Ideally speaking, the “manifesto” of Crepuscular chastity is Martini’s “Elogio della castità” [Praise of chastity] in which the poetic I proclaims the ultimate vow to reject sensual love: “Oggi ho sepolto in un cofano d’oro / l’ultimo bacio suo senza lamento...” [Today I buried in a golden box / her last kiss without a lament] (*Tutte le poesie* 136). In making a human sacrifice, which recalls ancient religious tradition and the biblical episode of Abraham immolating Isaac, the poetic persona envisions the transformation of the lover’s body into an altar on which he abandons his sexual instinct. This sacred feminine body transitions from human to nonhuman, but does not materialize into a traditional object of desire, as these lines show:

*Se, infine, il corpo della bella amante  
trasparisca dall’ultimo suo velo,  
ch’io mi ricordi, allora, una tremante  
fiammella in vetro azzurro sotto il cielo.  
[...]  
Null’altro io chiedo: o santa castità,*

*che vivrai nella mia casa, per quella  
atroce gioia che io ti immolo, fa  
della tenera amante una sorella. (Tutte le poesie 137)*<sup>236</sup>

A similar, yet more sophisticated, denial of sexualization occurs in Corazzini's "La morte di Tantalo." The ambiguity is embedded in the linguistic choices of the text, portraying the couple waiting in the golden vineyard. The poetic I refers to the companion of his consumption waiting at the fountain as the "dolce amica" [sweet girlfriend], using a feminine noun-adjective combination, and then twice as "dolce bene", which is a masculine noun in agreement with a masculine adjective.<sup>237</sup> Nothing is further specified about the two mysterious figures, except that they are not suffering from a "dolore carnale" [carnal pain], which could be interpreted as the absence of physical pain or as a sublimation of carnal pleasure in the martyrdom of endless waiting. Yet, at a certain point the situation drastically changes. The couple lingering at the fountain, waiting for an unintelligible divine cause, suddenly decide to enjoy the fruit of the vineyard and drink the golden water of the fountain. The text is purposefully cryptic; nevertheless, the act of consuming the forbidden fruits of the vineyard could conceivably allude to reciprocal physical discovery made by the two characters. The key element, though, is that Corazzini plays ambiguously on sexuality, shifting it from human bodies to sensualized objects of desire—the grapes and the golden water—enjoyed in the dark. Converting their state of

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<sup>236</sup> If, finally, the body of the beautiful lover / shines through her last veil, / I will, then, remember a trembling / flame in blue glass, under the sky. /[...] // I ask nothing more: oh saint chastity, / That you will live in my house, for that / atrocious joy that I immolate you, make / the tender lover a sister.

<sup>237</sup> Commenting on this aspect of the poem, Villa interprets the ambiguity of the poem as a clear personification of the androgynous status of the protagonist, who combines a masculine *animus* (the narrative voice) and a feminine *anima* (the "dolce amica"); Cfr. *Sergio Corazzini "poeta sentimentale"*, 60-3. I prefer to maintain the cryptic halo of the poem, leaving open the possibility for both readings: as a scene that represents two lovers; or as an interior monologue between the masculine and feminine side of the androgynous protagonist.

ignorant purity into a more impure, but also more aware, life, the couple can finally embrace a new status of bodily knowledge, which the chromatics of objects highlight:

*Assaporammo tutta la notte  
i meravigliosi grappoli.  
Bevemmo l'acqua d'oro,  
e l'alba ci trovò seduti  
sull'orlo della fontana  
nella vigna non più d'oro. (O 212-13)<sup>238</sup>*

Although it may seem that Crepuscularism weakens sexual lust, turning the Dannunzian body into a desexualized mannequin, it is more accurate to speak of a mystic and allusive eroticism of the body. Substituting the climax of intercourse for the experience of ecstasies, Corazzini treats bodies as places of corporal agony, where the ego dissolves into the divine and finally feels its own divinization:

*Io mi allontano  
e la mia veste bianca  
se la dividono i rovi,  
e la mia ghirlanda s'è mutata  
in una corona di spine,  
le mie piccole mani sanguinano  
senza fine  
e l'anima è triste come  
li occhi  
di un agnello che sia per morire. ("L'ultimo sogno", O 166)<sup>239</sup>*

At a different level, the erotic sanctification of the body-in-pain is mirrored in Saint-Point's "Manifest Futurist de la Luxure" [Futurist manifesto of lust], in which the female writer includes the experience of religious exaltation as a form of diverted sexuality. In her view, lust is an actual energetic force, yet also a physical transposition of the impulse towards the Unknown, in

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<sup>238</sup> We savored the marvelous clusters / throughout the night. / We drank the golden water, / and the dawn found us sitting / on the edge of the fountain / in the vineyard no longer golden. (SE 65)

<sup>239</sup> I draw away / and the brambles start to rend / my white garments, / and my garland is transformed / to a crown of thorns, / my little hands are bleeding / without end / and my soul is as sad as / the eyes /of a lamb that is about to die. ("The last dream", SE 53)

that the movement expresses: “La Luxure, c’est la recherche charnelle de l’Inconnu, comme la Cérébralité en est la recherche spirituelle. La Luxure, c’est la geste de créer et c’est la création.” [LUST IS THE QUEST OF THE FLESH FOR THE UNKNOWN, just as Celebration is the spirit’s quest for the unknown. Lust is the action of creating, it is Creation] (18, Apollonio 71).

Deprived of sentimentalism and religious morality, physical intercourse between any partners becomes an actual cognitive moment in which the ego temporarily overcomes itself through the assimilation of another body, without ever extinguishing its thirst for knowledge. Published in 1913, Saint-Points’s bold statements on sexuality can be considered a later corollary of an aspect that Marinetti had only briefly touched on in the founding manifesto, addressing the Futurist need of a primordial language. Bare lust as the most pure and vital source of bodily energy expresses that same cognitive enthusiasm—what Marinetti defines “entusiastico fervore” [enthusiastic fervor] (*TIF* 10)—that Crepuscularism attains through the sacrifice of sick and martyred flesh.

### **5.5 Ego as a Traumatic Social Construction: Anti-Promethean Protagonists, Regressive Figures, and Modern Hermits**

Crepuscular and Futurist personas occupy a social space of outsiders—rebels, powerless victims, fools, and sick people. “Exoticness” and diversity are the fundamental traits of these Avant-Garde characters whose journey of self-knowledge starts with social rejection, often in the form of banishment, condemnation, or as a conscious choice of isolation and solipsism. In many myths and folktales, the main dramatis personas must be expelled from their native environment to develop heroic personalities through perilous and complex quests. The moment of crisis and estrangement is indeed necessary for the maturation of the character and is pivotal for the final,

social re-integration with their original social nucleus. Crepuscular and Futurist works offer a variant on this scheme. According to Vladimir Propp, in a narration, the functions that mark a separation (such as absentation, interdiction, and violation) serve as triggers for the development towards the final social reintegration and personal victory of the hero (*Morphology of the Folktale*). In the Futurist and Crepuscular appropriation of this narrative pattern, the traumatic experience of the protagonist generates a counter-action and a series of peripetias that never reach a reconciled, happy ending. The unmet finale freezes the dramatis persona in a fixed function, negating the possibility of an ultimate resolution. The quest of the hero expands into an everlasting series of unanswered interrogatives, continuous fights against personified or figurative villains, and helpless waiting for a *deus ex machina*. *Sam Dunn è morto* by Bruno Corra provides an exemplary case of spiraling narrative. In the preface, the novel is presented as a “romanzo sintetico” [synthetic novel], which aims to remove any useless details to provide an essential and dry modern narration (12); yet, the conclusion lingers on the sibylline prophecy of an upcoming “rivoluzione fantastica” [fantastic revolution] that the protagonist has foreseen in vague terms:

Il silenzio scettico di Sam Dunn ritarderà ma non impedirà l'avvento meraviglioso che molti indizi già annunciano. E chissà? Forse egli non ha voluto affaticarsi per tramandarci delle verità che erano in cammino e che si sarebbero per forza rivelate da sole. Tutti conoscono le poche righe incomprensibili che egli scrisse alcuni minuti prima di morire: «Io sono un attimo bizzarro galleggiante nella pazzia dell'esistenza. Me ne sto sulla poltrona sbalordito ed incerto di fronte alla realtà tranquillamente vivente». (112)<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> The skeptical silence of Sam Dunn will delay but will not prevent from marvelous advent those many clues already announced. And who knows? Maybe he didn't want to tire himself by passing on some truths that were on their way and would have necessarily revealed themselves on their own. Everybody knows the few unintelligible lines that he wrote a couple of minutes before dying: “I am a bizarre moment floating on the madness of existence. I lay on the chair astonished and uncertain in front of a quietly living reality.”



At the end of his journey, Sam Dunn knows nothing more about his life or about existence, but can only look on in amazement. The case of Corra's character opens the way for further consideration on the typology of personas that Crepuscularism and Futurism propose. Erasing any final reconciliatory moment or active return to society, the two movements permanently destabilize the modern model of the Promethean hero, herald of positive values and progress for the community. Conversely, they intend to unmask the decline of humanism and the failure of its enlightening message, emphasizing the tragic aspects in the myth of the unchained titan, symbol of supreme intellectual rebellion, but also of extreme sacrifice.

Staging a victimized hero who recalls the solipsistic Promethean martyrdom of intelligence is a strategy that obsessively reoccurs in Crepuscular works. The theme of the protagonist's exclusion suffuses Corazzini's poetry, becoming the identifying mark of the pure "fanciullo poeta" [poet little boy], who can be related to the prince Myshkin from Dostoevskij's *The Idiot*. Rejected and scorned for being sick and naively saintly, Corazzini's child also finds in the exile of malady the proof of his Christological, misunderstood mission. Like the Dostoevskian prince, the little boy is an idiot, in the Greek meaning of being isolated in his own private sphere and not having the right to participate in political life. Social banishment and divine election are somewhat indivisible yet incompatible forces that constitute the ambiguity of the sacred, namely "the ambiguity of the ban, which excludes in including" (*Homo Sacer* 51). In a similar way, Corazzini's child embodies the deep ambivalence of being a "Dio scacciato" [banished god] (*O* 297), conflating the unintelligibility of the ban with the mystery of the divine. Far from being an extemporaneous and genuine expression of poetic candor, the choice of a child as the main poetic persona is born from a project of self-divinization and literary influences that the Roman author has assimilated and combined—namely the classical myth of the *puer*

*aeternus*, the Dionisian figure, Nietzsche's boy "who wants to die", and Meister Eckart's messianic model (Villa 58).<sup>241</sup> "Desolazione del povero poeta sentimentale" marks the climax of Corazzini's mystic elevation through victimization and self-reduction. Not by chance, the poem has a theatrical, monologic structure that involves a mute listener, who is only present to satisfy the masochistic narcissism of the child, tortured by ephemeral, quotidian spleen. Under the pretense of diminution, the boy depicts himself as an elected creature, estranged from the noise of life, to experience "the Silence" as a moment of contact with the divine—"Io mi comunico del silenzio, cotidianamente come di Gesù" [I receive the Holy Communion of silence, daily, like that of Jesus" (*O* 145, *SE* 33).<sup>242</sup> This "sacred" and still "divine" *puer* can be interpreted as a powerful mythologem that connects Corazzini's work to religious tradition, as well as literature and visual arts. The adoption of a victimized hero, embodied in a child, recalls pagan mythology, Christian tradition, and popular folklore, providing a cultural archetype—the chosen child destined to accomplish an extraordinary undertaking—that Corazzini re-contextualizes and re-elaborates as an open provocation against his cultural canon. Through this figure, Corazzini can also be connected with his epoch, which adopted childhood as a mysterious moment of maximum innocence, creativity, and, still, ineffable suffering. This conflicting view of childhood emerges in the sculptures of children by Medardo Rosso, who represented infancy in all its

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<sup>241</sup> The *puer aeternus* is a figure of classic mythology related to a divine status of eternal youth, often connected with the god Dionysus. In *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, the man who wants to die represents a stage of nihilism that humans have to experience as a consequence of the death of God (the episode of the tightrope walker is exemplary of this stage). Eckart, a medieval German mystic, was rediscovered in the nineteenth century and assimilated by Idealist philosophy, as well as by mystical movements. These thoughts revived especially Eckart's idea that God inhabits the soul of any individual, and the conception that man can return to the One (God) by spiritually transcending his own individuality. Cfr. also Villa, *Il crepuscolarismo*, cit.

<sup>242</sup> For Eckart, the search of God passes through an idea of poverty as an extreme renunciation of any desire and goal. Only one who does not desire anything can embrace the real experience of the Divine.

nuances: from the *aetas aurea* par excellence to moments more dreadfully close to death.<sup>243</sup> The sub-theme of children's illness and suffering inspired Northern European artists, inasmuch that Edvard Munch, in a letter to the director of Oslo National Gallery, proposed naming the turn-of-the-century period "the Age of the Pillow", as "many painters did pictures of sick children on their pillows" (Bischoff 10). The topic also finds literary purchase with French Symbolist poets—in particular Francis Jammes and Albert Laforgue—who strongly influenced Corazzini's concept of childhood.

The Roman poet merges the disquieting side of infancy, which was typical of the Nordic sensibility, with the Pascolian notion of the "fanciullino" as boundless hermeneutical potential at an age in which it is possible to grasp "the most ingenious similarities and relations among things", and altering their hierarchy, moved by a special sense of "wonder, rather than by ignorance, and by curiosity, rather than mere loquacity" (15). From Pascoli Corazzini adopts the idea of returning to childhood, not as a regression, but, as La Valva explains, as "a possibility of discovering a new life system" as "the indispensable condition for every creative act" (x). If contextualized in its cultural panorama, Corazzini's "sacred" child, who is destined to die, rises as a prophetic figure conveying different hermeneutics on the most blinding and stinging "indicibile positività" [ineffable positivity] (Jankélévitch 64) of life's simple things. Through the tears of the little boy, the Crepuscular author does not renounce the creation of verses, but abandons the old model of celebratory and assertive poetry, as he foresees the coming of the "newest poet" and a new hermetic, poetic experience.

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<sup>243</sup> The theme of childhood appears in the following works by Rosso: *Il birichino* (or *Gavroche*) (1881-1882), *Amore materno* (1883), *Aetas aurea* (1886), *Bambino malato* (1889-1893), *Bambina che ride* (1889), *Enfant au sein* (1889), *Bambino ebreo* (1892), *Bambino al sole* (1892), *Bambino alle cucine economiche* (1892-1893), *Ecce puer* (1905-1906).

The sense of not belonging and the ironic failure of the Promethean heroic model are the signature traits of Gozzano's poetic ego(s). Unlike Corazzini's poetry, the literary and individual experience of Gozzano's protagonist follows a narrative progression: From juvenile abandonment in literary fantasies, the poetic persona moves towards the realization that his ideals were only a Dannunzian "favola bella" [beautiful tale], something between myth and illusion. As a veteran of Love and Death, the ego seeks for a new balance, conjugating literary vocation and quotidian bourgeois life. Gozzano's first collection, *La via del rifugio*, can be defined as a moment of bitter "self-discovery" through the lenses of literature. As the title implicitly suggests, the collection traces an illusory road to the shelter of the poetic I's literary evasion. Thus, this first attempt at acquiring self-consciousness relies, absurdly, on escaping it through a retreat from reality and a regression into memory and dream.

In the opening poem, which lends its name to the collection, the poetic persona detaches his faculty of thought from rational and empirical knowledge to reach a dream-like, spiritual dimension. The only way to create a more "sustainable" existence for himself is through separation from the inanity of the "casi della vita" [cases of life] ("*La via del rifugio*", TP 74). To justify this will to escape, Gozzano stages an allegorical scene of quotidian insensateness and wanton cruelty: While the protagonist lays quietly on the grass, his nieces capture a beautiful butterfly and kill their prey, stabbing it with a stickpin. The collection proceeds, emphasizing the impossibility of the protagonist adhering to reality, knowing himself, and finding truth in any social space, as Gozzano confesses in "Il responso" [The response]: "Ma pesa la menzogna terribilmente! / O maschera fittizia che mi esaspera nell'anima che sogna!" [But the lie weighs terribly! Oh mask / fake mask that exacerbates myself in the dreaming soul!] (TP 89).

This incapacity infects the poetic persona with a malady of the soul that makes it impossible to know beyond the boundaries of the incurable disease of literature. Thus, the protagonist slowly realizes that he lives trapped in an artificial knowledge and can see nothing more than appearance, as he admits, wondering: “se non fosse l’*io* / una sola virtù dell’Apparenza” [if the *I* / were not simply a virtue of Appearance] (“I sonetti del ritorno.V”, *TP* 102). Literature is an illusory and isolating shield that prevents him from the blissful ignorance of being unable to discern between being and appearing; after all, not knowing is what makes life possible, as with the goose of “La differenza” [The difference], which happily ignores that she is going to be eaten:

*Ma tu non pensi. La tua sorte è bella!  
Chè l’esser cucinato non è triste,  
triste è il pensiero d’esser cucinato. (TP 104)*<sup>244</sup>

The desire to evade this shelter creates the opposite outcome, dragging the poetic persona into a labyrinth where all possible avenues of escape, from literature to religion, are closed. Even the regression into childhood reveals a Leopardian sense of never having fully enjoyed anything but illusions. The child-alter ego of “Parabola” [Parable] follows this central motif, illustrating the cognitive dyscrasia between his expectations at the view of a juicy apple and the actual experience of eating it: “Non sentii quasi il gusto e giungo al torso!” [“I barely tasted it and get to the core!”] (*TP* 109). Toward its end, the collection turns towards a skeptical and more ironic solipsism, which characterizes the most mature poetic persona of the second collection:

*Rido nell’abbandono  
O Cielo o Terra o Mare,  
comincio a dubitare  
se sono o se non sono! (“Nemesi”, TP 125)*<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> But you don’t think. Your fortune is great! / As being cooked is not sad, / sad is the thought of being cooked.

The circular structure of the collection intensifies the disruptive power of its attempt to recapture illusions. *La via del rifugio* opens and closes with a reflection on the power of literary deception as a means to transcend quotidian life. Yet, the “Lasciatemi sognare” [Let me dream!] (TP 132) of the last poem, “L’ultima rinunzia” [The last renunciation] seems to anticipate how renouncing the embrace of reality entails social destruction, as, in the text, the protagonist lets his mother starve to death to ascend to a solitary privileged dimension of poetic evasion.

Reminiscing about Petrarch, Gozzano opens his second collection, *I colloqui*, with a section entitled “Il giovanile errore” [The juvenile error], which marks the transition between false, juvenile illusions and a more mature “knowledge of irony.” In this collection, irony becomes a filter through which the poetic I knows and shapes himself, performing a continuous game of travesty. The protagonist jumps back and forth between many different but related roles and alter egos, including the lawyer Guido, the Romantic hero Paolo, and the mediocre intellectual Totò Merúmeni. The performative nature of Gozzano’s poetic persona(s) purposefully sows the proto-Pirandellian doubt that being somebody is a mirage, a routine of acting out social roles while hiding the real self behind numerous masks.

In *I colloqui*, irony acts as a deforming mirror, which reflects the poetic I through references and hints at literary pretense (Zaccaria 27). Thus, the cognitive filter of irony reaches the climax of absurdity, blurring the truthfulness of Gozzano’s representation and the sincerity of his persona. For this reason, through his I, Gozzano does not provide a realistic representation of his social life, but rather a fictional reconstruction, told in first person, by the unreliable voices of puppet-narrators. From this deformed perspective, what the poetic I knows and recollects is

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<sup>245</sup> I laugh in abandonment / Oh Sky oh Earth oh Sea, / I start to doubt / If I am or I am not. (“Nemesis”)

inseparable from what he has read. At the age of twenty-five, he is left with a “libro di passato” [book about the past] (TP 136)—a book of memories that goes back to Dante’s *Vita Nova* “libello de la mia memoria” [the book of my memory]:

*un bel romanzo che non fu vissuto  
da me, ch'io vidi vivere da quello  
che mi seguì, dal mio fratello muto* (“*I colloqui*”, TP 138)<sup>246</sup>

This is indeed the social drama of Gozzano’s I; he cannot access any direct knowledge or life experience, but can only approach life through a third person, as he affirms in the poem “Il più atto”: “Sulle soglie del Tempo e dello Spazio / è pur conforto rivivere in altrui” [On the threshold of Time and Space I find / sweet comfort to think we live in others once again] (TP 160, TM 49).

This untrustworthy poetic I, who appears as a victim of his inability to live, partially repurposes Corazzini’s victimized and narcissistic hero. While Corazzini’s “fanciullo” appears as a martyr due to a divine call that has expelled him from his community, Gozzano is a profane intellectual-martyr—a “gelid sophist” who exhibits cognitive superiority and detachment from the petty-bourgeois, provincial life that he is condemned to live, yet all his poetic inspiration comes from that bourgeois world he mocks and rejects; thus, he eventually finds a compromising solution that guarantees a balance between intellectual isolation and immersion in society. The real Promethean trait of this complex character relies on the rediscovered ability to progress in his own life, abandoning false literary “divinities” to pursue a more prosaic and authentic role as a *sui generis* “(post-)humanist.” In the last section of *I colloqui—Il reduce*—Gozzano’s poetic persona seems to find a balance, assuming a role of master of “bourgeois Epicureanism.” He

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<sup>246</sup> But a lovely novel I could never be / the hero of: I looked on while another / lived it, my silent brother following me. (“The colloquies”, TM 7)

develops a modernized *tetrapharmakos* based on ironic detachment, which makes it possible to “survive” and fully appreciate a “petit and bourgeois life” (“In casa del sopravvissuto”, *TP* 213). This new approach provides the poetic persona with a deeper knowledge of himself, matured by the renunciation of the unattainable model of the intellectual and the embrace of a peaceful, voluntary literary exile. This parodic Machiavellian experience of literary confinement redefines Gozzano’s persona as a “wise” poet who has jovially accepted his cognitive defeat. Paradoxically, only with his “last renunciation” can Gozzano’s ego reassert his privileged position as a bourgeois intellectual. This lonely and wise “veteran-poet”, who lives in retreat in his villa and enjoys his self-sufficient life, combines the figure of the “honest bourgeois” with the Latin *topos* of the virtuous and sage farmer from Virgil’s *Georgic*:

*«Sono felice. La mia vita è tanto  
pari al mio sogno: il sogno che non varia:  
vivere in una villa solitaria,  
senza passato più senza rimpianto:  
appartenersi, meditare...Canto  
l'esilio e la rinuncia volontaria». (“Un'altra risorta”, *TP* 205-6)<sup>247</sup>*

The loss of Promethean spirit constitutes a complex motif in the development of Futurist characters, who arrive to the extreme, like Gozzano’s Totò Merùmeni, to feel embarrassment about the humanist role of traditional intellectuals. In the poem “Autopsia” [Autopsy], Paolo Buzzi translates the Crepuscular ironic “last renunciation” into a violent self-confession of isolation:

*La carne mi si consuma nel pensiero.  
Sono una rete di nervi sospesa sull'abisso.  
Fui nel sole  
fino ai trent'anni.  
Amici avevo ed amiche. Or sento l'ombra*

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<sup>247</sup> “I am happy there. My life’s a perfect fit / with my dream, a dream without a deviation: / my villa in its splendid isolation, / a life without a past without regret: / doing what suits me, musing...I celebrate / exile and free-willed renunciation.” (“Another resurrected”, *TM* 143)



*che d'ogni parte m'invade.  
Tento d'essere ancora il mio bel sole, io solo.  
Ma, spesso, ho notti prive pur della luna.  
Adoro i vecchiarrelli miei, che m'hanno fatto  
così diverso e strano e pieno d'ubbie per la testa:  
e, in fondo, ho la vergogna d'essere un Poeta. (Aeroplani 163)<sup>248</sup>*

It is possible to see a Promethean thirst for innovation in the Avant-Garde yearning for technological progress, as Luciano De Maria has argued (xli); it is undeniable, though, that none of the Futurist personas embody an educative approach toward the human genre, but rather express revulsion at those who are unable to foresee the violence of their jarring, primitive-modernization. Rational humanity reduces to nothing, when challenged by its own deepest irrational impulses — those “meteore vertiginose chiuse nell’atomo umano” [vertiginous meteors closed in the human atom] (*Aeroplani* 173) that Buzzi identifies with mad people, closed in mental asylums. The most blatant opposition to the Promethean model is Gazurmah. By killing his father and seducing Colubbi, Mafarka’s former lover, Gazurmah repudiates any moral law, and rises as an over-human solipsist hero, careless of society, and self-sufficient due to a powerful body and exceptional mind. This Futurist “mechanical god”, who flies away followed by a flocks of condors, can even laugh at the ineptitude of the creeping humanity: “Io non sono un uomo strisciante che si sforza, durante la notte, di spingere la sua piccola testa di tartaruga fuori dall’immenso guscio del firmamento! ... Il firmamento? Io ne sono padrone! [I am no crawling man who strives at night to push his puny tortoise head outside of the immense carapace of the firmament! ... The firmament? I am its master!] (*M* 228, *MF* 205).

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<sup>248</sup> My flesh consumes itself in my thought. / I am a web of nerves suspended on the abyss. / I was in the sun / until I was thirty. / I had male and female friends. Now I feel the shadow / that invade me from everywhere. / I still try to be my sun, alone. / But, I often have nights without even moon. / I adore my old parents, who made me / so different and strange and full of groundless fears: / and, deep in my heart, I am ashamed of being a Poet.

Palazzeschi's "L'incendiario" [The arsonist] offers a twentieth-century Christological retelling of the Promethean figure. In this Avant-Garde rewriting of the bearer of fire's myth, the chained Prometheus is a merciless arsonist who has been imprisoned in an iron cage in the middle of a square. In the first lines, the author insists on the incommunicability between the captured hero and the people, who accuse and insult him. In Palazzeschi's poetic narrative scheme, the situation suddenly changes with the arrival of the poet who triggers a counter-action, celebrating the parodic Prometheus-Jesus as a divine messiah, freeing him to set fire to the world:

*Uomini che avete orrore del fuoco,  
poveri esseri di paglia!  
Inginocchiatevi tutti!  
Io sono il sacerdote,  
questa gabbia è l'altare,  
quell'uomo è il Signore! (TTP 183-84)<sup>249</sup>*

Once again, the recognition of the hero does not involve any social reconciliation, but rather emphasizes the gap between the poet—the only one able to grasp the deep meaning of the arsonist's pyromania—and "gli stolidi uomini" [unwise men] that look but do not understand. In this altered perspective, modern people are afraid of fire, as they can neither recognize the hidden revitalizing power of the arsonist's flames, nor his heroic mission. Palazzeschi's unpopular hero is another foolish and "Dionysian" Prometheus who has turned the progressive power of fire into destructive bursts, as the only purifying antidote against a numb, serious, and unimaginative humanity. The same social ban and condemnation of the protagonist occurs in "Il codice di Perelà." More than a Promethean character, the man of smoke who descends among men is an ironic messiah with no redemptive mission. Although he does not bring a message of

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<sup>249</sup> You creatures afraid of fire, / miserable men of straw! / On your knees, all of you! / I am the priest, / this cage the altar, / this man the Lord! (Benson 19)

salvation, he is initially celebrated as a redeemer, for no logical reason, and then, in the same illogical way, he is indicted of murder and imprisoned as an enemy. Perelà is an unaware “hero by chance” thrown into the scene to perform a senseless and grotesque reenactment of the Passion.

The ability to laugh at the “delirio cronico dell’Universo” [chronic delirium of the Universe] (Buzzi, *Aeroplani* 174) and at their unaccomplished or misunderstood social missions is the trait that unifies Crepuscular and Futurist Avant-Garde heroes. These “prophets” of a new cognitive perspective are destined for intellectual solitude and rejection due to their groundbreaking message, yet they gain a deep sense of humor and learn to enjoy the twilight of traditional gods, as well as their own “defeat” as acclaimed saviors. All Crepuscular and Futurist heroes resemble Corra’s Sam Dunn, the “elected soul” who, in his own martyrdom, realizes the ultimate truth: “la vita è un pasticcio, abbastanza grande abbastanza complicato e molto confuso in cui non si capisce niente” [life is a mess, big enough, complicated enough, and very confusing, in which no one understands anything] (74). In light of this admission, Sam Dunn can only burst into laughter, “preso da una convulsion di riso” [caught by a convulsion of laugh] (75), and enjoy the palingenetic catastrophe produced by the release of a fantastic vital energy on humanity. He accepts his existence as an irrational casualty and dies ingloriously in the most tragi-prosaic, domestic accident—suffocated by the giant buttocks of a maid. The illogical unpredictability of life beats the hero; nevertheless, his death maintains an intellectual allure. Celebrating through these fallen heroes what humans do not comprehend or control translates into a literary apophatic theology that describes the bodily journey of the ego in the world *via negativa*.

## Chapter Six

### Knowing “the Other”: Futurist and Crepuscular Relational Cognition

*Sono dunque solo e diminuito,  
con due gambe sole  
due braccia sole  
due occhi ed una unica bocca.  
Gli altri dove saranno mai?  
(Govoni, “Io e Milano”, P 179)<sup>250</sup>*

#### 6.1 Introduction

In their key texts and manifestos, Crepuscularism and Futurism exhibit representations of social dynamics and interpersonal relations in early twentieth-century bourgeois society, showing that “cognition itself *is* socially determined and *for* social functioning” (Brewer and Hewstone xii). Both movements conduct a discourse on the evolution and dissolution of dialogism, in the epoch that ushered in mass communication. Criticizing the lack of real interaction in the bourgeois context, they propose models of synthetic communication that go beyond dialogic exchange. This analysis of relational cognition also investigates how Crepuscularism and Futurism call into question the traditional view of love as a moment of encounter. Continuing their attack on bourgeois gender construction, the two Avant-Gardes revise the literary and social imagery related to this eternal poetic motif, revealing the inconsistency of the nineteenth-century rhetoric of love.

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<sup>250</sup> I am indeed alone and diminished, / with only two legs / only two arms / two eyes an one only mouth. / Where are the others? (“I and Milan”)

## 6.2 Fighting the Limits of Bourgeois Relational Knowledge: Empty Dialogues and “Passatist” Love

Relational knowledge is strictly intertwined with communication, broadly understood as an experience of interaction leading to a mutual exchange of cognition. Although this form of knowledge can arise only through an encounter with “the other”, this encounter can be far from an ideal synergy, as even intentionality does not always guarantee the delivery or receipt of the message. Unintentional messages can, at times, reach and affect random receivers, hence communication occurs when information is transmitted and “not necessarily received or understood” (Littlejohn 7). Delivering messages that will not be heard, codified, or discerned is the core strategy of Crepuscular and Futurist criticism of traditional communication. In the Avant-Garde universe the sender and receiver share neither a symbolic nor an interpretative code and, most importantly, the sender is ignoring bourgeois norms of social negotiation, ostracizing its system of communication. Following parallel strategies, Crepuscularism and Futurism undermine bourgeois dialogism in all its forms—from formal to quotidian conversations—demonstrating how interaction is a farcical, conventional *doxa*.

Avant-Garde interaction emphasizes Zeno’s paradox of Achilles and the tortoise, as the basis for any form of relation: By the time the ego-Achilles has advanced in knowing “the other-tortoise”, “the other” will have already moved ahead, becoming something different from what s/he was before. Unveiling bourgeois relational immobility, Crepuscularism and Futurism embrace a fluid communication that accepts the possibility of never reaching its interlocutor nor even needing one. Crepuscular poetry emphasizes how bourgeois dialogues are nothing more than puppet plays, and offers alternative communicative modalities that bypass the commonly accepted notion of conversation as mutually created content. Futurism instead faces the question

of fake relations. Mimicking dialogues without triggering any actual exchange, this Avant-Garde experiments with innovative forms of mass communication that overcome the limitations of dialogic interaction. For both Futurism and Crepuscularism, the challenge to canonic models of communication implies an attack on the traditional representation of love, based on the overused “character-tools” of the hyper-realistic *mater familias* and the unrealistic *femme fatale*. In their “poetics of the hammer”, the two movements pauperize the function of the modern angelic Vesta and the captivating Armida, dismantling the three main relational entanglements: “the triangle of adultery, the pepper of incest, and the dressing of Christian sin” (*TIF* 304).

In “Dialogo di marionette” [Dialogue of marionettes], Corazzini stages a love dialogue between puppets that parodies the inevitable deformation of “the other” in the process of (supposed) interaction. The poem dichotomizes the question of relationality into two main approaches: The queen embodies how Realism kills “the other”, overthinking issues of communication, while the poet represents the Romantic idyllic projection that avoids any actual encounter. He is a utopian voice and seems capable of ignoring the tangible obstacles that the queen points out—the balcony made of papier-mâché cannot hold them, her oakum braid cannot serve as a rope, and she cannot even feel pain, as her heart is made of wood. The pressing stichomythia reaches a crescendo of incomprehensibility that pillories the seriousness of the romantic drama. Instead of understanding the impediments indicated by the queen, the poet remains loyal to an outdated script that weakens his cognitive potential under the blind, nonsensical will of *Eros* and *Thanatos*:

– *Non mi dite una parola,  
io morirò...*

– *Come? per questa sola  
ragione? (O 164)*<sup>251</sup>

The logical principles wane and the dialogic relationship transforms into a moment of separation, yet only from this rupture can the poet sets himself free from his over-used script and acquire a new perspective towards “the other” as a multifaceted unexpected. In the Crepuscular “dialogic theater”, Gozzano becomes the puppeteer of bourgeois sketches, in which “real” characters behave like marionettes and are unable to engage in the cognitive experiences of their iterative roles. Conversation constitutes the skeleton on which the author builds, stratifies, and ultimately masks the experience of “the other” through the myopic eyes of the bourgeoisie. Emphasizing this aspect, Gozzano entitles his second collection *I colloqui*, as dialogic interaction provides the cognitive terrain from which to spy on the bourgeois world, quickly sketching its demystifying portrait.

Adopting an alienated narrative voice in “L’amica di nonna Speranza” [Grandmother’s Speranza friend] Gozzano captures a frivolous conversation that could take place in “certi salotti / beoti assai, pettegoli, bigotti” in Turin [some salons / rather stupid, gossipy, bigot] (“Torino”, *TP* 209). The drawing room becomes the privileged observatory for understanding the scale of values that the bourgeoisie adopts in processing the facts and figures of a discussion that “naturally” revolves around entertainment, fashion, gossip, war, and politics. Filtering life through a cognitive level, these conversations cram and imprison the complexity of the outside world into the narrow-minded spaces of a homogeneous interpretative community:

*Capenna? Conobbi un Arturo Capenna... Capenna... Capenna...  
Sicuro! Alla Corte di Vienna! Sicuro... sicuro... sicuro...»*

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<sup>251</sup> – You don’t speak to me, so I / will die. / – What? You will die for that / alone? (SE 49)

«Gradiscono un po' di moscato?» «Signora Sorella magari...»  
E con un sorriso pacato sedevano in bei conversari.

«...ma la Brambilla non seppe...» – È pingue già per l'Ernani...  
«La Scala non ha più soprani...» – «Che vena quel Verdi... Giuseppe»

«...nel Marzo avremo un lavoro alla Fenice, m'han detto,  
nuovissimo: il Rigoletto. Si parla d'un capolavoro».

«...Azzurri si portano o grigi? » – «E questi orecchini? Che bei  
rubini! E questi cammei... » – «la gran novità di Parigi...»

«...Radetzky? Ma che? L'armistizio... la pace, la pace che regna»  
«...quel giovine Re di Sardegna è uomo di molto giudizio!»

«È certo uno spirito insonne, e forte e vigile e scaltro...»  
«È bello? » – «Non bello: tutt'altro». – «Gli piacciono molto le donne...» (TP 186)<sup>252</sup>

Futurism demonstrates similar methods to invalidate the bourgeois relational horizon. Palazzeschi's *Il codice di Perelà* utilizes a typical format of dialogic illusion, in which A and B are framed in an exchange that produces action without interaction. As if they were following a script from *commedia dell'arte*, bourgeois characters are free to improvise, but only within a restrictive range of options, leading to a pre-arranged finale that does not alter their cognitive expectations. Many characters speak *at* Perelà, but none of them speaks *with* him to comprehend something new about or from him, which might change the bourgeois mental representation of the world. The man of smoke is continuously catalogued under familiar rubrics that prevent any doubt of his real nature. As these passages show, he is named Perelà, and “forced” to be

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<sup>252</sup> Capenna? I knew an Arturo Capenna ... Capenna ... /Capenna... / To be sure! At the Court of Vienna! To be sure... to be / sure... to be sure...” // “Would you care for some muscatel?” — “That would be a / most welcome libation.” / And so with a calm smile they sat themselves down for some / good conversation. // “...Brambilla? No voice...” — “And what hips! She’s / already too fat for Ernani...” / “La Scala has no more soprani...” — “This Verdi’s on / everyone’s lips...” / “...in March we’re to have a new piece at the Phoenix, so / everyone said. / Rigoletto: brand new, never played. And already they say / ‘masterpiece’.”// “... What are you wearing this year, blue or gray?” — “And / those earrings? And those / lovely rubies! And those cameos!...” — “All the / latest from Paris, my dear...” // “...Radetzky? Eh? Peace, it appears... the armistice / ...”, — in my opinion, / as young as he is, the Sardinian King has the wisdom of /years!” // “And a spirit that doesn’t know fear, shrewd and tireless, ever / alert...” / “And handsome?” — “Not, quite the reverse.” — “Quite an eye / for ladies, I hear...” (TM 104, 106-7)



*something* in order to dispel his interlocutors' fear of facing an ontological substance that is only explicable as an epistemological gap in their cognitive domain:

- Non vedete che uomo buffo?
- Non dev'essere mica un uomo sapete.
- Che cosa dev'essere?
- Un poco di buono, ecco cos'è!
- È un nuvolone venuto basso basso.
- Un nuvolone? A una cappa di piombo!
- Non è un uomo, non è un uomo!
- Se è un uomo, è vestito di pelle d'elefante. (143)<sup>253</sup>

These dialogues, filled with social formulas and clichés, serve the function of reassuring people of their cognitive power over Perelà. Their effort at trapping the unknown—a mysterious man made out of smoke—in the realm of the known exhibits a paroxysmal need to label everything, even a gap in their cognitive map. Instead of embracing the otherness of Perelà as a dimension of search, uncertainty, and possibility, the citizens of the realm imprison the man of smoke following an urge to attribute an identity to him, on the basis of a false syllogism: If Perelà is not divine, he must be evil; therefore, he deserves a punishment. The man of smoke is locked in the cage of the bourgeois cognitive narrowness, which requires a label for any ontological box, even the hastily assigned label of “enemy.” Mistaking cognition for a stable “status of belief”, bourgeois people cannot escape the vicious cycle of continually rediscovering the already known in the unknown. In this conversation, for instance, the gentlemen of the court grotesquely try to explain the origin of the man of smoke from a human perspective, generating an endless series of trivial misunderstandings and absurdities:

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<sup>253</sup> Don't you see that funny man?  
He must not even be a man, you know.  
What must he be?  
A scoundrel, this is what he is.  
He is a big cloud come very low.  
A big cloud? He has a lead hood!  
He is not a man! He is not a man!  
If he is a man, he is dressed with the skin of an elephant.

- Voi venite, dunque?
- Di lassù.
- Dove, lassù?
- Lassù dove io rimasi sempre, prima di scendere alla luce.
- Siete stato molto tempo prima di venire alla luce?
- Ci sarà stato quanto tutti gli altri, nove mesi.
- Forse più di trent’anni. Anzi, certo, trentadue o trentatré anni.
- Ma ci canzona, sapete, ci canzona.
- [...]
- Quando siete nato?
- Non lo so. Stamani all’alba io scesi alla luce.
- Ma che diavolo vuol dire con questo scendere?
- Vuol dire che è venuto alla luce stamani, nascere e venire non è la stessa cosa?
- Ma lui dice che è sceso.
- E quando uno nasce cosa fa sale?
- Ma nemmeno scende. Ed è nato così grande e grosso? (145)<sup>254</sup>

The incapacity of bourgeois communication is central to the prose in “Una serata in famiglia” [An evening with the family] in which Soffici adopts a polyphonic communicative strategy, modulating three main voices—the narrative ego, his mother and aunt praying, and his mother and aunt chatting about family memories. These melodic lines, though synchronic and occasionally intertwining, maintain their cognitive alterity. The litany of the Rosary is the voice that links the other two, emphasizing the presence of communication in the scene. The prayer, which becomes background noise, is a communicative ritual, nothing more than a litany of mispronounced Latin words, hidden beneath a moral imperative without meaning: “... Grolia

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<sup>254</sup> -- Where do you come from, then?

From up there.

Up there, where?

Up there where I have always stayed, before I came down to light.

Have you stayed there for a long time before coming to light?

He must have taken nine months, as long as the others.

Maybe more than thirty years. Actually, certainly, thirty-two or thirty-three years.

He makes fun of us, you know, he makes fun of us.

[...]

When were you born?

I don’t know. This morning at dawn I came down to light.

But what the hell does he mean with this “coming down”?

It means he came to birth this morning, indeed, being born or coming to birth, isn’t it the same?

But he says that he came down.

But when one is born what does he do, does he come up?

*But one doesn’t either go down. And was he born big and strong, like this?*

patri e figlio e spritossanto, sicutera in principio e nonce sempre in secola seculu mammen...” (Arlecchino 22). As a counterpoint, the first person narrative voice inserts amidst the prayer passages from a book that harshly condemns religion as the most evil human fabrication. The prayer is also interrupted by the chatter and storytelling of the two ladies, confirming the genuine philistinism of petty-bourgeois people and their judgmental attitudes. The three voices develop without ever encountering or understanding each other’s reason. Nevertheless, the apparent harmony of the domestic scene hides the disharmony of the incompatible and distant cognitive views living under the same roof.

Digging into the family nest to reveal its unsuitability as a place for interaction and communion is a theme that is shared by Crepuscularism and Futurism; the bourgeois family becomes the nucleus of the relational malady that overlaps with ordinary life, as Martini states in this the poem “Al mio medico” [To my doctor]:

*Prigione senza uscita,  
deserto senza via  
è questa malattia.  
O medico, ho la vita... (Tutte le poesie 234)<sup>255</sup>*

This hidden disease, which has generated the ephidemy of respectability, obsesses and destroys the bourgeoisie to the point of becoming an autoimmune disease that phagocytizes any authentic relationship. In the poem “A Cesena”, Moretti describes the monstrous, though invisible, metamorphosis of his newly married sister into a dreadful Madame Bovary from Cesena. Beneath her perfect demeanor, she is scheming secret, domestic plans against her jealous mother-in-law, cheap sister-in-law, and rich grandfather. In only six months of marriage, the

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<sup>255</sup> Prison without escape / desert without route / this is the malady. / Oh doctor, I have life...

poet's sister has lost her spontaneous smile and "wears" a fake "sorriso [...] di nuora" [smile of the daughter-in-law] that covers her hypocritical role-play of the perfect wife and mother-to-be:

*« Mamma! » tu chiami, e le sorridi e vuoi  
ch'io sia gentile, vuoi ch'io le sorrida,  
che le parli dei miei viaggi, poi...*

*poi quando siamo soli (oh come piove!)  
mi dici rauca di non so che sfida  
corsa tra voi; [...] (TLP 288-89)<sup>256</sup>*

Futurism is equally harsh toward the contractual hypocrisy of marriage, which nourishes the falsehood of domestic relationships. In *Mafarka il futurista*, Marinetti adopts a rich variety of animalistic comparisons to represent women in the role of family nucleus: Uarabelli, the symbol of the perfect housewife, is both a giant repulsive snail and a night bird (128); Colubbi, the lover, is a stockwoman of hyenas and greedy beast (204, 211); Langurama, the mother, is a mummy with a pig snout (213). Marinetti's domestic zoomorphism recalls a more ancient model, the satire *On Women* by Semonides of Amorgos. In this work, the poet stigmatized many different kinds of women, describing their awful vices through association with animals and natural elements. It is crucial to recall that Semonides' compositions were conceived to be performed during symposiums, in which Greek males from the same fraternity shared and celebrated their common values. In a similar way, the Futurist "arsonist brothers" shape their social and relational identity as a close group, by defining the revolutionary beliefs that made them stand out from the social bourgeois flock. The contempt for women becomes a cognitive tool to denounce the relational exploitation of the benevolent feminine image as a form of domestic enslavement.

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<sup>256</sup> "Mom!" you say, and smile at her and want / that I be polite, you want that I smile, / that I tell her of my journeys, then... // when we are alone (oh how it pours!) / you tell me gruff about I don't know what tough / challenge between you ladies; [...].

Through its burning misogyny, *Mafarka il futurista* tears to pieces a family model that, as stated in the manifesto “Contro il matrimonio” [Against marriage], is a deleterious and prehistoric prison, comparable to a lurid meld of impaired old people, women, children, pigs, donkeys, camels, hens, and excrement in Bedouin tents. This declaration highlights the cultural turning point of Futurist misogyny. While Semonides’ invective against women—the worst evil which gods have ever inflicted upon man—ends with the celebration of the only good and virtuous kind of woman, the bee-woman, in his own novel Marinetti goes further, annihilating this woman type. Uarabelli-Ciarciar, the exotic version of the perfect bourgeois bee-woman, is shredded by her own husband in the grip of homicidal madness. Uarabelli’s only fault is having no personality outside her bourgeois role, being nothing more than formless, disgusting pulp, which stains the couple’s bedroom. Turning the bourgeois house into a charnel house, Marinetti exposes the “lurida mescolanza” [dirty mix] (*TIF* 368) that inhabits such a horrific place and unveils the disgusting essence under the perfect cover of Magmal and Uarabelli-Ciarciar’s marriage.

The polemic attack against the domestic seclusion of bourgeois women emerges very strongly in the short story “Una donna con tre anime” [A woman with three souls] by the female Futurist Rosa Rosà. The protagonist, Giorgina, is Uarabelli’s western clone: a faded figure, confined in the prison of her home, unexpressive, passive, and unable to arouse any erotic instinct. The insignificant Giorgina suddenly experiences a personality disorder that reveals her three hidden souls, which lead her to exhibiting abnormal new qualities and behaviors: from instinctive and immoral actions to amazing rhetorical and writing skills. The story ends with Giorgina’s clash with male society, when a medical intervention forces the housewife back to her

initial status. In the relational setting of bourgeois society, the discovery of female agency is treated as an unhealthy irregularity and confined to the brief space of an encounter with malady.

Demolishing the relational model of bourgeois love also involves showing the impracticality of the Dannunzian *femme fatale* and its cinematographic popularization. In this respect, one of the Crepuscular strategies is to debase this socio-cultural icon to a quotidian level, desecrating her uniqueness through an endless process of multiplication into a host of vulgar prostitutes, servants, and milliners. Govoni's Colombina appears as an everyday diva-harlot, who no longer loves Romanticism or cheesy kisses, but has satirically embraced her rights as an emancipated woman:

*Si concede a chi vuole: se si fa pagare  
non guarda pel sottile con gli amanti eletti.  
E si presenta sotto mille vari aspetti,  
donna moderna dalle voluttà più rare. (P 91)<sup>257</sup>*

The same mocked “modern woman” appears as the provincial surrogate for the Romantic love of Totò Merumeni. After fantasizing about actresses and princesses, “the real son of our times” finally finds a more realistic and convenient lover, an eighteen-year-old cook:

*Quando la casa dorme, la giovinetta scalza,  
fresca come una prugna al gelo mattutino,  
giunge nella sua stanza, lo bacia in bocca, balza  
su lui che la possiede, beato e resupino... (TP 198)<sup>258</sup>*

Gozzano openly laughs at any idealized love, celebrating licentious and occasional “amori ancillari” [ancillary loves] that portray different relationships of power. Female servants easily free themselves from the bourgeois morality that their masters would like to subject them

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<sup>257</sup> She gives herself to whoever wants: if she gets paid / she doesn't split hairs with the elected lovers. / And she appears under thousands of different aspects, / modern woman of the rarest pleasures.

<sup>258</sup> When the house is all asleep, the barefoot girl slips out, / fresh as a little plum in the chilly morning air, / comes quietly to his room, kisses him on his mouth, / leaps on him: he enjoys her as he blissfully lies there... (TM 129)

to, yet escaping ethical impositions only leads them to reconfirm the master-servant dialectic at a more subtle, relational level. Once transposed to the sexual field, the struggle ends with the exploitation of the servant, as a recognized social instrument of the lordship's erotic initiation:

*Ella m'irride, si dibatte, implora,  
invoca il nome della sua padrona:  
«Ah! Che vergogna! Povera Signora!*

*Ah! Povera Signora!...» E s'abbandona. (TP 145)<sup>259</sup>*

Crepuscularism also plays with the feuilleton character of the fallen woman, contaminating it with the medieval role of the *donna angelo*. A salvific prostitute appears in Martini's poem "Il cieco e le 'cocottes'" [The blind and the cocottes], in which a blind beggar-musician is hosted in a brothel but thinks he is in the monastery of Saint Fidelis, triggering the evangelic identification of prostitutes with the most blessed souls (Matthew 21, 28-32). The poem proceeds with a dialogue that highlights how relational knowledge and ignorance are only a matter of belief and relational perspectives. Thus, to the "different" eyes of the poor blind man, not affected by bourgeois blindness, the prostitute becomes a divine mediator:

*«Voglio...salire da te.» «Ma...non mi vedi,  
non sai quale io mi sono.» «E che m'importa?  
[...]  
M'apri, se salgo?» «Che faremo?» «Ma...»  
Il cieco vede i giorni che verranno,  
la cella e quelle che l'ospiteranno  
suore candide [...] (Tutte le poesie 229)<sup>260</sup>*

The Crepuscular and Futurist criticism of traditional feminine roles finds an ideal point of connection in the silent movie *Rapsodia Satanica* by Nino Oxilia, filmed in 1914 and released in

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<sup>259</sup> She laughs at me, she struggles, starts to shout, / and in the name of her mistress she entreats: / "Oh, the poor lady! The shame if it gets out! //Poor Lady!..." And she climbs between the sheets. (TM 21)

<sup>260</sup> "I want to...come up to you." "But...you don't see me, / You don't know who I am." "What do I care? / [...] / "Do you open, if I come up?" "What are we going to do?" "But..." / The blind man sees the coming days, / the cell and those who will host him / candid nuns [...]

1918. The eclectic *metteur en scène*, who was close to both Crepuscular cultural circles as well as to Futurist groups, renewed the collective imagination of the cinema diva through his remake of the Faustian tradition from a female perspective. In the movie, the former *femme fatale* Countess Alba d'Oltrevita trades true love for eternal youth and beauty, symbolically unmasking how the allure of this type of woman is nothing more than a literary “deal with the devil.” *Rapsodia Satanica* morphs D'Annunzio's literary model into a pop culture diva but, in doing so, unveils the artificial constructions of male chauvinist fantasies, which have projected female nature onto a series of objectified images that Marinetti had already identified:

la donna veleno, la donna ninnolo tragico, la donna fragile, ossessionante e fatale, la cui voce, greve di destino, e la cui chioma sognante si prolungano e continuano nei fogliami delle foreste bagnate di chiaro di luna. (“Contro l'amore e il parlamentarismo”, *TIF* 292)<sup>261</sup>

The gendered discourse of relationality embraces a broader redefinition of the poetics of love, which represents this poetic sentiment as a relational *impossibilia*. For Crepuscularism, love is an unreachable desire, which would lose its intellectual appeal once fulfilled; for Futurism, love is simply a literary construction from the past to reject. Commenting on their approaches, it could be said that both movements return to the sources of lyrical poetry, as Crepuscularism reinvents the motif of an unsatisfied desire for love, while Marinetti's “synthetic love” resounds as an Avant-Garde translation of the sudden psycho-physical shock that Cavalcanti's “spiritelli” [spirits] generate at the only view of the beloved.

In the Crepuscular universe, the theme of love as a missed relational possibility is a reinvention of the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century narrative of the encounter with a beloved woman, who also represents the literary sounding board of the poetic persona. Yet, the *Vita*

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<sup>261</sup> the poison-woman, the tragic knickknack-woman, the fragile woman, obsessing and fatal, with a voice made heavy by destiny, and dreamy hair that extends and continues in the foliage of the forest wet with moonbeam.



*nuova* and the *Canzoniere* fix this exceptional moment in specific cosmological and individual time-spaces, ruled by Love and God, as events that surpass human capabilities. Quite the opposite occurs in the Crepuscular reinvention, where the absence of the encounter becomes pivotal. The encounter itself is barely mentioned, or is sung of as a missed and regretted opportunity. The moment loses its benchmark function, being flattened and absorbed in a flow of scattered thoughts. In the poetic I's chaotic reconstruction, the unnamed beloved makes her first appearance in a mourning, haphazard delirium that alludes to the platonic nature of the relationship:

*per la tua bocca rossa  
che non ho mai baciata  
e che pure m'ha data  
la dolorosa scossa,*

*per le tue mani stanche,  
per le tue mani molli  
che toccare non volli  
(erano tanto bianche!),*

*per la voce che mai  
non seppi, per i gesti  
ignoti, per le vesti  
che avevi e che ora avrai*

*nella semplice bara  
fiorita; in somma tutto  
amo di te, il mio lutto  
sei tu, piccola cara! ("Follie", O 111-12)<sup>262</sup>*

Corazzini's poetic I loved a stranger and all the missed experiences of a relationship that never happened but is paradoxically remembered. Prioritizing the poetic I's perception of the event over the event itself, Corazzini omits the encounter from his poetic narration, creating a

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<sup>262</sup> For your red mouth / that I have never kissed / and that yet gave me / a painful shake, //for your tired hands / for your weak hands / that I didn't want to touch / (they were so pale!), //for your voice that I /never knew, for the unknown /gestures, for the clothes / that you had and now will have // in the simple blossomed / cuffing; overall I love everything / about you, my mourning / you are, my little darling! ("Foolish thoughts")

love relationship “known” through a feeling of lacking. This could be said for Dante and Petrarch’s personas, too, as only the departure of Beatrice and Laura opens the possibility for both poetic egos to move from a self-referential discourse that never reaches its addressee to a dialogue that produces interaction. Dante sets the ground for experiencing a plethora of encounters and interactions in his journey through the *cantiche* of the *Commedia*; Petrarch, in his final prayer to the Virgin, leaves “behind all previous attempts to converse with himself and the earthly other outside himself” to embrace a true dialogic nature of speech as an “*in praesentia* conversation” to God (Cervigni, “The Petrarchan Lover” 124). For Crepuscularism, the loss of the beloved is also functional for ending a communication *in absentia*, making it possible to envision other possible paths for communication. For instance, in the Gozzanian world, the most idyllic place for love is an unfound island, a metaphorical non-place of the encounter that never happens; an island, that, like love, is on the map of human routes but was not discovered in centuries of expeditions. This wonderland is still on the map, perpetuating the mystery of its existence: Is this “*isola non-trovata*” [unfound island] a mirage or does it exist?

*S’annuncia col profumo, come una cortigiana,  
l’Isola Non-Trovata... Ma, se il pilota avanza,  
rapida si dilegua come parvenza vana,  
si tinge dell’azzurro color di lontananza... (“La più bella”, TP 283)<sup>263</sup>*

The idea of the mysterious island turns love from a relational question into a purely cognitive one. Gozzano’s poetic I does not fall in love with women but with the intriguing possibility that the most beautiful woman is nowhere to be found; she is the cognitive narcotic of the dreamer who desires nothing more than to continue dreaming.

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<sup>263</sup> She lures them with her perfume, like a courtesan, / the Undiscovered Island... But if they come her way, / rapidly she’ll vanish like a vision on the wind, / hiding herself in the azure colors of faraway... (TM 225)

Rather than escaping from the encounter, Futurism confronts it, turning communion into a clash. The only possible Futurist love relationship is warlike and composed of opposite polarities that cannot help but to contrast each other during the encounter. This relational structure appears vividly in Paolo Buzzi's *L'ellisse e la spirale* [The ellipsis and the spiral], a kitsch novel fusion of traditional narration, movie script, and tables of words in freedom, which depicts a war of the sexes in a science-fiction setting, with esoteric references. Like its model, *Mafarka il futurista*, the book aspired to be a prophecy of subversion for society—as Buzzi affirms in his preface addressed to Marinetti. It was also an epic poem of Futurist “modernity”, celebrating the birth of a new humanity based on the fight between the masculine and feminine principles, embodied respectively by the emperor Naxar and the queen Deliria (Caruso viii). The relationality that the book endorses is based on a spiritual and alchemic process of regeneration, according to which the two opposing principles of masculinity and femininity unify to generate a metamorphosis and sublimate themselves into new matter.

The metaphor of “relational war” is also central in Marinetti's manual of seduction, *Come si seducono le donne* [How to seduce women]. The concept of partner-prey relies on a brief possession of the body that consumes the other in the fleeting act of conquest. Adhering to the idea of intensifying years in days and instants, to enjoy a woman at full-speed (60), in his writing, the Futurist leader condenses an episodic love affair with a lady from Bologna, randomly met on a train, to the space of a Futurist formula: “Controllore sagace + treno direttissimo + notte d'agosto + assenza di viaggiatori nello scompartimento X seduttore = bellissima bolognese mangiata e bevuta. [Shrewd ticket inspector + super express train + August night + absence of travelers in the carriage X seducer = great Bolognese feast and drink] (76).

Yet, war is not simply a literary metaphor but the actual historical framework for the book, which Corra and Settimelli acknowledge in their preface: “libro guerresco and igienico” [wartime and sanitary book] (21). Freeing love from the myths of unicity, eternity, and fatality, the book expresses the “healthiness” of declaring “tutto quello che c’è di meccanico, di effimero, di barometrico, di caduco, di brillante e di allegro nelle relazioni tra uomo e donna” [everything mechanical, ephemeral, barometric, short-lived, brilliant, and happy in the relationships between man and woman] (22) and envisions radical transformation of human relationships into intense and condensed exchanges of energies, lived and burnt out in the moment.

War becomes the optimal *in vitro* environment for relationships, offering a “situational” aphrodisiac and the ground for sexual emancipation and balance between the sexes. Once freed from their domestic captivity, women can express their nature as uninhibited and eager lovers, embracing relational instinctual cognition over intellectualism, as Marinetti states: “Il cervello è un motore aggiunto e inadatto al chassis delle donne che ha per motore naturale l’utero” [The brain is an additional and unsuitable engine to the chassis of women, which have the uterus as the natural engine] (69). Empowered by their instinctiveness, women can finally attain the new relational possibilities of Futurist free love, which is based on the devaluation of traditional duties like pre-marital virginity and exclusive commitment. For Futurism, the main problem of bourgeois relationality is the urge to institutionalize encounters into relational cages, like marriage. Any institutionalized relationship relies on a deformed idea of possession and slavery, which negates any sentimental freedom for women, as Marinetti explains in a later work, from 1919, *Democrazia Futurista* [Futurist Democracy]:

Dire: la mia donna non può essere altro che una cretineria infantile o una espressione da negrieri. La donna è mia quanto io sono suo, oggi, in questo momento, per un'ora, un mese, due anni, secondo il volo della sua fantasia e la forza del mio magnetismo animale o ascendente individuale. (*TIF* 369)<sup>264</sup>

In “Contro l'amore e il parlamentarismo” [Against Love and Parliamentarism] from 1915, the leader has already declared that Futurism has the duty to denounce love as a literary fabrication, banishing it from both real life and literature:

Noi siamo convinti che l'amore—sentimentalismo e lussuria—sia la cosa meno naturale del mondo. Non vi è di naturale e d'importante che il coito il quale ha per scopo il futurismo della specie. L'amore—ossessione romantica e voluttà—non è altro che un'invenzione dei poeti, i quali la regalano all'umanità... E saranno i poeti che all'umanità lo ritoglieranno. (*TIF* 292-93)<sup>265</sup>

Sharing this perspective in *Diario di una giovane donna futurista* [Journal of a young Futurist woman], Flora Bonheur describes her quotidian marital status as the condemnation to live with Ildebrando Martelli, “un ignorante, una bestia, un cretino, tutto quello che di più imbecille, di più lurido si può immaginare” [an ignorant (man), a beast, an idiot, all the most stupid, most filthy traits one can imagine] (Salaris, *Le futuriste* 46). Since marrying him, her marriage vows have turned into the commitment to making her husband's life as unhappy as possible. Bonheur even portrays an actual physical fight with Ildebrando, which evolves from verbal offenses to Futurist punches. Only during the fight did she find her own accomplishment:

*Così così la vita coniugale mia.*  
*Futurista?*  
*Passatista?*  
*A voi il responso.*  
*Finirà?*  
*Quando?*  
*Esulto: mi divide, diffondo gioia. Trionfo.*

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<sup>264</sup> To say: “my woman” cannot be anything other than an infantile silliness or an expression of slave-traders. The woman is as much mine as I am hers; now, today, in this moment, for an hour, a month, two years, according to the flights of fancy and the strength of my animal magnetism or individual influence.

<sup>265</sup> We are convinced that love—sentimentalism and lust—is the least natural thing in the world. There is nothing natural and important other than coitus, which has the purpose of the futurism of the species.

Love—romantic obsession and sensual pleasure—is nothing else than an invention of poets, who give it as a gift to humanity... And the poets will be those who will take it away from humanity.

Vittoria!  
Brrr! Brrr! Ssst!... Psss! Psss!...  
Cirr.... cirr.... cirr.... cirr.... Flutt flutt flutt....  
Ciac.... ciac... ciacc...  
Che è?  
Che non è?  
Sono felice! (Salaris, *Le futuriste* 47)<sup>266</sup>

Pushing the metaphor of love and war to the limit, the female Futurist writer Fanny Dini reaches the climax of desire to sacrifice the beloved person by translating that close relationship into an infinite connection with the “Other”, understood as everything the world has to offer: “– Vorrei uccidere la persona che amo—di più—fare del suo teschio una lampada—e andare a conversare di cose meravigliose con tutte le notti del mondo.” [– I would like to kill the person whom I love—even more—to make a lamp out of his skull—and go talk about wonderful things with all the nights of the world] (“Al futurismo trionfante”, Salaris, *Le futuriste* 90)

For Futurism, defining a new form of relationship between sexes goes beyond Marinetti’s oxymoronic “feminist misogyny”, which later evolved into a “wartime vision of woman as the epitome of corporality and the intelligence of the body” (Re 123). Gendered relationality became the object of an intellectual polemic after the publication of *Come si seducono le donne*, and saw the involvement of many Futurist women.<sup>267</sup> If, in Marinetti’s Futurist world, love is mainly a fast expression of bodily energies, for the Florentine group love involves a much more complex interaction, at both a sensual and intellectual level. Addressing Marinetti in an open letter, Robert Enif illustrates the actual relation of power between men and women, based on female intellectual superiority; being naturally wiser, women fake weakness to make men believe that

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<sup>266</sup> This is my married life. / Futurist? / Passatist? / The response is yours. / Will it end? / When? / I exult: it divides me, I diffuse joy. Triumph. / Victory! / Brrr! Brrr! Ssst!... Psss! Psss!... / Cirr.... cirr.... cirr.... cirr.... Flutt flutt flutt.... / Ciac.... ciac... ciacc... / What is it? / What is not? / I am happy!

<sup>267</sup> A selection of these articles was later published as the appendix to the second edition of *Come si seducono le donne* under the rubric “Polemiche sul presente libro” [Polemics against the book on hand].

they have mastered the art of seduction. In the opinion of the “Parolibera futurista” [Futurist Paroliberist]—as she signs the article—the verb “sedurre” [seduce] derives from the cliché of the predator-prey game. Criticizing this passatist heritage, Enif proposes a positive definition of love:

E che aspettiamo a definire l’amore come un’intelligente cooperazione tra i due sessi che cercano insieme con eguali diritti, egual volontà la soluzione di un problema psico-fisiologico più o meno urgente? (Appendix, *Come si seducono le donne* iv)<sup>268</sup>

Although this definition seems to allow a possible compromise, Crepuscularism and Futurism do not seem to find any real conciliation between the necessity of satisfying sensual pleasure and the human search for a spiritual communion with universal otherness. The bridge that links the reflection of the two movements is indeed the notion of love as a relationship that implies a cognitive sacrifice, namely accepting the inability to understand the partner, either “knowing” or not knowing his/her body. This concept finds its match in the Crepuscular definition of love, proposed by the Futurist female writer Shara Marini. For her, love entails a barely definable experience, as nobody can help to love what s/he will never fully conquer: “Si ama quello che non si è toccato e non si toccherà mai” [One loves what one has never touched and will never touch] (*Come si seducono le donne* xiv). This is why some men cannot understand women as, in contrast to Gozzano’s image of the unpicked roses,<sup>269</sup> they have “sempre goduto e calpestato questo fiore per poterlo amare” [always enjoyed and stepped on this flower to be able to love it] (*Come si seducono le donne* xiv). A similar Crepuscular feeling appears in prose by

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<sup>268</sup> What are we waiting for to define love as an intelligent cooperation between the two sexes that together finds the solution to more or less urgent psychophysical problems with equal rights, and equal will?

<sup>269</sup> Cfr. Gozzano, “Cocotte”: “Non amo che le rose / che non colsi. Non amo che le cose / che potevano essere e non sono / state...” [I love only that / roses that I never plucked. I love only what / could once have come to be and never will...] (*TP* 190, *TM* 119).

Soffici, which testifies to the personal evolution of the writer outside Futurism. Commenting on a crucial moment in which the protagonist ego could have revealed his feelings to a girl, Soffici explains that the highest form of love was letting the partner go, preserving her from an inevitable romantic failure:

Sentii allora che potevo amarla, che forse l'amavo [...]—ma non dissi nulla e non mi mossi. A che pro? Tutti gli amori finiscono così male, che l'atto più profondamente amoroso è forse di nascondere agli esseri amati i palpiti del nostro cuore. (*Arlecchino* 81)<sup>270</sup>

Once again, relational knowledge remains trapped in the hubris of knowing what would be better to ignore. This impasse nourishes the Crepuscular and Futurist self-destructive love, a relational semi-bridge built on the cognition that even the synthesis of two bodies does not reach their mutual “comprehension.” This unsatisfied cognitive thirst overflows in a broader search for “the other”, conceived as a never-ending process of conquest, which is animated by a unique certainty: “fuori delle contingenze / Il prisma dei tempi e dei sentimenti / muore al dettaglio” [beyond the contingences / The prism of times and feelings / dies in detail] (Soffici, “Noia”, *Simultaneità* 30).

### 6.3 Noisy Communication

While demonstrating that dialogism and love are relational dead-ends, Crepuscularism and Futurism show how actual interaction only occurs under disturbing conditions. Focusing on what Montale will later define as “l’anello che non tiene” [the link that doesn’t hold] (“Non chiederci la parola”), these two Avant-Gardes reveal how the missing links in the chain of human

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<sup>270</sup> I then felt that I could love her, that perhaps I loved her—but I did not say anything and I did not move. What for? Every love ends so badly that the most loving act is maybe hiding the palpitations of our heart from the one we love.



communication are fraught with meaning. Adopting counter-logic, both movements draw attention to the communicative gap of bourgeois society, making the infinite number of points that separate the “ego-Achilles” from “the other-tortoise” visible. They investigate the meaning of the communicative dispersion in the endless sequence of micro-intermediate distances needed to cover half the distance, and before that, half of half the distance, and half of half of half of the distance. Addressing this constitutional and yet hidden issue, Crepuscularism and Futurism delve into the territory of disturbed, missed, or misunderstood communication, showing how interference and miscommunication can open unexpected routes towards “the other.” This apparent contradiction translates into a commentary on the deforming power of art; if literature cannot help to transfigure its object of knowledge during its cycle of creation and interpretation, every literary communication is indeed a production of noise over a lost or ungraspable signal. Literature acts as an echo-sounder, transmitting a sound that bounces back, creating a perceptible reflection. Through this mechanism, the Avant-Garde triggers relationality through a “negative” re-echoing of noises, rather than through the transmission of “positive” sound.

Crepuscular “noises” can be generically conceived as the interference that obstructs communication. Though barely perceptible, these soft noises are signals of a lost connection and allude to the primary loss of significance that affects any relational praxis. In “Spleen”, by Corazzini, the voice of “the other” is virtually hidden behind a pressing sequence of unanswered questions that become interference, but also the actual message of the barely attempted conversation. The “you” keeps silent, while the poetic I cannibalizes the dialogue, turning it into a theatrical monologue:

*Sei triste, mi dai pena  
questa sera; non canti, non mi parli...  
Che hai? malinconia  
di morire? Ti duoli*

*perché siamo soli?  
 Ricordi l'ultimo ballo  
 nel tuo salotto giallo  
 rosato dai tarli?  
 Sai che è primavera?  
 Io non me n'era accorto:  
 non ho rosai,  
 non ne ho avuto mai  
 nel mio triste orto. (O 132)<sup>271</sup>*

“Spleen” functions as a doorway to a distorted, cognitive dimension in which the ego pretends to be focused on his unhappy *amica* [female friend], and cannot help but divert his attention to *things*, pointing at small, meaningless details: the wood-worms, the unnoticed arrival of spring, and the rosebushes. One may conceivably wonder if the interlocutor is even part of the scene or if the entire dialogue constitutes a digression, among others, to kill time in the unending wait for a different type of relationality, namely for “chi / sappia farla [l’anima] vibrare?” [the one / who could make it come alive] (O 132, SE 23). The idea of an illusory dialogue that develops into a monologue also appears in Oxilia’s “Parole che vengono di lontano” [Words that come from far away]. The communicative setting of the poem is a phone call between two lovers presumably in an extra-marital affair. Instead of creating a contact, the call exhibits how wireless technology has only potentiated the deep lack of connection that makes “the (human) other” an unreachable, sealed monad. The poem interposes the words of the woman with the mechanic noises of the telephone, as if she were in relation *with* the medium, not *through* the medium:

*«Pronti! Pronti!» [...]
 L'apparecchio borbotta.
 «Pronti! Pronti! O mio amore.»*

*«Pronti! Pronti! Amor mio,
 sono giunta stamani.*

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<sup>271</sup> You’re sad, you make me worry / this evening; you don’t talk to me, don’t sing... / What is it? The melancholy / of dying? Are you sorry / because we’re all alone? / Do you still recall / the last dance in your yellow hall / now worn and moldering? / Do you know that it’s spring? / It hadn’t crossed my mind; /there are no roses here, / there never were / in this sad garden of mine. (SE 23)

*Ora siamo lontani.  
Sono triste» (un contatto) «amore mio!» (Poesie 107)<sup>272</sup>*

The receiver cannot fill the distance that the phone should have reduced, so, even though the call is going on, the poetic I visualizes the cord as an infinite line—emphasized by the alliteration of the sound “f”—that, in linking him to the lover, will never bring them together: “Odo la voce ma non vedo il volto... / E il filo il filo il filo / infinito tra noi” [I hear the voice but don’t see the face ... / And the wire the wire the wire / wide between us infinitely] (*Poesie* 108).

The use of onomatopoeic noises also marks the relational distance of “Invernale”, [A wintry scene] a poem by Gozzano set in an ice-rink where a couple is skating, when the ice suddenly cracks—“«... cri... i... i... i... icch...» / l’incrinatura il ghiaccio rabescò, stridula e viva.” [“...Cri...i...i...icch”... / in an arabesque across / the ice, shrill and alive, the crack appeared.] (*TP* 149, *TM* 29). The cracking ice refers to the crumbling relationship and the attempt to continue to skate on the cracking ice is the ultimate foolish attempt to maintain a close connection with “the other”:

*Fatto lieve così come uno spettro,  
senza passato più, senza ricordo,  
m’abbandonai con lei nel folle accordo  
di larghe rote disegnano il vetro. (TP 149)<sup>273</sup>*

The poetic persona tries to overcome the uncomfortable feeling of abandonment, but the noise becomes more threatening: “Dall’orlo il ghiaccio fece cricch, piú tetro... / dall’orlo il ghiaccio fece cricch, piú sordo...” [At the edge the ice more darkly groaned... / and at the edge the ice more deeply cracked...] (*TP* 149, *TM* 29). Trying to knowing “the other” becomes a

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<sup>272</sup> “Pronti! Pronti!” [...] / The device mumbles. / “Pronti! Pronti! Oh my love”, // “Pronti! Pronti! My love, / I arrived this morning. / Now we are far. / I am sad” (a contact) “my love!”

<sup>273</sup> Light as a phantom suddenly, unbound, / no memory left, no past to recollect, / I gave myself to her in a mad compact. / Across the glass we circled round and round. (*TM* 29)

dangerous challenge that terrorizes the I; he attempts to reach the ice-skating girl one last time, calling her name, but she ignores him. The communication is broken, like the ice, and silenced by its cracking noise. The poem closes with an abrupt, ice-cold scene, in which the character's proxemics and haptics antiphrastically accompany the laconic comment of the woman, who shakes his hand, whispering: “— Vile! —!” [“You coward”] (*TP* 150, *TM* 31).

These few examples illustrate how the universe of Crepuscular relations uses “noises” to highlight latent gaps while offering a communicative buffer for the lack of interaction. The question that these noises raise can be restated thus: What if, behind Corazzini's “dialogical monologue”, Oxilia's infinite wire, and Gozzano's cracking ice, there was only a deep Pascalian abyss, accompanying the poetic ego? What if the *you* were only a reassuring hologram that the modernist, tantalizing ego created to justify itself—something that does not exist, even though, quoting the obscure Palazzeschian refrain, “la gente passando si ferma a guardarlo” [people passing by stop to look at it]?<sup>274</sup> At a visual level, Crepuscular poetry reifies the inescapable block in interpersonal relationships through the recurrent presence of gates, as these lines from various texts show:

*Dopo tanti anni, ieri. Il viale breve  
dietro il vecchio cancello si distende  
come un tempo; però sotto la neve  
non vi sono più fiori, [...] (Corazzini, “La villa antica”, O 173)<sup>275</sup>*

*L'oscuro viale dai mille cipressi  
che porta al cancello del grande piazzale  
è aperto a la gente.*

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<sup>274</sup> The image of people being speechless spectators of marvelous events is an obsessive motif that links together the poems of *I cavalli bianchi* by Palazzeschi.

<sup>275</sup> After many years, yesterday. The short boulevard / behind the old gate extends / like old times; but under the snow /there are no longer flowers [...] (“The ancient villa”)

*Soltanto il cancello non s'apre. (Palazzeschi, "Il cancello", TLP 8)<sup>276</sup>*

*Ho rivisto il giardino, il giardinetto  
contiguo, le palme del viale,  
la cancellata rozza dalla quale  
mi protese la mano ed il confetto... (Gozzano, "Cocotte", TP 190)<sup>277</sup>*

In this sleeping world, enchanted with sweet boredom and *mal de vivre*, gates are visual reminders of the relational boundaries of modernity, in which social rules keep people imprisoned in invisible, "soundproof" cages. Human communication is the attempt to control vital noise that poetry can only denounce, picturing the missed connection behind any interaction.

Incorporating noises into communication represents one of the aesthetic frontiers of Futurism. According to Futurist poetics, the harmony that traditional Latin syntax falsely creates must be destroyed and replaced with cacophonous sounds. The reason behind this aversion to classical musicality is strictly connected to the foundation of a new cognitive system. Futurist encounters occur only when relational expectations are blurred, tricked, or openly disposed. In the Founding Manifesto, boredom and fear of the unknown, as well as lack of effective communication, triggers the speeding Marinetti into the sudden reaction that causes the exceptional Futurist crash:

*Ecco ad un tratto venirmi incontro due ciclisti, che mi diedero torto, titubando davanti a me come due ragionamenti entrambi persuasivi e nondimeno contraddittorii. Il loro stupido dilemma discuteva sul mio terreno... Che noia! Auff!... Tagliai corto e per disgusto mi scaraventai colle ruote all'aria in un fossato... (TIF 9)<sup>278</sup>*

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<sup>276</sup> The obscure boulevard with thousands of cypresses /that leads to the gate of the big plaza / is open to people. / Only the gate doesn't open. ("The gate")

<sup>277</sup> I've seen the little garden once again / the one next door to it, the palm trees trailing / leaves down the avenue, the rusted railing / where the hand appeared with a piece of candy then... (TM 115)

<sup>278</sup> And there, suddenly, were two bicyclists right in front of me, cutting me off, as if trying to prove me wrong, wobbling like two lines of reasoning, equally persuasive and yet contradictory. Their stupid argument was being

Drawing a parallel between Marconi's introduction of wireless technology into media and Futurist aesthetics, Timothy Campbell highlights the pivotal importance of noisy entropy in Marinetti's communicative strategy. The war, with its maximum level of energetic interaction, increases entropy, producing the ideal noisy context for the Futurist cognitive process. "The machinery of war" and "its more accelerated arena" provide the ideal conditions for "the symbolic relation between objects and *parole in libertà*"; as Campbell remarks, "it is simply easier to reproduce the discourse of noise if you go where the noise is, and war is fundamentally a noisy and speedy affair" (*Wireless communication* 89). Under the Futurist laws of velocity, information is a flow of acoustic, visual, and olfactory wireless noise that must be immediately manipulated and turned into information.

Futurist noise also reshapes the process of reception and interpretation of the message. Futurist media practices are based on technical signals, which provoke predictable, unconscious physiological reflexes (Niebisch 344). Using this strategy, Marinetti exercised a powerful, physiological control over the masses, exposing his audience to an addictive message that was constantly instigating a public reaction. Changing noises from disturbing agents to the nuclei of the message, Futurism opens a new way to relate with "the other." Entering into contact implies reacting to the irreducible entropic nature of the cosmos, which noise embodies. Even in the jocular setting of the "Futurist evenings", the "dynamic and synoptic declamation" involved attacks on the audience as a communicative modality of reciprocal knowledge, based on the idea that physical penetration of the audience-space was a means to increase spectator involvement (Kirby 31).

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discussed right in my path . . . What a bore! Damn! . . . I stopped short, and to my disgust rolled over into a ditch, with my wheels in the air. . . (F 50)

Pushing this violent involvement of the audience to the limit, Futurism adopted actual noises in concerts with *intonarumori* [noise-intoners], producing “pathetic cries of ‘no more’ [...] from all the excited quarters of the auditorium.”<sup>279</sup> Marinetti defined the negative reaction of the horrified public as the “voluttà d’esser fischiati” [pleasure of being booed], explaining that what is applauded is not above average, but rather something mediocre, banal, re-vomited or over-digested (*TIF* 313). These performances of noises, far from random reproductions, were out-and-out compositions that aimed to *hit* the public with the confusing and irregular turmoil of life. According to Luigi Russolo’s manifesto “L’arte dei rumori” [The art of noises], noises have a higher cognitive value than sounds, being unpredictable and infinite. The overlap and fusion of noises and life has an extraordinary cognitive potential, as the relation between these two elements opens the way for an imaginative re-appropriation of reality—which is indeed bare noise:

Non sarà mediante una successione di rumori imitativi della vita, bensì mediante una fantastica associazione di questi timbri vari e di questi ritmi vari, che la nuova orchestra otterrà le più complesse e nuove emozioni sonore. (*MDF* 89)<sup>280</sup>

This idea also appears in the manifesto “Ricostruzione futurista dell’universo” [Futurist reconstruction of the universe], in which Balla and Depero aim to use the technique of plastic dynamism to communicate the “espressione [...] rumoristica” [noisy expression] of a universal vibration. Communication translates into re-creation of the world in *another* possible universe, in which even the invisible, the impalpable, the imponderable, and the imperceptible take shape and are continuously converted into noisy art-action. Noise arises as the pure potential of sound, from

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<sup>279</sup> Kirby reports a review by the *Times* on the concert of noise-intoners at the Coliseum in London on June 15, 1914.

<sup>280</sup> It will not be through a succession of noises imitating those of life, but through a fantastic combination of the various timbres and rhythms that the new orchestra will achieve the newest and most complicated aural emotions. (*F* 138)

which to create a new object—“l’arte diventa Presenza, nuovo Oggetto, nuova realtà creata cogli elementi astratti dell’universo.” [art is becoming Presence, new Object, new reality created with the abstract elements of the universe] (*MDF* 162, *F* 210)

#### **6.4 Relationality and Cognition of “The Other” as Silence and Synthesis**

Once translated into words, human relations are unintelligible noises that stand in for the inability of language to reach “the other”, and yet, relationality does not end with the communicational defeat of bourgeois language. Among the new possible nonverbal, relational horizons that the two Avant-Garde movements propose, two paths stand out: the Crepuscular Silence and the Futurist universal vibration. The search for a primal language emerges strongly in “Desolazione del povero poeta sentimentale.” In this, Corazzini’s “manifesto”, the crying of the little boy sounds as a scream for attention. Shedding tears is a form of “separation behavior that functions as an appeal for the caregiver’s presence” (Kay 27), expressing a need to reach “the other” that cannot be quantified or rationalized through words. As a behavior instinctually developed from the very moment of birth, crying constitutes a grade-zero action and is among the most basic physiological activities—and noises—that humanity shares. Corazzini’s crying child expresses an emotional response to the unsolvable, frustrating conflict with the adult and magniloquent poetry and begins an alternative form of interaction. His nonverbal communication intertwines the Latin stem *communio*—namely sharing in common—with the Christian usage of this word to designate the sacrament of *communion*. In the spiritual materiality of Eucharist, where the flesh and blood of Christ coexist in the transubstantiated matter of the bread and wine,



the little child finds a form of unmediated contact with the divine, understood as a rapture in the “universal other”:

*Io mi comunico del silenzio, quotidianamente, come di Gesù.  
E i sacerdoti del silenzio sono i romori,  
poi che senza di essi io non avrei cercato e trovato il Dio. (O 144)<sup>281</sup>*

Transcending human communication, Corazzini moves towards an ideal *koinonia*, conceived as an emotional and universal sharing of the divine in the Silence. In this mystical view, Silence is not a lack of noise; it is rather an animated nothingness in which otherness is too close to be distinguished; in the realm of silence, “the other” is a tangible “close distance” (Bodei 87). Corazzini describes this privileged entrance into the realm of silence in *Esortazione al fratello*. In this lyrical prose, the author fuses Gospel and Nietzschean aphorisms to illustrate the jolting status of feeling-together in solitude, in which “the other” is more of a shadow—a double—than a separate entity:

Sii semplice e puro come un fanciullo; non altra ombra godere se non quella generata dal prezioso lume della tua anima.  
E questo lume, assai dolce, sappia tu nutrire di olii non vani e curare affinché il suo raggio non sia parte di un tutto, ma un tutto, per se stesso. [...]  
E, con l’ombra, ama il silenzio, poiché l’ombra delle tue parole è il silenzio.  
Amalo come Calvario delle tue Immagini, come Croce del tuo Sogno, come Tomba della tua Anima. Saprà darti una stella per una parola, un’aquila per un grido, un pianto per un ricordo, sempre. [...] Lo spasimo bianco sarà per tenerti ognuna ora: tutto che di più infantile e di più lontano verrà a battere alla tua porta, dovrai accogliere nel profondo e goderti. La tua tristizia sarà quella de l’uomo che sempre ritorna: tristizia e letizia maggiore tu non saprai, né mai sapresti. (O 234)<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> I receive the Holy Communion of silence, daily, like that of Jesus. / And the priests of silence are the outcries, / since without them I would not have sought and found God. (SE 33)

<sup>282</sup> Be simple and pure like a little boy; do not enjoy any other shadow than that generated by the precious lamp of your soul.

And be able to nourish without vain oils this very sweet, lamp, so that its ray would not be part of a whole, but a whole, for itself. [...]

And, with the shadow, love the silence, as the shadow of your words is the silence.

Love it as a Calvary of your Images, as Cross of your Dream, as Tomb of your Soul, It will be able to provide you with a star for a word, an eagle for a scream, a cry for a memory, always. [...]

Adopting a mystical modern language, the Roman poet creates a sensorial fullness of silence that recalls Dante's inability to render the vision of God in human terms. Corazzini's mysticism borrows from Maeterlinck's notion of "active silence" as the messenger of the supreme and most sublime truths. According to the French Symbolist, silence is the medium of spiritual knowledge and soul-to-soul communication; as he states: "It is idle to think that, by means of words, any real communication can ever pass from one man to another" (*Silence* 32). From this perspective, silence becomes an active form of communication that allows for an overcoming of individual limits, which verbal language symbolizes; as Maeterlinck states "the true life, the only life that leaves a trace behind, is made up of silence alone" (*Silence* 33). This notion of silence as a full, connective void—"il silenzio che vede e che ascolta" [the silence that sees and listens] (*Soliloquio delle cose*, *O* 232)—constitutes an intimate oasis of reciprocal and direct understanding that dialogic interaction cannot reach. Silence also offers sensorial enhancements that combine and intensify listening and viewing. What Corazzini calls "visibile silenzio" [visible silence] (*O* 232) is a space of extrasensorial penetration of alterity, in which eyes and ears can grasp a perfect form of communion that does not inhabit spoken language.

In the enchanted melancholic world of Crepuscularism, in which noises are mild and barely perceptible, words prove to be so powerless that they are not even able to break the light film of these soft, disturbing agents. Palazzeschi's fairy-tale universe of *I cavalli bianchi*, with its voices and litanies, seems as if it is under a numbing spell that has turned interaction into iteration. Cursed into mechanical actions, the characters of the collection act to guarantee the

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The white spasm will occupy each hour: all the more infantile and remote things will knock at your door, you will have to receive them inside and enjoy yourself. Your sadness will be that one of the man that always comes back: you will never experience more sadness and joy, and neither would you.

repetition of an anonymous history and the transmission of unchangeable knowledge founded on an amorphous *vox populi*. In this setting, the only possible contact, as Aldele Dei highlights, is a silent gaze. Yet this silence lingers, inactive: The public, which otherwise would be absolutely passive, waits while looking at events that remain mysterious, in speechless astonishment and superstitious marvel (Introduzione xlv). The poem “La ferita del silenzio” [The wound of silence] refers to the spell of silence that stands above this enchanted land, where the spring, which makes a continuous, ignored noise of flowing water, symbolizes the eternal cyclical temporality that progress only apparently modifies. The bridge and the trains that link the mountains are connective agents that do not put people in communication, leaving the wound of silence eternally open and potentially accessible:

*Fa un lento romore costante  
la fonte ch'è sotto l'arcata del ponte  
che il monte riunisce pel passo dei treni. (TTP 17)*<sup>283</sup>

There are, though, silences that can heal this wound, or at least soothe the pain. For Gozzano's persona, silence becomes the actual road to the shelter that he ultimately finds. In a suggestive way, *I colloqui* closes its empty conversational effort with an invocation to be quiet:

*Meglio tacere, dileguare in pace  
Or che fiorito è il mio giardino,  
or che non punta ancora invidia tace. (TP 217)*<sup>284</sup>

This absence of literary communication is personified by the Muse that falls silent in her palace, like the beautiful countess Castiglione of whom people tell stories. Once again, Gozzano reflects on the unfillable gap between the bourgeois “favoleggiare” [telling of fabulous stories]

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<sup>283</sup> It makes a slow constant noise / the spring that is under the arch of the bridge / that the mountain links for the passage of trains.

<sup>284</sup> Better to fade away without a peep, / now while my garden's still in bloom today, / now while the tongue of envy's still asleep. (TM 165)

(*TP* 217) and the hidden truth that only silence can treasure. To survive the invented stories of his literary decline, Gozzano, in his mask as Countess Castiglione, can only respond with a forgery, perpetuating the everlasting circle of pretend relationality. The silence will eternalize his false *imago* as a young silent “other” that people will remember and talk about: “L’immagine di me voglio che sia / sempre ventenne, come un ritratto;” [I want my image to be always young / fixed at twenty, as by the artist’s hand] (*TP* 218, *TM* 167). The dimensions of literature and life remain indistinguishably entangled in Gozzano’s relationality. As Gozzano stated: “Non la vita foggia la letteratura: la letteratura foggia la vita” [Life does not shape literature: literature shapes life] (*Poesie e prose* 1078); thus, reading between the lines of his characters’ words and silences, it is impossible to determine where literature ends and life begins. Literature itself is too deforming a cognitive tool to be able to guarantee transparency, but “real” life has relegated truth to the pre-language of silence. In Gozzano’s labyrinthine world, it is indeed impossible to escape from the impasse of false truths and subtly distorted cognition. Literature is a Sphinx that reveals “the other” only through enigmas, while manipulating life.

The idea of transcending human communication offers a strong point of connection between Crepuscularism and the Futurist fringe of the Azur Patrol. In “Pittura dell’avvenire” [Painting of the future], Ginna exposes the need to abandon physical interaction in order to experience the presence of those vibrating forces that, similar to electricity or Hertz’s waves, propagate through the ether (*Manifesti* 203). Penetrating “the other” entails overcoming the ordinary image of the world and its usual relationships to perceive a field of strong forces that operate invisibly and silently. With this perspective, Ginna’s abstract art is a form of communicative detachment that finds a new language in the subconsciousness of the state of mind. His work *Occhi sul mondo* [Eyes on the world] seems to express this new form of

interaction that departs from the soul to reach other worlds: A big eye in the center of the canvas develops rays from its eyelashes that intersect with the sea and the sky. The iconography of the single eye—the so called “Occhio-Mente” [Eye-Mind] or of the eye of the angel—was a very popular *topos* in esoteric circles to symbolize a clairvoyant view that sees beyond human reality, permeating the invisible.

Through a different language, the urge to reach “the other” through a “full” silence emerges later in the most “orthodox” Futurism. In the thirties, Marinetti explored silence as a source of communication and relationality in his *Sintesi radiofoniche* [Radio synthesis]. In the synthesis “I silenzi parlano tra loro” [Silences speak among themselves], intermissions of “pure silence” interrupt sequences of sounds—notes of various musical instruments or mechanical and human noises.<sup>285</sup> As for Corazzini, Futurist silence is not an empty space but opens the doors for a new form of “penetrating communication” that trespasses “the barriers of human and technological communication”, realizing a global network (Luisetti, *A vitalist art* 289). Yet how is it possible to overcome these barriers? For Marinetti, the first step implies a negation of the dialogic relationship between the “I” and the “you.” The declaration of destroying the ego in literature is a popularized slogan; it has not been equally highlighted, though, that killing the traditional literary ego, with its dreadful logic and wisdom, implies the nullification of the

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<sup>285</sup> 15 seconds of pure silence.

A flute’s do re mi.

8 seconds of pure silence.

A flute’s do re mi.

29 seconds of pure silence. A piano’s sol. A trumpet’s do. 40 seconds of pure silence. A trumpet’s do. An infant’s wah wah. 11 seconds of pure silence. An eleven-year-old girl’s stupefied oooh. (Schnapp, *Radio Synthesis* 417).

“passatist” interlocutor in the magmatic chaos of the “universal vibration” (*TIF* 100). It is indeed the loss of the “you” that exercises the strongest impact on the development of a new model of communication and relationality.

Futurism substitutes a dialogical model, based on the dialectic interaction of thesis (ego) and anti-thesis (you/“the other”), for a model of communication that intuitively dissolves alterity into an abrupt synthesis. This synthetic process can be more easily visualized at a morphological level, in the adoption of the “sostantivo sintesi-moto” [synthesis-motion noun] that functions as a movable and attachable coach, and can be reshaped according to elastic and comprehensive analogies (*TIF* 101). Moving from the linguistic to the relational perspective, it is possible to see how Futurism must abandon the traditional “dialogical you” to embrace a synoptic communication in which the “you” can be infinitely multiplied in currents of crossing and parallel sensations (*TIF* 103). The notion of otherness is translated into a totalizing and constant feeling of being part of a whole. This longing for global ubiquity, which recurs in many Futurist manifestos, envisions and anticipates the twentieth-century conquests of digital communication, foreseeing the need to erase distances, attaining an infinite potential for interaction:

Gli uomini [...]. Oggi posseggono il senso del mondo; hanno mediocrementemente bisogno di sapere ciò che facevano i loro avi, ma bisogno assiduo di sapere ciò che fanno i loro contemporanei di ogni parte del mondo. Conseguente necessità per l'individuo di comunicare con tutti i popoli della terra. Conseguente bisogno di sentirsi centro, giudice e motore dell'infinito esplorato e inesplorato. Ingigantimento del senso umano e urgente necessità di fissare ad ogni istante i nostri rapporti con tutta l'umanità. (*TIF* 69)<sup>286</sup>

Conceiving relationality as a holistic form of energetic and conflicting exchange entails, for Futurism, a simplification of the view of “the other” as a potential, dynamic form of the ego-

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<sup>286</sup> People [...]. Today possess the sense of the world; they scarcely have the need to know what their ancestors used to do, but have the constant need to know what their peers from any part of the world are doing. Consequent necessity of the individual to communicate with all the people in the world. Consequent need to feel the center, judge and engine of the explored and unexplored infinite. Magnification of the human sense and urgent necessity of establishing our relationships with the whole of humanity at every instant.

in-motion. The ego-in-becoming is already a (potential) other. In different terms, this concept emerges in *Arlecchino* by Soffici, in which the author states that the only way towards relational knowledge is to abandon the search for exact definitions, merging into a synthetic “comprehension” of any alterity:

Perché volete che mi decida a dire se l’esistenza di tutti questi esseri e queste cose sia subordinata al mio essere che li concepisce; se essi sono in me o fuori di me; se per me il soggetto si identifica con l’oggetto? Dillo tu professore ebreo che disprezzai tanto ieri sera e che non puoi comprendermi? [...] Che mi importa a me della verità? Io non voglio che vivere e amare. Amare non vuol dire comprendere? [...] Io vorrei quest’ottobre salire ancora su questa collina, verso il tramonto, con i miei tre amici e la mia unica amica, e che tutti con un bicchiere di aleatico in mano, fossimo d’accordo nel dire che l’universo è perfetto e che l’amore è la sua legge—E sentirlo, non altro. (15-6)<sup>287</sup>

Soffici’s idea of comprehensively feeling rather than intellectualizing the object of inquiry can be associated with the notion of synthesis that Marinetti states in the manifesto “Il teatro futurista sintetico” [The Futurist Synthetic Theatre]:

Sintetico  
cioè brevissimo. Stringere in pochi minuti, in poche parole e in pochi gesti innumerevoli situazioni, sensibilità, idee, sensazioni, fatti e simboli. (*TIF* 114)<sup>288</sup>

Through the theatrical synthesis, the encounter with “the other”—namely with the reality that vibrates around us (*TIF* 117) and inside us—realizes a new form of understanding that overcomes the fussy logic of a detailed explanation, as in real life “non ci accade mai di afferrare un avvenimento interamente con tutte le sue cause e conseguenze” [one never grasps an event entirely, in all its causes and consequences] (*TIF* 117, *F* 206). Far from providing a harmonic

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<sup>287</sup> Why did you want that I resolve to say if the existence of all these beings and these things is subordinated to my being that conceives them; if they are inside me or outside me; if for me the subject identifies with the object? Let’s tell, Jewish professor that I despised so much last night, you cannot understand me? [...] What do I care of truth? I want nothing more than living and loving. Doesn’t loving mean understanding? [...] This October I would like to go up on this hill, at about twilight, with my three friends and my only girlfriend, and that we all, with a glass of aleatico in hand, agree in saying that the universe is perfect and that love is its law.—And feel it, nothing more.

<sup>288</sup> Synthetic

that is, very brief. Into a few minutes, into a few words and gestures, we must compress innumerable situations, sensibilities, ideas, sensations, facts, and symbols. (*F* 205).

and logical synthesis of “the other”, Futurism, as well as Crepuscularism, reconstructs the daily, fragmentary cognition of modern life, outside any bourgeois moral or social order. The two Avant-Gardes make visible how life is an unreeled assemblage of human and nonhuman “pezzi di disputa” [flashes of argument] that we collect in our spirit as dynamic fragmentary symphonies of gestures, worlds, noises and light (*TIF* 118, *F* 206). Moving towards a form of cinematographic poli-expressive symphony, both Crepuscularism and Futurism strive for a synthetic language that is embodied by the nascent media, performing a literary “cinematographic” fusion of silence, noises, music, and visual images to express the unfinished puzzle of relationality.



## CONCLUSION

Gli altri? Chi sono gli altri? [...] Io stesso sono il centro del mondo sensibile anzi tutto il mondo intero con tutte le sue propaggini e diramazioni. (*Lettere a F.T. Marinetti* 103)<sup>289</sup>

In a letter to Marinetti, the Crepuscular-Futurist Govoni refers to the tragic senselessness of the war and, from the perspective of this “contingenza transitoria” [transitory contingency] (103), defines “being in the world” as being the world itself. It is an almost unnoticed, and yet pivotal, shift from the initial profession of self-centrism—I am the center of the world—to the later statement that affirms a new cognitive and ontological notion of an ego-world. In 1915, when Italian Avant-Garde was mostly already over, fading under the influence of War Word I, this image ideally shows the heritage of the Crepuscular and Futurist experience of the author.

In the letter, the he ego turns into an open world—a bare “thing” filled to the point of explosion and potential interaction with everything. Filling the gap between perceiver and perceived, Govoni envisions his I as an oxymoronic container of the entirety of living matter, which he embodies but seeks also to trespass. Hanging between Crepuscular martyrdom and the Futurist “lotte più belle e feconde” [more beautiful and fruitful fights], Govoni contemplates the (Corazzinian) “via del sacrificio e del martirio e forse della salvezza?” [path of sacrifice and martyrdom and perhaps salvation] (102) while pondering his own nullification, through a silent

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<sup>289</sup> The others? Who are the others? [...] I myself am the center of the sensible world, or rather the entire world with all its offshoots and ramifications.

and obscure “animalistic” defeat—to tie a stone around his neck and throw himself in a river, drowning like a cat (102).

In this brief statement, Govoni expresses *in nuce*, the *destructive* journey of the Avant-Garde, from Crepuscularism to Futurism, in the first quarter of the twentieth century; a journey that marks a radical transition in the insight into human cognition of life. Designing a new universe, the Avant-Garde does not start, as commonly believed, with the destruction of traditional language, but with the demolition of the modern ego. Crepuscularism covers a fundamental, pre-Futurist function in undermining the pillars of modernity. The modern paradigm, conceived as the biopolitical product of the Age of Reason, is the principle target of the Crepuscular sabotage of tradition. The movement opposes the *homo politicus*, endowed with civic sense and ruling power over humans and things with a series of weak anti-heroes, who cast doubt on the possibility of people distinguishing themselves from things and dominating material life. Sick children, old illiterates, and dumb beguines invade literature, challenging the Law of scientific knowledge, as well as the Romantic teleology, with unwritten rules of uncertainty, ambiguity, and disorder.

Forerunning Marinetti’s manifestos, Crepuscular writers invalidate the modern apparatus based on artificial scientific norms, revealing the limits of a paradigm that imprisons humanity within cognitive and ontological dividing lines, in order to guarantee the sovereignty of the rational subject. Thus, Crepuscularism is not the singing of malady, disempowerment, and melancholic, provincial life. Behind the bold affirmation of *not knowing anything* and *not being anything*, which cuts across all the main texts of the movement, there is a conscious, polemic message. The common denominator of Crepuscularism, from Corazzini’s mystical poetry to Gozzano’s “school of irony”, is the proposal of another possible “un-modern” approach towards

life, open to the most irrational, nonsensical, and threatening sides of a polymorphic existence. From this perspective, the Crepuscular dissident message sets the ground for the rebellious wave that Futurism later explicated in a louder tone, proclaiming the death of logical reason and the rise of an irrational spirit, nourished with fire, hate, and speed.

Introducing Crepuscularism into a more global context, it is essential to understand its role as a bridge between French Symbolism, American Transcendentalism, and Futurist Avant-Garde. It is an historical fact that Crepusculars were relatively isolated, yet it would be simplistic to label their work “provincial” due to the geographic bounds of the movement or the claustrophobic settings of their poems. It also reductive to identify their prosaic and humble style with the voice of a regressive and submissive poetry. In their presumed provincial retreat, Crepuscular works portray a society that, under the pretense of technological and political progress, does not even have full control over its more domestic and habitual spaces. Looking at the quotidian “miniature world” of bourgeois life through the magnifying lens of poetry, Crepuscularism turns this microcosmos into a fairy-tale setting, enchanted with the spell of routine and spleen.

The Crepuscular poetic background shows the influence of Symbolist poets—mainly Jammes and Maeterlinck—in the creation of a melancholic and enigmatic atmosphere, the obsession with quotidian tools, and the ambiguous religiosity that pervades the texts. Thus, Crepuscular provincialism is not a limiting factor in the development of this movement, but rather testifies to its openness and receptiveness to French culture. In particular, the adoption of domestic spaces, represented by estranged perspectives, turns any quotidian detail—house décor, devotional objects, and knickknacks—into something alien and mysterious, declaring the powerlessness of reason even in an encounter with the most “known” life. In maturing these

reflections from Symbolist motives, Crepuscularism poetry does not, however, create an Italian Symbolist filiation. Rather it embellishes this component to the extreme, questioning its theory of correspondences. Crepuscular poets break the Baudelairian relationship between the man passing through a forest of symbols and his ability to grasp them. While in the Crepuscular world things seem to “look with understanding eyes” (Baudelaire, “Correspondances”), it is impossible to associate a univocal meaning to those symbols, as they proliferate and overlap. Things lay as opened eyes—like “occhi aperti smisuratamente nell’ombra terribile” [wide-open eyes in the terrible shadow] (Corazzini, *Soliloquio delle cose*, O 233)—but remain unintelligible. From this post-Symbolic perspective, quotidian objects act as reminder of an unsolved knot: What do humans know about themselves? What do they know about the things surrounding them?

These two central interrogatives are the foundation of the rebellious act that Avant-Garde pursued against the modern system and its attempt to solve the entanglement of life through rational self-deception. As Bruno Latour argued in his essay *We have never been modern*, modernity relies on a dual, antithetic process that opposes a practice of “purification” to a practice of “hybridization” (51). Although the modern apparatus tries to divide nature from culture, human from nonhuman, subjects from things, it cannot help to deal with the uncontrollable mixing of these elements. The Avant-Garde functions, thus, as an open denunciation of a system that sharply separates categories in order to disregard the possibility of living in a pre-modern “middle-kingdom” inhabited by hybrids.

Crepuscularism and Futurism are indeed Avant-Gardes, and not solely for their attack on modern language. Similar restrictive views have generated, especially for the Futurist movement, an identification of its message with Marinetti’s provocative manifestos and experimentations with words in freedom. Through the demolition of the nineteenth-century literary *koinè*, the

Avant-Garde puts under siege a system of thought that has elevated man as the rational and moral ruler of “things”, detaching humanity from its more instinctual, irrational, and basic “thing-like being.” Borrowing from various spiritual and philosophical approaches that conceive life in terms of vital energies—from Neo-Platonism to Nietzsche and Bergson—Crepuscularism and Futurism reshape the modern universe on the basis of a cognitive and ontological hybridization with all-encompassing matter.

In promoting this view, both movements abandon the egocentric perspective of Modernism that, although showing a fragmented subject in crisis, is still anchored to the separation of the I-perceiver from the perceived surrounding reality. It is worth highlighting, though, that in the Italian context, Modernism assumes a dual literary and spiritual dimension, which Crepuscularism inherits and further elaborates. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Modernism was a religious movement animated by a desire for renovation within the Roman Church. Among the ideas that Modernist writers divulged was a re-evaluation of the immanent side of the religious experience. In a different and extreme way, which also borrows from thinkers like the Belgian Maurice Maeterlinck and the American Waldo Emerson, Crepuscularism fuses the Modernist positions about the personal experience of faith with a broader notion of *anima mundi*, which translates into an “animism of things.” This renovation of the poetic of things constitutes the skeleton of the Avant-Garde mission, which Crepuscularism realized, at a cognitive and ontological level, prior to Futurism.

Reinventing the notion of knowledge implies, both for Crepuscularism and Futurism, a redefinition of the common idea that cognition refers to or produces an *object* of knowledge. This also involves the demystification of the scientific method based on the I-observer and on finding objective and universal laws. The Avant-Garde reexamines the question of cognition,

overcoming the idea of knowledge as intellectual dominance over “things.” Cognition becomes, for both movements, a form of immediate intuition that trespasses into an experience of metamorphic *sympatheia* with the world. This form of analogic and irrational cognition translates, in Futurist terms, into a totalizing immersion of the human into the nonhuman, through the “psicologia intuitiva della materia” [intuitive psychology of the matter] (*TIF* 52). Banning rational knowledge, Crepuscularism and Futurism seek the intuitive glimpse that allows for a temporary, participative understanding of the mysterious meaning of reality. Knowledge is no longer intellectual speculation and experimentation, but an ephemeral epiphany in which the essence of matter manifests itself. While Crepuscularism still adopts a more cautious language, alluding to the status of “feeling like a thing” or “being a living thing”, Marinetti states his “theory of knowledge” as an accelerated path towards an intuitive participation in the life of matter, which denies any previous cognitive process and any boundary between ontological categories:

Collo scoprire nuove analogie tra cose lontane e apparentemente opposte noi le valuteremo sempre più intimamente. Invece di umanizzare animali, vegetali, minerali (sistema sorpassato) noi potremo animalizzare, vegetalizzare, mineralizzare, elettrizzare o liquefare lo stile, facendolo vivere della stessa vita della materia. Es., per dare la vita di un filo d’erba, dico: «sarò più verde domani». (“Distruzione della sintassi. Immaginazione senza fili. Parole in libertà”, *TIF* 73)<sup>290</sup>

This perspective of openness towards the Unknown reverses the traditional opposition between knowledge and ignorance. Crepuscularism and Futurism conceive not knowing as a maximum openness towards anything. “La morte di Tantalò”, Corazzini’s poetic last will, stands as the Crepuscular “manifesto” of a new vision of cognition. The verb *errare*—to err, but also to wander—identifies two fluid gendered characters who, after liberating themselves from the

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<sup>290</sup> Instead of humanizing animals, vegetables, and minerals (a bygone system) we will be able to animalize, vegetize, mineralize, electrify, or liquefy our style, making it live the very life of matter. For example, to render the life of a blade of grass, we might say: “I will be greener tomorrow.” (*F* 147)

chains of a pre-imposed knowledge, are finally free to enjoy the “ignorance” of any restrictive Law and to be, in a Nietzschean fashion, interpreters of their own destiny. Cognition thus becomes destructive creation, antedating the Futurist pyromania and its scorched-earth strategy intent on producing a radical new from the burning wisdom from the past.

This radical change in the cognitive approach problematizes the role of materiality in everyday life. If knowing means ignoring the human-nonhuman boundaries and participating in matter, and if man is a thing among other things, what indeed are things? Ushering in a provocative “terminal Realism” while also denying the notion of things as pure symbols, Crepuscularism and Futurism deeply investigate the role of materiality. In their universe affected by *horror vacui*, things are an obsessive presence and constant reminder of the contrast between the purpose of objects and their life beyond usability.

Critics have constructed the myth of Futurism as an ode to machines that evolves into a form of idolatry for the products of modern technology. By contrasting, the old and forgotten Crepuscular “little things” that cannot be ultimately dismissed seem the empty simulacra of a past that is gone, but is irrationally regretted. Standing before the modern humanity with their dusty and outdated appearance, these useless objects represent an archaic world that is still alive and present, although technological progress would argue otherwise. Yet setting the two movements in opposition in relation to their approach to “modern things” does not take into account the way Futurist hyper-technological objects, like their Crepuscular antecedents, are also dysfunctional and useless. Although Futurist machines are apparently shiny and fast, they live under the impending law of consumption: They can be new only if they remain unused and useless, *paralyzed* in the fictional eternity of literature and art. Once they are used and old, they are no longer Futurist. The very usability of Futurist objects is what would keep them from the

dream of speedy and aggressive machines, conceived as dynamic prostheses of the human body. Paradoxically, objects can be new, fast, and “futuristic” only if they remain immobile. Not by chance, even the most trivial Futurist things—like cards, pictures, and pottery—are now regarded as *objects trouvés*, treated like “Crepuscular relics” and jealously collected by Avant-Garde fetishists. (Unconsciously?) highlighting the inherent contradiction of the fast obsolescence of technology and the new, Crepuscularism and Futurism foresee questions of materiality that have become central in an epoch in which the usable life of things is very brief and infinitely long, due to the ongoing process of virtualization and digitalization. From this perspective, the Avant-Garde illustrates two main aspects of our post-millennial approach to things: the fleeting Futurist life cycle of modern objects and the Crepuscular eco-critical need to preserve things from their foretold death.

The Avant-Garde expands its reflections on knowledge and thingness, intertwining these two complimentary discourses on the representation of the body. In the process of the dissolution and redefinition of the traditional “flesh-and-soul” ego, the body occupies a primary space. The corporeal dimension rises as the primary locus of the organic and inorganic encounter, giving birth to anti-modern quasi-humans or quasi-things. In Crepuscular and Futurist works, the body develops into the hybrid space *par excellence*—a perceptive area in a state of continuous becoming. In this respect, Gozzano’s self-definition as a “thingy with two legs” *materializes* the ego as the unlimited potential to be everything.

This idea returns under many guises, from Corazzini and Ginanni’s mystic dissolution of the body into living nothingness to Palazzeschi’s grotesque hero made of vanishing smoke. It also appears in the Marinettian project of the Futurist man with interchangeable parts. Being made of molding clay, dynamically shaped and reshaped in the moment, implies a process of



dismemberment of the traditional body into scattered parts, actual vivisection at its extreme. The body reveals its most extraneous and repellent side, denouncing the uncanniness that centuries of gendered *kalokagathia* have tried to hide. Crepuscularism and Futurism propose ambiguous models that criticize the performativity of gender in early twentieth-century society, parodying the bourgeois family model with alternative figures, such as the de-masculinized Crepuscular boys or the hyper-masculine Futurist Mafarka, who dreams of conceiving a son without female reproductive organs. This subversion of the bourgeois order, or rather of its normative illusion of order, is announced by anti-Promethean and insurrectionary messiahs that overthrow the canonic image of the hero as a guarantee of lawfulness. As Avant-Garde Zarathustras, the Crepuscular and Futurist borderline characters act as intellectual martyrs, announcing the deaths of the Enlightenment's gods and the need to accept the entropic force of Life with an ironic, liberating laugh.

Knowledge marks a moment of encounter with "the other", especially in an epoch experiencing the first wave of technological mass communication. Exploring the relational aspect of cognition, the Avant-Garde exhibits, once again, its typical destructive-reconstructive action. The target for both Crepuscularism and Futurism is the traditional dialogism, which in bourgeois society is a form of iteration without interaction. Puppets' conversations, idle chitchats, nonsensical misunderstandings, and actual verbal attacks occupy the dialogic space, violating the rules of a standard exchange in which an "I" and "you" are involved in the production and negotiation of a message. Conversely, Crepuscular and Futurist works sabotage canonic communication, turning it into the realm of noise, broadly conceived as the actual sound of life that normative interaction tries to cover. From a Lacanian perspective, the Crepuscular "soft noises" and the Futurist loud concerts of "intonarumori" [noise-intoners] represent *the Real*

“espressione rumoristica” [noisy expression] of the universe, which language has tried to conceal and standardize. From this common ground, Crepuscularism and Futurism search for pre-linguistic forms of penetrating communion rather than communication. This approach ranges from a mystical conception of Silence as a full void in which the ego breaks the human boundaries in the act of finding “the other”, to energetic Futurist exchanges in war-like, symbiotic collisions.

Critical approaches that have strictly separated Crepuscularism from Futurism on the basis of Marinetti’s manifestos and his poetic of words in freedom have investigated the Avant-Garde “symptom” without looking at its causes and effects. Drawing on a bigger picture, it is possible to see how Futurism shares a common reaction towards the bounds that modernity set with Crepuscularism. Thus, the actual Avant-Garde component of these two movements finds its roots in the proposition of a cognitive and ontological anti-modern paradigm that foresees current challenges. To rethink the rational parameters of a society founded on a ruling ego means questioning the agency of humans in relation with the realm of things.

The historical Avant-Garde preannounced the impossibility of conceiving humanity as disconnected from material and virtual things. In an era in which living things animated by artificial intelligence proliferate casting doubts on our intellectual superiority, and “the man multiplied by the machine” has come true, the Avant-Garde has not exhausted its provocative spirit and seems to have confirmed that things have indeed changed the face of humanity. Virtual life has realized multiple identities from the same physical body, erasing for good the gendered “flesh-and-soul” model that Crepuscularism and Futurism had begun to undermine in the early twentieth century. Extending this path of inquiry, it would be fascinating to investigate how more contemporary literary and visual cultures have inherited the Avant-Garde discourse on things in

their portrayals of the trade-off between the modern paradigm of *homo faber* and his or her obvious dependence on materiality, not only as raw materials but also as integral parts of self- and relational identification.

The latest reflections on the posthuman, ranging from political to genetic issues, find their theoretical bases in the poststructuralist tradition. Undeniably, Post-structuralism has ushered in a challenge to the “dominant image of thoughts as the expression of a white, masculine, adult, heterosexual, urban-dwelling, property-owning subject” (Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory* 6). Nevertheless, Crepuscularism and Futurism—in its Avant-Garde phase—partially anticipated the erosion of this embodiment, envisioning post-anthropocentric positions, breaking the traditional unity of the subject and its division from animal and material domains. The two movements have also foreseen another central aspect of contemporary life: the environmental impact of the complex relation between the organic and inorganic. From this perspective, the expanding agency of things over humanity is evident and problematic. Who is in control of what, in dealing with recycling issues, toxic waste, and environmentally unsustainable sources of energy?

In the conflict between the regret for an unrecoverable past and the excitement for hyper-technological progress, Crepuscularism and Futurism suggest approaches towards materiality. They call for a co-participative environment, triggering eco-critical reflections on the relations between modern urbanization and natural preservation of wilderness. Overcoming the idea of human intellectual detachment from living matter, they foster an innovative view of space that “uomini e cose affratella” [fraternize humans and things] (Vallini, “L’ironia”, *UGA* 102). In this no-man’s-land being human means being part of a living organism that humanity can comprehend, only when respecting its mystery in a mutual relation of “osmotic alterity”— as “l’ignoto non teme la luce / del nostro cervello” [the unknown doesn’t fear / the light of our

brain] (102). From this perspective, the ironic human debasement of Crepuscularism opens to environmentalist readings that are far more contingent than the Futurist mechanical dream. With its levity and delicate mordancy, Crepuscularism teaches humanity about its own (rational) weakness, leaving the reader with many interrogatives and only one truth:

*Come si muore e si vive  
all'ombra del Tutto e del Nulla?  
Silenzio. Mai nessun Buddha  
c'insegnerà come si vive! (UGA 102-3)<sup>291</sup>*

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<sup>291</sup> How does one die and live / in the shadow of Everything and Nothing? / Silence. No Buddha / will ever teach us how to live!

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