

Jenny Ponzio

**Religious Narratives in Italian Literature after the Second Vatican Council**

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Jenny Ponzio

# **Religious Narratives in Italian Literature after the Second Vatican Council**



A Semiotic Analysis

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# Introduction

La littérature est un dévoilement de l'homme  
et du monde, disait Sartre; et il avait raison.  
Elle ne serait rien si elle ne nous permettait  
pas de mieux comprendre la vie.  
*Todorov (1984: 188)*

The aim of this book is to study a sample of recurring religious themes in Italian fiction published after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). This chronological point of reference has been chosen due to the innovative character of the Council and its significant repercussions in Italian culture. Indeed, the Second Vatican Council constitutes a key moment in the history of Catholicism in which the Church, after carefully examining the contemporary situation, firmly took a stance in favor of “modernity” and encouraged practitioners to adapt her traditions to the new needs of contemporary society. The research presented herein explores some facets of the post-conciliar religious sensibility such as it is expressed in literature. As the analysis reveals, there are several controversial aspects of religious concepts that have ancient roots but have assumed a peculiar character in light of the new positions adopted by the Church. In particular, this book investigates the complex set of ideas expressed by Italian writers about the biblical narration of human origins and traditional religious language and ritual, the perceived clash between the immanent and transcendent nature and role of the Church, and the problematic notion of sanctity emerging from contemporary narrative. The method adopted for this study of a wide corpus of narrative texts – mostly novels – is inspired by semiotics, including both its linguistic and narratological branches.

## a The Second Vatican Council and literature

In the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, Catholicism has been obliged to face the growth of alternative and competing worldviews entailing ideas, values, and narratives that differ profoundly from those presented in Church tradition. The Roman Church herself has undergone important internal changes the main expression of which is the policy of *aggiornamento* sanctioned by the Second Vatican Council. In particular, the conciliar Fathers ascertained that “Profound and rapid changes are spreading by degrees around the whole world. Triggered by the intelligence and creative energies of man, these changes recoil upon him, upon his decisions and desires [...] and upon his manner of thinking and acting with re-

spect to things and to people” (*Gaudium et Spes* 1965: n. 4). According to this view, a new secular mentality accompanying a period of growing upheaval led people to abandon God and religion: “Unlike in former days, the denial of God or of religion, or the abandonment of them, are no longer unusual and individual occurrences. For today it is not rare for such things to be presented as requirements of scientific progress or of a certain new humanism. In numerous places these views are voiced not only in the teachings of philosophers, but on every side they influence literature, the arts [...]. As a consequence, many people are shaken” (*Gaudium et Spes* 1965: n. 7).

In response to increasing secularization, the Roman Catholic Church announced a policy of *aggiornamento* or adaptation of her traditional teachings to the modern world. Just as the Church identified the impact of secularization on literature and the arts, a part of her response consisted of seeking to transform these aesthetic media as a necessary component of the mission of salvation. The most obvious aspect of this semiotic shift was the vernacularization of the mass. More than a simple act of translation, this shift also reflected a new way of thinking about signs and communication, not only between the Church and her members (and non-members) but also between the deity and human beings.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the Second Vatican Council issued its own prescriptions about artistic expression. In the constitution about liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963), the Church strongly emphasizes that content be prioritized over form (i.e. the “semantic function,” see Yelle: forthcoming). While “The Church has not adopted any particular style of art as her very own...” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 1963: n. 123), it does provide precise guidelines concerning the message and goal of the arts: “[The fine] arts, by their very nature, are oriented toward the infinite beauty of God which they attempt in some way to portray by the work of human hands; they achieve their purpose of redounding to God’s praise and glory in proportion as they are directed the more exclusively to the single aim of turning men’s minds devoutly toward God” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 1963: n. 122). The question is to what extent such ideas have been translated into the domain of secular Italian literature.

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<sup>1</sup> For a general introduction to the Second Vatican Council and its reception, see: Alberigo and Jossua (1985).

## b The relationship between Italian literature and Catholicism

In Italy, significant percentage of people still define themselves as “Catholic,” albeit not in an “orthodox” or integral way; in addition, the Catholic worldview continues to play an important role in Italian culture and imagery with the result that even those who define themselves as non-believers end up engaging with this religious tradition as one of the components of their cultural background (Garelli 2014). In this general context, the relationship between Italian writers and religion is often complex.

On the one hand, there has been a rather powerful anticlerical intellectual tradition in Italy, in particular dating to the period of Italian nation-state formation (1861) and the Church’s loss of temporal power (1870). Since that time literature has increasingly sought to overcome the direct influence of Catholic religion and doctrine (Segre 2005; Dalmas 2013). On the other hand, a number of writers openly took up Catholic positions in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and were active exponents of the Christian Democracy party (e.g. Rodolfo Doni, Eugenio Corti).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, a number of critics and scholars have pointed out that 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian literature featuring Catholic motifs maintains a mid- or low profile and does not include masterpieces in the same way as, for instance, French literature (see e.g. Getto 1967 and Dalmas 2013). The literary quality of works featuring catholic motifs is not particularly relevant for the purpose of this book, and neither are the political and religious positions adopted by individual writers. The research presented here consists neither in an evaluation of the artistic value of the works under consideration nor in an enquiry into the thoughts and faith of authors, but rather in a study of several recurring ideas expressed in these works.

Another controversial subject of debate among critics and scholars is whether or not there exists a proper “Catholic line” in Italian literature. As scholars such as Pifano (1990), Casoli (1995), Sommavilla (1993), Ballerini (1980), and Iannace (1985) demonstrate, there is a persisting interest in Catholic<sup>3</sup> inspiration and themes in literature but no agreement on either a hypothetical canon of

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<sup>2</sup> The Italian Christian Democracy (*Democrazia Cristiana*) is also well present in these authors’ work, see e.g. Doni (1986), a novel about the politician Giorgio La Pira; Doni (1980), which narrates the story of the life of a Catholic active in the Christian Democratic party; and Corti (2014 [1983]), which collects three volumes of a 20<sup>th</sup> century familiar saga in which the Christian Democratic Party plays an important role. Corti is also the author of an essay about the *Democrazia Cristiana* (Corti 1995) and another essay about the Second Vatican Council (Corti 1996).

<sup>3</sup> These kinds of essays often use the term “Cristiano” instead of “Cattolico:” in large strata of Italian culture, the two terms are commonly used as synonyms.

Catholic works or which authors can be considered unequivocally Catholic. In addition, this debate most often takes place among militant Catholic theorists and critics. As a consequence, it is necessary to rethink the notion of a “Catholic line” and possibly overcome it through a critical approach that is as neutral as possible (neither Catholic nor anti-Catholic). One thing is certain: if we were to propose a definition of Catholic literature including only works that follow the Church’s guidelines (for example in the *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 1963, see above) and adhere to her doctrine in a fully orthodox way, it would be hard to identify a suitable corpus.

Indeed, most works featuring Catholic themes do not offer an unproblematic literary translation of theological ideas that complies with the popularizing aims of the Second Vatican Council. Instead, even authors generally regarded as Catholic frequently present a critical and problematic perspective. As we will see, there are also authors who propose unconventional, transgressive, and unorthodox interpretations of traditional themes such as sanctity. This lack of conformity involves not only content but also form: while the conciliar Church proposes that authors adopt a plain, simple, clear, and referential language – in contrast to a baroque, “mysterious,” and complex style – 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian literature often experiments with forms that significantly diverge from this model.

Despite the divergences between ecclesiastic prescriptions and literary production, there is an interesting relationship between theology and literature. As Pifano (1990: 13) has noted, since the 1950s theologians have paid ever more attention to secular culture, and consequently literature, as part of the dialogue between faith and modernity that culminated in the 1960s with the Second Vatican Council. According to this perspective, theology is called on to take into consideration “those stubs of words about God – sometimes similar to prayers, sometimes shouts, blasphemies – that take shape in the weft of artistic and literary expression and that profoundly and immediately reveal the spiritual trouble of an age”<sup>4</sup> (Papasogli 1990: 6). Thus, “literature, with its specificity, becomes a ‘place of theology.’ Epics, poetry, drama present ‘the image of man’ (*Gaudium et spes* 1965: n. 62), his permanent suspension between heaven and earth, spirit and matter, fantastic and real, utopian and possible”<sup>5</sup> (Pifano 1990: 15).

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4 “quei mozziconi di parole su Dio – simili qualche volta a preghiere, qualche volta a gridi, a bestemmie – che prendono forma nella trama dell’espressione artistica e letteraria, e che rivelano in profondità e con immediatezza il travaglio spirituale di un’epoca”.

5 “la letteratura, con la sua specificità, diventa ‘luogo della teologia’. L’epica, la poesia, la drammatica presentano l’immagine dell’uomo’ (*Gaudium et spes* 1965: n. 62), la sua permanente sospensione tra cielo e terra, spirito e materia, fantastico e reale, utopico e possibile”.

At the same time, some literary writers are also well aware of the relationship between their work and theology, and claim that fictional works are a privileged medium for expressing and experimenting with theological ideas. For example, a theological dimension can unquestionably be found in Manganelli's posthumous *Il presepio* (1991), where the author reflects on the meaning of the feast of Christmas,<sup>6</sup> as well as in Santucci's meditations on the life of Jesus Christ (Santucci 1969). Similarly, Morselli (1977b) contains reflections formulated by the author during a process of spiritual development and conversion. The work tries "to put theology's back to the wall"<sup>7</sup> and claims that discourse about faith is not the exclusive domain of theologians:

The fact that only specialists can talk about faith, from the pulpit or from the desk, is an undisputed and appreciated opinion, typical of our times. Someone, however, affirms more radically that faith is not a matter of reasoning, and that where faith begins thought should stop because dogma and ecclesiastic discipline do not leave it any freedom. This book takes a position against those comfortable prejudices; in the same way, it advances an individual but significant opposition against those that by now triumphantly deny the common man any involvement in specific religious interests.<sup>8</sup>

A more structured reflection about the relationship between theology and fictional literature is proposed by the writer Ferruccio Parazzoli. Indeed, in an essay published in 2012 Parazzoli mentions the concept of "narrative theology" first proposed by Harald Weinrich (1973, see also Finnern 2014), and reverses the

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6 For example: "Holy Christmas is, precisely, a day devoted to the feast due to a divine birth; a birth, remark it, not the hyperuranium world, but down here, in our law dwelling, among death, mortals, excrement, houses, animals. A divine birth, but in the form of man; birth of a divine child, similar to a child in every way, rather, a proper child, but also absolutely divine. Born from a woman? Yes, born from a woman. And his father? Here we enter into a theological dilemma..." ("Santo Natale è, per l'appunto, giorno deputato alla festività dovuta ad una nascita divina; nascita, si noti, non del mondo uranio, ma quaggiù, nelle bassure della nostra dimora, tra i morti, i morituri, gli escrementi, le case, gli animali. Nascita divina ma in forma d'uomo; nascita di un bambino divino, in tutto simile ad un bambino, anzi un bambino proprio, ma insieme assolutamente divino. Nato di donna? Sì, nato di donna. E di padre? Qui entriamo in un dilemma teologico..." Manganelli 1991: 13–14).

7 "mettere la teologia con le spalle al muro" (Morselli 1977b: 13).

8 "È giudizio pacifico e gradito, tipico del nostro tempo, che di fede non si possa parlare che da specialisti, dal pulpito o dalla cattedra; mentre qualcuno più radicalmente afferma che la fede non è materia di ragionamento, e che dove quella comincia il pensiero deve fermarsi, poiché dogmi e chiesastica disciplina non gli lascerebbero nessuna libertà. Questo libro si oppone a quei comodi preconcetti; come oppone una individuale ma parlante smentita a coloro che ormai trionfalmente negano ogni ineranza di interessi religiosi specifici, all'uomo comune, nel mondo di oggi" (Morselli 1977b: 13).

terms by proposing “theological narrative”. Parazzoli (2012) claims that, in the present day, the Bible “remains closed, complete in itself. The Character of God does not come out of it, he walks to and fro inside it between impassable walls”.<sup>9</sup> The new theological narrative, therefore, should not start from the Bible and apply it to today’s life and issues, as narrative theology suggests; rather, it should instead start from the human dimension with the intention of reaching the divine:

The terms are inverted: not the path from the Word of a “God who speaks” and acts to narrative language, but from narrative language to the Character of God. Theological narrative: a narrative that tries out the way of verticality and that no longer starts in the incipit of the Scripture, but inside man, and develops and expands beyond the visible. Therefore, it is no longer a language that transposes the Scriptures, but a language of man who has God as his horizon and believes that he can bring God back to active existence after his eclipse.<sup>10</sup>

In many cases, the Italian writers who present reflections about Catholicism and faith in their work are also well aware of the relevance of the Second Vatican Council. A number of them make explicit reference to the Council in their work, while others narrate stories that problematize some of the issues dealt with by the conciliar Fathers that are seen to be particularly delicate and topical. Examples of an explicit reference to the Council can be found in Silone (2014 [1968]), who welcomes the renewal of the Church fostered by the Council (see chapter 3), in Doni (1982), who offers a “liberal” interpretation of the Council’s position on sexual issues,<sup>11</sup> and in Pasqualino (1970), whose reference is more

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**9** “... la Bibbia, resta chiusa, complete in se stessa. Da essa il Personaggio Dio non esce, vi passeggia avanti e indietro tra insuperabili mura” (Parazzoli 2012: 93).

**10** “Si rovesciano i termini: non più il percorso dalla Parola di ‘un Dio che parla’ e agisce al linguaggio narrativo, ma dal linguaggio narrativo al Personaggio Dio. Narrativa teologica: una narrativa che tenta la via della verticalità, che trova il proprio incipit non più negli incipit della Scrittura, ma all’interno dell’uomo e si sviluppa e si spinge oltre il visibile. Non più, dunque, come linguaggio di Dio in trasposizione dalle Scritture, ma linguaggio dell’uomo che ha Dio per orizzonte, che ha fede di riportarlo in attività oltre l’oscuramento dell’eclisse” (Parazzoli 2012: 93–94).

**11** For example: “The recent Council had reminded us that celibacy is not ‘essentially’ connected to the nature of priesthood, that continence was not imposed in the primitive Church, as the tradition of the Eastern Church also demonstrates. Several bishops, however, held the idea that sexuality was basically perverse, marriage a remedy to the evil fruit of the original guilt. I thought again, I saw Peter married, if he had a mother-in-law, as the Gospel says. And I thought again of the destiny of the numerous mothers of the present day, who suffered and even died for the Church’s refusal to allow them abortions” (“Il recente Concilio ci aveva ricordato che il celibato non è ‘essenzialmente’ legato alla natura del sacerdozio, che la continenza non era imposta nella Chiesa primitiva, come dimostra anche la tradizione della Chiesa orientale. Diversi ves-

polemical. Indeed, Pasqualino (1970) criticizes the scarce attention that the Council granted to the theological treatment of God. According to the narrator, this subject is of great importance nowadays since God's existence is increasingly challenged:<sup>12</sup>

It is true that the Church's official acts do not report the case of the bishop who, in the middle of the last council, was supposed to have shouted: "But is there a God?" The question is said to have provoked a certain hilarity among the conciliar fathers who were able to hear it; the others – the majority – were distracted, as happens in all assemblies when a not-very-authoritative or unknown character intervenes. However, the question was apparently taken up vigorously once again, including by the one who was considered to be the greatest theologian after Luther.<sup>13</sup> He reproached the Catholic Church for not taking it into consideration, more precisely because "the constitution lacks a chapter *De Deo*". He was answered that the Church has even dealt with God too much in the past; in particular, in the First Vatican Council, dramatically interrupted (the piedmontese army breaking through Porta Pia and occupying Rome) and continued in the Second Vatican. It was precisely this continuation, however, that implied the recovery of the question of God, his attributes, and the relationships and covenants with Him, now that an anguishing doubt is increasingly taking the place of past certitude.<sup>14</sup>

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covi conservavano, però, l'idea che la sessualità fosse tendenzialmente perversa, il matrimonio un rimedio al male frutto della colpa di origine. Ripensai, rividi Pietro sposato, se aveva una suocera, come dice il Vangelo. E ripensai la sorte di tante madri di oggi che soffrivano e addirittura morivano per il rifiuto della Chiesa a consentir loro un aborto..." (Doni 1982: 19).

**12** Questioning God's existence is also the dominant theme in Pasqualino's novel. See paragraph 3.2 on the literary development of this theme.

**13** This probably refers to reformed theologian Karl Barth's comments about the dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum*; on this issue, see Rosato (2004: 74). The preparatory theological commission of the Second Vatican Council, and especially the Holy Office, however, did propose that a theological reflection about God be developed, see von Teuffenback (2012).

**14** "È vero che gli atti ufficiali della Chiesa non riportano il caso del vescovo che, nel bel mezzo dell'ultimo concilio, avrebbe gridato: 'Ma Dio c'è?'. La domanda avrebbe suscitato una certa ilarità fra i padri conciliari che poterono udire; gli altri, la maggioranza, erano distratti, come accade in ogni assemblea quando interviene un personaggio poco autorevole o sconosciuto. Però l'interrogativo sarebbe stato ripreso, e con vigore, fra l'altro da colui che veniva considerato il più grande teologo dopo Lutero. Egli rimproverò alla Chiesa cattolica di non averne tenuto conto, più precisamente 'perché nella costituzione manca un capitolo *De Deo*'. Gli fu risposto che di Dio la Chiesa si è occupata fin troppo nel passato; in particolare, nel Concilio Vaticano I, drammaticamente interrotto (l'esercito piemontese che sfonda Porta Pia e occupa Roma) e continuato nel Vaticano II. Proprio questa continuazione però implicava che si riprendesse la questione di Dio, dei suoi attributi, dei rapporti e dei patti che si hanno con Lui, oggi che un dubbio angoscioso viene sempre più occupando il posto della passata certezza" (Pasqualino 1970: 14–15).

## c The semiotic method in the study of literary themes

The basic presupposition of this book is that literature is a privileged vehicle for the expression and circulation of ideas in a specific culture or semiosphere (Lotman 1984). Indeed, writers collect ideas, themes, and stories from their cultural milieu and often innovate them through their literary production to then spread these renewed ideas among their reading public. Given this general presupposition, I intend to study several components of religious imagery as it is expressed in literature. It perhaps goes without saying that this entails not inquiring into authors' personal religious convictions but rather how religious themes are dealt with in their works.

The analysis of themes in literature is practiced in a number of academic traditions and publications. Some excellent examples are the impressive study of “the knowledge of God” in the French literature of the last two centuries conducted by Michel and Michel (2008), McCormick's (1988) work on philosophical themes in fiction, and the Italian dictionary of literary themes (Ceserani, Domenichelli, and Fasano 2007). With respect to the existing academic literature, what characterizes this work is its relationship to semiotics. Indeed, this discipline offers both a refined methodology for analysing narrative texts and, at the same time, philosophical and lexical instruments for inquiring into ideas about signs and language (or “semiotic ideologies,” see chapter 1) and their relationship to religious beliefs.

In Italy, there is an outstanding tradition of semiotic analysis of literature, coinciding with the period in which structuralism was most widespread and involving prominent scholars such as Cesare Segre, Maria Corti, and D'Arco Silvio Avalle.<sup>15</sup> My research inherits some aspects of this critical tradition as well as theoretical and analytical notions deriving from French structuralism. However, it conceptualizes the analysis of literary texts not in and of themselves, but rath-

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15 According to Segre (2005: 40), “i risultati più consistenti della semiotica si ebbero proprio nella critica letteraria, grazie alla duttilità con cui furono maneggiati gli strumenti proposti in ambito teorico, senza mai derogare agli aspetti stilistici del testo, e quasi sempre tenendo ben presente la sua peculiarità e la sua posizione nella storia”; “Culturalmente, ebbero grandi conseguenze la voga della linguistica, la diffusione dello strutturalismo, e poi della semiologia, che rinnovarono i metodi critici [...]. Il clima favorevole era stato preparato dalla grande ondata di filologia prodotta dal magistero di Gianfranco Contini. Si mette a punto una metodologia originale (alludo ai direttori – D.S. Avalle, M. Corti, D. Isella, C. Segre – della rivista ‘Strumenti critici’, fondata non a caso nel 1966, a M. Pagnini, A. Serpieri, S. Agosti, e tanti altri), che partendo dalle nostre tradizioni filologiche vi immette le novità portate non solo dai linguisti (Saussure, Bally, Benveniste, Jakobson), ma anche da antropologi (Propp, Lévi-Strauss) e critici d'avanguardia (Barthes, i formalisti russi, Lotman)” (Segre 1998: 73–74).



er in the framework of a wider semiotics of culture: my aim is not to carry out literary criticism strictly speaking, but to reconstruct certain aspects of collective imagery. I began to explore this particular analytical perspective as part of my research on the representation of Italian national identity in a broad corpus of Italian novels published between 1948 and 2011 narrating the process of national unification (Risorgimento, 19<sup>th</sup> century). The study of this corpus, featuring a variety of styles and genres, was carried out by creating a taxonomy of characters on the basis of their values and styles of action. This comparative study of the different systems of values embodied by characters led me to define both a collective symbolic image inventory shared by intellectuals and the complex relationship between writers and national institutions. This first research (Ponzo 2015) persuaded me of the efficacy of adopting a semiotic approach to the study of broad corpora of literary texts in order to identify recurring themes.

The notions of “theme” and “motif” have acquired a well-defined meaning in the course of the last half-century.<sup>16</sup> The formalist Tomachevski (1965: 263) defined theme as the unity constituted by the significations of the particular elements of a work:

The meanings of a work’s particular elements constitute a unit that is the theme (what one talks about). One can talk about both the theme of the whole work and the themes of its parts. [...] The literary work is endowed with a unitary character when it is built starting from a unique theme that is developed on the course of the work.<sup>17</sup>

Motif is a subcategory of theme. For example, in 1967 Falk defined motif as a set of “textual elements such as actions, statements revealing states of mind or feelings, gestures, or meaningful environmental settings” and theme as “the idea that emerges from motifs by means of an abstraction” (Falk 1967: 2). Theme is thus a “topic,” disseminated in a text through a “constellation of motifs” (Falk 1967: 3). For example, this topic may consist in:

The hero’s class, his religion, his profession, or his relation to society [...]. The topic may be the hero’s dominant characteristic: the miser, the adventurer, the sentimentalist. It may be

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**16** Insightful reflections on the nature of themes and motifs, as well as on methods for their study in the field of literary criticism and literary studies, can be found in Bertoni & Fusillo (2003); Ferrand (2003); Giglioli (2001); Prince (1985); Bremond, Landy & Pavel (1995); Segre (1993b: 211–226); Segre (1985: chapter 7); Ducrot & Todorov (1972: 283–284).

**17** “Les significations des éléments particuliers de l’oeuvre constituent une unite qui est le theme (ce dont on parle). On peut aussi bien parler du thème de l’oeuvre entiere que du thème de ses parties. [...] L’oeuvre littéraire est dotée d’une unité quand elle est construite à partir d’un thème unique qui se dévoile au cours de l’oeuvre”.

the main event or situation: conspiracy, war, delinquency [...]. Or it may be the complex of features and situations associated with certain figures: Oedipus, Don Juan...

(Falk 1967: 2)

When the representation of a theme takes place through a certain type of recurring character, it generates a “thematic role”. Developed in the context of the French semiotic school of Algirdas J. Greimas (Greimas & Courtès 1979), the concept of thematic role constitutes a central theoretical premise in the third and fourth chapters of this book (see § 3.1). Other semiotic notions that have served as methodological grounds for this research, such as the notions of connotation, *debrayage*, and semiotic ideology, as well as the notion of ritual as it emerges from cultural and semiotic anthropology, are explained in each respective book chapter as they first appear in the analysis.

## **d The corpus and structure of the book**

This work maintains a dual relationship with semiotics. Indeed, not only does semiotics provide the methodological framework for my analysis, but this study also explores themes that are closely connected to semiotic issues. More precisely, the first two chapters are devoted to questions having to do with ideas about language and communication, while the third and fourth chapters look into two recurring thematic roles.

The corpus of analysis was chosen on the basis of a preliminary process of selection that stemmed from my initial intention to explore recurring literary themes connected to key semiotic issues and related to Catholicism, a religious tradition that was central in Italy for centuries but has more recently been challenged in many respects. To this end, I studied the largest possible number of novels and fictional works (including tales and plays) featuring motifs and themes ascribable to the Catholic tradition. Since I considered the Second Vatican Council to represent a watershed and was interested in verifying if the conciliar Church’s positions had an influence on fictional literature, I focused my attention on works published during and after the Council. After conducting that preliminary inventory, I singled out the four themes that were addressed with more frequency and/or the most complexity in terms of arguments and connotations, as well as seemed to me to be particularly significant from a semiotic and cultural perspective. I then chose a sample for each theme comprising between three and five works.

The first chapter is thus devoted to the theme of language and, more precisely, to ideas about the origin of language and the forms of agency involved in the

process of linguistic creation. As mentioned above, the Second Vatican Council paid a great deal of attention to issues associated with language and communication. As a consequence, the study of this theme is particularly significant in that it allows us to sketch the portrait of a semiotic ideology that has been built in relation to a religious tradition. The tradition in question is sometimes accepted and sometimes challenged, but it nevertheless continues to have an influence on ideas about language and its arbitrariness. In the corpus, the theme of language is often connected to another key theme, that is, the theme of creation. The latter is developed in two different and often contrasting ways. The first way consists of exploring the theme of the divine creation of mankind and of the relationship between human and divine agency in the origin of human language (a relationship that often takes the form of overlapping and co-authoring). In the second approach to the theme of creation, authors engage creation by the artist, who is represented as the demiurge of a narrative universe and, as such, in competition with the role of God. This second development of the theme of creation is in turn related to the ambivalent value generally attributed to form. In contemporary Italian narrative, religion, art, and language often compete in providing form, a meaningful way of thinking about and representing reality. Generally, however, all form is both longed for and refused. There are characters who see form as a horrific state of stillness and immobility that denies life, instead offering annihilation and purity to overcome material, bodily corruptibility: the quest for form often parallels a process of self-disruption (see e.g. Tamaro 1997; Testori 1974).

The second chapter deals with literary representations of liturgy and ritual. Again, this theme is connected to a topical issue in that the reform of liturgy played a central role in the Second Vatican Council's policy of *aggiornamento*. The representation of Catholic ritual is interesting from a semiotic point of view because rituals involve a plurality of semiotic systems and their literary representation entails not only interpretation but also a move to increase the already complex semiotic stratification of rituals by adding a further semiotic layer. Particular attention is devoted to the connotations attributed to liturgical Latin. I argue that two generations of writers – that is, writers who were young before the Second Vatican Council and remember pre-conciliar liturgy versus writers who were born after the Second Vatican Council – have different ideas and different approaches to Latin and traditional liturgy. Like other linguistic and ritual features (objects, gestures, colors, sounds), liturgical Latin forms the foundation of a religious aesthetics that pervades the corpus, constituting not only a specific stylistic choice but also a way of conveying specific semiotic ideas.

The third chapter is devoted to the thematic role of the Pope. A century after the Church's loss of temporal power and especially with the post-conciliar pontificate of John Paul II, the figure of the pope has increasingly become that of a spiritual and moral leader whose influence – especially on questions of ethics – extends well beyond the community of the Catholic faithful. In other words, the pope is no longer a king; instead, he has become a primarily public figure in today's globalized society. The Church also promotes this primacy of the pope's role as spiritual and moral leader through a specific policy of canonization: of the nine pontiffs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, three were proclaimed saints (Pius X, John XXIII, and John Paul II) and one blessed (Paul VI). However, despite the loss of her earthly kingdom and her renewed role as a spiritual entity, the Church continues to constitute an earthly institution, and as such it necessarily deals with political and economic interests. In literature, this dualism is often embodied by the figure of the pope, the head of the Church. Indeed, my analysis identifies two different and contrasting literary models for representing the figure of the pope, mirroring an unresolved contradiction between immanence and transcendence in the Church's vocation which, as the novels so effectively express, is perceived as particularly serious and problematic in the post-Second Vatican socio-cultural context.

The fourth and last chapter explores the thematic role of saints. The post-conciliar Church stresses the role of saints as models of perfection to be imitated more than simple objects of cult worship; it presents sanctity as both her universal vocation and as a status that can be reached through a plurality of individual paths, thus granting unprecedented importance to models of secular sanctity. Moreover, an exceptionally high number of new saints were proclaimed under the pontificate of John Paul II (1978–2005). In a context of global change (Latour 2012; Lyotard 1979), therefore, models of sanctity take on new importance in guiding human beings by proposing a renewed form of religious identity.<sup>18</sup> Given these changes in the models of sanctity proposed by the Church, it is interesting to look into contemporary literary representations of sanctity. Surprisingly enough, Italian writers develop the theme of sanctity in ways that differ significantly from edifying hagiographic accounts and traditional stereotypes of sainthood. Indeed, works in the corpus sometimes describe sanctity as self-irony, as a form of moral – more than religious – probity, but also as an exterior posture, as selfishness and even as a kind of perversion. My analysis focuses on

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**18** The canonization of new saints had a similar function in the Reformation period, when the proclamation of saints such as Theresa of Avila and Ignatius of Loyola served to propose a renewed Catholic identity in a moment in which the Church was facing profound changes; regarding this point, see Leone (2010).

these non-conformist representations and points out recurring features of the thematic role of saints, such as their being “separated” or lonely characters.

This book therefore seeks to give an account of a common imagery shared by Italian writers about issues that are both semiotic in character and related to the Catholic cultural tradition. The analysis presented here shows that the issues dealt with by the Second Vatican Council actually did have an influence on fictional literature. At the same time, however, in most cases Italian writers have tended to receive and develop the positions adopted by the conciliar and post-conciliar Church in a critical, polemical, or even subversive way. As a consequence, rather than suggesting that the Second Vatican Council has had a direct influence on literature, it would be more accurate to speak about the circulation and development of ideas in the semiosphere of Italian culture between the 1960s and 2010s.

To conclude, this work hopes to shed new light on some facets of Catholic ideas and values in contemporary Italy. Moreover, it hopes to provide its readers with the opportunity to study relatively famous writers such as Pomilio, Meneghello, or De Luca from a new perspective, but also with an occasion to learn more about less well-known authors whose works are nevertheless interesting from a semiotic and cultural point of view.

# 1 Semiotic Ideology and Religious Themes in Italian Fiction

Ceterum, omnes credentes, cuiuscumque  
sint religionis, vocem et manifestationem Eius  
in creaturarum loquela semper audierunt.  
*Gaudium et spes (1965: n. 36)*

The goal of this chapter is to shed light on a particular semiotic ideology<sup>19</sup> that consists in the set of ideas about language expressed in fiction featuring religious themes and published in Italy since the 1960s. More precisely, the focus of this research is ideas of linguistic authorship and creation as they are articulated in literary texts. The reflections outlined herein are based on the principle that discourse about the nature of language is not the exclusive domain of specialized areas such as theology and ecclesiastic doctrine, on one hand, or linguistics and the philosophy of language, on the other hand. On the contrary, this discourse has a broader cultural range. In particular, one of the fields in which the study of semiotic ideologies can be productive and significant is literature. Indeed, literature has an intrinsically linguistic nature and is a good breeding ground for the development of meta-discourses about language and literary creation.

The most striking peculiarity of the semiotic ideology explored in this study is that it contrasts with the idea that language is arbitrary, an idea which has dominated contemporary western high culture from at least Saussure (1916) onwards.<sup>20</sup> According to this widespread perspective, words are arbitrary couplings

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**19** A semiotic ideology is “a set of basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world” (Keane 2003: 419). This concept derives from the notion of “linguistic ideology” (i. e. “any sets of beliefs about language articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” Silverstein 1979: 193). The notion of semiotic ideology broadens the one of linguistic ideology by including other semiotic systems besides verbal language. On these concepts see also Keane (2007); Kroskirty (2003); Lambeck (2013); Leone (2011); Philips (1998); Rumsey (1990); Schieffelin, Woolard, & Kroskirty (1998); Suleiman (2013).

**20** Saussure’s thought actually finds its roots in antiquity. As Manetti (2013) shows, Saussures’ theory of the arbitrariness of the sign presents similarities with Aristotelian and Stoic equational model of the linguistic sign. In the Aristotelian and Stoic thought there was an equational model of the linguistic sign and an inferential model of the non-linguistic signs. Later, St. Augustine proposed a unified model of the sign based on the ancient inferential model. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Saussure proposed in his turn a unified equational model based on the linguistic sign (on this

of sounds and meanings produced by social convention.<sup>21</sup> Instead of embracing this way of thinking, a number of authors express an alternative semiotic ideology in their works, an ideology that harkens back to an ancient tradition. Anderson provides a clear description of this alternative semiotic conception, identifying it as one of the pillars of premodern and prenatal communities:<sup>22</sup> it consists of “the idea that a particular script language offered privileged access to ontological truth, precisely because it was an inseparable part of that truth. It was this idea that called into being the great transcontinental sodalities of Christendom, the Islamic Ummah, and the rest” (Anderson 2006: 36). Sacred language and script were the basis of a cosmological view that made sense of human contingency and functioned as a social glue. Sacred language was believed to be the medium between supernatural agency and the community, which considered itself the unique receiver of the Truth (Anderson 2006: 13). According to this perspective, sacred language is so effective precisely because the sign is not arbitrary. Signs are considered to be “emanations of reality, not randomly fabricated representations of it” (Anderson 2006: 14).

In the Abrahamic traditions, the story of creation has a significant linguistic component:<sup>23</sup> the book of Genesis narrates that God pronounced verbs in the imperative or future tense (the two forms are not distinguishable in Hebrew) ten times, and then repeated the same verbs in the indicative tense, which indicates the completion of order as a matter of fact. Five times in a row, these creative actions are followed by the explicit attribution of a name.<sup>24</sup> The same linguistic dimension is underlined in the beginning of the Gospel of John (“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” John 1.1). The biblical account is part of the common imagery – or “encyclopa-

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topic see also Eco 1984). On the evolution of the semiotic ideology of early Christian tradition, see also Markus (1996).

**21** That is, each word is an arbitrary combination of a set of sounds and a portion of meaning, but this does not mean that individuals have the power to arbitrarily invent words. Language is not the product of individual arbitrariness, but of social convention: the only condition for the linguistic arbitrary code to work is that it is conventionally shared by a community, otherwise communication is impossible.

**22** The other two were the idea of monarchy founded on divine dispensation and the idea of a temporality “in which cosmology and history were indistinguishable” (Anderson 2006: 36).

**23** For a concise overview of the theological debate about language, including in relation to 20<sup>th</sup> century developments in linguistics, see Phillips (2003) and Dalferth (2003).

**24** For a semiotic reading of Genesis and for further considerations about the linguistic dimension of divine creation, see Volli (2012: 50–51, 252–262).

dia”<sup>25</sup> – of Italian writers, and the clash between this cultural-theological background and the 20<sup>th</sup> century idea of the arbitrariness of language inevitably gives rise to complex questions such as: is language the product of the human mind alone, or is it related in some way to divine creation? Who creates signs and language and who establishes their meaning? Can language create reality, as the Bible claims in relation to the divine *logos*?

This topic is also interesting, therefore, in that it has to do with gauging the persistence of traditional biblical creation motifs in Italian culture at a time when the ideas these motifs contain appear to have become problematic due to their clashing with prevailing thought, represented for example by scientific theories about the origins of life. In the contemporary context, the Church herself seems to face difficulties in interpreting and proposing the traditional story of creation to the faithful.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, the issue of agency in linguistic creation is connected to the problem of the role of the writer, who is somehow a “demiurge” when he autonomously – and running counter to social convention – uses words creatively in literature, thus building a “possible world”.<sup>27</sup> This concept is clearly expressed, for example, by Catholic writer Ferruccio Parazzoli, although he remains pessimistic about the efficacy of the writer-demiurge’s work:

In the painful encounter with reality, in search of a uniqueness that is by now beyond his reach, the writer no longer believes that he has achieved, or alluded to, an order, a staticity that is restful, or, at least, thanks to the filter of language, reassuring. The writer-maker presents his own ethical universe as *imago mundi* [...]

Likewise, the demiurge writer presents his own utopia, his own being-elsewhere, as a dream symbol. [...]

This is where we reach the limit of the Work of Language. Pascal invited us to leap: either leap or you are doomed to wandering in the labyrinth that is *imago mundi* with no way out. The writer-maker uselessly presents himself as the key to the knowledge of a creation that no longer has a Creator. The Work of Language revolves around itself like a spinning top.

Anyone who intends to leave the labyrinth has only one choice of path [...] Either the writer accepts his condition or he howls his nostalgia for when he was only a man under

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25 In semiotics, encyclopaedia indicates a set of knowledge and beliefs shared by a community. See Volli (2006: 67), Eco (1975 and 1979).

26 This difficulty was pointed out, for example, by Joseph Ratzinger in the 1980s: “... assistiamo [...] paradossalmente alla scomparsa quasi totale dell’annuncio della creazione dalla catechesi, dalla predicazione e perfino dalla teologia. I racconti della creazione vengono nascosti; le loro affermazioni non sembrano più proponibili” (Ratzinger 1986: 7–8).

27 As Eco (1979: 246) puts it, each text is “a machine for producing possible words”.



the gaze of an off-stage God. We are on the threshold of silence. The Work of Language rolls around itself.

“Leap!” invites Pascal, once again [...] But we cannot leap if there is nothing left to grab, if we have removed the Finish Line from the path...<sup>28</sup>

As this passage suggests, in the semiotic ideology considered herein, discourse about language is often related to the broader problem of form, understood as an ordered system of ideas granting meaning to reality. In the selected corpus as well as more generally in the literature of the period under investigation,<sup>29</sup> a longing for form, for order, constitutes a recurring theme. The quest of a new order often begins with rejecting the old one and is translated into a broader longing for meaning. In the corpus presented here, this quest for meaning sometimes coincides with a quest for God as the first source of the meaning that explains the world. A number of characters share the impression that meaning eludes them while at the same time they enact a fierce rebellion against purely referential language. They thus look for a new language that can capture deep and true meanings better than traditional language. This attitude is typical of postmodern literature,<sup>30</sup> and it is relevant to observe how these contemporary ideas are related to concepts which in turn stem from religious tradition.

Setting off from these premises, this chapter is divided into two parts. The first focuses on ideas about the origin and nature of human language, analysing in particular *Nascita di Eva* (“Birth of Eve,” Alianello 1966), *Fuori del Paradiso* (“Out of Paradise,” Crovi 1982), both of which re-narrate and develop the story of Genesis,<sup>31</sup> and *E Disse* (“And He said,” De Luca 2011), which explores the Exo-

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**28** “Nel doloroso contatto con il reale, alla ricerca di una unicità che ormai gli sfugge, lo scrittore, non più credere di avere raggiunto, o alluso, a un ordine, una staticità riposante, o, almeno, grazie al filtro del linguaggio, rassicurante. Lo scrittore-faber propone il proprio universo etico come *imago mundi* [...] Così lo scrittore demiurgo propone la propria utopia, il proprio essere-altrove, come simbolo onirico. [...] Ecco raggiunto il limite dell’Opera del linguaggio. Pascal aveva invitato al salto: salta, o sei condannato ad aggirarti senza via di uscita nel labirinto che è *imago mundi*. Lo scrittore-faber si propone inutilmente come chiave della conoscenza della creazione senza più Creatore. L’Opera del linguaggio gira su se stessa come una trottola. Chi intenda uscire dal labirinto ha una sola strada da percorrere [...] Lo scrittore accetta la propria condizione o grida la propria nostalgia di essere soltanto un uomo sotto lo sguardo di un Dio fuori di scena. Siamo alle soglie del silenzio. L’Opera del linguaggio si arrotola su se stessa. ‘Salta!’ invita ancora Pascal [...] Ma non si salta se non c’è più nulla da afferrare, se dal percorso abbiamo cancellato il Traguardo...” (Parazzoli 2012: 83–84).

**29** See e.g. Ponzio (2015: 441–479) about the concept of form in Tadini (1989).

**30** See footnote 37.

**31** The origins of mankind and references to their biblical account make up a recurring theme in Crovi’s work: characters symbolically called “Adam” can be found also in Crovi (1984) and in

dus episode in which God communicates the ten commandments. The second part of the chapter focuses on the problem of literary creation and of form, and studies in particular *Il cane sull'Etna* ("The dog on the Etna," Pomilio 1978) and *Anima mundi* ("The soul of the world," Tamaro 1997).

## 1.1 Forms of agency in linguistic creation: the origins

Both Alianello (1966) and Covi (1982) begin at the moment in which Adam and Eve leave Eden and wander, lonely and scared, across the earth, gradually coming to understand their new mortal condition. In both novels, the semiotic role of inventing/discovering language is assigned to the woman. In Alianello, Eve's experience with new feelings and objects is accompanied by the appearance of new words in her mind. For example:

Tears? Yes; a new word that was born to her there and then. And not just the word. There is a meaning that grips and terrifies her, a never-before-understood meaning. And together they pierced her mind and pressed into it words never before understood, never said, as bad as a bushel of nettles: suffering, pain, evil.<sup>32</sup>

The creation of language is not a conscious search for a sequence of sounds to be coupled with a referent, but a spontaneous event that does not leave any room for linguistic relativism<sup>33</sup> and for the 20<sup>th</sup> century linguists' idea that the same meaning could be expressed by any combination of sounds and that there is no intrinsic relationship between the signifier and the signified composing a sign, but only a conventional and arbitrary one.<sup>34</sup> In several passages, it seems that Eve's very thought gives rise to words: "... Thought contrasts with never-before-understood anguish and develops new words".<sup>35</sup> In another pas-

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Covi (1984). As the author himself specifies in the "Nota" at the end of the work (Covi 1982: 107), this theme is also present – although only implicitly – in the poetry collections Covi (1974) and Covi (1982b).

**32** Lacrime? Sì; una parola nuova che le nasceva lì per lì. E non la parola soltanto. C'è un senso che l'ha presa e l'atterrisce, un senso mai inteso. [...] E insieme le bucarono la mente e ci si pigiavano dentro parole mai intese finora, mai dette, cattive come un cespo d'ortiche: pena, dolore, male" (Alianello 1966: 10 – 11).

**33** According to the theory of linguistic relativism, also known as "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis," the structure of languages affects their speakers' worldview and cognitive development. On this topic, see e.g. Whorf (1956) and Sapir (1983).

**34** See Saussure (1916: part 1, chapter 1).

**35** "il pensiero contrasta con angoscie mai intese e matura parole nuove" (Alianello 1966: 28).

sage, however, God himself, who speaks in the humans' heart in several occasions, seems to be the ultimate author of language. Words authored by God belong to a superior category of language:

... the Lord came down from heaven and uttered His words within them; right in the cavity of their heart; but also in their thoughts.

They did not see him, no, God does not let himself be seen; but there was no room for error: all the usual words, the words of man, fled unchallenged and outside of reason before that admirable accent.<sup>36</sup>

Beside this distinction between human and divine words, Alianello's novel also presents other, distinct categories of words. Firstly, there are words that – as I have mentioned – spontaneously spring from Eve's mind as she experiences new things in her earthly life, but there are also words that she knew before. Remembering these words that belong to her life in Eden requires an effort, and once Eve has recalled them in her mind, she becomes aware that they now have a different meaning than they did in Eden. This is the case with the name of God:

There is no God for us? Ah! She whispered as if a thunderbolt had flashed alongside her and closed her eyes. What name did she say in her thoughts? She had always had that Name fixed in her mind, but without a voice, icy, inert, since the Thing happened, and she suffered from it as if she had lost her sense of touch, her sight... I don't know. A disappearance, a falling back headlong into herself, an unconscious twisting of her pain. The name is the same one she used to know; but now it has a different meaning. And perhaps that is where all its evil lies.<sup>37</sup>

The words that belong exclusively to earthly life include adverbs such as “better” (... better is a new word that did not exist, then. In the earthly Paradise there was only good, which was equal in every place, at every hour<sup>38</sup>) and “maybe”

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**36** “... il Signore scendeva dal cielo e diceva le sue parole dentro di loro; proprio nella cavità del cuore; ma anche nel pensiero. Non lo vedevano, no, Dio non si lascia guardare; ma non c'era da sbagliarsi: a quell'accento mirabile tutte le parole consuete, le parole dell'uomo, fuggivano via sgominate e fuori di ragione” (Alianello 1966: 115).

**37** “Non c'è Dio per noi? Ah! Sussultò come se una saetta le fosse balenata accanto e chiuse gli occhi. Che nome ha detto nel suo pensiero? L'ha avuto sempre fisso dentro la mente quel Nome, ma senza voce, gelido, inerte, da quando è accaduta la Cosa, e ne soffriva come ad aver perduto il tatto, la vista... che so? un venire meno, un riscarsare a capofitto dentro di sé, un rigirarsi inconscio della sua pena. Il nome è uguale a quello che lei sapeva dapprima; ma ora il suo significato è diverso. E forse tutto il suo male sta qui” (Alianello 1966: 29).

**38** “meglio è una parola nuova che allora non c'era. Nel Paradiso terrestre c'era soltanto il bene che era eguale in ogni luogo, a ogni ora” (Alianello 1966: 60).

(“Maybe... this too is a word from here, from now: back then I was sure of everything”<sup>39</sup>). Another important word on earth is “need” (*bisogna*), which is closely connected to the concept of necessity, the new master of mankind after the act of rebellion towards God (Alianello 1966: 22). Eve says to Adam: “Now I know what God has done to us: He has degraded us to beasts and beasts, beasts is what we are. And now need, need... we didn’t know that word up there... not ever. Need...”<sup>40</sup>

Secondly, during their time in Eden, Adam authored some words while Eve authored others. In Eden, it was Adam who attributed names, such as the names of animals (Alianello 1966: 145) and Eve herself, as he suddenly remembers:

And man’s heart trembled almost as if shaken by a sudden revelation. Now he understands that she was born not only to be his companion, his flesh and joy, but that she is the very image of his new destiny and life [...]. And that life is made like her, of supreme beauty and tears, of possession and loss, of pain and hope; but that her essence is her flesh, her strength is herself, Eve.

He finally understands why he had called his woman Eve, meaning life.<sup>41</sup>

Eve in Eden is not presented as the author of names as she is on earth, but she does invent an important adjective. Shortly before the fall, during her conversation with the serpent, Eve invents a kind of thought that goes beyond morality in the pursuit of purely intellectual curiosity. This thought is characterized by the adjective “interesting:”

For what was perhaps the first time this feminine word came to her, as a woman: “interesting,” which does not mean good or bad or even beautiful or ugly, but the curiosity to taste, to experience, for the sake of newness, however empty or dangerous it might be. The mental delicacies that Eve likes: Adam never said that word.<sup>42</sup>

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39 “Forse... anche questa è una parola di qui, d’adesso: allora tutto m’era sicuro” (Alianello 1966: 61).

40 “Ora lo so quel che ci ha fatto Dio: ci ha degradato fino alle bestie e bestie, bestie siamo. [...] E ora bisogna bisogna... non la conosceamo questa parola lassù... mai. Bisogna...” (Alianello 1966: 79).

41 “E il cuore dell’uomo tremò quasi per una rivelazione improvvisa. Ora intende che lei è nata non solamente per essere la sua compagna, la sua carne e la sua gioia; ma che è l’immagine medesima del suo nuovo destino e della sua vita [...]. E che la vita è fatta come lei, di suprema bellezza e di pianto, di possesso e di perdita, di dolore e di speranza; ma che la sua essenza la polpa, la sua forza è lei, Eva. Finalmente comprende perché avesse chiamata Eva la sua donna, che vuole dire vita” (Alianello 1966: 43).

42 “Per la prima volta forse le era venuta in mente questa parola femminile, da donna proprio: ‘interessante’ che non vuol dire cosa buona oppure cattiva e nemmeno bella o brutta, ma curi-

The theme of the two genders' semiotic role is also central to Crovi's "fiaba antropologica," as he himself describes his work (Crovi 1982: 107). *Fuori dal Paradiso* is indeed structured in very short chapters (often shorter than a page) narrating, often specularly, the experience of the Man and the Woman (not explicitly named Adam and Eve) after leaving Eden: one chapter describes the man's perspective, the next the woman's, and so on. In this novel as well, the process of developing a semiotic consciousness is attributed to the woman. The man is more focused on bodily senses or, in other words, perception: he progressively learns to interpret reality through smell, sight, etc. As the narrator explains, the man decodes "the language of the world, where he tried to orientate himself in the shelter of his silence".<sup>43</sup>

The woman, in contrast, is more focused on communicating with the other beings and on imitating the things and creatures she sees around her: she is sensitive to signs and indeed she begins to create her own. She thus gradually invents the language of gestures ("When she understood that animals and man understood her gestures as signs, she began to use her hands and feet to make them feel expectations or fears".<sup>44</sup> And, when she learns that footprints are "the signs" (Crovi 1982: 25) of animals' movement, she begins first to reproduce such prints and then to draw. She is also the inventor of verbal language. After listening to the noises produced by the other animals and by her own body, the woman "practicing to blow air from her mouth, composed the first words".<sup>45</sup> The woman is also the first being to have the idea of engaging in a trade, that is, of exchanging food with the man, and she is likewise the inventor of music, dance, and sculpture. It is by playing music that she "introduced in the man, who listened to her from afar, melancholy and envy of knowledge".<sup>46</sup> However, despite this richness of semiotic systems, the word is conceived as the main and higher fruit of knowledge. The woman offers it to the man through a kiss: "... the woman brought her face closer to the man's, extended her tongue towards his mouth and, delving inside, offered the man the fruit of knowledge, the word".<sup>47</sup>

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osità da gustare, da sperimentare, per amor del nuovo, vacuo o pericoloso che sia. Golosità mentale che piace ad Eva: Adamo quella parola non l'ha detta mai" (Alianello 1966: 50).

<sup>43</sup> "Squittii, ruggiti, frulli, sibili, barriti, fischi furono ben presto, per lui, il decifrabile linguaggio del mondo in cui cercava di orientarsi al riparo del proprio silenzio" (Crovi 1982: 31).

<sup>44</sup> "Quando capì che i suoi gesti costituivano, per gli animali e l'uomo, dei segnali, cominciò ad usare mani e piedi per provare in loro attese o paure" (Crovi 1982: 21).

<sup>45</sup> "... esercitandosi ad espellere aria dalla bocca, compose le prime parole" (Crovi 1982: 32).

<sup>46</sup> "... insinuò nell'uomo, che l'ascoltava da lontano, la malinconia e l'invidia della conoscenza" (Crovi 1982: 40).

<sup>47</sup> "... la donna avvicinò la sua faccia alla faccia dell'uomo, allungò la lingua verso la bocca di lui e, penetrandola, offrì all'uomo il frutto della conoscenza, la parola" (Crovi 1982: 98).

Crovi's and Alianello's interpretations of Genesis involve several differences, the main one being that, in Crovi, the woman is the sole person to invent language, independently of God and of the man. While in both authors it is the woman who carries out most of the semiotic work, Crovi does not address the theme of God's speech and words in the humans' minds. Another novel that is similar to Alianello, not for the literary style<sup>48</sup> but for the linguistic themes, is Erri De Luca's short novel *E disse* (2011) that reinterprets the Exodus.<sup>49</sup> In De Luca's work, Moses has the role of medium, speaking the words of God that enter his mind. God's word has a creative power, it "makes:"

This is revelation. "Fire and hail, snow and mist, stormy wind fulfilling his word" (Psalms 148: 8) [...] They saw his word do: above the rock and within each person. They saw the voice: culmination of visionary experience.<sup>50</sup>

This creative power exhorting humans to act according to the divine message is the same as the first word that gave birth to the world:

Those words had made the universe after their first syllables were pronounced: "Tei or," let there be light. In Hebrew, four vowels and one consonant lit up the nights and illuminated the day. The universe swarmed with sparks. Then those words called the world to make itself, during the six days of creation.

It was matter emerging from the voice of the divinity, it was the substance of beauty because it sprang from words.<sup>51</sup>

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**48** Alianello's is a long novel with a traditional narrative structure, while De Luca's is a short novel with short chapters, using more modern Italian language and frequently inserting Hebrew terms.

**49** De Luca is also the author of a translation and comment on the Exodus (De Luca 1994). Moreover, the character of Moses appears in a number of his works; see Montel (2011). For reflections on De Luca's translations of biblical texts and the ideas about writing expressed in his works, especially in *Montedidio* (2001), see Ruthenberg (2014).

**50** "Così è rivelazione. 'Fuoco e grandine, neve e fumo, vento di tempesta fece la sua parola' (Salmo 148, 8) [...] Videro la sua parola fare: sopra la roccia e all'interno di ognuno. Videro la voce: culmine di esperienza visionaria" (De Luca 2011: 37).

**51** "Quelle parole avevano fatto l'universo dopo le prime sillabe di annuncio: 'Tei or', sarà luce. In ebraico quattro vocali e una consonante avevano acceso le notti e illuminato il giorno. L'universo brulicò di scintille. Poi quelle parole avevano chiamato il mondo a farsi, durante i sei giorni di creazione. Era materia uscita dalla voce della divinità, era sostanza di bellezza perché scaturita da parole" (De Luca 2011: 48–49).

Thus, the word is what leads and “makes” man what he is: “And words make man, stand before him, guide him or lose him”.<sup>52</sup>

In *E disse*, too, there is a brief reflection on the semiotic tasks the woman is in charge of on earth: while Adam gave names to the animals on Eden, it is Eve who gives names to their sons:

The creator of the world, therefore its sole responsible party, who at that hour was beating his sentences on rock, immediately and always preferred women. To them he had given to impart life. That task, that domain, was theirs alone. Adàm had given names to all the animals, but he had not even been consulted as to the names of his children. That too was up to Eva, Havà.<sup>53</sup>

The message written by God on the rocks of Mount Sinai, however, is directed specifically to men, as confirmed by the use of the masculine grammatical gender. Indeed, with this message God invites men to contribute to the “life of the generations” (De Luca 2011: 45) by studying and transmitting his divine word. Therefore, while the primary semiotic role is the prerogative of women, men have the intellectual and narrative task of guarding and transmitting God’s word.

In other works quoting Genesis, in contrast, verbal language is presented as a fully human invention. This is the case with Tamaro (2013), for instance. *Ogni parola è un seme* once again addresses the theme of the first word ever pronounced by a human being, which is an “obsession” (Tamaro 2013: 13, 17) that the author recognizes not only in her characters but also in herself, something she has been concerned with since childhood. In the book, the author-narrator references the scientific hypothesis that humans began to speak while hunting in response to the contingent exigencies of coordinating their efforts:

It seems that the ability to speak was prompted by an adaptive need to hunt. [...] It seems that the first word erupted spontaneously, to communicate hunting needs: Further to the right! To the left! [...] (Lionesses also hunt in groups, however, and communicate very well with each other using simple movements of their tails.)<sup>54</sup>

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52 “E le parole fanno l’uomo, gli stanno davanti, lo guidano oppure lo smarriscono” (De Luca 2011: 79).

53 “Il creatore del mondo, perciò il suo responsabile unico, che in quell’ora stava battendo su roccia le sue frasi, preferiva da subito e da sempre il femminile. Al quale aveva dato da trasmettere la vita. Quel compito, quel campo, era esclusiva loro. Adàm aveva dato un nome a tutti gli animali, ma non era stato nemmeno consultato per il nome dei suoi figli. Pure quello spettava a Eva, Havà” (De Luca 2011: 42).

54 “Pare che la capacità di parlare sia stata promossa da una necessità adattiva alla caccia. [...] Pare che la prima parola sia esplosa spontaneamente, per comunicare necessità venatorie: Più a

In contrast with this hypothesis, the narrator believes that the first word developed by humans was a “why” triggered by a sense of mystery:<sup>55</sup>

Mystery [...] produces not certainties but anxieties and, from the turmoil, questions arise. Despite the certainties of science, which holds that the first word referred to prey, I still think that it was instead, “why?”

Why the day? Why the night? Why the beginning? Why the end? Why fragility?<sup>56</sup>

A different perspective on the “semiotic” genesis of the world can be found in Ferrucci’s *Il mondo creato* (1986), where the protagonist is God telling his story. The act of creation is seen as a correspondance between God’s will and words: “I couldn’t say: ‘Now I want a plant, a forest, a hundred forests’: to desire was my way of speaking”.<sup>57</sup> Thus, the created world is a “universal diary” in which “notes and sketches” are the things created by a deity who defines himself as an artist (“the artist in me prevailed more and more and the surveyor dozed”<sup>58</sup>; “As the aged poet who one day, in his idle wandering about the house, discovers notebooks full of forgotten poems and rereads them with astonishment, so I contemplated those new creatures”<sup>59</sup>). God is animated by a need for communication that induces him to create human beings so as to have an interlocutor (Ferrucci 1986: 39–41, 68, 90). And yet God himself finds it difficult to communicate with his creatures.<sup>60</sup>

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destra! A sinistra! [...] (Anche le leonesse comunque cacciano in gruppo e comunicano benissimo tra loro, con semplici movimenti della coda)” (Tamaro 2013: 25).

**55** A very similar concept can be found in the work of the French jurist and psychanalyst Legendre (1999). This coincidence does not prove a direct influence, but rather a common type of thought circulating in the semiosphere (Lotman 1984) of contemporary western culture.

**56** “Il mistero [...] non produce certezze ma inquietudini e, dal turbamento, nascono le domande. Malgrado le certezze della scienza, che considera la prima parola riferita alla preda, io continuo a pensare, invece che sia stata: ‘perché?’ Perché il giorno? Perché la notte? Perché l’inizio? Perché la fine? Perché la fragilità?” Tamaro (2013: 35).

**57** “Non potevo dire: ora voglio una pianta, una foresta, cento foreste: desiderare era il mio modo di parlare” (Ferrucci 1986: 19).

**58** “sempre più in me prevaleva l’artista e il geometra sonnecchiava” (Ferrucci 1986: 26).

**59** “Come il poeta invecchiato che un giorno, nel suo ozioso girovagare per casa, scopre quaderni fitti di poesie dimenticate e le rilegge con sbigottimento, così contemplai quelle nuove creature” (Ferrucci 1986: 43).

**60** For example: “Così terminò il mio incontro col dittatore sconfitto, che mi lasciò nell’animo la sensazione che avrei potuto dirgli assai di più e meglio” (Ferrucci 1986: 396); “Giungono a me preghiere confuse, intersecate da scariche elettriche. A stento riconosco le parole” (Ferrucci 1986: 406).



## 1.2 Communication issues

In both Alianello (1966) and Crovi (1982), the beginning of life outside of Eden coincides with the loss of perfect communication. In Alianello, although new words take shape in Eve's mind, communication between her and Adam is difficult, and Eve understands with dismay that she and the man do not think in the same way because their minds are divided (Alianello 1966: 14–15). Similarly, Adam and Eve are not able to understand the language of nature anymore, for example: "... and the water grumbles, it speaks... once she understood that speech, or so she thought"; "... the leaves just barely rustle because of the shifting wind, so delicately [...] and to whom do they speak? To her? But she is no longer able to understand them".<sup>61</sup>

As mentioned above, Crovi provides a detailed account of how humans – and particularly the woman – progressively build semiotic codes, especially by observing the nature around them and experiencing the possibilities of their bodies. However, the narrator does not explore the dimension of communication with the supernatural which is so central to Alianello. Indeed, in *Nascita di Eva* the recurring topic of humans feeling they have been abandoned by God is closely connected to their difficult quest to restore some way of communicating with him, however imperfectly:

But he does not look at us. What does he do to God if I [Eve] cry out? God! God!<sup>62</sup>

... that night [... Adam] had prayed to God from the bottom of his heart to answer him. That he should suggest no, even if it were to hurt, or instead encourage him, if that is his will; but within prayer he had found nothing but himself, with his doubts, his anxiety, and an indecisive, unstable thought that became distracted at the sight of a thousand useless images...<sup>63</sup>

While Adam retains a feeling of gratitude towards God, Eve is often angry and irreverent. These different attitudes are inherited by their two sons, Abel and Cain, respectively. The latter tries several times to make contact with God by talk-

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**61** "... e l'acqua brontola, parla... una volta intendeva quel discorso o le pare"; "... le foglie frusciano appena appena per il vento che s'è mutato, leggero leggero [...] e a chi parlano? A lei? Ma lei non è più capace d'intenderle ..." (Alianello 1966: 17 and 18).

**62** "... Ma lui non ci guarda. Che gli fa a Dio se io [Eva] grido? Dio! Dio!" (Alianello 1966: 80).

**63** "... quella notte [... Adamo] aveva pregato Dio dal fondo del suo cuore ché gli rispondesse. Che gli suggerisse di no, semmai faceva male, o l'incoraggiasse invece, se quella è la sua volontà; ma dentro la preghiera non ci aveva trovato altro che se stesso, coi suoi dubbi, la sua ansia, e un pensiero indeciso, instabile che si distraeva dietro mille immagini futili ..." (Alianello 1966: 152).

ing to him and making demands of him. Each time Cain waits for an answer that does not come, thus growing more and more angry at God and his pride injured (e.g. Alianello 1966: 109, 113). Abel, on the contrary, builds the first altar out of rock; he kneels and waits for God to communicate with him: the humility of waiting in silence (Alianello 1966: 118) seems to be what makes the difference between Abel and his brother. Indeed, Abel is rewarded with a mystic experience through which he confusedly perceives God's word:

Abel knelt beside the rock and waited. That was the first altar in the world, but he did not know it. And behold, his heart suddenly expanded, as if the word of God had come to him, blissful and lucid. But he did not hear it with his ear, nor did his thoughts, suddenly inert, understand its meaning. And yet it was a blessing, a yearning for joy [...] perhaps this, this blessed loss, is a sign, a promise of the divine word.<sup>64</sup>

At different moments, God speaks to both Abel and Cain. With Abel, he speaks through an angel in a dream (Alianello 1966: 166 ff) and as thunder when accepting the sacrifice the young man offers him:

Then the Lord appeared in his own way and all were terrified, because it was a crash, a rush and a thunderbolt that dazzled them. He plunged, roaring like a raptor that sensed from above.

A wave of heat swept over Abel's altar, consumed its victims and was immediately dissolved in the placidity of heaven. There was no cry or groan, only horror in the dishevelled souls.<sup>65</sup>

Cain, on the contrary, is the receiver of a message within himself, as happened to Eve and Adam while in Eden; this time, however, the message arrives in "a severe tone of displeasure and punishment" (Alianello 1966: 189):

... it was his mind that spoke; but it did not utter his own words, born of him, Cain's words. It was a voice from outside, straining his spirit and resounding within him, powerful and precise: "*Why have you become angry? And why do you hang your face in your chest? Be-*

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**64** "Abele s'inginocchiò accanto al sasso e attese. Quello fu il primo altare nel mondo, ma lui non lo sapeva. Ed ecco che d'improvviso gli si dilatò il cuore, quasi gli fosse giunta, beata e lucida, la parola di Dio. Ma non l'udì con l'orecchio né il suo pensiero, d'un tratto inerte, poteva intenderne il senso. Eppure era una beatitudine, uno struggimento di gioia [...] forse questo, questo smarrirsi beato, è un segno, una promessa della parola divina" (Alianello 1966: 117).

**65** "Allora il Signore parlò a modo suo e tutti ne furono atterriti, perché fu uno schianto, un impeto e una folgore che li abbagliò. Piombò rombando come un rapace che saetti dall'alto. Una vampa avvolse l'altare di Abele, ne consumò le vittime e subito era dissolta nella placidezza del cielo. Non ci fu grido né gemito, orrore soltanto negli animi sgominati" (Alianello 1966: 185).

*ware: know that if you do well, you will have good, if you do wrong, sin will be at your side at once*".<sup>66</sup>

Envyng the way God gives preference to Abel and the communication and comprehension between them, Cain makes an extreme, arduous attempt to attract God's attention: he kills his brother in a blasphemous sacrifice. Indeed, Cain intends his killing of Abel not only to represent vengeance for God's having given sorrow to humans, but also both the affirmation of a new humanity free of God and the ultimate attempt to send him a message:

[Cain] needed air and silence, because his chest was blocked and tight, and the noises of others bewildered him. Instead, it was necessary for him to make a void around his words. Which ones? He did not know; but necessary things, those that Abel will bring to God. Words to consider one by one...<sup>67</sup>

The theme of communication between humans and the deity also appears in De Luca, which focuses in particular on the relationship between oral and written language. In De Luca (2011), narration begins when Moses returns from Mount Sinai, where he had an experience that shocked him so greatly as to cause him amnesia. When he recovers his memory, he climbs to his feet, stands in front of the slope of the mount and begins pronouncing the words that he now remembers having heard on the peak. As he pronounces them, the words are contemporarily written in rock with fire:

"Anóghi:" The voice emanating from him was made of metal beaten hot on the anvil. He pushed the camp to turn towards 'Anóghi', me. With his back to all of them, he gazed fixedly at a point on the opposite wall. He wasn't reading: the word spoken came out written on the rock. It was carved from right to left following an invisible line. The first word still smoked when the second, the tetragrammaton, the unpronounceable name of the divinity, followed. He said: "Adonài," a surrogate name, but the fragments of the four letters explod-

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66 "... era la sua mente che parlava; ma non diceva parole sue, nate da lui, parole di Caino. Era una voce di fuori, forzando il suo spirito, e che gli risonava dentro, potente e precisa: *'Per qual motivo tu sei adirato? E perché porti la faccia in seno? Bada: che se farai bene, bene avrai, se farai male, subito al tuo fianco starà il peccato'*" (Alianello 1966: 188).

67 "[Caino] Aveva bisogno d'aria e di silenzio, ché il petto ce l'aveva impedito e stretto e il rumore degli altri lo frastornava. Invece gli era necessario fare il vuoto attorno alle sue parole. Quali? Non lo sapeva; ma cose necessarie, quelle che Abele porterà a Dio. Parole da considerare una per una..." (Alianello 1966: 199).

ed on the rock. The first is iod, an apostrophe that stands high on the staff, an almond on the branch. The other letters followed all at the same time.<sup>68</sup>

This narration presents an interpretation of a biblical passage that poses a semi-otic problem: in the Exodus, Moses is described as both the one who trasmits a message written by God to the Hebrews and as the transcriber of a message that he received orally from God.<sup>69</sup>

This form of contemporaneously oral and written speech is the “most direct manifestation of the deity” (De Luca 2011: 34). Oral language is seen as specifically human, and consequently “impure,” and this is why it cannot pronounce the name of the deity. At the same time, however, it has the task of communicating with God: “The human voice is made to rise like fire and smoke straight to the sky, it pushes from the bottom of a humiliation, of a danger, knocking upwards towards a listening”.<sup>70</sup> Written language, in contrast, comes from God himself, and therefore it is pure and does not desecrate its content. This is why the written transmission of the divine word by the scribes is performed through a set of “minutions rituals” (De Luca 2011: 35). Thus, the letters of verbal language “demonstrate” the deity, and this is why the chosen people are not allowed to keep images or “representations:” “From now on, no image can be superimposed on the words you hear, on the voice you write on the rock. It will be the letters that provide the image of the deity, that demonstrate it, which is the

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**68** “‘Anòkhi’: la voce che gli uscì era di metallo battuto a caldo sull’incudine. Spinse l’accampamento a voltarsi verso ‘Anòkhi’, io. Spalle a tutti loro guardava fisso un punto della muraglia dirimpetto. Non stava leggendo: la parola detta usciva scritta sulla roccia. Si scolpì da destra a sinistra secondo un rigo invisibile. [...] La prima parola fumava ancora quando seguì la seconda, il tetragramma, il nome impronunciabile della divinità. Lui disse: ‘Adonài’, nome sostitutivo, ma sulla roccia esplosero i frantumi delle quattro lettere. La prima è iod, apostrofo che sta in alto sul rigo, una mandorla sul ramo. Seguirono le altre lettere contemporaneamente” (De Luca 2011: 31–32).

**69** As Leone (2014: 395) points out, Jewish and Christian traditions, as well as secular interpretations, have emphasized either the first or the second version. In particular, “Christian interpretations of such ambiguity play a fundamental role in the way Christianity proposes itself as an alternative to Judaism: a religion where the Law is written on hearts versus a religion where the Law is written on stone”. There is also another novel re-writing Moses’s story in this corpus, namely Ferrucci (1986); in this text, however, the figure of Moses is negative in that he cheats and betrays God by imposing commandments which run contrary to the intentions of God and trying to kill him.

**70** “La voce umana è fatta per salire come fuoco e fumo dritta al cielo, spinge dal basso di una umiliazione, di un pericolo, bussando in su a un ascolto” (De Luca 2011: 35).

opposite of showing it. You will not have any figurines or illustrations, you will have a book”.<sup>71</sup>

Although God’s word is the only medium allowed to represent divinity, it has a peculiar synesthetic character in that it involves all the senses:

That word was unburned heat. It spread to the senses, it was a letter delivered to the eyes, in the ears, burning on the skin, it pierced the nose with factory smoke, and in the mouth it was the foretaste of milk and honey from the new earth. [...] from the words of the divinity an avalanche of physical intensity was released.<sup>72</sup>

Another similarity between Alianello (1966) and De Luca (2011) is a common reference to the language of nature even though, unlike Alianello’s characters, De Luca’s Moses is successful in understanding the words of the animals and natural elements:

He was happy in the wind, he welcomed it, listening. He was one of those who grasp a phrase where others understand only noise. From the tense throat of a lion, in a flurry, in an avalanche, in a rumble of thunder he recognized a speaking voice. And while he listened to it, he also read it, written and tense.<sup>73</sup>

A further issue of communication found in this corpus is the progressive loss of the meaning of words due to their over-use in our mass media society: this theme is fully developed in Tamaro (2013), where “seed-words” endowed with creative power and raising humans towards Heaven are opposed to “confetti-words,” deprived of meaning:

For too long now our words – human words – have not been able to take root. They wander wearily without finding the ground that would allow them, in the now cosmic chatter that surrounds us, to create a breach. A glimmer of meaning, of truth, of foundation.

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**71** “D’ora in poi nessuna imagine si dovrà sovrapporre alle parole che ascolti, alla voce che scrive sulla roccia. Saranno le lettere a fornire l’immagine della divinità, a dimostrarla, che è l’opposto di mostrarla. Non avrai figurine, illustrazioni, avrai un libro” (De Luca 2011: 37).

**72** “Quella parola era caloria che non si consumava. Si diramava ai sensi, era lettera consegnata agli occhi, nelle orecchie, ardente sulla pelle, penetrata nel naso con fumo di officina, e in bocca era l’anticipo di latte e miele delle terra nuova. [...] dalle parole della divinità si sprigionava una valanga d’intensità fisica” (De Luca 2011: 48).

**73** “Era felice al vento, lo accoglieva in ascolto. Era di quelli che afferrano una frase dove gli altri intendono solo un chiasso. Dalla gola tesa di un leone, dentro una raffica, in una valanga, in un tuono lui riconosceva una voce dire. E mentre l’ascoltava anche la leggeva, scritta e tesa” (De Luca 2011: 10).

There are many, too many, more and more useless. We talk to each other continuously with the most technologically advanced means, only to say nothing. Instead, the more speeches we make, the more difficult it is for us to understand each other.

Compared to seed-words, our words are confetti-words, they move with our breath. When the air stops they settle on the ground, waiting for another puff of wind.

We talk and talk without it ever occurring to us that words, in order to really exist, must be nourished by listening.

Only by listening to He who speaks with a powerful trumpet sound or like a light breeze can we live reflecting on our greatness, it allows us to escape the temptations of ignorance, impatience, the call of that idolatry that, in disguise like the wolf dressed as a fairy tale lamb, is devouring people's dignity.

Yes, every word is a seed, and where it must set down is the human heart.

It is there, within us, that it must take root, break the covering of indifference, grow, rise up to heaven, transforming us from pongids into creatures brimming with wisdom.<sup>74</sup>

In the general axiology that this corpus expresses, the difficult achievement of language, that is, the enormous semiotic effort of semantizing the world in its origins, occupies a position of anthesis in relation to the infinite propagation and multiplication of messages characterizing contemporary society. According to this perspective, such semiotic "drift" (Eco 2004: 325–338) is a critical problem in that verbal language – and its power to truly name and order objects, feelings and beings – is often seen as the distinctive feature of humanity, the main product of knowledge, and the sensitive sign that humans possess souls.

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**74** "Da troppo tempo le nostre parole – le parole degli uomini – non sanno più radicarsi. Girano stancamente senza trovare il terreno che permetta loro, nel chiacchiericcio ormai cosmico che ci avvolge, di aprirsi un varco. Uno spiraglio di senso, di verità, di fondamento. Sono tante, troppe, sempre più inutili. Ci parliamo continuamente, con i mezzi tecnologicamente più avanzati per non dirci niente. Anzi, più discorsi facciamo, più difficoltà abbiamo a comprenderci. Rispetto alle parole-seme, le nostre sono parole-coriandolo, si muovono secondo il fiato. Quando l'aria si ferma, si posano al suolo, in attesa di un altro refo di vento. Parliamo e parliamo, senza mai essere sfiorati dal dubbio che la parola, per esistere davvero, deve essere nutrita dall'ascolto. Solo l'ascolto di Colui che parla con un suono potente di tromba o come una brezza leggera, ci permette di vivere riflettendo sulla nostra grandezza, ci permette di sfuggire alle tentazioni dell'ignoranza, dell'impazienza, al richiamo di quell'idolatria che, sotto mentite spoglie, come il lupo travestito da agnello della fiaba, sta divorando la dignità delle persone. Sì, ogni parola è un seme, e il cuore dell'uomo il luogo in cui si deve posare. È lì, dentro di noi, che deve mettere radici, spezzare il tegumento dell'indifferenza, crescere, innalzarsi verso il cielo, trasformandoci da pongidi in creature colme di sapienza" (Tamaro 2013: 44–45).

## 1.3 Language and humanity

In effect, the close relationship between language and humanity is another relevant and recurring theme in our corpus. The capacity to engage in expression through an articulated verbal language is often represented as the characteristic that distinguishes humans from all other beings.

In Alianello (1966), this theme is represented through the characters of monkeys that are very similar to human beings. When they see one of these monkeys for the first time, Adam and Eve are shaken. Eve in particular is distressed because of the physical similarity she perceives between herself and the animal (a female of the species). She refuses to admit there might be any kind of kinship, however, because it would underline her own bestial nature, which she firmly rejects. While observing the monkey, Adam and Eve exchange a series of ideas about its nature. They conclude that the creature is not human specifically by virtue of the fact that it cannot speak. Indeed, they argue, words are what differentiates humans from animals because only beings who have a soul can speak:

- No, these are not like us, men. If they were men, explained Adam, seriously, they would have a soul.
- And they don't have one?
- Those who have a soul speak – said the man. – And do you see this one? Do you hear it? It mews and yelps... but no words... no words that are things.<sup>75</sup>

What is significant in this passage is that Adam takes for granted the correspondence between sign and referent, and that such a correspondence is presented as the specific trait characterizing human language. By the way, it is probably not a coincidence that this is the only referent for which Eve feels lexical uncertainty: while generally the signifier and signified perfectly coincide in the language that springs up in her mind (see above), she cannot find a satisfactory word for the bewildering animal before her (“that little person-like-thing or person-ish thing, as Eve thought of calling it”<sup>76</sup>).

Language is thus the sign characterizing full humanity. It is also the fruit of knowledge; this is probably the reason why the woman, the first to eat the apple, is usually the first to master it. In light of these considerations, it is possible to identify three different levels of mastery of communication in Alianello's novel.

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<sup>75</sup> “No, questi non sono come noi, uomini. [...] Se fossero uomini, – spiegò grave Adamo – avrebbero l'anima. E non l'hanno? Chi ha l'anima parla – asserì l'uomo. E tu la vedi questa? La senti? Miagola e guaisce... ma parole no... parole che siano cose, no” (Alianello 1966: 128).

<sup>76</sup> “quella omacciola o ominastra, come volle chiamarla Eva” (Alianello 1966: 135).

First, in Eden there is a condition of perfect communication, between Adam and Eve, between them and nature, between the first couple and God. Second, after the fall, communication becomes difficult. Third is the condition of the “*ominastri*,” those who do not possess language. The loss of the power to master language coincides with the humans approaching a bestial state. It is significant that the action that most degrades human nature, i.e. the murder of the brother, is firstly executed by the “*ominastri*.” Cain conceives the idea of killing Abel when he sees the remains of two “*ominastri*” who had killed each other. The first monkey seen by Adam and Eve was also dealt mortal injuries by one of its counterparts: these sub-human beings are characterized by the fact that they kill each other for reasons not coherent with basic survival, but at the same time this is also what they and human beings have in common. The bestiality of the “*ominastri*” represents the lower part of human nature, dominated by “violence and hatred” (Alianello 1966: 198).

These novels also present language as the sign of human superiority over other components of creation by citing the Genesis theme of man’s power to give a name to animals.<sup>77</sup> This concept is clearly expressed by Tamaro (2013) who, even while emphasizing the creative power of human language, calls for a closer dialogue with animals, casting these latter as the keepers of a relationship with transcendence:

[Animals] are the companions of our earthly journey. They are the ones who tell us about another dimension. They tell us about it but we are unable to hear them. In the Bible it is Adam who gives a name to every animal, all too often we forget this. There is a deep and inextricable bond between us and them, and that bond is the delicate thread of voice. The voice that calls their name, the voice that is not an inarticulate sound, roar, wheezing, but a precise identity. A voice that, in turn, calls on us to answer for the uniqueness of our name. “Every word is a seed, and where it must set down is the human heart”.

In fact, maybe this is another thing we have forgotten: the creative power of the word, which can once again be a seed of poison, of discord, of destruction, or a seed that germinates, one that brings light into our lives and fuels the growth of trees under whose branches we might rest.<sup>78</sup>

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77 According to this perspective, the price of this superiority is that – as we have seen – humans become estranged from creation in that they are no longer able to understand the language of nature.

78 “[Gli animali] sono i compagni del nostro percorso terreno. Sono loro che ci parlano di un’altra dimensione. Ce ne parlano e noi non siamo capaci di ascoltarli. Nella Bibbia è Adamo a dare il nome ad ogni animale, troppo spesso ci dimentichiamo di questo. Tra noi e loro c’è un profondo e inestricabile legame e quel legame è il filo tenue della voce. La voce che chiama il loro nome, la voce che non è suono inarticolato, ruggito, rantolo, ma precisa identità. Voce che, a nostra volta, ci chiama a rispondere dell’unicità del nostro nome. ‘Ogni parola è un



With respect to the other works considered in this chapter, all published previously, Tamaro contains a markedly “environmentalist” feeling of not only kinship with animals, but also responsibility towards them. What is particularly interesting is that this environmentalist concern is put into close relationship with the biblical story of Genesis:

Weren't the beasts of the steppes and all the birds in Heaven moulded from the earth as Adam was moulded?

And is it not Adam, in Genesis, who gives a name to all creatures? Why does the Almighty not do it directly? Did he not already contain all the names and all the forms within himself? So why did he give man this responsibility? What do we do when a child is born? Don't we give him a name? And don't our parents, our grandparents, our brothers and sisters have a name?

To give a name is to share a journey of communion, of responsibility.<sup>79</sup>

Despite this reference to God's power to create through words, Tamaro (2013) also expresses the idea that verbal language was initially developed by mankind, a fact which implies that this reflection about Genesis should be read in a metaphorical sense. Moreover, Tamaro (2013) further specifies the linguistic feature that most characterizes humanity. As mentioned above, according to Tamaro (2013) the first word was the “why?” triggered by mystery. Consequently, the narrator believes that the essence of humanity is expressed through and represented by the interrogative form: “Yes, the essence of man is constituted by questioning. No other living being is capable of doing the same. No one else is able to ask himself what will come of it – of finiteness, of temporality – and to ask himself questions”.<sup>80</sup> The first word was thus a question, and questions are the form of language that Tamaro (2013) presents as most characterizing humanity.<sup>81</sup>

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seme, e il cuore dell'uomo è il luogo in cui si deve posare'. Ecco, forse proprio di questo ci siamo pure dimenticati: del potere creatore della parola che può essere ancora una volta seme di veleno, di zizzania, di distruzione o seme che germoglia, che porta luce nelle vite e fa crescere alberi sotto le cui fronde è bello riposarsi” (Tamaro 2013: 6).

**79** “Le fiere delle steppe e tutti i volatili del Cielo non sono stati modellati dalla terra così com'è stato modellato Adamo? E non è forse Adamo, nella Genesi, a dare un nome a tutte le creature? Perché non lo fa direttamente l'Onnipotente? Tutti i nomi e tutte le forme non erano già dentro di Lui? E allora, perché ha dato all'uomo questa responsabilità? Che cosa facciamo noi quando nasce un figlio? Non gli diamo forse un nome? E non hanno un nome i nostri genitori, i nostri nonni, i nostri fratelli? Dare un nome vuol dire condividere un cammino di comunione, di responsabilità” (Tamaro 2013: 100).

**80** “Sì, l'essenza dell'uomo si costituisce interrogando. Nessun altro essere vivente è capace di fare altrettanto. Nessun altro è in grado di chiedersi cosa ne sarà – della finitezza, della temporalità – e di farsi domande” (Tamaro 2013: 35).

## 1.4 The cosmological power of the word and literary activity

As shown above, a number of literary works evoking the biblical tradition attribute a sacred significance and strong creative power to the word. The issue of the creative power of language is, however, extended far beyond works that re-narrate biblical stories: it is a widespread motif, often connected to the theme of the creative power of human writing. Literature and poetry are often seen as media, either for creating an alternative and self-sufficient reality (a narrative universe of which the Author is the only creator, or demiurge), or for pursuing meaning in order to explain real life. Sometimes this quest is permeated by religious values:<sup>82</sup> in these cases, the theme of language and its creative-cosmological nature is generally based on a sense of need for order and for form. This sense of lack of meaning is the starting point for the quest for artistic form but also, at the same time, cosmological order. Characters and narrators therefore seek answers to questions about the existence of God and/or try to identify the meaning of what they perceive as his painful distance or absence. Such themes are well developed, for example, by Pomilio (1978) and Tamaro (1997).

The protagonist of the tale that gives its name to the collection *Il cane sull'Etna* (Pomilio 1978) is a writer. The tale has a thin narrative pattern and strong component of semiotic reflection. It is a representative example of the postmodern literary crisis in which authors asked themselves whether literature – or at least the novel – was dead<sup>83</sup> and tended to use words in a deconstructionist way, considering the literary text to be a self-sufficient and autoreferential universe.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, in the beginning the narrator dreams of writing a dictionary

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**81** The capacity to imagine the future is also mentioned by Crovi (1982) as a feature characterizing human beings. Crovi (1982) attributes the development of this capacity to woman. A different perspective is presented in Ferrucci (1986: 52), where human language is created by God in order to imitate birdsong and to try to reach the same beauty and capacity to fly that he erroneously associates with language.

**82** See e.g. Zangrilli (1992 7–8).

**83** Pomilio's character, for instance, writes in his notebook: "Più che fare letteratura, [...] oggi stiamo decidendo qualcosa intorno alla letteratura, probabilmente che cosa farcene della letteratura" (Pomilio 1978: 18). For further reflections about Pomilio's work in light of the general context of literary crisis, see Reina (1989).

**84** A representative example of this point is Italo Calvino's comment about Giorgio Manganelli's avant-gardist novel *Nuovo Commento* (1969): "Through a process of accumulations, the reader crosses a threshold and arrives at a sudden illumination: of course, the *text* is God and the universe [...]. Then, he reads again from the beginning with this key, that the *text* is the universe as language, as discourse of a God that does not refer to anything else than the sum of the signifiers..." (Calvino 1993: 150, my translation). For a brief discussion of the influence of deconstructionism on Italian writers, see Segre (1998: 87–88).

of terms that have lost their meaning. These terms are mainly the names of moral and religious values such as truth and faith:

He sometimes dreamed of being able to write an encyclopedia of disruption, or at least a dictionary of terms that were being decommissioned. He was sorry to pronounce [the word] faith and to have to think that it was no longer there. [...] He distrusted certain terms, he found them similar to old signage, and in the worst cases similar to the blackened flags that serve to announce a death has taken place but without grieving for the deceased. Even when he wrote [the word] truth, he suspected it of not meaning anything at all.<sup>85</sup>

The writer thinks that his time is characterized by an excess of irrationality. The symptom of this irrationality is that terms stemming from a longstanding tradition suddenly lose their meaning and dignity. It is for this reason that he would like to write a book without a plot, a book containing only “clues to sense” and not meanings per se. His language would be a purely arbitrary code, a language without “a metaphysics,” that is to say, without what in Saussurean terms we could call a “*parole*” and which would therefore tend to pure “insignificance:”

Therefore, his strongest ambition at that time was, if anything, a book that was absolutely uncontrolled and absolutely irresponsible, one that also captured the debris of his mental life without taking any care whatsoever to reorganize or reinvent it: a potential novel that did not tell a story, but rather offered a repertoire of occasional events or, more precisely, metaphorical clues adrift. (“Clues,” he noted, “not senses, much less meanings! We have used metaphysical deceptions for too long. But could there be [...] a metaphor in the absence of a metaphysics? And a set of words without anything to denote? Take note, [...] a language of pure signs is conceivable only in terms of pure insignificance”).<sup>86</sup>

The writer is fascinated by the “gratuitousness of words,” by the arbitrary use of words, which he associates with “a sort of primordial freedom that was imbued

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**85** “Sognava alle volte di poter scrivere un’enciclopedia del dissesto, o almeno un dizionario dei termini in disarmo. [...] Gli faceva pena pronunciare fede e dover pensare che non c’era più. [...] Di certi termini diffidava, li trovava simili a vecchie insegne, e nei casi peggiori alle bandiere abbrunate, che servono a far sapere che una morte c’è stata, ma non a far compiangere il defunto. Anche a scrivere verità gli veniva il sospetto di non significare, propriamente, niente” (Pomilio 1978: 17).

**86** “Perciò la sua ambizione più forte in quel periodo era, semmai, un libro assolutamente non dominato e assolutamente irresponsabile, che catturasse anche le scorie della sua vita mentale senza affatto curarsi di riorganizzarla o reinventarla: un romanzo potenziale, che non narrasse una vicenda, ma fosse un repertorio d’eventi occasionali o, appunto, una deriva di indizi metaforici. (‘Indizi’ annotò ‘e non sensi, tanto meno significati! Ce ne siamo serviti per troppe frodi metafisiche. Ma può darsi [...] una metafora in assenza d’una metafisica? E un insieme di parole senza alcunché da designare? Nota bene, [...] un linguaggio di puri segni è concepibile solo in termini di pura insignificanza.’)” (Pomilio 1978: 19).

with ambition and innocence at the same time”.<sup>87</sup> While the writer yearns in vain for this Adamitic condition of verbal innocence, he also feels that referential language has lost its efficacy: it is only good for producing “a reference in relation to the world, but no longer says anything about the world”.<sup>88</sup> Despite dreaming of a purely arbitrary and “meaningless” language, the writer feels an urgent need to “give weight to words if we want to understand the reality of things”.<sup>89</sup> However, this task of bringing back referentiality is particularly difficult because things in this epoch “escape” any description (“nowadays it’s not that we don’t write, it’s that things can’t be written”<sup>90</sup>).

These semiotic reflections are connected to themes that recur not only in this tale, but more generally in a number of works included in this corpus. The first is the theme of the characters’ feeling of inadequacy and discomfort living in their own times<sup>91</sup> (e. g. Pomilio 1978: 18). The second is the theme of history having lost direction and meaning in the current moment:

... he was of the opinion [...] that in his time history has lost its coordinates, or at least that reassuring possibility of taking stock to see where one is and where to turn the bow, the possibility that ensures that history resembles a heading and gives the illusion, according to personal taste, that it is a plan, providence or destiny.<sup>92</sup>

However, the writer does not have the courage to embrace pure nihilism by writing the word “nothing” (Pomilio 1978: 18). Despite these fantasies about the insignificance of language, the writer still believes in the “evocative power of words” (Pomilio 1978: 22). In the course of the tale, there is an increasingly evident detachment from linguistic nihilism though the adoption of a hironic attitude towards it. At the same time, the narrator expresses his concern about the present condition of language and launches an accusation towards the “beauticians” of his time who would like words to contest reality and thus end up contesting themselves (Pomilio 1978: 36–37).

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**87** “... una sorta di libertà primigenia che sapeva, in pari tempo, di velleità e d’innocenza” (Pomilio 1978: 20).

**88** “un referto intorno al mondo, ma non dice più niente del mondo” (Pomilio 1978: 20).

**89** “dare un peso alle parole se vogliamo capire la realtà delle cose” (Pomilio 1978: 21).

**90** “... al giorno d’oggi non siamo noi che non scriviamo, ma sono le cose che non si lasciano scrivere” (Pomilio 1978: 21).

**91** See paragraph 1.5.

**92** “... era dell’avviso [...] che al suo tempo si fossero perse le coordinate della storia, o comunque quella rassicurante possibilità di fare il punto per vedere dove si è e dove volgere la prora, che rende la storia somigliante a una rotta e dà l’illusione, a seconda dei gusti, che risponda a un progetto, a una provvidenza o a un destino” (Pomilio 1978: 28).

The problem, according to the author, is that words are no longer able to keep pace with the frenetic proliferation of objects. They are therefore in a state of alteration that consists of “gorging themselves on meanings never before seen and forcibly driven to the point of being the hyperbole of themselves”.<sup>93</sup> This situation entails an “epistemology of decentralization” in which meaning is lost in a centrifugal movement. The inability to capture reality is particularly evident in newspapers titles, which are more and more nonsensical: they constitute a “mysticism of unrelated forms,” language “disengaged from the conventional and slightly outdated ballast of reliability, no longer reduced to an artisanal tool of thought or a modest and homely periphery of reality”.<sup>94</sup> Thus, journalists replace poets in the rhetorical use of language and the condensation of meanings (Pomilio 1978: 34–35).

It is the protagonist himself who carries out this destruction of sense, and he does so in a particular way: he reflects on the kinship among words on a phonetic basis rather than a semantic one. That is, he tries to find unusual kinship relationships by firstly coupling words with similar sounds, and then comparing their meaning, thus achieving nonsensical results. This procedure causes words to undergo “semantic degradation” (Pomilio 1978: 39). This “disjointed jumble of words strung together at random, according to purely phonic associations [...] in their fury to bungle the semiological crust, crawl [...] in the brain as bare and slimy as snails”.<sup>95</sup> This practice leads him to understand “how arbitrary the regime of language really is and [...] how risky and contrary to reality it is to define things beginning with words”.<sup>96</sup>

The cause behind this problem of the degradation of meanings and words is identified as the death of metaphysics and its being substituted by the many “meta” of modern ideologies and disciplines, which represent examples of intellectual fraud:

... he began to reflect on the curious kinship that develops between words as soon as we try to associate them not according to meaning, but according to sound: suffice, therefore, to

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**93** “ingozzarsi di sensi mai veduti e avviati forzosamente all’iperbole di se stessi” (Pomilio 1978: 33).

**94** “mistica di forme irrelate [...] sciolta dalla convenzionale e un po’ vecchiotta zavorra dell’attendibilità, evitandole di ridursi nuovamente a un artigianesco utensile del pensiero o a una modesta e casalinga periferia del reale” (Pomilio 1978: 34).

**95** “sconnesso farfugliamento di parole messe insieme a caso, per pure associazioni foniche [...] a furia di pasticciarne la crosta semiologica gli strisciano [...] nel cervello nude e lubriche come lumache” (Pomilio 1978: 43).

**96** “quanto arbitrario è il regime del linguaggio e [...] quanto arrischiato e poco conforme a realtà è partire dalle parole per definire le cose” (Pomilio 1978: 42).

say tempio (temple) to evoke empio (sacrilegious) and scempio (destruction), and even Dio (God), when we are not paying enough attention, suffers a kind of semantic degradation and risks being mistaken for rio (river). And perhaps precisely to avoid such desecration – he reflected idly and almost jokingly immediately afterwards – not only do we currently avoid naming him and even more so invoking him to explain human matters, but most people, in all circumstances, preferred to remain in the mezzanine of the metempirical instead of facing that last stretch of stairs leading up to the main floor, where, among dusty old furniture, someone is still hoping to find the ghost of metaphysics wandering: a strange spectre [...] that everyone or almost everyone denies exists and few name for fear of evoking it, but nevertheless it is present and rather cumbersome, like certain illustrious ancestors who we would feel were much deader if we could have sold them in substance, complete with the coat of arms. And undoubtedly [...] it would go a long way to understanding our times if, once we have taken note of the death of metaphysics, we were to reflect with some small measure of malice on the way its old prefix, the venerable *meta*, is used: a suspicious emblem which, in truth, our times rightly show us not to hold on to [...], but is nonetheless hoisted at the apex of words as soon as we need to invest them with dignity: and so [the *meta*] has derived a metalogic from logic and a metamathematics from mathematics, only to then turn its nose up at moving on to physics (as the catalogue of sciences would have it) and get stuck like a dog who suddenly discovers he is on the trail of an animal bigger than he had suspected.<sup>97</sup>

The protagonist falls into a definitive state of semiotic pessimism when he reads a sort of literary manifesto that calls for “semiological guerrilla warfare” in order

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97 “... cominciò a riflettere sulle curiose parentele che si stabiliscono tra le parole appena ci si prova ad associarle non secondo il senso, ma secondo il suono: per cui basta dire tempio per evocare empio e scempio, e perfino Dio, a non prestarvi la debita attenzione, subisce una specie di degradazione semantica e rischia d’andar confuso con rio. E forse appunto per evitargli una siffatta profanazione – rifletté oziosamente e quasi per scherzo subito dopo – non solo al giorno d’oggi s’evitava di nominarlo e ancor più di chiamarlo in causa per spiegare le cose umane, ma la più parte delle persone, in ogni circostanza, preferiva trattenersi nel mezzanino del metempirico invece d’affrontare l’ultimo tratto di scale per salire al piano nobile, dove, tra vecchi polverosi arredi, qualcuno tuttora vuole che s’aggiri il fantasma della metafisica: uno strano spettro [...] che tutti o quasi negano che ci sia e pochi mano nominare per paura d’evocarlo, ma pure è presente e piuttosto ingombrante, al modo di certi antenati illustri che sentiremmo assai più morti se avessimo potuto svenderne, con la sostanza, anche il blasone. E indubbiamente [...] si andrebbe parecchio addentro nella cognizione del nostro tempo se, una volta preso atto della morte della metafisica, ci mettessimo a riflettere con un minimo di malizia sull’uso che tuttavia vi si fa del suo vecchio prefisso, il venerabile *meta*: sospettabile insegna, per la verità, alla quale il nostro tempo mostra giustamente di non tenere [...], ma che pure ancora inalbera in cima alle parole non appena ha bisogno d’investirle d’una dignità: sicché dalla logica ha desunto una metalogica e dalla matematica una metamatematica, salvo poi a storcere il muso al momento di passare alla fisica (come pure vorrebbe il catalogo delle scienze) e a impuntarsi al modo d’un cane che scopra all’improvviso di trovarsi sulle peste d’un animale più grosso di quel che sospettava” (Pomilio 1978: 39–41).

to “alienate the universe of known meanings”.<sup>98</sup> In that moment he realizes that the prevailing thought of his time is a “panlogistics of denial” and that “beauticians” serve the function of deontology and teleology (Pomilio 1978: 39). The lack of meaning in the newspapers titles made up of words completely devoid of sense leads him to think that this semiological guerrilla warfare (Pomilio 1978: 43) has achieved its goal and that “words no longer express any value”. In light of this shift, he definitely states that “the world could not be cured”.<sup>99</sup> It is worth mentioning that the expression “semiological guerrilla warfare” was introduced in the 1960s by Umberto Eco, who claimed that semiotics could foster critical and alternative readings of texts by freeing the reader from the perspective imposed, on one hand, by political authority and, on the other hand, by the intention of the author, which according to Eco was traditionally assigned an excessive importance.<sup>100</sup> In consideration of Umberto Eco’s celebrity and of the growing diffusion of semiotic methodology also among literary critics (see Introduction), it is evident that this reference in Pomilio’s text openly and provocatively calls into question contemporary semiotics.

In the preface, Pomilio (1978) affirms that characters are metaphors and that the tales presented in *Il cane sull’Etna* were composed during a period of creative crisis that he ended up overcoming even before the book was published. However, the protagonist of “Il cane sull’Etna” can be interpreted not only as a metaphor for the author’s personal experience, but also as a metaphor for the more general semiotic crisis plaguing a number of writers in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, this tale presents an affresco of different ideas that were circulating in the 1960s and 70s: in Pomilio, ideas deriving from structuralism, deconstructionism and the thesis of arbitrariness of language clash with religious values. The protagonist’s discourse about the rejection of metaphysics can be seen as the point of both contact and contrast between two different systems of thought. This rejection leaves an epistemological blank that it is hard to fill in a new and satisfactory way. Once more, and despite the modernity of thought expressed by Pomilio in relation to the authors previously addressed in this chapter in whose work modern debates over language seem to have limited direct influence, the theme of meaning and language is thus ultimately connected to the theme of the existence of God and consequent existence of a metaphysical order. Even though “semantic degradation” and “meaninglessness” are a temp-

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<sup>98</sup> “guerriglia semiologica” for the “straniamento dell’universo dei significati noti” (Pomilio 1978: 37–38).

<sup>99</sup> “le parole non esprimono più alcun valore”; “il mondo era senza rimedio” (Pomilio 1978: 44).

<sup>100</sup> On the “semiotic guerrilla warfare” see the 1967 essay “Per una guerriglia semiologica” in Eco (1973); see also Fabbri (1998) and Desogus (2012).

tation, the refusal to reject God and metaphysics necessarily leads writers to endorse religious values in order to overcome the acceptance of senselessness. The experimental play with the semiotic limits of language carried out in literature is therefore ultimately seen as a moment of crisis in a dialectical process, that is, as a moment of antithesis leading to a new phase of positive creativity.

In Tamaro's *Anima mundi* (1997), the protagonist and narrator, Walter, is characterized by a constant search for sense and order: "Order, disorder, life, death, light, shadow. From the moment I became aware of my existence, I had done nothing but wonder, I asked myself questions which no one could answer".<sup>101</sup> As a child, the protagonist visits a natural science museum where he sees the body of a deformed foetus, probably the result of radiation from a nuclear bomb. The idea that nature might be suffering a loss of form and order shocks him:

"The fact that nature could lose its shape had impressed me a lot. I saw an elderly, scarred woman wandering around a house in disarray. Everything was in disarray, the drawers, the wardrobes, as if thieves had just come through. She wandered through the rooms staring into space, not knowing what to look for any longer".<sup>102</sup>

At school, he also learns about the lack of direction and sense in human history: "History, I thought then, must be a sort of wagon with broken brakes. A wagon with no one on board that plunges down a hill, knocking over everything".<sup>103</sup> Then, when one of his schoolmates dies, the protagonist becomes conscious of a dismaying sense of emptiness: "The only thing I was aware of was the ambush of the void around me. It was hard to move, to imagine something, with that sword eternally pointed at my throat".<sup>104</sup> At the age of fifteen he is a difficult teenager, he still looks for meaning but now he tries to do so through words, which, together with poetry, become an integral part of his quest for order and sense: "Very quickly my life plunged into disorder. [...] I shook things up

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**101** "Ordine, disordine, vita, morte, luce, ombra. Dal momento in cui avevo preso coscienza del mio esistere, non avevo fatto altro che interrogarmi, mi facevo domande a cui nessuno poteva rispondere" (Tamaro 1997: 12).

**102** "Quel fatto che la natura potesse perdere la forma mi aveva impressionato parecchio. Vedevo una signora anziana, scarmigliata, che si aggirava in una casa in disordine. Tutto era per aria, i cassetti, gli armadi, come dopo il passaggio dei ladri. Vagava per le stanze con lo sguardo smarrito, senza saper più cosa cercare" (Tamaro 1997: 31).

**103** "La storia, ho pensato allora, deve essere una sorta di carro a cui si sono rotti i freni. Un carro senza nessuno a bordo che precipita da una discesa e travolge ogni cosa" (Tamaro 1997: 36).

**104** "L'unica cosa di cui ero cosciente era l'agguato del vuoto intorno. Era difficile muoversi, immaginare qualcosa, con quella spada perennemente puntata alla gola" (Tamaro 1997: 42).



to make a glimmer of truth appear. I had always done so. Only now, I was looking for words for that truth”.<sup>105</sup>

When disorder entered my life, it entered as a pure element. It was mountain air, diamond, quartz [...]. Lucidity was its strong point; instead of a gaze, I had infrared binoculars. I was probing, I was stirring. I was sure that the apparent banality was nothing more than a shell to be broken. Poetry would be born from its fragments. Not the poetry of others, which I read in books, but the poetry that was to be mine alone.<sup>106</sup>

Poetry is therefore a way for the character to find order beyond apparent disorder, to create a universe of his own. This need for order is also expressed in a conversation the protagonist has with his best friend, Andrea. When asked who he would like to be, he answers that his ideal role would be that of accountant, because an accountant is “... someone who has thought only of accounts since he was a child, he does sums and when he draws a line under it everything is correct, everything makes sense. [...] It would be beautiful”.<sup>107</sup>

Both Walter and Andrea go through a long trajectory of perdition. In the end, they both arrive at a monastery where a nun explains to them the real meaning of life. Existential void, disorder, and a lack of meaning all derive from the fact that man is prey to his own arrogant intelligence:

I am old enough to have seen a large part of the century go by. I can now say that this is the evil of our time. Supreme intelligence, nourished only by itself. At a certain point we lost our fear of God, our actions became empty, detached from a larger project. Where there is emptiness there is the Unrational. It quickly infiltrates everywhere and, everywhere, spreads its madness. Without respect, without love, man is only a monkey running around the world with blood on his hands.<sup>108</sup>

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**105** “In tempi molto rapidi la mia vita piombò nel disordine. [...] Scuotevo le cose perché vi apparisse uno spiraglio di verità. Lo avevo sempre fatto. Soltanto che adesso, per quella verità, cercavo le parole” (Tamaro 1997: 45).

**106** “Quando il disordine è entrato nella mia vita, è entrato come elemento puro. Era aria di montagna, diamante, quarzo [...]. La lucidità era il suo punto di forza, al posto dello sguardo, avevo un binocolo a infrarossi. Scandagliavo, smuovevo. Ero certo che la banalità apparente non fosse altro che uno scudo da infrangere. Dai suoi cocci sarebbe nata la poesia. Non quella degli altri, che leggevo sui libri, ma quella che sarebbe stata soltanto mia” (Tamaro 1997: 47).

**107** “... uno che fin da piccolo pensa solo ai conti, fa le somme e quando tira la riga sotto tutto è esatto, tutto torna. [...] Sarebbe bellissimo” (Tamaro 1997: 79).

**108** “Io sono abbastanza vecchia, per aver visto scorrere una gran parte di secolo. Posso ormai dire che questo è il male del nostro tempo. L'intelligenza superba, nutrita soltanto di se stessa. A un certo punto è andato smarrito il timore di Dio, le azioni sono diventate vuote, avulse da un progetto più grande. Dove c'è il vuoto c'è l'Irrazionale. Scivola rapido dappertutto e, dappertutto

It is only when he is older that the protagonist understands what intelligence really is. He had an initial glimpse of it when he was sixteen and pet some lambs that a truck was transporting to the slaughterhouse:

Intelligence was dissolving into something else.

I hadn't given this something a name yet, but I knew I'd met it before at least once. It was when, as a boy, I had caressed the lambs that were going to die. It was just a flash of lightning. A flash that revealed a different form of understanding. When I was sixteen, I mistook it for art. Now I knew it was just the feeling of compassion.<sup>109</sup>

Walter thus understands that the only way to overcome the lack of meaning is the Christian value of compassion, not the quest for order in poetry. Art, as he used to conceive it, is only the fruitless product of human intelligence nourished by the proud illusion that it is complete in and of itself. In the same way, the existential void in his soul disappears when he learns to accept death not as the absolute void, but only as a different form of existence (Tamaro 1997: 280). Therefore, in Tamaro's novel, sense can be found somehow paradoxically in a spiritual-religious dimension rather than in the artifice of literary writing.

This is a recurring idea in works by this author. For Tamaro, the artistic – and artificial – component of literature is subordinate to a bare – and “earthy” – search for meaning. For example, in the *Preface* to the second edition of her first published novel, *La testa fra le nuvole* (1989), Tamaro reflects on her literary style. She rejects “literature” understood as a stylistic exercise and claims that, as a writer, she uses words as tools to pursue meaning in the mystery of human life:

[After writing *La testa fra le nuvole*] I have returned to my words. To my stone-words, speech-words, torch-words. I left literature – understood as metaphor, as a decorative ancillary of existence – and I plunged into life.

Drill-words, dagger-words, snare-words to capture prey, I have returned to my original style, the style of the explorer, the hunter, the geologist, the person who loves to unravel, to sink, the one who knows that mystery is hidden in the heart of every man. And this mystery must be sought, digging into the banality of every day.<sup>110</sup>

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to, sparge la sua follia. [...] Senza rispetto, senza amore, l'uomo è soltanto uno scimmione che corre per il mondo con le mani sporche di sangue” (Tamaro 1997: 271).

**109** “L'intelligenza si stava stemperando in qualcos'altro. A questo qualcosa non avevo ancora dato un nome, sapevo però di averlo già incontrato almeno una volta. Era stato quando, da ragazzo, avevo accarezzato gli agnelli che andavano a morire. Era stato appena un lampo. Un lampo che aveva svelato una forma diversa di comprensione. A sedici anni l'avevo scambiata per arte. Adesso sapevo che si tratta soltanto del sentimento della compassione” (Tamaro 1997: 279).

**110** “sono tornata alle mie parole. Alle mie parole-sasso, parole-lancia, parole-torcia. Ho lasciato la letteratura – intesa come metafora, come ricamo accessorio dell'esistenza – e mi sono tuffata nella vita. Parole-trivella, parole-pugnale, parole-laccio per catturare la preda, sono tornata

Therefore, for Tamaro literature consists in a search for profound meanings through words. This search is conducted by adopting a style in which words adhere as closely as possible to real life, thereby seeking the mystery hidden behind everyday banality.<sup>111</sup>

## 1.5 Conclusion

In this analysis I have noted the relationship between ideas about language and communication and religious traditions and beliefs in a sample of Italian literary texts written after the Second Vatican Council. This chapter has shown how the connection between semiotic and religious ideas influences literary style, narrative patterns, and ideas about literature itself. It has also shown that, in contemporary Italian narrative, religion, art, and language often compete in providing a form, a meaningful way of thinking about and representing reality, and that the semiotic ideologies expressed in fiction mirror broader cultural traditions. In particular, our corpus features a complex semiotic ideology out of which three main issues can be identified. The first concerns the problem of agency in linguistic creation, the second the difficulty of communication, and the third the problem of form.

Regarding agency, the conception of language expressed in Alianello (1966) is similar to the traditional one described by Anderson (see above), in which signs were considered “emanations of reality, not randomly fabricated representations of it” (Anderson 2006: 14). More specifically, this semiotic ideology looks similar to an idea by Augustine of Hippo expressed in his dialogue *De Magistro*, that of the “Interior Teacher”. According to Augustine, “Only the Interior Teacher, which is Christ dwelling in the mind, can teach by at once displaying to the mind the reality to be known and providing the language for its understanding. He is the source of both the objects encountered and the light which illuminates them for our understanding” (Markus 1996: 84). In this view, a non-human (and divine) agent is assigned a prominent role in linguistic production. Of course,

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al mio timbro originale, al timbro dell’esploratore, del cacciatore, del geologo, della persona che ama districarsi, inabissarsi, di chi sa che il mistero è nascosto nel cuore di ogni uomo. E questo mistero va ricercato, scavando nella banalità di ogni giorno.” (Tamaro 1989: Prefazione).

**111** According to Segre (2005: 194–196) *Anima Mundi* is a book pervaded of “buonismo” (i. e. of a do-gooder attitude) and too conform with banal and widespread ideas. Segre attributes these characteristics to the author’s intention to write a best-seller. Here, we are not interested in the intrinsic artistic quality of the novel or in its originality, but precisely in the ideas that it expresses and in the fact that they represent a common imagery and reach a wide public.

this conception is quite unlike the widespread 20<sup>th</sup> century notion of the arbitrariness of language. Crovi's work presents a more modern conception of language in that, in his novel, linguistic creation involves exclusively human agency. De Luca, for his part, echoes Jewish exegesis but re-elaborates the Exodus story by granting divine agency a preminent position in forging and writing words, using Moses as a mere medium. Despite their significant differences, however, the three books all assign a central semiotic role to women, presented as the main inventors of human language in contrast with a perfect, Edenic, divine language.

Another interesting position is represented by Tamaro (1997), who does not hypothesize direct divine agency in the production of language but presupposes that God serves as the guarantee of the referential function of language: without God as a conceptual foundation for semiosis, language and words lose all meaning and their capacity to refer to anything. A similar position is expressed by Pasqualino (1970).

The case of De Luca (2011) is representative of the point made in the introduction: the analysis presented herein does not delve into the personal convictions of the authors; rather, it explores religious themes as they are developed in their works. Indeed, in the course of a lecture he delivered at the University of Lausanne (Switzerland, on 4 November, 2013), De Luca was asked by the author to talk about his novel *E disse*. He replied that he could not address God as "tu," that he could only talk about Him in the third person, the most distant form. Indeed, De Luca chose to talk of the deity through his writing and avoid direct speech with God because direct speech implies faith, which – he said – he did not have. Thus, while on a purely textual level De Luca's work appears to represent a case in which communication between humans and the deity is easy and direct, on a meta-discursive level De Luca's literary operation proves to be far more complex, revealing the idea of a problematic attempt to communicate with a being even while denying – or questioning – his existence. This idea of the difficulty of communication between fallen humanity and the deity, and between humans themselves, is one that appears repeatedly in the corpus, and also touches on the difficulty of communicating through literary writing. In line with a widespread 20<sup>th</sup> century idea, the novels analyzed herein go so far as to suggest that all of these forms of communication are impossible, or at least inefficient, unless a final interpretant – God – is postulated to halt the semiotic drift leading to meaninglessness. This general lack of meaning represents a common and recurring fear.

As for the problem of literary creation and the need for order and form, the concept of form is ambivalent in this particular corpus. Generally speaking, form is both longed for and refused. Some characters see form as a terrifying immobility that runs counter to life even while offering a sort of peace and an apparent

antidote against material, bodily corruptibility. The quest for form often parallels a process of self-disruption: this is what occurs, for example, to both Giuseppe's friend Andrea in Tamaro (1997) and Testori's characters (1974, see chapter 4). However, there are also positive representations of form and order as an antidote to senselessness. Indeed, in both Tamaro's and Pomilio's work we see instances of the typical 20<sup>th</sup> century themes of the protagonists' discomfort with living in their own times,<sup>112</sup> the feeling of a loss of meaning, and the consequent exploration of the range, semiotic consequences, and possible solutions to this loss of meaning through literary writing.

Despite the fact that their characters manage the problem of meaning in different ways (irony and an experimentation with the possibilities of "meaninglessness" in Pomilio and an endorsement of the realistic option in Tamaro), neither author gives up on metaphysics or the existence of God as pivotal points for explaining the world and guaranteeing order; an order that is believed to exist however difficult it might be to perceive it in modern times. The existence of this superior order is somehow connected to – and somehow justifies – the continuing belief that literary form is still possible and desirable. A similar point of view is expressed in other works, such as Vecchioni's collection of tales *Scacco a Dio* (2009), in which numerous protagonists are writers who explore the meaning of life through writing; even though they think they are doing so against God and as a form of rebellion, in reality they are following his plans and he looks down on them with love. After all, if language is represented in this corpus as the distinctive feature of human nature, literature, which represents the highest form of linguistic production, cannot be denied dignity and respect.

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**112** For a discussion of inquietude and existential disease in 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, see for instance Segre (2005: 50), Segre (1998), Papasogli (1990: 7–8), and Magris (1991: 6–8, my translation): "A lucid and heart-breaking disenchantment crosses the great 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry, which bravely defies it and succumbs – in the name of the truth that does not allow illusions – to its confirmation. [...]he individual realizes to be a fictive unified covering, put on top of a proliferation of disordered impulses and energies, because he realizes that he has not a central value to rely on. Everywhere the fundament of existence, the base of values upon which to build one own's person [...] has entered a crisis. [...] The complexity and plurality of life rose up against all reason claiming to build their existence and indicate them a path. On every level – ideological, moral, political – our existence is characterized by this wild autonomy of the single, free and unrelated subjects, who do not want to recognize themselves in any value transcending their immediacy". Regarding this topic, see also the following chapter.

## 2 Literary Representations of Rituals and Liturgical Latin

Introíbo ad altáre Dei.  
Ad Deum qui laetificat iuventútem meam.  
(*Missale Romanum 1962*)

This chapter deals with representations of Catholic liturgy and rituals in contemporary Italian literature. The Second Vatican Council brought about profound changes in the way liturgy is conceptualized and performed; thus, the intention of this chapter is to study the echoes of these changes in fiction. As a consequence, before looking into these issues from the perspective of literary works, it is appropriate to highlight some central aspects of the general context in which literary production takes place.

In the framework of the Second Vatican Council, the constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963) outlined a reform to render the meaning expressed in liturgical texts and rites clearer so that the faithful can actively take part in them and be fully conscious of their meaning (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 1963: n. 21). The conciliar fathers' emphasis on the need for reform<sup>113</sup> indicates that the Church considered pre-conciliar liturgy to be too obscure, not suited for conveying the sacred realities meant to be expressed by rituals and no longer capable of meeting the "circumstances and needs of modern times" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 1963: n. 1). This opinion was not arbitrarily formulated by the conciliar fathers; rather, it derived from their observation of the contemporary context. Indeed, one of the main principles that animated the Council was the goal of analysing today's socio-cultural and historical circumstances in order to formulate appropriate doctrine.<sup>114</sup>

Latin plays a particularly important role in the discourse of the *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, as well as in the economy of the aesthetic code of Catholic rituals reproduced in literature. The *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963: n. 36) establishes that "the use of the Latin language is to be preserved in the Latin rites. But since the use of the mother tongue, whether in the mass, the administration of the sacraments, or other parts of the liturgy, frequently may be of great advant-

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**113** *Sacrosanctum Concilium* was the first document produced in the frame of the Council. According to Ratzinger (2008: 5–6), the fact that the first issue discussed by the conciliar fathers was liturgy testifies to its prominent role in the Church's activities. Regarding this constitution, see also Schmidt (1966).

**114** See for example the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (1965).

age to the people, the limits of its employment may be extended. This will apply in the first place to the readings and directives, and to some of the prayers and chants". The authors of the *Concilium* opted to include vernaculars to improve the "communicative efficacy" of the liturgy, that is, its easy and full comprehension by the faithful (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 1963: n. 59). Therefore, as Yelle (forthcoming) states, the reform promoted by the Second Vatican Council emphasizes the "semantic function of the liturgy".

The position taken by the conciliar fathers is the product of a long debate that has waged within the Church since at least the Middle Ages.<sup>115</sup> In Catholic tradition, Latin, Hebrew, and Greek were often represented as the only languages adequate for conveying the revealed truth.<sup>116</sup> In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, conservative Catholics tried to preserve this tradition by asserting two main arguments (Waquet 1998: chapter 2): firstly, Latin, and the liturgy such as it had been codified since the Council of Trent, expressed the unity of the faithful<sup>117</sup> in that Latin was the common language of a united community; secondly, Latin was the one language that communicated the mystery of faith. Two different mentalities thus clashed, one favoring the mysterious<sup>118</sup> and "numinous" element of religious experience, the other favoring clarity and comprehension.

In 1962 (just one year before the *Sacrosanctum Concilium*), pope John XXIII issued the apostolic constitution *Veterum Sapientia* defending the dignity of Latin and its use in the Church with a number of arguments. For example, the pontiff presented Latin as particularly suited to be the universal Christian language because of its natural solemnity and elegance, its immutable character, and its Roman roots, coinciding with the geographical site where the Church de-

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**115** In reality there have been references to the importance of comprehension and sobriety in rituals since the origins of Christianity, for example in Paul (1 Corinthians).

**116** "There is no idea here of a world so separated from language that all languages are equidistant (and thus interchangeable) signs for it. In effect, ontological reality is apprehensible only through a single, privileged system of re-presentation: the truth-language of Church Latin ..." (Anderson 2006: 14). About the idea of Latin as a sacred language in the history of the Church, see Lang (2012).

**117** This concept was expressed, for example, in an apostolic letter by Pius XI in 1922 (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, vol. XIV: 452–454) aimed at reinforcing the study of Latin among the clergy. Regarding the general problem of the scarce mastery of Latin within the Church herself (with a particular focus on French clergy), see Waquet (1998: chapter 2).

**118** Historian of Christian literature Christine Mohrmann (1957), for example, recognized mystery as one of the distinctive features of sacred language, together with stability and the use of rhetorical figures more akin to oral speech. A similar argument was developed by 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropologists such as Malinowski (1935: part 6), who claimed that a "coefficient of weirdness" (or meaninglessness) is a constitutive feature of sacred and magical language.

veloped and positioned her Holy See. In the same year, Karl Rahner, one of the theologians whose name is more closely associated with the views proposed by the Council, published a text entitled “Latin, the language of the Church” (1962). As Rahner states in the preface, the booklet’s goal is to examine the problems overlooked or only marginally addressed in John XXIII’s document. Rahner (1962) underlines that the superiority of Latin is established not by divine revelation, but only by human tradition due to historical circumstances, and that the value of Latin only lies in its acting as an international language that can be functional within the Church. He firmly denies that Latin possesses any real, specific suitability to be the language of the Church as opposed to any other language. Rahner (1962) also stresses the importance of using vernaculars in liturgy and cautiously advances the hypothesis that Latin might be fully abandoned in favor of modern languages. He argues, moreover, that the idea of a sacred language – i.e. a language that is the only one capable of being used to communicate with the deity and allowing supplicants to obtain an answer to their prayers, the sole language with apotropaic efficacy – belongs to the realm of superstition, making it incompatible with Christianity and thus something to be rejected.<sup>119</sup>

In a work published as a contemporary comment to the Second Vatican Council, another prominent theologian, Joseph Ratzinger (1965: chapter 1), claimed that the exterior and accessory elements progressively became more relevant than the scriptural and theological content of liturgy beginning in the late Middle Ages. The Council of Trent purified Catholic doctrine and rendered it more precise, but at the same time it also crystallized liturgical forms in a way that led them to become “archaeologized” and caused a “popular paraliturgy” to spring up beside them. In this context, overcoming Latin was one of the main measures suggested as a means of eliminating superfluous elements and reestablishing the authentic function of liturgy, i.e. to foster communication between the faithful and the deity.<sup>120</sup>

The liturgical reform promoted by the Council, and the marginalization of Latin in particular, was met with severe critiques from conservative Catholics. In 1973, for example, Abbé Georges de Nantes<sup>121</sup> published the *Liber accusationis*

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**119** In reality, throughout Christian history it has been common practice to translate and to integrate different languages.

**120** On the Protestant critique about vain repetitions in Catholic rituals and on the Reformation debates about translation, see Yelle (2013: 103–115).

**121** George de Nantes was a French priest who founded the “Ligue de la Contre-Réforme catholique”. Despite a *suspensio a divinis*, he continued to celebrate the mass.



in *Paulum sextum* accusing the pontiff of “schism, heresy, and scandal”.<sup>122</sup> By adopting the expression coined by Malinowski (1935), we can argue that George de Nantes accuses Paul VI of having desecrated language by distorting its “coefficient of weirdness,” that is, its unintelligible character.<sup>123</sup> Another notorious, radical critique came from archbishop Marcel Lefebvre and his followers. Lefebvre’s opposition became so strong as to lead to his excommunication.<sup>124</sup>

Despite the inclusion of modern languages, however, the popes continued to manifest respect and interest for Latin both during and after the Second Vatican Council. For example, in 1964 Paul VI funded the *Institutum Altioris Latinitatis* for the study of Latin in the Salesian Pontifical University.<sup>125</sup> In 1980, John Paul II issued the apostolic letter *Dominicae cenerae* in which he revisited some of the arguments made by John XXIII, recognizing the role played by Latin and expressing respect for the faithful who still wanted eucharist to be celebrated in Latin:

Nevertheless, there are also those people who, having been educated on the basis of the old liturgy in Latin, experience the lack of this “one language,” which in all the world was an expression of the unity of the Church and through its dignified character elicited a profound sense of the Eucharistic Mystery. It is therefore necessary to show not only understanding but also full respect towards these sentiments and desires. As far as possible these sentiments and desires are to be accommodated, as is moreover provided for in the new dispositions. The Roman Church has special obligations towards Latin, the splendid language of ancient Rome, and she must manifest them whenever the occasion presents itself.<sup>126</sup>

In 1984 and 1988, John Paul II issued other documents<sup>127</sup> expressing the same concern and sympathy for the faithful who felt attached to the Latin liturgy and authorizing the use of the 1962 Roman Missal (which constitutes the last edition of the Tridentine Missal, published by John XXIII).

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**122** “Vous avez brisé la tradition séculaire en changeant le langage. De mystérieux et sacré, il est devenu ce que vous vouliez, ‘intelligible et profane’. Invoquant Saint Paul, comme d’habitude à contresens, Vous donniez tort à l’Église de tous les siècles, en prenant le contre-pied et en condamnant sa loi immuable. N’est-ce pas cela, le schisme?” (Georges de Nantes 1973).

**123** See footnote 53.

**124** On Lefebvre see Miccoli (2011), Chalet (1976), and Congar (1977).

**125** *Litterae apostolicae motu proprio datae “Studia latinitatis”*, 1964, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, LVI: 225–231.

**126** [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1980/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_let\\_19800224\\_dominicae-cenerae.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1980/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_19800224_dominicae-cenerae.html)

**127** In particular the special indult “Quattuor abhinc annos” issued by the Congregation for Divine Worship (1984) and the motu proprio *Ecclesia Dei* (1988).

When he became pope under the name Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger did not reject the principles of the Second Vatican Council but he did follow in his predecessor's footsteps by granting particular importance to the preservation of traditional liturgy and of Latin. In 2007, in the post-synodal exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis*, Benedict XVI encouraged the use of Latin, especially during international gatherings:

In order to express more clearly the unity and universality of the Church, I wish to endorse the proposal made by the Synod of Bishops, in harmony with the directives of the Second Vatican Council, that, with the exception of the readings, the homily and the prayer of the faithful, it is fitting that such liturgies be celebrated in Latin. Similarly, the better-known prayers of the Church's tradition should be recited in Latin and, if possible, selections of Gregorian chant should be sung. Speaking more generally, I ask that future priests, from their time in the seminary, receive the preparation needed to understand and to celebrate mass in Latin, and also to use Latin texts and execute Gregorian chant; nor should we forget that the faithful can be taught to recite the more common prayers in Latin, and also to sing parts of the liturgy to Gregorian chant.

In the same year, the pope issued the *motu proprio Summorum pontificum*, which represents “the strongest impulse for a renaissance of Latin as a liturgical language” (Lang 2012: 12); indeed, the document “lifted previous restrictions that applied to the *Missale Romanum* of 1962 and the other liturgical books in use before 1970. They now constitute the ‘Extraordinary Form,’ or *usus antiquior* (older use), which, together with the ‘Ordinary Form,’ is an expression of the one Roman rite” (Lang 2012: 13). Although the declared intention of this *motu proprio* was to foster unity among the faithful, as the letter attached to the document specifies, the effect of this partial restoration of the old liturgy was instead to rekindle the debate between supporters and critics of Latin and traditional rites.<sup>128</sup>

Pope Francis's position towards Latin appears more controversial. On different occasions he expressed both the intention to preserve the principles of the *Summorum pontificum*<sup>129</sup> and perplexity regarding the rigidity of some young people supporting traditional liturgy, together with his firm intention to retain

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**128** It is easy to find traces of this debate, which lasted for several years, in the press and online, see for example <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2007/07/30/martini-non-celebrero-la-messa-in-latino.html>; [http://it.paix-liturgique.org/aff\\_lettre.asp?LET\\_N\\_ID=2130](http://it.paix-liturgique.org/aff_lettre.asp?LET_N_ID=2130); <http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/sfida-dei-tradizionalisti-dieci-anni-summorum-pontificum-1442327.html>.

**129** <https://www.ilfoglio.it/articoli/2013/05/28/news/la-messa-antica-non-si-tocca-il-papa-gesuita-spiazza-ancora-tutti-54182/>.

the reform outlined by the Second Vatican Council<sup>130</sup>. Curiously, however, Francis uses Latin as the common language of the Church in a peculiar context: social media. Indeed, he publishes posts on Twitter in Latin.<sup>131</sup>

Taking into consideration this general context, I seek to reconstruct post-conciliar imagery about liturgy expressed in a specific cultural field, that of Italian literature. My analysis focuses in particular on the connotations<sup>132</sup> attributed to liturgy in literary texts. It investigates whether the lack of communicative efficacy and clarity posited by the conciliar fathers actually reflects the ideas circulating in broader culture and if such ideas significantly changed after the Council. To this end, I propose to study a text published in the same year as the *Sacrosanctum concilium*, that is, the novel *Libera nos a Malo* by Meneghello (“Deliver us from Malo/evil,” 2007, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1963), a novel published fifteen years later entitled *Pontificale in San Marco* (“Pontifical mass in San Marco,” Bartolini 1978), and a novel published in the new millennium, *Il peso della grazia* (“The weight of grace,” Raimo 2012). These three works were selected because they devote particular attention to the description of rituals and are representative of a shared imagery about Catholic liturgy.

Following ritual theory and considering ritual to be a form of performance involving multiple semiotic systems,<sup>133</sup> I will explore how ritual signs – such as objects, gestures, and sounds – are connotated in our corpus. Catholic official literature itself expresses this same idea that ritual is composed of multiple semiotic systems and actions. For example, it is clearly stated in the *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963) when the conciliar fathers describe the features of churchgoers’ active participation in rituals: “To promote active participation, the people should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psal-

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**130** <https://www.quotidiano.net/cronaca/foto/riforma-della-messa-il-papa-stronca-i-nostalgici-del-latino-1.2731101>; [http://www.unavox.it/ArtDiversi/DIV1766\\_Un\\_giovane\\_risponde\\_a\\_Papa\\_Francesco.html](http://www.unavox.it/ArtDiversi/DIV1766_Un_giovane_risponde_a_Papa_Francesco.html).

**131** [https://twitter.com/pontifex\\_in](https://twitter.com/pontifex_in). It should be noted, however, that the pope’s posts are translated into Latin by a team of priests who make up a specific Vatican office charged with disseminating news in this language: <http://www.famigliacristiana.it/articolo/il-prete-che-traduce-il-papa-in-latino.aspx>; <http://www.lastampa.it/2015/03/30/vaticaninsider/c-un-prete-made-in-usa-che-traduce-i-tweet-del-papa-in-latino-bNqDINCPDGyl23sinBQUmM/pagina.html>.

**132** In semiotics, connotation takes place when a denotative sign (a “normal” sign composed of a signifier and a signified) becomes, in its totality, the signifier of a new sign, called a connotative sign. Therefore, connotation can be described as an aura of meaning around a denotative sign (Volli 2006: 34–35; Barthes 1964: chapter IV; Greimas and Courtés 1979: “Connotation”).

**133** See e.g. Rappaport (1999: 24), who defines ritual as “the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers”; Keane (1997); Lueddeckens (2006).

modity, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes. And at the proper times all should observe a reverent silence” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 1963: n. 30). The sum of all of these semiotic features not only conveys a strictly codified meaning, it also constitutes a precise aesthetic style. I will thus investigate the way this aesthetic code is reproduced in fictional literature, describing which of its elements are selected and highlighted and identifying the meanings and connotations they bear.

Moreover, this chapter pays particular attention to the connotations and features of the use of Latin in connection with religious themes in contemporary Italian fiction. In particular, the representation of liturgical features and of Latin in the novels comprising this corpus displays two main connotations. On the one hand, they are associated with the end of an epoch. At times this character of obsolescence inspires a sense of both nostalgia and irony, such as in Bartolini’s *Pontificale in San Marco* (1978) and Meneghello *Libera nos a malo* (2007 [1963]). On the other hand, liturgy and rituals are also described as a way to recover a form of order (for a discussion of this aspect, see chapter 1), to rediscover the meaning of life and to try to re-establish communication with God, such as in Raimo’s *Il peso della grazia* (2012).

## 2.1 Latin and the memory of the past: *Libera nos a Malo*

*Libera nos a Malo* (2007 [1963]) describes the narrator’s childhood in the village of Malo, in the region of Veneto, during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since this novel has a strong autobiographic component,<sup>134</sup> it can be studied as a cultural record and as a collection of memories. It is true that the text is literary and fictional; what is of most interest here, however, is not the accuracy of the narrated events but rather the ideas and the imagery related to Catholicism and the perceived relationship between religious experience and language.<sup>135</sup> The novel is characterized by a complex operation of linguistic stratification: dialect<sup>136</sup> is framed as the authentic language of village life, while Italian and Latin are pre-

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**134** The autobiographic nature of the work is, for example, evidenced by the fact that author’s relatives are mentioned using their real names. Regarding Meneghello’s autobiographic writing, see Zampese (2014: chapter 2).

**135** References to the value of Meneghello’s novel as a document of linguistic uses and Meneghello’s competencies in sociolinguistics can also be found in Segre (1991 and 2005: 91–98) and in Scott (1990: 367 ff).

**136** On the role of dialect in *Libera nos a malo*, see Segre (1993: VII–XIII, which partly reproduces Segre 1991), Zampese (2014: 80–103), Meneghello (1986), and Scott (1990).

sented as foreign languages imposed from above but not fully integrated in local culture.

In Meneghello (2007), religious language is represented from the point of view of the protagonist recalling his childhood. It thus constitutes an incomprehensible code that the childish imagination colors with a fantastic semantic aura. This also happens with the language of fascist propaganda: languages expressing a particular ideology and evoking concepts that are not directly related to daily experience are difficult for the child to understand; therefore, the meaning gaps he is unable to fill from his own store of knowledge are instead filled through creative, fantastic interpretations.

This deformation of religious signifieds is paralleled by the deformation of their relative signifiers, often giving rise to a comic effect, such as in the description of the children's "atinpùri" (Meneghello 2007: 7–8), which stands for "Impureacts" (Meneghello and Randall 2011: 7): both the signified (children's "prohibited" games) and the signifier ("atinpùri") sound like a parody of the traditional "adult" ones as defined in Catholic doctrine. Another example is the *Padre Nostro* verse "Libera nos a malo. Amen," which is quoted in both the title and a specific passage of the novel. The title contains a pun in that Malo is the name of the village where the novel is set, but it is also the word for "evil" in Latin. Similarly, in the passage below, the quotation of the same verse constitutes an example of the characteristic interpretative style through which the narrator adapts theological concepts to the reality of peasant life. In this case, the Latin expression is interpreted in light of its assonance with the dialect term "luàme," manure or ordure. In the protagonist's mind and experience, manure is associated with the danger of falling into manure heaps, which can prove fatal, especially for children. Hence, the prayer asking to be "freed from manure" seems perfectly reasonable to the protagonist. This interpretation also assumes a metaphoric connotation because "falling into the manure" becomes an expression for evoking all kinds of violent and painful deaths<sup>137</sup> as well as the pains of hell:

*Libera nos amaluamen.* Deliver us from *luàme*, from ordure. For many years my friend Nino thought that was how you wrote it. It seemed to him a fundamental and amazingly appropriate prayer; rarely did a prayer focus on a problem so well.

Deliver us from *luàme*, from perilous falls into the dung pit, so frequent, so unpleasant for your little sons and daughters. Deliver us from what *luàme* signifies, the dark splatter of death, the lion's jaws, the bottomless pit!

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137 For a discussion of this passage and Meneghello's references to death more generally, see Pellegrini (1992: 138). For the theme of the "luamaro," see also Meneghello (2004: 10–11).

Deliver us from ungrateful death: the cat in the bag that the man beats against the wall with both hands, [...] the bleeding pig squealing at the top of the courtyard [...]  
Deliver us, Lord, from this *luàme*, from the filthy gates of Hell!

(Meneghello and Randall 2011: 123)<sup>138</sup>

The literary form of this passage, consisting in short paragraphs each beginning with the invocation “*Liberaci*” (deliver us), reproduces the formal scheme of prayer even while being inspired by this unique theology. The dialect term “*luàme*” is the off-key element, the one that introduces the ideas of ferocious death, of dirtiness (*sudiciume*), of down-to-earth and everyday – but none the less terrible – violence. In the end, however, this intuitive interpretation is at least partially accurate as far as it touches on the semantic area of the “evil” evoked by the Latin “*malo*”.

According to the narrator, the source of this partial and intuitive – and therefore only approximate – understanding is the Church’s pedagogical method. Religious truths are not explained, they are inculcated as definitions to be learned by heart. Moreover, this learning process takes place only in childhood:

... while respect for religion – in a general sense, as an underlying attitude – is primarily transmitted by women, its theological content and official set of rules is almost entirely absorbed during childhood, in catechism. What you learn, you learn as a child, and this accounts for the fantastic side of certain interpretations, interpretations that often survive right into adulthood. [...]

Our childhood indoctrination gave us fairly solid theological grounding (because it was based on learning *definitions*) [...]. On the other hand there was a whole series of incomprehensible matters, incomprehensible in part because of the language in which they were transmitted, in part because the matters referred to were remote or archaic.

What was *Accidia*, sloth? The best explanations seemed to point to a kind of laziness, and so why not call it that? *Accidia*: it was impossible not to think of a little, brown fish, rolled up and highly salted. *Anchovy*.

(Meneghello and Randall 2011: 256–257)<sup>139</sup>

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**138** “*Libera nos amaluamen*. Non sono molti anni che il mio amico Nino s’è reso conto che non si scrive così. Gli pareva una preghiera fondamentale e incredibilmente appropriata: è raro che una preghiera centri così un problema. Liberaci dal luàme, dalle perigliose cadute nei luamàri, così frequenti per i tuoi figliuoli, e così spiacevoli: liberaci da ciò che il luàme significa, i negri spruzzi della morte, la bocca del leone, il profondo lago! Liberaci dalla morte ingrata: del gatto nel sacco che l’uomo sbatte a due mani sul muro, [...] del maiale svenato che urla in cima al cortile [...] Libera Signore i tuoi figli da questo luàme, dalla sudicia porta dell’Inferno!” (Meneghello 2007: 92).

**139** “... mentre il rispetto della religione – in senso generale, come atteggiamento di fondo – si trasmette principalmente attraverso le donne, il suo contenuto teologico e normativo ufficiale viene assorbito quasi interamente nell’infanzia, quando si va a Dottrina. Ciò che s’impara, s’im-

Not only does doctrinal pedagogy not give common people sufficient linguistic means to understand liturgy, it does not provide individuals with the tools of critical thought required to resolve theological doubts. Thus, while doubts grow in complexity with age, the person does not have the theological, cultural, or intellectual means to engage in the kind of critical and mature approach that might resolve them:

And when we didn't understand what we had memorized? The explanations (written) didn't consist in "helping us to understand," but supplied more definitions, these too to be memorized. And if we didn't understand the written explanation? And if the verbal explanation of the written explanation still left us in doubt?

Finally, the important thing was not to understand, but to know. Doubts were discouraged, and if necessary, prohibited. Doubts were supposed to become less childish and foolish as we grew, like Jesus, in wisdom and age – but age, rather than assist in resolving doubt, seemed to make it more difficult. With time, you ended up falling back on the position taken by nearly all adult males: now that you were no longer a child, these things were best left to children and devout women. To children who recited the Sins That Cried Out to Heaven, to women who muttered prayers in incomprehensible jargon. Such things must mean something, but what they mean was no business of ours, it was church business. There was no connection between these abstruse lists of Vices and Virtues and everyday real life.

(Meneghello and Randall 2011: 261)<sup>140</sup>

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para da bambini; e questo spiega la coloritura fantastica di certe interpretazioni che sopravvivono spesso nella vita adulta. [...] La nostra *indoctrination* infantile ci dava un'impostazione teologica abbastanza solida (proprio perché si trattava di imparare *definizioni*) [...] D'altro canto però c'era tutta una serie di cose incomprensibili, parte per il linguaggio in cui erano trasmesse, parte per la natura remota o arcaica delle cose significate. Che cos'è l'*Accidia*? Dalle migliori spiegazioni risultava che fosse una forma di pigrizia, e allora perché non chiamarla così? S'introduceva irresistibilmente l'idea che fosse un pesciolino color marrone, arricciolato come un'acciuga e fortemente salato" (Meneghello 2007: 192–193).

**140** "E quando non si capisce quello che s'impara a memoria? Le spiegazioni (scritte) non consistevano nel 'far capire', ma offrivano definizioni autentiche da imparare a loro volta a memoria. E se la spiegazione scritta non si capisce? E se l'eventuale spiegazione verbale della spiegazione scritta lascia dei dubbi? In definitiva l'essenziale non era capire, ma sapere. I dubbi erano scoraggiati, e se necessario proibiti. I dubbi potevano diventare sempre meno puerili e assurdi a mano a mano che si cresceva, come Gesù, in sapienza e in età; ma questo anziché facilitarne lo scioglimento sembrava renderlo più difficile. A poco a poco si finiva col ripiegare sulla posizione della stragrande maggioranza degli adulti maschi, non si era più bambini, queste cose si lasciavano ai bambini e alle donne devote: ai bambini recitatori di Peccati che gridano Vendetta al Cospetto di Dio, alle donne biascicatrici di preghiere in gerghi sconosciuti. Queste cose significheranno pur qualcosa, ma ciò che significano non riguarda noi, riguarda solo la Chiesa. Non c'è passaggio tra questi elenchi astrusi di Vizi e Virtù, e la vita reale di ogni giorno" (Meneghello 2007: 196).

The other facet of incomprehensibility or mysterious meaning is fascination. Indeed, besides developing fantastic interpretations of the religious terms' archaic and remote content, children are captivated by their abstruse linguistic form. In a number of passages, the narrator describes what could be defined as an aesthetic appreciation of religious language (e.g.: "The four Sins That Cry Out to Heaven interested us because of that stupendous name..." Meneghello and Randall 2011: 260<sup>141</sup>). Nouns are capable of fascinating children both with their sounds and with the imaginary realities they evoke in their minds.

There is also a similar, interwoven aesthetic appreciation connected to rituals. The aesthetic experience of religious language not only takes place at the *Dottrina* (religious school), it is also found in rituals, where it is amplified by their multisensorial character:

This was the reign of devotions, of extra communions, of rosaries, litanies, and *jaculatoria*, of novenas and triduum, of *fioretti* and first Fridays of the month, of processions and the exposition of the Most-Blessed-Sacrament, of abstinence and fasting, of the worship of the saints.

Many of these things had ancient and magical aspects to them, long roots stretching back to the days when San Gaetano was our parish priest more than four hundreds years ago [...] and even before that, when we were a tiny settlement devoted to the same ancient Madonna we have in Castello. There were the candles, the dim lights, the black veils worn by the women, the holy water, the benches with their straw seats, the incense, the sing-song voices, the altars for the saints, the nude, wounded body of Jesus Christ that we kissed on Good Friday, the priest's vestments, the lovely mysterious language of certain prayers. Some had phrases like magical spells:

*Turris Davidica*

*Turris Eburnea*

*Domus aurea*

*Foederis arca*

*Ianua coeli...*

Tower of David

Tower of Ivory

House of gold

Ark of the covenant

Gate of heaven...

The things of this religion were connected to other things of life: misty autumn, winter's chill at Christmas, summer drought. The bells told us, beyond the hour of the day, the hour to wash your eyes at the pump in the courtyard to ward off blindness, the hour to

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141 "Ci attraevano per il loro stupendo nome i quattro peccati che gridano vendetta al cospetto di Dio..." (Meneghello 2007: 195).



drink a finger of white wine against viper bites in spring, and the hour to come together in Grandmother's kitchen to pray for the dead.

The grown-ups sat in a circle, the lights were low, the pan of roasting chestnuts smoked over the fire. We children, kneeling on the straw seats (which stamped violet twine marks on our knees), exaggerated the strange endings in *s* that the women pronounced more like a *z* as the seminarians did, imitating them to make surreal sound effects: *Ora-pro-No-bizz. Ora-pro-No-bizzzz!* until the women noticed and gave us a slap.

The magical alternated with the entertaining, especially in the worship of the saints with their different personalities and talents. Saint Anthony, an orderly soul with a good memory who helped those who lost things find them, was very powerful among us. But to get him to act you needed an intermediary who was familiar with the necessary spell. It was called *i sequèri*, and my Aunt Lena knew it by heart: she would pace around the room reciting *Secuèri miràcula...* and so on with great concentration, and the second or third time Saint Anthony was compelled to cough up the thimble or the needle, the earring or the coin purse.

(Meneghello and Randall 2011: 253–255)<sup>142</sup>

The luminosity, the garments, the smells, the touch of elements such as water on the eyes, the taste of a symbolic drop of wine, the sounds, the chants, and the

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142 Era questo dunque il terreno delle devozioni, le comunioni-extra, i rosari e i terzetti, le litanie e le giaculatorie, i tridui e le novene, i fioretti e i primi venerdì del mese, le processioni e le esposizioni del Santissimo, le astinenze e i digiuni, il culto dei Santi. C'erano aspetti antichi e incantevoli in molte di queste cose, lunghe radici affondate nei tempi in cui San Gaetano fu nostro Arciprete, più di quattrocento anni fa [...] e prima ancora, nei secoli in cui eravamo una minuscola villa devota alla stessa Madonna antica che abbiamo in Castello. C'erano le candele, le lampade fioche, i veli neri delle donne, l'acquasanta, le sedie impagliate, l'incenso, le cantilene, gli altari dei santi, il corpo nudo di Gesù ferito che baciavamo il Venerdì Santo, i paramenti dei preti, la bella lingua misteriosa di certe preghiere. Alcune sequenze parevano incantate: *Turris Davidica* [...] Le cose di questa religione si associavano con le altre cose della vita, l'autunno brumoso, il freddo di Natale, l'arsura dell'estate; le campane indicavano, oltre che le ore del giorno, l'ora di bagnarsi gli occhi alla pompa in corte contro la cecità, l'ora di bere un dito di vino bianco contro i morsi dei serpenti in primavera, e l'ora di riunirsi per il Terzetto dei Morti in cucina dalla nonna. I grandi si mettevano in cerchio, le luci erano basse, la pignatta delle castagne cotte fumava sul focolare. Noi piccoli inginocchiati sulle sedie impagliate (che stampano segni violetti sui ginocchi, come cordoncini) approfittavamo delle strambe finali in esse che le donne pronunziavano quasi come *zeta* alla maniera dei seminaristi, per creare imitandole effetti fonici surreali: *Ora pronò-biz, Ora pronò-bizz!*, finché le donne s'accorgevano e tiravano scappellottini. L'incantevole e il divertente si alternavano, specie nel culto dei Santi, con le loro diverse personalità e abilità. Era molto potente presso di noi Sant'Antonio, persona ordinata e di buona memoria, che faceva trovare la roba a chi la perdeva. Occorreva però un intermediario che conoscesse bene l'incantazione necessaria a farlo intervenire. Si chiamava i sequèri. Mía zia Lena la conosceva benone: si aggirava per la stanza recitando 'Secuèri miraàcula...' e tutto il resto, con intensa concentrazione; e alla seconda o alla terza volta Sant'Antonio era costretto a tirar fuori deàle o gùcia, bùcola o tacolin" (Meneghello 2007: 190–191).

prosody of the orations, their mysterious language, the antique images, the gestures and formulas bequeathed from innumerable generations are all components of the sense of “enchantment” described by the protagonist.<sup>143</sup> Ritual belongs to an enchanting “surreal” dimension, but at the same time it is rooted in concrete life, and confers on life a certain rhythm and a sense. This connection with concrete life in turn influences ritual. In particular, it determines the mix of orthodox liturgy and practices connected to popular religiosity, exemplified by the “sequèri” for Sant’Antonio, but also by other almost pagan rituals found in peasant culture:

The anteroom of paradise, on a little mound at the bottom of the courtyard had an acacia tree on the top, and there, gathered around it, we would pray: *Beauteous Virgin, send rain* when it was dry, and *Beauteous Virgin, send sun* when it was damp. Among those dripping branches, imagining them laden with candles and little loaves of *pan d’oro*, you could see what paradise looked like, the light shining in your face.

(Meneghello and Randall 2011: 27–28)<sup>144</sup>

The fantastic aura that pervades this passage is also found in the description of “*messa prima*” (the first mass celebrated on Sunday morning), which is imagined in primordial tones because it does not belong to the direct experience of the protagonist:

*Messa prima*, in the drowsy bosom of the night, the fantastical prehistory of that time called Sunday. Stars in the sky, a cock beginning to crow; inside, a golden penumbra and the candles’ yellow haloes. A small gathering of the faithful, poor people, accustomed to hard work; the priest himself perhaps a bit rough; a brief and simple sermon. This religion comes *prima*, before the rest; it rises with the field hands, the mountain folk, the serving girls, the people to begin work at dawn.

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**143** See in this sense Pellegrini (1992: 37), who relates the protagonist’s growth with a progressive overcoming of “mythical” thought – a concept that looks similar to disenchantment – because it implies the “attempt to reduce myths to clarity:” “*Libera nos a malo* è il documento di una lotta contro il riaffiorare estatico delle immagini, di quegli istanti aurorali dell’infanzia e del paese che hanno quasi l’aspetto e la potenza di idoli, che l’autore cerca di ridurre a materia contemplativa [...] cercando di abituarsi ‘a non crederci più, come a un mistero che non è più tale’”.

**144** “La montagnola dell’anteparadiso era in fondo al cortile e c’era sopra un’acacia: radunati lì intorno si pregava *Mama-bèla mandate la piova* quand’era secco, e *Mama-bèla mandate il sole* quando era già spiovuto. Lì in quei rami sgocciolanti, figurandoseli carichi di candeline e mezzipanetti di pan d’oro, si vedeva in controluce com’è fatto il paradiso” (Meneghello 2007: 23).

*Messa prima!* It astonished me to think that every Sunday while we slept, before the night began to fade, this ancient thing – possible, it seems, only in a time out of time, far from any link to daily life – really took place. I see the little community of the faithful standing for the *messa prima*, gathered before the altar in the early morning darkness. Each has a gnarled stick to lean on; they wear skins, their heads are shaved, all but a fringe of hair around the neck, like a high collar. One giant eye is fixed on the priest.

(Meneghello and Randall 2011: 246)<sup>145</sup>

In many cases, the contrast between the solemn character of Latin and the contingent life evoked by dialectal terms produces an ironic and comic effect, for example in the description of the procession.<sup>146</sup> Here, terrible divine wrath appears out of proportion with its potential object, that is, the peasants with their humble, dialectal names:

When the Pilgrim Virgin came to Malo, they then carried her to Marano in a night procession. It is all countryside between here and Marano, with narrow, winding roads that run down to the creeks – Proa, Timonchio, Jòlgora. All around, the fields seem to go on forever, and only a hundred meters off the road you feel you're in an archaic, unexplored place, far from the world of maps and paved roads. The procession moved forward by candle light, and the peasants sang:

*Parce populo tuo! Ne in aeternum irascaris nobis!*

Spare your people! Be not forever angry with us!

Do not be angry with Sgualdo, with Vacareto, with Pométi Bè! Spare your little people of Malo in procession toward Marano, in the middle of the dark countryside!

(Meneghello and Randall 2011: 271)<sup>147</sup>

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**145** “*Messa prima*, nel grembo insonnolito della notte, la preistoria favolosa del tempo chiamato Domenica. Le stelle fuori, i primi canti dei galli; dentro, la penombra dorata e l’alone giallo delle candele. Un piccolo popolo di fedeli, poveri, usi ai lavori duri; un prete forse rosso anche lui, che predica poco e semplicemente. Una religione che viene *prima* del resto, e si alza coi braccianti, i montanari, le serve, la gente che comincia a lavorare all’alba. *Messa prima!* Mi pareva incredibile che ogni domenica, quando noi si dormiva, prima che la notte cominciasse a sbiadire, avvenisse davvero questa antica cosa che la fantasia isolava in un tempo fuori dal tempo, senza rapporto con la realtà quotidiana. Vedo la piccola comunità dei fedeli che assiste in piedi alla messa prima, nel buio premattutino, assembrata davanti all’altare. Ciascuno ha un bastone nodoso a cui s’appoggia; sono vestiti di pelli, hanno la testa rapata, tranne la frangetta di capelli sulla coppa come un collare alto. Il grosso occhio ugnolo è fisso sul prete” (Meneghello 2007: 183–184).

**146** On the procession as a recurring motif in 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian fictional literature, see Ponzio (2017).

**147** “Quando venne qui la Madonna pellegrina, la portarono poi a Marano in processione notturna. Tra qui e Marano c’è campagna, con strade strette e sinuose che scendono nei torrenti, Proa, Timonchio, Jòlgora. Intorno, i campi che paiono sterminati, dove a cento metri dalla strada ci si sente in una campagna arcaica e inesplorata, fuori dal mondo delle carte topografiche e delle strade asfaltate. La processione sfilava al lume delle fiaccole, e i contadini cantavano:

The different codes, the native one belonging to everyday peasant life and the one imposed by both secular (e. g. Meneghello 2007: 30, 97) and religious authorities, are the semiotic indicators that two different worlds co-exist. On the level of signifiers, these two worlds are characterized not only by different languages (Latin and formal Italian vs. dialect), but also by differences in several semiotic codes that generate peculiar atmospheres (gestures, colors, sounds, smells, etc.). Meneghello himself writes of diverse “*modi di vita*” (Meneghello 2007: 97) or ways of life. On the level of the signified, the two different dimensions are characterized by two different systems of values:

And yet we did have our own town customs, a set of values very often different from those officially in force: time-honored values that were primarily rural and of the people, combined with some borrowed ideas of urban, cultivated origins, assimilated and transformed in our own way. In so far as these habits made up a culture (an articulation of one’s way of life), it was exclusively a spoken culture, lacking any written texts. It had, however, the power of real things, while the official culture, expressed in writing in a foreign language, seemed an empty convention (although incontrovertible, like illness) and remained an abstraction until its secular or ecclesiastical arm moved in.

(Meneghello and Randall 2011: 129)<sup>148</sup>

Therefore, the code of the contingent world and of the peasant reality is considered to be authentic, while the religious one (as well as the one of the secular institutions), promoted by the Church through her archaic and foreign language, is perceived as an imposition from above which is passively accepted but not critically or deeply metabolized. In contrast with imposed worldviews, the peasants’ code has its own down-to-earth values and is governed by an ineluctable sense of “necessity,” i. e. the duties and inevitable burdens necessary to survive.<sup>149</sup>

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*Parce populo tuo! Ne in aeternum irascaris nobis! Non stare arrabbiato con Sgualdo, con Vacaretto, con Pométi Bè! Risparmia il tuo piccolo popolo di Malo in marcia verso Marano, in mezzo alla buia campagna!*” (Meneghello 2007: 204–205).

**148** “... un nostro costume paesano c’era: noi si viveva secondo un sistema di valori in buona parte diverso da quello ufficialmente vigente; un sistema di antica formazione prevalentemente rurale e popolare, che aveva adottato anche idee di origine urbana e colta, ma le aveva assimilate e trasformate a modo suo. In quanto questo costume si rifletteva in una cultura (un’elaborazione riflessa del proprio modo di vivere) era soltanto una cultura parlata, priva di testi scritti. Aveva però la potenza delle cose vere, mentre il codice culturale ufficiale, espresso per iscritto in una lingua forestiera, dava l’impressione di una convenzione vuota, e (benché indiscusso, come le malattie) restava astratto fino al momento in cui il suo braccio secolare o ecclesiastico non intervenisse a raggiungerci” (Meneghello 2007: 97).

**149** The theme of “necessity” (understood as perpetual and inescapable striving for the survival of the mortal physical body) also appears in novels featuring the theme of the fall of human kind, analyzed herein in chapter 1.

Finally, this imagery of rituals and Latin is connotated as belonging to the past. It can only be recalled from the “outside” constituted by the present and represented through the expedient of narration. This chronological connotation is specific to a generation of Italians who were children before the 1960s.<sup>150</sup> People of this generation, like the author/narrator of *Libera nos a Malo*, spent their childhoods in the context of a traditional popular culture pervaded by mysterious Catholic symbols, an aura which permeates their childhood imaginations and memories. This traditional culture quickly fades during their mature years, however, due to social, cultural, and historical changes and more specifically the new liturgical forms introduced after the Second Vatican Council. In the imagery represented in *Libera nos a Malo*, Latin and traditional liturgy are thus tinged with a mythical aura and narrated with a shade of nostalgia and the benevolent smile reserved for something that belongs to one’s culture, that contributed to shaping one’s personality, but that is relegated to the fantastic and far-away kingdom of childhood.

## 2.2 Ritual as the sign of an ending age: *Pontificale in San Marco*

*Pontificale in San Marco* was published in 1978 by Friulian author Elio Bartolini. Bartolini’s work is particularly significant in the framework of this study because of its detailed descriptions of liturgical gestures, sounds, and garments. As we will see, the accurate representation of ritual has a precise narrative function and complex meaning.

The novel is set in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the patriarchate of Aquileia was dissolved.<sup>151</sup> The focus is on the story of the last patriarch, Daniele Dolfino. Driven by historical circumstances (the economic decadence of his region, the interests of both the Hapsburgs and the Roman Curia), Dolfino is forced to leave Aquileia. He therefore returns to his family’s home in Venice. However, in exchange for his cooperation, he asks Pope Benedict XIV for permission to celebrate a last “*pontificale*” – that is, a pontifical high mass according to the patriarchal rite – in the cathedral of San Marco, in Venice, and the pope agrees.

Although narrated in the third person, the novel follows the patriarch’s stream of consciousness. Dolfino has a strong sense of decay, of loss of majesty and authority, and of end. In his thoughts he often compares his own figure,

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<sup>150</sup> This chronological indication should be read only as an approximative estimate.

<sup>151</sup> On the history of the patriarchate of Aquileia, see Corbanese (1983) and Seneca (1954).

characterized by compromises, loneliness, perplexity when facing the constant threat of nasty intrigues, with the heroic figures of his predecessors, whose deeds he recalls in epic, nostalgic tones. The action takes place between Dolfino's arrival in Venice and the day of the celebration of the *pontificale*. In his thoughts, the patriarch often imagines the details of the ritual that he is going to celebrate, which is described complete with every sequence, every single liturgical word, action, and object. For example, the fourth chapter begins as follows:

*“Ecce Sacerdos magnus  
qui in diebus suis placuit Deo”.*

On the altar of the *secretum*, the sacristan will already have prepared the vestments for the last pontifical mass of the Patriarch of Aquileia: chasuble, dalmatic, tunicle, piviale, stole, cincture, shirt, amitte, the maniple inside the Gospel Book to indicate which passage to read (and the officiating deacon will read it with a sword belt and a helm on his head because, under the pontifical garments, it was in armor that Patriarch Bertrando celebrated a Christmas night before rebel Gorizia [...]).

After having prepared those vestments, the priest will cover them with a cloth of the same red colour.

In the meantime he will have arrived at the gates of Saint Mark in a cap and *cappa magna*, preceded by the Cross of Lorraine, the image of Christ facing him (because that is the mode granted him by a bull from Innocent II); when he appears, the dean of the canons will meet him and offer him the aspergillum with knob to which, after removing the cap, he will touch his forehead before sprinkling the clergy and the people; he will enter greeted by the song of *Ecce Sacerdos magnus* [...]; kneeling to the foldistorium, he will pray (and the others will kneel to pray); he will get up (and the others will get up); he will move towards the secretarium, having put back on the skullcap, but not the cap, and accompanied *hinc inde* by the two assisting deacons.<sup>152</sup>

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152 “Sull’altare del *secretum*, il sacrista avrà già predisposto i paramenti per l’ultimo pontificale del patriarca d’Aquileia: pianeta, dalmatica, tunicella, piviale, stola, cingolo, camice, amitto, il manipolo dentro l’Evangelario come segnacolo della sequenza da leggere (e il diacono celebrante la leggerà cinto di spadone, un elmo in testa perché, sotto le vesti pontificali, era in corazza che il patriarca Bertrando celebrava una notte di Natale davanti Gorizia ribelle [...]). Quei paramenti, dopo averli predisposti, il sacerdote li coprirà con un grembiale del loro stesso rosso colore. Nel frattempo lui sarà giunto alle porte di San Marco in berretta e cappa magna, preceduto dalla croce di Lorena, l’immagine del Cristo rivolta verso di lui (perché così gli concede una bolla d’Innocenzo II); al suo apparire, il decano dei canonici gli si farà incontro porgendogli l’aspersorio con il pomo del quale, toltosi la berretta, lui si toccherà la fronte prima d’aspergere clero e popolo; entrerà salutato dal canto dell’*Ecce Sacerdos magnus* [...]; inginocchiandosi al faldistorio, pregherà (e gli altri si inginocchieranno a pregare); s’alzerà (e gli altri s’alzeranno); ripreso lo zucchetto, ma non la berretta, e accompagnato *hinc inde* dai due diaconi assistenti, moverà verso il *secretarium*” (Bartolini 1978: 77–78).

The forthcoming Pontifical mass becomes a hotly debated topic in Venetian public opinion because of three elements in particular. Firstly, people discuss its unusual location (Venice's cathedral instead of Aquileia's), thus indirectly underlying the importance of place in the complex semiotic economy of the ritual.<sup>153</sup> Secondly, the contrast between the Roman rite and the patriarchal one, especially in terms of the chant of the Credo, represents a scandalous element. Public opinion is not very interested in the theological or doctrinal difference between the Roman and the patriarchal ritual formula; rather, and thirdly, people are concerned about the differences in their musical performances, requiring that San Marco's choir study a specific score for the occasion. As a consequence, a number of conjectures are put forward concerning the political reasons why Rome is granting the patriarch such a freedom. What is significant for the broader public is thus the exterior façade of ritual and the hierarchy of power behind them. Indeed, people discuss the meaning of the *pontificale* itself, wondering in particular whether it has a particular or a general meaning, i. e. whether it celebrates the fall of an individual patriarch, or the fall of the patriarchate of Aquileia itself (Bartolini 1978: 109).

Despite his accuracy in imagining every detail of the ritual, Dolfino himself has doubts about its real meaning and value:

'His ring, 'his' pectoral cross, 'his' metropolitan pallium, 'his' mitres, for which to hold aloft the acolyte must cover his hands, 'his' pastoral, which when removed or handed to his right as pontifical must be kissed every time, the gold, the silks, the colours of the liturgical cycles, the velvets of the coffer, the illuminated pages of the antiphonaries, the incense to be sprinkled on the embers of the thuribles, is it all vanity? Just a caste privilege? These are concerns that, tiredly, he knows have no answer.<sup>154</sup>

The patriarch concludes that the real meaning of the scrupulous observation of the liturgy of the *pontificale* lies in perfecting a gratuitous act. At a deeper level, however, the *pontificale* is the symbolic affirmation of Dolfino's will to abdicate (Bartolini 1978: 84) and, at the same time, it also symbolizes the sacrifice of both his person and his figure as patriarch for the common good (Bartolini 1978: 87).

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153 On the role of space in ritual, see e.g. Smith (1987).

154 "Il 'suo' anello, la 'sua' croce pettorale, il 'suo' pallio da metropolita, le 'sue' mitre che l'accolito, per reggerle, deve velarsi le mani, il 'suo' pastorale che nel toglierlo o nell'affidarlo alla destra di lui pontificante ogni volta va baciato, gli ori, le sete, i colori dei cicli liturgici, i velluti delle custodie, le pagine miniate degli antifonari, gli incensi da cospargere sulle braci dei turiboli, è vanità tutto questo? Appena privilegio di casta? [...] Sono inquietudini che, stancamente, sa senza risposta" (Bartolini 1978: 44).

In this perspective, the sacrifice of the abdicating patriarch mirrors the sacrifice of Christ celebrated in the mass.

Indeed, the novel contains a rich and elaborate series of sleights of hand. For example, in the incipit, the reader is initially led to believe that the patriarch is arriving in Venice, but later it becomes clear that the patriarch is actually posing for a portrait representing his arrival. The description of the arrival is not a direct representation, therefore, but rather the description of an artwork which, as the narrator observes, is designed in keeping with a stereotyped genre. Numerous allusions to the theatrical character of Venetian society are scattered throughout the text, for example in relation to a romantic encounter which leads the narrator to think:

Because this is a city, where “virtuous” women act by singing, noblemen act by squabbling in coffee shops, spies act stalking those they watch, the primary consideration when gondolas overtake each other is doing so to the beat of a picturesque rhythm, prohibitions are contravened spectacularly precisely so that others will notice...<sup>155</sup>

Of particular interest is a passage during a high-society dinner in which an apostolic nuncio tells the story of twelve men and women he saw disguised as apostles, mocking liturgical paraments and rituals. The nuncio tries to elicit his tablemates’ indignation in the face of this blasphemy, but in vain: the others remain indifferent about an episode the narrator defines as “a mediocre little scene of revelry” (Bartolini 1978: 117).

This idea of simulation is also related to the concept of perfection. Perfection, according to the patriarch, lies in the rigid form of a performed liturgy. It is constituted by the beauty of liturgical objects, the precision and majesty of the movements, the rich and multisensorial features, and the thick web of meanings with which all these features are associated. Perfection is, however, accompanied by both melancholy and the awareness that some deep, disquieting, and impure truth is lurking just under the surface. This applies, for example, to sanctity:

... the morning’s psalmody recalls the saddening sweetness of every excess of perfection; the sublime Teresa scourges herself, blaming herself for sins she never committed, Maria Margherita Alacoque humiliates herself by eating the excrement of cholera victims, but

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**155** “Perché è una città, questa, dove le ‘virtuose’ recitano cantando, i nobiluomini recitano accapigliandosi nelle botteghe dei caffè, le spie recitano appostando i loro sorveglianti, le gondole si sopravanzano anzitutto dietro un ritmo scenico, ai divieti si contravviene spettacolarmente proprio perché gli altri se ne accorgano...” (Bartolini 1978: 105).



something inevitably clashes, the tormentor of sackcloth allowing us to glimpse spurious sufferings and gay misunderstandings.<sup>156</sup>

In the same way, the formal perfection of the ritual of the pontifical mass hides a dark side, that is, the inadequacy of the officiant himself, the “*sacerdos magnus*,” whose past is stained by a sinful secret. This secret torments the soul of Dolfino; he sublimates and tries to exorcize it through his cult for the purity of the Virgin, even to the point of forcefully promoting the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Dolfino has never found the courage to confess his sin, not until the night before his last *pontificale*. This omission makes his guilt even greater because his whole activity as a priest has been blasphemous and false in light of this unforgiven sin.<sup>157</sup> Because of the gravity of the sin, the priest who confesses Dolfino cannot absolve him. He is found dead on the stairs of the church the same morning he was supposed to celebrate his last *pontificale*, the one he had imagined in every single detail.

In Bartolini’s novel, ritual is represented as a complex semiotic system, a system which is strictly and rigidly codified. Rich in aesthetic features, ritual has a strong impact on all the senses. The above-quoted passages stimulate the tactile imagination by evoking the textures of the paraments (e.g. silks and golds); the visual imagination, for example by evoking the colors of the liturgical objects and religious images (the sumptuous red of the garments and the image of Christ positioned towards the patriarch); and the auditory imagination, for example by evoking the liturgical chants and music accompanying them. The numerous segments in Latin quoted in the text contribute to endowing ritual with a connotation of solemnity and antiquity. In addition, there is a scrupulous description of liturgical actions and gestures (such as kneeling, kissing, and reading). In general, this precise, complex semiotic code is connected to a particular meaning.

More often than not, this meaning is not pre-eminently theological; instead, it has to do with the historical deeds indicating the power and prestige of the patriarchate. The dominant aesthetic component of the *pontificale* is magnificence, opulence, hierarchical order, and authority. However, as mentioned

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156 “... il salmodiare di Mattutino riporta alle dolcezze rattristanti d’ogni eccesso di perfezione; la sublime Teresa si flagella incolpandosi di peccati mai commessi, Maria Margherita Alacoque si umilia mangiando gli escrementi dei colerosi, ma qualcosa necessariamente stride, il martoro dei cilici lasciando intravedere spurie sofferenze ed equivoci gaudi” (Bartolini 1978: 148).

157 The motif of the fraudulent simulation of the Eucharist by a priest during the mass is also present in Bartolini’s tale “Preti e patriarchi” in the collection *Sette racconti cattolici* (Bartolini 1992: 38–39).

above, the dominant emotion through which this ritual is represented in the novel is regret for something that is about to be lost forever or, in other words, the perfect and heart-breaking beauty of something that is being seen and experienced for the last time in this world. As a supreme and bitter irony, we finally learn that this perfection is nothing but the fruit of imagination, and that this last, magnificent *pontificale* is never actually performed. This effective narrative expedient underlines both the inconsistency of the complex ritual apparatus, and the deceptive nature of its formal perfection and sensuous beauty, that is, its baroque *vanitas*.

### 2.3 Ritual and Latin as keys for a new quest for meaning: *Il peso della grazia*

*Il peso della grazia* (2012) is Raimo's first novel. The title alludes to the gratuitous gift – blessing – of life, a gift which is, however, constantly burdened with a painful sense of weight. This concept is explained in a passage in which the protagonist narrates how, as a child, he was sure that he would die at the age of twenty-one:

Then I made it to twenty-one years old, and I was saved. I had made it past twenty-five, and then thirty. I had grown up; I had grown up even more without risk, a healthy and smooth existence, without ever reflecting on the value of life. And now what? It was as if I was taking advantage of a blessing. God was giving me more time, and I was acting as if nothing had happened. But this blessing was not light, as it should have been. It had a weight. A burden that infected my every thought and gesture: every minute I was allowed to live was free but incontrovertibly heavy; that was the truth.<sup>158</sup>

In this novel, religious language and liturgy are connected to a quest for meaning. The protagonist and narrator, Giuseppe, is a young researcher who must give up his job at the university because of a lack of funding, whose parents are divorced, and who finds fulfilment in a romantic relationship – albeit one that is sometimes difficult – with Fiora, an ophthalmologist.

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158 “Poi c’ero arrivato a avere ventun anni, e mi ero salvato. Avevo superato i venticinque, e poi i trenta. Ero cresciuto; ero cresciuto ancora senza rischiare, un’esistenza sana e liscia, senza che rifletessi mai sul valore della vita. E adesso? Era come se stessi abusando di una grazia. Dio mi stava concedendo dell’altro tempo, e io facevo finta di niente. Ma questa grazia non era leggera come avrebbe dovuto essere. Aveva un peso. Un peso che contagiava ogni pensiero e ogni gesto: ogni minuto che mi era concesso di vivere era gratuito ma incontrovertibilmente pesante; era questa la verità” (Raimo 2012: 396).

The protagonist grew up in an atheist family that considers Catholicism to be an “edifice of things said and unsaid, of myths and abstractions, [...] almost as if it were a matter of generalised corruption, fraud on a massive scale”.<sup>159</sup> Giuseppe converts to Catholicism during a period of research in Finland. From that time onward he prays every morning according to the liturgical daily calendar (“The liturgical year A, the second weekday cycle, the third week of the Psalter, Monday”<sup>160</sup>). He has his own ritual: he looks up the prayers for the day on the Internet and kneels in front of a small cross in his flat, then he says the prayers, trying to stay concentrated (Raimo 2012: 27–29). At the stylistic level, the description of this individual, domestic morning ritual presents an interesting mix of registers. On one hand there is the register of everyday contemporary life and technology, on the other hand the liturgical language with its nuances of antiquity and solemnity.<sup>161</sup> In this way, for example, long passages stating the hymn and psalm pronounced by Giuseppe are alternated with a description of the noises produced by the neighbor’s TV and water pipes.

Giuseppe has a serious problem with concentration: while he prays, he has to fight every second against distraction. This distraction stems not only from his recent encounter with Fiora, but also from the lack of meaning in his life. In contrast with this meaninglessness, ritual is important in that it confers a sense of routine and order in the protagonist’s existence, an existence characterized by uncertainty, irregularity, and precariousness:

After the hymn I kneel and look just outside – and these days when the dawn of June brings out the contours of things, I find it even more difficult to concentrate so I can pray. This morning there was also a dog barking somewhere and the television of the woman who lives downstairs [...]

The first of the two psalms was the one that says: ‘How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! [...]’

Praying, asymmetrical things came to mind. Recharge the cell phone. The futility of a life in which – again – the only thing I dedicated myself to was a battle to make others believe that the windmills I was imagining were real structures. [...]

I recite the psalms nasally, as I go forward in the prayers I use this ever more sing-song tone. [...]

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**159** “edificio di detti e non detti, di miti e astrazioni, [...] quasi fosse una faccenda di corruzione generalizzata, un imbroglio su larga scala” (Raimo 2012: 33).

**160** “L’anno liturgico A, il secondo ciclo feriale, la terza settimana del salterio, lunedì” (Raimo 2012: 27–28).

**161** This mix of liturgy and contemporary contingent world is recurrent in the novel, see e.g. the episode in the church: “... sono lì a sfogliare lodi e vesperi dei prossimi giorni – come volessi vedermi i trailer della settimana liturgica” (Raimo 2012: 220).

I have repeated Our Father three times, trying to give meaning to the words I was saying.<sup>162</sup>

In the same way, the protagonist tends to isolate himself in his thoughts when he listens to speeches that either do not interest him or touch him too much (for example Raimo 2012: 115): his mental escape is a defence against both boredom and excessive emotive involvement. This trouble with concentration is thus a sort of existential condition for the protagonist: for much of his time he lives a life “distracted” from itself, that is to say a life without fulfilment, almost alienated.

The protagonist’s condition seems to represent that of a whole generation, characterized by a feeling of uncertainty due to precarious employment and difficulties finding personal fulfilment and affirmation, using global media to communicate but suffering from problems of social interaction, with attention-deficit and concentration disorders, trying to respond in individual ways to the clash between the perceived decay of traditional religions and the continuing need for spirituality.<sup>163</sup> This existential uncertainty is expressed clearly in one of the protagonist’s rare moment of spontaneous – although almost blasphemous – prayer (see below), which takes place in an empty church, at the feet of an image of Jesus:

Well. Jesus, what’s going on? Would you please tell me in a nutshell?

What is it, what is this story that my human eyes can’t understand? If there’s something you have to tell me, God, talk to me cl-ear-ly. [...]

Don’t answer me with this sorrowful face, these hollow cheeks, these watered-down eyes. [...]

Things are easy for you, Lord Jesus.

You know that you have to die at Easter, be tried, be crucified, suffer on the cross, rise again, appear to the apostles, not be believed... Everything as it is proclaimed by the Scriptures. Everything as the prophets have said. You take on the sins of the world, yes, that’s it. Everything is easy for you! But you don’t understand, for God’s sake, you don’t understand

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**162** “Dopo l’inno mi inginocchio e guardo subito fuori – e in questi giorni in cui l’alba di giugno fa risaltare i contorni delle cose, mi viene ancora più difficile riuscire a concentrarmi per pregare. Stamattina c’era anche un cane che abbaia da qualche parte e la televisione di quella che abita di sotto [...] Il primo dei due salmi era quello che dice: ‘Quanto sono amabili le Tue dimore, Signore degli eserciti! [...]’ A pregare mi sono venute in mente cose asimmetriche. Ricaricare il cellulare. [...] L’inutilità di una vita in cui – ancora – l’unica cosa a cui mi dedicavo era una battaglia per far credere a altri che i mulini a vento che stavo immaginando erano costruzioni reali. [...] Recito i salmi col naso, mano mano che vado avanti nelle lodi uso questo tono sempre più cantilenante. [...] Il padre nostro l’ho ripetuto tre volte, tentando di conferire un senso alle parole che pronunciavo...” (Raimo 2012: 29 – 31).

**163** This 21 century unease inherits a nourished 20<sup>th</sup> century tradition, on which see footnote 47.

that the true suffering of man is not all that: it is uncertainty. Do you see me here, me? It is not knowing what to do that reduces us to this state, that makes us feel bad, do you understand? Not the fear of death, but the fear of this. Incomprehensible things.

You didn't take all this this empty anguish on yourself! Have you ever felt this pain of our lives in which every day, every minute, we might make mistakes, or we might die, this feeling that from one moment to the next the earth really might go missing from under us?<sup>164</sup>

Moreover, the theme of concentration is connected to two other, more specifically religious issues concerning the relationship of the faithful to Catholic religion and tradition, and liturgy in particular.

The first is the practice of praying. The novel represents two distinct types of prayer. One is the recitation of fixed liturgical texts made of prescribed words and gestures, as in the above-quoted passage; the other is the spontaneous prayer that constitutes an attempt to engage direct dialogue with God. Spontaneous prayer takes place on relatively few occasions. The first one occurs during the protagonist's research in Finland when, lonely and disoriented, he falls ill. His only company is an eyeless statuette of the Virgin that he finds in the rubbish and takes to his room. He begins to talk to her, and the soliloquy progressively becomes a dialogue:

I read the books to the statue, even though I pretended not to. This reassured me: it was as if I was talking to myself, and she was there overhearing.<sup>165</sup>

My conversations with Our Lady had grown thicker. I was no longer ashamed to turn to her, and she on the other hand seemed to answer me. I talked to her about everything [...] I felt like a five-year-old boy telling his mother about his day: everything that went through his head. And Our Lady responded in a similar tone. She asked me about this and that;

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**164** "Be'. Gesù, che cosa sta succedendo? Me lo dici, *per piacere*, in due parole? Che cos'è, cos'è questa storia che i miei occhi umani non capiscono? Se c'è qualcosa che devi dirmi, Dio, parlammi chiaro. [...] Non mi replicare con questa faccia dolente, 'ste guance scavate, 'sti occhi annacquati. [...] È tutto facile per te, Signore Gesù. Sai che devi morire a Pasqua, essere processato, venire crocifisso, patire sulla croce, risuscitare, apparire agli apostoli, non essere creduto... Tutto come è annunciato dalle Scritture. Tutto come hanno detto i profeti. Ti prendi i peccati del mondo, sì, è fatta. È tutto facile per te! Ma non lo capisci, santo cielo, non capisci che la vera sofferenza dell'uomo non è questo: è l'incertezza. Ma mi vedi qui, a me? È il non sapere cosa fare che ci riduce in questo stato, che fa stare male, lo capisci? Non la paura della morte, ma la paura di questo. Delle cose incomprensibili. Tu questa angoscia vuota mica te la sei caricata su di te! Questa pena della nostra vita in cui ogni giorno, ogni minuto, potremmo sbagliare, o potremmo morire, questa sensazione che la terra davvero potrebbe mancare sotto i nostri piedi da un momento all'altro, l'hai mai provata?" (Raimo 2012: 278).

**165** "Leggevo i libri alla statuetta, anche se fingevo di non farlo. Così mi assicuravo: era come se parlassi tra me e me, e ci fosse lei a origliare" (Raimo 2012: 48).

curious, sensitive. I felt understood. In some moments I even felt caressed. Was she talking to me or was I the one who imagined her answers?<sup>166</sup>

Was it possible that it was Our Lady who spoke through the statue, or was it me who was attributing to her a principle of existential guidance of my own?<sup>167</sup>

What fosters the spiritual concentration necessary for prayer is the condition of absolute isolation:

Conversations with Our Lady. Perhaps every event that is projected onto the spine of time gradually takes on an aura of density that it did not have when it happened to us. But every time I think of this strange Erasmus [...] in the room surrounded by snow, me and the blind statue, it occurs to me that perhaps it was only there – in those conditions of true isolation – that I was able to pray.<sup>168</sup>

The protagonist's conversations with the statuette become the only reason for him to stay: when the artefact is destroyed by the landlady on the suspicion that it is the source of the bacteria causing both Giuseppe and her to feel sick, Giuseppe leaves Finland and returns to Italy. In the novel's symbolic system, the landlady's act may represent a discarding of both Christianity and image worship as rubbish. Indeed, this Finnish woman embodies a mentality based on values such as technology and ecology (her main interest consists in recycling rubbish). In relation to this mentality, Christianity, the traditional feminine figure represented by the Virgin Mary, and manifestations of popular religiosity (such as talking to and feeling affection for a statuette) may appear to be useless junk, not only worn but also maintaining a potentially dangerous and contagious character.

This experience of spontaneous conversation with a supernatural being conducted with childish abandonment is therefore identified by the narrator as au-

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**166** “I miei dialoghi con la Madonna si erano infittiti. Io non avevo più pudore a rivolgermi a lei, e lei d’altro canto sembrava rispondermi. [...] Le parlavo di tutto [...] Mi sentivo un bambino di cinque anni che racconta la sua giornata alla madre: tutto quello che gli è passato per la testa. E la Madonna controbatteva a tono. Mi interrogava su questo e quello; curiosa, sensibile. Mi sentivo compreso. Addirittura, in certi momenti, mi sentivo accarezzato. Mi stava parlando o ero io che immaginavo le risposte?” (Raimo 2012: 49).

**167** “Era possibile che fosse la Madonna a parlare attraverso la statua, o ero io che stavo attribuendo a lei un mio principio di guida esistenziale?” (Raimo 2012: 50).

**168** “Le conversazioni con la Madonna. Forse ogni evento che si proietta sul dorso del tempo assume pian piano un’aura di densità che non possedeva nel momento in cui ci è accaduto. Ma ogni volta che penso a questo strano Erasmus [...] nella stanza circondata dalla neve, io e la statua cieca, mi viene in mente che forse soltanto lì – in quelle condizioni di isolamento reale – ero riuscito a pregare” (Raimo 2012: 51).

thentic prayer. This kind of prayer is in sharp contrast to recitative prayer, which does not take place in the form of dialogue and is highly codified instead of spontaneous. It is with this standardized type of prayer that the protagonist has problems concentrating. This difficulty probably derives from the incongruity between the ritual formula and the conditions under which they are pronounced, as well as the issue of repetition. The repetition of prayers has been at the center of a longstanding debate in the Christian world, at least since the Protestant critique of “useless repetition” and, later, the Second Vatican Council’s suggestion that ritual be simplified and redundant, formulaic elements avoided.<sup>169</sup>

Besides the echo of this debate, Raimo’s text also alludes to a particular kind of prayer repetition aimed specifically at connecting the signifier with the signified. This is probably an allusion to a text by Simone Weil, as in other passages of the novel Weil is explicitly cited as a model by the protagonist. The text in question is a letter written in 1942, in which Weil narrates how she learnt the *Our Father* in Greek by heart and how she formulated her daily liturgical practice:

Since that time I have made a practice of saying it [the Our Father] through once each morning with absolute attention. If during the recitation my attention wanders or goes to sleep, in the minutest degree, I begin again until I have once succeeded in going through it with absolutely pure attention.

(Weil 1999: 505)

The second issue connected to concentration in Raimo’s novel is faith itself. Indeed, faith is closely associated to the capacity to focus on things. The protagonist borrows this idea from his spiritual father and from the theologian Karl Rahner:

To follow Don Filippo’s advice I would have to concentrate on what I see. I would have to remember the instructions he gave me one of the first times we met. I asked him for advice on how to pray. And he quoted Karl Rahner: “Faith is a matter of concentration. And you have to concentrate on two things. Nature and men. If you concentrate on nature, you understand the mystery of Creation; if you concentrate on men, you understand the mystery of freedom”. Karl Rahner is one of the reasons why I converted, I still tell myself that today.<sup>170</sup>

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**169** See in particular *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963: n. 34): “The rites should be distinguished by a noble simplicity; they should be short, clear, and unencumbered by useless repetitions; they should be within the people’s powers of comprehension, and normally should not require much explanation”. See also Yelle (forthcoming) and Yelle (2013: chapter 4).

**170** “Se dovessi seguire i consigli di don Filippo dovrei concentrarmi su ciò che vedo. Dovrei ricordarmi la prescrizione che mi ha dato una delle prime volte che ci siamo incontrati. [...] Gli avevo chiesto consiglio su come pregare. E lui mi aveva citato Karl Rahner: ‘La fede è una questione di concentrazione. E devi concentrarti su due cose. La natura e gli uomini. Se ti con-

Raimo's novel also engages with an aesthetic issue concerning religion. Although the introduction of long quotations from the hymns and the psalms can reveal an appreciation for liturgical language, in this book the narrator often rejects Catholic aesthetics. There are three main aspects to this rejection.

The first concerns the aesthetics of the act of prayer itself. During his morning prayer, the protagonist tries to avoid looking into the mirrors around him because he finds it annoying to see himself praying: the very act of praying, and more specifically the stereotypical humble position and facial expression, is ridiculous in his opinion.<sup>171</sup>

The second is the narrator's rejection of Catholic believers' aesthetic indifference, an indifference he perceives in their untidiness, ugliness, and lack of taste in clothing. This idea is expressed in an episode in which the narrator takes part in a religious meeting:

Not even Don Filippo, who is a person of refined reading, ironic, caustic, capable of overturning the clichés that lurk in every statement, does not even he see how these people are dressed? Those others. Women in purple, bell-shaped shorts to mid-thigh, high-waisted, and on top: tight, discoloured red blouses, plaid and floral skirts, a plethora of light blues and greens, yellowish shades, jackets that are two sizes too big, gold buttons, short socks, hairstyles with dangling locks, different coloured dye jobs, growing-out roots, cheap plastic watches, shoes that look like slippers, moccasins, moccasins, moccasins, so many moccasins, canvas shoes with laces, unshaven legs, tights under their pants (when its thirty-five degrees out), pockmarked skin, hyperlipidic, with yellow teeth... Every time I have to deal with these Christians all together, I can't help but think that Christianity is an excuse to do nothing to improve oneself, a strange form of unsightly sincerity. To be able to say, without social anxiety: *Okay, it's true, I'm no looker, I'm gross, so what?*<sup>172</sup>

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centri sulla natura, comprendi il mistero della Creazione; se ti concentri sugli uomini, comprendi il mistero della libertà'. Karl Rahner è uno dei motivi per cui mi sono convertito, mi dico ancora oggi" (Raimo 2012: 116).

**171** "It's annoying to see yourself praying: a ridiculous practice in itself – your posture, scrunching up your face -, every time I'm tempted to get rid of all the mirrors that are scattered around my house." ("È fastidioso vedersi pregare: una pratica in sé ridicola – la postura, la contrizione della faccia –, ogni volta mi viene la tentazione di disfarmi di tutti gli specchi di cui è disseminata la mia casa" Raimo 2012: 28).

**172** "Non li vede nemmeno don Filippo, lui che appunto è una persona di letture raffinate, ironica, caustica, capace di rovesciare i luoghi comuni che si annidano in ogni discorso, non li vede come sono conciat i questi qui? Questi *altri*. Donne coi calzoncini a mezza coscia violetti, scampanati, alti in vita, e sopra: camicette rosse strette e scolorite, gonne a quadri, a fiori, tutta una pletora di celestini e verdastri, giallognoli, giacche di due taglie più grosse, bottoni dorati, calzini corti, capigliature coi ciuffi, tinte non uniformi, ricrescite, orologi di plasticaccia, scarpe che sembrano ciabatte, mocassini, mocassini, tanti mocassini, scarpe di tela con i lacci, gambe non depilate, collant sotto i pantaloni (con trentacinque gradi), pelli butterate, iperlipi-



Giuseppe is intolerant of what he sees as their slovenliness and does not want to assimilate to it. The idea of Christianity as a “form of unsightly sincerity” contrasts with the third aspect of the protagonist’s rejection of Catholic style, namely his annoyance with “Catholic lexicology” understood as rhetoric style. The main element that irritates Giuseppe – and consequently fuels his distraction – is the use of stereotyped expressions and empty, obsolete (“moth-balled”) metaphors, as exemplified by the narrator in italics:

Most of the time these phrases of Don Filippo’s, the precise passion with which he discusses decisions that are fundamental for people, pierce a point in my stomach that releases a medicinal substance capable of immediately dissolving any fear of the world, of the future or of death. *Whether the statement is yes yes or no no.* It should clear away the ordinary formalism whereby life choices are more or less all the same. Instead. Decide. To be. Holiness as the only possibility.

But then there is something that holds me back. In the midst of the words that melt my breath, suddenly it is there, floating, the mucilage of pale metaphors that do not refer to anything. Catholic lexicology: moth-balled, sour. Words in brine. *God who allows you to find the smooth paths. Christ who offers his life for his sheep. You who must become part of history. God who asks nothing of you and only wants you to be happy. God who keeps the covenant even if you don’t want him to. You who must surrender yourself to His hands...*

It’s a very subtle shift, and Don Filippo ends up surprising me, and he reveals himself to be an organic and repetitive man of the church reproducing a repertoire learned by heart. So, all it takes is an analogy with fish or some peasant image (fields to plough, harvest to lay in) and, instead of staying there listening to him I become detached, I flee.<sup>173</sup>

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diche, denti gialli... Ogni volta che ho a che fare con tutti questi cristiani tutti insieme, mi viene da considerare semplicemente che il cristianesimo è una scusa per non far nulla per migliorarsi se stessi, una strana forma di sincerità antiestetica. Per poter dire, senza ansia sociale: *Va bene, è vero, non sono un granché, faccio schifo, e allora?*” (Raimo 2012: 135).

**173** “La maggior parte delle volte queste frasi di don Filippo, la passione precisa con cui disdetta delle decisioni fondamentali per le persone, mi pungono un punto dello stomaco da cui si libera una sostanza medicamentosa in grado di dissolvere immediatamente ogni paura del mondo, del futuro e della morte. Sia il tuo discorso sì sì, o no no. Si dovrebbe far piazza pulita del formalismo ordinario per cui le scelte di vita si equivalgono più o meno tutte. Invece. Decidere. Essere. La santità come unica possibilità. Poi però c’è qualcosa che mi frena. In mezzo alle parole che sciolgono il fiato, ecco galleggiare all’improvviso la mucillagine delle pallide metafore che non si riferiscono a nulla. La lessicologia cattolica: canforata, acidula. Le parole in salamoia. Dio che ti fa trovare le strade spianate. Cristo che offre la vita per le sue pecore. Tu che devi entrare nella storia. Dio che non ti chiede niente e vuole solo la tua felicità. Dio che mantiene l’alleanza anche se tu non vuoi. Tu che devi abbandonarti nelle Sue mani... È uno scarto veramente leggerissimo, e don Filippo finisce di stupirmi, e si rivela un uomo di chiesa organico e ripetitivo che riproduce un repertorio imparato alla perfezione. Così, basta un paragone coi pesci o qualche immagine contadina (campi da arare, raccolti da stipare) che io invece di restarlo a ascoltare mi isolo, fuggo” (Raimo 2012: 118).

Thirdly, Giuseppe is irritated by the fact that priests use presumptuous tones in their speech, tones which can humiliate a person in difficulty. This issue emerges when Giuseppe asks himself why, when going through a hard time, he avoided contacting his spiritual father:

... why, in that period of feeling lost, did I never think of making the simple phone call I'm making now? Because I feared that he would listen to me with that quiet voice of his, like you do with crazy people. Sinners and madmen, Catholic understanding, the lost-sheepisation of people: he would kindly show me the meaning of events, the so-called wisdom of God, that wisdom that, on the lips of priests, seems nothing but wisdom. The wisdom of God. If one is always right, if one is omniscient, isn't it annoying to ask him why things are like this and not the way we thought they would be?<sup>174</sup>

This religious “pretentiousness” is presented as the counterpart of the pretentiousness of Giuseppe’s supervisor at the university, professor Torelli, who makes Giuseppe empty promises in order to exploit his labour. Interestingly, what characterizes Torelli’s empty speech is the use of cliché Latin phrases:

*Semel in a year licet insanire* was his motto when he wanted to impose some unreasonable decision. *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*, the answer that we were given every time a foreign university was willing to give us money to relocate out of the country; money that he refused in the name of an alleged educational autonomy that had to be defended.<sup>175</sup>

In this case, Latin is the code of those who hold power over and deceive the humble: the same use of Latin appears in the Italian 19<sup>th</sup> century literary masterpiece Manzoni’s *Promessi Sposi* when poor Renzo complains about lawyers’ and priests’ “latinorum”.

The protagonist’s intolerant attitude towards Christians and their rituals is only one facet of the wider issue of the social dimension of religion. Giuseppe’s religiosity is basically individual. For example, his conversion can be classified

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174 “... perché in questo periodo di sbando non ho mai pensato di fare la semplice telefonata che sto facendo adesso? Perché temevo che mi avrebbe ascoltato con la sua voce quieta come si fa con i pazzi. I peccatori e i pazzi, la comprensione cattolica, la pecorellasmarritizzazione delle persone: mi avrebbe gentilmente mostrato il senso degli eventi, la cosiddetta sapienza di Dio, quella sapienza che sulle labbra dei preti non sembra nient’altro che *saccenza*. La *saccenza* di Dio. Se uno ha sempre ragione, se è onnisciente, non è fastidioso chiedergli conto del perché le cose vanno così e non come avevamo pensato?” (Raimo 2012: 443).

175 “*Semel in anno licet insanire* era il suo motto quando voleva imporre una decisione irragionevole. *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*, la risposta che tornava ogniqualevolta un’università straniera si mostrava disponibile a sganciare dei soldi per farci espatriare; denaro che lui rifiutava in nome di una presunta autonomia didattica da difendere” (Raimo (2012: 54).

as “intellectual” according to Lofland & Skonovd’s (1981) typology of conversion motifs.<sup>176</sup> Indeed, Giuseppe’s conversion takes place in a condition of isolation, which is also theorized as the necessary environment for true prayer (Raimo 2012: 32); it is progressive in character and of medium length; and is not related to any sudden epiphany or spending time with a community of believers. In fact, Giuseppe does not like to take part in crowded collective rituals. This characteristic stems from his education. His parents “had stopped believing in any collective rites, including the incomprehensible and boisterous rites associated with the church of their parents, old men and villagers”.<sup>177</sup> Giuseppe’s parents create their own family ritual as a substitute for religious ritual, but this alternative does not produce positive results (his parents are not able to raise their children in a peaceful atmosphere, and they finally divorce):

... the way they had compensated [...] for this elimination of religious rites was to embrace [...] a rigorous devotion to a family liturgy created and canonized by themselves. Lunches in the dining room – dinners in the living room – times to go to sleep – holding their arguments before we woke up again...<sup>178</sup>

In an episode that takes place well after his conversion, the protagonist enters a church and takes part in a ritual, the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, performed by a small group of old ladies. The protagonist repeatedly tells himself that he should praise God for all the good things in his life and follow the old ladies’ example. In his eyes, however, their devotion resembles the way children become addicted to TV series. On one hand, therefore the protagonist is dissatisfied with his own ability to pray, but on the other hand he casts ironic disdain on the old women’s devotion by describing it as a sort of childish enchantment:

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**176** “The first motif we want to single out is as yet relatively uncommon, though we expect it to become increasingly important. The ‘intellectual’ mode of conversion commences with individual, private investigation [...] by reading books, watching television, attending lectures, and other impersonal or ‘disembodied’ ways in which it is increasingly possible *sans* social involvement to become acquainted with alternative ideologies and ways of life. In the course of such reconnaissance, some individuals convert themselves in isolation from any actual interactions with devotees of the respective religion” (Lofland & Skonovd 1981: 376).

**177** “avevano smesso di credere a qualsiasi rito collettivo, inclusi quelli incomprensibili e cacciaroni della chiesa dei loro genitori, vecchiotti e paesani” (Raimo 2012: 32).

**178** “... il modo in cui avevano compensato [...] questa rimozione dei riti religiosi era stato abbracciare [...] una devozione rigorosa per una liturgia familiare da loro stessi creata e canonizzata. Pranzi in tinello – cene in salotto – ore in cui andare a dormire – discussioni privesaglio...” (Raimo 2012: 33).

I should praise Him greatly. The Most Holy.

I should change my relationship with Him. Make Him one of the key people in my life.

I should take my cue from these seventy-year-old ladies who love this host – a piece of bread enclosed in a slide, as if under a microscope – so much so that they come every morning to say the rosary, adoration, mass. It's incredible: these pious women live like kids obsessed with TV shows. From a certain age onwards they cannot do without the rosary just like kids can't do without a new episode of *Misfits*, and in the end without even realizing it you've spent two hours staring into space...<sup>179</sup>

At a certain point the protagonist finds himself alone in the church. The only person with him is a young girl who looks like a mystic and who has no trouble concentrating on prayer, unlike Giuseppe. Following her example, after a moment of letting his mind wander as usual, the protagonist achieves one of his rare moments of authentic, concentrated prayer:

I turn to the young girl, who only responds with a nod. She is completely focused. She kneels down, closes her eyes and puts her hands together. Praying with this little girl makes me feel a kind of performance anxiety.

I'm an adult who can't stop thinking about Fiora [...] and this little girl who instead looks like a little mystic. It doesn't offer me any supporting complicity. It forces me to withdraw into my own thoughts. Prayers, questions, inferences, after a while I start competing with her as she prays. I too kneel, hands joined, and concentrate.

And from somewhere appear trees and the stairs leading up to the house in Via Livata, crucifixes, Fiora, a deserted road, a coffee maker [...], a skinny little priest, a statue of the Madonna, stained-glass windows, a pearly sun, hurricanes, flying dogs, emaciated men, passages from the Gospel that resonate with me, *the cripples will enter first, the dead will bury the dead, those of you who do not hate your father and mother are not worthy of entering the Kingdom of Heaven*, until I seem to be truly praying, begging God for some words of comfort: because I don't want things to change, because no matter how good things are, there is always something or someone who might suddenly disappear, and only God can ensure good and evil, indeed only God can avert evil... And I am so immersed in the rite of distancing myself from evil that when I see the monstrance with the Blessed Sacrament swinging above the altar, it seems to me that God is about to tell me something...<sup>180</sup>

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**179** “Dovrei lodare molto. Il Santissimo. Dovrei cambiare il rapporto tra me e Lui. FarLo diventare una delle persone-chiave della mia vita. Dovei prendere spunto da queste signore settantenni che amano ques'ostia – un pezzo di pane chiuso in un vetrino, come sotto un microscopio – tanto da venire tutte le mattine a fare il rosario, l'adorazione, la messa. È incredibile: queste donne pie vivono come i ragazzini fissati con le serie tv. Da una certa età in poi non possono fare a meno del rosario come non si può fare a meno di una nuova puntata di *Misfits*, e alla fine neanche ti sei reso conto ma sei rimasto due ore con lo sguardo incantato” (Raimo 2012: 217).

**180** “... mi volto verso la ragazzina, che non ricambia se non con un cenno. È tutta concentrata. S'inginocchia, chiude gli occhi e mette le mani giunte. [...] pregare insieme a questa bambina mi

The monstrosity's swinging back and forth is a mystical experience, a sort of supernatural earthquake that is perceived only by Giuseppe and the little girl, and the latter is frightened by it. Here again the author creates a contrast between traditional and routinized ritual, represented by the old ladies, and the spontaneous and intimate prayer that takes place in conditions of loneliness and establishes an authentic channel of communication between man and God.

This tendency to engage in a form of post-modern mysticism is the main antidote to his problem of concentration. The second solution to this problem contrasts with the mystic one, however, in that it consists in anchoring religion to the concrete aspects of life. The theme of the problematic relationship between religion and contingent reality emerges at several places in the novel. In particular, in a moment of difficulty and disorientation when the protagonist is obliged to abandon his research and accept lowly work as a house cleaner, he wonders, "... what would Jesus Christ do in a situation like this? Why is converting not useful in practical life?"<sup>181</sup>

Indeed, the protagonist tries in vain to apply biblical stories and teachings to his own situation in order to find guidance in them. He calls this interpretative effort "hermeneutic hysteria" (Raimo 2021: 61). In his opinion, the only positive example he might follow is represented by Simone Weil, precisely in that she brings religion down to the level of practical matters and concrete experience:

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fa salire una specie di ansia da prestazione. Io adulto che non riesco a non pensare a Fiara [...] e questa ragazzina che invece sembra una piccola mistica. Non mi dà nessuna sponda di complicità. Mi costringe a ritirarmi verso i miei pensieri. Preghiere, domande, illazioni, dopo un po' mi metto in competizione con lei che prega. M'inginocchio anch'io, mani giunte, e mi concentro. E da qualche parte appaiono alberi, e le scale da salire nella casa di via Livata, crocifissi, Fiara, una strada deserta, una macchina per il caffè [...], un prete mingherlino, una statua di una Madonna, vetrate, un sole perlaceo, uragani, cani volanti, uomini smunti, passi dal Vangelo che mi risuonano, *gli storpi entreranno per primi, i morti seppelliscano i morti, chi di voi non odia suo padre e sua madre non è degno di entrare nel Regno dei Cieli*, finché mi sembra di stare veramente pregando, elemosinando da Dio alcune parole di conforto: perché non voglio che le cose cambino, perché per quanto vadano bene le cose, c'è sempre qualcosa o qualcuno che potrebbe all'improvviso sparire, e solo Dio può assicurare il bene e il male, anzi solo Dio può evitare il male... E sono così immerso nel rito di allontanamento dal male che quando vedo l'ostenorio con il Santissimo oscillare sopra l'altare, mi sembra che Dio stia per comunicarmi qualcosa..." (Raimo 2012: 220 – 221)

**181** "... che cosa farebbe Gesù Cristo in una situazione del genere? [...] perché essersi convertiti non serve a nulla nella vita pratica?" (Raimo 2012: 61).

I should follow the example of Simone Weil who, when she decided in 1942 to abandon intellectual life and go work at Renault, wrote to her brother: ‘The time for chatting [...] is over, over... now we need to penetrate the world around us with our own living experience.’<sup>182</sup>

A similar concept is expressed in a key episode that takes place towards the end of the novel, when Giuseppe watches a video presenting the life story of a nun. He was present when the nun was talking during the above-mentioned Christian meeting, but at that moment Giuseppe was distracted and did not listen at all. Much later he happens to see the video, and the meaning of the nun’s account touches him deeply and teaches him an important truth. The nun was gravely sick for years and ended up going blind. In the end, when she is feeling angry and desperate about her deteriorating physical condition and the isolation it causes, she is taken to Lourdes. The moment of her spiritual healing takes place during mass, that is, in the moment that she participates in a collective ritual. The sermon focuses on Jesus’s healing of the blind, which the priest interprets as the story of being included (*“la storia di un’inclusione”* Raimo 2012: 424) in public life and religious ritual: the blind man has an imperfection that excludes him from community and worship but Jesus, by placing mud on his eyes, completes the act of creation and thereby corrects this imperfection. At this point the man does not see yet, however, because the true imperfection lies not in blindness but rather in his exclusion from the community. According to the priest, this is why Jesus sends the man to the pool for ritual purification: what ends up changing the man’s status is the act of bathing in the pool, because in so doing he is admitted to public space and takes his place in the community. The nun, who has likewise recovered her sight, comments:

Do you know what your salvation is? Your salvation, just like that of the born blind man, is that you must be practical. Trust those who heal you, rather than those who deceive you with words. Your limit is that you are mistaken about what is important. The important thing is not that God heals, but the way He heals... Be practical.<sup>183</sup>

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**182** “Dovrei prendere esempio proprio da Simone Weil che nel 1942, quando decide di abbandonare la vita intellettuale e di andare a lavorare alla Renault, scrive al fratello: ‘Il tempo per le chiacchiere [...] è finito, finito... adesso occorre penetrare con la propria esperienza viva il mondo circostante’” (Raimo 2012: 62).

**183** “Sapete qual è la vostra salvezza? La vostra salvezza, come quella del cieco nato, è che dovete essere pratici. Fidatevi di chi vi guarisce, non di chi vi abbindola con le parole. Il vostro limite è che vi sbagliate su cosa sia l’importante. L’importante non è il fatto che Dio guarisca, ma il modo in cui guarisce... Siate pratici” (Raimo 2012: 425).

The theme of blindness appears repeatedly throughout the novel: the statuette that fosters Giuseppe's conversion is eyeless and placed in a setting in which the protagonist is excluded from community. Fiora, whose love helps him find his place in the world, is an ophthalmologist. Both seeing and "being practical," that is to say pragmatic, represent understanding what is really important, being a complete person and taking one's place in the social and religious community. Religion is thus associated with the concepts of inclusion and concentration, the state of being a fully realized individual who is not distracted but rather lives his life fully conscious and in close relationship with others.

One of the interpretive keys through which this novel can be read is thus the story of a man who lives a life of isolation and distraction from himself, a man who is lost and blind but nevertheless feels some spiritual tension in relation to religion. His concept of religion is stereotypical, however; it is full of prejudice (see for instance the episode of the Christian meeting) and "cold," in the sense that in his loneliness he tries to repeat ritual formulas, is rarely able to let himself go in spontaneous prayer and refuses the social aspect – as well as the aesthetics – of community rituals. His romantic relationship and progressive spiritual growth (culminating in the nun's testimony) lead him to understand his blindness and lack of fulfilment, as well as the importance of experiencing religion in everyday life (in practice) and of being part of a community. The first form this community takes is the family he creates with Fiora, but it also entails participation in religious rituals as a form of belonging.

## 2.4 Conclusion

The incomprehension and semantic re-elaboration of liturgical Latin, as well as the perception of a discrepancy between ritual formulas and everyday language, have constituted a recurring topos in Italian literature since its origins in Medieval times. As Segre (1993: XVIII) observes: "Italian writers have always known that Latin prayers are the first victims of incomprehension and attempts at resemantization. From Boccaccio and Sacchetti to Bacchelli".<sup>184</sup>

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, this topos was enriched with new, specific connotations. After the Second Vatican Council, the affirmation of modern national languages in the liturgy – and especially in mass – produced

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<sup>184</sup> "Che poi le preghiere latine siano le prime vittime dell'incomprensione e dei tentativi di risemantizzazione, lo hanno sempre saputo gli scrittori italiani. Da Boccaccio e Sacchetti a Bacchelli".

(or at least increased) a perception of Latin as a language that belongs to the past, inevitably relegated to the memory of a dying tradition and destined to be forgotten little by little. Traces of this common perception can be found in a number of texts, even outside the realm of fiction. For instance, the essay *Sicut erat* by the prominent Italian linguist Gian Luigi Beccaria, published in 1999, clearly represents this particular late 20<sup>th</sup> century attitude towards liturgical Latin. Beccaria (1999) explores an extensive collection of Italian and regional expressions borrowed from liturgical Latin, and examines the speakers' procedures of semantically reworking a mysterious religious language into a more familiar code, with a specific focus on popular language:

When facing church Latin, although it is a misunderstood language, speakers do not merely take on a passive approach. That extraneous entity is related to everything that is part of their actual experience as speakers. The not-understood Latin expression is reformulated in a more or less conscious way. This pertains to the well-known phenomenology of popular etymology, which usually concerns the rare, "foreign" words that speakers adopt imperfectly and react to in some way, granting them new reasoning.<sup>185</sup>

Beccaria's study seeks to document a linguistic phenomenon destined for imminent extinction:

This book seeks to reconstruct a social overview of memory [...] I enter a forest of words stemming from a past which is not so distant, but which have made their way through the centuries of the Christian era: some of these words have definitively taken root in the language or dialects; others have died out, or are struggling, on the edge of dissolving, and yet they hung on well until a few generations ago. Thus, again, this is a sort of book about what has remained and, simultaneously, a museum-book, or a well-thought-out catalogue, or a journey *à la recherche* of time, of stories that are buried and in need of unearthing.<sup>186</sup>

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**185** "Di fronte al latino di chiesa, anche se lingua incompresa, il parlante non assume un atteggiamento di mera passività. Quell'entità estranea è riportata a tutto ciò che rientra nella sua esperienza concreta di parlante. L'espressione latina non capita è riformulata in modo ora più ora meno consapevole. Si rientra nella fenomenologia ben nota dell'etimologia popolare, quella che tocca di solito le parole rare e 'straniere' che il parlante assimila imperfettamente e verso le quali in qualche modo reagisce, rimotivandole" (Beccaria 1999: 43).

**186** "Questo libro cerca di ricostruire un quadro sociale della memoria [...] si inoltra in una selva di parole appartenenti a un non lontano passato, ma che hanno attraversato i secoli dell'era cristiana: parole che hanno, alcune, definitivamente attecchito in lingua o nei dialetti; altre defunte, o malvive, sul punto di dissolversi, ma di grande tenuta sino a qualche generazione fa. Dunque, ancora una sorta di libro su quello che resta, e insieme libro-museo, o catalogo ragionato, o avventura *à la recherche* del tempo, di storie sepolte e da disseppellire" (Beccaria 1999: 5).



As Meneghello's novel shows, when reproduced in literature this semantic reworking of liturgical Latin can become an effective narrative device – or figure – creating both comic and nostalgic effects and thus conferring a strong thymic (affective)<sup>187</sup> connotation on the story being narrated. A similar feeling of a dissolving tradition pervades the representation of ritual in Bartolini (1978) as well as in other authors of the same generation. For example, Gennaro Manna's *L'Abdicazione* ("The abdication," 1973) includes the following passage about a character who grew up in a village but then lost his ideals when working in the city of Rome during the years of the post-WWII economic boom:

The nostalgia for praying like he had prayed as a child tortured him like the searing memory of a first love. He recited some of the ancient words of the Confiteor with fervour, but he felt that they were lifeless, desecrated. The immense and distant God that he could touch with a simple act of contrition when he was sixteen, now no longer seemed willing to listen to a man who was once again presenting himself to the father after a disjointed life full of arrogant bitterness and nothing else.<sup>188</sup>

In *Servo inutile* ("Useless servant") by Rodolfo Doni, published in 1982, a similar feeling pervades a young priest who left the countryside for the city and lives together with his lover, a situation about which he feels guilty:

It was May, and I had maintained the custom of reciting the third part of the rosary with the blessing of the Virgin at vespers. Of all our childhood prayers, that was dear to me. There was a lot of sentimentality in all this: with the sweetness of spring; the memory of voices: that of our old prior who chanted loudly followed by the murmur of the women who responded, and that of us children in singsong; the scent of incense...<sup>189</sup>

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**187** In semiotics, "thymic" is a category indicating a basic mood or affective disposition, which can be positive ("euphoric") or negative ("dysphoric") and which plays a fundamental role in the formation of axiology (Greimas & Courtès 1979).

**188** "La nostalgia di pregare come quando era ragazzo lo torturò [...] come il ricordo lacerante di un primo amore. Recitò con [fervore] alcune antiche parole del Confiteor ma le sentiva spente, dissacrate. Il Dio immenso e lontano che a sedici anni raggiungeva con un semplice atto di dolore, ora sembrava che non fosse più disposto ad ascoltare uomo che, dopo una vita disarticolata, si ripresentava al padre con un carico di spavalda amarezza e nient'altro" (Manna 1973: 209).

**189** "Era Maggio, e avevo conservato l'uso di recitare al vespero la terza parte del rosario con la benedizione della Vergine. Delle nostre preghiere fanciulle quella mi era cara. C'era molto sentimentalismo in tutto questo: con la dolcezza della primavera; il ricordo delle voci: quella del nostro vecchio priore che scandiva grossa seguita dal mormorio delle donne che rispondevano, e di noi bambini che cantilenavamo; l'odore dell'incenso..." (Doni 1982: 15).

A similar nostalgia associated with the feeling that the traditional liturgy has lost its spiritual power is expressed in Luciano Radi's beautiful introspective novel *Non sono solo* ("I am not alone," 1984). The protagonist, an elderly priest, writes:

I feel the need to pray, but I am no longer satisfied by the spoken invocations nor by the truths defined by the words of man. Honestly, even the daily session of meditation and taking stock of my conscience that I have been doing since I was a child no longer meets my current spiritual needs. I am convinced that I remain detached, that I am not talking to Him but only myself. I find it impossible that, after so many years of priesthood, I have yet to learn true prayer, but it really is true, that is how it is!<sup>190</sup>

These literary texts thus represent ideas belonging to a common imagery about traditional liturgy characterizing the post-conciliar 20<sup>th</sup> century. As mentioned above, this particular imagery belongs specifically to the last generation of Italians who witnessed traditional liturgy during their childhood, and who recall and narrate it after it has been gradually abandoned in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, Meneghello, Bartolini, Manna, and Radi were all born in 1922, while Doni was born in 1919 and the linguist Gian Luigi Beccaria in 1936.

However, it is reasonable to hypothesize that this imagery changes significantly with the advent of the new millennium. As stated above, the official documents issued by the Church repeatedly mention that the faithful continue to call for Latin and traditional liturgy, and especially under Benedict XVI Latin and the traditional celebration of the mass were once again assigned greater importance. This process of re-evaluating Latin and attaching new connotations to traditional liturgy goes well beyond the lofty spheres of the ecclesiastic hierarchy, however. Indeed, in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century there has been new openness towards Latin in multiple cultural contexts. Even excluding contemporary uses of Latin unrelated to religious issues,<sup>191</sup> there are significant signs that new generations of Catholics are experiencing a revival of Latin and attachment to liturgy. This is evident on the Internet, for example, where a number of Italian sites

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**190** "Sento il bisogno di pregare, ma non mi soddisfano più le invocazioni recitate, né le verità definite dalle parole dell'uomo. A dire il vero anche la meditazione e l'esame di coscienza che faccio tutti i giorni, sin da quando ero bambino, non rispondono più ai miei attuali bisogni spirituali. Ho la convinzione di rimanere all'esterno, di non dialogare con Lui, ma di parlare con me stesso. [...] Mi sembra impossibile che, dopo tanti anni di sacerdozio, io debba ancora imparare la vera preghiera, ma è proprio vero, è così!" (Radi 1984: 91).

**191** This analysis does not consider, for example, the fictional, inventive use of Latin in Harry Potter's spells, the existence of websites in Latin (e.g. <http://ephemeris.alcuinus.net/>) and the use of Latin in various musical genres (see e.g. [http://bologna.repubblica.it/cronaca/2014/09/10/news/le\\_canzoni\\_dei\\_pink\\_floyd\\_rivivono\\_in\\_latino-95442721/](http://bologna.repubblica.it/cronaca/2014/09/10/news/le_canzoni_dei_pink_floyd_rivivono_in_latino-95442721/));

and blogs express young Catholics' appreciation for traditional liturgy and Latin.<sup>192</sup>

Raimo's work offers a literary representation and interpretation of this cultural and religious relationship between young people and traditional liturgy. In the novel, the recitation of traditional orations is not perceived as the passive acceptance of an obsolete and incomprehensible tradition. On the contrary, performing such prayers is a conscious and deliberate choice by an educated young man who understands their meaning. Although reciting existing prayers does not have the same positive connotations as spontaneous and sincere invocation, it nevertheless has an important role in the economy of Giuseppe's story in that it represents a step forward in his process of spiritual growth. The protagonist's performance of liturgy also has an aesthetic component and repercussions on the novel's style, as biblical quotations constitute an integral component of the literary text.

In Raimo's account, ancient practices are connected to new ones (such as looking up the day's liturgy on the Internet), but what is even more relevant is that their meaning is closely connected to a search for order and existential meaning. Latin and ritual therefore assume a specific set of connotations for young people who seek to affirm their religious identity by both anchoring it to historical roots (the history of the Catholic Church) and reworking ancient practices – and sometime Latin itself – in a way that detaches them from their ancient connotations (i.e. the mass as an obsolete practice, Latin as the language of hierarchical power) and instead imbues them with brand-new connotations that suit their new cultural and mediatic contexts.

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**192** To mention just a few: <http://www.summorumpontificum.org/cari-confratelli-la-santa-messa-antica-attira-e-molto-i-giovani/>; <http://blog.messainlatino.it/2009/03/la-messa-tridentina-e-roba-da-giovani.html>; <http://archivio.blogsicilia.it/e-i-giovani-ringraziano-il-papa-per-la-messa-in-latino/>; <http://www.libertaepersona.org/wordpress/2012/01/la-messa-in-latino-a-noi-giovani-piace/>.

### 3 The Thematic Role of the Pope, between Immanence and Transcendence

[Literature presents] ‘the image of man’  
(*Gaudium et spes*, no. 62), his permanent  
suspension between heaven and earth,  
spirit and matter, fantastic and real,  
utopian and possible.<sup>193</sup>

This chapter is devoted to analysing different literary representations of the figure of the pope. Given his position as leader of an earthly institution as well as religious and spiritual model, the ways in which the pontifical role is configured in narrative texts is highly representative of certain recurring ideas about Catholicism circulating in contemporary culture. The analysis thus focuses on a sample of three works the plots of which are focused on the pontiff and which contain references to the conditions of the papacy after the Second Vatican Council: the 1968 play *L'avventura di un povero Cristiano* (“The adventure of a poor Christian”) by Ignazio Silone, *Roma senza Papa* (“Rome without the Pope”) by Guido Morselli, published posthumous in 1974, and the 2002 novel *Imprimatur* by Rita Monaldi and Francesco Sorti.

In terms of methodological approach, the study presented in this chapter is inspired by the concept of thematic role as developed in generative semiotics. Generative semiotics involves the analysis of narrative texts on different levels; in particular, Greimas (1987) distinguishes between narrative and discursive (or figurative) levels, specifying that they are autonomous yet interconnected. The narrative level is characterized by the so-called narrative program composed of logic-semantic relations distributed among actantial roles. Actants are “abstract agents” (Schleifer 1987: 84) that can be classified according to three categories: sender/receiver, subject/object and helper/opponent. On the figurative level, actantial roles are distributed among actors. Actors are “elements of discourse” (Greimas 1987: 113) defined on the discursive level by a figurative entity (that is, they have a human, animal or other form). Moreover, they are animated and can be recognized thanks to their proper names and unique, individual features. Actantial roles and actors belong to the deep-syntactic and superficial-semantic levels, respectively.

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**193** [La letteratura presenta] “l’immagine dell’uomo” (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 62), la sua permanente sospensione tra cielo e terra, spirito e materia, fantastico e reale, utopico e possibile” (Pifano 1990: 15).

Greimas also hints at a third level and a third kind of role that connects the narrative and the figurative planes, however: the thematic role. The choice of a certain figure, or of a certain set of figures, gives rise to specific isotopies, figurative trajectories, and narrative structures. Indeed, the thematic role has a dual nature:

In addition to *theme*, it is also a *role*, and at the linguistic level we can find its structural equivalent in the *name of the agent* that is both a *name* (= a nominal figure) and an agent (= a parasyntactic role). [...] A *thematic role* is defined in terms of a twofold reduction. The first is the reduction of the *discursive configuration* to a single *figurative trajectory*, realized or realizable within discourse. The second is the reduction of that trajectory to a competent agent that virtually subsumes it. When a given figure that we meet in discourse is [...] invested in with a thematic role, it can [...] be described and analyzed as either an overall configuration or as a figurative trajectory enclosed within the discursive universe.

(Greimas 1987: 118)

Greimas cites the example of the “fisherman,” a lexeme that defines someone endowed with a certain competence relative to a certain doing: “The fisherman of course represents all the possibilities of his doing, everything that can be expected of him by way of activity. Placing him into a discursive isotopy makes a thematic role of him, one that can be used by the story” (Greimas 1987: 118–119).

Following Greimas’s theory, this chapter presents an analysis of the character of the pope as a thematic role. Indeed, as we shall see, the pope can take on different actantial roles (such as sender, opponent, and helper) and he can also be represented by different actors (that is, the different individual popes such as Celestine V or Innocent XI). And yet the role of the pope is intermediate in relation to the actantial and actorial structures, meaning that “the pope” can actually be defined as a thematic role. This thematic role assumes different features in different texts, however. Considering the dynamic relationship between the three levels (actantial, thematic and actorial), this study will identify some significant variations of the thematic role of the pope in contemporary Italian literature.

### 3.1 The pope who renounced his title: *L'avventura di un povero cristiano*

*L'avventura di un povero cristiano* is the last book by Ignazio Silone and it has been defined as the author’s intellectual legacy (Marabini 2014). The work was published in 1968, three years after the end of the Second Vatican Council. It is a play about the monk and hermit Pietro Angelario, who was elected Pope Celestine V in 1294 but then stepped down from this dignified office after only

a few months to return to ascetic life. The theatrical-dialogue form of the text reduces the narrative elements to instead prioritize an exchange of reflections about different models of religious life. Indeed, Silone uses a neat chiaroscuro to present the contrast between two characters that clearly represent two opposite ideologies: Pope Celestine V and his successor Boniface VIII.

The play's introduction, in which Silone's writing takes on autobiographical tones, explicitly relates this medieval story to the 20<sup>th</sup> century Catholic context. The entire work revolves around an opposition between the Church, a hierarchical institution focusing on questions of earthly power and led by unscrupulous prelates, and popular Christian spirituality, a religious condition that disdains earthly interests to focus exclusively on transcendent values, as represented by Pier Celestino (as the protagonist is known after his resignation) and his friends and followers the *Fraticelli*.<sup>194</sup> According to Silone (2014), all of Christian history is "bipolar:" "... based on concordats and on eschatology, historicized and prophetic".<sup>195</sup> The reason for this fracture within the Christian community is ultimately an interpretative problem stemming from the biblical promise of the imminent advent of God's kingdom which has not been fulfilled. Indeed, Silone represents perpetual strife between an ascetic and egalitarian Catholic utopia meant to hasten the end of times, on one hand, and institutional religion on the other hand, more concerned with contingent and material interests. As the end of the world has yet to come about, institutional religion tries to bring about God's kingdom on earth.

The narrator explains that many coenobitic ascetic communities were founded in Pier Celestino's region, Abruzzo, during the Middle Ages. Most of them avoided overt heresy but also kept their distance from the official life of the Church. Being influenced by Gioacchino da Fiore's doctrine, they shared a belief in the imminence of God's kingdom and waited for "a third age of mankind, the age of the Holy Ghost, with no Church, no State, no coercion, in an egalitarian, sober, humble, and benign society, entrusted to the spontaneous charity of men".<sup>196</sup> According to Silone, such a utopian perspective has taken on different forms and names over the centuries, but it has always survived as an alternative, revolutionary Catholic narrative. Indeed, Silone interprets the entire history of

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**194** The *Fraticelli*, also called "Spiritual Franciscans," rose up against the authority of the Church, criticizing her richness and proposing instead an ascetic way of life. They were declared heretical by Boniface VIII. On this subject, see Burr (2001).

**195** "concordataria ed escatologica, storicizzata e profetica" (Silone 2014: 24–25).

**196** "una terza età del genere umano, l'età dello Spirito, senza Chiesa, senza Stato, senza coercizioni, in una società egualitaria, sobria, umile e benigna, affidata alla spontanea carità degli uomini" (Silone 2014: 22).

Italian Christianity in the terms of this opposition between utopian and institutional views:

[The history of the utopia is ultimately the counterpart of the official history of the Church and of her compromises with the world. In effect, since she founded her juridical base and arranged herself with her dogmatic and ecclesiastical apparatus, the Church has always viewed every revival of the myth with suspicion. From the moment the Church presented herself as the Kingdom, namely from Saint Augustine onward, she has tried to repress every movement showing a tendency towards the promotion of a return to the primitive belief. Utopia is her remorse. Much of Celestine's adventure took place in the illusion that the two different ways of following Christ could be reconciled and unified. But, being obliged to choose, he did not hesitate. That painful rupture of Christianity was produced by the fundamental fact that the Kingdom of God, announced by Christ as imminent, was not fulfilled.<sup>197</sup>

We can acquire a more precise idea of this opposition if we consider several passages from the last dialogue between Pier Celestino, at that point only a simple monk and no longer Celestine V, and his successor Boniface VIII, who has imprisoned him:

BONIFACE VIII [...] The time has come, I think, to solemnly raise once again the fundamental question of the principle of authority before Christianity and the States.

PIER CELESTINO [...] I have to confess to you, Sanctity, that my worries are of a different nature. I am scared by the growing secularization of the Church of Christ. She is unrecognizable.

BONIFACE VIII Don't you understand that nowadays the Church cannot retire from the political stage and remain inactive? [...] Before it is too late, the Church must claim *ex cathedra* her superiority over all the human orders. [...] Christ entrusted to us the "*potestas legendi atque solvendi in coelo et in terra*" [the power to bind and loose in heaven and on earth].

PIER CELESTINO [...] Power does not attract me, on the contrary, I find it essentially evil. The Christian commandment summarizing all the others is love. [...] the root of all evil, for the Church, lies in the temptation of power. [...] Our kingdom is not of this world. Our kingdom...

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**197** "La storia dell'utopia è in definitiva la contropartita della storia ufficiale della Chiesa e dei suoi compromessi col mondo. Non per nulla la Chiesa, da quando si fondò giuridicamente e si sistemò col suo apparato dogmatico ed ecclesiastico, ha considerato sempre con sospetto ogni resipiscenza del mito. Dal momento che la Chiesa presentò se stessa come il Regno, cioè da Sant'Agostino, essa ha cercato di reprimere ogni movimento con tendenza a promuovere un ritorno alla credenza primitiva. L'utopia è il suo rimorso. L'avventura di Celestino si svolse, per un lungo tratto, nell'illusione che le due diverse vie di seguire Cristo si potessero ravvicinare e unire. Ma, costretto a scegliere, non esitò. Quella dolorosa lacerazione della cristianità ebbe origine dal fatto fondamentale che il Regno di Dio, annunciato da Cristo come imminente, non si era avverato" (Silone 2014: 22–23).

BONIFACE VIII [...] I know the prophecies, when I was young I amused myself with them as well. Did the good news of Christ really contain the announcement of an imminent end of the world? Some authors claim that it is so, and this is fine. But we must recognize that the world goes on, isn't it so?

PIER CELESTINO This does not seem to me a good reason why the Christian religion should renounce itself and settle in the world, as if the world will last eternally.

BONIFACE VIII What does its duration matter? [...] What is important is to affirm the superiority of the Church over the world, which is the only reality available.

PIER CELESTINO What has the Christian religion become, adapting itself to the world? To what extent has it transformed the world or been corrupted by the world? [...] God created souls, not institutions.<sup>198</sup>

Boniface VIII is entirely focused on affirming the Church's earthly power, because the advent of the Kingdom of God has not taken place as announced in the Scriptures and the mundane world is thus the only reality available to humans. Since he deems the transcendent dimension distant and uncertain, material interests take priority in his perspective. The Church therefore assumes the role of a human institution, of a state having to fight to assert its superiority over the other human institutions. For Pier Celestino, in contrast, the priority is the otherworldly Kingdom. He thus assigns the greatest importance to the soul and to the precept of love, disdaining earthly power, material values, and the hierarchy of ecclesiastical institutions.

The wait for the Kingdom of God is the pivotal point in Pier Celestino's system of values and it determines his way of acting, a fact we can deduce from a

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**198** "BONIFAZIO VIII [...] È venuto il momento, io penso, di risollevarlo solennemente davanti alla Cristianità e agli Stati la questione fondamentale del principio d'autorità. PIER CELESTINO [...] Le mie preoccupazioni, devo confessarvi, Santità, sono d'altra natura. Io sono atterrito dalla crescente secolarizzazione della Chiesa di Cristo. Essa è irricognoscibile. B. Non vi rendete conto che, oggi come oggi, la Chiesa non può ritirarsi dalla scena politica e rimanere inerte? [...] Prima che sia troppo tardi, la Chiesa deve rivendicare ex cathedra la sua superiorità su tutti gli ordinamenti umani. [...] Cristo ci ha affidato la 'potestas legandi atque solvendi in coelo et in terra'. P. [...] La potenza non mi attira, la trovo anzi essenzialmente cattiva. Il comandamento cristiano che riassume tutti gli altri, è l'amore. [...] la radice di tutti mali, per la Chiesa, è nella tentazione del potere. [...] Il nostro regno non è di questo mondo. Il nostro regno... B. [...] Conosco le profezie, in gioventù me ne sono diletto anch'io. La buona novella di Cristo conteneva davvero l'annuncio di una imminente fine del mondo? Alcuni autori lo pretendono, e sia pure. Ma è giocoforza riconoscere che il mondo dura; non è così? P. Non mi sembra che sia una buona ragione perché il cristianesimo rinunci a se stesso e si installi nel mondo, quasi che esso debba durare eternamente. B. Che importa la sua durata? [...] L'importante è di affermare la superiorità della Chiesa su di esso, unica realtà disponibile. P. Cos'è diventato il cristianesimo adattandosi al mondo? Fino a che punto esso l'ha trasformato o ne è stato corrotto? [...] Dio ha creato le anime, non le istituzioni" (Silone 2014: 200 – 203).



dialogue in which his followers ask him how much time the Church should wait for redemption and if, in the meanwhile, it is right to simply care for one's own soul. Pier Celestino replies that Christians should respect the mystery; there is no contradiction, he argues, between waiting for the Kingdom and building a world in its image:

Can there be any opposition between the life of a seriously Christian soul and the act of waiting for the Kingdom of God? I think not. It seems to me that the Christian soul, by aspiring fervently to the Kingdom of God, conforms to its image and adjusts its behaviour to it, starting from relations with its neighbours [... Such a soul] fulfils, even if only minimally, the Kingdom. No doubt, there remains a contrast between the soul and existing institutions and laws. When and how will the Kingdom be established with the free participation of all creatures? When and how will charity substitute laws? Nobody can know, but this must not be an encouragement to us to be lazy. Indeed, the Christians that bravely live according to that spirit from this moment onward, actually anticipate the Kingdom. And in our daily prayer the invocation remains: Your Kingdom come.<sup>199</sup>

According to this perspective, charity, or Christian love, is the supreme value. It will substitute law in a dimension that transcends the human social and legal system. For believers, waiting for the Kingdom entails adopting a particular set of values based on love and a particular way of acting, for instance in relating to their fellow men or in the way they cultivate their own souls.

The meaning of the claims attributed to the two rival popes can be more effectively grasped in light of the introduction to the play and specifically Silone's assertion that every utopia originates from the same fundamental and universal spiritual drive. Silone compares Christian utopia with contemporary revolutionary utopias, Socialism in particular:

The men that once said no to society and entered convents now mostly end up among the advocates of social revolution (even if later they disavow, or they believe they disavow, the

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**199** "Può esistere un'opposizione tra la vita di un'anima seriamente cristiana e l'attesa del Regno di Dio? Non mi pare. A me sembra che l'anima cristiana, la quale aspiri intensamente al Regno di Dio, si conforma a immagine di esso e vi adegua il suo comportamento, a cominciare dalle relazioni col prossimo. [...] essa realizza, sia pure in misura minima, il Regno. Rimane senza dubbio il contrasto dell'anima con le istituzioni e le leggi esistenti. Quando e come il Regno sarà instaurato con la partecipazione libera di tutte le creature? Quando e come la carità sostituirà le leggi? Nessuno può saperlo, ma non dev'essere un incoraggiamento alla nostra pigrizia. Poiché i cristiani che, fin da oggi, vivono coraggiosamente secondo quello spirito, in realtà lo anticipano. E nella nostra preghiera quotidiana rimane l'invocazione: Venga il tuo Regno" (Silone 2014: 169).

original [religious] drive). I do not hesitate to attribute to the rebels the achievement of deeper fidelity to Christ.<sup>200</sup>

Silone presents himself as a Catholic who distanced himself from the Church during his youth because of a sense of “intolerance towards the backwardness, the passivity, or the conformism of the clerical apparatus in relation to the serious choices imposed by the times”.<sup>201</sup> He recognizes that, in the meantime, the Church has progressed, thanks especially to the reforms proposed during the Second Vatican Council:

Sincerely, we have to say that it is much better, and hope that [the Church] continues in the direction she has taken. The Council has been a positive event that will benefit everybody, even the unfaithful. In the effort that she has undertaken to update herself and to overcome inner oppositions, the Church has shown a spiritual vitality that many thought she did not possess. How can this not be a reason for rejoicing? Moreover, some of the Council’s bravest deliberations contain an answer that also responds to the unheeded questions which in past times led some of us to break [with the Church], and it bears repeating: better late than never.<sup>202</sup>

Nevertheless, Silone persists in his detachment from the Church because once “*il ribelle*,” the rebel, has seen an institution from the outside, he perceives its ideology too clearly and his innocence is lost forever:

No more, therefore, a message of the Father to the sons, to all the sons, a limpid natural light discovered at our birth, common good, universal, evident truth [...] but a complex historical product, produced by a specific culture [...]. A [...] superstructure.<sup>203</sup>

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**200** “gli uomini i quali una volta dicevano no alla società e andavano nei conventi, adesso il più sovente finiscono tra i fautori della rivoluzione sociale (anche se in seguito essi rinnegano, o credono di rinnegare, la spinta d’origine). Non esito ad attribuire ai ribelli il merito di una più vicina fedeltà a Cristo” (Silone 2014: 24).

**201** “insofferenza contro l’arretratezza, la passività, o il conformismo dell’apparato clericale di fronte alle scelte serie imposte dall’epoca” (Silone 2014: 29).

**202** “Dobbiamo dire, sinceramente, tanto meglio e augurare che essa perseveri nella direzione presa. Il Concilio è stato un avvenimento positivo che gioverà a tutti, anche ai miscredenti. Nello sforzo compiuto per “aggiornarsi” e vincere le resistenze interne, la Chiesa ha dimostrato una vitalità spirituale di cui molti non la ritenevano capace. Come non rallegrarsene? Dirò di più. Alcune delle deliberazioni conciliari più coraggiose contengono una risposta soddisfacente anche alle domande inascoltate che a suo tempo portarono certuni di noi alla rottura ed è il caso di ripetere: meglio tardi che mai” (Silone 2014: 30).

**203** “Non più, dunque, messaggio del Padre ai figli, a tutti i figli, limpida luce naturale scoperta nascendo, bene comune, verità universale, evidente [...] ma prodotto storico complesso, prodotto di una determinata cultura [...]. Una [...] sovrastruttura” (Silone 2014: 31–32).

And yet, Silone adds, “Christ is bigger than the Church,” so what survives is “a de-mythologized Christianity, reduced to its moral substance,”<sup>204</sup> that is to say a sort of disenchanting religion. In this vein, Silone associates the sentiment of Christian fraternity and love for the poor expressed in the *Pater Noster* with the socialist ideal. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, the *Pater Noster* is also quoted by Pier Celestino as the prayer for the advent of God’s Kingdom. Silone’s work therefore expresses a form of religious thought that is deeply influenced by modern revolutionary utopias. At the same time, however, the social, earthly realization of values such as love and equality is imagined as provisional, imperfect implementation, as these values can only truly be achieved in an otherworldly dimension.<sup>205</sup>

As Celestine’s example shows, the conquest of otherworldly perfection is based on caring for the soul. Boniface, with his ambitions and immoral political actions (he breaks his word, imprisons Celestine and causes his death), is surely a negative model of pope. He does, however, maintain a clear place at the head of a socio-political structure, that is, the structure of the Church as a state, as an institution. Celestine in contrast represents a positive model, but this positive model is also completely incompatible with the actual role of the pontiff. Celestine simply cannot be a pope if he wants to continue to be himself. Taking on the role of pope necessarily implies compromising with the world and losing the purity of his soul.

Silone’s work does not, therefore, present a positive actant-pope and a negative actant-pope as two alternatives. Indeed, there is no alternative: the role of the pope is irremediably earthly, immanent, and ultimately anti-Christian. Silone’s vision does not allow any room for compromise; there is no possibility of rescuing the role of the pope as such, to grant it euphoric connotations. And since the pontiff is the pivot point of the entire Church-system, there is no way to save the Church as an institution from moral corruption. The only solution seems to be an ascetic Christianity, but as shown by Celestine, the model of this Christianity is ultimately subjective. It causes individuals to focus on their own souls, to live most of the time in isolation and not organized into the kind of vast community the Church is supposed to represent. Silone’s utopian perspective can therefore be considered revolutionary in that it presupposes

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**204** “Cristo è più grande della Chiesa [...] cristianesimo demitizzato, ridotto alla sua sostanza morale” (Silone 2014: 33).

**205** Regarding the Christian-socialist utopia in Silone and its revolutionary character, see Tuscano (1991: 14–15); Martelli & Di Pasqua (1988: 105–130); Annoni (1974: 70–76, 106–120), who speaks of “evangelical anarchism”; d’Eramo (1971: 415–421); Atzeni (1991: Parte Seconda); Lifonso (1991); and Scurani (1991).

the overthrow of the Church as an institution. As I will show, what in Silone is described as a utopia (the detachment of the pope and of the Church from the world), in Morselli is presented as a dystopia.

### 3.2 The dystopia of *Rome without the pope*

Although nowadays Guido Morselli is considered a leading figure in the Italian 20<sup>th</sup> century literary landscape, during his lifetime no editor would agree to publish his works. Morselli committed suicide in 1973. One year later, for the very first time, one of his novels was published, and it enjoyed striking critical success.<sup>206</sup> The novel in question was *Roma senza papa*. The date indicated at the end of the text is 1966, suggesting that the novel was completed just one year after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. Indeed, many of the themes addressed in Morselli's work echo the most intensely discussed issues surrounding the Council, such as the reform of liturgy or the difficulty of adapting the Church's tradition to currents of modern thought that sometimes openly clash with Christian doctrine.

The text is organized as a diary or, rather, a set of journalistic notes written by a Swiss Catholic priest who has come to Rome to be received by the pope. The narration is set at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, only few years before the start of the new millennium. This imaginary future is basically dystopic. After the death of historical pope Paul VI, the fictional pope Libero I and his successor John XXIV overturn the Catholic world. Indeed, Libero I has left Rome and moved the papal seat to an insignificant village, Zagarolo, thirty kilometres from the city. Having abandoned her ancient tradition, the Church is headed towards disintegration and perdition.

The narrator observes the new Roman Catholicism with apprehension, discontent, and nostalgia. He belongs to an inter-period generation that can neither remain in the old world or integrate fully into the new one, incapable as it is of accepting the new *mores* and mentality without regrets; this generation thus lives in a perpetual state of uncertainty (Morselli 1974: 22). At the same time, the narrator feels that he has the role of “an ideal bridge: two worlds in succession and in contrast still communicate, through me”.<sup>207</sup>

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**206** See for instance Fortichiari (2002).

**207** “Mi sento ponte ideale; attraverso me, due mondi in successione e in contrasto comunicano ancora” (Morselli 1974: 74).

The Swiss priest holds quite conservative views. For example, he thinks that “every time a doctrinal point falls, the world’s order ends up injured and weakened”.<sup>208</sup> He defends “formal traditions” in ritual and liturgy and is therefore criticized by the Roman clergymen: “The assistant told me that I am outdated because I celebrate starting from the *Introibo*. [...] Obsolescence de facto. This is a country where people are happy to liberate themselves from a formal tradition”.<sup>209</sup> Furthermore, he is the author of a thick theological treatise in defence of the hyperdulia.<sup>210</sup> Indeed, since pope Libero I has published an official document casting doubts on the legitimacy of the cult of the Virgin, the faithful are divided between pro- and anti-hyperdulia. In the absence of a firm and competent authority, numerous sociological, anthropological, political, and media debates spring up seeking to define those truths that were once the exclusive domain of theologians. With his treatise, therefore, the narrator intends to reaffirm the priority of the pope and his specialists – theologians – in matters of faith, criticizing the presumed “democratic” vulgarization and secularization of religion:

The modern Church has two bases: the Tridentine doctrine, and the Pope. There is no need for this dualism to be definitely transformed into a Trinity by the consecration of a democratic “Holy Ghost”.

The imprescriptible character of the Marian cult [...] has to be established by the Pope based on the consistent opinion of his theologians. [...] And TV has nothing to do with it; laymen must be left out and deprived of authority.

The issue is highlighting the vice of the century, the vulgarization or secularization of the ecclesiastical and religious sphere. Now I shout out my indignant warning.<sup>211</sup>

The questionable democratic turn in Catholicism can also be seen in the fact that the dogma of papal infallibility has been modified; now, this authority is recog-

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**208** “ogni volta che cade un punto dottrinale, l’ordine del mondo risulta offeso e indebolito” (Morselli 1974: 159).

**209** “Il coadiutore mi ha dato del passatista perché celebro incominciando dall’*Introibo*. [...] Obsolescenza di fatto. Questo è un paese dove si è felici di liberarsi di una tradizione formale” (Morselli 1974: 10).

**210** The worship of Mary as Virgin and Mother of God.

**211** “La Chiesa moderna ha due basi [...]: la dottrina tridentina, e il Papa. Non si sente affatto il bisogno che questo dualismo si trasformi definitivamente in Trinità con la consacrazione di uno ‘Spirito Santo’ democratico. La imprescrittibilità del culto mariano [...] la deve fissare il Papa sulla conforme opinione dei suoi teologi. [...] E la TV non c’entra, i laici devono essere lasciati fuori ed esautorati. La questione sta mettendo in luce il vizio del secolo, la volgarizzazione o laicizzazione della sfera ecclesiastica e religiosa. Ora io faccio sentire il mio, indignato, grido d’allarme” (Morselli 1974: 15–16).

nized on a case by case basis and only with the approval of the synod's majority. The pope and the doctrine set by the Council of Trent are the foundations of the modern Church, but the narrator bitterly laments that the Counter-Reformation epoch has come to an end. Indeed, he describes a set of radical decisions made by the Church, decisions which can be seen to represent a hyperbolic version of the politics of "aggiornamento" launched by the Second Vatican Council and of its possible consequences. For example, in Morselli's narrative world the Church has legitimized the use of contraceptives and authorized marriage for priests; she has established the consecration of female deacons and legalized euthanasia as well as the use of hallucinogenic substances. In general, Church politics consists of unconditional adaptation to prevailing norms, as prohibition is deemed to have negative effects:

... [it is] vain and harmful to step aside, to just tag along behind. [...] To channel social phenomena, not to ignore or fight them, this is Christian wisdom: not *odium theologicum* or unrealistic intransigence. Often [...] things are harmful because they are forbidden, they are not forbidden because they are harmful. In matters of faith, may religious authority be strict, in matters of custom may it be indulgent.<sup>212</sup>

Furthermore, the pope has proposed that the term of each pontiff last only fifteen years (with this element, Morselli seems to have forecasted the retirement of Pope Benedict XVI) while the Jesuits have launched an economic system based on collectivization to resolve the *Questione Meridionale*.<sup>213</sup> The Church is planning a new Council that will discuss the theory of "socialidarity," that is, a form of solidarity based on mutual, mainly economic, interests that is destined to take the place of the virtue of charity. Good must be done because, in today's global village, the consequences of poverty, illness, and calamity go beyond the individual sphere to affect all of human kind. The Evangelical principle of brotherhood and universal love did not work, but this new solidarity, even though it is based on a selfish principle and cold economic law, actually leads to concrete results. The Church also proposes a liberal sexual policy under the motto of "love and freedom". Not only can priests get married but, according to popular

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**212** "... inutile e dannoso tirarsi da parte, per poi accodarsi ultimi. [...] Incanalare i fenomeni sociali, non ignorarli o combatterli, questa è sapienza cristiana: non l'*odium theologicum*, o l'intransigenza velleitaria. Spesso [...] le cose sono dannose perché sono proibite, non sono proibite perché sono dannose. In materia di fede l'autorità religiosa sia severa, in materia di costume indulga" (Morselli 1974: 28–29).

**213** The longstanding but still unresolved issue of Southern Italy's poverty and under-development, especially when compared to the greater richness and development characterizing Northern Italy.

rumours, the pope himself has a girlfriend, a “theosophist and missionary of Zen Buddhism”.<sup>214</sup> Furthermore, according to the narrator, the Church is ready to accept homosexual unions: “Tastes, today, are impartially considered comparable, and the religious acknowledgment of even the most particular among them is discussed. Why not? Religion does not want to be considered sex-phobic, and gratification is declared to be the primary goal of marriage. [...] In Paris, a cardinal participates in celebrations of Voltaire’s tercentenary, quoting his words: *amour et liberté, voilà deux synonymes*”.<sup>215</sup>

The Church is therefore a slave to public opinion: in order to go along with the fair-play language prevailing at the time she accepts principles such as carnal pleasure which are in sharp contrast to traditional Catholic morals. Similarly, she has become anti-dogmatic and conforms to scientism by abolishing the beliefs and dogmas (such as Immaculate Conception or the Assumption of the Virgin) that clash with scientific laws. Furthermore, some monasteries use LSD to initiate their monks, the bishop of Detroit has won the Davis Cup, and some priests use coke instead of wine during the celebration of the Eucharist. The Church has abolished belief in the Devil (“Today theologians consider the devil to be useless old junk”<sup>216</sup>), while a growing movement of progressive Catholics is actively calling for psychology to be integrated into Catholicism (“The endeavour to convert the psychoanalytic Antichrist”<sup>217</sup>). Psychology, the enemy of Catholicism “neutralized” through its incorporation, gives rise to awkward theological discourses such as the one stated by the priest Rusticucci:

Psychoanalysis, from enemy to handmaid at the service of the Church, it resolves, don’t you see? faith’s biggest problem. [...] How could Adam conceive evil, if he was the perfect creature of a perfect author? Genesis dishes up the Serpent, but the problem is only shifted, not resolved. The Devil, the Serpent, could not be created devil by God. And if it created itself as a devil, who (as, indeed, Augustine asks) had granted it the will to make itself devil? The evil, the sin in God’s creatures, from whence does it come? [...] Well] the solution is simple: the subconscious. The sub-con-scious! In me, in you, in Adam, in Eve, in the Devil, to hell

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**214** “teosofa e missionaria di buddhismo zen” (Morselli 1974: 114).

**215** “I gusti, oggi, sono imparzialmente equiparati e si parla di riconoscimento religioso anche ai più particolari fra essi. Perché no? La religione non vuole essere presa per sessuofoba, e in campo matrimoniale la gratificazione è dichiarata scopo primario. [...] A Parigi, un cardinale interviene alle celebrazioni del tridentenario di Voltaire ricordandone le parole: *amour et liberté, voilà deux synonymes*” (Morselli 1974: 61).

**216** “Oggi [...] per i teologi il Diavolo è un’inutile anticaglia” (Morselli 1974: 159).

**217** “L’impresa di convertire l’Anticristo psicoanalitico” (Morselli 1974: 47).

with him! – The incongruous address ends in a big laugh that sets the room’s glasses to trembling.<sup>218</sup>

Many of the issues mentioned in the novel echo the pressing issues of Morselli’s time, such as for example the numerous theological and non-theological controversies concerning contraception;<sup>219</sup> the lively debate about marriage destined to culminate in the 1974 referendum legalizing divorce in Italy; and the possibility of integrating psychology and theology, an idea which attracted a growing number of Catholics.<sup>220</sup> More generally, all of the challenges posed by contemporary times and underlined by Morselli, from the management of scientific progress to the marriage of clergymen, are listed in a specific document produced by the Second Vatican Council, the “Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” (*Gaudium et Spes*: 1965), in which the Church defines its position with regard to modern times. For instance, she admits that modern psychological knowledge is useful in supporting pastoral activities even while reaffirming her traditional positions on other issues, such as the marriage of clergymen.

In Morselli’s dystopia, the radical, modernist decisions engendered by the post-Second Vatican spirit of reform do not enjoy universal agreement. Instead of fostering the unity of the Catholic community, they all fuel endless debate. As mentioned above, pluralism leads non-specialist interlocutors to intervene in discussions on matters of faith, but at the same time it also causes increased specialization, for example in theology. This specialization is the sign of a process of fragmentation that impedes cohesion and gives rise to chaos:

Cosmotheology, by now outmoded, is not enough. There must be a theology of acculturation, a theology of automation. [...] Even a sports-related theology. And another about food. [...] The century that is industriously kicking the buckets ends not in glory but in exasperated specialization. And specialization has a new theoretical pretext: endless polycentrism,

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**218** “La psicoanalisi al servizio della Chiesa, da nemica divenuta ancella, ci risolve, capite?, il più gran problema della fede. [...] Come poté Adamo concepire il male se era creatura perfetta, di un autore perfetto? Il Genesi tira fuori il Serpente, ma il problema si sposta. non si risolve. Il Diavolo, il Serpente, mica poteva essere stato creato diavolo da Dio. E se si era fatto diavolo da sé, chi (domanda precisamente Agostino) gli aveva messo in corpo la voglia di farsi diavolo? [...] Dove viene nelle creature di Dio il male, il peccato? [...] Ebbene. [...] la soluzione è semplice: l’inconscio. L’in-con-scio! In me, in voi, in Adamo, in Eva, nel Diavolo che vi porti! L’incongrua allocuzione termina in una risatona che ne tremano i vetri della sala” (Morselli 1974: 48–49).

**219** Cfr. Noonan (1966) and Paul VI’s encyclical letter “*Humanae Vitae*” (1968).

**220** Cfr. Misiak & Staudt (1954). In Italy, the figure of Father Agostino Gemelli (1878–1959) was particularly important in promoting psychology among Catholics (see e.g. Mattesini 1991).



the fragmentation of the visible and invisible universes. Of all of this, of course, the young people are proud. [...] Today's man is a galaxy. Today's life is pluralism. Without end.<sup>221</sup>

Furthermore, ecumenism (promoted in its turn by the Council, in particular in *Unitatis Redintegratio*: 1964) causes all religions to be brought down to the same level, as evidenced by theories of the “bilateral apostolate. Exchanges of missionaries between Europe and Trobriand Isles, Europe introduced to totems and pagan love as previously Malaysia [was introduced] to the Gospel”.<sup>222</sup> The Church has formed a committee to unify all the Christian denominations; she has already reintegrated the Anglican Church and accepted atheism, even among the clergy, and considers the “God-is-dead Movement” to represent a positive supplement to religion, prompting it to be “more critically alive”.<sup>223</sup> The theological movement of the “Death of God,” represented for instance by Altizer and von Buren – both mentioned in Morselli's text (Morselli 1974: 108) – was actually at the center of a lively debate in the 1960s, when Morselli was composing his novel.<sup>224</sup>

The general trend is apparently towards “protestantization,”<sup>225</sup> giving up liturgical pomp and exterior forms in general in favor of austerity:

The Church is renouncing her sumptuous and joyful Romanity, even in Rome. [...] Certainly, the Church is looking for austerity [...] not only formal, not false. War has been declared on the visible. On the senses. No Trobriand, no pagan love. (The ecclesiastical wedding represents the defeat of carnality. Surely not its victory). But then, I notice, there is the ecumenical movement, ecumenism tends to diminish the differences between the various Christian conceptions. It ought to act on Protestants and Catholics alike.<sup>226</sup>

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**221** “Non basta l'ormai vecchia cosmoteologia. Ci dev'essere una teologia della acculturazione, una teologia dell'automazione. [...] Anche una teologia sportiva. E un'altra, alimentare. [...] Il secolo che sta laboriosamente tirando le cuoia, muore, in bellezza no, in esasperata specializzazione. E la specializzazione ha un nuovo pretesto teorico, il policentrismo all'infinito, la frammentazione dell'universo visibile e dell'invisibile. Di tutto questo, si capisce, i giovani sono fieri. [...] L'uomo d'oggi è una galassia. La vita di oggi è pluralismo. Senza limiti” (Morselli 1974: 35–36).

**222** “bilateralità di apostolato. Scambi di missionari fra Europa e Isole Trobriand, l'Europa iniziata ai totem e all'amore pagano come già la Melanesia al Vangelo” (Morselli 1974: 38).

**223** “più criticamente viva” (Morselli 1974: 108).

**224** For a short overview of the theme of questioning God's existence in 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian fiction, see Castelli (1989). Regarding the “God is dead” theological theme, see for instance Altizer & Hamilton (1968); Mondin (1968).

**225** “ci protestantizziamo” (Morselli 1974: 20).

**226** “La Chiesa sta ripudiando la sua romanità fastosa, e festosa, persino a Roma. [...] certo la Chiesa è in cerca di una austerità [...] non soltanto formale, non mentita. Dichiara guerra al visibile. Al senso. Niente Trobriand, niente amore pagano. (Il matrimonio ecclesiastico è una scon-

And yet the Church's new austerity, her "protestantization," is not appreciated by the Protestants themselves. Instead, they are returning to Catholicism precisely because they long for the traditional apparatus that has been banned. Once the difference between the denominations is minimized, Catholicism loses its attraction for Protestants:

- The real paradox [...] is that the English reformed are annoyed because now that they are joining Rome they have too little to give up, not enough sacrifices to make. The union was fostered by the second (or third) Pre-Raphaelite revival, with the fervour it produced for angels, saints, and madonnas. But in the meanwhile Catholics have banned angels and saints from the churches, and they threaten to get rid of the Madonna as well. [...] Then, there is the dismantlement of the pontifical court. Catholic or not, Englishmen love pageantry. Why make such a mistake, does anyone know?

[...] Catholics don't understand that by protestantising themselves they lose their charm for Protestants. [...] English, the truly universal language, will substitute Latin as the official language of Catholicism.<sup>227</sup>

In Morselli's dystopia, the lack of a strong authority causes different, contrasting opinions and opposing forms of radicalism to proliferate.<sup>228</sup> This contradictory doctrine is represented by Rusticucci, for example, who cites psychological theories to argue that women (including the Virgin) have no rational soul (identified with the *super-ego*) and therefore cannot commit sin. This serves to confirm the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, albeit in a negative sense; according to Rusticucci, however, such dogma is the product of historical contingency, an ecclesiastic reaction to the menace of the revolution in 1848. In the meantime, other Catholic currents strive to demonstrate that even animals have souls, thus reconciling Catholicism and Buddhism. All of the different "neo-modernist" currents share the idea that the Gospel must be "supplemented" (Morsel-

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fitta della carnalità. Non una sua vittoria di sicuro). D'altra parte, osservo, c'è il movimento ecumenico, l'ecumenismo tende a diminuire le differenze fra le varie accezioni cristiane. Dovrebbe agire sui protestanti quanto sui cattolici" (Morselli 1974: 39).

227 "Il vero paradosso [...] è che i riformati inglesi si indispettiscono perché ora che si uniscono a Roma hanno troppo poco da liquidare. Troppe poche rinunce da fare. L'unione è stata favorita dal secondo (o terzo?) revival preraffaellita, col fervore che ha prodotto per angeli, santi, madonne. Ma nel frattempo i cattolici hanno bandito angeli e santi dalle chiese, e la Madonna minacciano di metterla anche lei in soffitta. [...] Poi [...] c'è lo smantellamento della corte pontificia. Cattolici o no gli Inglesi sono amanti della pageantry. Come mai un errore simile, se ne sa niente? [...]. I cattolici non capiscono che protestantizzandosi perdono il loro fascino sui protestanti. [...] L'inglese, lingua veramente universale, sostituirà il latino come lingua ufficiale del cattolicesimo" (Morselli 1974: 61–63).

228 "Questi sono i lieviti con cui la Chiesa si affaccia al Duemila. Tanto radicalismo, e nessuna paura di contraddirsi" (Morselli 1974: 42).

li 1974: 95). The narrator presents these uncoherent doctrines as instances of absurdity caused by ecumenism and a specific sin against the Spirit, a sin he calls “*dissipation*” that consists in a kind of incoherence.<sup>229</sup> In reality, *Dissipatio H.G.* is the title of Morselli’s last novel, and in this work “dissipation” indicates the evaporation or vanishing of all humankind. In the context of *Roma senza papa*, the term *dissipatio* instead evokes the dispersion of the principles of religion and of the Church as an institution. On the basis of these different meanings of dissipation we might hypothesize that Morselli’s pessimism progressed gradually, as his apocalyptic vision – expressed in the key term “dissipation” – had not yet reached its furthest depths when *Roma senza papa* was published.

As described above, there are several pontiff figures in Morselli’s story. According to the narrator, Pius XII (who died in 1958) was the last ruling pope to be surrounded by a true court and to follow functional, effective protocol. After him, the Church’s “style” changes.<sup>230</sup> No longer a court, the papacy is reduced to a barely functional bureaucracy: “By ceasing to be a court in order to reduce itself to a bureaucracy, the Holy Seat has lost splendour without gaining precision”.<sup>231</sup> Moreover, the Swiss priest interprets the pope’s decision to leave Rome as an attempt to purify Catholicism from the pagan element that is particularly strong in Rome. However, the move to reject its pagan component is a risk for Roman Catholicism itself: “But what if the detachment [from paganism] proves to be fatal to Roman Catholicism, which is a mixed organism? Roman of Rome, I say. (I can describe at least three Catholicisms, supposing that the US species counts as such)”.<sup>232</sup> Indeed, according to the narrator, the basic face of Catholicism represented by its showy, exterior worship of the Madonna, Saints, and relics is the most authentic, venerable, and irrevocable component of Catholicism. It is destined to vanish by the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and its death will entail the death of Catholicism itself:

Its material is destined to disappear before the year two thousand, within four or at most five years. [...] Saints’ shins and skulls; cruets exuding bodily liquids; shrouds, dried flowers, nails and thorns, reliquaries of all styles in simple or precious shrines, with yellowed

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**229** “la dissipatio (cioè l’incoerenza, peccato contro lo Spirito)” (Morselli 1974: 83).

**230** “Adesso altri uomini, altro stile” (Morselli 1974: 24).

**231** “finendo di essere una corte per ridursi a una burocrazia, la S. Sede ha perso in splendore senza guadagnare in precisione” (Morselli 1974: 24).

**232** “Ma se il distacco si mostrasse fatale a quel misto organismo che è il cattolicesimo romano? Romano di Roma, dico. (Di cattolicesimi, supposto sia tale la specie statunitense, ne so descrivere perlomeno tre [...])” (Morselli 1974: 26). This thought seems to mirror Antonio Gramsci’s theory, which recognized that every religion is only a superficial unit, actually composed by heterogeneous varieties characterizing different social groups (Gramsci 1971).

shreds slivers fragments of hair, nails, cloth, wood, papyrus, and glasses, together with the heap of ex-voto: from orthopaedic limbs and bomb fuses to the figureheads of sailing ships, crutches, sabers, torn tires. All the humble or sumptuous paraphernalia (sometimes sacrosanct, sometimes, and it does not matter, naively false) and the innumerable bric-a-brac of what, for me, is not “superstition,” the undergrowth of faith but the blunt, ancient, venerable catholicity of the senses and sentiment, un-reflected-upon and therefore direct, authentic.<sup>233</sup>

After Pius XII’s death, ancient and spontaneous “Catholic paganism” is replaced by a cold technology the supposed effectiveness of which is unquestionably overrated. The pope has dismissed all of his soldiers (their uniforms having been sold to a theatre), an incalculable number of chamberlains, and a crowd of laymen and clergymen who were once in charge of the ancient, sumptuous ceremonial pomp.<sup>234</sup> To explain this choice, many Romans hypothesize that the new popes wish to follow the Evangelical example, are reacting to the economic crisis, or that they seek to simplify the administration of the Church. Pope John XXIV, however, does not take a clear position in this respect. The narrator therefore assumes that he chose a meaningless place for his seat in order to create an ideal center rather than a topological one:

The material dominion of mankind expands to the stars, the material domain of Christ’s Vicar, already narrow, now becomes thinner and disappears, in a final, voluntary, and by itself emblematic, dematerialization. Indeed, today the Throne barely rests on the earth [...] therefore declaring that the visible kingdom ends with and evaporates into the invisible kingdom, the identification of the physical point where the Vicar still dwells *loses all denotative function*. And the point ceases to be a place in the topographical sense, it becomes a “pole” or “*umbilicum*”. I see the issue this way: no exile, much less a “Babylonian” exile. On the contrary, a Jerusalem, the celebration and the summit of an ascent.<sup>235</sup>

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**233** “Il suo ‘materiale’ è destinato a sparire prima del Duemila, entro quattro, cinque anni al massimo. [...] Stinchi e teschi di santi; ampolle stillanti liquidi fisiologici; sindoni e sudari, fiori secchi, chiodi e spine, reliquiari di ogni stile in teche semplici o preziose, con brani schegge frammenti ingialliti di chiome, unghie, stoffe, legni, papiri, vetri, oltre alla congerie degli ex voto: dagli arti ortopedici e dalle spolette di bombe alle polene di velieri, le stampelle, le scia-bole, gli pneumatici squarciati. Tutto l’armamentario umile o sontuoso (a volte sacrosanto, a volte, e non importa, ingenuamente falso) e il bric-à-brac innumerevole, di quella che per me non è ‘la superstizione’, sottobosco della fede, ma la preta, l’antica, la venerabile cattolicità del senso e del sentimento, irriflessa e dunque diretta, autentica” (Morselli 1974: 100).

**234** “una secolare pompa cerimoniale da far parere disadorno al confronto, e meschino, l’apparato che circondava l’ultimo Czar di Russia” (Morselli 1974: 54).

**235** “Il dominio materiale dell’uomo si allarga agli astri, il dominio materiale del Vicario di Cristo, già ristretto, si assottiglia ora e scompare, in una finale scorporazione, volontaria e di per sé emblematica. Giacché oggi il Soglio appoggia appena sulla terra. [...] premesso insomma

John XXIV has solved an ancient antithesis. As long as it was “Roman,” the Papacy could not be “Catholic” in the full sense of the word. Universality did not harmonize with localization, even though this was rooted in history and anchored in the sublime. John had the courage to delocalize, to unbind the Papacy. Once one admits the reasons behind the “detachment,” the choice to establish a substitutive and, of course, a-geographical seat, abstracting from localization, is not a matter of faith.<sup>236</sup>

In the same way, the clergymen are confused about the Pope’s unclear position with regard to exterior worship, the use of images in liturgy and the regulation of ritual and devotional practices (Morselli 1974: 98–99). In light of this uncertainty, they all speculate or make their own decisions.

Without the pope, Rome is actually “*orba Urbs*” (Morselli 1974: 94), it is no longer the “*caput mundi*” (Morselli 1974: 57); it is provincial, “lazy, emptied, somehow depressed”.<sup>237</sup> Its entire economy is reduced to tourism but even the numbers of tourists are dwindling because the pope is away and has ceased to provide a picturesque character (Morselli 1974: 32). People feel shocked and abandoned: “... this guy’s ditched us, he’s not our pope anymore;”<sup>238</sup> “Rome without the pope is a ruin, Monsignor. A female without a husband. [...] The whole of economic life, and consequently cultural life, is heading towards paralysis”.<sup>239</sup>

The Vatican itself is but a museum: its spiritual meaning has been annulled by the absence of its “genius,” the pope. The United Nations would like to rent part of the former Holy Seat; the secular value of peace becomes more important than the value of religious faith. The Vatican only consists of a physical dimension, deprived of spirituality:

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che il regno visibile si riassume e si annulla nel regno invisibile, l’identificazione del punto fisico nel quale necessariamente il Vicario ancora risiede *perde ogni funzione denotativa*. E il punto cessa di essere una località in senso topografico per divenire ‘polo’, o ‘umbilicum’. Così vedrei la questione: niente esilio, e tanto meno ‘babilonese’. Al contrario, una Gerusalemme, la celebrazione e il culmine di una ascesa” (Morselli 1974: 152–153).

**236** “Giovanni XXIV ha risolto un’antica antitesi. Finché era ‘romano’ il Papato non poteva essere ‘cattolico’, nella pienezza del termine. L’universalità non si accordava con la localizzazione, per quanto radicata nella storia, per quanto ramificata nel sublime. Giovanni ha avuto il coraggio di slocalizzare il Papato, di disancorarlo. Una volta ammesse le ragioni del ‘distacco’, l’elezione della sede succedanea e, s’intende, a-geografica, astratta dalla localizzazione, non è materia di fede” (Morselli 1974: 172–173).

**237** “impigrìta, svuotata, con un che di depresso” (Morselli 1974: 30).

**238** “... questo a noi ci ha piantati, non è più er Papa de noantri. Un poco di fronda a Roma la fanno, è chiaro. Lo choc è stato forte” (Morselli 1974: 46).

**239** “Roma senza papa è una rovina, Monsignore. Una femmina senza marito. [...] Tutta la vita economica, e quella culturale di riflesso, vanno incontro a una paralisi” (Morselli 1974: 77–78).

Spaces and perspectives are a physical dimension, no longer versed in the spiritual domain. Those big candles which, as a boy, I thought the altar's Solomonic columns resembled, they do not burn anymore, and the smell of turpentine overpowers the aroma of incense. Now that the Counter-Reform has surrendered (after four centuries) to the Pro-Reform, San Pietro is nothing but a mausoleum. [...]

This is why, under the gilding and stucco that remains, Bernini's baroque is splitting apart. A Presence (and an unconditioned authority) used to spread its vital spirit everywhere in the buildings [...]. Nowadays, everything is silent there, even though seventeen kilometres of apartments, chapels, loggias and libraries provide a reservoir of artwork in comparison to which the Hermitage and Louvre pale.<sup>240</sup>

However, despite having given up its terrestrial seat and rejected the exteriority of worship, the Church is more material and mundane than ever:

... for the last thirty years the Church's main concern has been socio-economic and pacifist breaches. But don't you think that this means becoming definitively mundane? The Church has never been as earthly as she is now, now that she is not territorial at all. The territoriality of the past did not keep her from being otherworldly, and the cataphract and bellicose popes also defended the dogmatic patrimony, and not only with anathemas. Today (they say) the Church is a warm society. Yes, it is warm, but also full of lacerations...<sup>241</sup>

Rome is still an important center of Catholicism, but instead of being the beginning and the end, the centripetal force holding the faithful together under the authority of the pope, it is reduced to a centrifugal crossroad.<sup>242</sup> Indeed, the Vatican is a space that offers the most complete freedom of speech possible and in Piazza San Pietro itself there is a sort of "speaking corner" like the one in London's Hyde Park. When the narrator visits this place, a speaker is giving a speech

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**240** "Spazi e prospettive sono dimensione fisica, non più versata nello spirituale. Quei candeloni a cui da ragazzo mi veniva fatto di rassomigliare le colonne tortili dell'altare, non ardono più, e l'odore di trementina vince l'aroma dell'incenso. Adesso che la Controriforma cede (dopo quattro secoli) alla pro-Riforma, San Pietro è soltanto un mausoleo. [...] Ecco perché, sotto le dorature e gli stucchi intatti si sfalda il barocco di Bernini. Negli edifici [...] una Presenza (e Autorità incondizionata) espandeva il suo vitale spirito ovunque [...]. Oggi tutto vi tace, anche se per diciassette chilometri di appartamenti, cappelle, logge e biblioteche, è offerto un serbatoio di opere d'arte al cui confronto scompaiono l'Hermitage e il Louvre" (Morselli 1974: 86–87).

**241** "... le aperture socioeconomiche, e pacifistiche, sono da trent'anni la preoccupazione centrale della Chiesa. Ma non le pare che sia un definitivo mondanizzarsi? La Chiesa non è mai stata così terrena come ora che di territoriale non ha niente. La territorialità di un tempo non le impediva di essere ultraterrena, e i papi catafratti e bellicosi difendevano però il peculio dogmatico, e non soltanto con gli anatemi. Oggi (dicono) la Chiesa è una società calda. Calda sì, ma anche piena di squarci..." (Morselli 1974: 121).

**242** "Ci si passa ancora da Roma, per forza, ma diretti chissà dove, ciascuno per una ragione propria che qui non ha più la sua origine, o il suo termine" (Morselli 1974: 93).

against theism, claiming that it does not have any democratic basis, that God must not be considered a king; the speaker argues that God must be loved but not held in awe, that atheism is better than servitude, and that people have to get rid of reactionary religion and remember that, just like humans have obligations towards God, so He has obligations towards them as well.

In the episodes involving the protagonist and narrator, the pope is mostly present *in absentia*. The narrator is in Rome waiting for an audience that has been postponed. Indeed, the pope refuses to be present on numerous public occasions: “John XXIV postpones audiences and sends substitutes to the ceremonies. They say that he is an agoraphobe, a poor orator, and shy. He is a pontiff in the shadows, maybe mysterious. Pius XII gave no less than two-hundred-fifty public speeches a year. In the three years of his pontificate, John spoke twenty-nine times”.<sup>243</sup> The pope is present in the narration as the object of discourses or as a gigantic image (Morselli 1974: 37). Most of all, he is present as a 3D simulation: each Sunday, a lifelike projection involving not only sight but also auditory and tactile effects depicts the pope parading through the square of San Pietro. The narrator describes this staging as a “pitiful but also painful play,” a “commemoration, somewhere between the theatrical and the macabre”.<sup>244</sup> Once more, technology cannot replace the real presence of the pope and the role of traditional religion. It is not only the faithful who feel they are being governed by an invisible head, the clergy have the same impression:

So we, the small ones, do not see what the Head is, thinks, and does. You should laugh at these little priests who know, who foresee. The Pope? They said it was not easy to understand Pius XII [...], and that this was because of autocracy. Now that autocracy is over, the Pope is still distant, to the point that no one can reach him. Let's gather all the hypotheses, the conjectures, the “interpretations” that have been put forward in newspapers, books, and booklets over the few years since the transfer of the Seat. There is enough to cover the parterre of the Colosseum with a goodly layer of waste paper.<sup>245</sup>

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**243** “Giovanni XXIV rimanda le udienze, si fa sostituire alle cerimonie. Lo dicono agorafobo, scarso di oratoria, timido. È un pontefice ombroso. Forse, misterioso. Pio XII teneva non meno di duecentocinquanta discorsi pubblici all’anno. Giovanni, in tre anni di pontificato, ha parlato ventinove volte” (Morselli 1974: 68).

**244** “pietoso ma anche penoso giuoco”; “rievocazione, tra teatrale e macabra” (Morselli 1974: 88 and 89).

**245** “Così noi piccoletti non vediamo quello che il Capo è e pensa e fa. Dovresti ridere di questi pretini che sanno, che prevedono. Il Papa? Dicevano che non era facile capire Pio XII, [...] e la colpa era dell’autocrazia. Adesso che l’autocrazia non c’è più, il Papa resta sempre tanto in là che nessuno ci arriva. [...] Mettiamo insieme le ipotesi, le congetture, le ‘interpretazioni’ che nei brevi anni trascorsi dal trasferimento della Sede si sono venute tentando in giornali, libri e libelli. C’è da coprire la platea del Colosseo di un buono strato di cartaccia” (Morselli 1974: 151).

Part of the problem derives from the fact that John XXIV was a monk, and now that he is a pope he cannot bear to give up ascetic life altogether in favor of action:

... in Monsignor's letters there is still the ascetic misunderstanding; the clergy's active vocation is confused with the smooth and renunciatory mystical vocation. To neglect earthly things can perhaps be useful to the contemplator; for us it is deadly. [...] John, therefore, was a monk. Now that he is the pope and has left the paths of contemplation to undertake the less comfortable paths of responsible and direct action, the question is whether he has changed his life. His conception and actual conduct of life. A pope coming to the Throne from the government of a big archdioceses only changes the scale of his job: John has not only changed his career, he has taken on a new and braver ideal.<sup>246</sup>

The narrator observes that the pope enjoys good food and the company of women: even though he is sober and well-balanced, he cannot be fully classified as an ascetic. Nevertheless, he is not a man of action. His way of acting is mysterious, bizarre and, in the view of many of the faithful, unsatisfactory. Indeed, as mentioned above, the pope does not travel; he is agoraphobic and reluctant to speak in public. Just like Celestine V in *Silone* (2014), the election of the invisible pope John XXIV in *Morselli* is described as the solution to a controversy that splits the conclave into two opposing parties, a political alternative that both sides find to be acceptable. However, while Celestine V is a positive character, John XXIV represents a noticeably negative figure: not only does he not have the charisma to be a leader, he does not even present a positive and coherent ideal of Christian life.

In the end, the narrator, together with other priests, is finally ushered into the simple, functional residence of the pope. After the long wait in Rome, the audience is informal and disappointing. The pope gives a short and ambiguous speech:

"Priests tend to see the good God in their own image, even while they preach that, conversely, we are made in His image. Instead, we have to persuade ourselves that God is different, God is not a priest. [...] The Church [...] consists of three things. Theology, liturgy, and

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**246** "... nelle circolari di Monsignore c'è ancora l'equivoco ascetico; si confonde la vocazione attiva del clero con la morbida e rinunciataria vocazione mistica. Trascurare le cose terrene può forse essere utile al contemplatore, a noi è nefasto. [...] Giovanni, dunque, era monaco. Adesso che è papa e ha detto addio alle vie della contemplazione per intraprendere quelle, meno comode, dell'azione responsabile e direttiva, la domanda è se ha cambiato vita. Concezione e intima condotta di vita. Un papa che venga al Soglio dal governo di una grande arcidiocesi, cambia soltanto dimensioni di lavoro: Giovanni, oltre a cambiare carriera, ha assunto un nuovo e più strenuo ideale" (*Morselli* 1974: 162–163).



hierarchy. They rhyme, in all respects. Including in the sense that all three of them present us with problems that have the characteristic of seeming to be very difficult. But let us consider what we have just said". (John was smiling again, with a happiness, I would say, which was not praiseworthy. A prophane happiness [...]: of a life content to live here and now. Punctually, earthly). "Let's consider that, if we are priests, then God is something different. And we will soon realize that these problems are not so difficult after all".<sup>247</sup>

The pope lives in a residence from which artwork is banned; in its place hang the signs of an imminent "agricultural economy" (Morselli 1974: 181). At the same time, however, the pope claims transcendent values, saying that he cannot deal with the matters of this world because he is convinced that both he as a person and the sacerdotal and papal role have certain limits. The pontiff thus offers a subjectivist, relativistic conclusion that leaves the priests in a state of confusion and demoralization:

"The pope cannot deal with the matters of this world," he observed. He immediately corrected himself: "he cannot handle them. He cannot, for many good reasons. Among others, let's acknowledge it, my friends, so as not to display his incompetence to you. [...] He should handle souls. And today, with you, he should handle yours. But this is a matter that you know much better than him, and again, for many good reasons in addition to the main and obvious one". [...] The Pope is sure of his modesty, he *explains* his reticence, he does not apologize for it. Apparently, he sees this as a natural, and insurmountable, limit of his office (or of priesthood itself), [a limit] stemming first of all from respect for others' personalities. From acceptance of what Grace, the Spirit, or individual will and vocation, produce in every single man.<sup>248</sup>

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**247** "I preti sono portati a vedere il buon Dio a loro propria immagine e somiglianza, anche mentre predicano che siamo noi a immagine e somiglianza Sua. Invece [...] bisogna persuaderci che Dio è diverso, Dio non è prete. [...] La Chiesa [...] comprende tre cose. Teologia, liturgia, gerarchia. Sono in rima fra loro, in tutte le maniere. E anche perché tutt'e tre ci presentano problemi che hanno la specialità di sembrarci difficilissimi. Ma consideriamo quello che abbiamo detto adesso' (Di nuovo Giovanni sorrideva, con una felicità, direi, non meritoria. Profana [...]: di una vita contenta di vivere qui e ora. Puntualmente, terrenamente). 'Consideriamo, che se noi siamo preti, Dio invece è qualche cosa di diverso. E ci accorgeremo presto che quei problemi non sono tanto difficili'" (Morselli 1974: 176–178).

**248** "Delle cose del mondo, il Papa non può occuparsi' osservò. Si corresse subito: 'Non può trattare [...] Non può, per molte buone ragioni. Fra l'altro, amici miei, ammettiamolo pure, per non mostrare anche a voi la sua incompetenza. [...] Dovrebbe trattare delle anime. E oggi, con voi, delle vostre. Ma questo è un argomento che voi conoscete ben meglio di lui, e anche qui, per varie buone ragioni oltre quella ovvia e principale'. [...] Il Papa è sicuro di questa sua modestia, ragiona la sua reticenza, non è che se ne scusi. A quanto pare la vede come un limite naturale, oltre che invalicabile, posto al suo magistero (o addirittura al sacerdozio stesso) in primo luogo dal rispetto delle personalità altrui. Dall'accettazione di ciò che la Grazia, o lo Spirito, o l'individua [sic] volontà e vocazione, opera in ogni singolo uomo" (Morselli 1974: 179–180).

The narrator is aware that the world is undergoing a period of extreme spiritual uncertainty, and this impression grows when he returns to Rome after his audience. The sense of crisis is represented in the description of the decadence of Rome without the pope. Things fall apart when the person who represented the central spiritual idea propping up the whole system leaves an empty space: “When our group came back to the city, it seemed [...] different. The absence of the great Roman (not John, or Pius, or Benedict, but He, impersonal and sovereign), that absence, which before was but an idea, now became a measurable lack, yawning more in things than between men. And the things suffered it by falling to pieces”.<sup>249</sup> The absence of the pope thus leads to theological chaos, to the erosion of doctrine, tradition, liturgy, hierarchy, and order, to fragmentation and confusion.

The pope was the incarnation of the central authority, projecting a sort of spiritual energy from Rome out to the world as a whole. The absence of this central role, the Church’s gradual adaptation to the modern world, the elimination of external form and ritual, all of these changes lead to the loss of Catholicism’s most authentic identity. Unlike Silone (2014), Morselli represents the asceticism of a pope as harmful. Indeed, in Morselli (1974) the pope’s asceticism entails an inevitable shift towards secularization. With the fictional pope John XXIV, the ascetic way of life inherited from the monastic tradition and filtered through Protestantism ends up producing secularism: the pontiff chooses a balanced lifestyle. Having distanced himself from both the excessive rigor of asceticism and active involvement in earthly questions, he lives quietly, informally, anchored in the here and now. His way of life seems to be informed by an idea of subjectivity that is in contradiction with the universality that is the basic principle of Catholicism. As a consequence, this asceticism converted into secularism does not lead to spiritual growth; rather, it completely disrupts the spiritual reality and power the pope embodied.

John XXIV therefore represents a “transcendent” pope in that he does not take charge of earthly concerns; he is unattainable, invisible, and absent. He is also an “immanent” pope in that he takes care of his person (he lives in a comfortable residence, eats good food, has a girlfriend, etc.) and is content to live in the here and now. However, the text suggests that this dual nature does not correspond to the characteristics a pope must have. The last passage quoted above expresses precisely this idea: what is missing in this future Christianity is the

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<sup>249</sup> “Quando la nostra comitiva rimise piede in città, questa ci parve, o parve a me, diversa. L’assenza del grande Romano (non Giovanni o Pio o Benedetto, ma Lui, impersonalmente e sovraneamente), quella assenza, stata dianzi un’idea, diveniva una misurabile lacuna, aperta nelle cose, più che fra gli uomini. E le cose la subivano disfacciandosi” (Morselli 1974: 181).

role of the pope, not the pope as a particular individual but his semiotic role as impersonal sovereign and super-human authority, without which not only the Church but also Rome and the world itself is bound for disruption and senselessness. In Morselli's text, therefore, the future pope John XXIV is an actor who does not fully correspond to the thematic role of the pope, that of an ideal and impersonal leader, both spiritual and earthly authority, shaped by Catholic tradition. The character of the real-life pope Pius XII, on the contrary, is presented as much more consistent with this positive papal model.

Morselli's novel thus raises a pressing doubt as to whether the thematic role of the pope (with all the related issues and consequences) can really continue to function after the dramatic changes occurring in the 20<sup>th</sup> century which, as outlined above, are more or less directly connected to or mirrored by the Second Vatican Council.

### 3.3 The pope at the center of a conspiracy theory: *Imprimatur*

*Imprimatur* is an historical novel and thriller. The protagonists are invented and secondary real-life historical characters, but they are caught up with an alleged scandal involving real-life historical characters of primary importance. According to this story, pope Innocent XI (1611–1689) secretly funded William of Orange's invasion of England, thus allowing Protestantism to prevail over Catholicism in the country. In so doing, the pope acted not as the head of the Catholic Church but as the leader of a powerful family of bankers, the Odescalchi. The novel therefore paints a sharp opposition between the immoral deeds attributed to Innocent XI and the official account of his popularity as a tolerant and sober pontiff, actively fighting nepotism and promoting the moral and administrative reform of the Roman Church. What is historically true is that a controversial cause for canonization was initiated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but it was not until 1956 that he was beatified by Pius XII (Menniti 2004).

The novel was published by Mondadori (one of the major Italian publishing houses) in 2002, but after the first edition it was repealed from the Italian market. The editorial fortunes of *Imprimatur* are reported in a booklet by Simone Berni (2008), who speaks of a “case of present-day censorship”.<sup>250</sup> In this pamphlet, Berni claims that the fact that the novel was taken off the market despite its commercial success and the authors were unable to find new publishers points to a sort of conspiracy, a move to sabotage a work containing a disturbing

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250 “caso di censura dei nostri giorni” (Berni 2008: V).

truth. Berni relates the novel's account to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Innocent XI, like many European rulers of his time, fought against the Muslim Turks who were threatening to invade the Christian west. According to Berni, when Islam once again menaced the west, the Church set out to sanctify Innocent XI in order to send a message to the world:

To sanctify a pontiff who fought Islam had symbolic value that they wanted to exploit fully, in all of its significance. After all, this was not the first time that pope Odescalchi proved useful for a political operation. Even his beatification, in 1956, was read as a clear political signal; it was the year in which the Soviet army invaded Hungary. This was therefore a threat from the East, just like the Turkish army defeated in Vienna in 1683 thanks to the political work (and funds) of Innocent XI.<sup>251</sup>

According to Berni, the publication of *Imprimatur* with its negative portrait of the pope spoiled the Church's plans. The Holy Sea decides therefore to instead beatify Marco D'Aviano, a warrior monk who incited the soldiers before the decisive 1683 battle against the Turks in Vienna, thus leaving pope Innocent XI in the shadows. In the view of Berni and the novel's two authors, it was this set of circumstances, together with the fact that many leading figures of the Italian publishing world are linked to the Vatican (for example to Opus Dei), that explain the book's hostile reception. Just like the novel, Berni's report depicts the powerful leaders determining events as mysterious figures lurking in the dark with connections to the highest secular and ecclesiastical powers. In semiotic terms, we might say that, despite their absence as concrete characters, such figures are blatantly present as actants.

*Imprimatur* begins with a prolepsis.<sup>252</sup> In 2040, a priest enquiring into Innocent XI for his cause for canonization writes to his superior, sending him a novel by two young authors (bearing the names of the actual authors) and based, in its turn, on a report written by an innkeeper's boy in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The novel contains a story that suggests the pope may not be appropriate for canonization. In the end, the frame closes with the priest drawing on historical data to corroborate the accuracy of the events and characters mentioned in the text.

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251 "Santificare un pontefice che ha combattuto l'Islam ha un valore simbolico che si intende sfruttare fino in fondo, in tutte le sue valenze. Del resto non era la prima volta che papa Odescalchi si rivelava utile a un'operazione politica. Anche la sua beatificazione, avvenuta nel 1956, era stata letta come un chiaro segnale politico: era l'anno in cui le armate sovietiche avevano invaso l'Ungheria, una minaccia dunque che arrivava da oriente, come le armate turche sconfitte a Vienna nel 1683 grazie all'opera politica (e ai finanziamenti) di Innocenzo XI" (Berni 2008: 54).

252 Or flashforward, i.e. a sequence narrating events that are placed in the future with reference to the principal story. On prolepsis, see Genette (1972: chapter 1).

The story begins with a Roman inn being placed under quarantine because the mysterious death of one of its guests is suspected of being caused by the plague. After a number of intrigues and adventures, the protagonist and narrator, the innkeeper's boy, discovers that the guest who died is Fouquet, former minister of Louis XIV and keeper of a secret, magical music that cures the plague. At the same time another guest, Dulcibeni, is plotting against the pope. Dulcibeni intends to infect the pope with the plague because Innocent XI is responsible for selling his twelve-years-old daughter to a man involved in Odescalchi business affairs. Dulcibeni's goal is not only to obtain vengeance for his daughter (he ignores the fact that she ended up as a courtesan living in the same inn), but also to execute the pope for "betraying religion," because "he bartered the honour of the Church and of Christendom for profit" (Monaldi & Sorti 2009: 573).<sup>253</sup> Dulcibeni thus plans to kill the pope right before the decisive battle in Vienna so as to condemn all of Christianity to invasion by the heretic Turks. In the end, however, his plot fails.

Many passages in the novel take an overtly critical stance against the Church. For example, the priest in the novel's proleptic frame engages in an excursus about the practice of slavery in the Church and Innocent XI's particularly cruel treatment of his own slaves:

... the Blessed Innocent XI possessed Selim, a nine-year-old Moorish boy. [...] All the popes, down to and beyond the baroque age, made use of slaves [...]. But the contracts signed by Innocent XI in regard to slaves were by far the most cruel [...]. After years of inhuman labour, the galley slaves, by now incapable of working any longer, begged to be freed. To ransom them, Pope Innocent claimed the poor savings which, year after year, these wretched slaves had somehow scraped together. [...] Those without money were made to wait until death resolved the problem. Meanwhile, they were thrown in prison, where the doctors found themselves having to cope with poor bodies destroyed by overwork and hardship, horrible ulcers and unhealed wounds decades old.

(Monaldi & Sorti 2009: 606–607)<sup>254</sup>

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**253** "... tradimento della religione, esatto. Per i soldi ha svenduto l'onore della Chiesa e della Cristianità" (Monaldi & Sorti 2002: 561).

**254** "... il Beato Innocenzo XI possedeva Selim, un moretto di nove anni. [...] Tutti i Papi, fino all'età barocca e oltre, fecero ricorso a schiavi [...]. Ma i chirografi firmati da Innocenzo XI in materia di schiavi erano di gran lunga i più crudeli [...] Dopo anni di fatiche disumane, i forzati, ormai inabili al lavoro, chiedevano la libertà. Come riscatto papa Odescalchi pretendeva il povero gruzzoletto che anno dopo anno gli sventurati avevano umilmente accumulato. [...] Chi non aveva soldi veniva fatto attendere, finché la morte risolveva il problema. Nel frattempo veniva rinchiuso in carcere, dove i medici si vedevano consegnare poveri corpi distrutti dalle fatiche, dalle privazioni, da orribili ulcerazioni, da piaghe decennali" (Monaldi & Sorti 2002: 589–590).

After reading the private letters of Innocent XI, the priest remarks that “Every sentence, every line, every note is poisoned by an obsessive fixation with money. [...] The obsession with money consumed even his flesh” (Monaldi & Sorti 2009: 607–608).<sup>255</sup>

Another example is constituted by the book’s numerous polemical references to the Jesuits. Beginning with the first pages of the book, we find a negative portrait of a clergyman, Father Robleda, a Jesuit who throughout the novel is depicted as a physically repugnant, vicious, mean, and dishonest character: “... Padre Robleda [...], panic-stricken, began to groan and to pant, his neck all red and swollen. So piercing were his screams that they minded me of the squeals of swine, hanging head downwards before slaughter” (Monaldi & Sorti 2009: 2).<sup>256</sup> One of the negative “Jesuit” characteristics of Father Robleda is that he uses sacred law and doctrine to his own advantage. For example:

And he explained to me that the Jesuit fathers, having a special vocation for the sacrament of Confession, had always made a careful study of the doctrine of sin and pardon [...] The study of case histories was limitless, and was to be considered with the greatest prudence. [...] “And is stealing always a sin, Padre?” I insisted [...] “Anything but. Here, too, one must consider the inner and outer circumstances in which the act was accomplished. It is certainly not the same when a rich man robs a poor one as when a poor man robs a rich one. [...] The obligation to return stolen goods is, of course, important [...]. But the obligation may also be subject to limitations, or even be cancelled out. It is not necessary to return what has been stolen if that means impoverishing oneself: a nobleman may not deprive himself of servants, and a distinguished citizen may certainly not demean himself by working.” [...] But from this discourse it seemed almost as though white were black, truth the same as lies, and good and evil one and the same thing.

(Monaldi & Sorti 2009: 58–60)<sup>257</sup>

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**255** “Ogni frase, ogni riga, ogni annotazione è intossicata dal pensiero martellante dei soldi. [...] L’ossessione dei soldi gli consuma persino la carne” (Monaldi & Sorti 2002: 591–592).

**256** “... prese a roboare in preda al panico, con il respiro corto e il collo rosso e gonfio. Tanto che mi aveva ricordato gli urli che emettono i porci quando, appesi a testa in giù, vengono martati” (Monaldi & Sorti 2002: 20).

**257** “E mi spiegò che i padri gesuiti, avendo particolare vocazione per il sacramento della confessione, avevano da tempo studiato con gran cura la dottrina del peccato e del perdono [...] La casistica era sterminata, e andava considerata con grande cautela. [...] ‘E a rubare, padre, si fa sempre peccato?’ insistetti [...] ‘Tutt’altro. Anche qui devi considerare le circostanze interne ed esterne in cui l’atto è compiuto. È cosa certamente diversa se il ricco ruba al povero, o il povero al ricco [...] L’obbligo di restituzione è cosa importante, certo [...]. Ma l’obbligo può anche essere limitato, o venir meno. Non occorre restituire quanto è stato rubato, se ciò significa impoverirsi: un nobile non può privarsi della servitù, e un cittadino distinto non può certo abbassarsi a lavorare.’ [...] Ma da quei discorsi pareva quasi che il bianco si chiamasse nero, che la verità fosse uguale alla menzogna, che bene e male fossero tutt’uno” (Monaldi & Sorti 2002: 76).

According to Dulcibeni, who has Jansenist tendencies, the Jesuits use confession as a way to engage in espionage in favor of the pope. Dulcibeni asserts that espionage is actually the Jesuits' only real activity and the reason for the unique privileges that the pope has accorded them (Monaldi & Sorti 2009: 203). In the novel, however, there is also a second Jesuit mentioned, the brilliant scientist and erudite Father Kircher, an historical character.<sup>258</sup> In the book, Father Kircher is the one who discovers the secret music that heals the plague.

Another negative episode involving the Roman Curia is related to the practice of astrology, formally prohibited but actually promoted and practiced by high-ranking prelates. One of the inn guests cites the case of the Abate Morandi, an astrology expert who is well informed about the secrets of the Vatican. Morandi charts an erroneous horoscope predicting the date of the pope's death and is put on trial, but once there he begins to reveal matters that have the potential to ignite an enormous scandal. He is therefore poisoned: "Father Morandi was dead, and he alone had shouldered the tremendous burden of the vices of the entire pontifical court" (Monaldi & Sorti 2009: 248).<sup>259</sup> Galileo's recantation, Argoli's exile, Campanella's escape and Centini's pyre are all described as direct consequences of the Morandi affaire, a case that caused widespread hostility towards astrology sympathizers. The narrator expresses indignation about the Church's cruelty towards Morandi and the other intellectuals as well as about her indulgence towards the prelates involved in astrological practices.<sup>260</sup>

The general public is also aware of other discrepancies between ecclesiastical law and the actual practices of the clergy. For example, the narrator asserts that everyone in Rome knows that, although Catholic doctrine has always condemned the practice of castration to obtain eunuch singers, the practice was very widespread in Rome and many *castrati* secured prominent roles at the papal court.<sup>261</sup> Furthermore, "... in former centuries the pontiffs had found it nec-

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**258** See for instance Findlen (2004).

**259** "*Padre Morandi era morto, portando con sé, sulle sue sole spalle, il carico tremendo dei vizi dell'intera Corte pontificia*" (Monaldi & Sorti 2002: 258).

**260** "... il petto mi s'empì di giustificata collera: era giusto essere puniti, com'era accaduto all'abate di Santa Prassede, per un peccato a cui i porporati e gli stessi Pontefici sembravano indulgere? Se l'astrologia era solo un trastullo innocente, un delirio figlio dell'ozio, perché mai un tale accanimento contro Morandi e Campanella? Se, al contrario, era un peccato degno di grave castigo, com'era possibile che tanta parte della Corte di Roma v'avesse avuto a che fare?" (Monaldi & Sorti 2002: 262).

**261** "... la dottrina cristiana condannava sin dalle origini la castrazione. Ma il caso voleva che proprio a Roma i servigi dei castrati fossero altamente apprezzati e ricercati. Tutti sapevano che la Cappella Vaticana soleva utilizzare stabilmente i castrati [...]. Poco importava che in più occasioni il Sacro Soglio avesse minacciato la scomunica per chi praticava l'evirazione. E ancor

essary to forbid the clergy to live in the same neighbourhood as such women [prostitutes], yet these prohibitions had as often as not been ignored or circumvented” (Monaldi & Sorti 2009: 131–132).<sup>262</sup>

Another controversial matter is the collection of relics, encouraged by the Church and performed by the cagey “*corpisantari*,” dirty, ugly and devious men who traffic in disgusting human remains in the subterranean areas below the city. In the end, however, the *corpisantari* take on the positive role of helpers. During an excursion into Rome’s underground caverns, the narrator along with one of the main characters, the castrato singer and spy Atto Melani, meet a pair of relic hunters. Melani explains:

“To exercise a dirty trade like this [...] you need a couple of characters like you see before you. These tomb robbers are called *corpisantari*, after the sacred relics of saints for which they are always searching. If fortune does not smile upon them, they sell some rubbish to the next simpleton they meet. Have you not seen them, in front of your inn, selling Saint John’s shoulder-blade or the jaw of Saint Catherine, feathers from angels’ wings, splinters from the one True Cross borne by Our Lord? Well, the suppliers are our two friends, or their companions in the trade. When they are in luck, they find the tomb of some presumed martyr. Of course, those who reap the honours of translating the relics of Saint Etcetera to some church in Spain are the cardinals, or that old windbag Father Fabretti, whom Innocent X appointed, if I am not mistaken, *custos reliquiarum ac coemeteriorum*, the Custodian or Relics and Cemeteries”.

(Monaldi & Sorti 2009: 174)<sup>263</sup>

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meno importava che la femminea avvenenza dei castrati fosse di turbamento agli spettatori. Dalle chiacchiere e dagli scherzi dei miei coetanei avevo appreso che bastava percorrere poche decine di metri dalla locanda per trovare la bottega di un barbiere compiacente, sempre disponibile a effettuare l’orrenda mutilazione, purché la ricompensa fosse adeguata e il segreto venisse mantenuto” (Monaldi & Sorti 2002: 45).

**262** “... già nei secoli antichi i Pontefici avevano dovuto vietare al clero la convivenza promiscua con questa specie di donne [prostitute], e che però tali divieti erano stati spesso ignorati o aggirati” (Monaldi & Sorti 2002: 145–146).

**263** “Per fare un lavoraccio sporco come questo [...] ci vuole un paio di soggetti come quelli che hai davanti. Si chiamano *corpisantari*, dal nome delle sacre spoglie di cui sono sempre alla cerca. Se gli va male, vendono qualche porcheria al gonzo di turno. Hai mai visto vendere in strada [...] la clavicola di San Giovanni o la mascella di Santa Caterina, piume di ali di angelo, schegge di legno della vera e unica Croce portata da Nostro Signore? Ecco: i fornitori sono i due nostri amici, o i loro compagni d’arte. Quando gli va bene trovano la presunta tomba di qualche presunto Martire. A fare la bella figura di annunciare la traslazione delle spoglie di San Tizio in qualche chiesa spagnola ci vanno però i Cardinali, o quel vecchio trombone del padre Ferretti, che Innocenzo X ha nominato, se non erro *custos reliquiarum ac coemeteriorum*” (Monaldi & Sorti 2002: 186–187).



In this context of decay, public opinion, as reported by the narrator at the beginning of the story, describes Innocent XI as a political and military leader, a wise economist and administrator, and a reformer who is carrying Christianity towards more sober and ascetic mores. This passage reports precisely the physical and psychological portrait of the pope as he is perceived by the public at large:

To ward off the [Turkish] threat, many illustrious kings [...] had mobilized [...]. Almost all had been convinced to fly to the assistance of the besieged by the one true Bulwark of Christendom, Pope Innocent XI.

The Pontiff had, indeed, struggled long and strenuously to league together, gather and strengthen the armies of Christendom. And this he had done, not only by political means but also through precious financial support. [...]

The Holy Mission which the Pontiff was desperately seeking to accomplish followed upon innumerable pious works wrought during the seven years of his Pontificate.

[...] Benedetto Odescalchi, had above all set the example. Tall, very thin, broad of forehead, with an aquiline nose, severe of mien, his chin prominent yet noble, wearing goatee and mustachios, he had gained renown as an ascetic.

Shy and reserved in character, he [...] took care to avoid popular acclamations. It was noted that he had chosen for himself the smallest, barest and most inhospitable apartments that ever a Pontiff inhabited [...]. He was so frugal and parsimonious as only to wear the habits and vestments of his predecessors. From the time of his election, he always wore the same exceedingly threadbare white cassock, and changed it only when it was pointed out to him that too negligent a dress ill-befitted the Vicar of Christ on earth.

Likewise, he had acquired the highest merit in the administration of the Church's patrimony. He had restored order to the funds of the Apostolic Chamber which, since the bad times of Urban VIII and Innocent X, had suffered all manner of robbery and fraud. He had abolished nepotism [...].

Moreover, he had at last recalled his subjects to more austere and temperate usages. The theaters, places of disorderly entertainment, were closed. [...] Musical festivities and diversissements were reduced to a minimum. Women were forbidden to wear dresses too open and *décolleté* [...]. The Pontiff had even sent forth bands of police spies to inspect the laundry hanging from the windows and confiscate any over-audacious bodices or blouses.

(Monaldi & Sorti 2009: 6–8)<sup>264</sup>

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**264** “Per scongiurare la minaccia [dei turchi], s'erano mobilitati molti Principi illustri [...]. Tutti quanti però erano stati convinti a soccorrere gli assediati dall'unico, vero baluardo della Cristianità: Innocenzo XI. Da molto tempo, infatti, il Pontefice lottava strenuamente per coalizzare, radunare e rafforzare le milizie cristiane. E non solo con i mezzi della politica, ma anche con un prezioso sostegno finanziario [...]. La Santa Missione che il pontefice stava disperatamente cercando di portare a compimento si aggiungeva poi alle innumerevoli pie opere compiute in sette anni di Pontificato. [...] Benedetto Odescalchi, aveva innanzitutto dato l'esempio. Alto, magrissimo, la fronte larga, il naso aquilino, lo sguardo severo, il mento sporgente ma nobile sovrastato da pizzo e baffi, si era guadagnato la fama di asceta. Di carattere schivo e riservato, [...] evitava con cura le acclamazioni popolari. Era noto che avesse scelto per sé le stanze più piccole, inospitali e spoglie che mai Pontefice avesse abitato [...] Era così frugale e parsimonioso da uti-

However, despite the popular fame of pope Innocent XI, many characters in the novel have a different opinion of him. Atto Melani, for example, interprets the sobriety imposed by the pope as tantamount to the decay of Rome: “The grandeur and felicity of Rome ended with the ascension of this Pope, and they will return only with his death. [...] The churches are neglected, the palaces are crumbling, the streets are full of potholes and the aqueducts are close to collapse [...]; punishments are even harsher than in former times” (Monaldi & Sorti 2009: 25).<sup>265</sup> Robleda explains to the narrator that the pope is also a prince with a temporal domain that he must defend and promote by all means. According to the Jesuit, the only reason the pope has eradicated nepotism is to keep all the offices for himself. Innocent XI is greedy, stingy and coward but he is also perseverant. He scrupulously controls the business of his family, a family which used dishonest dealings to grow its wealth during the plague and still practices usury on a wide scale. The pope has prohibited the Jews from granting loans only to eliminate them as competition. He protects the heretic Jansenists only because of his hostility towards Louis XVI. Before the pontificate, he had obtained the charge of cardinal by corrupting the previous pope’s lover. As the narrator remarks, this portrait strongly contradicts the widespread image of Innocent XI (Monaldi & Sorti 2009: 158–163).<sup>266</sup>

Father Robleda is also the main actor in an episode showing the discrepancy between the figures of the historical popes and the expectations associated with the papal role. Robleda enlightens the narrator about the numerous prophecies – mostly heretic and apocalyptic – concerning the advent of a utopian “angelic pope” who will purify Rome and the whole of Christendom. The prophecies set

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lizzare solo abiti e paramenti dei suoi predecessori. Sin dall’elezione vesti sempre la stessa sottana bianca, benché oltremodo consunta, e la cambiò solo quando gli venne fatto osservare che al vicario di Cristo in Terra non conviene un abbigliamento troppo trascurato. Ma anche nell’amministrazione del patrimonio della Chiesa s’era acquistato meriti altissimi. Aveva risanato le casse della Camera Apostolica, che dai tempi ingiuriosi di Urbano VIII e Innocenzo X avevano subito ruberie d’ogni genere. Aveva abolito il nepotismo [...]. Inoltre, aveva finalmente richiamato i suoi sudditi a costumi più austeri e morigerati. I teatri, luogo di disordinato sollazzo, erano stati chiusi. [...] Feste e trattenimenti erano ridotti al minimo. Alle donne erano stati proibiti abiti troppo aperti e scollati alla francese. Il Pontefice aveva anzi spedito squadre di sbirri ispezionare la biancheria stesa alle finestre, per sequestrare corsetti e camicette troppo audaci” (Monaldi & Sorti 2002: 24–25).

**265** “La grandezza e la felicità di Roma sono finite con l’ascesa di questo Papa, e torneranno solo alla sua morte. [...] Le chiese sono trascurate, i palazzi cadenti, le strade dissestate e gli acquedotti non tengono. [...] le punizioni sono ancora più dure che in passato” (Monaldi & Sorti 2002: 42).

**266** Monaldi & Sorti (2002: 171–176).

out the figure of an angelic pope who will act as a true shepherd and example of morality, unifying the whole of humanity in the name of the true faith, in opposition to the actual corruption of the papacy. This ideal pope will be able to explain all the mysteries and to bring peace by placing himself above kings, all of whom will come to adore him.<sup>267</sup> In semiotic terms, therefore, we can say that the “pope” is an ideal role that is never occupied by any concrete agent. All human incarnations of the “pope” cannot but fail to match the perfection of this ideal figure. At the same time, the text alludes to the fact that the creation of the utopian role of the pope has been developed over the centuries in contrast to the actual popes, characterized as they were by corruption and immorality. Perceiving the historical popes as extremely negative figures, prophets and theologians have felt the need to provide a contrasting and extremely positive model, with the intention of bringing reality towards their ideal.

In the end, the narrator confesses that the events he has witnessed and participated in have changed his relationship with religion forever. Although his faith endures, there is an irreparable breach between him and the Church:

I am no longer the innocent boy of those days [...]. The things I then saw and heard, and which I shall never be able to reveal to anyone, have marked my life forever. The Faith has not abandoned me; yet, inevitably, the sentiments of devotion and fidelity which every good Christian should foster for his Church have been forever corrupted.

(Monaldi & Sorti 2009: 578)<sup>268</sup>

These words are very similar to the ones written by Silone (see above). They express a religiosity accepting Catholic faith, but taking a distance from the Church, which is perceived as an institution incompatible with the theological

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**267** “Ma Robleda era solo all’inizio, giacché, sosteneva egli, non poteva non essere citata la seconda misteriosa, insondabile profezia di Carlo Magno, il quale nel Giorno del Giudizio compirà un glorioso viaggio in Terra Santa e colà verrà incoronato appunto dal Papa angelico, mentre le sante visioni di Santa Brigida davano per certa la giusta devastazione di Roma ad opera della stirpe germanica. Ma tali fantasie di distruzione e purificazione della sede del Papato, corrotta da avidità e lussuria, erano pallidi artifici dell’immaginazione se paragonati alla Apocalipsis nova del Beato Amedeo, in cui era finalmente dato sapere che il Signore avrebbe eletto un Pastore per il suo gregge che avrebbe spiegato tutti i Misteri, e avrebbe guidato i desideri di tutti, e i Re sarebbero giunti da tutto il mondo per adorarlo, e la Chiesa d’Oriente e quella d’Occidente sarebbero divenute una sola, e gl’infedeli sarebbero stati riguadagnati all’unica vere Fede e si sarebbe finalmente avuto *unum ovile et unus Pastor*” (Monaldi & Sorti 2002: 202).

**268** “Non sono più il ragazzo innocente di quei giorni [...]. Ciò che allora ho visto e sentito, e che mai potrò rivelare ad alcuno, ha segnato per sempre la mia vita. La Fede non mi ha abbandonato; inevitabilmente, tuttavia, il sentimento di devozione e fedeltà che ogni buon cristiano dovrebbe nutrire per la sua Chiesa si è per sempre corrotto” (Monaldi & Sorti 2002: 566).

and moral principles she is supposedly based on. In both cases there is a sense of disillusion, of loss of innocence and ideals.

The figure of the pope is effective in representing the deceitful image the Church presents to the faithful. This clearly emerges in the priest's final remarks, made in 2040:

The Blessed Innocent was an accomplice of Protestant heretics, thus gravely damaging Catholic interests: he allowed England to be invaded by William of Orange for the sole purpose of obtaining repayment of a monetary debt.

Pope Innocent was also a financier of the slave trade, nor did he renounce the personal possession of slaves; and he treated those who were old and dying with sanguinary cruelty.

He was a niggardly and avaricious man, incapable of raising himself above material concerns, obsessed by the thought of lucre.

The figure and the work of Innocent XI were thus unjustly celebrated and elevated, using false, devious and partial arguments. Evidence was concealed [...].

Thus the lie triumphed in the end. The financier of heretics was pronounced the Saviour of Christendom. The greedy merchant became a wise administrator; the stubborn politician, a capable statesman. Revenge was dressed up as pride, the miser was called frugal, the ignorant man became simple and plain-living, evil stole the clothing of goodness; and goodness, abandoned by all, became earth, dust, smoke, shadow, nothing.

(Monaldi & Sorti 2009: 608–609)<sup>269</sup>

In contrast with the false image presented in historical accounts and the Church's narratives, on several occasions the novel offers an alternative truth: "what false papers proclaim is not always false" (Monaldi & Sorti 2009: 633).<sup>270</sup> According to the perspective proposed by the two authors, apocryphal texts such as letters but also fictional texts or counterfeit historical documents are of course "false," but at the same time they contain a truth that the dominant system seeks to conceal.

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**269** "Il Beato Innocenzo fu complice degli eretici protestanti a danno dei cattolici; lasciò che l'Inghilterra venisse invasa da Guglielmo d'Orange, e solo per farsi restituire un debito in denaro. Papa Odescalchi fu poi finanziatore del traffico negriero, non rinunciò a possedere schiavi personalmente e trattò con crudeltà sanguinaria i vecchi e i moribondi. Fu un uomo gretto e avaro, incapace di elevarsi al di sopra delle preoccupazioni materiali, ossessionato dal pensiero del lucro e del denaro. La figura e l'opera di Innocenzo XI furono quindi celebrate ed elevate ingiustamente, con argomentazioni false, fuorvianti o parziali. Vennero occultate le prove [...]. Alla fine trionfò dunque la menzogna, e il finanziatore degli eretici fu detto Salvatore della Cristianità. Il commerciante avido divenne un saggio amministratore, e il politico testardo uno statista coerente; la vendetta si travestì da orgoglio, l'avidò venne chiamato frugale, l'ignorante si trasformò in uomo semplice, il male prese i panni del bene, e quest'ultimo, abbandonato da tutti, si fece terra, polvere, fumo, ombra, nulla" (Monaldi & Sorti 2002: 591–592).

**270** "non sempre i falsi dicono il falso" (Monaldi & Sorti 2002: 613).

As a consequence, “false” texts contain a “secret” truth while “true” or authentic texts are lies. This observation seems to refer implicitly to the novel itself, a text of a fictional character (by virtue of its combination of historical and non-historical characters, for instance, and the narrative expedient of the “report” by the innkeeper’s boy), in order to expose a scandalous truth that has long been kept secret: “For too long, the truth was made to wait out in the cold. Once the official version had crystallised, historians went to unprecedented lengths to stick only to what had already been said” (Monaldi & Sorti 2009: 632<sup>271</sup>). The final sentence of the novel seems to confirm its intention to constitute truthful testimony and enact a concrete “political” act by correcting the public image of pope Innocent XI and preventing his canonization:

In the bright wake of the example of John Paul II, who forty years ago did not hesitate to recognize and apologize for the great wrongs committed by the Church in her history, it would represent a step back not only to hide, but also to reward the deviations and the too many shadows scattered on pope Benedetto Odescalchi’s earthly deeds. And maybe the time has come to settle also this account.<sup>272</sup>

In conclusion, in *Imprimatur*, Innocent XI is described as being moved by purely immanent and material values. The pope’s devotion to contingent interests ends up negating transcendent and spiritual values. As a consequence, transcendent values become apparent, false values, used to deceive the faithful and to secure and increase wealth and power. This causes a separation in the mind of the faithful between the pope and his Church, on one side, and faith and the sacred, on the other. In turn, this state of affairs disrupts the Church and leads her to perdition. The Church is therefore called on to apologize for her mistakes and strike out in a new direction, but no positive model for this new path or the role of the pope (apart from the isolated reference to the luminous example of John Paul II and the idealized figure of the angel-pope) is actually offered in the text.

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**271** “Per troppo tempo la verità ha dovuto attendere. Una volta cristallizzatasi la versione ufficiale, gli storici furono zelanti come non mai nel ripetere il già detto” (Monaldi & Sorti 2002: 612).

**272** This passage is not present in the English version. “Nel solco luminoso dell’esempio di Giovanni Paolo II, che quarant’anni or sono non esitò a riconoscere e a chiedere perdono per i gravi errori commessi dalla Chiesa nella sua storia, sarebbe un passo indietro non solo occultare, ma addirittura premiare le deviazioni e le troppe ombre che hanno costellato l’opera terrena di papa Benedetto Odescalchi. E’ forse giunta l’ora di saldare anche questo conto” (Monaldi & Sorti 2002: 638).

### 3.4 Conclusion

In the narratives analyzed herein, the thematic role of the pope corresponds to different actantial roles. Drawing on Greimas's theory,<sup>273</sup> it is evident that all the popes are "senders" in that they are the supreme leaders of an institution and the models and promoters of a certain system of values and way of life: as the representatives of Christ on earth, they play a crucial role in proposing Christianity as an "object of value" to the believers. Secondly, the popes also act as "subjects" who seek to obtain particular "objects of value;" for example, Monaldi and Sorti's Innocent XI pursues money while Silone's Celestine V pursues a purely spiritual good. Thirdly, some popes act as "opponents;" for instance, Boniface VIII is an opponent in relation to Celestine V and the *Fratricelli*. Significantly, however, no pope in our sample acts as a "helper:" none of the texts analyzed here depict the pope taking positive action in favor of other subjects.

As mentioned above, the pope can be considered as a thematic role. However, it is possible to identify two subcategories in this role: the ascetic and the prince. The first is focused on immaterial, spiritual, and transcendent values, while the second is focused on immanent and earthly concerns. If we connect the thematic and figurative levels, we might argue that the thematic role of the ascetic pope is represented by the characters of Celestine V and John XXIV while the thematic role of the prince pope is represented by Boniface VIII and Innocent XI. If we analyze the thymic component, that is, the attribution of a positive (euphoric) or negative (dysphoric) emotional valence (Greimas & Courtès 1979), the elements can be outlined as follows:

<i>Thematic level</i>	<b>Ascetic pope</b>		<b>Prince pope</b>	
<i>Figurative level</i>	Celestine V	John XXIV	Boniface VIII	Innocent XI
<i>Thymic valence</i>	Euphoric	Dysphoric	Dysphoric	Dysphoric

The prince pope's object of value is an earthly one, such as power (Boniface VIII) or money (Innocent XI). The dysphoric character associated with this role is due to the fact that such material interests are perceived as conflicting with the spiritual and humanitarian values characterising Christianity as a religion. The prince pope is therefore invariably associated with extremely negative descriptions of a corrupt, decadent, and blasphemous Church.

<sup>273</sup> See the introduction to this chapter.

The ascetic pope seems to represent a positive model in the character of Celestine V, but only at first glance. Indeed, as mentioned above, Celestine's story proves that ascetic life is ultimately incompatible with the role of the pope as leader of an earthly institution. In Morselli, John XXIV represents an ascetic pope who, like Celestine V, has come from a monastic background and who frees the Church from earthly interests and cares. He constitutes a negative model, however: he is an absent pope and his retiring from the world is tantamount to abandoning the Church to fragmentation and the loss of her doctrinal pillars.

Therefore, the pope's adoption of earthly values inevitably leads him and his Church to corruption, while the adoption of ascetic values is ultimately incompatible with the role of the pope itself; an ascetic pope inevitably leaves the Church to wallow like a body without a head, delivering her to dispersal and death. Between these two extremes, no compromise seems possible. The only character in our sample that represents a harmonious fusion of the two papal roles, the ascetic and the prince, is the "angelic pope" of the prophecies mentioned by Monaldi and Sorti. This ideal pope is both a spiritual and a political leader. However, this utopian character has an explicitly fantastic status that only serves to even more forcefully highlight the contrast between this ideal and reality, that is, the figures of real-life popes.

This dichotomy in the figure of the pope is evident not only in the sample analyzed herein; it can also be seen in other novels. For example, in Saviane's *Il papa* ("The pope," 1963), a clerk climbs the ladder of an ecclesiastical career while trying to preserve the righteousness of his ideas, but it is not clear if he actually manages to become a pontiff or if he instead dies young, thus leaving this role of righteous pope to exist as nothing but unrealized utopia. Another example, Chiusano (1979), presents a fierce polemic about the papacy and the illegitimacy of its earthly power.<sup>274</sup>

Finally, we can consider the figure of the pope as it is presented in literature in connection with the cultural and historical circumstances in which the texts were composed. Such an operation is justified, even facilitated, by the numerous references to the present-day contained in all the works considered in this chapter. Indeed, events and characters of the past and of the future are often evoked in our corpus to offer a more or less explicit comment on today's world and the role religion plays in it. Some of the main issues addressed in the texts include:

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<sup>274</sup> Another novel that focuses not specifically on the figure of the pope but on the Church as an institution involved in international intrigues is Giovannetti (1978), in which a Russian spy pretends to be a prelate and finally converts to Catholicism.

- The heavy historical legacy burdening the Church, that is, a past stained by injustice, avidity, immoral leaders, and the associated difficulty of overcoming this negative image.
- The idea that appearances and reality do not match: this corpus presents the recurring theme that the spiritual and moral values proposed by the Church are but a façade concealing its real, underlying material interests. If we wanted to trace the cultural genealogy of this set of ideas, we might say that it bears a resemblance to theories of ideology as a mask developed by Marxist intellectuals. Silone uses for instance the term “superstructure,” while in the case of Monaldi and Sorti this kind of thinking is taken into the realm of “conspiracy theory”.<sup>275</sup>
- The subsequent distinction between the principles of religious faith, which are often accepted, and the Church as an institution, which is often condemned and rejected.

In this context, contradictory drives prevail. On the one hand, these texts reveal a deep need for change and reform, for overcoming outdated traditions. On the other hand, there is a pervading fear that change and opening will lead to a form of loss (of culture, tradition, values, moral models, etc.) that cannot be compensated for and will instead set the stage for chaos. This shared feeling of mixed desire for and fear of change is echoed in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and, even more so, in the debates surrounding it. The literary representation of the figure of the pope mirrors this contradictory situation. The role of the pope is connected to both a powerful need for authority and religious and moral direction, and intolerance of the pope’s power. It is also connected to impatience with or hostility towards an outmoded model of sovereignty and discomfort with the Church’s steps towards modernity that are perceived as awkward and incongruous.

In conclusion, the figure of the pope, suspended between heaven and earth, is characterized by a dichotomy for which no possible reconciliation has yet been found, at least in literature. However, paradoxically enough, the very conflictual and problematic nature of the thematic role of the pope is a sign of its importance. Indeed, as these texts show, high expectations are associated with the pope, and high achievements are expected of him. The human actors taking on such a role are thus obliged to deal with an ideal that they are not likely to be able to embody fully. Nevertheless, the very perfection inherent in such a utopian role reveals a deep, unfulfilled human need for spiritual guidance.

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<sup>275</sup> See Leone (2016) for a discussion of the characteristics of conspiracy theories and their role in contemporary culture, as well as a semiotic analysis of an extensive sample of such theories.



## 4 Atypical Models of Sanctity

One can detect in Western culture in the twentieth century – a culture that has been famously described as seared by the acids of modernity – a longing for saintliness, albeit detectable in unexpected places.  
(Cunningham 2005: 108)

This chapter deals with the representation of sanctity in contemporary Italian fictional literature. According to Leone, “... saints are among the most formidable communication media of Catholicism. Through saints, the Church proposes some narrative models of spiritual perfection. By embracing such models, believers are able to conform to certain religious values” (Leone 2010: 12). According to this perspective, hagiographic literature can be described as a narrative blueprint providing a path towards religious perfection or, in Grégoire’s words, the vehicle of “a doctrine which is philosophy and theology, ethics and mysticism, sociality and personalism”.<sup>276</sup> Hagiographic literature can therefore be interpreted as vulgarized theology:

... Hagiographic literature vulgarizes the conclusions of learned theology in some way. It is popular literature that performs a substitute and complementary didactic function. Hagiographic writing [...] adapts to the elementary level of each audience; a type of narrative that has become intelligible inculcates the most difficult elements of faith and religion. Hagiographers are thus a kind of “popular theologians”! This methodology was decisive for transmitting the doctrine, for preserving its orthodoxy and for its integrity.<sup>277</sup>

Saints therefore function as signs, the decoding of which offers a better understanding of human existence:

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<sup>276</sup> “una dottrina che è filosofia e teologia, etica e mistica, socialità e personalismo” (Grégoire 1987: 3).

<sup>277</sup> “l’agiografia, in qualche modo, volgarizza le conclusioni della teologia dotta. E’ una *letteratura popolare*, che svolge una funzione didattica sostitutiva e complementare. Il racconto agiografico [...] si adegua al livello elementare di ogni pubblico; un racconto diventato intelligibile inculca gli elementi più difficili della fede e della religione. Così l’agiografo è quasi un ‘teologo popolare’! Questa metodologia è stata decisiva per la trasmissione della dottrina, per la preservazione della sua ortodossia e per la sua integrità” (Grégoire 1987: 19).

Hagiographic documents historicize, on a literary level, an essential aspect of the Christian vision of history: an intelligence of human action and development, on the basis of the semiotic reading of an existence, that is, the life of the saint.<sup>278</sup>

The representation of the lives of saints in contemporary fictional literature is undoubtedly connected to this traditional Catholic idea of saints as narrative and symbolic *exempla* that ought to serve as models for the faithful to follow in shaping their lives. It is also characterized by an inevitable reference to the well-codified genre of hagiography. Nevertheless, significant differences can be detected between traditional hagiography and the texts that I analyze herein.<sup>279</sup>

As Cunningham points out (see epigraph), 20<sup>th</sup> century novels are an “unexpected place” in which to find representations of sanctity. The combination of hagiography and modern fictional literature therefore constitutes a new genre that confers new characteristics on the representation of the saints. Indeed, “Hagiographic literature is a genre traditionally devoted to the glorification of the saints” (Delehay 1912: III). In the novels under consideration, in contrast, the representation of saints is problematic, sometimes polemical, and, in every case, quite distinct from non-critical and peaceful devotion. Moreover, the analysis presented here shows that many contemporary novels emphasize the representation of saints as outsiders, belonging to a separate state of being: a meta-level is often added to the account of the life of saints, creating the effect of what in semiotics is called a *débrayage* (detachment). In this chapter, I analyze the characteristics and consequences of this “*débrayée*” representation.

Indeed, sanctity can be studied as an “enunciated discourse” (Leone 2010: 16). According to the semiotic theory of enunciation, a text becomes autonomous from the act of discourse by which it was produced. The text does, however, bear internal traces of the discursive act. In particular, the categories of person, time, and space are constituted in the text through a process of detachment (*débrayage*) from the instance of discourse. After the initial *débrayage* separating the enunciation from its textual instances, each text involves a dynamic system of *débrayages* and *embrayages*, that is, of the simulation of distance from and proximity to the discursive act.

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278 “Il documento agiografico storicizza, a livello letterario, un aspetto essenziale della visione cristiana della Storia: una intelligenza dell’agire e del divenire dell’uomo, sulla base di una lettura semiotica di una esistenza, quella, appunto, del santo” (Grégoire 1987: 217).

279 For an overview of sanctity as a literary theme in international literature, see Forner (2007), who also observes that modern literature abounds with “non-canonical” figures of saints. For example, in Wilde (1896) a criminal is compared to Jesus Christ, and in Roth (1939) an alcoholic tries to pay his debt of 220 Francs to Saint Teresa of Lisieux.

While *débrayage* consists in the creation of simulacra (actors, space, and time) independent from the discursive act, *embrayage* simulates proximity with the discursive act (for instance, through the use of the first and second person, the present tense, and deixis). In contrast to *débrayage*, *embrayage* gives the receiver an impression of reality, of emotive and cognitive proximity. Literary texts abound with internal instances of *débrayage*. For example, one of the interlocutors of a dialogue can develop a secondary tale and set up a second-level dialogue inside the main one. Each internal *débrayage* therefore produces an effect of “referentialization,” a second-level discourse inside the story giving the impression that the story itself constitutes the “real” situation of enunciation.<sup>280</sup>

In the novels analyzed here, sanctity is evoked but at the same time it is described by taking a step back from it. Sanctity and saints are often represented as exterior models, something unfamiliar, as labels that conceal something else, and as rigid and artificial forms imposed onto real life (see chapter 1), while life is instead depicted as dominated by emotions, passions, flesh, blood, tears, and love. Often, observant actants are unable to interpret the thoughts and deeds of the saints, as they have no choice but to observe and describe such thoughts and deed from outside, as if they were opaque surfaces concealing an incomprehensible mystery.

In this chapter, I analyze a sample of five novels selected for the interesting figures of saints they present: the disquieting skeleton-saint in Testori’s *La cattedrale*, (“The cathedral,” 1974); Saint Ursula and the tormented choral account of her legend in *La corona di Undecimilla* (“Undecimilla’s crown,” 1986) by Minnie Alzona; “the sinner saint” Aronne in *Il santo peccatore* by Raffaele Crovi (“The sinner saint,” 1995); and, finally, I conclude with a short excursus into the figure of the blind child Eustace represented in both *Viaggio angelico* (“Angelic travel,” 1977) by Minnie Alzona and *Il ballo della sposa* (“The bride’s dance,” 2012, first published in 1985) by Luigi Santucci.

## 4.1 The skeleton saint: *La cattedrale*

There is a striking structure in Testori’s novel composed of two pairs of actors taking on the same actantial role:<sup>281</sup> the first couple is composed of two actors with an actantial role that we could define as “the artist,” represented by the medieval goldsmith and the contemporary writer; the second couple is composed of

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<sup>280</sup> Also see Volli (2006: 118–119); Greimas & Courtès (1979).

<sup>281</sup> Regarding the semiotic notions of actant and actor, see chapter 3.

two actors in the actantial role of “the saint,” represented by Carlo di Borromeo, alias “the Saint,” and the contemporary bishop. In each couple, one of the actants lives in the past and the other in the present (that is, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). The correspondent figures (the two saints and the two artists) are superimposed in such a way that it is sometimes difficult to determine to whom a passage refers. As in the case of Crovi (see below), we can speak of characters with a double, divided self.

Both the saint and the bishop are represented as physically exhausted. For example:

Emaciated and hollow in the face, he resembled the very image of his longed-for and invoked penance, the pulsating veins on his forehead like strings of steel...<sup>282</sup>

Indeed, they seek out the mortification of the flesh (“He sought to suffer. Suffer more consciously, suffer through his flesh as well”<sup>283</sup>). As a matter of fact, the body is identified with temptation, corruption, and bestiality, as the bishop thinks when observing the excavations taking place in the cathedral’s foundations:

“Vice, sin...” he thought. And then, deep down, in the centre, the obscene and wicked abyss of the excavations, almost the symbol of the void in which everything and everyone would have ended up; precisely because of vice, sin, greed, pride, the flesh, that same flesh that tempted and moved him as well, like every other living being; be it beast or man; and that perhaps, in some odd secret ways, moved even plants, even the most incorruptible and hardest of minerals, even the most crystalline and gleaming of stones.<sup>284</sup>

However, the bishop believes that his own times are more mediocre, and that his own sanctity is less valuable than that of the saint who was the spiritual leader of the community gathered around the same cathedral, centuries before. The bishop is plagued by doubts about God, deeming the deity to be silent and distant:

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**282** “Emaciato, scavato, ridotto a essere l’immagine stessa della penitenza desiderata e invocata, le vene pulsanti sulla fronte come corde d’acciaio” (Testori 1974: 29).

**283** “Voleva soffrire. Soffrire più consapevolmente. Soffrire anche lui dentro la carne...” (Testori 1974: 14).

**284** “‘Il vizio, il peccato...’ pensò. E poi, giù, nel centro, la voragine oscena e scellerata degli scavi, quasi fosse il simbolo del ventre in cui tutto e tutti sarebbero finiti; proprio per il vizio, per il peccato, per l’avidità, per la superbia, la carne, quella carne che tentava e trascinava anche lui, come ogni altro vivente; bestia o uomo che fosse; e che forse trascinava, chissà in che strani segreti modi, anche le piante, anche i minerali più incorruttibili e duri, anche le pietre più cristalline e lucenti” (Testori 1974: 63).

The Voice that had thundered down at Sinai, that had shouted from the woods of the cross, was silent, mute, like a schist: or like a tomb stone. Was he thus able to answer instead of that terrible, deaf and crucified Pythia?

Was he able to respond, right then and there, on that summer evening, with an answer that would delude his children with any hope, like the answer the Saint had been able to give wounded and suffering people, like a praying mantis who, going out in the sacred processions, going on to the pulpits, praying, [...] had been able to swallow, extinguish and at the same time exalt [...] that life that, over the centuries, had burst free and senseless and that, now, was digging and destroying every ancient institution, every ancient foundation and every ancient truth around him, to replace the certainty and peace accumulated on earth with his meaningless and hopeless fever?<sup>285</sup>

Doubts had been attacking and crashing down on his soul for years. The exercise of sacred power was not enough; age and experience were not enough; knowledge of the past and present was not enough, nor was certainty of the future and even of eternity.<sup>286</sup>

In particular, the bishop doubts that “the meaning of the event for which, as a boy, he had devoted his life to faith” that is, the story narrated in the Gospel, “still had to do with earth”.<sup>287</sup> The bishop questions the applicability of the Gospel to his own times, and he is obsessed by the suspicion of its “laughable a-historicity” [risibile astoricità] (1974: 27). He does not realize that this doubt, namely the reduction of an eternal truth to historical contingency, is “the contradiction itself, indeed, the killing and murder of the reason he thought he had devoted himself to faith, to the priesthood”.<sup>288</sup>

The role of the Saint is that of imposing form on the chaotic, anarchic and shapeless energy of life, an energy that has tended to prevail over the course of

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**285** “La Voce che aveva tuonato giù dal Sinai, quella che aveva urlato dai legni della croce, taceva, muta, come uno schisto: o come la pietra d’una tomba. Poteva, dunque, rispondere lui al posto di quella Pizia terribile, sorda e crocifissa? Poteva dare lui, adesso, lì, in quella sera d’estate, una risposta, che illudesse d’una qualunque speranza i suoi figli, come il Santo l’aveva saputa dare ai piagati e ai ploranti, mantide che uscendo per le sacre processioni, salendo sui pulpiti, pregando, [...] aveva saputo ingoiare, spegnere e insieme esaltare [...] quella vita che poi, nei secoli, era esplosa libera e insensata e che, adesso, andava scavando e distruggendo lì, attorno a lui, ogni antica istituzione, ogni antico fondamento e ogni antica verità per sostituire alla certezza e alla pace accumulatasi nella terra, la sua febrilità senza significato e senza scampo?” (Testori 1974: 15).

**286** “I dubbi assalivano e schiantavano da anni la sua anima. Non bastava l’esercizio del sacro potere; non bastava l’età, l’esperienza; non bastava la conoscenza del passato e del presente, né la certezza del futuro e persino dell’eterno” (Testori 1974: 26).

**287** “il significato della vicenda per cui, ragazzo, aveva votato la sua vita alla fede [...] riguardava ancora la terra” (Testori 1974: 25).

**288** “la contraddizione stessa, anzi, l’uccisione e l’assassinio di ciò per cui pensava d’essersi votato alla fede, al sacerdozio...” (Testori 1974: 27).

the centuries. The people, repeatedly described as a mass of miserable and decaying human bodies, used to invoke the saint as an authority which provides a framework, a structure, a ritual to face calamities such as the plague or drought. The bishop believes that the people of his own time no longer feel this need, which means that his faith and his religion are obsolete and destined to die out:

It was not him that they stretched their hands, eyes, arms, crushed fingers, broken bones and cracked tibias [...].

They called for the Saint. They called for the great princely purple who, following his coat of arms, had prostrated and humiliated himself. What he thought had reached his ear once again that evening was only the last echo of that cry; the last perceptible echo before his faith had to close the shutters, as if it were a workshop to be shut down and sold off or a dynasty to be buried and erased.

He felt horrified. He tried to make the sign of the cross.

Carlo; Federico; and who knows how many before and after them had been able to answer because they had been called for, invoked, requested. But what answer could he have gotten [...] if no one felt the need to ask him a query or a question anymore?

Everything now was a single, horrible, silent vanification, an endless non-questioning. Even the initial verse of the Great Book, which, useless and solemn, he placed on the table with the others...<sup>289</sup>

Indeed, the bishop thinks that mankind is heading towards a form of autonomy that completely denies transcendence, immersed instead in a purely earthly and bodily reality. This changes the role of the saint in the context of society and strips it of its mythical aura:

The time in which he happened to live was no longer the time for faith; nor was it for hope. Perhaps there was still some room for charity. Eventually man, on his unstoppable path towards autonomy, would also have filled that one. So there would be no more room except for the certainty of exhausting our whole lives down here, in the desolation of the earth. [...]

The worries, the painful, martyring asceticism, the raptures and ecstasies of his predecessors must have been quite different! Borromeo's must have been quite different, [...] es-

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**289** “Non era a lui che tendevano le mani, gli occhi, le braccia, le dita frante, le ossa spezzate, le tibie spappolate [...]. Chiamavano il Santo. Chiamavano la gran porpora principesca che, seguendo il suo stemma, s’era prostrata e umiliata. [...] Ciò che quella sera gli era parso giungere ancora al suo orecchio era soltanto l’ultima eco di quel grido; l’ultima percepibile, prima che la sua fede dovesse abbassare la saracinesca, come se si trattasse d’una bottega da chiudere e liquidare o d’una dinastia da seppellire e cancellare. Inorridì. Cercò di farsi un segno di croce. Carlo; Federico; e chissà quanti prima e dopo di loro, avevan potuto rispondere, perché erano stati richiesti, invocati, domandati. Ma lui, che risposta avrebbe potuto estrarre [...] se nessuno sentiva più di dover porgli un’interrogazione e una domanda? Tutto adesso era un’unica, orribile, muta vanificazione, una interminabile non-domanda. Persino il versetto con cui s’apriva il Gran Libro che, inutile e solenne, posava insieme agli altri sul tavolo...” (Testori 1974: 28).

pecially during his wakes, to which he used to dedicate himself in that same room, with an equal amount of heat, after the long days spent in the streets and lazarettos among the sick, orphans, dying; in the reek and stench of rotting bodies [...]

Of his superb crawling through the ranks of the suffering; of his showing and offering the Host [...]; of his invoking charity and faith; of his imposing chastity and penance, he had nothing left in his soul and body but discomfort and repulsion [...]. As if the neurasthenia he had to hold back in order to impose on himself and others the truth and holiness of that drastic and absolute identification between hope and dominance, between strength and pity, between religion and power, had formed a clot that was only now able to melt, emitting, in the guise of a bubo, a jet of anger.<sup>290</sup>

This passage conveys the idea that the structure of meaning imposed by faith and power upon human misery and chaos is artificial and the priest/saint has to exert a great deal of effort to maintain it by acting out his role.

While the bishop's body is usually described as fat, performing painful and difficult movements, full of bodily liquids and covered in sweat during sleepless nights, the saint is described as a dry skeleton lying in the crypt of the cathedral, immobilized in his pontifical ornaments and crystal sarcophagus. The saint has lived the "mad life of the marginalized and abnormal," and has now reached a "blind, holy and horrible peace".<sup>291</sup> Nevertheless, he is still animated by thoughts and strong human passions:

In the silence of the underground crypt that he had chosen of his own will as a sepulchre, encircled by the rock crystal of the urn, dressed in papal robes woven with silver and gold, covered and almost distressed by the weight of crosses and jewels, as if he were a pharaoh who, to increase the certainty of his own eternity, had not only forbidden that the path

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**290** "Non erano più, quelli in cui gli accadeva di vivere, tempi per la fede; e neppure, per la speranza. Forse restava ancora qualche spazio per la carità. Poi l'uomo, nel suo inarrestabile cammino verso l'autonomia, avrebbe colmato anche quello. E così non ci sarebbe stato più posto che per la certezza d'esaurire tutta l'esistenza quaggiù, nella desolazione della terra. [...] Ben altre dovevano esser state le preoccupazioni, le dolorose, martirizzanti asceti, i rapimenti e le estasi dei suoi predecessori! Ben altre quelle del Borromeo, [...] soprattutto durante le veglie, cui era stato solito darsi, in quella medesima stanza, in un'uguale calura, dopo le lunghe giornate trascorse per le strade e i lazaretti, tra i malati, gli orfani, gli agonizzanti; nel puzzo e nel fetore dei corpi che marcivano [...] Del suo superbo strisciare tra le file dei piangenti; del suo mostrare e offrire l'Ostia [...]; del suo invocare carità e fede; del suo imporre castità e penitenza, non gli restava dentro l'anima ed il corpo che il fastidio e la repulsione [...]. Come se la nevrosi che aveva dovuto trattenere per imporre a sé e agli altri la verità e la santità di quella drastica e assoluta identificazione tra speranza e dominio, tra forza e pietà, tra religione e potere, avesse formato un grumo che solo adesso poteva sciogliersi, emettendo da sé, come un borbuto, uno schizzo di rabbia" (Testori 1974: 42–43).

**291** "folle esistenza d'emarginato e d'anomalo [...] cieca, santa e orribile pace" (Testori 1974: 60).

leading to his tomb be walled over but wished to keep wide open and point it out to everyone so that it would become the example, the immovable, chilling example of what God asked and wanted from man, the Saint felt a stab passing through his skeleton like the tip of a knife.<sup>292</sup>

What disturbs the Saint is the perception of two human beings who are about to perform an action he sees as going beyond sin or blasphemy, an action that represents the very negation of the “Eternal and total life, of the eternal and total Being, understood as the will and delivery of the Unmovable and Invincible”.<sup>293</sup> This blasphemous action reverses the truth in the name of which the saint sacrificed his life and gave his body for embalming.

The embalming of his body, his being weighed down with symbolic jewels and constricted within the sarcophagus all signify the ordered form that the saint has been struggling to impose upon reality. This form is menaced by the blasphemous act, however, and so is the meaning of his life and sacrifice. The Saint is a monstrous character animated by negative emotions such as anger. His thoughts reveal that form is more important to him than the Christian values he cites when preaching to the people. In the end, it is more a problem of power and structure and of personal authority than a problem of Catholic virtues:

The saint jolted in indignation and anger. His skeleton was all tensed up, almost as if he was witnessing a foul act or injustice that the Infallible and Just was about to commit against him; indeed, against the Truth for which and of which he had become proof, flesh, embalming and form.

There it was: his urn, the clothes spun of pure batiste and gold, the stones, the rubies, the emeralds he was covered in, the marvellous silver bas-reliefs surrounding him, the brocades lining his crypt, all suddenly proved unable to emit a reverberation that might fight against the other one, that of the stranger who went down...<sup>294</sup>

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**292** “Nel silenzio dello scurolo, che di sua volontà s’era scelto come sepolcro, immerso dentro il cristallo di rocca dell’urna, vestito degli abiti pontificali tramati d’argento e d’oro, coperto e come affranto dal peso delle croci e dei gioielli, quasi fosse un faraone che, per un di più di certezza verso la propria eternità non solo avesse vietato di murare la via che conduceva al proprio sepolcro, ma avesse voluto spalancarla e indicarla a tutti, affinché diventasse l’esempio, l’immobile, agghiacciante esempio, di ciò che l’Iddio domandava e voleva dall’uomo, il Santo senti una stiletta trapassargli lo scheletro, come la punta di un coltello” (Testori 1974: 65–66).

**293** “Vita eterna e totale, dell’eterno e totale Essere, inteso come volontà e parto dell’Immobile e dell’Invincibile” (Testori 1974: 66).

**294** “Il Santo ebbe come un sussulto di sdegno e di rabbia. Il suo scheletro si contrasse tutto, quasi stesse per prender testimonianza d’un fallo o di un’ingiustizia che l’Infallibile e il Giusto stava per commettere proprio contro di lui; anzi contro la Verità per cui e di cui s’era fatto prova, carne, imbalsamazione e forma. Ecco: la sua urna, gli abiti filati in batista e in oro purissimi, le pietre, i rubini, gli smeraldi di cui era ricoperto, i meraviglianti bassorilievi d’argento da cui era



Both actants, the saint and the artist, seek to overcome the flesh. The first mortifies and disavows his body through abstinence and deprivation. The second tries to neutralize it by surrendering to its threat of excess, by exhausting it and violating its natural laws. The saint imposes the form of institutional authority; the artist imposes an artistic and transgressive form on reality, but both end up achieving self-disruption.

As in Alzona (1986, see below), sanctity is not based on altruistic concern but is rather a selfish ambition. This can be seen from a passage describing the Saint who, near death, is wholly concerned with the construction of “the monument” of his own sanctity rather than caring for the people dying of plague:

... fever-stricken, reduced to a heap of bones that continued to live only for the unequalled pride of coat of arms and race that had always driven and supported him [...] Even in that extreme hour he seemed to want to build, as he had done throughout his life, the monument to his holiness, as if even in that last hour he needed the certainty that only this monument could give him by reflecting within others; the certainty that he had truly and completely achieved, lived, possessed, shown, experienced and enjoyed holiness. [...]

However, even in that night of weakness, with the death that had by then penetrated his entire body [...] he did not think of the sick, the dying and the orphans in the lament of their sorrows; he thought of them as means to and weapons of victory of the divine over the human, of the light and splendour of the Church over the darkness and rotteness of the world.<sup>295</sup>

This lack of love for humankind brings him to pronounce not words of encouragement and hope, but of penitence and annihilation, showing off the example of his own mortification:

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circondato, i broccati che foderavano la cripta, tutto s’andava mostrando, di colpo, incapace d’emettere un riverbero che potesse lottare contro l’altro, quello dello sconosciuto che scendeva giù...” (Testori 1974: 66–67).

**295** “... Febbricitante, ridotto ormai a un mucchio d’ossa che continuavano a vivere solo per l’inaudito orgoglio di blasone e di razza che l’aveva sempre spinto e sostenuto [...] Allora sembrava volersi fabbricare, anche in quell’ore estreme, come aveva fatto durante tutta l’esistenza, il monumento alla sua santità, quasi che anche in quell’ultime ore avesse bisogno della certezza che quel monumento poteva dargli solo nel suo riflettersi dentro gli altri; la certezza che la santità lui l’aveva veramente e totalmente raggiunta, vissuta, posseduta, mostrata, sperimentata e goduta. [...] Ma neppure in quella notte di debolezza, con la morte che ormai aveva penetrato per intero il suo corpo [...] pensava ai malati, ai morenti e agli orfani nel compianto dei loro dolori; li pensava come a mezzi ed armi di vittoria del divino sull’umano, della luce e dello splendore della Chiesa sulle tenebre e sul marcio del mondo” (Testori 1974: 81).

... So, even in that visit, he would have launched from his lips, which the disease had by then reduced to two strips of purplish skin, orders and injunctions of penance, chastity, total mortification and total hardship rather than words of affection and hope. He would also have said, when necessary, and without any modesty, since holiness hates and tears those feminine and worldly veils, that he [...] had flogged and beaten himself. They should look, if they wanted, at his flesh, the little that was left of it, at his bruises, his marks, his wounds and his sores.<sup>296</sup>

Right after this passage set in the past, there is an episode set in the present and connected to the blasphemous act execrated by the skeleton. In this episode, a boy and a writer hide themselves underground in order to act out their homosexual love for each other. The writer's young lover evokes "all the horrors, shame and infamy that he had to accept in order to live".<sup>297</sup> The story of the saint is thus placed in sharp contrast with the story of the boy: the first seeks and practices voluntarily mortification in order to win over the flesh, while the second suffers and accepts mortification in order to survive. The first experiences mortification as a virtue and a way of purification, the second experiences different kinds of humiliation as a form of corruption and degradation. The comparison between these two kinds of sufferings has the potential to cast further doubt on the value of the sanctity of the proud and inhuman saint.

The presence of the artist and young boy causes the skeleton such terror and anger because, from the perspective of the saint, the two of them are going to subvert the laws of Creation. Their action entails the annihilation of everything the saint represents and of the religion for which he has sacrificed everything. As the two living humans approach, he feels the threat of "emptiness, negation, nothingness".<sup>298</sup>

Could nature, thus, have gone so far? Could a saint, an embalmed man in total obedience and in total sacrifice to the Eternal, after so many centuries, feel defeated and humiliated, right there, right beside his own mausoleum? And all this at the hands of two foul, vile beings who were accepting not only sin, but much worse; to destroy the value, the meaning

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**296** "... Così, anche in quella visita, più che parole d'affetto e di speranza, avrebbe lanciato dalle sue labbra, che la malattia aveva ormai ridotte a due strisce di pelle violacea, ordini e ingiunzioni di penitenza, di castità, di totale mortificazione e di totali stenti. [...] Avrebbe anche detto, ove ce ne fosse stato bisogno, e senza alcun pudore, poiché la santità odia e lacera quei veli femminiei e mondani, che [...] s'era fustigato e battuto. Guardassero, se volevano, sulla sua carne, sul poco che ancora ne restava, le ecchimosi, i segni, le ferite, le piaghe" (Testori 1974: 81–82).

**297** "tutti gli orrori, le vergogne e le infamità che, per vivere, aveva dovuto accettare" (Testori 1974: 82).

**298** "il vuoto, la negazione, il niente" (Testori 1974: 87).

and the very fabric of Creation? But, then, what was Eternity and what did it mean anymore? And what, in the infinite span of that timeless time, did the appearance of Christ and the bleeding life of his human followers and faithful mean?<sup>299</sup>

Sanctity thus means embalming, a total sacrifice to eternity that involves giving up the body altogether: the saint must be a dry skeleton.<sup>300</sup> To confirm this, the passage immediately following is centered on the character of the bishop who likewise seeks the answer to the same question formulated by the saint:

Yes, what was it? And what did it mean? The bishop asked himself, embarrassed and physically distraught. He felt enveloped and immersed in a sticky and shameless sweat, just like at birth. He felt his soul dissolve and rot in that gouache, a liquid from which no man could ever had freed himself, poor frogs all of them who no Christ would ever be able to save.<sup>301</sup>

The sticky liquid weighing down the bishop's body is the opposite of the dryness characterizing the skeleton of the embalmed saint, and it seems to be both the cause of the corruption of the soul and a condition from which humankind cannot free itself.

Even while displaying different attitudes toward the materiality of the human body, the actant of the saint and the actant of the artist are similar in terms of another important aspect. Sanctity is described as an artificial form of perfection and, consequently, posited as belonging to the same sphere as

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**299** “La natura dunque poteva giungere a tanto? Che un santo, un imbalsamato nell’obbedienza totale e nel totale sacrificio all’Eterno, potesse sentirsi, dopo tanti secoli, sconfitto e umiliato, lì, al fianco del suo proprio mausoleo? E tutto questo per opera di due esseri immondi, due vermi, che stavano accettando non già di peccare, ma d’arrivare ben oltre; di distruggere il valore, il senso e il tessuto stesso della Creazione? Ma, allora, che era e significava più l’Eternità? E che mai, nell’arco infinito di quel tempo senza tempo, l’apparizione del Cristo e la vita sanguinante degli umani suoi seguaci e fedeli?” (Testori 1974: 87).

**300** This reduction of the body of the Saint to the state of living skeleton resembles a topos in Italian literature consisting of the “petrification” of characters. This topos can be found, for example, in the tale “Pietrificazione” by Chiusano (1989: 30–35) in which a man dressed like a friar decides to transform himself into a statue on the façade of the Duomo of Milan because of a sad romantic misadventure, or in Tadini (1989) in which an old lady – a character with strongly symbolic connotations – is described as a wooden statue. For further reflections on this last character and examples of “petrification” in contemporary Italian literature, see Ponzo (2015).

**301** “Già, che era? E che significava? Se lo chiedeva, imbarazzato e fisicamente affranto, anche il Vescovo. Il porporato si sentiva avvolto e come immerso in un sudore appiccicoso e inverecondo, proprio come al momento della nascita. Avvertiva la sua anima disfarsi e marcire in quella guazza, un liquido di cui nessun uomo si sarebbe mai liberato, povere rane tutti, che nessun Cristo sarebbe mai riuscito a salvare” (Testori 1974: 87).

art (both the figurative, plastic art of the goldsmith and the literature and poetry of the writer). Both forms of perfection have a baroque character, described as sumptuous and precious, but they can be only be achieved through sorrow, which entails both spiritual and bodily pain.

Here again we see one of the themes identified in chapter 1: all attempt to pursue a form of perfection and order leads to self-disruption and contrasts sharply with the deep power of human feelings, the passions and sensuality, especially love. The apocalyptic vision that concludes the novel stresses the vanity of this search for perfection, of the presumptuous attempt to impose form and order on chaos, but also the fragility of the passions. The body of the saint, like all the other human remains and religious symbols, end up being devoured by beasts. The world view asserted by the saint is thus totally destroyed, as is humanity itself and humans' presumptuous effort to impose form and order on chaos.

From the beginning of the novel, traditional religion is represented as decaying and played out, and the transgressive act of the writer and boy is the last and decisive attack on this system of thought that eventually crumbles. Their act is described in terms of seeding life but, in the end, the creative power of this transgressive act is denied by death. Indeed, both sanctity and art are ultimately a denial of life, understood as materiality, imperfection, and chaos. The collapse of the order represented by Catholicism and its model of sanctity is not substituted, therefore, with a positive model represented by the saint's counterpart, that is, the writer-artist: there is no positive ideal to be found and humanity collapses under the weight of its flesh and searing passions.

Similar themes can be found in another work by Testori, *Passio Letitiae et Felicitatis* (1975), the title of which quotes the thoroughly codified hagiographic genre of *Passio* (and in particular *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, dating to about 203),<sup>302</sup> which was a report about the acts of the martyrs and their trials. In Testori (1975), however, the traditional theme of martyrdom<sup>303</sup> is subverted, mainly because it is associated with a homosexual love affair between two nuns (Letizia and Felicita) that culminates in their death.

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**302** Regarding this *Passio* and the figures of Perpetua and Felicitas, see Goosen (2000: 352–353).

**303** For an exhaustive overview of the Church's definition of martyrdom, see Lambertini (2010–2017), vol. 3.

## 4.2 Sanctity from outside: *La corona di Undecimilla*

*La corona di Undecimilla* is a novel inspired by the legend of Saint Ursula, according to which Ursula was a Christian princess who led her fiancé and her 11,000 handmaidens to martyrdom. The narration is coral, that is to say it is arranged into short chapters that express the point of view of the people surrounding Ursula (called *Vulnerata*, in the novel) and especially her handmaiden *Undecimilla*, “one of the many [...] who face martyrdom for fidelity and obedience to their sovereign”.<sup>304</sup> The saint is therefore always described from an external perspective, a device which continually casts doubts on the nature of her faith, on the righteousness of her involving less motivated and conscious people in her pursuit of martyrdom and on her tendency to “make of herself the object of her worship”.<sup>305</sup> *Vulnerata* is depicted as a proud and charismatic young woman, animated by mysterious energy, never disturbed by “the strain and sorrow of doubt” and “committed to defeating all forms of disordered tenderness”.<sup>306</sup>

The handmaiden and other people surrounding *Vulnerata* are presented as the anonymous faces in which God has chosen to manifest himself, while the saint-princess is fixed in “a sort of Byzantine hieratic posture,” as Chiusano observes in his presentation of the novel.<sup>307</sup> *Vulnerata* chooses to take on a role that was thrust upon her from the moment of her birth and that determines the destiny of the people surrounding her as well: “It was the consecration of *Vulnerata* to God following her august parents’ will that determined the course of all these lives and broke them”.<sup>308</sup>

*Undecimilla*’s faith is simpler and humbler than, and therefore superior to, the rigid and proud devotion of *Vulnerata*:

Enclosed within the magic sphere of her devotion to *Vulnerata*, *Undecimilla* seemed to echo *Vulnerata*’s quest to blend herself in God, but without strengthening her aims with the rigour of faith. And in her dedication there is a touching note, because, while she is striving only to knock at *Vulnerata*’s heart, *Vulnerata* is knocking at the doors of eternity. They rep-

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**304** “una delle tante, [...] che affronta il martirio per fedeltà e obbedienza alla sua sovrana” (Alzona 1986: 21).

**305** “fare di se stessa l’oggetto del proprio culto” (Alzona 1986: 24).

**306** “la fatica e il dolore del dubbio”; “impegnata a vincere ogni forma di disordinata tenerezza” (Alzona 1986: 60).

**307** “una sorta di ieraticità bizantina” (Chiusano 1986: 12).

**308** “Fu la consacrazione di *Vulnerata* a Dio per volontà dei suoi augusti parenti a muovere i fili di tutte queste esistenze e spezzarli” (Alzona 1986: 29).

resent two different quests for happiness. However, Undecimilla's quest is humbler and does not entail the others' sorrow.<sup>309</sup>

She [Undecimilla] is a gentle girl, full of promises, but – since she is not good at whatever intrepid passion – she is afraid of that which transcends her. To bind her limit to God's infinity must have seemed a great arrogance to her, in part because she has always questioned this mystery through a third party, to gratify Vulnerata's aspirations. She has lived in the cult of obedience, she has known only a kind of veneration: the one for her sovereign, ignoring the fact that this feeling would lead her to accomplish specific forms of fulfillment. [...] She only fears that she will have to live in jealous loneliness, condemned to guard the love that consumes her. And she ignores the fact that, when her blood flows like water on the city's stones, she will be animated by one wish alone: to continue to live on after her death.<sup>310</sup>

The narrator Clematius compares Undecimilla and Vulnerata, and describes the martyrdom and the sanctity of the second as the product of a pride which has nothing to do with true love:

[Vulnerata was the] Daughter of a century in which the fact of being Christian was in itself an interior mark giving the woman the prerogative to display it through martyrdom. One should therefore not be surprised at the joy with which Vulnerata followed a path charted even before her birth. What is instead surprising is your [Undecimilla's] determination, which has nothing to do with the crazy arrogance of the mystics, nor can it be interpreted as an act of blind obedience, because your words, although broken and confused, reveal an adherence that, albeit hard-fought, is brimming with love. Really, sometimes love can be a heroic virtue.<sup>311</sup>

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**309** “Chiusa nella sfera magica della sua devozione a Vulnerata, Undecimilla sembra ripetere la vocazione di Vulnerata a confondersi in Dio senza tuttavia ingagliardire i suoi propositi con il rigore della fede. E c'è nella sua dedizione una nota struggente, poiché, mentre lei è solo tesa a bussare al cuore di Vulnerata, Vulnerata batte alle porte dell'eternità. Sono due diverse ricerche di letizia. Solo che quella di Undecimilla è più umile e non passa attraverso il dolore degli altri” (Alzona 1986: 30 – 31).

**310** “È una fanciulla tenera, piena di promesse ma – negata ad ogni intrepida passione – ha il timore di ciò che la trascende. Congiungere il suo limite all'infinito di Dio le sarà parso superbia grande, anche perché questo mistero lo ha sempre interrogato per interposta persona, per compiacere le aspirazioni di Vulnerata. Lei ha vissuto nel culto dell'obbedienza, non ha conosciuto che un tipo di venerazione: quella per la sua sovrana, ignorando che questo sentimento l'avrebbe portata ad attuare precisi adempimenti. [...] Lei ha solo paura di dover vivere in una gelosa solitudine, condannata a custodire l'amore che la consuma. E ignora che quando il suo sangue verrà sparso come acqua sulle pietre della città, sarà abitata da un solo desiderio: quello di continuare a vivere dopo la sua morte” (Alzona 1986: 97).

**311** “Figlia di un secolo in cui l'appartenenza al Cristianesimo era già un marchio interiore che dava alla donna la prerogativa di testimoniare attraverso il martirio, non dovrebbe sorprendere il suo [di Vulnerata] gaudio nel seguire un disegno tracciato prima ancora che nascesse. Stupisce invece la tua [di Undecimilla] determinazione che non ha niente da spartire con la folle

Vulnerata therefore sees martyrdom as the only means a woman has at her disposal to attain liberation and redemption for herself. In the end, however, this goal leads her to reject life itself. In the novel, the refusal of life and passion is always represented as negative. For example, on catching sight of Vulnerata's cortege, a hermit who lives a life of solitary meditation on a cliffside becomes conscious of his own spiritual aridity:

I thought that controlling the passions was man's highest quality; today I fear that it can become a vice, because the spirituality I glimpsed in those young people [...] struck me like an ax. [...] I proudly wore my refusal of life as a badge, as a sort of moral heraldry. I had never wondered who might benefit from it. I held that winning over temptations was a reason for the utmost wisdom [...] Wisdom had proliferated in me, to the point of reducing me to a dry twig, ignored by everyone.<sup>312</sup>

Considering the wars and persecution following Vulnerata's story, Clematius observes that the collective sacrifice she wanted to enact would ultimately prove vain. One of the characters watching Vulnerata's cortege, a panhandler, echoes this thought: "what a waste, and for whom?"<sup>313</sup> Indeed, pain and death are not the best ways to celebrate God's glory.<sup>314</sup>

Many characters in the novel describe themselves as Vulnerata's unwilling victims and the saint as responsible for their death. For example, the sailor who died in the shipwreck of part of Vulnerata's fleet says: "I did not want to share the destiny of the lady who is responsible for this endeavor. The words that recurred in her story were unknown to me. I knew nothing about virtue, love, faith, promises, or debts of honor. It seemed to me that all of these things were part of the great lofty story of which she believed herself the protagonist".<sup>315</sup>

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superbia dei mistici né può essere interpretata come un atto di cieca obbedienza, poiché le tue parole, sebbene spezzate e confuse, tradiscono un'adesione che, per quanto combattuta, trabocca d'amore. Davvero l'amore qualche volta può essere una virtù eroica" (Alzona 1986: 32).

**312** "Credevo che il dominio delle passioni fosse la qualità più alta dell'uomo; oggi temo che possa divenire un vizio, giacché la spiritualità intravista in quei giovani [...] mi ha colpito come una scure. [...] Portavo il mio rifiuto alla vita fieramente come un sigillo, una sorta di araldica morale. A chi giovasse non mi era mai passato per la mente di chiedermelo. Ritenevo motivo di somma sapienza vincere le tentazioni [...] la saggezza aveva proliferato al punto da ridurmi a sterpo secco, ignorato da tutti" (Alzona 1986: 50–52).

**313** "quanto spreco e per chi poi?" (Alzona 1986: 53).

**314** Alzona (1986: 60).

**315** "Non volevo dividere la sorte della damigella responsabile di questa impresa. Le parole che ricorrevano nella sua storia mi erano sconosciute. Non sapevo niente di virtù, amore, fede,

Vulnerata looks intransigent and shows “almost fanatic whims”.<sup>316</sup> She does not seem to consider others’ emotions and needs, but she is a charismatic leader: when the cortege arrives in Rome, Pope Cyriacus is so impressed and fascinated by the bent to sacrifice driving Vulnerata and her following that he decides to accompany them on their way back. During the journey, the pope and two bishops who join her procession “seem to live in a sort of dependence on her, to the point that the roles have been inverted and it is she who incites and persuades them when they show hesitation”.<sup>317</sup> Even though the princess seems to be lacking in passion and her soul and feelings are impenetrable, Undecimilla once catches her crying and understands that Vulnerata loves her fiancé Etero and that sacrificing love is hard for her as well. However, the “quest for the invisible”<sup>318</sup> always prevails in Vulnerata: her world is far away and her self-realization can only take place beyond the earth and earthy passions.

Undecimilla undergoes martyrdom for the love she feels, primarily for Vulnerata but also for Vulnerata’s fiancé, Etero. She sees sacrifice as “the only exciting occasion that was offered to me”.<sup>319</sup> She does not have strong, ascetic faith, however; instead, she loves life and is not convinced of the righteousness of martyrdom:

A fervent sense of life was my religion: how could I desire the escape towards Vulnerata’s mysterious homeland and exultantly desert this earth which for me was rich in promises? Now, she is in the light, she has chosen the kingdom that is elsewhere, so she experienced that confusion of the affections with the certainty of the great peace that awaited her. For me it was different: I felt like a standard deserted by the fervent wind that I invoked; my incertitude was a shattered stream. And, meanwhile, I felt that I existed, that I was the whole solid ground. Her world was dazzled, my world did not have margins of brightness apart from the one of her friendship and, later on, of the trepidation I felt in relation to Etero.

Beyond the threshold of my consciousness, a nostalgia breathed in me for the mysterious shiver of God that inhabited her, but I did not manage to experience her faith. This investiture, which was chosen by her more than by the confusion of events, left me indifferent except when it struck me like a suffered injustice. I felt that, as long as history will be

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promesse e debiti d’onore. Tutte cose che mi pareva rientrassero nella gran fola di cui lei era protagonista” (Alzona 1987: 47).

**316** “estri che sfioravano il fanatismo” (Alzona 1986: 109).

**317** “sembrano vivere in una sorta di dipendenza da lei, al punto che i ruoli si sono rovesciati ed è lei ad incitarli e persuaderli quando tradiscono qualche esitazione” (Alzona 1986: 109).

**318** “ricerca dell’invisibile” (Alzona 1986: 85).

**319** “la sola occasione eccitante che mi venisse offerta” (Alzona 1986: 39).



enacted by the few while the multitudes endure it, to talk of saint causes was a silly thing.<sup>320</sup>

Indeed, when Undecimilla receives Christian baptism, she feels like she is committing fraud, accepting it more out of obedience than real conviction and thus driven by terrestrial feelings:

When I went down the stairs to step into the baptismal font, Etero was so close to me that I had to step back so as not to touch him. I was stricken by the doubt that we were both committing fraud, making ourselves Christians out of obedience more than conviction.

Now, however, I can consider our shared sense of duty to be Christian. Surely it was more licit than Vulnerata's, who required it from us. But it was all a tangle of affections that drew each of us, and in this chain of ambiguous purposes I do not know who among us was right.<sup>321</sup>

Only one soldier in her entourage refuses to be baptized: he rejects this “jump into the net of the afterlife,” the trap “of an existence released from matter and time”.<sup>322</sup> Indeed, Vulnerata seems to live outside of normal life, outside of time, already fixed in her past and in her legend.

According to Undecimilla, Vulnerata's project of accepting Etero then forcing him to convert to Christianity and to undergo a pilgrimage to Rome before the wedding is all part of a deceitful game: “... deceit even more stolid because its

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**320** “Un ardente senso della vita era la mia religione: come potevo desiderare la fuga verso la patria misteriosa di Vulnerata e disertare esultando questa terra per me ricca di promesse? Lei, adesso, è nella luce, ha scelto il regno che è altrove, perciò visse quella confusione di affetti con la certezza della grande pace che l'aspettava. Per me fu diverso: mi sentivo un vessillo disertato dal vento ardente che invocavo; la mia incertezza era un ruscello sfaldato. E, intanto, sentivo di esistere, di essere tutta la terra ferma. Il suo era un mondo abbagliato, il mio non aveva margini di fulgore se non quello della sua amicizia, e in seguito della mia trepidazione per Etero. Oltre la soglia della coscienza alitava in me una nostalgia per il misterioso fremito di Dio che l'abitava, ma non riuscivo a vivere la sua fede. Questa investitura, scelta più da lei che dalla concitazione degli eventi, mi lasciava indifferente quando non mi feriva come un torto subito. Sentivo che, sin quando la storia verrà fatta da pochi mentre a soffrirla saranno le moltitudini, parlare di cause sante era cosa stolta” (Alzona 1986: 35–36).

**321** “Quando scesi i gradini per immergermi nel fonte battesimale ebbi Etero così vicino che dovetti ritrarmi per non sfiorarlo. Fui colpita dal dubbio che entrambi stessimo compiendo una frode, facendoci cristiani più per obbedienza che per convinzione. Adesso invece posso anche ritenere cristiano il senso del dovere che ci accomunava, certo più lecito di quello di Vulnerata nell'esigerlo da noi. Ma era tutto un groviglio di sentimenti a trascinarci l'un l'altro e in questa catena di propositi ambigui non so chi di noi fosse nel giusto” (Alzona 1986: 74).

**322** “il salto nella rete dell'aldilà”; “di un'esistenza svincolata dalla materia e dal tempo” (Alzona 1986: 76).

only goal was sacrifice”.<sup>323</sup> However, Etero is aware of Vulnerata’s plan as well. He accepts the destiny she has chosen for him, for all of them, because he loves her and, moreover, because he is persuaded that martyrdom is a way to conquer the evil of their dark times.

Only when the martyrdom is imminent does Vulnerata confess her doubts to the most trusted of her handmaidens, asking her to talk to her fellows so that they might be free to choose:

Now she feared that she had abused our devotion for her, and she blamed herself because she had involved us in her plan for salvation, which threatened to end in our deaths. She pronounced this word with contrition, although she was fully absorbed in nostalgia for the eternal.

She was distressed because she felt that we were not ready for this sacrifice.

She was comforted by frequent visitations (premonitory dreams or visions of the arcane?); since birth she had been promised to God, and [...] by now she did not ignore that which was her fate and ours as well. Even the faith a few creatures in the group experienced was not enough to accept such a fate. [...]

Had she suddenly realized that we are all alone before our own salvation? And that, although a sacrifice must be enacted by a multitude in order to be of use to the wicked times in which we live and to ensure the celebration of her fame, she could not oblige us to follow God’s footprints against our own hearts? [...] Following her, now, no longer seemed to me only a duty worthy of high praise, because – in leaving us free to choose – she had bound us to her destiny forever.<sup>324</sup>

Vulnerata is always observed from the outside and, unlike all the other characters, her soul continues to be opaque and indecipherable to the very end. In contrast to the people of her cortege who are animated by lively and vivid emotions, therefore, during her entire path from childhood to martyrdom her figure resembles a rigid, silent icon, full of the mystery of exterior magnificence. Sanctity is,

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323 “... un inganno tanto più stolido in quanto puntava solo al sacrificio” (Alzona 1986: 38).

324 “Adesso temeva di aver abusato della nostra devozione per lei e si rimproverava di averci coinvolte in questo suo piano di salvezza che minacciava di concludersi con la morte. Pronunciò questa parola con contrizione, sebbene lei fosse tutta presa dalla nostalgia per l’eterno. Era affranta perché ci sentiva impreparate a questo sacrificio. Lei era confortata da frequenti visitazioni (sogni premonitori o visioni dell’arcano?); dalla nascita era stata promessa a Dio, e [...] ormai non ignorava più quale fosse la sua e la nostra sorte. Tale che per accettarla non era neppure sufficiente la fede vissuta da poche creature del gruppo [...]. Si era all’improvviso resa conto che ognuno è solo di fronte alla propria salvezza? E che quantunque un sacrificio, per giovare al tempo scellerato in cui viviamo ed ottenere la celebrazione della fama, debba essere vissuto da una moltitudine, essa non poteva costringerci a seguire le orme di Dio controcuore? [...] Seguirla, adesso non mi pareva solo più un dovere altamente meritorio, giacché – lasciandoci libere di scegliere – ci aveva vincolate per sempre al suo destino” (Alzona 1986: 111–112).

somewhat paradoxically, associated with egoism and inhumanity and represented as the result of the choice to adopt a prefixed, rigid narrative program implying the rejection of life. As a consequence, sanctity provides an ambivalent model that contrasts neatly with the positive values of human life, the good passions, and the ability to appreciate the beauty of the earth. In light of the value of human life, martyrdom and sacrifice are depicted as a terrible waste.

The austere, aloof religiosity of the saint, all aimed at reaching a transcendent dimension, is therefore opposed to a simpler form of religiosity that finds it difficult to transcend earthly life and retains a more human dimension. This second kind of religiosity is presented as humbler but, in the end, superior. Sanctity is a rigid model imposed on the fluidity of life and necessarily destined to annihilate it. Such a model requires that a certain kind of character – in this case, a beautiful and charismatic princess – take on the behavior characterizing the stereotype of the martyr and perform a series of acts all aimed at sacrificing her youth, wealth, and life.

The saint is a solitary and mysterious monad. However, *Vulnerata* takes the people surrounding her, people who do not understand and cannot take on her specific role, and involves them in the creation of her myth. What *Vulnerata* sees as transcendent and saintly, her handmaidens, and in particular *Undecimilla*, see as simply death. *Vulnerata*'s thoughts are never revealed, so she ends up being the incarnation of a thematic role,<sup>325</sup> a character type: "the saint".

### 4.3 *The sinner saint*

In the novel *Il santo peccatore*, the narrator, named Michele Bravo, is fighting death in a hospital and tells the story of his brother Aronne Scotti. From the very beginning the novel stresses the deep connection between Aronne and the narrator:

And did I dream, or did I feel, next to me, inside of me, the breath of Aronne, the priest of my journey towards salvation? [...] I knew Aronne very well, but it seems that he knew me better than I knew myself...<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> See chapter 3 for a discussion of the semiotic concept of thematic role.

<sup>326</sup> "E sognavo o sentivo, accanto a me, dentro di me, il fiato di Aronne, il sacerdote del mio viaggio verso la salvezza? [...] Conoscevo molto bene Aronne, ma pare che lui conoscesse me meglio di me stesso..." (Crovi 1995: 8).

In the course of the narration it becomes more and more evident that the two characters are the same person. The protagonist is a character with a doubled self whose life's aim has been to undertake a process of spiritual growth, of sanctity, culminating in sacrifice. The desire for martyrdom is an "awful temptation" that Aronne has been obsessed with for many years. Nevertheless, his goals undergo a radical shift during the three days preceding his symbolic resurrection, an event that provides him with the occasion to re-think his life and to understand that the path he had chosen was not true sanctity but "immoral vanity". Indeed, the narrator is often critical of Aronne, the fake saint. For example:

I have known Aronne's bewilderment as a kid, his inquietude as an adolescent, his insolence as a young man in rebellion, his devouring passion for knowledge as a university student, his total dedication as a biology professor in defense of the energy of life. I knew that many people, in recent years, had considered him, with pressing naivety, to be a saint, or at least a miracle worker [...]. For others, Aronne was a fearless hero, an example of perfection, a scandalous witness of simplicity; I knew, because I grew up with him, because he was my brother, how vulnerable he was, how fragile, so much so that, sometimes he, like Cain, had killed in me, Abel, all impulse towards innocence or euphoria.

Therefore, I will unveil the secrets of this false hero. He revealed them to me in every detail during those three nights at the hospital [...] I promise I will account for all of his ambiguities and his lies. Aronne is a fake saint, an involuntary saint: he has practiced extravagance more than virtue.<sup>327</sup>

This opening presents the story as the narrative of the life of a saint, but from the beginning the traditional hagiographic model is called into question. Indeed, the saint is not idealized; he is a "fake" hero and an ambiguous character whose sanctity is not necessarily positive and whose life is probably not a good *exemplum* to follow. Later on, the reader learns that Aronne has an uncertain identity: he has changed his name various times, he has had "three fathers" (Crovi 1995: 11) and no one knows his real physiognomy ("No one knows Aronne's face"<sup>328</sup>). The

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327 "Ho conosciuto, di Aronne, il suo smarrimento di ragazzo, la sua inquietudine di adolescente, la sua improntitudine di giovane in rivolta, la sua divorante passione conoscitiva di studente universitario, la sua totale dedizione di professore di biologia in difesa dell'energia della vita. Sapevo che molti, negli anni recenti, lo avevano considerato, con incalzante ingenuità, un santo o perlomeno un taumaturgo [...] Per gli altri, Aronne era un eroe spericolato, un esempio di perfezione, uno scandaloso testimone di naturalezza; io sapevo, per il fatto di esserci cresciuto assieme, per il fatto di averlo fratello, quanto fosse vulnerabile, quanto fosse fragile, al punto che, talvolta, lui Caino, aveva ucciso in me, Abele, ogni soprassalto di innocenza o euforia. Perciò, di questo falso eroe svelerò i segreti che in quelle tre notti di ospedale mi ha rivelato in ogni dettaglio [...]. Prometto che darò conto di tutte le sue ambiguità e bugie. Aronne è un santo fasullo, un santo involontario: ha praticato più la stravaganza che la virtù" (Crovi 1995: 8–10).

328 "Nessuno conosce la faccia di Aronne" (Crovi 1995: 29).

narrator tends to minimize Aronne's gifts and accomplishments such as his "prophecies" and "miracles," presenting them as the result of people's misunderstanding<sup>329</sup>:

In the 1980s, when he indulged in the practice of sending messages that someone has emphatically defined as prophecies, he signed them with the names Sirach, Jeremiah, Hosea [...] Aronne also gave biblical names to the numerous disciples that began to surround him, maybe to encircle him, that is, to hold him hostage, when his fans, the newspapers, the buzz, started to spread and to expand on accounts of his extravagances and his hypothetical miracles: Gabriele, Davide, Daniele, Elia were the most famous. They were such convinced and passionate witnesses of Scotti's mission that they considered themselves to be his apostles. They were called angels by Scotti's faithful, who started to see signals of prodigies in each of Aronne's gestures and words.<sup>330</sup>

Aronne displays a well-defined semiotic style. Not only does he adopt Biblical names, he often speaks in parables, "exemplary micro-tales,"<sup>331</sup> and he writes letters to different receivers in which he occasionally quotes Paul.<sup>332</sup> He and his fellows also own several radio stations and write concise, aphoristic messages on sheets of paper which are handed out to people or posted on the city walls. A media businessman once tells Aronne that he is not only astute in his use of the power of radio ("radiocrazia"), but that he also invented "oracrazia," referring to his way of writing prophetic or admonishing messages. Aronne is very upset when he has to admit that "Oracracy (whether oral or oracular power) was his guilt, the sinful temptation he had to get rid of".<sup>333</sup> He is also very attentive to the symbolic aspects of reality, such as the symbolic meaning of numbers or of the fingers of the hand.

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**329** Other examples of people mistakenly labeling Aronne as a provocative preacher and as a healer: Covi 1995: 49–51.

**330** "... negli anni Ottanta, quando si è lasciato andare alla pratica di lanciare messaggi che qualcuno ha enfaticamente definito profezie, li ha firmati con i nomi di Siracide, Geremia, Osea [...] Aronne ha attribuito nomi biblici anche ai molti discepoli che hanno cominciato ad attorniarlo, forse ad accerchiarlo, insomma a tenerlo in ostaggio, quando i fans, i giornali, e le chiacchiere si sono messi a spargere e a dilatare le notizie sulle sue stravaganze e i suoi ipotetici miracoli: Gabriele, Davide, Daniele, Elia erano i più noti; così convinti e appassionati testimoni della missione di Aronne, da considerarsene gli apostoli. Angeli si sono messi a chiamarli le donne e gli uomini di fede in Scotti, che hanno cominciato a scorgere in ogni gesto e parola di Aronne segnali di prodigi..." (Covi 1995: 12–13).

**331** "miniracconti esemplari", he has "il gusto dell'apologo" (Covi 1995: 64).

**332** "Nella sua lettera ai Romani, San Paolo ci ricorda [...] che, più del bene che si fa, vale il male che non si fa" (Covi 1995: 85).

**333** "l'oracrazia (forza orale o oracolare che fosse) era la sua colpa, la tentazione peccaminosa di cui si doveva liberare" (Covi 1995: 123).

Moreover, Aronne holds a high opinion of the power of the word<sup>334</sup>: “‘In the beginning was the Verb’ says the Gospel; and, indeed, it is God’s word, his ‘fiat’, that created the world; just like the man’s word creates social life”.<sup>335</sup> Indeed, his real vocation and talent is communication, the gift of dialoguing with people and help them to express themselves. It is this communicative ability, together with the therapeutic energy he feels in his hands, that constitute Aronne’s almost miraculous gift for healing. The narrator admits that some of the deeds performed by Aronne, especially some healings, are essentially inexplicable, but at the same time he tends to rationalize these wonders and to attribute a moral – rather than miraculous – character to the sanctity of Aronne and his disciples:

I know that the deeds attributed to these angels [...] are only civic acts and not wonders: but people need to believe in the fantastic character of reality, in the generosity of destiny, or in the affectionate irony of God who helps the weak and not the strong.

I cannot deny or confirm the miracles attributed to Aronne, because I heard them defined as such by the people who say that they were directly involved. In reality the miracles are known only by those who receive them, who sometimes benefit from the thaumaturgy of illusion. [...] Aronne has never spoken about the wonders attributed to him, I do not know if this is because of his uncertainty about the events or his (scientist’s) conviction that what took place in all the prodigious cases was the so-called “spontaneous remission” of the illness. This sudden disappearance of the pathology, by the way, is at least as mysterious as it is a miracle.

After all, Aronne has always been a perplexed man. Perplexed and uncertain...<sup>336</sup>

Aronne’s life and thinking are repeatedly compared to those of Severinus Boethius. Boethius experienced the martyrdom that was denied to Aronne, but he was never canonized. They are both fictional saints: “[Boethius’s] sanctity was

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**334** On this theme, see chapter 1.

**335** “In principio era il Verbo’ dice il Vangelo; e, infatti, è la Parola di Dio, il suo ‘fiat’, che ha creato il mondo; come la parola dell’uomo crea la vita di relazione” (Crovi 1995: 127).

**336** “Io so che i fatti attribuiti a questi angeli [...] sono solo atti civili e non prodigi: ma la gente ha bisogno di credere nel romanzesco della realtà, nella generosità del Destino, o nell’affettuosa ironia di Dio che aiuta i deboli e non i forti. Io non posso negare o confermare i miracoli attribuiti ad Aronne, perché li ho sentiti definire tali da chi dice di esserne stato protagonista. I miracoli li conoscono veramente solo i miracolati, che qualche volta godono della taumaturgia dell’illusione. [...] Aronne non ha mai parlato dei prodigi a lui attribuiti, non so se per incertezza sugli eventi o se per convinzione (da scienziato) che, in tutti i casi prodigiosi, si sia realizzata la cosiddetta ‘remissione spontanea’ del male, che poi è misteriosa, questa improvvisa scomparsa della patologia, almeno quanto un miracolo. D’altronde, Aronne è sempre stato un uomo perplesso. Perplesso e incerto...” (Crovi 1995: 14–15).

likewise a fantasy of posterity, the projection of a collective destiny”.<sup>337</sup> Aronne also feels a deep kinship with the 16<sup>th</sup> century mathematician Gerolamo Cardano, but he acknowledges an important difference:

[Cardano], great expert of dreams and horoscopes, loved to immerse himself in the supernatural, in the invisible, in the mysterious; while Aronne, a 20<sup>th</sup> century visionary trying to pursue, according to a bastard social project, the cancellation of the personality that he had created for himself, aimed to reveal the miracles of nature, depriving them of all mystery.<sup>338</sup>

Despite this substantial difference, Aronne agrees with Cardano’s statement according to which “When the mind in its ardor reaches God, then our nature transcends itself and miracles take place: then you can see the fearful become brave, the unhappy blessed, the ignorant wise, the weak strong”.<sup>339</sup> Aronne’s religiosity is not univocal. For example, he attributes violence to man’s wickedness rather than God, while “he ended up having an odd dialogue”<sup>340</sup> with the deity. Indeed, Aronne addresses a letter to God:

Dear God, you are both an unknown and a reality to me: you are inside me, you are the mystery of life that I decipher by living. The evangelist defined you as the Verb, the Word that creates Existence: I feel that this is true; the gift of the word, the dialogue, gives flavour to my experience. I feel you are the Justice [...] and the Truth, because the lie does not generate good. You are the Father [...] You are invisible but present because you are the strength that supports me in bewilderment, [...] I like to pray to You, because being close to you causes me to discover and rediscover the feeling of company...<sup>341</sup>

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**337** “anche la sua [di Boezio] santità è una fantasia dei posteri, la proiezione di un desiderio collettivo” (Crovi 1995: 27).

**338** “[Cardano], grande esperto di sogni e di oroscopi, amava immergersi nel soprannaturale, nell’invisibile, nel misterioso; mentre Aronne, visionario del Novecento che cercava di perseguire, secondo un progetto sociale bastardo, la cancellazione della personalità che si era creato, puntava a rivelare i miracoli del naturale spogliandoli di ogni mistero” (Crovi 1995: 110).

**339** “quando nel suo ardore la mente arriva a Dio, allora la nostra natura trascende se stessa e si producono i miracoli: allora si vedono i pavidì diventare coraggiosi, gli infelici beati, gli ignoranti sapienti, i deboli forti” (Crovi 1995: 112).

**340** “ha finito per avere uno strano dialogo” (Crovi 1995: 20).

**341** “Caro Dio, per me tu sei un’incognita e insieme una realtà: sei dentro di me, sei il mistero della vita che decifro vivendo. L’evangelista Ti ha definito il Verbo, la Parola che crea l’Esistenza: sento che è vero; l’offerta della parola, il dialogo, dà sapore alla mia esperienza. Sento che sei la Giustizia [...] e sei la Verità perché la menzogna non genera il bene. Sei Padre [...] Sei invisibile ma presente perché sei la forza che mi sostiene nello smarrimento. [...] Mi piace pregarTi, perché mettermi in confidenza con te mi fa scoprire e riscoprire il sentimento della compagnia...” (Crovi 1995: 21).

Aronne is disposed to joyful religiosity; he does not display a penitent attitude at all. Even his choice of chastity does not have the character of a vow to God or renunciation:

... he denies having chosen [chastity] to establish a spiritual detachment between himself and others. He does not want it to be considered an emblem of purity because he considers himself impure, that is, human. He says that he does not practice it because his goal is perfection, because he judges perfection to be an ambiguous pretension of privilege. He affirms that it is not an offer on his part to God, because to the unknown God he dedicates his whole life, he mocks the hypothesis that it is a treatment (mortification) against guilt because he lives it with joyful lightness...<sup>342</sup>

This view of chastity differs deeply from the traditional conception of a “great divide” between “the world of the spirit and the word of the flesh” (Weinstein and Bell 1982: 73), often implying a dramatic internal struggle.<sup>343</sup>

During his youth, Aronne spends several years living in a vicarage with a priest. There, he appreciates the gestures accompanying the liturgy and other sacerdotal activities, as they give him “the idea that everything has to be done with majestic rigor, as if it were a ritual”.<sup>344</sup> Nevertheless, Aronne leaves the priest his friend and his protected and secure life in order to study at the University of Pavia. In Pavia, Aronne loves to visit the basilica of San Michele and it is there that he reflects on his indeterminate religiosity, which has a well-defined moral code but does not yet have a clear object of veneration. Indeed, Aronne is waiting to be converted:

... [In the basilica], protected by the silence and the constant semi-darkness, he managed to imagine the moment of his conversion, when, through baptism, he would make himself Christian. He had this event set aside as the moment of his definitive covenant with God, as the moment of his metamorphosis from a man curious about life to a creator of life. [...] Although he had chosen a life of chastity and abstention from temptations and

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**342** “... nega di averla scelta [la castità] per stabilire un distacco spirituale tra sé e gli altri, non vuole che sia considerata emblema di purezza perché si considera impuro cioè umano. Dice di non praticarla per puntare alla perfezione perché giudica la perfezione un’ambigua pretesa di privilegio, afferma che non è una sua offerta a Dio, perché all’incognita Dio dedica l’intera vita, sotte l’ipotesi che sia una terapia (una mortificazione) contro i sensi di colpa perché la vive con gioiosa leggerezza...” (Crovi 1995: 37).

**343** For an account of the relationship between chastity and sainthood, see Weinstein and Bell 1982: 73–99. The topos of the problematic and painful observance of chastity and of its transgression – especially on the part of the clergy – are developed in several 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian novels, for example: Doni’s *Servo inutile* (1983) and Saviane’s *Il papa* (1963) both developing the motifs of sacerdotal celibate and chastity.

**344** “L’idea che ogni cosa va fatta con maestoso rigore come se fosse un rito” (Crovi 1995: 45).



of mental and physical integrity, he had not yet decided to whom he would consecrate himself, for whom he would spend his work and his life.<sup>345</sup>

Aronne's religiosity is a deeply moral one, centered on the value of optimism, the only principle that remains intact following the crisis at the hospital:

[Aronne] thinks of his story of rural Abel transformed into urban Cain, of the priest (such as biblical Aaron) who believed he led men towards the Promised Land but, on the contrary, he created for them, there in the desert of the city, the golden calf of a hope which, he fears, was an atrocious illusion. Aronne, who had faith in himself and in others, is now suspicious of himself and looks at others with dread that he might discover that they are lost, also because of him: he suspects that trusting in him and awaiting his miracles has been and still is a dangerous idolatry. "I am a prevaricator," he accuses himself at times [...]. He has long been upset by an affirmation [...]: "Optimism is a heresy". He does not care about being defined a heretic: he is disturbed by the doubt cast on the fact that optimism is a moral, religious, energy. Indeed, for his whole life he has invested in optimism.<sup>346</sup>

Aronne is not interested in power or in politics; rather, he tries to help people in need. One of his existential principles is that "Religion does not need martyrs. You have to live it, not die for it".<sup>347</sup> When a military official asks him "Do you believe in God?", however, he answers: "I can't exclude the possibility that he exists, I would like him to manifest among us".<sup>348</sup> When, after a paradoxical dialogue, the official tells him that he should be a priest, the narrator comments:

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**345** "... lì [in San Michele] riusciva, protetto dal silenzio e dalla costante penombra, a immaginare il momento della sua conversione, quando si sarebbe fatto, con il battesimo, cristiano. Teneva in serbo quest'evento come il momento del suo definitivo patto con Dio, come il momento della sua metamorfosi da curioso della vita in creatore di vita. [...] nonostante avesse scelto una vita di castità e di astinenza dalle tentazioni e di integrità fisica e mentale, non aveva ancora deciso a chi votarsi, per chi spendere il lavoro e la vita" (Crovi 1995: 52–53).

**346** "[Aronne] pensa alla sua storia di Abele campagnolo trasformatosi in Caino urbano, di sacerdote (come l'Aronne della Bibbia) che ha creduto di guidare gli uomini verso la Terra Promessa e, all'opposto, ha creato per loro, lì nel deserto della città, il vitello d'oro di una speranza che teme sia stata un'atroce illusione. Aronne, che aveva fede in se stesso e negli altri, adesso è diffidente verso di sé e dirige lo sguardo sugli altri con la paura di scoprirli, anche per sua colpa, perduti: sospetta che la fiducia riposta in lui e l'attesa dei suoi miracoli sia stata e sia una pericolosa idolatria. 'Io sono un mistificatore' si accusa talvolta [...] Lo turba da tempo un'affermazione, [...]: 'L'ottimismo è un'eresia'. Non gli importa di poter essere definito eretico: lo inquieta la messa in dubbio che l'ottimismo sia un'energia morale, religiosa. Sull'ottimismo, infatti, ci ha investito tutta la sua vita" (Crovi 1995: 25).

**347** "Alla religione non servono i martiri. Bisogna viverla, non morire per lei" (Crovi 1995: 65).

**348** "Lei crede in Dio?" "Non posso escludere che esista, mi piacerebbe che si facesse vivo tra noi" (Crovi 1995: 67).

Other people had suggested this to him as well: and don Pietro had hoped that that was his vocation; but, while the priest is a mediator (or a witness, or an interpreter) of the Sacred, a mediator between men and God, that was not the role for him; he wanted to be the non-sacramental vehicle of dialogue between men and men.<sup>349</sup>

Aronne therefore has a moral form of religiosity with a rather undefined conception of God based on virtues such as charity and hope. This religiosity refuses institutional or sacramental investiture, preferring instead to focus on dialogue between humans. Aronne works as a university professor for several years, and during this period he thinks he has found his vocation because he sees science as a way of reaching the truth and a ministry carried out to help and improve life:

... he felt a growing drive to consider science not only as an adventure of knowledge, but as a service to common life: he judged science to be the endless search for models of inquiry to unveil the mystery of life, but also the progressive experimentation of instruments to efficiently carry out the task, or rather the ministry, of improving life. [...] He felt at last like a priest convinced of his mission.<sup>350</sup>

When he realizes that science is used not to achieve social betterment but to produce an economic profit that sacrilegiously alters nature, Aronne understands that the “crazy race of modernity is nothing but the Apocalypse itself”.<sup>351</sup> He begins to see the university as a “false temple”<sup>352</sup> and himself as a “poor Christ among the merchants,”<sup>353</sup> and so he quits his prestigious job. His colleagues compare him to Celestine V<sup>354</sup>:

... just like the cardinals of the Roman Curia considered Pietro da Morrone, Celestine V, the former hermit who became a Pope and renounced the Papacy in order to avoid having to

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**349** “Glielo avevano suggerito anche altri; e don Piero aveva sperato che quella fosse la sua vocazione; ma, se il sacerdote è un intermediario (o un testimone o un interprete) del Sacro, un mediatore tra gli uomini e Dio, non era quello il suo ruolo; a lui interessava essere il tramite non sacramentale del dialogo tra uomini e uomini” (Crovi 1995: 68).

**350** “... sentiva sempre più forte l’impulso a considerare la scienza non solo un’avventura di conoscenza ma un servizio alla convivenza: giudicava la scienza la ricerca incessante di modelli d’indagine per svelare il mistero della vita ma anche la progressiva sperimentazione di strumenti per svolgere con efficienza il compito, anzi il ministero, di migliorare la vita. [...] si sentiva finalmente un sacerdote convinto della propria missione” (Crovi 1995: 75).

**351** “corsa pazza della modernità altro non è che l’Apocalisse” (Crovi 1995: 79).

**352** “tempio posticcio” Crovi (1995: 78).

**353** “povero cristo tra i mercanti” (Crovi 1995: 79).

**354** About the character of Celestine V, who is also represented in Silone (2014 [1968]), see chapter 3.

cope with the compromises of Power, to be an enemy. [... Aronne] considered the hood of the [academic] cape to be, more than a phallic symbol, the symbol of the “blue tent,” as if the professor could delude himself that he was putting his head in the hereafter: on the contrary, he wanted to keep his body, including his head, in the here and now.<sup>355</sup>

Aronne not only refuses power, its compromises and institutionalized beliefs and practices, he also rejects a traditional concept of transcendence that causes people to alter and underestimate the contingent world. It is this conviction that leads him to quit his academic job and start working as a forger, in order to “once again find a tactile relationship with reality”.<sup>356</sup>

Later on, Aronne begins having stigmata and carries out religious meditations:

He reads the Gospel like the Protestants read the Bible: opening the text randomly and absorbing at one moment its testimonial energy, at another moment the intelligence of its wisdom. He transcribed certain passages of Revelations [...], provocative and illuminating messages, such as “do not judge,” “enter by the narrow door” [...] Thinking about those messages, Aronne felt that Christians, combining the three theological virtues, faith hope and charity, could create in every moment a shield against deceit and disillusionment.<sup>357</sup>

In this passage, Christian religion is interpreted once more in a moral and contingent sense (non-transcendent, not orientated toward the afterlife). This is also evident in the list of the new “beatitudes” (including: “Blessed are those who never pinch: they will live with their heart and their mind in peace. Blessed are those who act selflessly: they will not be persecuted by the anxiety to possess”<sup>358</sup>) developed by one of Aronne’s followers, and in the list of the “capital sins: to cede to the exaltation of power; to delude oneself into thinking that

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**355** “... proprio come i porporati della Curia romana considerarono un nemico Pietro da Morone, Celestino V, l'ex eremita divenuto Papa che rinunciò al Papato per non dover subire i compromessi del Potere. [... Aronne m]editò che il cappuccio della cappa [d'ermellino], più che un simbolo fallico, era il simbolo della ‘tenda celeste’, quasi che il docente potesse illudersi di mettere la sua testa nell’Aldilà: mentre lui voleva mantenere il suo corpo, testa compresa, nell’Aldiqua” (Crovi 1995: 80).

**356** “ritrovare un rapporto tattile con la realtà” Crovi (1995: 82).

**357** “Leggeva il Vangelo come i protestanti leggono la Bibbia: apprendone il testo a caso e assorbendone ora l’energia testimoniale, ora l’intelligenza sapienziale. Trascriveva certi passaggi della Rivelazione [...] messaggi provocatori e illuminanti come ‘non giudicate’, ‘entrate per la porta stretta’ [...] Aronne, nel ripensare a quei messaggi sentiva che il cristiano, coniugando le tre virtù teologali, fede speranza carità, poteva crearsi in ogni momento uno scudo contro inganni e disinganni” (Crovi 1995: 97).

**358** “Beato chi non arraffa mai: vivrà con il cuore e la mente in pace. Beato chi opera disinteressatamente: non sarà perseguitato dall’ansia di possedere” (Crovi 1995: 98).

wealth engenders justice; to think that charity can absolve us from social faults; to pay others to do good in your stead”.<sup>359</sup>

Another example of the moral and contingent dimension of Aronne’s religion can be seen in the episode in which a bishop asks Aronne how he conceptualizes paradise, purgatory, and hell, and he answers:

Hell is violence, falsity, bureaucracy: indeed, even Dante’s *Inferno*, with all of his guardians, is a big bureaucratic structure. Purgatory is life: the terrain of doing and undoing, of trying and attempting, of confidence and hope. Paradise is freedom, it is talking to God and to men without caution and blackmail.<sup>360</sup>

When the bishop asks Aronne to join the Church and to be an example of conversion, Aronne declines. He explains that his goal is to “help others and myself to be simple, anonymous men, with no more anxieties or passions”.<sup>361</sup> The bishop replies that Aronne is looking not for paradise or purgatory but rather limbo; he does not understand that Aronne does not want to reach a state of passivity and meaninglessness; rather, he wants to be a “peacemaker”.<sup>362</sup> Aronne wishes to overcome emotive impulses in favor of moral feelings, he wants to use deeds to bear witness and to change history: Aronne defines himself as a “moral hygienist”.<sup>363</sup>

Towards the end of the novel, Aronne reflects on the saints. Once more he reverses the traditional model, bringing it from transcendence to contingency, from the supernatural to ordinary life:

Saints are strange: there is the hermit saint, the wanderer saint, the wounded saint, the thaumaturge saint, the preacher saint, the inquisitor saint, the theologian saint, the minstrel saint, the soldier saint, the penitent saint, the mystic saint and the sinner saint. Aronne asked himself whether sanctity was human heroism or religious scandal, human scandal or religious heroism; and he recalled an opinion by pope Pius IX, who said about a saint: “In his life the supernatural became almost natural and the extraordinary

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**359** “peccati capitali: cedere all’adulazione del potere; illudersi che il benessere generi giustizia; pensare che la carità assolve dalle colpe sociali; pagare gli altri perché facciano del bene per te” (Crovi 1995: 102).

**360** “L’inferno è la violenza, la falsità, la burocrazia: difatti, anche l’inferno di Dante, con tutti i suoi guardiani, è una grande struttura burocratica. Il purgatorio è la vita: il territorio del fare e disfare, del tentare e del provare, della confidenza e della speranza. Il paradiso è la libertà, il parlare con Dio e con gli uomini senza cautele e ricatti” (Crovi 1995: 105).

**361** “Aiutare gli altri e me stesso ad essere, senza più angosce e senza più passioni, uomini semplici, anonimi” (Crovi 1995: 105–106).

**362** “pacificatore” (Crovi 1995: 106).

**363** “un igienista morale” (Crovi 1995: 124).

ordinary”. Could one also have said, wondered Aronne, “in his life the natural became supernatural and the ordinary extraordinary”?<sup>364</sup>

Aronne goes to the hospital because he has been shot. The process of his physical healing represents a re-birth: it “saved his physical life, but maybe also his moral life, because the noise of applause was bewildering Aronne, unconsciously leading him towards that presumption of the good that often produces the banality of evil. Aronne now had to face the cure of humility and silence”.<sup>365</sup> Aronne gives up chastity, starting living his life over again with “pacified humility”.<sup>366</sup> He feels that the time for conversion has come; he has himself baptized, takes Eucharist and undergoes confession. From that moment on, the narrator says, “Aronne Scotti no longer exists”.<sup>367</sup> His disciples are now able to continue their mission by themselves and he decides to bear witness only with his silence:

Therefore, Aronne Scotti does not exist anymore, and Michele Bravo, who has taken his place, has decided to bear witness to his love and his fear for the world with silence. Michele agrees, today, with don Lorenzo Milani’s statement “If we could stay silent our whole lives maybe this would be the moment we become Christians”.

Miki spends entire days in silent, lonely sits-in in front of churches and palaces, in streets and squares.

However, many people suspect that, inside the clothes and skin of the man crouching there on the ground, is the same Aronne Scotti that Pavia’s inhabitants have for years considered a saint. There are even people going to kneel in front of him to ask for a blessing: also because the proverb says “those who want the saints should pray to them”.<sup>368</sup>

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**364** “Strani, i santi: c’è il santo eremita, il santo girovago, il santo piagato, il santo taumaturgo, il santo predicatore, il santo inquisitore, il santo teologo, il santo menestrello, il santo soldato, il santo penitente, il santo mistico e il santo peccatore. Aronne si chiese se la santità fosse eroismo umano o scandalo religioso, scandalo umano o eroismo religioso; e ricordò un’opinione di papa Pio IX, che aveva detto, di un santo: ‘Nella sua vita il sovrannaturale divenne quasi naturale e lo straordinario ordinario’. Si sarebbe potuto anche dire, si interrogò Aronne, ‘nella sua vita il naturale divenne sovrannaturale e l’ordinario straordinario?’” (Crovi 1995: 176).

**365** “... gli ha salvato la vita fisica, ma forse anche la vita morale, perché il rumore degli applausi stava frastornando Aronne, guidandolo, inconsciamente, verso quella presunzione del bene che produce spesso la banalità del male. Aronne doveva ora affrontare la terapia dell’umiltà e del silenzio” (Crovi 1995: 193).

**366** “umiltà pacificata” (Crovi 1995: 194).

**367** “Aronne Scotti non esiste più” (Crovi 1995: 197).

**368** “Dunque, Aronne Scotti non esiste più e Michele Bravo, che ha preso il suo posto, ha deciso di testimoniare il suo amore e la sua paura per il mondo con il silenzio. Michele condivide, oggi, l’affermazione di don Lorenzo Milani ‘Se si potesse stare zitti per tutta la vita forse sarebbe la volta che diventeremmo cristiani’. Miki passa intere giornate in silenziosi sit-in solitari, davanti

Aronne now knows the misleading power of words, and so he adopts silence as a humble form of prayer. Aronne understands that he has not been able to attenuate the sorrow of the world and he thinks this is because he is “a small saint, an insignificant saint, or rather an insignificant man,” “I deluded myself that I was leading the way towards a regenerated world but, just like the biblical Aaron whose name I abused, I was not able to find my way out of the desert...”.<sup>369</sup> As a consequence, he refuses all the honors reserved for saints, such as being celebrated in portraits hung in churches. Nevertheless, he continues to nurture the hope that he will live beyond the year 2000, “since today we live in the Apocalypse, may I too see the time of the Lamb, the time of salvation. [...] I believe in the advent of Christ’s universal pacification; Christ, who belongs to both the city of God and the city of man, can create the New City”.<sup>370</sup>

One day Don Piero, persuaded that Aronne does have “moral charisma” and a gift for healing, tells him: “Your sanctity is nothing but irony’. Irony directed at myself, perhaps, Aronne thought quietly [...], and he was not disappointed by that, because he had always thought that the feeling of freedom builds its roots in self-mockery”.<sup>371</sup> Consistently with this view, Aronne “made fun of himself”,<sup>372</sup> for example by dressing scarecrows in his own clothes as if they were images of himself. In the same way he also mocks wealthy people and those who conform to social norms. Many of his actions are, in fact, elaborate and exuberant jokes aimed at denouncing instances of injustice and making people more aware.

Irony as a rhetorical device entails taking a step back from its object. Such a distance allows the person using irony to adopt a critical perspective on the ob-

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a chiese e palazzi, in strade o piazze. Tuttavia molti sospettano [...] che nei vestiti e nella pelle dell’uomo accolto per terra ci sia l’Aronne Scotti che i pavesi, per anni, hanno ritenuto un santo e c’è anche chi va ad inginocchiarsi davanti a lui per chiedere una grazia: tanto più che il proverbio dice ‘Chi vuole i santi, se li preghi’” (Crovi 1995: 199).

**369** “un piccolo santo, un santo insignificante, anzi un uomo insignificante, un piccolo uomo” (Crovi 1995: 202); “Mi sono illuso di guidare il viaggio verso un mondo rigenerato ma, come l’Aronne della Bibbia, del cui nome ho abusato, non ho potuto uscire dal deserto...” (Crovi 1995: 205).

**370** “... perchè, vivendo noi oggi nell’Apocalisse, possa vedere anch’io il tempo dell’Agnello, il tempo della salvezza. [...] Io credo nell’avvento della pacificazione universale di Cristo; Cristo, che appartiene sia alla città di Dio che alla città dell’uomo, può creare la Nuova Città” (Crovi 1995: 206).

**371** “La tua santità non è altro che ironia’. Autoironia, forse, pensò, quieto, Aronne [...]: e non ne era dispiaciuto, perchè aveva sempre pensato che sull’autoironia mette radici il sentimento della libertà.” (Crovi 1995: 70).

**372** “prendeva in giro se stesso” (Crovi 1995: 166).

ject of observation. Irony applied to the self implies, in turn, a subject who takes a step back from himself, a double or split subject in which one part critically observes the other. In Crovi's novel this is expressed very clearly. The narrator and the saint are the same person, but for most of the novel they are described as two brothers with different names and different lives. The narrator speaks of himself using the first person and of the saint using the third person. He puts distance between himself and his sanctity, framing it as something exterior, as a form, label or role placed on him partly by himself and partly by the expectations of the people, who are always on the lookout for charismatic leaders and miracles. The "saint" ends up being a fictive, invented character, in contrast with the more authentic self of the protagonist. Irony is therefore a tool for conducting the severe self-examination that constitutes the core of the narration. Indeed, as described above, Aronne seeks to achieve "the cancellation of the personality that he had created for himself".

In Crovi's novel, irony directed at the self is the aesthetic and semiotic device by which sanctity is described as an exterior form, as a label or contrived double of the authentic self. Sanctity is thus reduced to a rhetorical figure, desecrated, disenchanting and brought back down to a human scale. This concept of sanctity is different from the traditional one, and it shifts the emphasis from the miraculous or spectacular to the purely moral side. Indeed, especially in the first part of the novel, Aronne's religiosity is undefined and full of doubts while his moral aims are clear from the beginning and remain constant throughout, whether or not he believes in a transcendent deity.

In effect, the moment of his conversion to Christianity coincides with his definitive renunciation of the rhetoric of sanctity and acceptance of the only authentic form of religious witnessing: the humble acceptance of life in all of its aspects, including physical love, and simple silence, scorning all forms of propaganda, all rhetoric, traps or flattery using words. Only at this point can the subject overcome its division and acquire peace and unity. The message of the novel is that real sanctity is made not of exterior signs or miracles, but of interior peace, coherence, humility and silence.

#### 4.4 Sanctity and blindness

In several novels, sanctity is represented as a form of blindness, the result of a sacrifice or martyrdom the character has undergone due to his or her naïve, mythical vision of the world. In this corpus, such a motif can be found in Vulnerata's story, but it is represented especially clearly by the character of Eustace who appears in two novels, *Il ballo della sposa* (Santucci: 2012, first published in

1985) and *Viaggio angelico* (Alzona: 1977). Eustace is a child whose story is caught up with the Children's Crusade, a legendary event described in both historical sources and fictional literature such as Schwob (1896) that served as a source of inspiration for Alzona<sup>373</sup>. In the two novels examined in this section, Eustace is a central character: a blind child, he represents an extraordinary model and example of spiritual perfection. Blindness creates a distance between Eustace and the rest of the world and an aptitude for contemplating invisible and transcendent realities while at the same time cultivating an enchanted, mythologized vision of the world.

In *Il ballo della Sposa*, Eustace is an orphan, abandoned by his mother amidst the garbage and exploited by heartless beggars until he escapes with the protagonists, Ugo and Agnes, to join the Children's Crusade. He is convinced that, in the Holy Land, he will find Jesus and be healed of his blindness. Eustace "had big, beautiful eyes, always turned upwards, as if he were looking at a bird on the top of a tree, so that almost the only part you could see was their very white cornea. But Eustace did not see birds, he did not see anything, because he was blind".<sup>374</sup>

However, the boy believes he is not actually completely blind: "I do not think I am really blind. I only see things upwards, but they vanish soon".<sup>375</sup> Eustace has visions of white and gold things, similar to angels, and he hears voices in his head such as the one that tells him to go to the Holy Land. Eustace writes the song of the young crusaders:

We go towards faraway lands.  
Come on, let's march. We are happy and there are many of us.  
They called us dragonflies and frogs,  
but we will be little saints.

We will see in Bethlehem the cradle  
and the beautiful city of Christ.

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**373** Alzona (1977) mentions Schwob (1896) in the "Nota dell'autore" at the beginning of *Viaggio Angelico*. Schwob's book is composed of eight versions of the same event narrated by eight different characters: this structure is analogous to Alzona's narration of Undecimilla's story (Alzona 1986, see above). Regarding the Children's Crusade, see the essays: Miccoli (1961); Dickson (2008). In addition to Schwob (1896), see also the fictional works by Thomas (1973); Treece (1958); Vonnegut (1969); and Goodich (2004: IV, 47–50).

**374** "Aveva occhi grandi e assai belli, sempre arrovesciati verso l'alto come guardasse un uccello in cima a un albero, così che di essi si distingueva quasi solo la cornea bianchissima. Ma Eustace non vedeva uccellini, nulla vedeva poiché era cieco" (Santucci 2012: 25).

**375** "Io non penso di essere proprio cieco. Vedo soltanto cose verso l'alto, che però scompaiono presto" (Santucci 2012: 26).



We do not care anymore about the world,  
anyone who wants joy must follow us.<sup>376</sup>

This song explicitly presents the model of sanctity as giving up the earthly world. In Pisa, Eustace falls to his death from a horse before he can board the ship for the Holy Land. Before dying, however, he has a vision of the Holy Land he is convinced he has achieved thanks to a miracle:

“I have already had my miracle [...] They brought me to the Holy Land, I swear, and I see it, and I would like to be able to describe it to you. What I see is more beautiful than what you see. Things are not to be observed with the eyes, your eyes are lying and insatiable. But I see everything, truly everything. And I am happy.”<sup>377</sup>

His body is placed on the ship, beneath the mast, at the feet of a big crucifix, with his head uncovered and wholly visible. Eustace’s body is not a sad sight for the travelers; it stays fresh, not decomposing, and gives off the perfume of violets, a traditional and well-known attribute of sanctity. Eustace is the perfect personification of the idea that salvation can be achieved through innocence, which is also the main aim of the Children’s Crusade. Given his disability, he is a saint who lives separated from the world from the very beginning, but at the same time he is extremely generous and compassionate.

In *Viaggio Angelico*, Eustace is an aristocratic child who leaves home with a young girl, Ally, to join the Crusade led by Etienne. The situation among the characters is similar to the one described by Santucci (2012): the female character takes lovely care of Eustace while Etienne and Ugo represent a sort of alter-ego in contrast to Eustace’s contemplative and humble nature. Etienne and Ugo are active characters and, in order to act, they must necessarily stain their innocence, to come to a compromise with the harshness of reality. Etienne in particular is also the model of the charismatic leader whose strength and virtue is mainly appearance, as his eloquence does not correspond to the substance of things:

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376 “Noi si va verso terre lontane. Su, marciam. Siam felici e siam tanti. Ci han chiamati libellule e rane, ma saremo dei piccoli santi. Noi vedremo a Betlemme la culla e di Cristo la bella città. Non ci importa del mondo più nulla, chi vuol gioia seguirci dovrà” (Santucci 2012: 48).

377 “L’ho già avuto il miracolo [...] Mi hanno già portato nella Terra Santa, vi giuro, e io la vedo e vorrei potervela descrivere. Quello che vedo io è più bello di quello che voi vedete. Le cose non si guardano con gli occhi, i vostri occhi sono bugiardi e incontentabili. Io invece vedo tutto, proprio tutto. E sono felice” (Santucci 2012: 57).

Etienne had the gift of eloquence, Eustace of silence. Etienne celebrated danger, Eustace practiced patience. His triumphal excitement was almost impertinence and self-passion as much as Eustace's weeping and silent pain encouraged meditation and forgiveness. [...]

Eustace never resorted to evangelical miracles. He did not tempt God by proclaiming himself the object of his pity. [...] The only miracle he had to ask for each day was the strength to endure his disability by mitigating its atrocity with silence.

Eustace tended most of all to the transparency of the hearth [...] Etienne, on the contrary, with his prophetic spirit made every delusion acceptable.<sup>378</sup>

In Alzona's novel, Eustace represents the heroism of childhood and the acceptance of God's will. The narration adopts the point of view of Allys, who is driven to join the crusade by a spirit of adventure and for Eustace's sake more than religious reasons. Just like Undecimilla, Allys cannot but observe Eustace's spiritual perfection and deep faith from outside. Allys wants to provide Eustace with an "angelic adventure, the only one capable of carrying him out of the painful exclusion to which he was condemned".<sup>379</sup> In order to help him, she invents a mythical reality for him:

I obscurely felt that there were only two ways to help him: either to darken reality, to slander life [...] to push him towards something transcending the visible, or to bring everything back to the dream, and to create on this foundation the play of an existence made up of heroic emotions; to transfigure it, elevating it to a scenario worthy only of the august deeds that I used to invent for him.<sup>380</sup>

Unlike Eustace, Allys's faith is weak; she sees the Crusade as a way out of an unsatisfactory life. She is characterized by "extreme disenchantment"<sup>381</sup> but

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**378** "Etienne aveva il dono dell'eloquenza, Eustace del silenzio. Etienne esaltava l'azzardo, Eustace praticava la pazienza. La sua eccitazione trionfale sfiorava l'improntitudine e la passione di sé quanto la lacerante e taciuta pena di Eustace spronava alla meditazione e al perdono. [...] Eustace non faceva mai ricorso ai miracoli evangelici. Non tentava Dio proclamandosi oggetto della sua pietà. [...] Il solo prodigio ch'egli quotidianamente doveva chiedere era la forza di sopportare la sua menomazione mitigandone l'atrocità con il silenzio. Eustace tendeva soprattutto alla trasparenza del cuore [...] Etienne, invece, con il suo spirito profetico rendeva accettabile ogni chimera" (Alzona 1977: 22–23).

**379** "avventura angelica, la sola capace di sottrarlo alla dolorosa esclusione cui era condannato" (Alzona 1977: 14–15).

**380** "*Oscuramente sentivo che non c'erano che due modi per soccorrerlo: o intristire la realtà, difamare la vita [...], per sospingerlo verso qualcosa che trascendesse il visibile, o riportare tutto al sogno e su questo creare il gioco di un'esistenza intessuta di emozioni eroiche; trasfigurarla, elevandola a uno scenario degno solo delle auguste vicende che per lui ero solita improvvisare*" Alzona (1977: 15).

**381** "un estremo disincanto" (Alzona 1977: 41).

nonetheless wants to preserve Eustace's illusions. The idealized reality Allys invents for Eustace is based on chivalric ideas of sanctity and sacrifice: she evokes for him "the courageous spirit of sacrifice characterizing the chivalric ideal shared by the troubadours who sang melodies of unsatisfied desire or [...] the Crusades to sanctify the warrior spirit..."<sup>382</sup> Despite this transfigured vision of the world transmitted to him by the young girl, however, Eustace has "... a sort of arcane joy mitigated by his detachment from the world, because, for him, any too-intense participation in things was dissipation".<sup>383</sup> Indeed, "Eustace's heart [...] was always elsewhere. It wandered not so much in the legends that I improvised for him, but rather in the regions of faith".<sup>384</sup> Eustace is moved by a deep "need for the absolute",<sup>385</sup> and this preserves his innocence from the passions and from disenchantment.

Indeed, while all of the other characters take part in the crusade driven by covert, earthly passions or are animated by arrogant and not charitable feelings, Eustace is the only one who treats it as his only chance not only to be part of a mythical, epic, and heroic endeavor but also to make a sacrifice of his life, to fulfil his faith and his vocation to martyrdom. At the same time, however, Allys feels guilty because she suspects that she has manipulated Eustace by fueling his dream and involving him in the crusade only to fulfil her own thirst for adventure, even though she actually understands "the extent to which the sacrifice that Etienne asked of us was absurd and despicable, in its seduction".<sup>386</sup>

During the long journey towards the Holy Land, Allys grows up: "My heart had consumed the refined gold of innocence. I was about to exit childhood and, along with it, lose wonder and mystery".<sup>387</sup> This does not happen to Eustace; he never loses the innocence of childhood, in part because of his premature death. The Saracens capture the young crusaders and many of them are forced into slavery, made to choose between converting to Islam or being killed. Eustace refuses conversion and is therefore put to death. Allys describes Eustace's martyr-

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**382** "l'animoso spirito di sacrificio proprio dell'ideale cavalleresco comune ai trovatori che intonarono le melodie del desiderio inappagato o [...] le Crociate per santificare lo spirito guerriero..." (Alzona 1997: 15).

**383** "... una sorta di letizia arcana mitigata dal suo distacco dal mondo giacché per lui ogni partecipazione troppo intensa alle cose era dissipazione" (Alzona 1977: 16).

**384** "Eustace [...] aveva sempre il cuore altrove. Non tanto spaziava nelle leggende che io improvvisavo per lui quanto nelle regioni della fede" (Alzona 1977: 20).

**385** "bisogno di assoluto" (Alzona 1977: 44).

**386** "quanto fosse assurdo ed esecrabile, nella sua seduzione, il sacrificio che ci chiedeva Etienne" (Alzona 1977: 86).

**387** "Il mio cuore aveva consumato l'oro fino dell'innocenza. Stavo per uscire dall'infanzia e perdere con essa meraviglia e mistero" (Alzona (1977: 91).

dom as an “extreme gesture crafted with a silent heart as a work of art”.<sup>388</sup> For him, “This marvellous and undermined life [...] was nothing but a crossing, aimed as it was at other goals”.<sup>389</sup>

Eustace therefore represents a model of sanctity that excludes ordinary people. It is based firstly on his blindness, which causes him to be detached from the world, to tend towards the contemplation of transcendence and to resign himself to God’s will. Secondly, it is based on the innocence of childhood. At the same time, it is tied to a fictional dimension, to the development of a mythical reality based on cultural heritage, an epic vision of life that ultimately does not correspond to reality. Moreover, Eustace’s is a form of perfection that can only be observed from outside. In both novels, Eustace is a model of spiritual perfection that the other characters, with their human weaknesses and scarce faith, cannot match. Eustace possesses a world of his own that no one else can see. Eustace is the object of the love and gazes of the other characters, but to some extent it is impossible for them to fully know him; he has privileged access to a superior sphere of spiritual life that continues to constitute a mystery for those around him. He represents the personification of myth in the harshness of reality. His enchanted figure is looked on with love and some nostalgia by the disenchanting characters surrounding him. Once more, in this respect as well, the ways this story of sanctity is constructed are different from those employed in traditional accounts.

Indeed, in both Alzona (1977) and Santucci (2012), Eustace represents the saintly child, a figure whose description can achieve a powerful poetic effect thanks, for example, to his state of separation from the world, his gentleness and his beauty. However, Eustace’s sanctity is described as a naïve adherence to fictional narratives that have no correspondence in reality.

## 4.5 Conclusion

The figure of the saint is intrinsically ambivalent (Consolino 1994). On one hand, saints have an intense relationship with the world. Indeed, they are human beings who have achieved a high level of perfection, thus becoming imitable models for other people and guiding them in their everyday lives; moreover, saints are supposed to play an active role in the matters of this world both during

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**388** “estremo gesto preparato nel silenzio del cuore come un’opera d’arte” (Alzona 1977: 136).

**389** “Questa vita meravigliosa ed insidiata [...] non era che un transito teso com’era ad altri traguardi” (Alzona 1977: 127).

and after their deaths. On the other hand, however, they are also characterized by their being separated from earthly life, of engaging in communion with God, and of a form of exceptionality that distinguishes them from the rest of humanity. As mentioned in the introduction, this state of “separation” is particularly accentuated in contemporary literature.

At least from the Second Vatican Council (*Lumen Gentium* 1964) onward, the church has proposed new models of sanctity inspired by the principle of “sanctity for all”,<sup>390</sup> thus seeking to reduce the perceived distance between the idea of sanctity and everyday life. Notwithstanding these efforts, however, the analysis presented here shows that this condition of “separation” is particularly accentuated in contemporary literature and is, moreover, endowed with new connotations.

This can be explained, firstly, in light of the fact that traditional ideas about sanctity continue to influence people’s thinking, particularly the idea that a saint has a special relationship with transcendence:

[The words] “sacrality” and “sanctity,” in a Christian sense, [...] define a phenomenon and a situation, either personal or not, characterized by a positive reference to the Transcendent. In their concrete application, they always imply the notion of separation, in a positive sense, that distinguishes both Divinity [...] and all creatures seeking to meet or communicate with it. Sanctity is, therefore, vital participation in the being/entity of God [...]. The saint requires a series of forms of avoidance, prohibitions and, in an affirmative sense, consecrations and veneration...<sup>391</sup>

Grégoire (1987: 3) theorizes that there is also a further kind of “distance” connected to sanctity. Indeed, he observes that all hagiographic accounts refer to a dead person who is projected into the present and future but nevertheless belongs to a past that is always distinct from the time of the receiver. Through hagiographic accounts, the meaning of the story of the saint is made current and brought into dialogue with ongoing issues. In semiotic terms, therefore, we

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**390** On this principle and on the renewal of models of sanctity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Rusconi (2005).

**391** “[I vocaboli] ‘sacralità’ e di ‘santità’, in chiave cristiana, [...] definiscono un fenomeno e una realtà, personale o no, caratterizzata da un riferimento positivo col Trascendente. [...] Nella loro applicazione concreta, implicano sempre la nozione di *separazione*, in modo positivo, che contraddistingue tanto la Divinità [...] quanto ogni creatura che intende incontrarla o comunicarla. La santità è dunque una partecipazione vitale all’essere di Dio [...]. Il santo richiede una serie di evitazioni, di divieti e, in modo affermativo, di consacrazioni e di venerazioni...” (Grégoire 1987: 46–47).

can say that all hagiographic accounts contain a *débrayage*, a distance between the text's content and the discursive situation.

Secondly, the disconnected status of saints can also be explained from a literary perspective. Indeed, "solitude" is often recognized as a key condition in the novel genre (Barengi 2002). In an insightful essay from 2009 Testa explores this particular feature, distinguishing between two main categories of characters in 20<sup>th</sup> century fiction, namely "heroes" or "absolute" characters and "*figuranti*" or "relative" characters. While the latter are defined in relation to others, the former are defined in contrast to others, and their antagonistic attitude can culminate in either self-disruption or a tendency towards the annihilation of the world (Testa 2009: 96). According to Testa, an "absolute" character

is characterized by an essential lack of evolution or, in any case, of change; by a passionate striving for truth to the detriment of any other values; and by an intensification of subjectivity which, in terms of composition, has the monologue form as its ultimate objective. Underlying all these aspects we can identify his or her tragic and ostentatious conflict with reality.<sup>392</sup>

Following Testa's typology, I would argue that, while the post-conciliar Church points out and actively promotes the "relative" nature of the saint, Italian literature instead tends to represent saints as "heroes," not in the sense of the "heroicity" that is a traditional requisite of sanctity but in the very different sense of the saint as an "absolute" character. This prerogative is not specific to Italian fiction; it can be found in other contexts as well. For example, Cunningham (2005) points out that a specific condition of detachment is typical of models of sanctity of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Mentioning examples from different national literatures, Cunningham shows that the 20<sup>th</sup> century saint represented in novels is an "outsider:"

Each of the novels uses the imagery of the Bible [...] and the language of sanctity to explore the theme of human transcendence for the greater good of humanity in a culture in which the traditional forms and language of religious faith do not seem capable of bearing up under the weight either of religious doubt or the might of powerful anti-religious political movements of both Left and Right. Their particular angle of vision reflects at least one element of the conception of saints in the twentieth century: namely, the saint as outsider both in terms of being outside traditional religious practice and also as witness *against*

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**392** "si caratterizza per una sostanziale assenza di evoluzione o, comunque, di mutamento; per una passionale aspirazione al vero a scapito di qualsiasi altro valore; e per un'exasperazione della soggettività, la quale ha, sul piano compositivo, per suo obiettivo estremo la forma del monologo. Alla base di tutti questi aspetti si può collocare il suo tragico e ostentato dissidio con la realtà" (Testa 2009: 96).

the political-social situation which they consider inhumane and venomous.  
(Cunningham 2005: 109)

And yet the state of “separation” that is generally described as an essential and positive characteristic of sanctity takes on a negative value in the Italian literature analyzed herein. This negative value is often represented through the addition of a further level of *débrayage* consisting in the lack of identification with the character of the saint, that is, the practice of representing the saint from the outside as a monad, an incomprehensible being, the other.<sup>393</sup> Such distance is expressed through certain rhetoric devices such as irony (Crovi 1995), the duplication of characters (Testori 1974), or the adoption of an external narrative point of view (Alzona 1986).

Moreover, there is also another important difference between the narratives analyzed herein and traditional hagiography. While traditional hagiography is, as stated by Grégoire (1987) in the quote above, a form of popular literature that functions to vulgarize theology, it is clear that our texts diverge significantly from this model. Indeed, in many cases they cannot truly be said to adhere to established theology. As we have seen, for example, the sanctity of Vulnerata in Alzona (1986) is a form of selfishness and lack of comprehension of or consideration for others (that is, a lack of compassion); the sanctity of the bishop in Testori (1974) is a negative model; and Crovi’s sinner saint refuses sanctity as a mundane façade that does not constitute true moral and religious elevation. Crovi (1995) instead proposes an alternative model of sanctity consisting of a purely “moral” perfection that renounces the traditional attributes of “religious” sanctity (namely, a privileged relationship with God and the supernatural). Therefore, even though most of the novels considered in this chapter, with the exception of Testori (1974), can be considered popular literature (due to the simplicity of their language and structure, for example), the messages they convey do not represent examples of the orthodoxy mentioned by Grégoire (1987).

These representations of sanctity are the products of a long historical process. In particular, it is possible to identify – albeit with a goodly measure of generalization – several key periods that brought about fundamental changes in the representation of saints.<sup>394</sup>

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**393** Of course, this is a generalization based on the analyzed novels, but exceptions exist. For example, the short tale “I santi” in Buzzati (1968) adopts the point of view of a fictive saint, San Gancillo. Canonized 200 years after his death, San Gancillo, who is a humble peasant saint, tries in vain to make alive people to remember him.

**394** For an overview of the history of the Church’s definition and regulation of sanctity, see Dalla Torre (1999); Boesch Gajano (1999); Gotor (2004).

The first period is constituted by the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when numerous new cults were established appealing to different social groups and responding to both religious needs and the aims of papal politics. As Goodich explains, accounts of miracles were abundant and popular belief in them continued at the same level as previous centuries. However, scholastic theologians

... attempted to limit the number of phenomena termed miraculous and to provide rational arguments against enemies of true faith. We therefore begin to discern a growing effort in learned circles to stress the saint's virtuous life as an example to believers rather than miracles, given the unreliable testimony of the laity, the efforts of Satan do delude the faithful, and the possibility of employing philosophical, medical, legal and other sources to provide a rational explanation to many miracles.

(Goodich 2004: Preface X)

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, therefore, we might identify an initial trend towards reducing the miraculous and accentuating the moral and “semiotic” value of saints as a sign and example. This change took place in parallel with a progressive shift towards centralizing the power to canonize new saints in the hands of the pontiff alone. Indeed, before the publication of Gregory IX's Decrees (1234) both the pope and bishops were allowed to proclaim new saints, but Gregory IX established this as the exclusive prerogative of the pope. In order to curb the proliferation of uncontrolled and often unorthodox cults, the criteria for defining sanctity and the procedures for its official recognition became more detailed and systematic. At the same time, saints played an important role in proposing a positive model of perfection in contrast with increasingly heretic currents of thought.

The second key period is constituted by another moment in which the Church was required to strenuously defend her doctrine, that is, the Counter-Reformation. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Pope Urban VIII set out a detailed framework of the criteria for defining sanctity. He stated that, in order to be canonized, saints, with the exception of martyrs, had to fulfill three requirements: “doctrinal purity, heroic virtue, and miraculous intercession after death” (Weinhaus and Bell 1982: 141). As Leone (2010) points out, harsh Protestant critics of the Catholic conception of sanctity had a certain influence on the modern model of sanctity proposed by the Roman Church. The saints acquired the role of “religious media” (Leone 2010: 5): the Church specified that they were not the direct object of idolatrous veneration, but vehicles through which the faithful could contemplate and reach God.

The norms and doctrine regarding sanctity were systematically laid out in a highly important text published between 1734 and 1738: *De servorum Dei Beati-*



*ficazione et Beatorum Canonizatione*<sup>395</sup> by Prospero Lambertini, the bishop who later became pope under the name Benedict XIV (and who we met as a character in Bartolini 1978). This work, which was published during the Illuminist period, accentuated the tendency to use scientific methods to evaluate sanctity, for example by consulting physicians in the examination of miracles and by using historical-critical methods to examine the sources about saints who lived in ancient epochs.

The latest period of change is the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There are scholars and theologians (such as Grégoire) who directly connect the Second Vatican Council with changes in the representation of sanctity. Whether or not the Council had a direct influence on the conception and representation of sanctity, there has surely been a trend, the precursors of which can already be identified in previous historical periods, to further rationalize the figure of saint, to reduce its miraculous component to a minimum or deny it altogether and to grant the saint's deeds a purely moral and ethical value. Moreover, 20<sup>th</sup> century fictional literature tends to represent the transcendent character of sanctity in a negative light. As mentioned above, the saint's intransigent detachment from the world is often depicted in dysphoric terms: in Alzona (1986) it is described as selfishness and heartlessness, in Covi we find a saint who renounces mundane glory but does not cease his moral action in this world, even while bearing witness in silence, and in Testori (1974) the saint is still a body even after his death.

In conclusion, on one hand the literary representations of saints analyzed echo the move, launched by the Church herself, to remove the enchantment from sanctity. On the other hand, however, this desire to void sanctity of her supernatural and traditional aura is not matched by the capacity or will to propose a positive model of sanctity in line with the principles of the Second Vatican Council, which proposed sanctity for everybody to be applied by "normal" people in everyday life. This model of sanctity is not positively represented in Italian literature and has not, to date, been converted into a recurring thematic role in fiction. On the contrary, Italian literature offers mainly atypical, provocative, and unconventional models of sanctity.

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<sup>395</sup> Lambertini's work is still considered a seminal reference by those who work on the causes of canonization (see e.g. Criscuolo, Ols, and Sarno 2014), and a new edition of the Latin text accompanied by the Italian translation was published between 2010 and 2017.

## Conclusion

Both religious and literary discourses pay a great deal of attention to communication and to the use of signs, thus constituting fruitful terrain for the development of reflections on semiotics. Religious and literary semiotic ideologies produced in the same place and period are very likely to present similarities, and indeed the meta-discourse about language and communication contained in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and in the contemporary and successive Italian fictional literature share several common points.

The most significant similarity is probably the stress that both metalinguistic discourses put on the referential function of language.<sup>396</sup> The Second Vatican Council stresses the fact that religious communication should be clear and understandable, that the simple and efficient transmission of meaning is more important than the form or beauty of religious language. According to the conciliar and post-conciliar Catholic Church, rather than working as a mysterious and magnificent code, language should be used to convey intelligible content, especially in liturgy. To this end the Council promoted the vernacularization of the mass and of other liturgical texts, thus undoing the prominence of Latin as a common language inside the Church and instead fostering an abundance of different languages to be used in sacred contexts. This increasing number of codes entering the sphere of the sacred was also paralleled by an increasing number of channels that the conciliar fathers deemed useful for spreading the Church's message: the *Inter mirifica* (1963) decree encouraged and regulated Catholics' use of media such as the press, radio, and TV.

In the literary works analyzed herein, the referential function of language is at the center of a widespread concern. The increasing number of different languages and cultural codes in religion, in the arts, and in culture more broadly, as well as the exponential increase in information in an unprecedented number of media, are seen as fostering an abuse of language, causing it to risk losing its meaning. The increase in codes is thus frequently read as a centrifugal movement that leads to chaos. From the writers' point of view, the absence of a conceptual center and code superimposed from above entails greater creative freedom. Such freedom is seen as the possibility to shrug off the authority of tradition (both religious and literary tradition). In our corpus, however, it also engenders a fear of meaninglessness and unintelligibility, together with the awareness that any experimental code will inevitably be imperfect. In addition, a number of novels express a generalized sense of difficulty in communication,

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**396** On the referential function, see Jakobson (1960).

both between human beings and between humans and the deity. Authors such as Tamaro and Pasqualino, moreover, also express another facet of this widespread concern about referentiality. According to these authors, the risk of language losing its referentiality, that is, its inevitable decline towards meaninglessness, is caused by humans' tendency to exclude God. The absence of God produces an infinite semiotic drift ending in meaninglessness. From this perspective, God plays the role of the conceptual guarantor of meaning, the only pillar sustaining human semiosis.

In our corpus, this sense of the difficulty of communication and imperfection of human language are contrasted with the idea of a perfect match between signifier and signified. This idea is connected, in turn, with the theme of perfect language: lost with the fall from Eden, perfect language is at the heart of an endless quest on the part of human beings.<sup>397</sup> However, while texts such as Crovi (1982) credit solely human beings with having created human language, other texts, such as Alianello (1966), still attribute a role to divine agency in the creation and production of language, even after the fall. In the case of Alianello (1966), this also entails a perfect correspondence between signifier and signified, in that the names of things and feelings come into Eve's mind as she experiences and recognizes them. These positions do, obviously, contrast with the theory of the arbitrariness of language that currently dominates cultivated secular discourse. As I have observed, especially after the Second Vatican Council's move to open its doors to "modern" culture, the Church herself has had problems proposing the narrative of Genesis to the audience of her faithful. The story of creation poses other theological problems that have resonated deeply, such as debates about creationism;<sup>398</sup> nevertheless, even though the problem of language holds only a secondary position, it does constitute another element of the story that seems difficult to put forward and to explain, nowadays, given that prevailing secular culture tends to instead endorse the semiotic ideology of the arbitrariness of language.

There is no doubt that religious motifs connected to the Bible and to Catholicism continue to play a lively role in Italian literature. The same is true of traditional liturgy. The stories considered here express the idea that traditional liturgy was deeply rooted in Italian culture, at least until the Second Vatican Council. Writers who grew up in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century tend to express both a sense of its old-fashioned character and nostalgia for its loss. At the same

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**397** The search for the perfect language is a recurring topos in Western culture, see Eco (1993).

**398** Which, however, had a greater resonance in the US than in Europe. On this topic, see e.g. Hayward's annotated bibliography (1998).

time, a new generation of young Catholics is reacting to the Church's stress on the use of national languages and plain meaning centered on referentiality by re-adopting and re-evaluating Latin. In Raimo (2012), for instance, the performance of Latin liturgy is part of a process of spiritual growth aiming at injecting some order into the protagonist's life and thought and re-inventing a Catholic identity in today's world.

Although religious motifs connected to the Bible and to Catholicism do maintain a lively presence, they are often treated in ways that contrast with Catholic doctrine, sometimes in openly polemical tones. These polemics are mainly directed against the Church as an earthly institution but, despite their accusatory character, such critical positions also entail at least two constructive elements. The first consists in the fact that religious practices, characters, and symbols are often connected to a spiritual quest, a move which is evident in the intention, expressed by authors such as Parazzoli, to write literary texts as a way of carrying out and presenting theological research. The second constructive aspect consists in the use of literature as a virtual place for experimenting with possible modes of life<sup>399</sup> inspired by religious values and leading to the adoption of a Catholic religious identity as a viable option in today's world. In particular, the novels propose two opposite attitudes. On the one hand, Raimo provides a "pragmatic" ideal of Catholic life in which the individual takes an active part in community and fully lives his life. In a similar way, a full acceptance of the body complete with specific needs and the creation of a family constitute the ultimate ends of the pathway of spiritual growth charted by Crovi's saint. On the other hand, however, there is also a strong tendency towards ascetism expressed in our corpus, especially in Silone (2014).

The problem posed in *L'avventura di un povero cristiano*, which dates back to 1968, is still relevant even today. For example, the act of giving up secular society, perceived as disordered, chaotic, and immoral, and taking on a Benedictine way of life was proposed in 2017 in *The Benedict Option: a strategy for Christians in a post-Christian nation* by the US author Dreher. This book caused a lively debate, the echoes of which made their way as far as Europe. For instance, the famous Jesuit journal *La Civiltà Cattolica* strongly criticized Dreher's proposal of a "Benedict option" for life by claiming that it "carries the risk of an exclusive focus on moral rigidity, doctrinal purity and the reestablishment of a parallel society rather than on the construction of unity and communion within the Church

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<sup>399</sup> On theories presenting fictional characters as vehicles for the experimentation of ways of life, see Ponzo (2015: 21–22).

and with all people of goodwill”.<sup>400</sup> Actually, in the Second Vatican Council<sup>401</sup> the Church promoted the active participation of the faithful in the world and assigned a more incisive role to the secular in spreading the Church’s message. The fact that social engagement is one of the main pillars of post-conciliar Catholicism is also evidenced by the emphasis on social models of sanctity,<sup>402</sup> as well as by the tendency for popes such as John Paul II and Francis to act more and more as moral leaders and prominent participants in social and humanitarian matters.

The fact that the Church has lost her temporal power and tends to present herself as a social rather than sovereign or political institution, however, does not resolve the recurring critique of her attachment to earthly interests. This is evident in Morselli’s dystopia, where the “Church has never been as earthly as now that she is not territorial at all” (Morselli 1974: 121). Morselli’s text is an exemplary representation of the fear of centrifugal loss of authority and of meaning. The absence of a geographical cornerstone and spiritual authority leads to a situation of confusion in which the truth ends up lost in the plurality of voices that rise up to cover the Vatican’s silence. As a consequence, this body of literature does not end up resolving the contrast between immanence and transcendence, which can be seen in both the conceptualization of a Catholic way of life and in the Church as simultaneously earthly and spiritual institution; the authors cited here do not propose a positive solution to this dilemma.

The Second Vatican Council declared that the main goal of artwork should be “turning men’s minds devoutly toward God” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 1963: n. 122). As we have seen, it is hard to find an unproblematic encouragement of Catholic faith in the literature analyzed here. At the same time, however, there is no question that, in most cases, fictional literature entails a spiritual quest, the intention of finding the right direction in which to look in the effort to locate God. The message of *aggiornamento* and openness proposed by the conciliar Church has not fully achieved its goal, apparently. The inner change fostered by the Second Vatican Council has been welcomed by authors such as Silone, but it has not brought about either the clarity of doctrine hoped for by conciliar fathers or an uncontestedly positive image of the Church. Furthermore, the conciliar prescription about art is also violated in the sense that religious themes and figures are sometimes not treated with an edifying function at all. In these cases, religion is treated in a “secularized” way, if by secularization

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**400** <https://www.laciviltacattolica.it/rassegna/la-civiltà-cattolica-demolishes-the-benedict-op-tion/>

**401** See e.g. *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (1965).

**402** About social models of sanctity, see e.g. Rusconi (2005: 338–352).

we mean “the complete autonomy of a world that is to be understood intrinsically on its own terms” (Bedouelle 2005: 1466). For instance, religious themes occupy a prominent place in Meneghello’s novel, but the intention of this work is clearly not that of enlightening the reader or leading him or her to religious faith. Similarly, the figure of the saint is rarely presented as an educational *exemplum*. Novels such as Alzona (1986) or Testori (1974) instead provide a problematic portrait of the figure of the saint. In these literary representations, saints appear not as a model to imitate, as Catholic tradition prescribes, but rather as a post-modern elaboration of the human type that Le Goff (2012) identified as one of the cultural models (“the saint”) shaped in the Middle Ages and underlying European culture. It would make more sense, therefore, to speak of a cultural or secular, rather than religious, representation of saints.

Is this literary treatment of religion, in most cases unorthodox and sometimes purely cultural or secular, a sign of secularization? As we have seen, post-conciliar secular literature clearly claims an active role in theological reflection. This exportation of theology from its traditional contexts and genres legitimized by the authority of the Church might actually look like a form of secularization. While a more traditionalist, conservative perspective could identify this move to introduce theology in a profane domain as a form of desacralization, writers tend to interpret this general interest in theological reflection as the positive indicator of a generalized longing for the sacred. According to this perspective, the literary treatment of religious themes tends to be considered not a degradation but rather an expansion of the domain of the sacred beyond its traditional borders. Despite all the discrepancies pointed out here, such an expansion does seem to be in line with the general spirit of openness promoted by the Second Vatican Council.

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