Relations Beyond Encounters: Reinterpreting Post-Coloniality in Egyptian and Italian Literatures and Identities between 1826 and 1940

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Literature

by

Nadine Makram Wassef

Committee in charge:
Professor Stephanie Jed, Co-Chair
Professor Pasquale Verdicchio, Co-Chair
Professor Fatima El-Tayeb
Professor Amelia Glaser
Professor Pamela B Radcliff

2013
Copyright

Nadine Makram Wassef, 2013

All rights reserved.
The Dissertation of Nadine Makram Wassef is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

Co-Chair

Co-Chair

University of California, San Diego

2013
DEDICATION

To Carol, Karim, and Ramy,
You are my source of love, joy, and wisdom
You are my revolution, you are my home
EPIGRAPH

Dall’altra parte del mare non c’è solo ciò che non è ancora sviluppo ma vie che vanno verso i deserti e gli altipiani, altre preghiere, altre chiese, altre lingue che rifiutano la traduzione. [...] Fino a quando continueremo a ritenere che lo scorrere inevitabile verso Occidente sia l’unico moto possibile del giorno e che il Mediterraneo sia solo un mare del passato, avremo puntato gli occhi nella direzione sbagliata e il degrado che ci circonda non cesserà mai di crescere.

Franco Cassano

Parlare del Mediterraneo è parlare non solo della nostra storia o delle relazioni in dimensione euromediterranea, ma della storia dell’umanità. Ripercorrendo un immaginario itinerario di luoghi, miti e leggende, da Atene a Smirne, da Palermo a Cartagine, da Lepanto ad Alessandria fino ad Itaca, appare chiaro come il “Mare Nostrum” conservi intatta una tradizione che è testimonianza della nostra civiltà e cultura.

Massimo D’Alema

Non possono esistere i solamente uomini, gli estranei alla città. Chi vive veramente non può non essere cittadino, e partigiano. Indifferenza è abulia, è parassitismo, è vigliaccheria, non è vita. Perciò odio gli indifferenti.

Antonio Gramsci

P.S.: Il dialogo continua attraverso il Mediterraneo che è Mare Omnibus.

Nadine Wassef
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page ................................................................. iii
Dedication ................................................................... iv
Epigraph .......................................................................... v
Table of Contents ................................................................. vi
List of Figures ................................................................... viii
Acknowledgements ................................................................. ix
Vita ............................................................................... xiii
Abstract of the Dissertation.................................................... xv
Introduction ........................................................................ 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 1</th>
<th>................................................................. 24</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>.................................................................. 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>.................................................................. 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>.................................................................. 38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 2</th>
<th>................................................................. 51</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>.................................................................. 52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>.................................................................. 57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>.................................................................. 65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>.................................................................. 70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>.................................................................. 75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>.................................................................. 80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>.................................................................. 85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>.................................................................. 91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Chapter 3 | ................................................................. 95 |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 4</th>
<th>................................................................. 130</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>.................................................................. 132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>.................................................................. 138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>.................................................................. 144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>.................................................................. 150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>.................................................................. 154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>.................................................................. 157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>.................................................................. 166</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Conclusion

Chapter 5
- 5.1
- 5.2
- 5.3
- 5.4
- 5.5
- 5.6
- Conclusion

General Conclusion

Works Consulted
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: *Manifesto del futurismo* word cloud ........................................... 85
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would never have come to fruition without the support of many individuals, and it is with pleasure and gratitude that I acknowledge their effort.

I would like to acknowledge Professor Stephanie Jed for her support throughout this long process as my advisor and the co-chair of my committee. Since I joined the Literature department her mentorship and generous availability have been a major source of support for me both as a PhD student, as a mother, and as a person. Stephanie, I will always be indebted to you for having taught me how to be a scholar, teacher, and mentor. Thank you for your advice also in matters related to my work as a Teaching Assistant and for all the letters you took the time to write in my support. You always listened to me and attentively read my work even in its earliest draft format and you patiently guided me to better express myself and better shape my argument. You have given me the opportunity to develop my own individuality and self-sufficiency by allowing me to work with such independence while being available whenever I needed guidance. I cannot thank you enough for having encouraged me to not only grow as an Italianist and Comparatist but also as an instructor and an independent thinker.

I would also like to acknowledge Professor Pasquale Verdicchio for his invaluable support as the co-chair of my committee. Through multiple drafts, his guidance and comments have proven to be invaluable. Pasquale, your encouragement and mentorship have inspired me to find my way in research. Thank you for believing in my work and for patiently guiding me to shape my project. Thank you for your honesty, integrity, your dedication to your work and students, and most importantly
your sense of humor. Thank you for professionally pointing to the strong areas of my work and for giving me support when I needed it. Your friendship means a lot to me.

I am also grateful to the remaining members of my wonderful and supportive dissertation committee, Pamela Radcliff, Amelia Glaser, and Fatima El-Tayeb. Their academic support and generous input are greatly appreciated. Pamela, Amelia, and Fatima, (in the order you joined my dissertation committee) your dedication to your own work has been an inspiration. I am honored for having had the opportunity to work with you and grateful for every time you made yourself available to listen to my questions and to read my drafts.

Chapter 2, in part, has been accepted for publication of the material as it may appear in the Palgrave-MacMillan Mediterranean Series. Publication of the paper is expected in October, 2014 as part of the volume Mediterranean Modernism: Intercultural Exchange and Aesthetic Development, 1880-1945. I would like to thank Adam J. Goldwyn and Renée M. Silverman for their hard work putting this volume together and for including many voices across the Mediterranean in this great volume.

My dissertation was financially supported by the Literature department through a final year dissertation fellowship. I would like to thank the Executive Committee for awarding me a Departmental Dissertation Year Fellowship for 2012-13. This fellowship has granted me a productive final year devoted to research and writing. I am grateful to the department for supporting my project and for trusting my promise to complete my dissertation before June 2013.

I would also like to thank the Egyptian Cultural and Educational Bureau staff in Washington, DC for their continuous support and prompt handling of the
paperwork of my study-leave to keep my teaching position at Ain Shams University while I was working to complete my degree.

I would like to take the opportunity to express my immense gratitude to a great mentor and professor that I have lost last October. Professor Moheb Saad Ibrahim was the chair of my Masters Thesis that I completed in 2008 and has been a great mentor and teacher since I was an undergraduate student at the same university. His never failing support whenever I talked to him over the phone until a week before he passed away and his belief in my work and capabilities have continuously inspired me since I was an undergraduate student. Doctor Moheb, as I used to call him, has been a living proof, for my colleagues and me, to the integrity of professors and their dedication to mentorship and research despite the lack of financial resources of which Egyptian Academia has been suffering for decades.

I want to thank my friends for their collegiality and friendship. Four friends, in particular, I must mention: Ilaria Tabusso-Marcy, Ana Grinberg, Milda Zilinskaite, and Ramez Sami Ghobrial. You friendship and support throughout this process had made graduate life more tolerable and even enjoyable. Ilaria, thank you for your constant support and help when I had questions about Italian culture. Thank you for sharing your vegetables from your vegetable garden and for cooking for me when we studied together. Ana, thank you for your constant support, availability, care and friendship. Thank you, Milda, for being present even when you were travelling in another continent. Thank you for teaching me how to enjoy life, my research, and how to appreciate other people. Also, thank you, Ramez, for your continuous support from Cairo. For five years you patiently took care of paperwork related to my leave of
absence at Ain Shams University. I am deeply grateful for being surrounded by so many smart, loving, and generous friends and colleagues.

My acknowledgment extends to my parents and sisters. I want especially to thank my mother and mother in law for supporting me by leaving their work and home to come stay with us in San Diego for extended periods of time to help take care of the children. Mom, thank you for supporting me by being physically present when I needed help. My father, thank you for always believing in me and for teaching me perseverance and the value of time. My sisters, Marianne and Maggy, thank you for your continuous encouragement and for thinking about the smallest details. Even if we live in three different continents our friendship is everlasting. My parents, your hard work to give me a good education in Egypt will always inspire me. I am grateful for your love and support. Thank you for inspiring me not to give up at times when balancing so many responsibilities seemed impossible.

Last, but not least, I acknowledge with deep thanks my wonderful friend and husband, Ramy K. Aziz. Our friendship has started five years before our twelve years of marriage. Ramy, I would not have been able to complete this long dissertation journey without your love, support and belief in me. I am indebted to you especially for the last few months when you completely took care of our small children to give me the time to fully work on my dissertation. We both have grown and changed throughout this journey and we have learned a lot about love and life. This dissertation is dedicated to your, Ramy, and to our beautiful children Carol and Karim. Thank you for your unconditional love and for being in my life.

xii
VITA

1999 Bachelor of Arts in Italian, Ain Shams University

2000-2001 Teaching Assistant, Department of Italian Studies, Ain Shams University

2001-2004 Teaching Assistant, Department of Foreign Languages, University of Memphis

2004 Master of Arts in Romance Languages, University of Memphis

2004-2005 Language Instructor, Department of Foreign Languages, University of Memphis

2006-2008 Teaching Assistant, Department of Italian Studies, Ain Shams University

2008 Master of Arts in Italian Literature, Ain Shams University

2008-2010 Teaching Assistant, University of California, San Diego

2010-2011 Research Assistant, University of California, San Diego

2011 Candidate in Philosophy in Literature, University of California, San Diego

2011-2012 Teaching Assistant, Third World Studies Program, University of California, San Diego

2013 Doctor of Philosophy in Literature, University of California, San Diego

PUBLICATIONS


FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Literature (Italian and Comparative Literature)

Studies in Italian Cinema and Culture
Professor Pasquale Verdicchio

Studies in Modern Italian Literature
Professor Moheb Saad Ibrahim

Studies in French Literature
Professor Brigitte Weltman-Aron and Professor Ralph Albanese

Studies in Middle Eastern Literature
Professor Babak Rahimi
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Relations Beyond Encounters: Reinterpreting Post-Coloniality in Egyptian and Italian Literatures and Identities between 1826 and 1940

by

Nadine Makram Wassef

Doctor of Philosophy in Literature

University of California, San Diego, 2013

Professor Stephanie Jed, Co-Chair
Professor Pasquale Verdicchio, Co-Chair

The scope of this dissertation is to examine the representations of Egypt in modern Italian literature. By closely analyzing Egyptian, Italian and French texts related to the colonial moment and the Italian intellectual environment during fascism I revise current views of colonial relations between Egypt and Europe. Informed by a historical and a theoretical perspective that deals with the rise of nationhood, the regulation of national identity, and intellectuals’ responses to these changes, I
demonstrate the inadequacies of the terms “national” and “colonial” to account for the “intermingling” and “interdependent” work of the texts I examine. The novels and poems I examine host representational features that reveal the polyphonic character of the lives of Italian immigrants in Egypt during the early twentieth century. Such polyphony invalidates fascist efforts at establishing a national identity based on the illusion of an essential national character and a homogenous cultural background.

This dissertation recognizes the intersection of three main vectors in the creation of the creative works analyzed in this dissertation: politics, the cultural environment, and the specific autobiography of the authors. The literary texts I study in this dissertation, constructed from the everyday events of intercultural relations, seek to understand life through social interactions. In this way, I stress the need to view cultural relations between Egypt and Italy not as the mere result of colonial interests that become regulated during the fascist era but rather as a relationship that has been organically built through mutual dialogue, friendship and cultural negotiations formed across time and that I aim to detect in the literary texts in question.
Introduction

Far from encouraging a sense of aggrieved primal innocence in countries which had suffered the ravages of colonialism, I stated repeatedly that mythical abstractions such as [“East” and “West”] were lies, as were the various rhetorics of blame they gave rise to; cultures are too intermingled, their contents and histories too interdependent and hybrid, for surgical separation into large and mostly ideological oppositions like Orient and Occident. (Edward Said *Representations of the Intellectual* xii)

The scope of this present dissertation is to examine the representations of Egypt in modern Italian literature. By focusing on Egyptian and Italian texts related to the colonial moment and the Italian intellectual environment during fascism I revise current views of colonial relations between Egypt and Europe by placing these relations into a larger context dealing with the rise of nationhood, the regulation of national identity, and intellectuals’ responses to these changes. Indeed, my study demonstrates the inadequacies of the terms “national” and “colonial” to account for the “intermingling” and “interdependent” work of the texts I examine. The novels and poems I examine host representational features that reveal the polyphonic character of the lives of Italian immigrants in Egypt during the early twentieth century. Such polyphony invalidates fascist efforts at establishing a national identity based on the illusion of an essential national character and a homogenous cultural background.

In Egypt, and especially in the city of Alexandria, where all the Italian writers I address in this dissertation conducted a notable period of time, the lack of state organization of culture with all the negative aspects it brought about allowed a free environment of intellectual expression, of a polyphonic coexistence that did not necessarily serve a political agenda.
The post-colonial perspective generally posits an unequal and sometimes univocal encounter between colonizing and colonized subjects. In the introduction to their 2012 co-edited volume, *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo successfully ground their notion of the “postcolonial” in the assumption that “the economic and cultural effects of colonialism are still present in many countries, including Italy.” The two scholars rightly see continuity between postcolonial and neocolonial rhetoric in the Italian case. They accurately view the process of racialization, gendering, and cultural transformations as a manifestation of the imbalance of colonial power still in effect in today’s global world (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2; Loomba). Unfortunately, however, the only reference found in this volume to Italian texts produced in Egypt at the turn of the twentieth century implies what Edward Said calls “mythical abstractions” of east and west. While referencing Said’s call for searching for “what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented” (Said *Culture and Imperialism* 66), Lombardi-Diop and Romeo fail to avoid “surgical separation into large and mostly ideological oppositions like Orient and Occident” (Said *Representations of the Intellectual* xii). When discussing Italian colonial past, Lombardi-Diop and Romeo mention F.T. Marinetti, Giuseppe Ungaretti, and Enrico Pea that I discuss in this dissertation in chapter 2, 4, and 5 respectively, as part of a wave in Italian literature from the 1880s onward that “saw the flourishing of a series of Orientalist and Africanist texts by highly influential writers.” (10). My consideration of these texts as emerging from Egyptian-European relations is meant to enable us to see a more complex and multidirectional picture of cultural influence and impact.
One contribution of my research consists in filling out a picture that has, up until now, featured primarily the European perspective reducing the lives of many Europeans in Egypt and the relationships they experienced during their stay and study in Egypt to mere cultural encounters and, consequently, to over-generalizations that limit our view of them to mere colonial and orientalist texts. In order to fill this gap, my dissertation recognizes the intersection of three main vectors in the creation of the creative work: politics, the cultural environment, and the specific autobiography of the authors.

The first vector, dealing with the political conditions surrounding the production of the literary works I examine here is intrinsically linked to Italian colonial aspirations at the turn of the 20th century. Postcolonial studies aim at deconstructing and exposing aspects of colonial subjugation and the depiction of the colonized subject as inferior and less sophisticated. Given present day world changes, it becomes ever more imperative to research and understand how early intercultural projects contributed to the nation-building and colonialism that eclipsed them. In this way, my dissertation research moves beyond the contestation, inequality, and otherness implied by the concept of colonial encounter to illuminate cultural negotiations both among Italian writers and residents in Egypt in post unitary Italy and among Egyptian intellectuals and their Italian counterparts before and after Italian unification.

The second vector, dealing with the cultural environment, acknowledges the interdisciplinary character of modern literature. The study of literature with a transnational perspective requires an interdisciplinary approach. Such an approach
cannot be separated from the rich layers of diverse relationships of people who produced such literary works and which can only be deconstructed through a close reading of the original texts – what Gayarti Chakravorty Spivak considers in Death of a Discipline to be “the best of the old Comparative Literature” (6). My contribution to the field of comparative literature given my ability to access those texts in their respective original languages, whether in Arabic, Italian, or French, is to identify the interdependence and interconnections between literary outputs in those languages.

The autobiographical aspect, which constitutes the third vector, is intrinsically linked to my actual consideration of those works as literature formed “from below” even in cases, such as F.T. Marinetti, whose work has been linked to the fascist regime’s efforts at regulating a national identity. I refer to the expression “from below” several times in my dissertation to refer to intercultural relations on the ground, as it were, relations that often existed undetected, below the radar of national ambitions to dominate cultural representation and self-definition giving readers an opportunity to modify our preconceived ideas about intercultural possibilities and potentials born in this period. In this way, despite their varying political identifications, economic conditions, and creative works, Marinetti, Ungaretti and Pea can be seen as intellectuals who, aware of their position in history, contributed to produce a view that defies national and colonial developments in their respective societies.
The literary texts I study in this dissertation, constructed from the everyday events of intercultural relations, seek to understand life through social interactions. In this way, I stress the need to view cultural relations between Egypt and Italy not as the mere result of colonial interests that become regulated during the fascist era but rather as a relationship that has been organically built through mutual dialogue, friendship and cultural negotiations formed across time and that I aim to detect in the literary texts in question. “From below” refers then to relationships rather than encounters, concrete rather than abstract, real rather than theoretical. As such, I consider texts to be built as the result of social interactions (social intercourse in the Bakhtinian sense) rather than the result of a solitary or even authoritative colonial and culturalist approach.

Furthermore, the study of creative literary texts as a space where these three vectors are free to either intersect, skew, or just remain in parallel requires that we envision them from a historical perspective. For this reason it is worth noting that my work focuses on three moments recognized as turning historical points in both Egyptian and Italian cultures. The first is the early nineteenth century when Muhammad Ali came to power in Egypt (1805) following the end of Napoleon Bonaparte’s three-year expedition in Egypt (1798-1801). The second historical moment is the period between the inauguration of the Suez Canal and the British colonization of Egypt (1869-1882). The third moment, marked by the rise of national

---

1 Marinetti’s work is usually seen as more ideologically constructed, but in my reading of his futurist novel, Mafarka le futuriste, I demonstrate his participation in the everyday construction of intercultural relations.

2 The end of Napoleon’s expedition has been conventionally considered by many Egyptian historians as the beginning of Egypt’s modern history. Muhammad Ali’s rule of Egypt aimed at transforming Egypt into a modern and European style imperial power.
sentiments and the call for a unified national identity in Italy, spans from Italy’s national unification to the rise of fascism (1861-1922). Theorists and historians alike have defined these three historical moments as times of a political imbalance in power between the east and the west. My research seeks to propose new theoretical frames to interpret the cultural texts produced during these times and proposes to highlight how culture, in these moments, is not subordinate to politics, but, rather, leads the way.

Early twentieth century Egypt is considered both as a temporal and spatial frame for all the texts I am placing in dialogue in this dissertation. Egypt and especially the Mediterranean city of Alexandria become spaces that are open to a diversity of cultures allowing them to exist and to coexist without attempting to melt them into a hybrid existence. Postcolonial models, especially when approaching works that represent moments of encounters between Egyptian and European intellectuals, have tended mainly to situate Egypt in the realm of the subaltern while placing Italy and France in the realm of the European and consequently the colonizer. While the French Egyptian colonial relations were clearly established through the physical military interventions of Napoleon Bonaparte’s campaign, the establishment of Italian Egyptian colonial relations – on the other hand – have been debated in recent decades by scholars of Italian culture.

In the introduction to *A Place in the Sun, Africa in Italian Culture from Post-unification to the Present*, Patrizia Palumbo addresses the reasons behind the delay on the part of Italian scholars in dedicating their attention to Italian colonialism until

---

3 It is noteworthy that the case changes when discussing relationships between Egypt and other African nations especially Sudan and Ethiopia.
recent time. Palumbo explains that this neglect is due to the fact that after the fall of the fascist regime in 1945, attention was first directed towards national reconstruction, then towards internal and external migrations by Italian nationals. Palumbo points out that “The urgent need for attention [to Italian colonialism] has become even more apparent since the 1980s, when immigration into the country from Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa made the exploration of the Italian colonial past and its relation to national identity imperative” (1). Palumbo rightly suggests the need to explore Italian colonial and postcolonial culture from an Italian theoretical perspectives (2). The collection of articles in her edited work present then a great contribution in highlighting the special characteristics of Italian colonialism.

As a new nation practicing colonialism, it is not a surprise that Italy adopted the colonizing strategies of other nations (especially the French assimilation and later association colonial theories) whether or not those strategies were successful. It is very clear that Italy oscillated between various strategies in creating allies and for this reason in the case of Egypt, where the British represented the colonizer starting from 1882, its presence was more complicated and ambiguous than in Lybia and Eritrea. Palumbo recognizes that “Although the nationalistic belief in Italy’s civilizing mission that informed much of the later colonial discourse is deeply embedded in the Risorgimento, it was only in 1885 that the Italian government initiated its colonial campaigns in Africa” (5-6). Despite Italy’s failed attempt to fulfill its colonial

---

4 Egyptian scholars addressing Egypt as a colonized country have either focused on the French or the British presence. The study of Italian colonialism from an Egyptian theoretical perspective is still needed.

5 Later (in chapter 5) I refer to a shift in the French colonial theories from the ones of assimilation to association
ambitions in Ethiopia, especially after the Adowa defeat in 1896, it still followed with the annexation of Lybia in 1911. A second successful attempt in Ethiopia was made in 1935 which granted Mussolini public support. The relationship with Egypt remained ambiguous and complicated. On the one hand, Egypt had been a British colony since 1881. On the other, it was in Italy’s interest to maintain relations of friendship if not support with such a huge territory\(^6\) adjacent to the Italian long held Eritrean colony (1882-1941); indeed, Egypt eventually became a linking territory between the colony of Lybia (1911-1943) and the colony of Ethiopia (1935-1936).

As I show in chapter 4, Italian intellectuals - Giuseppe Ungaretti amongst them - supporting their newly united nation, sought to contribute to the building and maintaining of such ties. In 1907 out of 11,287,354 inhabitants in Egypt there were 523,924 Europeans 34,926 of whom were Italian (Bigiavi 12). Several works appeared at the turn of the 20\(^{th}\) century discussing the influence of Italians on Egypt’s modern civilization mainly to promote, in Italian public opinion, the interest for such relations to continue. For example, Edoardo D. Bigiavi starts his book Noi e l’Egitto (1911) by asserting that the Italian influence in Egypt, so important in the past, has not declined “come si vuol far credere in Italia” [as some want us to believe in Italy]. According to him, such influence was still alive despite political changes in Egypt and his book invited the maintenance and increase of such influence (1).

Bigiavi’s Noi e L’Egitto is only one among many works that dealt with Italian-Egyptian cultural relations, influence, and ties. In 1902 Federico Bonola Bey, general

\(^6\) Egypt and Sudan were administered as one united territory from the time of Mohammad Ali (his son Ismail Pasha conquered northern Sudan in 1820) to the British occupation of both territories in 1882 and until Egypt gained independence in 1936 and Sudan in 1956.
secretary of the Khedival Society of Geography sent a letter to prof. L. A. Balboni to congratulate him on his work *Gl’Italiani nella Civiltà Egiziana del Secolo XIX*. In this letter, Bonola Bey was specifically supportive of how Balboni’s work underlined the hard work of Italians in the “land of the Pharaohs.” According to him, this approach would help dissipate negative self-images of inferiority embedded in many Italian circles: “a troppo torto è radicata in certe sfere nostre ed altrui la persuasione della nostra inferiorità” [unjustly it is to be found embedded in some of our circles and the circles of others the impression of our inferiority] (8). The strong presence of Italian circles across various social classes in Egypt was finally demonstrated by the need to issue a language-teaching book such as Carlo Alfonso Nallino’s *L’arabo parlato in Egitto* in 1900 (reprinted in 1913 and again in 1939). In this manual Nallino offered a guide to speaking the dialect of Arabic to help Italians residing in Egypt to “farsi intendere presso il popolo illetterato, ed assistere alla conversazione degli Egiziani colti” [be understood by the illiterate people and to take part in conversations of educated Egyptians] (v). The issuing of these books highlights then both the long presence of Italians in Egypt (in particular, Nallino was able to efficiently dissect various registers of Arabic spoken in Egypt) and those Italian scholars’ awareness that the Italian presence in Egypt was not temporary but continuing.

While the historical presence of Italian emigrants in Egypt dates back to the Maritime Republics in the Middle Ages, to speak about an Italian colony coincides with Napoleon Bonaparte’s French Expedition. In her *Oltre il mito. L’Egitto degli italiani (1917-1947)*, Marta Petricioli notes that one can only speak about a true Italian

---

7 The letter was included in the preface to the book that was later published in 1906.
colony starting in the nineteenth century when many Italians arrive in Egypt attracted by the modernizing project of Mohamed Ali (1). Petricioli’s account of the emigration of Italians to Egypt from post-unitary Italy out of economic necessity could explain the self-image of inferiority Bonola Bey mentions in his 1902 letter.

On the other hand, Petricioli discusses how the difference between Egypt and other destinations was that Egypt attracted a variety of professionals, merchants, artisans, workers, who were all attracted by the fast development of the Egyptian economy (Petricioli 1). The Italian community living in Egypt was then as diverse as the various Italian identities found in Italy around the time of unification. The diversity of economic classes out of which emerged the various Italian authors I discuss in this dissertation only represents the wide spectrum of Italian presence in Egypt at that time.

While not attempting to dissect the colonial situation within Italy, my study (from an Egyptian perspective) meets the body of scholarship critical of generalizations and stereotypical considerations of the West as a homogenous colonial entity. In addition to the challenge of mythical dissections of East and West, Pasquale Verdicchio, in the preface to his *Bound by Distance*, challenges the consideration of the West as a “stable and homogeneous political and discursive entity.” By focusing on the internal colonial relations between Italy’s northern and southern regions, Verdicchio successfully extends the postcolonial perspective to the analysis of Italian immigrant/emigrant writings.

Moreover, Verdicchio makes an important historical parallel between Italy’s colonialist aspirations in Africa and the annexation of the South as part of Italy’s
unification project. “As such, military activities in the South took on an air of preparation for the invasion and colonization of Eritrea in 1890, the same year that marks the beginning of the campaign against the Sicilian Fasci (1890-94).” What Verdicchio is suggesting by placing those two historical events in “such close proximity,” is that “the dates might in fact suggest an imperialist program of Piedmontese origins that worked its way down the peninsula before setting sail for the African continent” (27). The interruption of the notion of a homogenized Italian nation, at the turn of the twentieth century, requires also an interruption of the notion of a homogenized Italian colonizer in opposition to a colonized African.

The collection *A place in the sun, Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-unification to the Present* also invites us to seek other theoretical approaches when dealing with Egyptian-Italian relations. The complexity of conducting a post-colonial reading of Italian literature dealing with Egypt is evident as compared to other African nations. Cinzia Sartini-Blum in her “Incorporating the Exotic: From Futurist Excess to Postmodern Impasse” and Lucia Re’s “Alexandria Revisited: Colonialism and the Egyptian Works of Enrico Pea and Giuseppe Ungaretti” point out to this fact. Sartini-Blum looks at Marinetti’s work about North Africa from a perspective that considers Marinetti a fascist intellectual and Africa as a colonial subject. She says, “The quandary facing the fascist intellectual becomes more apparent when projected onto a distant object of individual and collective desire, namely the African territories. The regime sought to incorporate these territories, depicted by orientalist literature as exotic retreats for heroic individuality, and turn them into a regimented extension of the fatherland, a testing ground for the newly molded fascist subject” (138). Yet
Sartini-Blum notes how Marinetti differentiates “between literature valuable for colonial propaganda and (his own) inspired art.” She correctly points out that by doing this, “Marinetti leaves room for a discrepancy between aesthetic and political concerns” (140). Moreover, Sartini-Blum’s article shows a distinction between Marinetti’s work dealing with Ethiopia and Libya and his work that deals with Egypt. While the author explains this discrepancy as an “inner conflict between a futurist will to progress and a decadent regret for the past,” I would claim that the conflict results from the attempt to generalize and place Egypt in the category of the colonized land of Africa.

Lucia Re in the article that follows in the same collection, “Alexandria Revisited. Colonialism and the Egyptian Works of Enrico Pea and Giuseppe Ungaretti,” correctly points out that Alexandria for Marinetti did not represent the “primitive.” She adds, “Alexandria for Marinetti represented a model of modern metropolitan civilization that incorporated elements of both Europe and Africa, effectively decentering both, and thriving on the multiple contrasts between the two” (169). It is this consideration that invites Re to critique Edward Said’s interpretation of Aïda as the product of European imperialism before discussing the role of Alexandria in the works of Ungaretti and Pea without ignoring Marinetti and other writers who lived in Alexandria during the same period.

Reducing the character of the Italian community and its interaction with the Egyptians to the limits of the binaries of colonizer-colonized would be an oversimplification of a rather complex situation. A grounded discussion about Italian cultural relations rather than Italian colonialism in Egypt requires, first, a recognition
of the shifting policies during the long term Italian residence in Egypt. As such, my attempt to focus on the relationships rather than encounters can only be revealed through an attentive reading of representations of Egypt and Egyptians in a myriad of literary productions by Italians who resided in Egypt.

Stereotypical representations have already been studied in travel literature and many such texts have been ruled out as reliable sources for understanding nineteenth century Egypt. As Marta Petricioli and Barbara Codacci write in their co-authored article *Unfolding the Orient. Travellers in Egypt and the Near East*, travel accounts “do not give a realistic picture of the situation in Egypt and in no way reflect Italian knowledge of or interest in Egypt during that period” (235). However, despite the inefficiency of the early travel texts in describing what Egypt was like in the eyes of its inhabitants, they offer us, nonetheless, a good source for understanding the relationship between Italy and Europe. For example, it is important to note, as Petricioli and Codacci have done, that travellers in Egypt, like Flaubert, used the same stereotypes adopted by travellers’ accounts of Italy.

Gustave Flaubert’s *Voyage en Orient* provides evidence to support the hypothesis suggested by Petricioli and Codacci. Flaubert’s collection of his travel accounts in the “Orient” includes his long trip between 1849 and 1851. The list of places visited includes Egypt, Lebanon-Palestine, Rhodes, Asia Minor, and Constantinople, but also Greece, and Italy. While Flaubert declares his account to be exclusively dealing with his raw observations without any superimposed judgments, we still read his opinion and comparisons from time to time. A parallel in the consideration of Alexandria and Italy can be detected, as they both carry a hybrid
character between east and west. For instance, he calls Alexandria, the big city, “bâtarde, mi-arabe, mi-européenne” [bastard, half European half Arab] (77). The same way, Italy evokes mixed feelings and recalls scenes both from Egypt and from Paris. The rain in Naples reminds him of Paris - the city in which he never enjoyed living: “Il pleut, […] ; il me semble que je rentre à Paris, comme au mois de novembre 1840, en revenant de la Corse” [it rains, […] ; I get the feeling of entering Paris, like in November 1840, on my way back from Corsica] (475). In Rome, on the other hand, a soldier reminds him of the scene of Arabs holding their tobacco pipe “Un soldat portant un chariot dans son dos, de la manière les Arabes portent leur chibouk” (528). While Flaubert promises his readers not to pass judgement, one cannot help but see the clear demarcation between the Arabic and the European, which intermingling (such as in the case of Alexandria) would only produce an incompatible “bastard” hybrid.

Petricioli and Codacci note in their article “a marked difference between those who travelled at the beginning of the nineteenth century (1815-40) and those at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century.” According to them, the second group is “far more open to new experiences, more tolerant of diversity and less irked by discomfort” (P&C 226). I consider Flaubert’s travel account to be representative of the second group. Yet Flaubert’s role in proliferating stereotypes and “Orientalist” myths cannot be ignored. Petricioli and Codacci note how the stereotypes have contributed to the change in attitude of Europeans travelling to Egypt. After all, Flaubert’s travel to the Orient came after dreaming of this place with its sun, golden minarets, and beautiful women.
Flaubert’s vision is what Claudine Gothot-Mersch calls, in the introduction to his travel account, “une vision orientale” [an oriental vision] (7). As such, it would be quite impossible to analyze Flaubert’s visit to Egypt without considering Said’s perspective in his *Orientalism*. Flaubert would be one of those Europeans who “invented” the Orient, since in his writings, the Orient is still, as Said states, “a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experience” (1). But while Said’s post-colonial theory provides a fitting scheme when analyzing travel literature such as Flaubert’s, Petricioli and Codacci’s work help us see a shift in the Orientalist discourse of later Italian travellers.

If travel writing is dominated by the “ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the occident’” (Said 2), this distinction does not hold for every European writer residing in Egypt. Indeed, the texts analyzed in the following chapters argue that cultural relations between Italy and Egypt expressed in literature cannot be based only on travellers who Orientalized Egypt in their description of the visit. Egypt’s depiction by authors who bore an Italian name does not automatically imply an Orientalized depiction that strips the “other” of its ability to speak for itself.

Going back in time, the encounter of the Egyptians and the Europeans in the early nineteenth century can be examined as a concrete example of the notion of “Contact Zone.” This location, coined by Mary Louise Pratt, serves as a way to reassess the nature of boundaries and to redress the cultural prejudices related to the term *frontier*. According to Pratt “Contact Zones” are “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical
relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today” (Pratt 4). My work suggests that, for historical reasons, Pratt’s notion of “Contact Zone” is a better fit for earlier interactions than for those turn of the century texts that are the focus of this dissertation.

Pratt’s notion of Contact Zone presents a valuable tool when studying, for example, An Imam in Paris (1826) produced before Egypt witnessed a harmonious coexistence among the elite from several nationalities. However, moving forward in time, the notion of “Contact Zone” is no longer a fitting theoretical tool and intercultural relations are better analyzed through the lens of Albert Memmi’s theorization of a middle position between the privilege of the colonizer and the domination of the colonized. The beginning of the 20th century marks the rise of movements that express hostility toward the growing foreign community in Egypt. These movements are triggered by a combination of a religious revival, national awareness, together with a reaction to the snob attitude of the British and communities seeking British protection. In the midst of these events and extremes, the Egyptian elite finds itself in a middle position.8 The colonizer and their class privileged Egyptian elite through their access to education granted them high positions in the government.

---

8 Albert Memmi theorizes the term of the middle position in his best-known theoretical work "The Colonizer and the Colonized" (1957)
Italian intellectuals, being an integral part of the Egyptian elite community - also shared this middle position. While Said and Pratt’s works imply separation, a look at the writings and autobiographies of Marinetti, Ungaretti, and Pea offer us a different kind of testimony goes beyond the notion of encounter “where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (Pratt 4). All three authors, coming from different social backgrounds, share the privilege of being European foreigners residing in Egypt despite being treated as culturally inferiors by their French classmates. Avoiding such terms as clash and battle at the level of literary creation, the concept of the middle position leads us, rather, to a Bakhtinian notion of dialogue, in which the polyphony of literature is capable of transforming interlinguistic multilayers into aesthetic form. Mikhail Bakhtin rightly favors the novel as the best vehicle for this cultural polyphony, as the novelist critically engages in self-observation in the creative process. However, in addition to my study of several novels such as SonAllah Ibrahim Turban and the Hat (chapter 1) and F. T. Marinetti’s Mafarka le futuriste (chapter 2), and three of Enrico Pea’s autobiographical novels (chapter 5), I also deal in this dissertation with Verdi’s opera Aïda based on Ghislanzoni’s Opera Libretto (chapter 1), the two manifestos in which both fascist and antifascist intellectuals expressed their favor or opposition to the involvement of intellectuals in politics based on their consideration of the consciousness (or rather affirmation of the lack of consciousness) of the masses (chapter 5), and Ungaretti’s poems (chapter 4). These

---

9 An understudied case like Massimo Collalto – an Italian journalist who risks his career as the head of an Italian newspaper in Egypt to support Egyptian workers in their opposition to the British colonizer – is one of these examples. Petricioli in her Oltre il mito: L’Egitto degli italiani (2007) talks about Collalto’s struggle with the Italian government because of his newspaper’s attitude towards England. (Petricioli, 285).
various texts, in my opinion, are capable of uncovering the rich multilayered and dialogic environment at the turn of the century Egypt and Italy and also to uncover a rich debate intrinsically linked to the political changes experienced by both countries related to the role of the intellectual in their respective societies.

Chapter 1 examines three representative texts – *Turban and the Hat*, *An Imam in Paris*, and *Aïda* – that respectively revisit the colonial past, take part in nation building projects, and highlight the limits of a postcolonial approach in considering the multilayered dimensions of cultural interactions. While the main focus of my work is the Italian Egyptian context, I find it indispensable when referring to a colonial context to track the origin of Egypt’s interaction with the European West in a colonial context. SonAllah Ibrahim’s historical novel *Turban and the Hat* published in 2008 offers an excellent approach to a history that challenges official narratives. In this novel Ibrahim narrates the three years of the French Expedition to Egypt between 1798 and 1801 in a diary form through the eyes of a young Egyptian scholar. In addition to Ibrahim’s re-writing of history he also invites a reading “from below.” By brightly interweaving discussions between the fictional narrator and various historical and fictional characters, the author leads us to an understanding of the complex, multilayered history that later becomes simplified (monologized in the Bakhtinian sense) in official narratives.

In addition to Ibrahim’s *Turban and the Hat*, in this chapter I also analyze Rifa’a Rafi al-Tahtawi’s travel account *An Imam in Paris*, written during his sojourn in Paris where he was sent by Mohammed Ali in 1826 as part of the nation-building project. I end this chapter by pointing to a lively debate that arose around the analysis
of Verdi’s opera *Aïda*, first performed at the Khedivial Opera House in Cairo on 24 December 1871. Verdi was not the only person involved in the creation of the opera. The Italian libretto was written by Antonio Ghislanzoni and based on a scenario written by French Egyptologist Auguste Mariette following the orders of Ismail Pasha himself. Far from disagreeing with Edward Said’s reading of the opera as an orientalist text, I take off from where Said ends and introduce the use of Bakhtinian’s polyphony in disclosing the opera’s multidimensional aesthetics.

In Chapter 2, “Marinetti’s tides,” I present a literary case in which an attentive study of the author’s biographical self-representation becomes indispensible in unpacking the semiotics of Marinetti’s futurist text. While a sociopolitical approach to Marinetti’s creative work ultimately leads us to fascism and subsequently to deciphering his notions of race, nationalism, and identity from such a perspective, my approach, focused on Marinetti’s futurist novel and other autobiographical texts, allows us to see glimpses of possibilities beyond the fascist racism, misogyny and violence. Offering the Italian-Egyptian context as a case study opens up new interpretive possibilities for postcolonial and modernist studies. While Marinetti’s work and life have been evaluated as full of contradictions that could not be explained, my hypothesis is that Futurism, the movement that he founded in 1909, relied on the acceptance of the continuous evolution of the individual. From that Futurist notion of continuous change – that is also modernist in nature - both Egyptian and Italian intellectuals can only understand their identities in the intersecting and sometimes contradicting influences that shaped them in the past and continue to shape them to this day.
In chapter 3, by closely looking at the representation of the crowds, I argue that the apparent political divergence among intellectuals, expressed in two opposing Manifestos, *Manifesto of the Fascist Intellectuals* signed by Giovanni Gentile in 1925 and the *Manifesto of anti-Fascist Intellectuals* signed by Benedetto Croce in the same year, harbors – when deeply examined – an agreement on the evaluation of the nature and role of crowds. It is this same attitude that enabled a dialogue among Egyptian and Italian intellectuals, this same area of convergence that Al-Tahtawy highlights in the introduction to his *Imam in Paris* to be a shared position among the Egyptian nation and other civilized nations. I present a case in which Italian intellectuals on both sides of the divide adopt the same mistrusting attitude toward the masses that colonizers adopt towards the colonized. In so many cases of politically opposing positions, we find this common prejudice that discourage us from glimpsing possibilities of coexistence and dialogue.

In chapter 4, I examine Ungaretti’s collection of poems in *Vita d’un uomo* as an autobiography. My initial intention was to discuss Ungaretti’s work in connection to Pea’s work. What attracted me to discuss them together was mostly the close relationship created between the two of them demonstrated in their work and personal correspondences. In the course of my research and writing, many differences emerged that I decided that, despite their friendship, I needed to address the unique character of each of the two writers in separate chapters. In this chapter, I discuss Ungaretti’s creative work as a case of poetics of relationships and connections. His poetics, primarily autobiographical in nature, reflect his view of Egypt and the Mediterranean in addition to his views of Italy and France.
In the 5th and final chapter, I look at Enrico Pea’s autobiographical novels as an excellent point of departure for expanding our notions of transnational intellectual communities. I specifically discuss Pea’s awareness of his position as an autodidact that inspires both his poetics, his intellectual position, and the role of La Baracca Rossa, the gathering place for anarchists from around the world where both Ungaretti and Pea met each other for the first time by the Mediterranean shore of Alexandria. I place Pea’s intellectual position in dialogue with Gramsci’s later reflections on the organic intellectual, his critical position vis-à-vis l’Università popolare and the role of anarchists in its formation to finally suggest that Pea offers an excellent case of a working class intellectual who comes to consciousness of his role as a self-taught Italian immigrant representative of an Egyptian and Italian working community in cosmopolitan Alexandria.

Works that have informed my course of study, both in supporting my argument and for directing me towards some of the texts I focus on in my study, include Nina Berman’s book Impossible Missions? (2004) and Lucia Re’s article “Alexandria Revisited: Colonialism and the Egyptian Works of Enrico Pea and Giuseppe Ungaretti” (2003). While Berman’s main focus is the German colonial case, her first chapter refers to Max Eyth’s stay in Egypt in the 1860s. His case, according to Berman, rightly “challenges widely held assumptions about the mechanisms of European dominance over non-European countries.” Eyth, like the writers I refer to in my dissertation, offers yet another case that challenges the mythic separation between colonizer and colonized. Berman successfully deduces that Eyth’s attitudes and actions “were more deeply defined by universalist ideas about progress and
modernization than by racist or cultural prejudice.” Eyth’s story becomes a test case for much postcolonial theory where “culturalist explanations fall short of doing justice to the complexity of developments in nineteenth-century Egypt” (26).

In the same way, my work is indebted to Lucia Re’s “Alexandria Revisited” that examines the complexity of the production of Aïda especially from the Italian perspective referring to the historical situation of the Risorgimento and the reading of the opera as a tragedy. I agree that a monologic postcolonial reading of the opera is incapable of revealing the multivoicedness of Aïda and incapable of maintaining a dialogue among the often contradictory ideological positionalities represented in the opera. Most important is Re’s discussion of Marinetti, Pea, Ungaretti and Cialente’s work produced in Alexandria and her critique of the colonizer-colonized dichotomy in approaching their work. I contribute to this research through my analysis of these texts as creative works, through an analysis of the Egyptian/Italian intellectual and linguistic environment with which these works are in dialogue.

It is ultimately important to study those texts not from the monologic perspective of colonial works that need to be approached solely from a postcolonial perspective but rather as polyphonic works that are immensely rich repositories of cultural identity and human relationships that have been uniquely formed across nations, regions, social classes, languages, and historical positions. While being in dialogue with each other, they also become the result of their own dialogue with their respective cultures, histories and societies. I consider it crucial then to put together voices of the “colonized” with those of the “colonizer.” I want to underline the need to consider the texts I focus on in this dissertation not as products of mere colonial
encounter but rather as the products of relationships. The texts produced by Marinetti, Ungaretti, and Pea, do not belong exclusively to any linguistic group or national cultural but are unique aesthetic representatives of the coexistence of multiple voices, existences and relations.

In the conclusion, I answer a broader question related to the role of literature in the construction of national identity both in Italy and Egypt. As a an intellectual involved in teaching and research, I consider processes of Italian and Egyptian nation-building in the late nineteenth century pertinent to today’s historical and cultural context. Both Egyptian and Italian intellectuals during the late nineteenth century were focusing on their nation-building projects. As an Egyptian Italianist and comparatist, my intention is to uncover both narratives in order to place them in dialogue rather than privilege one over the other. With such considerations in mind, I hope that my research may serve, in some small way, to loosen the hold that nations have over their literatures or to simplify the approach to cultural figures through the lens of the colonial dichotomy of the oppressor and the oppressed or what Said calls the lies and mythical abstractions of “East” and “West.”
Chapter 1 – 19th Century Egyptian Colonial Past Revisited

1.1. *The Turban and the Hat, The French Colonial Expedition Revisited*

On my way back from the tent, I noticed a black woman exchanging laughs with a French soldier. I was feeling her appearance to be familiar. I then suddenly recognized her to be Sakta. I think she recognized me but she didn’t show it and then she surrounded the French man with her arms. (Ṣan‘-Allāh Ibrāhīm. *The Turban and the Hat* 147)

In his 2008 *ʿUmāmah wa al-qubaʿah ʿThe Turban and the Hat* Ṣan‘-Allāh Ibrāhīm relies on his reading of many historical sources to offer a reconsideration of Egyptian history during the three years of the French Expedition at the end of the 19th century. The novel offers a new perspective to long held myths surrounding Bonaparte’s three-years-French expedition to Egypt and the resulting encounter between the French and the Egyptians as the turning point for Egypt’s modernity. The novel is written in a diary form by an unnamed young scholar in residence under the protection and mentorship of the well-known historian and Azhari scholar Abd Al Rahman Al Jabarti (1753-1825). Between the afternoon of Sunday July 22nd 1798 until August 31st 1801 the young scholar gives a detailed account of his daily life events and whereabouts. The short anecdotes and the never-ending intersection of

---

1 The novel is only available in Arabic. All English translations appearing in this chapter are my own.
2 Al-Jabarti’s chronicles have been considered a main source for the historiography of the French in Egypt between 1798 and 1801. Cf. ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Jabarti’s *History of Egypt*. 
events would leave the reader lost in frustration if it wasn’t for the historical event of
the French presence in the city providing a larger plot for the novel.

In the context of my study of relations beyond colonial encounters, this chapter
analyzes texts that hold in the identity and historical positions of their respective
writers a new perspective to the study of the European–Egyptian colonial relations. In
this chapter I examine three texts – *Turban and the Hat*, *An Imam in Paris*, and *Aïda* –
that respectively revisit the colonial past, take part in nation building projects, and
highlight the limits of a postcolonial approach in considering the multilayered
dimensions of cultural interactions between Egypt, France and Italy in 19th century
Egypt.

Sonallah Ibrahim’s style in this novel is not different from his first novel *That
Smell* (1966) published two years after his release from prison. Ibrahim, a former
student activist and journalist had spent five years in prison during the Nasser regime
in Egypt on charges related to his Communist activity. His writing in general reveals
represent attempts to counter the hegemonic presence of the state in daily life through
a new style in literature which seek to express and capture daily life.

Including the slave girl, Sakta, in the plot of his 2008 novel, *The Turban and
the Hat*, becomes the narrator’s way to counter the official historical narrative. Sakta is
one among many stories that the writer includes in his novel to narrate such a
historical moment from below. The narrator’s first interaction with Sakta is sexual.
After going through his master’s notes, he enters the women residence where he sees
Sakta’s body for the first time. Only the next day he reveals part of her identity to the
readers: his master had purchased her from the slave market a month ago for eighty
Spanish piasters (18). Despite the seemingly intimate first contact, it remains at the level of a superficial encounter void of any possible communication: "[He] used to go to her every night since his master had travelled. She would lie under [him] quiet without exchanging a single word’ (28). From other residents he finds out she was called Sakta (Arabic for silent or taciturn) for her reluctance to speak.

Right from the beginning of the novel the narrator reveals the strategy of focusing on the private rather than the public as a conscious approach to history. At the beginning of the novel after he narrates his first sexual encounter with Sakta he announces:

I was hesitant about recording my encounter with the black slave. The sheikh, in his accounts, focuses on public events avoiding the discussion of private matters. I decided not to imitate him … (20)

In this way, Sakta’s story becomes an integral part of the historical colonial presence. Her oppression by the east – represented in her Egyptian masters – end by the arrival of the western soldiers (the oppressors according to the official narrative). Her oppression, resistance through silence, and final choice to escape from Al-Jabarti’s household gives us a new multidimensional perspective that counters the selective official historical narrative.

Ibrahim’s readers are reminded that the oppressor-oppressed dynamics are multi directional and not necessarily hierarchical. In the case of Sakta, The East, represented by Al-Jabarti’s household and the young scholar’s practices, are continuously contrasted with the West, represented by the French soldiers. Through
the character of Sakta, *The Turban and the Hat* combats constructions like “East” and “West” as translations of “oppressed” and “oppressor.” Sakta’s silence in al-Jabarti’s household in general, in addition to her looks that the narrator never manages to decipher (17), are finally inverted in laughter, embrace, and tears in the presence of the French soldier (147). Like other cases I discuss throughout my work, Sakta’s story challenges constructions such as “East” and “West” to provide a clear demarcation between the oppressor and the oppressed. As Edward Said states in the introduction to his *Representations of the Intellectuals*, such constructions “say nothing of racialist essences like subject races, Orientals, […] and the like” (xi-xii). Sakta’s shift from silence to expression challenges those constructions.

While Sakta is always silent in al-Jabarti’s household and endures her sexual subjugation without any sign of revolt, she makes the decision to leave the house when she is denied her right based on her pregnancy. When the worried master reveals to his student that Sakta is pregnant, the narrator suspects the possibility of his master being the father. The “danger” of such a conclusion, according to him and to his master is that Sakta’s son or daughter would have right to Al-Jabarti’s inheritance and her becoming a “non-transferable” slave (135-136). The irony, according to the narrator, is that Al-Jabarti’s mother was a slave liberated by being impregnated by her master. In Ibrahim’s fictional imagination of this detail, Al-Jabarti is depicted as an intellectual who has internalized his colonizers. He fails to see in his mother’s liberation from slavery a potential for Sakta’s liberation from her own. In this way, the

---

3 It never occurs to the young scholar that he might be the father since he stops sleeping with the young slave as soon as his master returned on July 31st. As his diary entries show, seven months pass between until Al-Jabarti’s calls him to tell him Sakta is pregnant on February 1st.
narrator expresses his disappointment in Al-Jabarti’s integrity as an intellectual unable to recognize his role in the liberation of those around him.

The young scholars’ questioning of his master’s integrity is transferred to his questioning of the latter’s judgment. Al-Jabarti’s fascination with the French and his support of their project is interpreted by the young apprentice as a sign of his master’s hypocrisy and delusional hope especially at the end of the novel when al-Jabarti chooses to rewrite his chronicles: “a new book that is the same old one after we remove what might anger them. We then offer it to Vizier Yusuf Pasha⁴ as a gift” (328). Recognizing the end of the French expedition and consequently the end of their rule, al-Jabarti announces that the old version of the chronicle is no longer fit to account for the history of that period. A new version, less supportive of the French is needed, according to him, to suit the new ruler. The statement offers support of Ibrahim’s argument regarding the failure of official historical narratives to provide us with an accurate reading of history and especially Egypt’s encounter with the west.

Instead of narrating history – as Al-Jabarti does in his chronicles – the young scholar narrates history through conversations he has with other historical characters. The French artist Denon⁵ confesses to the young scholar his disappointment in the French colonial project. The disillusionment in the progress of the West becomes a shared ground between both the colonizer (Denon) and the colonized (the young

---

⁴ Ottoman Vizier Yusuf Pasha entered the Delta marking an end to the French presence in Egypt in 1801.
⁵ Dominique-Vivant Denon is historically known to be the artist who travelled in Upper Egypt sketching different scenes and who became fascinated with the Egyptian ancient history. Denon’s work, published in 1802, set the scene to the later famous work the *Description de l’Égypte*, considered the most important cultural and scientific contribution of the French Expedition and its accompanying *savants* who comprised its Commission des Sciences et Arts d’Égypte.
scholar). After returning from a trip to Upper Egypt Denon tells the young apprentice that by following the French army during the battles he becomes aware of the atrocities France has committed against the Egyptians:

We who were very proud to be more just than the Mamluks we committed so many injustices. Do you know that I participated in oppressing the Cairo revolution? I believed we were going to bring civilization back to this country making it a new colony that compensated our losses at the hands of the British in the new world. We have done nothing but shed blood and collect taxes instead. Do you know who are the real victims? The peasants. (193)

In this way, in this novel, the author successfully weaves together reality and fiction to create a plausible assessment of the intellectual environment existing on both sides: French (Denon) and the Egyptian (Al-Jabarti) scholars.

The structure of Ibrahim’s novel, besides appearing in the diary form relies heavily on the narrator’s human interactions and relationships with various characters. Those small interactions, despite being on a very basic level, qualify readers to assess colonial relations as concrete interactions between humans rather than as abstract clashes between East and West. Egyptian writer and columnist Laylā Rāʻī, in a review of the novel that appears in Al Ahram newspaper, comments on Ibrahim’s depiction of the “clash” between the East (the Turban) and the West (the Hat). According to Rāʻī such a clash did not just lead to “conflicts and encounters between those two opposing worlds.” Rāʻī shares the writer’s view when she is able to read through the novel’s lines the possibility of the birth of “a new relationship amongst them… A relationship that may allow meeting, contact, and mutual exchange of interests or – at least –
contemplation, revision, re-visiting and evaluation while taking into consideration the bias of both sides.”

Unexpected relationships between the two worlds find a way to form. Refusing to fall prey to the superficial question of good colonizer or bad colonizer, we find that domestic relations of power are more intransigent than relations that cross the Mediterranean. The relation of Sakta and the young scholar is reduced to a mere silent and undecipherable encounter. On the other hand, while belonging to two different politically clashing spheres, the relationship of Sakta and the young French soldier, who ends up being killed (Ibrahim does not specify whether he dies in battle or by plague), finally exemplifies this possibility.

Ibrahim’s novel which sheds a new light to historical events supports my approach throughout this dissertation. While Ibrahim’s style intentionally narrates history from a personal perspective, the focus on glimpses captured through the details of the texts I analyze throughout this dissertation is capable of revealing the polyphony of life which transcends binaries such as East and West. Being the most recent novel among all the analyzed works included in my project it provides us with a new way of looking back at the first colonial encounter between Egypt and the West in modern times.

---

6. ندينا الثقافة. جريدة الأهرام. العدد 132. السنة 44.319. 9 أبريل 2008.
http://www.ahram.org.eg/Archive/2008/4/9/ARTS2.HTM
My translation from the Arabic:
"ويخلص صنع الله إبراهيم إلى حقيقة مهمة يؤكدها هنا في روايته وهي ان (التصادم) الذي وقع بين الشرق (العمامة) والغرب (القبعة) لم يخلف وراءه فقط الصدام والتنمر والمواجهة بين هذين العالمين المختلفين بل وقبل معه أيضا علاقة جديدة بينهما. علاقة قد تسمح باللقاء والتفاهم والاستفادة من بعضهما البعض أو فيما يضعف الإنسان... التأكد والمراجعة وإعادة القراءة والتغيير مع الأخ في الحبس. اختلال الكفتيين."

1.2. Al-Tahtawy’s Imam in Paris – Between Building New Bridges and Stressing an Old Colonialist Paradigm

The end of the French presence in Egypt is marked by Muḥammad ʿAlī’s rise to power. A former Albanian mercenary, sent to Egypt as part of the Ottoman force to oust the French, Muḥammad ʿAlī managed to destroy the power of the Mamluks’ dynasty – former rulers of Egypt. In 1805 Muḥammad ʿAlī was appointed wali (governor) by the Ottoman Sultan. He later declared himself ruler of Egypt and Sudan: “It was clear from the start that the new ruler was not going to allow his dominion to continue its slumber of times past. Nothing if not ambitious, Muḥammad ʿAlī Pasha set about building a regional superpower” (Newman 15). Such a decision, especially when coupled with his intention to seek Egypt’s independence from the Ottoman empire, only brought him into conflict with the Ottoman Sultan. The new appointed “wali” was understandably supported by the Egyptian educated class of Muslim scholars “ulama,” like Al-Jabarti, the central historical figure in Ṣanʿ-Allāh Ibrāhīm novel The Turban and the Hat, analyzed in the previous section of this chapter.

Ṣanʿ-Allāh Ibrāhīm’s focuses on intellectuals’ awareness during that time of their role as mediators between the people and the rulers (whether the Mamluks, the French, and later Muḥammad ʿAlī). Muḥammad ʿAlī aimed at modernizing Egypt primarily by forming a new Egyptian Army but also by introducing European sciences. As Newman highlights in the introduction to his English translation of An Imam in Paris, “The key to the project was, of course, education.” On the one hand, Muḥammad ʿAlī recruited foreign military advisers and trainers, on the other, “he chose the revolutionary path of sending people to the very places where these sciences
had been developed” (17). ʿUthmān Nur al-Dīn (1797-1834), the son of a humble water carrier at Muḥammad ʿAlī’s court, was the first to be sent to Italy for training in European sciences (17). Newman relates Muḥammad ʿAlī’s choice of Italy as the first destination to four factors:

First of all, there were long-standing trading links between the two countries, and Italy city-states were the first to have diplomatic representation in Egypt [...]. Second, it had the advantage of geographical proximity. Third, Italians made up more than two-thirds of the European expatriate community […]. Finally, the presence of large Italian trading communities all along the Islamic shores of the Mediterranean meant that Italian was the most widely understood European language in both the Near East and North Africa (17-18)

In this context, a quick look at Rifāʿa Rafiʿ al-Tahtawi’s travel account in Paris (1826-1831), *Takhlīṣ al-Ibrīz fī Talkhīṣ Bārīz, ‘An Imam in Paris,’* complicates assumptions that cultural exchange between Europe and Egypt was the result of a colonial project. While Ibrahim’s novel *The Turban and the Hat,* discussed in the previous section, falls in the realms of fiction, his reflection on the existence of a mutual relationship and his attempts to build bridges through culture are not the first to reflect on Egypt’s colonial past.

Al-Tahtawi was among the first scholars sent to Paris by Mohamed Ali the ruler who took power after Bonaparte’s withdrawal from Egypt. *Al-Takhlīṣ* was composed in the context of Muḥammad ʿAlī’s cultural Renaissance (*nahḍa*) of Egypt. Newman says in the introduction to his translation of *An Imam in Paris,* “Indeed, al-Tahtawi was the first to set out to write a comprehensive account of European society

---

7 For more details around the historical background of the composition of the *Takhlīṣ* refer to Daniel L. Newman’s introduction to the English translation that appears under the title *An Imam in Paris* (2004).
8 It is to note that up to 1892, Mohamed Ali’s *Nahda* is still mentioned with utmost respect and sympathy among Egyptian intellectuals. Cfr. “The Recent Egyptian *Nahda*” Al-Hilal Year 1 Part 4 December 1st 1892.
and culture. In addition, he expanded his compatriots’ vision of the physical world and it is in the Takhliṣ that many countries outside Europe were mentioned for the first time and thus became part of the Arab consciousness.” (83). In this context, Al-Tahtawy's account of his sojourn in Paris holds details that need more attention than to be merely considered one of the writings of authors under western colonization where the despising gaze of the colonizer’s "land of infidelity and obstinacy" is detected.

Al-Tahtawy who is writing from France - twenty five years after the departure of the French Colonial Expedition led by Bonaparte –reflects an evolutionary view of history where he places Egypt among other “civilized” nations. In the introduction to his book,⁹ al-Tahtawy reveals such views about history’s evolution where nations’ civilized is measured, depending on their advances in human skills and civil sciences, according to their advancement and “proximity to the primitive state” (102). Al-Tahtawy goes on to dividing nations into three categories: “The first category is that of wild savages, the second of the uncivilized barbarians, whereas the third comprised people who are cultured, refined, sedentarized (tahaddur), civilized (tamaddun) and have attained the highest degree of urbanization (tamassur).” Moreover, he explains what exemplifies each group and clearly locates Egypt in the same group as the Franks or the west:

The first group is exemplified by the savages of the lands of the Blacks, who are always like roaming animals and who do not distinguish between what is lawful and unlawful; they are unable to read or write and they do not know anything about things that facilitate this life or the hereafter. They are like animals in that they are [solely] driven by the urge to satisfy their desires. They only a few things or hunt a little

⁹ He also gives the introduction the following title: “First Chapter. Regarding what seemed to me to be the reason behind our departure to this Land of Infidelity and Obstinacy, which lies far away from us and where there are great expenses because of the high cost of living” (101).
in order to provide for themselves. They build a few huts or tents to protect themselves from the heat of the sun and the other natural elements.
An example of the second category are the Arabs of the desert, who have a type of human society, sociability and harmony since they know how to distinguish what is lawful from what is unlawful. They can read and write as well as other things, and understand matters related to religion […]
The third category includes Egypt, Syria, Yemen, the lands of the Rum, Persia, the Franks, the Maghrib, Sennār, most of the lands of America (Amrīkā), and many of the islands if the Encircling Sea [Oceania]. All of these nations have civilization and political institutions, sciences and industries, laws and trade (102-105).

No rhetoric of subordination to the west is seen in al-Tahtawy’s work. Distinct from the two poles of complete fascination or complete despise of the west, by including Egypt in the “third category/ group” with the Franks among other nations, al-Tahtawy announces that his trip is a chance for exchange in order to "restore [the land of Egypt's] former youth and revive its faded splendour" (108). Al-Tahtawy’s main focus is to revive Egypt’s splendor rather than build a nation similar to its former European colonizer.10

The need to offer a first-hand witness of the west becomes the main purpose of Al-Tahtawy’s travel account. As such, I agree with Daniel Newman’s suggestion that the denomination of travel literature is too narrow and should be replaced by Alterist literature. According to Newman, this term “refers to works that are directly based on journeys or stays in Europe and which deal with one or more aspects of the new.

---

10 Refer to: D. Newman. Myths and Realities in Muslim Alterist Discourse : Arab Travellers in Europe in the Age of the Nahda (19th C.). University of Balamand, 2002. Internet resource. In this article Newman relates the increased Muslim desire to discover the Christian West to the European colonial interference in the Muslim world: “While the Christian West and Muslim East had increasing contacts - whether it be as a result of conflicts or trade - in the 15th-18th centuries, Muslims continued to show little desire to visit the peoples that lived across the Mediterranean. However, things would change dramatically when the infidel gained a foothold in Muslim territory” (8).
continent, and the perceptions and responses to it by the traveller author” (36). Such an approach can be compared to Marinetti’s suggestion to the fascist regime to allow Italian travellers to visit African territories in his 1940 article published under the title *L’Africa generatrice e ispiratrice di poesia e arti* in order to colonize the world through art. Such an approach to the other as a holder of knowledge to be annexed to one’s own while carrying the potential of building bridges does not portray a cultural relationship organically embedded in a genuine human relationship.

In al-Tahtawy’s work, knowledge becomes the goal and highest ambition to be reached. Given the date Mohamed Ali reaches power, it is not a surprise to see him sharing one of the main motives announced by the French Expedition: establishing a scientific enterprise in the region which bridges the western enlightenment with the Islamic civilization and tradition.

Al-Tahtawy dedicates a chapter where he highlights the role of knowledge in transcending differences between the “infidel west” and the Islamic Enlightenment project. He further refers to the famous ḥadīth where the Prophet directs believers to seek knowledge “even in China,” using China as a metaphor to very far lands (109). Al-Tahtawy comes to this conclusion about seeking knowledge even in the lands of “obstinacy” as a result of his readings in the Islamic Imperialism. He also realizes that

---

11 In the second chapter of this dissertation, I discuss this article through which Marinetti attempts to regulate colonial literature while criticizing already existing travel literature that stereotypically portray the African as primitive and monotonous.

12 The first chapter holds the title: “Regarding what seemed to me to be the reason behind our departure for this Land of Infidelity and Obstinacy, which lies far away from us and where there are great expenses because of the high cost of living” Newman, Daniel L. (2012-01-16). An Imam in Paris: Account of a Stay in France by an Egyptian Cleric (1826-1831) (Saqi Essentials) (Kindle Locations 3464-3465). Saqi. Kindle Edition.

13 Ḥadīth refers to a collection of traditions containing sayings of the prophet Muhammad that, with accounts of his daily practice (the Sunna), constitute the major source of guidance for Muslims apart from the Koran (Oxford Dictionaries).
the ancient “splendor” could only be reached by embracing diverse cultures while maintaining the Islamic values. While only recently a discussion concerning the possible compromise between Islam and modernity has attracted the attention of intellectuals in general, al-Tahtawi’s *An Imam in Paris* can serve as an important primary text at the center of such a discussion.

In addition to using this text to understand Al-Tahtawy and consequently Egyptian intellectuals’ view of the colonizing west, the work serves also in revealing the way in which intellectuals also viewed themselves. As I mentioned earlier, in his introduction Al-Tahtawy notes that Egypt is already a modern nation belonging to the “third category/ group” in his progressive view of nation categorization which includes Egypt and the Franks among other nations.\(^{14}\) What these nations share, according to Al-Tahtawy, is that they have civilization. By civilization Al-Tahtawy means “political institutions, sciences and industries, laws and trade. They are proficient at technical equipment, possess the skills to carry heavy loads through light means and are familiar with seafaring and things like it” (105). Al-Tahtawy recognizes, however, that within this third category, discrepancies between these countries are only present in terms of the sciences and arts, the standard of living, compliance with a given system of laws and progress in craftsmanship. In this way, an exchange between countries belonging to this category becomes beneficial. While having excelled in the sciences, Al-Tahtawy reaches the West to seek philosophy.

---

Al-Tahtawy’s balanced view towards the French west could also be attributed to Muḥammad ʿAlī’s conscious decision to establish Egypt’s independence in general, not only from the just withdrawn French colonizer but also from the Ottoman Empire as well. Furthermore, An Imam in Paris presents an example of a scholarly work where the “other” is given a voice and is not alienated from the discourse and where there is an attempt to build bridges with the Other. Al-Tahtawi’s methodology shows a valuing of his cultural relationship with the French scholars who comment on his work. The method of research applied by al-Tahtawi manages to balance his subjective views. In the fifth section of the Fourth Essay of his book, al-Tahtawi publishes letters that he exchanged with French Scholars. One of the letters\(^\text{15}\) includes Monsieur de Say’s comments on al-Tahawy’s work which “shows that the author has a good critical sense and sound intelligence.” Moreover, Monsieur de Say is able to voice his concern that al-Tahtawy’s observations, while accurate in describing the Parisian inhabitants, fall short in recognizing that France is not only limited to the large cities (281). In such a balanced and healthy scholarly environment supported by respect, Al-Tahtawy is able to seek comments from the French scholar while the latter manages to express his critique of an unbalanced judgment on the Egyptian scholar’s part.

In addition, the mutual respect is maintained even in the case of critique: Al-Tahtawi includes the comments made by the French scholar as an integral part to be published along with his writing leaving to the reader the freedom to decide whose

\(^\text{15}\) Monsieur Silvestre de Say, a leading French scholar according to al-Tahtawi, starts his letter with “From one who is humbled before the mercy of his Lord – Glory be to him the sublime – to his highly esteemed friend, honored and respected brother, the eminent Shaykh Rifa’a al-Tahtawi” (280).
argument is more plausible. As such, Al-Tahtawi’s model provides a space for an intellectual dialogue where each side voices not only their own stereotypical considerations of the other, but also their concern of being stereotyped as well.

Ultimately, Al-Tahtawi’s sojourn in Paris leads later to a massive translation project that will survive all political changes in Egypt and in Europe as well. He becomes the founder of al-Alsun school of translation that later becomes the Faculty of Al-Alsun hosted by Ain Shams University in Cairo, Egypt. What will be later called colonial influence that ensures Egypt’s dependency to Europe is viewed around the time al-Tahtawi travels to Paris as a manifestation of the Egyptian hospitality for foreign writers and artists aimed at the building of modern Egypt rather than the depletion of its resources. Al-Tahtawy becomes representative of an intellectual who is fully aware of his role in history. In such a way, Al-Tahtawy’s account contributes to this dissertation’s perspective which seeks to revise the Egyptian-European colonial relations. As I have shown in the first two sections of this chapter, placing Egypt in the category of the colonized east, as Edward Said says in his *Representations of the Intellectual* encourages “a sense of aggrieved primal innocence” in Egypt which has not been the case throughout the 19th century. A clear demarcation – or in Said’s words “mythical abstractions” – between “East” and “West” or the Orient and the Occident turn out to be lies (xii). A more complicated and multidimensional picture start to emerge when we look at the details.

16 While my study here only attempts to highlight instances of human relationships and their reflection of colonial power dynamics detected in written work, further study on the role of Al-Alsun in preserving Al-Tahtawi’s legacy would be of so much value. A quantitative account of the number of collaborative research projects that have been conducted and their impacts on the course of study of various researchers would be of great value.
1.3. Verdi’s *Aïda*: Orientalism, Ornamentalism, or Nationalism?

In this section I move forward in time to Verdi’s opera that has been revisited – interestingly enough – by Edward Said in his 1993 *Culture and Imperialism*. Verdi’s *Aïda* is important not just as an opera but also as a literary text which presents a manifestation of the modernization project of Ismail Pasha – who ruled Egypt between 1863 and 1879. Studying the conditions before the production of the opera leads us to a different assumption than the one suggested by Edward Said where he assumes that "the political and certainly the cultural setting in which Verdi worked between early 1870 and late 1871 included not only Italy, but imperial Europe and viceregal Egypt, and Egypt technically within the Ottoman Empire but now gradually being established as a dependent and subsidiary part of Europe"(114).

The study of Opera Aïda (first performed in 1871) moves us From the French Egyptian colonial and cultural relations to the main focus of my dissertation which is Italian-Egyptian cultural relations. The reading of various critical works dealing with the opera in various disciplines leaves us with many questions: Is Verdi Orientalizing Egypt in his opera? Is Verdi translating his own pre-unitary nationalist sentiments shared by other Italian intellectuals of the Risorgimento in the composition of a love story that end tragically due to Egyptian imperialist ambitions? Is Khedive Ismail mimicking British Colonial “ornamentalism” by commissioning the composition of an Italian Opera for the inauguration of the Canal of Suez from Verdi, a composer who has never been to Egypt? Or, is *Aïda* a manifestation of Khedive Ismail’s

---

17 Interestingly published the same year he gives the Reith lectures published under the title *Representations of the Intellectual*.

18 Refer to page 44 for a discussion of David Cannadine’s term “Ornamentalism.”
modernization project that sought to follow Mohamed Ali’s legacy by being open to Western civilization as a buffer from its dependence on the Ottoman Empire?

Aïda is the name of an Ethiopean princess who is captured and brought into slavery in Egypt. The young military commander, Radamès, has to struggle with the classical conflict between his love for “heavenly Aïda” and his duty as a loyal warrior in the Pharaoh’s army. Egyptians, unaware of Aïda’s true identity as the daughter of the Ethiopian king, face her father’s army that comes to her rescue but then, led by Radamès, end up capturing Aïda’s father and other Ethiopians. Radamès requests the release of the Ethiopian prisoners as an award for his triumph but the Pharaoh also offers him in marriage the hand of his daughter, Amneris who, we learn, is secretly in love with Radamès. The plot is further complicated when Aïda has also to face the conflict between love and duty: her father, Amonasro, asks her to plot against Radamès to find the hiding place of the Egyptian army. Aida refuses to trick Radamès into betraying his Egypt. Nevertheless, Radamès, unaware that both Amonasro and Amneris are hearing him, reveals the date and time of his army’s plans to attack the Ethiopians. Overheard by Amneris, he is accused of revealing his army’s secrets and consequently treachery for which he has to face the death sentence by being buried alive. The opera ends with the second scene of the fourth act where the stage is divided into two sections: an upper section showing the Temple and a lower section where Radamès thinks he will die alone reassured that at least Aïda is safe to then find that she has been hiding and waiting to die with him.

The opera’s final tragic scene leaves the audience reflecting on the triumph of love even if it means death in the face of Egypt’s rigid imperialistic ambitions. The
unhappy ending, in this case, is not due to the impossibility of the two lovers to be united. The opera actually ends with Aïda dying in the arms of her lover. At least through the opera, the union is possible, and is eternalized both in the text and the music. Both Aïda and Radamès sing in the closing duet their farewell bid to earth, valley of tears: “O terra, addio, addio, valle di pianti!/ Sogno di gaudio che in dolore svanì!/ A noi si chiude il ciel, e l’alme erranti/ volano al raggio dell’eterno di” ‘Farewell, O earth! farewell thou vale of sorrow!/ Brief dream of joy condemned to end in woe!/ See, brightly opens the sky, an endless morrow/ There all unshadowed eternal shall glow!’.

The setting of the stage itself places both Aïda and Radamès in the oppressed position. Their voices join together in singing making them equals under the hand of the oppressor of which Amneris’ voice becomes representative. Realizing her role in their death, the Egyptian princess repents by wishing them peace and asking for their forgiveness.

Returning to the history of the composition of Aïda, the study of the opera has always been intrinsically linked to the discussion about Egypt’s historical moment during the rule of Kedive Ismail. In this context, it wouldn’t be a surprise to read Edward Said’s study of the opera as a representation of “Imperialism at work.” As shown earlier, the labeling of the opera as Western colonization at work through culture has been vividly present in the mind of Egyptian pan Arabic nationalism expressed in newspapers and magazines of the following period. Such a hostile attitude can be understood in the context of British colonization. As early as 1892 we

---

19 For an English translation of the opera, refer to: http://opera.stanford.edu/Verdi/Aida/libretto_e.html To watch Aïda and Radamès Closing Duet refer to: http://www.tubechop.com/watch/136056
read a harsh critique of Ismail’s overspending, his favoring of foreigners over natives which opened the door to foreign intervention in the country and which eventually led to the British colonization of Egypt in 1881. In an anonymous article published in the Arabic Journal Al-Hilal, edited by G. Zidan, we read about the history of privileges granted to foreigners within the Ottoman territory historically known as Capitulations of the Ottoman Empire. In this article we read: “the intention of these agreements and privileges is to facilitate trade and residence for subjects of these states in the Ottoman dominions because [foreigners] would not 
\underline{\textit{dare}}\text{ to do so without them}” [emphasis is mine] (61). The writer ends his article by speaking about Egypt as a special case where the “foreign element” has gone beyond limits since the arrival of Mohamed Ali’s family to power and especially at the hand of Ismail Pasha (63).

Returning to the first questions I propose in this section: Is Verdi Orientalizing Egypt in his opera? Edward Said in his Imperialism and Culture dedicates an article to the study of the Opera. According to him “the embarrassment of Aïda is finally that it is not so much about but of imperial domination.” (114). Said bases his argument mainly on the fact that Aïda was produced by Verdi based on a story composed by Mariette. Verdi never visited Egypt. Moreover Mariette was a French Egyptologist – a combination that makes the opera, according to Said, reflect Imperialism at work and a staging of ancient Egypt for the European eye.

Paul Robinson in an article published in 1993 “Is Aïda an orientalist opera” comments on Said’s article underlining details that Said may have missed and that are linked to Aïda’s music. By studying the music of the opera rather than the text, Robinson shows how Egypt is Europeanized rather than Orientalized in the text.
Moreover he says that it is Ethiopia that is presented as the colonized nation. He even adds that Verdi seems to sympathize with the Ethiopian character by showing it as a reflection of colonized Italy – and Robinson refers here to the impression that was made on Verdi throughout his career by the ideas of the Risorgimento and his dream for building a strong Italian unified nation.

Such a statement brings us to the second question: Is Verdi translating his own pre-unitary nationalist sentiments shared by other Italian intellectuals of the Risorgimento in the composition of a love story that ends tragically due to Egyptian imperialist ambitions? Lucia Re, in her article “Alexandria Revisited” notes that if one needs to offer a postcolonial reading of the opera from the Italian perspective, one needs to go back in history to the Risorgimento. In her attempt to contest Said’s “generalizations” in his postcolonial reading of the opera, she stresses the need to historically consider Aïda as an Italian postcolonial work rather than a colonialist one: “If one considers that Italy for centuries had been a battleground for French, Spanish, and Austrian imperialism, that 1870 was the year of Italy’s final unification that—with the declaration of Rome as capital—sanctioned its independence, and that Verdi and his music were among the most revered and popular symbols of the Risorgimento, Aïda may appear to hold an altogether different meaning.” (164).

Re actually goes as far as placing Italy and Egypt in a reversed colonial relation. She takes the readers back to a specific date: 1819 based on Ilbert and Briani studies that refer to the “five hundred Italian political exiles [who] resided in Egypt and were in contact with Mohammed Ali” (164). The reference to the political unstable past of Italians residing in Egypt who were able to find protection in a
stronger independent nation seeking to become a superpower brings us to the third question I would like to propose: Is Khedive Ismail mimicking British Colonial “ornamentalism” by commissioning an Italian Opera for the inauguration of the Canal of Suez from a composer who has never been to Egypt?

David Cannadine in his work Ornamentalism: How the British Saw their Empire (2001) theorizes the way the British Empire worked and how it looked by addressing the British Empire both as a social structure and as a creator of social perceptions. Through the single lens of the term he coins, Cannadine examines the “vast interconnected world” of the Empire in order to fill gaps in the study of the empire that has left out “the many aspects of empire that still await sustained historical treatment” (xvii). Nineteenth Century Egypt especially under the rule of Khedive Ismail around the time of the production of Aida sought to mimic such an idea. I consider Ornamentalism to be helpful in illuminating the reign of Ismail Pasha during a time in which he was seeking independence from both the British and the Ottoman empires.

What I see fitting in Cannadine’s notion of Ornamentalism is the theatrical approach Ismail adopted when freely assigning the composition of the opera to those who could convey best the “image” of the what I would call Egyptian Empire. In her 2002 article, “Verdi’s Egyptian Spectacle: On the Colonial Subject of Aida,” Katherine Bergeron looks at Aida as a theatrical project. She refers to Said’s focus on Verdi, the composer, and on Robinson’s focus on the music, to look at the theatricality of the opera by asking the question: “What would happen to our view of the opera if we were to begin not with the composer, but with the spectacle itself?” (150).
Bergeron supports the idea that the work was aimed at portraying Egypt in its grandeur. She goes as far as to proclaim that Verdi’s vision seems defeated when confronted with the Viceroy’s intention to present Egypt to the eyes of the world. According to her, the Egypt presented in *Aida* is far from reality “like the Viceroy, perhaps, who sat in a fake palace in order to make Egypt 'real' in the eyes of the world” (159).

Bergeron’s negative judgment of the role of the opera, however, is far from suggesting that we see Egypt as the oppressed in the colonial binary. While the Viceroy seems to present a fake modern spectacle, Egyptians are the ones considered as oppressed by the Viceroy according to her. This assumption parallels long held theories that Egyptians have always been ruled by a colonizer. Those theories culminated into a series of popular uprisings at the turn of the twentieth century dating as far back as Ahmed Orabi’s popular uprising against Khedive Tewfik (successor of Ismail Pasha). Orabi’s famous words, still present until today in collective memory, reflected the base for Egyptians’ (especially countrymen) resistance against unfair treatment and foreign interference in Egypt’s affairs. “We were born free and we will never be slaves” have thus become the motto of various popular uprisings/revolutions in Egypt until the most recent January 25<sup>th</sup> popular uprising/revolution.

Going back to Edward Said’s notion, that “the embarrassment of Aïda is […] that it is not so much *about* but *of* imperial domination” (114), we understand that the Viceroy would be the one Orientalizing Egypt in this opera and not Verdi. Far from equating the empire with evil we cannot exclude the fact that it is about domination; yet the intellectual debate that Edward Said’s article gives rise to reveals an ambiguity
in answering the question of who is dominating whom and who is located at the center versus the periphery in *Aida’s* imperial context. The fact that Egypt’s ambitions of becoming an empire (starting with Mohamed Ali) emerged in a postcolonial context (seeking independence both from the French and from the Ottoman Empire) requires a unique historical approach to the study of the relationship between the center and the periphery.

Cannadine actually refers to the two main historical approaches to the study of the British empire, that of “conservative-metropolitan” and “innovative peripheral, which differ in their depiction of the relationship between the center and the periphery. The first approach, to which Cannadine refers as “conservative-metropolitan,” has been based on seeing the empire “primarily as the emanation of impulses originating in the metropolis,” and the second approach, “innovative peripheral,” favored the study of the “assorted and multifarious experiences of many peoples in many parts of the world whom the British encountered, dominated, damaged, and grudgingly set free” (xiv-xvi). While pointing to the limitations of these two main approaches, Cannadine also refers to the shortcomings of other approaches undertaken by literary scholars criticized either for “viewing the past in too simplified a form of ‘good versus evil’ and ‘us versus them,’ for still fighting the nationalist struggles for independence when they have already been won, and for ignoring the extent to which empire was about collaboration and consensus as well as about conflict and coercion” (xvi). Cannadine’s ornamentalism does fit in the case of *Aida* because the binary of

---

20 Cannadine expresses his critique of Said and “his ‘Orientalist’ followers” for their erroneous assumptions that the British Empire was exclusively concerned with the creation of ‘otherness’ based on another erroneous assumption, according to him, that the “imperial periphery was different from, and inferior to, the imperial metropolis” (xix).
good versus evil in Egypt’s relation with Italy is not fitting. The relationship between the center and the periphery was more dynamic to be limited to a single direction. Moreover, the periphery itself varied, between the colonized south (Sudan and Ethiopia)\(^{21}\) and the competitor’s European north. The spectacle imagined by the Viceroy is mostly set to awe other great powers like the French, the British, and even the Ottoman Empires. 

In this case, I would like to finally move to the last question I ask in this section: Maybe *Aïda* is a manifestation of Khedive Ismail’s modernization project that sought to follow Mohamed Ali’s legacy by being open to Western civilization as a buffer from its dependence to the Ottoman Empire? Could it be that both Italy and Egypt are living their own post-colonial struggles during this period? For after all, the opera is about the love that is born between an Ethiopian princess, Aïda, and a Captain in the guard of the Egyptian army, Radamès. The sad ending is not due to the impossibility of them being together. The opera actually ends with the two lovers being united, yet political reasons are the ones that obstruct this love from surviving the confinement. At least through the opera, the union is possible, and is eternalized both in the text and the music. Both Aïda and Radamès sing at the end in a duet: “O terra, addio, addio, valle di pianti!/ Sogno di gaudio che in dolore svanì!/ A noi si chiude il ciel, e l’alme erranti/ volano al raggio dell’eterno di.” The setting of the stage itself places both Aïda and Radamès in the oppressed position. Their voices join together in singing making them equals under the hand of the oppressor represented in

\(^{21}\) As early as 1865 Ismail had expanded south to annex Ethiopean territory – then under Ottoman rule – to fulfill his dream of imperial expansionism
the voice of Amneris, the Egyptian princess who at the end wishes them peace and asks their forgiveness.

From this perspective, Re states that “Khedive Ismail is likely to have seen in Verdi’s music a political symbol of the spirit of national independence rather than a means to enslave Egypt economically, culturally, and politically to Europe” (164). By looking at the Italian perspective, Re presents a different angel to the analysis of the opera leading to a different assumption from the one suggested by Edward Said. Egypt’s dependency to Europe during Ismail’s rule, at least according to Said, is considered the only possible setting for the opera’s creation. The later British colonization of Egypt, in 1882 together with the aftermath of the Two Great Wars, makes such a conclusion plausible.22

Finally in 1996, Giovanni Verardi publishes another article “On Edward W. Said’s Aida” where he contests the colonial notion of the opera. Verardi makes a very valid remark that distances the opera from French imperial influence – through Mariette. According to him, the opera’s dramaturgy and ideology contrast with the “French modern sensitiveness” seen in the relationship between Aida and her father, Amonasro (528). The conflict in the opera is created through the contrast between Aida’s love for Radamès and her love for her father which symbolizes her love for her fatherland, Ethiopia. I feel more inclined to accept Verardi’s analysis, that seems to present a more valid explanation of Verdi’s acceptance of the project, in contrast to

---

22 Egyptian critics in the years that followed the 1952 revolution have been divided in their description of Ismail Pasha’s spending on cultural events such as the opera. Some have looked back to this period as a moment of denial and exaggerated spending only lead Egypt to the abyss of the British colonization. Others blamed external conspiracies from great powers to curb Egypt’s growing influence in the region.
Said’s certainty when he says, “Money, certainly was a reason: he was given 150,000 francs in gold. He was also flattered, since after all he was choice number one, ahead of Wagner and Gounod” (115).

The lively debate surrounding Edward Said’s study of the opera as a representation of “Imperialism at work” is, in my opinion, an evidence of the complexity of the dialogic identity of this work and, consequently, the inadequacy of claims to be able to interpret the intentions of its creators. As such, Said is right in concluding that “the political and certainly the cultural setting in which Verdi worked between early 1870 and late 1871 included not only Italy, but imperial Europe and viceregal Egypt, and Egypt technically within the Ottoman Empire but now gradually being established as a dependent and subsidiary part of Europe”(114). At least Said’s article leaves room for the complexity and multidimensional identity of this work and consequently the interpretation of the intentions of its creators.

**Conclusion**

Egypt’s dependency on Europe as conceived in the twentieth century could only be understood in the light of the British colonization of Egypt in 1881 together with the aftermath of the Two Great Wars. Yet, looking back to the events between 1861 and 1882 enables us to question the positions attributed to both Italian and Egyptian nations in a postcolonial discourse. Italy had yet to reflect on the regulation of Italian national identity\(^2\) now that it has been united. Even the notion of a united Italy was not conceived equally among Italians whose positions varied between

\(^2\) It is noteworthy to see the parallel between Italy and Egypt: both, around this time period, while seeking independence from an Imperial power were expanding their territory south.
supporters, opponents and sometimes also sufferers from such a political change. On the other hand Egypt was a growing nation seeking its independence from the Ottoman empire and pursuing Mohamed Ali’s legacy of building a Modern Egypt. The British Colonization of Egypt and the exile of the Viceroy, Ismail Pasha, first to Istanbul then to Rome seemed to change the course of history. Egyptian historians in the years that followed the 1952 revolution could only look back to this period as a moment of denial expressed in exaggerated spending by Ismail Pasha on cultural events that only lead Egypt to the abyss of the British colonization.

It is important to view those texts not from the monologic perspective of colonial works that need to be approached from a single perspective but rather as polyphonic works that are immensely rich repositories of cultural identity and human relationships that were uniquely formed across nations, regions, social classes, languages, and historical positions. While being in dialogue with each other, they also become the result of their own dialogue with their respective cultures, histories and societies.
Chapter 2 - Marinetti's Cultural Tides: The Flow of Futurist Aesthetics across the Mediterranean

Que les Arabes fussent mes soldats, je me l'accordais avec orgueil... Mais qu'ils devinssent mon troupeau!... lamentable sort, dont la seule conception eût à jamais flétri leur sang et le mien!... Mafarka le futuriste (165)
The Arabs as my soldiers, I was proud to acknowledge ... but not as my flock... A pitiful fate the mere conception of which would have fouled their blood and my own for ever after... Mafarka the futurist (141-142)

Scholars discussing futurism have mostly been drawn to studying its aesthetics in light of the fascist regime. This approach has drawn many scholars to look at the exotic representation of Africa and the racial and cultural “othering” of non-Italians in futurist art as part of the cultural project of fascism – supported by futurists - which aimed at stressing a pure Italian identity and character known as Italianità. This chapter analyzes Marinetti’s writings in light of his early life in Egypt in order to suggest a new approach to the reading of his work. Such a reading would reveal glimpses of new subjectivities that go beyond the already established colonial boundaries when studying cultural identities and the literature(s) that emerged as a result of such identities. In this chapter, I attempt to read Marinetti’s futurist work, not in light of the historical “catastrophe” known as fascism but in light of the changes experienced by the author as they become manifested in his literature. A close look at the language used by Marinetti in his writings reveals the African and Arabic components of his identity that formed during his life in Alexandria. These components have up till now been ignored – despite his referral to them on many occasions - in favor of his Italian colonial identity that formed and was expressed in
his writings later during fascism. In this chapter I specifically focus on Marinetti’s first futurist novel *Mafarka le futuriste* (1909), Marinetti’s autobiographical account in *Scatole d’amore in conserva* (1927), and the accounts of his trip to Egypt with his wife in 1930 which later appear under the title *Il fascino dell’Egitto* (1933). By analyzing Marinetti’s work from this perspective, I wish to shed light on the distinction Marinetti himself makes early on between the fascist political movement and the futurist artistic movement. In addition to the analyzed literary texts other primary texts such as Marinetti’s early correspondences with his Egyptian French school rector, correspondence with his brother, and the Futurist Manifesto become indispensable in understanding the fluidity existing between national boundaries as manifested in Marinetti’s identity intentionally expressed in his futurist work. This “multidimensional and multisensorial” consideration of Marinetti’s work as suggested by Wanda Strauven in her article “Futurist Images for Your Ear: Or, How to Listen to Visual Poetry, Painting, and Silent Cinema”\(^1\) avoids “a one-dimensional (mis)reading of the Futurist project as a whole” (277). Although Strauven focuses only on the issue of sound in Marinetti’s work, her work becomes very valuable when applied to culture, identity and language in the work of the Egyptian born Italian futurist author who up to 1909, given the language used in his early writings, was a French author.

### 2.1. From an Egyptian Marinetti to an animator of italianità

The influence of Egypt on Marinetti’s early life besides being an observation from a meticulous study of the author’s early life is also underlined and rather celebrated by the author in several occasions. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, born in

1876 in the city of Alexandria and educated by French Jesuits, lived in Egypt until he
was sent to Paris in 1894 to receive his baccalauréat at the Sorbonne. Probably
inspired by his Egyptian origin he chose Le Papyrus to be the name of the first
magazine he founded (and which appeared between 1894 and 1895). In his “Self
Portrait,” published in Scatole d’amore in Conserva the young Marinetti refers several
times to his “strange, colorful, and uproarious sort of life” (5).²

Ebbi una vita tumultuosa, stramba, colorata. Cominciai in rosa e nero;
pupo fiorente e sano fra le braccia e le mammelle color carbone coke
della mia nutrice sudanese. Ciò spiega forse la mia concezione un po’
nera dell’amore e la mia franca antipatia per le politiche e le
diplomazie al lattemiele. (8)
I had a strange, colorful, uproarious sort of life. I started off with rose
and black, a blossoming, healthy little tot in the arms and between the
carbon-coke breasts, of my Sudanese nurse. Which maybe explains my
somewhat blackish concept of love and my open antipathy toward
milk-and-honey politics and diplomacy. (5)

The African influence will remain at the core of Marinetti’s upbringing
throughout his career. It is not a coincidence that the mention of the arms of his
Sudanese nurse precede the mention of the influence by his Piedmontese father, “the
greatest civil law lawyer in Alexandria,” and his Milanese mother “who was entirely
composed of the most delicate, musical poetry of affectionate tears and tenderness”
(5). Egypt and its coastal city of Alexandria will remain central to the biography of the
author. In a later publication, Marinetti dedicates a chapter to “Alessandria d’Egitto”
in his Marinetti e il futurismo (1929) and, in another context, claims Egypt as the

² This section is translated by Doug Thompson in: Marinetti, Filippo T, and Günter Berghaus. Critical
text refer to this edition. Page numbers appearing after the Italian text refer to the original text originally
published in 1927 and which later appears in the copyrighted edition in: Marinetti, Filippo T, and Ivo
birthplace of his “sensibilità italiana” [Italian sensitivity]. My suggestion is that the exotic places, spaces, and statuses that may be attributed to the Egyptian other and that have provided evidence to Marinetti’s Orientalizing of Egypt in his world, accounts better for the intimate than the distant in Marinetti’s world.

A more detailed study of the history and culture of early twentieth century Egypt confidently affirms that Marinetti’s life in Egypt was in itself diverse in its stratification. Marinetti’s writings reveal an awareness of those different stratifications whether we agree with him or not. In an Extract from the proceedings of the 8th Convention of the Reale Accademia D’Italia, Marinetti already makes a distinction between what is black, Egyptian, and European in the production of African poetry, plastic arts, and music:

-La poesia la plastica e la musica africane sono state finora o arte egizia o primitivismo negro o miscela europeizzante di verismo statico minuzioso monotono nostalgico e l’architettura Africana è stata un antipatico plagio delle antiche costruzioni egiziane o arabe. African poetry, plastic arts, and music have been up till now either Egyptian art or black primitivism or a Europeanizing mixture of static, detailed, monotonous, and nostalgic verism; and African architecture has been an unappealing plagiarism of the ancient Egyptian or Arabic constructions. (5)

While criticizing European art for being a “mixture of static, detailed, monotonous, and nostalgic verism,” Marinetti also criticizes African architecture for being “an unappealing plagiarism of the ancient Egyptian or Arabic constructions” (5).

---

3 As it appears in La grande Milano tradizionale e futurista. Una sensibilità italiana nata in Egitto. collected by Luciano Maria in 1969
4 Marinetti, Filippo T. L’Africa Generatrice E Ispiratrice Di Poesia E Arti: Estratto Dagli Atti Dell’viii Convegno Tema: L’Africa. Roma, 4-11 Ottobre 1938-Xvi. Roma: Reale Accademia d’Italia, 1940. Print. The convention was held in Rome between the 4th and 11th of October 1938. It had Africa as its theme and was conducted under the title “L’Africa generatrice e ispiratrice di poesia e arti”
5 My translation.
A new suggested colonial way of understanding the relationship between European, Black, Arabic, and Egyptian arts is put forward in this convention. As such, all those identities act as various manifestations of African art. It is in this light that we can then understand Marinetti’s earlier work *Mafarka le futuriste* and its multicultural dimensions.

Marinetti’s first futurist novel, *Mafarka le futuriste*, holds so many familiar architectures and faces from the authors’ native Egypt: the village seized by the enemy is spelled Bab-el-Fotouk (52, 57, 63, 64), what would be spelled in Arabic as باب الفتوح in a clear reference to one of the gates to Old Cairo built in 1087. As the name in Arabic suggests, the gate was mainly used for the army soldiers on their way to *fotouhaat* meaning invasions or battles in which new lands were seized in order to build the Islamic empire. Other Arabic words such as Mashrabeya (Arabic style window enclosed with carved wood) and hallahoua (66) - what is now know as halawa (Arabic desert with a base of sesame) - are also used.

Most importantly, Mafarka-el-Bar is the king of Tell-el-Kibir. The opening scene of *Mafarka le Futuriste* is a battle, probably recalling the battle of Tell-El-Kibir, that would have been still alive in the collective memory of Egyptians and Europeans alike living in Egypt. The battle of Tel-Kebir is where Egyptians lost to the British in 1881 because of treachery on the Egyptian side, leading to the British colonization of Egypt. The battle is remembered in Egyptian history not just as a battle between Egyptians and the British but also as the failure of a popular revolution led by Orabi.

---

6 spelled the Egyptian way with a double “i” in “Tell” and an “i” in Kibir instead of an “e,” as mentioned in writings of the British “Kebir.”
Bey, the famous army general and nationalist, and the restoration to power of Khedive Tawfiq, original supporter of the British. Once Tel-el-Kebir was in British hands, a triumphant march was lead to Cairo on September 14, 1881. “Urabi and his associates were taken prisoner, court-martialed and exiled to Sri Lanka; Khedive Tawfiq [original supporter of the British] was restored to power. The war was effectively over.” 1881 marked the date of the official colonization of Egypt by the British. Why would Marinetti choose the name of the city charged with so many historical memories and references to be the starting point of his novel?

Details related to the language used in *Mafarka le futuriste* and Marinetti’s pointing to important Egyptian historical events call for a new approach to the reading of this first futurist novel. The opening scene clearly attempts to change the course of history by proposing a new narrative where Mafarka emerges triumphant in a battle historically lost by the Egyptians. With this detail in mind, rather than being an exotic and colonial text, *Mafarka le futuriste* becomes an attempt to give birth to a new form of art. A form that transcends national boundaries and that enables art to propose a new narrative when dealing with African and Arabic history. With this consideration we can then understand the disappointment of Mafarka in the citation included at the beginning of this chapter\(^8\) when he addresses Abdulla to express his true intentions: to help the Arabs become fighters rather than followers.

Mafarka who assumes a mixed identity between the Arabic and the African – in addition to the French which is not just limited to the language in which the novel is

---

\(^7\) [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/battles/egypt/](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/battles/egypt/)

\(^8\) He addresses Abdalla in chapter nine of *Mafarka le futuriste* appearing under “Le Discours futuriste” ‘The Futurist Address’ (163-174; Diethe and Cox 140-150).
first published - towards the end of the novel, delivers his futurist speech where he blames Abdulla for not having taken his place: “Abdalla, […] Quel cœur as-tu donc, si tu n'as pas senti le désir de me tuer pour prendre ma place?...” ‘Abdullah, […] What kind of heart have you got, if you haven’t felt the urge to kill me and take my place?’ (164; Dieth and Cox141). Being the leader of the Arabs for Mafarka – and consequently Marinetti – meant a military leadership where the led soldiers do not lose their dignity and self respect. “Que les Arabes fussent mes soldats, je me l'accordais avec orgueil... Mais qu'ils devinssent mon troupeau!... lamentable sort, dont la seule conception eût à jamais flétri leur sang et le mien!...” ‘The Arabs as my soldiers,’ Mafarka tells his his Captaine Abdalla, ‘I was proud to acknowledge … but not as my flock… A pitiful fate the mere conception of which would have fouled their blood and my own for ever after…’ (165; Dieth and Cox 141-142). Returning to Marinetti’s consideration of this novel as a tool that will change the world, we can then read this speech as an allegory of cutlural leadership proposed by Marinetti in order to give the Arabic culture its own independence. It is the recognition of a shared glorious past and heritage that should not be relied upon to define their present. It is also a recognition of his leadership as a temporary condition which would only be considered successful if it results in the Arabic soldiers gaining their independence.

2.2. Alexandria, birthplace of Marinetti: All equal under one Sun!

Between Marinetti’s birth in 1876 and until he moves to Paris in 1893, the time the futurist author lived in Alexandria is marked as a time of intersections, relations, meetings, and relationships. Even after moving to live in Europe, Alexandria still remains part of Marinetti’s art. His later work tells us that Alexandria will not remain
part of the past to be forgotten or revoked after he moves to Paris and then to Milan. He returns later in 1930 with his beloved wife, Benedetta. To her and her “futurist genius” (17) he offers a collection of articles that appears under the title *Il fascino dell’Egitto* in 1933.

After many years spent away from Alexandria, Marinetti returns finally to “il [su]o Egitto natale” [his native Egypt]. Such a return, as he puts it in his travel account is rather a return to “un punto fermo di contemplazione” [a still moment of contemplation] (21). Marinetti’s visit to Alexandria already presents a paradox: a futurist who deliberately decides to revisit his past. His visit is paradoxical when taking into consideration the futurists’ contempt for the past and the desire to [destroy the museums, the libraries, academies of any sort] (Manifesto del Futurism art.10). Yet Marinetti’s return is already made from an advantaged position. In Egypt, the return to his past is a deliberate choice.

The futurist Marinetti is unusually nostalgic during his visit to his native Alexandria of Egypt. Despite the noted oxymoron when discussing a nostalgic futurist, Marinetti’s state of mind is also reflected on his writing. Luciani De Maria notes this detail in his introduction to which he gives the title of “Marinetti viaggiatore” [Marinetti the traveller]. De Maria underlines the fact that “l’immagine di Marinetti che scaturisce dalle pagine del *Fascino dell’Egitto*, non è certo quella, vulgata e stereotipa, del caposcuola invadente e rumoroso, attivista e iconoclasta, perennemente agitato dall’affermazione ossessiva del verbo futurista.” [Marinetti’s image that

---

9 Those accounts were published little by little by the “Gazzette del Popolo” in Torino but were then collected in one volume in 1933.
emerges from the pages of *Il Fascino dell’Egitto* is certainly not the one, common and stereotypical, of the artistic movement leader who is intrusive and noisy, activist and iconoclast, and perpetually agitated by the obsessive affirmation of the Futurist word. De Maria continues his introduction underlining the change of style and syntax in the poet’s writing where Marinetti appears to be more traditional and his prose more reader-friendly and polite. De Maria also notes the elegance in the style and the application of good use of syntax on part of Marinetti whose allusions to the Futurist parolibera is only done discreetly (9).

This nostalgic state is not, however, a psychological state of which Marinetti is unaware. The nostalgic message becomes a deliberate choice on part of the author. For the first chapter of *Il fascino dell’Egitto* Marinetti chooses the title: “ultimi brandelli nostalgici di una sensibilità futurista” [last fragments of a nostalgic futurist sensitivity] (19-22). Marinetti’s nostalgia, throughout the collection is manifested in the author’s recreation of scenes where the past and the present magically intertwine to create a discourse with persons, places, and objects alike. Marinetti’s visit is a collection of interviews and encounters with Re Fuad, oriental music, palm trees, a cow, Arabic women, the Nile, “Sua Maestà il Cotone” [His Majesty the cotton], the desert, the sun, the sea, the pyramids, his mother, and Cavafy the poet.

Marinetti’s choice to return to Alexandria, which symbolizes his past, holds also his desire to reorganize this past and the people attributed to it in his own way. Alexandria was, originally the place where Marinetti came into contact with the people who will help him discover his passion for writing. Père Bufferne’s words - the Jesuit professor of humanities - about the young Marinetti’s description of the dawn
helps the adolescent gain awareness of his potential as a poet. Marinetti is only fourteen when père Bufferne tells him that “una [su]a descrizione di aurora sorpassava in bellezza tutte quelle di Chateaubriand, e [gli] prediceva la gloria di un grandissimo poeta” [one of his descriptions of the dawn excelled all the ones by Chateaubriand, and predicted in him the glory of a great poet] (Scatole d’amore in conserva 10-11). It would make sense then to see Marinetti’s return to such a still moment in his intimate memories expressed into a return to the contemplation of the sun that becomes personified in his writings.

Throughout his career, Marinetti’s description of the sun in its birth and death will be at the center of his art. The sun, mentioned as just “soleil” in the first instances in Mafarka le futuriste (5, 7) soon becomes the name of an African god “Soleil.” Besides being a representation of the Egyptian side of Marinetti, the sun will continue to appear in his art during the years spent away from the African side of the Mediterranean. In his first futurist novel Mafarfa le futuriste, the Sun, god of Mafarka, is described as “bouche de volcan,” “intarissable source de courage,” and “sceau de Dieu” [volcano mouth, endless source of courage, and God’s bucket] (33). In a quasi prayer to the Sun, Mafarka requests its help in forgetting his miserable past in order to be launched into his future: “cachète à jamais le parchemin racorni de mon passé misérable pour que je déchire le voile de mon futur!” (33) [“seal up for ever the shrivelled parchment of my wretched past”] (18). Mafarka’s words of worship to the Sun turn into a dialogue. After Mafarka asks the Sun to inspire him and give him
advice in order to be able to defeat his enemies, the Sun finally responds. The “symbole des volontés solaires” (33) [“symbol of the solar wishes”] (19) arrive in the form of a movement made by the sun to reassure Mafarka of his victory over his enemies.

Not only does the sun respond to Mafarka by giving him signs of victory over his enemies, it becomes omnipresent in its supervision of Mafarka’s actions while consistently changing its appearance. The Sun, source of power and knowledge, changes its appearance but never appears in this novel wearing western clothing. The first revelation of the Sun appears as an Arab warrior: “Je vois le Soleil qui galope… Son turban d’or massif se dérobe derrière un rideau de nuages!” ‘I can see the galloping Sun… His solid gold turban is hidden behind a curtain of clouds!’ (33; Dieth and Cox 19). The sinister Sun “sinistre soleil” later appears wearing a galabieh like an Arab sailor, “le sinistre Soleil, dans sa galabieh de chaux vive, accroupi lui aussi sur la poupe tanguante d’une barque, et le pied sur la barre du gouvernail, ainsi qu’un vieux pilote arabe commandant la manœuvre.” ‘the sinister Sun, in his quicklime galabieh, he too crouched on the pitching stern of a boat, his foot on the tiller like an old Arab pilot steering the course’ (42; Dieth and Cox 27). The Sun will then acquire all the images Marinetti seems to attribute to Egyptian heritage. Egypt, a land where warriors and sailors live, is able to embrace all these differences and still be beautiful and victorious.

Besides its presentation as a warrior and sailor, the sun is also presented as an erotic lover. The first day Mafarka wins the battle of Tel-el-kebir, and the sun erotically sets – Marinetti is obviously playing with the French expression “coucher du
soleil” ‘sunset.’ After fighting its way among the clouds, the sun wins by plunging into the sea satisfying the latter’s sexual desire and the desire of the African night impatiently waiting to arrive to the scene. The metaphor can only be captured when described in French where the sun and clouds are masculine “le soleil” and “le nuage” and where both the sea and the African night are feminine “la mer” and “la nuit africaine”.

Par-delà les remparts, le soleil dégagea sa tête rouge de l’horrible suaire de nuages sanglants qui l’enveloppait et plongea à l’occident. La mer, enfin soulagée, en soupira d’aise, voluptueusement, sous son grand éventail de rayons jaunes, cependant que débordait dans l’atmosphère fouettée d’or une masse énorme et ténébreuse de longs cheveux désordonnés, les cheveux criants et crétipants, les cheveux étrangleurs et lascifs de la nuit africaine. (47)

Beyond the ramparts, the sun freed its fiery head from the ghastly shroud of bloodshot clouds enfolding it, and plunged westward. The sea felt soothed at last, and voluptuously breathed a sigh of relied under its great fan of yellow rays, while into the gold-dappled atmosphere flooded a huge, tenebrous mass of long, dishevelled hair, the screaming, crackling hair, strangling and lascivious hair of the African night. (31)

The allegory extends beyond the frame Marinetti depicts for the reader to be interpreted by the protagonist who, besides being a successful warrior, is also a successful reader of poetry. Mafarka joins the reader in contemplating the sunset and becomes both part of the scene and participant in the interpretation. The personification of the African night with lustful hair that covers Mafarka’s face is accentuated by Mafaraka as he brushes the hair away. At the end, Marinetti does not leave us room to interpret this scene except as one charged with sensual, sexual, and

---

11 This description – as père Bufferne had said to the fourteen year old Marinetti – does “excel all the ones by Chateaubriand” (Scatole d’amore in conserva 10-11).
erotic details: Mafarka suggests to his brother that this is the perfect night to join the beautiful Ourabelli-Charcahr, his brother’s lover.

The setting sun as an image will also extend to be a place recurring in Marientti’s writing. Almost twenty years after the publication of *Mafarka le futuriste*, during his visit to Egypt he will revisit the places that obviously inspired his depiction of the setting sun. By making such a deliberate choice to return to his past, he chooses the only object that beats time to become a symbol of his return to life: the sun. In one of his collection’s chapters, “A passeggio con mia madre sulla spiaggia del porto antico” ‘A walk with my mother by the shore of the ancient port,’ Marinetti describes a walk by the Mediterranean shore, remembering his walks with his mother by the old port of Alexandria. The walk would be better called a journey into the past, bitter memories, but most importantly: a poetic description of the sunset and the death of the sun. By describing the sunset, Marinetti showcases not just his artistic brilliance but also marks Alexandria as the birthplace of his glory as a poet and a place for contemplation. During Marinetti’s walk by the Mediterranean shore with his mother (or maybe his wife since he leaves room for both interpretations), he offers his readers a mix of Baudelaire’s modernism and Chateaubriand’s romanticism in a unique description of the sunset. The serenity of the sunset contemplated at the shore is interrupted with action and dynamics typical of futurist art. This time, the action arrives from Marinetti’s memories: “Fruscio gasoso della schiuma, che eccitava i miei tuffi di bambino nuotatore.” ‘A grand foamy swish which used to excite my plunges as a young swimmer’ (98). Marinetti is probably recalling a very famous place known to young kids – especially boys – until today in Alexandria. Bir Mas’ud is considered a
place where Alexandria’s boys display their rebellious courage by jumping into the waves at the otherwise rocky shore when those high waves create a buffer from the deadly rocks.

In addition to the metaphorical power of the sun as depicted in Marinetti’s African futurist novel, the sun seems to play a pivotal role in the minds of intellectuals living in Egypt during the early twentieth century. In 1913, American engineer and solar energy pioneer Frank Shuman built the first solar engine in Maadi near Cairo. While the building of this solar engine came after the publishing of both the futurist Manifesto and Mafarka le futuriste, there are printed evidence that as early as 1907 the idea of building this solar engine was already present in the mind of its American inventor and advertised to the Egyptian public. In his fourteen-page booklet that appears under the title The Direct Acting Solar Engine, Frank Shuman already speaks about Egypt as one of his destinations when discussing his dream of building the large solar-power plant: “The home of the solar engine will be dry, intensely hot countries like Arizona and Egypt” (7). For Shuman, as will later be for the futurists, moving forward meant genius, speed and efficiency. In his 1907 booklet he continues explaining his innovative project as follows:

As liquefied air can be used at any and all places for the production of mechanical power, it would be easy for some far-seeing genius to describe the remarkable advance of the human race with the beneficial help of solar power and liquefied air, which, after all, we are using at present, only in a very indirect and clumsy manner. All of the coal we are burning is merely the stored-up power of the sun delivered on the earth some millions of years ago. We dig far into the ground to get this out, whereas the sun is delivering an equal power every day, right at our doors, free of all charge. It is only necessary for us to devise the proper means for receiving this infinite power and using it to advantage. (6)
It would be easy for us, living in the early twenty first century, to imagine the mindset of early twentieth century scientists and artists alike. Futurists’ fascination with speed was not foreign to the scientific progressive environment of the time captivated with notions of speed and “clean energy.” The sun, in addition to its poetic ability to beat time and death by returning to life after its temporary sunset, was also capable, in the mind of scientist and artists alike, to provide power. Schuman’s solar engine project was then built on the idea of beating time and relying on the direct capture of the sun power instead of digging far into the ground “to get it out.” Both for Marientti and Schuman, only meant a “far-seeing genius” would then be willing to invest in the future.

2.3. Between Fascism and Futurism

As futurism continued to develop, it continued to attract to it all sorts of vocabulary related to the future even political ones. Notions related to a regulated Italian identity, or italianità, became politicized and was stressed as an integral part of the fascist propaganda. On March 1st 1925, less than three years after Mussolini reaches power, Mario Carli and Emilio Stettimelli, directors of the newspaper L’impero throw a huge banquet to celebrate Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, praising him as “primo interventista” ‘first interventionist’ and praising Futurism for being “preparator del Fascismo” ‘preparing the ground for fascism’. The event is recounted by Marinetti in his Scatole d’amore in conserva and is followed by his citation of a telegram sent by Mussolini in which the fascist leader of Italy expresses both his regret for not having attended the banquet and his praise for the author “infaticabile e
The use *italianità* will continue to be developed and defined throughout the fascist regime’s years in power. At this point, both the regime and the artistic movement merged in their ambiguous definition of this, otherwise impossible to define, elastic term.

The totalitarian regime, right from the start, relied on specific notions that left room for speculation and consequently manipulation of terms related to identity. According to Mussolini’s 1925 telegram, Marinetti was an innovative poet who has given him a sense of “the ocean and the machine.” He also considered the futurist author to be a “dear old friend” and linked the friendship to the historical events of [the day of the first fascist battles]. Marinetti’s activist art was then praised for reserving the author the title of [a fearless soldier who offered the nation an untamed passion consecrated through blood!] (21-22). The main elements that proved Marinetti’s loyalty to and support of the regime can be summed up in the speed, violence, and progress whether in nature or machines, trust built on experience, and offering one’s blood in battle to prove loyalty.

Political scientists and historians studying fascism have understandably continued to refer to the Futurists as an essential component in Mussolini’s fascism.

---

12 The exact text of the telegram reads the following: “‘Sono dolente di non poter intervenire al banchetto offerto a F. T. Marinetti. Ma desidero che vi giunga la mia fervida adesione che non è espressione formale ma vivo segno di grandissima simpatia per l’infaticabile e geniale assertore di Italianità, per il poeta innovatore che mi ha dato la sensazione dell’oceano e della macchina, per il mio caro vecchio amico delle prime battaglie fasciste, per il soldato intrepido che ha offerto alla Patria una passione indomita consacrata dal sangue.’ Mussolini”. ([Scatole D'amore in Conserva, 21-22](https://example.com))

13 Robert O. Paxton explains the “term” Futurists as a “loose association of artists and writers who espoused Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s ‘Futurist Manifestos,’” and who “dismissed the cultural legacy of the past collected in museums and libraries and praised the liberating and vitalizing qualities of speed
The link between the futurist movement and the fascist regime which comes to power a decade later, in addition to the friendly telegram sent by the leader of fascism to the leader of futurism, can be verified a year earlier: in 1924, Marinetti publishes his work *Futurismo e fascismo* that he dedicates to his “caro e grande amico” [dear and great friend] Benito Mussolini. In this volume Marinetti declares that “Il Fascismo nato dall’Interventismo e dal Futurismo si nutrì di principî futuristi.” ‘Fascism born from Interventism and Futurism was nourished by futurist principles’ (18). Moreover, in the same year, Benedetto Croce, the antifascist intellectual publishes an article under the title “Fatti politici e interpretazioni storiche” where he criticizes Marinetti’s opposition to a school reform project proposed by Gentile. Besides Croce’s critique of Marinetti’s futurism, which he believed did not qualify to be called an artistic movement, he points out the relationship between the movement and fascism:

“Veramente, per chi abbia senso delle connessioni storiche, l’origine ideale del ‘fascismo’ si ritrova nel ‘futurismo’” ‘For all those who have a sense of historic processes, the intellectual roots of Fascism can be found in Futurism’ (191). The interdisciplinary nature of the futurist movement which embraced or rejected literature, art, history (or rejection of), and politics has turned the study of the alliance between fascism and futurism inevitable even when studying each movement as a separate phenomenon.

---

and violence” (Paxton 6). According to Paxton they were “young antibourgeois intellectuals and aesthetes” who were “the third component of Mussolini’s first Fascists” (6).

14 Fascism, born in Milan on Sunday, March 23, 1919 in the room of Milan Industrial and Commercial Alliance was supported that day by more than a hundred persons including Futurist intellectuals (Paxton 5).

15 Marinetti had previously judged the project as old fashioned and anti-fascist.
The debate about the relationship between fascism and futurism, which, as shown earlier, dates back to the times of the fascist regime, continues even today. Marxist theorist, Alan Woods, after a visit to an exhibition of Italian futurist art, notes: “The connection between Italian Futurism and fascism is well known, [...] It is an object lesson on how art and politics can become inextricably linked.” In another occasion we read in Richard Jensen’s article “Futurism and Fascism”:\(^{16}\) “It is particularly appropriate to re-examine the relationship between the rise of Fascism and the literary and artistic movement called Futurism, because in the last decade Futurism has once again been in the news.” Jensen refers in this article to the 1986 “largest and most comprehensive exhibition on Futurism ever mounted” which was co-sponsored by the Italian car manufacturing giant FIAT together with an American high-tech corporation. Between Woods’ and Jensen’s confirmation of the link between fascism and futurism, besides giving a lesson of the link between art, politics, and economy, they both intended to warn their readers of the possibility of accepting ideals that may have been shared between the political oppressive fascist regime and the futurist artistic movement. While the historical relationship between the two movements is indisputable, I still consider the need to examine futurism independently from fascism to be indispensable to our understanding of the history and literary movements of the early twentieth century as it emerges both in Italy and in Egypt.

A balanced consideration of the relationship between fascism and futurism is supported by Robert O. Paxton’s observations in his *The Anatomy of Fascism*. According to Paxton, many intellectuals inspired fascism without being necessarily

\(^{16}\) Published in History Today Volume: 45 Issue: 11.
fascists. He draws the example of Gaetano Mosca who inspired fascists while being himself an anti-fascist intellectual. This evidence challenges the consideration of intellectuals as creators of fascism. He continues to note that: “The intellectual and cultural critics who are sometimes considered the creators of fascism actually account better for the space made available for fascism than they do fascism itself” (39). This observation means that those critics and intellectuals rather than showing support for the fascist regime have unintentionally paved the way for fascism by weakening the position of its rivals, “the previously ascending bourgeois liberalism and the powerful reformist socialism of pre-1914 Europe” (39). Taking such considerations into account, we could then agree with Croce when he says that historical processes when studying futurism does lead us to fascism. Yet our study of those intellectuals’ adherence to fascism cannot only be based on their support of Mussolini before he reaches power or in the early 1920s. It is also important for our understanding of this historical period to consider how those intellectuals’ adherence to fascism changes as the regime itself changed its consideration of various minority groups and gradually restricted freedoms and the possibility for Italian diversity to be expressed. After all while Marinetti does adhere to fascism and does incorporate the defense of the political movement in his artistic project, the historical relationship between the two movements, nevertheless, does not imply and ideological similarity between the two.

In fact, Croce’s critique of Marinetti’s position accounts both for his fascist adhesion and for calling futurism an art movement. As stated in his 1924 article,

17 Refer to the third chapter of this dissertation where I discuss in details Mosca’s analysis of the inevitable “circulation of elites” in contrast to the uneducated masses unable to make rational decisions even within democracies (108-9).
Croce’s critique of Marinetti’s art movement separates his attack of the artistic value of the movement from political considerations.

[E] non vorrei che con questo, rammentando la mia costante freddezza e avversione al futurismo, […] si pensasse che io, con l’affermare le origini futuristche del fascismo, intenda estendere lo stesso giudizio di riprovazione dall’uno all’altro. Le mie negazioni, come quelle di ogni uomo ragionevole, sono sempre secundum quid.

[A]nd I do not intend by this, remembering my constant indifference and antipathy towards futurism, […] for people to think that, by insisting on the futurist origins of fascism, I intend to extend the same blaming judgment of one over the other. My negations, like any other reasonable man, are always secundum quid. (191)

Croce’s focus, like many other scholars addressing futurism and fascism, addresses the movement and the regime in a chronological sequence where futurism leads to fascism or where fascism finds ideological inspiration in futurism. Given the fact that both the movement and the regime dealt with the same notions like blood, battle, and Italianità, it becomes even harder to separate the discussion about the two.

Nevertheless a critical autobiographical reading of Marinetti’s writings as I demonstrate in this chapter highlights how the writings of the futurist author complicate our understanding of his notions about Italianità, art, battle, and blood – mentioned earlier in Mussolini’s 1925 telegram. This lens of analysis allows us to see glimpses of inconsistency in the relationship between Marinetti’s futurism and a later fascist oppressive ideology built on an exclusionary definition of those same terms.

2.4. Marinetti’s Biography Beyond Fascism

While some scholars (as shown earlier) have viewed Marinetti’s futurism as an important inspiration for fascism, mixed identities and languages detected in his work present evidence complicates such considerations. The impasse that Marinetti tries to
overcome in literature and that he manages to theorize towards the end of his career, rather than representing the contradiction within fascism, presents evidence regarding areas where futurism and fascism could not reconcile and where Marinetti’s futurist aspirations prevailed and sought channels to fulfill themselves despite - rather than because of - the fascist regime.

As such, the “lost youth” and the need to “consume the picturesque sites” found in Marinetti’s work to which Cinzia Sartini-Blum refers as “the paradoxical project of exoticist literature” in her article “Incorporating the Exotic: From Futurist Excess to Postmodern Impasse” is not that paradoxical when considered as part of a modernist project. Such so-called paradoxes in Marinetti’s work, I would argue, are autobiographical rather than evidence of escapism. It is the recall of these sites rather than the staging of them that ensures a faithful representation of African Literature in order to, using Marinetti’s own words, “express through poetry, plastic arts, and music the diverse sensibilities and the diverse states of mind of the numerous African regions (coastal and inland)” (Africa Generatrice-article 2).

According to Marinetti, such an artistic production requires visiting Africa and spending time in it rather than contemplating images and unrealistic stereotypical representations of it. The choking scenes of literal consumption of the picturesque sites of Northern Africa, depicted in Marinetti’s writings, are after all futurist expressions of contact through violation and clash not found in other colonial literatures. It represents an internalization of the colonized sites and characters rather than an imposition of the colonizer’s identity. Yet in the case of Marinetti, it becomes almost impossible to determine whether the author is colonizer or colonized.
Marinetti’s writing of his autobiography presents an application of the futurist consideration of this past. The abolition of such a past means re-writing it in light of the present and the future that the writer seeks to achieve. As such, we can read Marinetti’s desire to challenge stereotypical or incomplete representations about Africa in his 1938 article *L’Africa generatrice e ispiratrice di poesia e arti* as a desire to re-create Africa in the European mind. This desire cannot be separated from his earlier desire to rewrite his past through an autobiography that dismisses all stereotypical allegations embedded in the minds of the European public. In his autobiography written as early as 1902 and appearing later in *Scatole d’amore in conserva* published in 1927 we read: “Ci sono innumerevoli leggende da sfatare, correggere o rettificare, calunnie da cancellare… No! M’infischio di tutto questo. Seguo piuttosto il mio destino di missionario dell’arte e mi servo volentieri di me stesso, della mia vita intima e dei miei ricordi personali, per colpire una volta di più il passatismo che insozza ancora la mia cara Italia.” [There are innumerable legends to dismantle, to correct or to eliminate… No! I couldn’t care less. I shall instead follow my destiny of art missionary and I gladly use myself, my intimate life, and my personal memories, in order to strike once more the passatismo which still soils my beloved Italy] (8). While his autobiography stresses that the birthplace of his art resides in “Alessandria d’Egitto,” he later stresses the fact that his mission is later shaped to serve his country, Italy. In an attempt to reveal his own hidden identity Marinetti introduces his personal life and childhood memories as part of his desired Italian art and culture. He presents it as an artistic example of his call to futurism. He further presents his childhood as an inseparable component in his call to be an “Art
missionary” whose task aims at making his “cara Italia,” still “soiled” by its passatismo, a better nation. Following his own biography’s model, Italy in addition to rejecting its past needs to rewrite this past by including other forces and colors in order to be launched into a glorious future.

Marinetti’s autobiography will be an integral part of his art throughout his career. The introduction which, in its final expanded form, becomes part of Scatole d’amore in conserva and which appears in 1927 dates back to 1902 when it appears in the author’s La conquête des étoiles (Paris, Editions de la Plume, 1902). It then reappears in Marinetti’s preface to his concise autobiography Il delizioso pericolo, a collection of short stories published in the magazine Racconta Novelle (Anno II n. 29, 15 dicembre 1920). Marinetti’s re-telling of his private life and personal memories falls outside the proustian scheme of viewing childhood as a time of happiness to which the author longs to return. Marinetti’s quest à la recherche du temps perdu besides aiming at finding a source to his present, suggests that the focus of his artistic project is related to the future and most importantly provides a model to be followed by his nation, Italy. Through his words, Marinetti makes a very interesting shift in the art of writing. He turns his own personal life into a public project. His life with its colorful past becomes Italy’s national story as I will discuss further in this section.

From this perspective, we have a new way of looking at the meaning of the Marinetti’s mapping of his own life. As we have seen earlier when pointing to the author’s autobiographical text, Marinetti is already aware of the intertwining of several cultures and influences in his own life. This awareness far from serving as an admitting recognition is actually praised when he says “Ringrazio le forze che
presiedettero alla mia nascita e alla mia adolescenza, perché mi hanno, fino ad oggi, evitata una delle peggiori disgrazie che possano capitare: la Monotonia” (8). The use of the term “forze” [influences] to describe such influences comes as a clear contradiction with later fascist views of Italian cultural supremacy. This supremacy developed later into eugenic concepts of racial purity embedded in laws against miscegenation supported by Marinetti himself.¹⁸ He specifically mentions two cities and one region manifested in three persons who intersect in the formation of his own life: Alexandria, Milan, and Piedmont. Although he later mentions in his autobiography his formation in the French Jesuit school in Alexandria of Egypt, this influence does not seem “intimate” enough to be mentioned in his childhood section. While the two Italian cities are clearly connected to his father and mother and also to their character, his wet nurse’s Sudanese origin becomes expressed in the color of her skin. It is finally in Alexandria that Marinetti experiences the influence of all three person or the intertwining of – using his own words - such forces: his Sudanese wet-nurse, his father, and ultimately his dear mother.

In contrast to the expected rejection of the mixed colors by an ardent supporter of fascism, Marinetti applauds the intersection of those differences and goes as far as considering them “forces” rather than weaknesses: “Ringrazio le forze che presiedettero alla mia nascita e alla mia adolescenza, perché mi hanno, fin ad oggi, evitata una delle peggiori disgrazie che possono capitare: La Monotonia.” [I thank the

¹⁸ One of the recommendations in his *L’Africa generatrice e ispiratrice di poesia e arti* pronounced during a conference in Rome between 4-11 October 1938 was: “offrire ai poeti ai pittori agli scultori ai musicisti e agli architetti novatori lavati d’ogni abitudine tradizionale la possibilità di vivere qualche tempo in Africa a condizione che non ne traggono delle copie” ‘to allow innovator poets, painters, sculptures, free of any traditional habits, the possibility to live for some time in Africa on the condition that they do not find partners there’ (8).
forces that controlled my birth and my adolescence, because they have, until today, spared me one of the worst adversities that could happen: Monotony]. Marinetti “gladly makes use of his life” with its colorful past to become a universal story but it is also left for us to be interpreted as an alternative Italian national identity. In doing so, Marinetti in accordance to his futurist call for the rejection of the past alters his own past. As I show in the following section, even in his own autobiography, Marinetti’s retelling of his past lacks historical accuracy. The Alexandrian born Italian author, in a way, attempts to revive but also to recreate this past in order to reject passatismo.

2.5. Recreation of a Childhood Story, Recreation of a Nation’s Story

Despite the positive description of his childhood as a time of merging of several positive forces, Marinetti’s version of his past story leaves the reader no room to doubt that such a past must be left behind. Marinetti, in his self-portrait, negatively refers to “the religious constraints” of his Jesuit teachers. His teachers’ conservatism, according to Marinetti, “invece di favorire, stroncò lo slancio del mio misticismo” ‘Rather than supporting my mystical urges, cut them down’. Marinetti’s story does not end at the point of the older teachers discouraging the young poet from pursuing his poetic dreams. He continues; “Fui cacciato dal collegio per averci introdotto dei romanzi di Zola” ‘I was expelled from the school for having bought in some of Zola’s novels’ (Scatole d’amore in conserva 12; Critical Writing 7). At this point, the reader is left with the impression that Marinetti’s past education in the French Jesuit School

19 My translation. This section from the original text is omitted in the Thompson translation cited in this chapter under Critical Writings.
was one of constraints and short sightedness as compared to his futurist aspirations to chock and shake his readers.

A close look at Marinetti’s earlier correspondence reveals that Marinetti’s intentional creation of such a negative impression in the mind of his reader seems to have a priority over giving an accurate account of the interaction between the young Italian student and his French Jesuit teachers. At the end, the narrative proposed by the futurist author aims at showing the past as a period of conservative *passatismo* that may be beautiful and rich in colors yet doomed to be non-revolutionary and thus unfit for the futurist author. The correspondences between Père Catin, rector of the Jesuit School Saint François Xavier, the author’s parents on one side and the young Marinetti on the other, reveal a different account about the reason why Marinetti had to leave the Jesuit run school in Alexandria. Correspondences that date between 1891 and 1893 show that Père Catin had been in touch with Marinetti directly until the night he left for France to finish his studies. Until that night, père Catin makes every attempt to meet with young Thomas. “Je vous attends ce soir, j’ai besoin de vous parler” [I am waiting for you tonight, I need to talk to you] is how he starts his letter. Père Catin later refers to Marinetti’s “will” to leave the school and that Catin has no intention to force him to choose otherwise: “Il ne s’agit plus de vous retenir malgré vous au college” ‘It is not about keeping you against your will at the school’. “Je veux que vous ayez quelques explications que j’ai le droit de vous donner.” ‘I want to offer you some explanation that I have the right to give you’. The words used by Père Catin in his letter express a close relationship he has with the young student Marinetti. He refers to him as “cher enfant” ‘dear child’.
Scholars’ later awareness of the existence of this correspondence sheds some doubts on Marinetti’s version of the story of why he had to leave the Jesuit’s school in Alexandria. Yet the glamour of the story of living under the strict supervision of conservative adults seemed to be too attractive to be proven misleading. Instead of blaming the Jesuit rector, as Marinetti claims in his autobiography, Günter Berghaus is inclined to direct the blame to the young author’s father, “the upright lawyer” living in Alexandria. Commenting on Marinetti’s words “Fui cacciato dal collegio per averci introdotto dei romanzi di Zola” ‘I was expelled from the school for having bought in some of Zola’s novels’ (Scatole d’amore in conserva 12; Critical Writing 7), Berghaus, in one of the endnotes to the English translation of Marinetti’s autobiography, writes; “this is not entirely true” (426). Berghaus refers to père Catin’s correspondence but as evidence to the successful quest of the rector to persuade Marinetti junior to stay after he threatened to leave the school. Moreover, Berghaus refers to another letter where the Jesuit priest warns Marinetti senior of the moral threat such readings may affect the child who should be raised catholic. On June 15, 1891 père Catin brings to the father’s attention that “the fifteen-year-old boy was found reading books that were deemed ‘contrary to Catholic morality,’ [and] publicly praising the authors of novels ‘whose titles he should not even know.’” Berghaus concludes: “One can imagine how the upright lawyer reacted to this revelation” (426) suggesting that Marinetti senior must have scolded his fifteen-year-old boy. Nevertheless, further study of more of Marinetti’s correspondences actually reveal that Berghaus’ conclusion, although offering an interesting reading of this letter, while contradicting Marinetti’s version about his expulsion because of his
early intellectual rebellion, is still inconsistent with Marinetti senior’s character as further evidence reveals to us.

Both Marinetti senior’s biography and correspondences between the young Tommaso and his brother Leone convey to us the image of Marinetti’s father as a liberal lawyer who found refuge in the cosmopolitan city of Alexandria rather than the “upright lawyer” who would scold his catholic son for being an enthusiastic reader of profane French literature. We learn from Lucia Re’s article “Alexandria Revisited: Colonialism and the Egyptian Works of Enrico Pea and Giuseppe Ungaretti” that Marinetti’s parents had found refuge as an unmarried couple in the more tolerant Alexandrian colonial society away from the scrutiny of the Milanese bourgeoisie. She further explains that “Marinetti’s mother was already married and Italian law did not allow divorce” (171). Furthermore, in August 1891, two months after the exchange between the rector and Thomas’ father, Marinetti writes from Alexandria asking his brother, now on a trip in Italy with his father, for a favor:


Since I hope you will go, you and dad, to Milan by the end of next month, I will as you for a small favor. I would like that you buy me, or you make dad buy the following works: 1- Eugénie Grandet – by Balzac 2- Corinne – by Madame de Stael 3- Les mémoires de Judas – by F Petrucelli della Gattina 4-L’adolescenza – by Achille Mauri 5- Les Proletaïres –by Eugène Sue.

The way the young Marinetti asks his brother to buy him those books and the way he refers to his father does not show any indication that the “upright lawyer” may
have had any objections to these books. “Je te prie de me faire ce plaisir. Les Premiers ouvrages et le dernier surtout (sic), c’est ce que je désire le plus. Je te prie de t’en occuper lorsque tu seras à Milan. Dans le cas où papa ni (sic) veux (sic) peut être pas y aller – je te pris de faire tout tout possible pour le persuader et le faire changer d’idée. » Thomas’ only doubt is whether his father might cancel his trip to Milan rather than whether he might object to the buying of those books.

Both the image portrayed by Marinetti in his autobiography and by Berghaus in his reading of some correspondences agree on portraying Marinetti as rebellious to a bourgeois, catholic and restrictive older generation. As I have shown above, such an interpretation is problematic. Besides the classic attempts to question Marinetti’s intentions to tell the story from this perspective, what is left to us is analyzing what he stresses in his self portrait. It seems obviously important for Marinetti to portray himself as rebellious, anticlerical, and political. Moreover, he even goes as far as presenting himself developing and early rebellious consciousness since the age of six. When linked to the story he tells about the way he leaves his school in Alexandria, Marinetti seems to use the city of Alexandria and his father’s house as the initial location for rebellion. Leaving the private catholic school because of his love for literature is not the only detail that showcases Marinetti’s rebellious character. Marinetti’s first expression of discontent is directed towards the “solemn Arab merchants […] avidly bargaining for Parisian bed linen and chests of fruit with Jewish brokers and camel drivers” (6) under the balcony of his father’s house in Alexandria. He tells his readers how he expressed his discontent by “spraying” them for disturbing his turtle dove friends.
Vivevo le mie giornate su un balconcino di legno in una sognante intimità con le grasse tortore, che, appollaiate fra i regimi di datteri a due metri da me, tubavano melodiosamente, forse per preparare nelle mie orecchie la mia futura sensibilità rumoristica. Quando i mercanti disturbavano col loro vocio le mie tortore amiche, io rubinettavo giù il mio disprezzo infantile. (10)

I lived out my days on a tiny wooden balcony in a dreamy sort of closeness with some fat turtledoves which, perched up among the date palms, just a couple of meters from me, cooed away melodiously, perhaps preparing my ears for their future sensitivity to sounds. When the noise of the merchants talking disturbed my friends, the doves, I would turn on the tap of my childish liquid scorn, down among them. (6)

Between the age of six and fourteen, the major pillars of Marinetti’s adolescence are already placed: his love for art discovered in the wooden balcony in Alexandria, his potential to become “un grandissimo poeta” at the French Jesuite school, Saint François Xavier, and finally the discovery of sensual love and mysticism through “l’amore per Mary” (11). Besides the origins that intersect in his identity, Alexandria seems to be the perfect place for those realities to meet.

2.6. Between Marinetti’s Life and Art

The intertwining of the French, the African, and the Arabic rather than being an artificial technique applied by the author in his art becomes then a reflection of his intimate writing. The intertwining of cultures is also expressed in the one of languages as we notice in his use of names and his alternating between languages and even the use of hybrid words in his letters. Marinetti alternates between French and Italian in his correspondences with his brother Leone (or Leon as he consistently calls him “Cher Leon”) in the nine correspondences that date between 1891 and 1893.20

20 The correspondences are held at the Getty Research Institute Special Collection Library
Marinetti consistently writes in French to his brother except at the end of some letters where he adds a Post Scriptum or where he is in a hurry. An interesting combination of French and Italian appear in this case. He uses Vendredi instead of the Italian Venerdì. He also mixes between the Italian feminine plural definite pro-noun “le” spelled L E with the French “les,” spelled L E S. In addition, he refers to “mamma” by “mère,” and finally ends his letter with “un bacio à papà e a tè,” using accents that do not exist in standard Italian. I will not make attempts to arrive to conclusions regarding whether Marinetti’s mix of languages is a genuine confusion made by an adolescent who is raised bilingual or whether he tries to make a point about language hybridity in his letters. It might be as simple as a young man attempting to render his mother tongue (Italian) as adorned and “ornamented” as the French he uses at school. It might also be an adolescent revolutionary attempt to play with the language (French) which is the language representative of the academic discipline of the Jesuite school he attended and from which rigorous hard work he could finally take a break over the summer. In all cases, we can witness in those letters, early signs of the author’s lack of interest in the idea of “pure” language with clear demarcation from the languages used by speakers in their everyday lives.

In addition to language, Marinetti’s name is also spelled in different ways in his letters and writings. Marinetti is mostly referred to as Thomas in his early years especially by his brother and teacher, père Catin. His name later becomes Tommaso in different writings and letters and finally he is addressed as F.T. Marinetti or, obviously, as just Marinetti. But in his 1930 travel account to Egypt we almost hear the voice of his mother coming from the past and telling him: “Torniamo a casa Tom”
[Let’s go home Tom] (98). Marinett’s name like his life and the languages he grows up speaking, holds then a possibility of changing and sounding differently. While always referring to the same person it holds in the different pronunciations a reference to the person calling the author and their background.

The diversity of the languages he grew up speaking, will extend to become “dynamic a creative” years, as he calls them in his Il fascino d’Egitto after he leaves Egypt. The “dynamic and creative” years to which Marinetti refers in 1933 and which he spent away from his native Egypt are rather explosive and electric years which have reserved him the title of “Europe caffeine”: in 1909 Marinetti publishes the Manifesto of Futurist Literature in which he supports the writing of poetry capable of inspiring the sense of movement and material. The Manifesto puts more stress on beauty and the creation of poetry as the ultimate focus rather than the overturning of rules in general. This beauty together with the conquest of the human spirit could only be achieved using the medium of art by liberating it from the rules already established by the classics. Such rules – according to futurists - have imprisoned syntax, punctuation and words. The parole in libertà or words-in-freedom are created or rather say liberated and allowed to occupy the blank space of the page without the restrictions of already established rules to regulate them.

Analyzing the Futurist Manifesto reveals the repetition of certain words over others. Through the Manifesto Marinetti summarizes his view of art as the tool that will be used to change the world. The word cloud, in the figure below, illustrates the repetition of words such as “bellezza” [beauty] which has priority over “azione” [action]. This pattern explains futurists’ call for change through art. More importantly,
the artist’s desire for change appears central in the manifesto and is expressed through the repetition of the word “vogliamo” [we want]. Related to “bellezza” are methods applied for the change to happen such as the verb “canteremo” [we will sing], “la poesia” [poetry] and “l’automobile” [the car]. Even more important becomes the recipient of such actions, which is “il mondo” [the world]. The Manifesto introduces then the ideas that Marinetti will soon reiterate in the introduction to his Mafarka le futuriste: that “il mondo” [the world] is more important than “l’uomo” [man] who creates art. In accordance with his belief in his role as “Art Missionary,” discussed earlier in this chapter, Marinetti takes the initiative of writing his first futurist novel to put his theories into action. He writes in the introduction to the first version of the Mafarka le futuriste published in French in 1909:

Je suis le seul qui ait osé écrire ce chef-d’œuvre, et c’est de mes mains qu’il mourra un jour, quand la splendeur grandissante du monde aura égalé la sienne et l’aura rendu inutile. (15)

I am the only one who has dared to write this masterpiece, and it is by my hands that it will some day die, when the world’s growing splendour has equalled and superseded it. (1)

As such, the futurist author puts his manifesto into action, he presents Mafarka le futuriste as a novel that aims at redefining and reshaping not just Italy but the whole world “le monde” “il mondo”. The African novel written in French and taking place on the Egyptian desert becomes then, according to Marinetti, a universal novel the same way futurism was intended to be a universal – or in political terms totalitarian? – art movement. It is a novel that serves as a tool for change, a tool which the author will get rid of one day: “et c’est de mes mains qu’il mourra un jour,” when “la splendeur grandissante du monde aura égalé la sienne et l’aura rendue inutile” [and it
is with my own hand that it will die one day when the growing splendor of the world will mirror it and will make it useless] (15).

The consideration of his art as a tool marks a general attitude among intellectuals during early twentieth century Italy. While discussions over the role of the intellectual to create change in their society has mostly been attributed to Gramsci’s reflections in his *Prison Notebooks* as representative of the leftist opposition in general, Marinetti’s discussion of his art as a tool to create change in society was based on the same notions. As I show in the following chapter, where I discuss the existence of an area of convergence among Italian intellectuals in the matter of how to deal with the crowds, Marinetti’s was only part of such an awareness of his role. I would even go as far as arguing that Marinetti becomes representative of Italian artists where he assumes the role of “organizer of culture.” His Futurist movement can be read, then, as an attempt to organize the whole European culture to be tolerant of the new just-united Italy and Italians with all their diverse realities as a sign of the future.
Marinetti’s attempts to organize European culture were actually successful given the fact that Marinetti had the main elements of the movement genuinely – we can even use the Gramscian term organically – inherited in his biography. Founded in 1909, the Futurist Movement enjoyed instant success in all Europe reserving for Marinetti the title of champion of the avant-garde. Yet despite his success, in the preface to his novel *Mafarka il futurista* (1909) and in his self portrait or autobiography as it appears in *Scatole d’amore in conserva* (1927), Marinetti is consistently conscious of his critics. In the introduction to *Il fascino dell’Egitto* Luciano De Maria notes that Marinetti’s “vorace passione” ‘voracious passion’ draws him to read everything being written about him. Marinetti, according to De Maria, due to his competitive nature, would even go as far as and in private, due to his competitive nature, to challenge his opponents in their territory. That might explain his prose composition. But what matters to us is that Marinetti in his attempt to turn his
art into a totalitarian art movement, sought also to incorporate even classicism and style, which is the complete opposite of any type of avant-garde (10). Marinetti’s art can be read, then, as an all inclusive art where there is an incorporation of the opposites in addition to a consistent awareness of current events and critics opinions.

2.7. Futurism Between Racism and the Celebration of the Black

The co-existence of opposite notions allowed by the use of undefined terms related to identity that Marinetti has continuously praised as a source to avoid boredom makes an argument both for the author’s racism and his racial tolerance. Marinetti’s biography, like his work, offers us equally confusing evidence around his notions of race. In the second chapter of Marinetti’s Scatole d’amore in conserva which appears under the title; “Consigli ad una signora scettica” or “Advices to a skeptical friend,” the futurist author offers advise to his female friend to cure her hopeless boredom. Marinetti’s language is a mix of self-praise and mockery of his “white” friend’s taste in men. Having been his lover before, Marientti suggests that his friend’s thirst for adventure can only be satisfied through both an erotic and cannibalistic adventure with a black male: “Vi consiglio di attraversare l’Oceano in cerca di maschi esotici e di notti d’amore veramente emozionanti” ‘I suggest you cross the ocean looking for exotic males and nights of love that are genuinely emotional’ (32). The wild sexual drive is associated with a white female friend. This notion comes in contradiction with expectations from an author who allegedly considers blackness equal to the exotic. Yet this work, like others by Marinetti, complicates Marinetti’s notions of the exotic.

21 The first chapter is Marinetti’s autobiography or Autoritratto which I discuss in detail in this chapter.
In an imaginary little town in Florida to which he gives the name Kuroo, the futurist poet suggests that the mysterious race exists: “negri […] di una bellezza sorprendente. Fortissimi, muscolosi ma agili e senza le esuberanze massicce della loro razza” ‘blacks […] of such a surprising beauty. Strong, muscular but agile and lacking the thick excess of their race’ (32). The beauty and strength of the black male living in Florida are contrasted with the fragility of the whites who watch and hate them. The language used to describe the black male’s body, suggested as source of entertainment for the author’s white friend, can be easily compared to ads by slave owners or slave seekers familiar to Marinetti who was raised in late nineteenth century Egypt. While the abolition of slavery in Egypt dated as far back as the 1877 convention, the trade did not end until 1896 when severe penalties were implemented to punish slave buyers.22 Marinetti’s language, understandably propagandist, sarcastically relies on the ads’ form to persuade his friend yet also ridicules his friend’s outdated desire to seek entertainment in an abolished trade from the past.

Marinetti’s suggestion to his white female friend is of a seemingly well-calculated adventure where he presents himself as an omniscient mediator. His language is of an expert in both the white and black races. Besides being aware of his friend’s taste as a “assaggiatrice di maschi” ‘devourer of men’ who has swallowed “gli uomini più originali d’Europa” ‘most original men of Europe’ (32), he also presents himself as capable of speaking for black men who “desiderano golosamente le donne bianche ed in particolar modo le bionde un po’ fragile, delicate come [lei]” ‘avidly

desire white women and especially blonds who are a little bit fragile, and delicate like her. Marinetti also goes as far as ridiculing his female friend’s fantasy about these men who are ready to pay the price of death in exchange of “i loro rarissimi accoppiamenti colle donne bianche” ‘rare mating instances with white females’ (32). Marinetti continues his letter describing in details his white friend’s adventure with Kam-Rim, the black foreigner, he decides to be the good candidate for his white friend’s adventure. The adventure becomes even more sensual when her white servant, also in love with her, alerts the crowds to the existence of “the smell of a black!” (34). Kam-Rim is later caught by the mad crowd and turned in to be killed as punishment.

Marinetti gives a detailed description of Ka-Rim’s barbaric death throughout the night, under the madness of the light of the white moon. Kam-Rim will be chased, arrested, hanged, and shot six times in the heart. “Sarà il segnale di un’improvvisa fucileria. Pam pam pam pam paak. Venti, cento, mille carabine sparano. Tutte puntate contro il corpo negro che crivellatissimo ondeggiando si sfaccia tagliuzzato a pezzi e brandelli” (37). After this scene, Kam-Rim looses his name. He becomes a mere “corpo negro” ‘black body’. His brutal death does not become the end of the story either. A seller will appear in town announcing in English that “Everybody must take […] a piece of black flesh […] for his dinner” (38). Marinetti’s suggestion for his friend will be not to miss the occasion of taking two pieces rather than one.

It is under the white light of the moon that Kam-Rim loses his name first given to him by the author when he appears at his white mistress’ bungalow: “negro,

---

23 The only time the word “barbaric” is used in the text is when Marinetti describes the crowd’s lynching and hanging of Kam-Rim and when he talks about his friend’s following of this crowd: “In quanto a voi, cara amica, appena avete visto fuggire dalla vostra bungalow il vostro seduttore negro, seguite la folla, saziatevi con lei di barbarico linciaggio sino all’impiccagione” (emphasis is mine) (37)
bellissimo, figlio di un ricco padrone di fattorie”. After dark the beauty of the love scene between the two bodies is capable of erasing all racial differences: “via i pregiudizi sulle razze e sulla ferocia dei negri” (33). Kam-Rim’s superiority – according to Marinetti – is not just in his beauty but in his intelligence as well: “Kam-Rim intelligentissimo è capace di superare, oltre alla sua, tutte le razze della terra come amatore ardente e insieme cortese”. Despite his love for the white and fragile female body, Kam-Rim is still proud of his black culture: “Anche saprà sussurrarvi tra un bacio e l’altro le più dolci, gioconde e turbolente canzoni negre” (33). Kam-Rim’s beautiful voice will fill her heart with the nostalgia “che torce i visceri di quelle razze vinte, ma indomabili, condannate a perire eppur così ebbre di vita” (33). The only warning Marinetti gives to his friend is to be vigilant that no one sees the black man enter or exit from her bungalow.

The description of a black male in a very far location makes us wonder about his consideration of the exotic. After all, he doesn’t suggest an adventure for his friend in Africa. The description of this familiar location would have been easier to describe for him. But the choice of such an imaginary location, in contrast to Tell-El Kebir in Mafarka le futuriste, for example, makes us reflect on Marinetti’s consideration of race in his work. There have been debates among scholars around the role of racial discourses in Italy - which culminated in the adoption of racial laws in 1938 - in shaping the futurist artistic movement.24 The connection between nation and race is evident in Marinetti’s writing. Yet, the discussion of race from a progressive point of

24 The study of other artistic movements such as the Mouvement de la Négritude and highlighting the areas of convergence between the artistic aspect of this cultural movement and the futurist movement in which African colors and motifs are highly stressed gives would be an interesting comparative study to give us a different perspective about the futurists’ approach to race.
view is not as clear in his writing. A general impression can be that the representation of the African character does not belong to a nation, which is very much in harmony with a colonial Eurocentric consideration of African nations. Most importantly to our discussion about the representation of Egypt in his work, African does not become equivalent to Egyptian in his writing.

It is worth noting in Marinetti’s word choice is that he is also stressing the stratification of the Egyptian identity which includes the Arabic, the peasant, and the African. This distinction is noticed in his *Mafarka le futuriste* where the names and characters of his African novel represent such a diversity: Mafarka-al-bar, a name that is both African and Arabic: Afarqaً means “Africans” in Arabic probably with the initial M that belongs to the author’s last name. Al-bar, in Arabic meaning righteous, reflects the character of the Arabic warrior who besides his excellence in warfare share the chivalry and values of any great warrior that has been mentioned in history. Mafarka-el-Bar’s Captain’s name is Abdalla. In Arabic meaning God’s servant but also spelled the same way it would be pronounced in Egyptian (Abdalla instead of what will later appear in the English translation as Abdullah which better corresponds to the classical Arabic pronunciation of the name). Marinetti in his name choices displays in many instances in the novel both his knowledge of the Egyptian colloquial and his respect to Arabic values especially everything related to Islamic chivalry.

Mafarka-el-Bar, gives commands to his Captain Abdalla to save a black woman from the hands of a soldier in a battle he wins and end by enslaving 6,000 black males and 4,000 black females. The soldiers are called to take a break when
Mafarka calls God’s name in Arabic “Allah” three times and the sound of the Muslim prayer is heard in the background to give a sense of serenity and quietness.

Marinetti criticizes later the European production of African art, yet understandably - given his underlining of his own mixed origin - he lists *Mafarka le futuriste* in 1938 as a model for the African novel. Marinetti lists some names that present “exceptional” works in literature in addition to other works that “escape mediocrity” in plastic art. Among those works Marinetti lists some of his own: *Mafarka il futurista, Gli Indomabili, Il tamburo di fuoco, Il Fascino dell’Egitto* and *Il Poema Africano della Divisione 28 Ottobre*.

The ambiguity surrounding Mafarka’s identity invites reflection on the autobiographical aspects of the novel. The debate surrounding Marinetti’s true identity already starts at an early stage and throughout his career he always shows awareness of such a debate taking place. In the preface to his 1909 novel *Mafarka le futuriste* he defies this stereotyping by telling his “futurist brothers” in the preface to the novel: “Ne suis je pas au moins un barbare aux yeux de mes critiques” (IX) ‘am I not at least a barbar in the eyes of my critics?’. Looking at Marinetti’s *Mafarka le futuriste* in its historical context rather than in the context of events that will occur 10 years after (ie rise of fascism) or 29 years later (ie the Manifesto of Race) allows us to study Marinetti’s writing from a different perspective. For the young futurist poet, the novel is “polyphonique,” a “masterpiece,” as he calls it in his preface dedicated to seven of his “futurist brothers” (15). Marinetti’s early life, where the Italian, the French, the Egyptian, but also the African melt in one pot, is indeed the only one who would have “dared” to write such a masterpiece - using his exact words from the introduction to
the first version of the *Mafarka le futuriste* published in French in 1909: “Je suis le seul qui ait osé écrire ce chef-d’œuvre” (15) [“I am the only one who has dared to write this masterpiece”] (1).

**Conclusion**

Looking at all the meanings and colors that emerge from Marinetti’s first futurist novel, we can understand the young futurist poet’s words when he describes *Mafarka le futuriste* as “polyphonique,” a “masterpiece,” as he calls it in his preface dedicated to seven of his “futurist brothers” (15). Marinetti’s background, where the Italian, the French, the Egyptian, but also the African melt in one pot, is indeed the only one who would have “dared” - using his exact words - to write such a masterpiece. The futurist author presents *Mafarka le futuriste* as a novel that aims at redefining and reshaping not Italy but the whole world. The African novel written in French and taking place in the Egyptian desert becomes then, according to Marinetti, a universal novel the same way futurism was intended to be a universal art movement. It is a novel that serves as a tool for change that he may get rid of one day as he says that “it is with [his] own hand that it will die one day when the growing splendor of the world will match it and will make it useless” (15).

One can then understand why after all the colors and events related to the author’s native Egypt which he retells in his self portrait section in *Scatole d’amore in conserva*, Marinetti’s tone changes when he moves to another chapter of his life, time of solitude when he turns seventeen in 1893: “Solo, a Parigi. Diciassette anni” [alone, in Paris. Seventeen] (13). Out of all these colors, experiences, and movements, it would not be then exaggerated to say that Marinetti’s style is born: “stile moderno,
ultra-veloce, balzante, simultaneo, elettrico, espressione diretta della nuova vita” [modern style, ultra-fast, resilient, simultaneous, electric, and a direct expression of the new life] (15). This style will reserve to Marinetti the title given to him by Parisian newspapers as “La Caffeina d’Europa.” Looking at such a colorful past we become familiar with a new angle from which to analyze Marinetti’s work where the embrace of the foreign might be interpreted as an attempt to recreate his home and childhood. It is in Marinetti’s past that the contrasting identities succeed in finding reconciliation through art. Such an approach is - in my opinion - capable of liberating Marinetti’s work and other literary works from the established paradigms early 19th century intellectuals had to identify with: to be either colonizer or colonized in order to find a place on the map. Such a map, where what it means to be an intellectual together with national boundaries, has been already set and which Marinetti violently contested through art.

A consideration of futurism with fascism in the background confines us into interpreting futurism as an artistic movement where the leap into the future could only mean a leap into a catastrophe, a reality regulated by racial laws, censorship and colonial aspirations. Advocating new angles of study, a new frame becomes visible. Glimpses of future possibilities, despite a fascist strong presence can still be observed. With Marinetti we are able to contemplate the setting sun as a leap into the future that becomes – like the native city of the author, Alexandria - a sea of possibilities of identities.

Chapter 2, in part, has been accepted for publication of the material as it may appear in the Palgrave-MacMillan Mediterranean Series. Publication of the paper is
expected in October 2014 as part of the volume *Mediterranean Modernism: Intercultural Exchange and Aesthetic Development, 1880-1945*. 
Chapter 3 - Fascism and Crowds: An Analysis of Intellectuals’ Conception of the Masses in Fascist Italy.

In the context of studying the representation of Egypt in Italian literature in early twentieth century it becomes imperative to study the intellectual context that inspired Italian writers especially in a context where those writers throughout their career had to express their support or rejection of fascism. When discussing fascism in early twentieth century Italy many scholars try to focus on the intellectual aspect that led to the emergence of such a misgovernment.\(^1\) The adhesion of some intellectuals to fascism has been a perplexing issue for many scholars. Such confusion emerges especially when trying to find a common ground that would have connected those intellectuals with their divergent literary and theoretical views under fascism. Moreover, such confusion may be also due to the fact that scholars have conventionally studied fascism looking for causes, for oppositions, and contestations, for adherence and resistance. In this chapter, I argue that the apparent divergence among intellectuals, expressed in the issuing of two opposing Manifestos, *Manifesto of the Fascist Intellectuals* signed by Giovanni Gentile in 1925 and the *Manifesto of anti-Fascist Intellectuals* signed by Benedetto Croce in the same year, harbors – when deeply examined – an agreement on the evaluation of the nature and role of crowds. This evaluation of crowds could be defined as an area of convergence among Italian intellectuals of different political stripes in the early twentieth century. With this

\(^1\) Referring to Aristotele’s three types of misgovernment, Benedetto Croce, while in internal exile in Naples, “observed disdainfully that Mussolini had added a fourth type of misgovernment – ‘onagrocracy,’ government by braying asses.” (Paxton 7-8). Also check: Benedetto Croce, “Liberlaism and Democracy” in *My Philosophy and Other Essays on the Moral and Political Problems of Our Time* (London, 1951), p.94.
hypothesis as a starting point, I look at the topos of the crowds in different texts that appear around this time period. My study shows that when studying fascism from this perspective, a different picture emerges, one of convergences among fascist and antifascist intellectuals in their constructions of masses or crowds. The construction of masses, through the texts I present in this chapter, clearly appears to be of opinion-less and class-stratified groups that have no communicative connection to the writers who construct them.

Some of the main criticisms addressed at fascism have been the result of the way it dealt with Italian individuals during Mussolini’s rule between 1922 and 1943. Fascism is seen from a negative point of view when contrasted with other liberal and democratic governments. While Liberalism and Democracy allow individuals to express their choices whether they be political, religious, or intellectual, fascism dealt with Italians as a mass body depriving them of their individual and diverse expressions thus undermining the role of the Italian individual as a political subject turning him or her into an object whose only role is to reflect the victorious and modern appearance of the Italian state. Interestingly enough, the critique attributed above to the Italian state under fascism, could be very well attributed to anti-fascist intellectuals during that same period. It would be then reasonable to say that the reason fascism appealed to intellectuals in its early stages was that it offered a “solution” to a national problem that was sensed since the Risorgimento by intellectuals and politicians alike: the need to unite Italians. This problem concerned the leaders coming to conscience of the need to lead the crowds of the Italian nation in order to create a united Italian national identity.
While studying the position of intellectuals in early twentieth century *vis à vis* fascism specifically in the Italian case, it is important to note that among intellectuals there was not an agreement on the depiction of the Italian identity proposed by fascism. While literary expressions were extremely diverse, political views were concentrated into two groups: fascist and anti-fascist. I have chosen to analyze the exchange between the fascist and anti-fascist intellectuals – expressed in the *Manifesto of the Fascist Intellectuals* signed by Giovanni Gentile in 1925 and followed by *Manifesto of the anti-Fascist Intellectuals* signed by Benedetto Croce in the same year – because it allows a new consideration regarding the difference between the apparently contrasting political views of the Italian intellectuals under fascism. I will refer to the *Manifesto of the Fascist Intellectuals* the *Manifesto of the anti-Fascist Intellectuals*, respectively as MFI and MAFI to ease readability.

The names of many intellectuals have been linked directly or indirectly to fascism, sometimes leading North American scholars to keep them in the shadow or to address them with reservations. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and the French philosopher and theorist Georges Sorel serve as a very good example. Gustave Le Bon’s name can easily be added in this case. This chapter adopts Robert Paxton’s position, considering the labeling of certain intellectuals who wrote at the end of the nineteenth century as fascists. Paxton states that, “Intellectual and cultural preparation may have made it possible to imagine fascism, but they did not thereby bring fascism about” (39). Mussolini emerges at a time when all those intellectuals and cultural critics are expressing their analysis of the current situation. But as Paxton states, those intellectuals and cultural critics, sometimes linked to the creation of fascism actually
“account better for the space made available for fascism than they do fascism itself” (39). For this reason, I attempt in this chapter to reconsider the political dichotomy (fascist and anti-fascist), up till now used to describe the relationship between Italians under fascism, by suggesting the alternative dichotomy where intellectuals placed themselves as individuals or elite on one side facing the masses on the other. Intellectuals saw themselves as guides who had the responsibility to deal with those from whom they distinguished themselves – the masses.

My alternative interpretation may help reconsider the state of “anarchy” of the cultural sphere which Roger Griffin mentions in his paper, “The Sacred Synthesis: The Ideological Cohesion of Fascist Cultural Policy.” In the introduction to this important paper, Griffin mentions how academics studying fascism have seen the general failure of [the fascist regime’s] efforts to create a fascist culture as symptoms of ideological confusion and vacuousness” (1). Yet when looking at intellectuals’ adherence, refusal to adhere, or later the abandoning of fascist principals, in the lights of individual-crowds dichotomy, finding cohesion may be a simpler task. Confusion can be eliminated when reconsidering the assumption that the only way to categorize intellectuals during fascism is by dividing them into adherents and opponents to the regime. Intellectuals in general saw themselves as individuals during that time period. Their adherence or not to fascism was only a reflection of their evaluation of fascism’s success in presenting a suggestion to the question of leading the crowds.

While it would be easier to claim that intellectuals changed their political orientation over time, Robert Paxton’s theory, regarding various stages through which fascism developed, may present a better explanation. In his *Anatomy of Fascism,*
Paxton approaches fascism from a different perspective announcing that there is a difference between fascism as a revolutionary movement at its emergence and the one that came to power. According to him, “where fascism appealed to intellectuals it did so most widely in its early stages.” Paxton presents an empirical analysis of what fascist government did in contrast to what they claimed to be. “Fascism’s latitudinarian hospitality to disparate intellectual hangers-on was at its broadest then, before its antibourgeois animus was compromised by the quest for power” (40). For this reason, while the revolutionary aspect of fascism has been considered at the center of many studies, I place the perception of the crowds at the center not only of fascism but of the intellectual currents present before and after the rise of fascism. This sense of malaise, accompanied by the fear of what the crowds might be capable of, have consistently been at the center of the discourse of intellectuals and political leaders since the beginning of Italian unification in 1861, and escalated during the period spanning between the March on Rome of October 26, 1922 and the overthrow of Mussolini’s regime in the midst of the Second World War in 1943.

Gustave Le Bon’s *Psychology of the Crowd* is only part if not the first in a long list of studies that concerned the crowds. In 1901, Pasquale Rossi publishes *Psicologia Collettiva Morbosa*. In the introduction to his work, Rossi conducts a literature review on the subject of Collective Psychology claiming the science to be of Italian origin. Looking at the names he mentions, Rossi places his study in a series of studies on criminology, psychology, and sociology. While he does not include the names of the works of those authors, finding the title linked to those names reveals Rossi’s views about the placement of his study. He mentions names such as Enrico Ferri *Criminal
Sociology (1884), Giacomo Barzellotti – probably for his La Morale nella filosofia positivistica (1878), Scipio Sighele La Folla delinquente (1895), Cesare Lombroso L’umomo delinquente (1876), Augusto Tebaldi – probably for his work Ragione e pazzia (1884). He then speaks about the French genius such as Tarde and Lebon (Le Bon) who have, according to him, changed this science in an artistic manner (Rossi v).²

While Pasquale Rossi claims the origin to studies on collective behavior to be Italian, a year later, in 1902, Dr. M. Campeano publishes his Essai de Psychologie Militaire Individuelle et Collective. In this essay, Campeano speaks about collective behavior studies during that period where psychologists, “after having taken a descending route toward biological phenomena, which is a necessary condition of any conscience, started taking an ascending route, which brought them closer to sociology.”³ In his introduction, Campeano mentions the name and work of Gustave Le Bon, Sighele, and Tarde “pour ne citer que les principaux” [Only to mention the main ones] (6). In 1903 Scipio Sighele, after having published La Folla delinquente in 1895, publishes the first edition of his L’Intelligenza della Folla: Studio della

² “La psicologia collettiva, scienza intuita in Italia dall’ingegno luminoso di Enrico Ferri e dall’altro toscanamente elegante del Barzellotti; svolta, nelle sue prime e grandi linee, con generale penetrazione dal Sighele, specialmente per quanto riguarda l’aspetto criminale, cui si aggiunse, con valore di maestro, Cesare Lombroso, e con generale precorrimento il Tebaldi; passata attraverso l’ingegno francese, così profondamente artista, dei Tarde e dei Lebon, che dona a ciò che tocca una forza d’iridescenza e d’incanto, da renderlo sempre nuovo, come raggio di sole che trasforma la goccia di rugiada in topazi e rubini; curata con intelletto d’amore – se non con ingegno – da me, ha ricevuto, oramai, il diritto di cittadinanza nel mondo scientifico, e di figliuolanza nell’albero della moderna sociologia” (Rossi v).

³ My translation from the French: “Après avoir suivi une marche descendante, qui les conduisait aux phénomènes biologiques, condition nécessaire de toute conscience, les psychologues se sont aperçus, qu’on pouvait suivre aussi une route ascendante, qui les rapprochait de la sociologie ; […] Ces études se sont produites assez tard ; elles ne font guère que commencer ; mais ceux, qui s’y dévouent, semblent vouloir réparer le temps perdu. Parmi ces publications, celles qui traitent de la Psychologie des foules, dues à G. Le Bon, Sighele, Tarde (pour ne citer que les principaux) ont particulièrement forcé l’attention.” (Campeano 5-6).
Psychologia Collettiva. Sighele refers in the preface to the work of both Gustave le Bon and Pasquale Rossi while criticizing both their work for frequently confusing “the psychology of the crowds […] with the psychology of nations.”

Tracing the mention and influence of Le Bon’s work on studies on Collective Behavior is then evident. Moreover, the psychology of the crowd as part of modern science had a great influence on Mussolini. In his La Mia Vita, translated in English in 2006 under the title My Autobiography, Mussolini states:

Ho studiato a fondo il periodo della nostra storia definita Risorgimento nella sua essenza politica e morale. Ho analizzato con estrema cura lo sviluppo della nostra vita intellettuale dal 1870 fino a oggi. Questi studi hanno occupato le ore più serene della mia giornata. […] Ho ammirato i francesi. Uno dei libri che mi ha interessato di più è stato Psicologia della folla di Gustavo Le Bon. (46)

The fact that Mussolini only mentions this work by title invites to further exploration of the influence of Le Bon’s work on fascism.

Gustave le Bon, born in 1841, was first best known for his medical writings before being interested in social sciences. Catherine Rouvier publishes an interesting work about his political ideas in her work, Les Idées Politiques de Gustave Le Bon, which won the “Prix de Thèse de Science politique de l’Université de Paris II” in 1896. Rouvier starts the first part of her work by announcing how Le Bon’s work as a sociologist marks him as independent, combatant, and a “declared adversary of everything that is conventional” (53). Le Bon places himself through his work in

---

4 “hanno confuso spesso la psicologia delle folle (che è veramente della psicologia collettiva, cioè della psicologia dal punto di vista statico) con la psicologia dei popoli (la quale non è altro che della psicologia collettiva dinamica o sociologia).” (Sighele vi)

5 Translation in My Autobiography: “I have studied thoroughly the period of our history called Risorgimento in its moral and political sense. I have analyzed with great care all the development of our intellectual life from 1870 up to this moment. […] I have admired the French. One of the books that have interested me most was the ‘Psychology of the Crowd’ by Gustave Lebon” (20).
opposition to – what Rouvier calls – the already established Cartesian myth of the sublime power of reason in guiding human beings. Rouvier explains by saying:

Magnifiée par Descartes, la raison était devenue avec les philosophes des “Lumières” la déesse protectrice de l’homo politicus, du citoyen au despote éclairé […]. C’est elle qui guide le représentant du peuple vers cette «volonté générale» qui, loin d’être «la somme des volontés particulières», est une substance indéfinie et impalpable dont la seule caractéristique selon Rousseau est de “regarder à l’intérêt commun. (Rouvier 53-34)6

Magnified by Descartes, reason had become with the philosophers of the “enlightenment” the protective goddess of the homo politicus, from the citizen to the enlightened despot […]. Reason is what guides representatives of the people towards that “general will” which, away from being “the sum of individual wills”, is an indefinite and intangible substance which only characteristic is, according to Rousseau, to “look at the common interest.”7

While reason plays the major role guiding the common interest according to Rousseau who himself is part of the Cartesian legacy, Le Bon, however, sees that the ultimate power of the crowd and that should be applied to lead the crowd remains in the hands of the instinct not reason. In Psychology of the Crowd,8 Le Bon expresses an implied judgment of the lack of rationality of the crowds only capable, without guidance, to produce collective violence. “Les civilisations ont été créées et guidées jusqu’ici par une petite aristocratie intellectuelle, jamais par les foules. Ces dernières n’ont de puissance que pour détruire”. ‘Civilisations as yet have only been created and directed by a small intellectual aristocracy, never by crowds. Crowds are only powerful for destruction’ (12; xix). In his own words, Le Bon makes a clear

---

6 The quotes Rouvier is using are from Rousseau’s Contrat Social, liv. II, chap.3.

7 My translation.

8 In this paper I use two versions of Gustave Le Bon’s Psychologie des Foules, the original French and a translated version. The page numbers correspond to the French and English versions respectively.
distinction between “intellectual aristocracy” who plays a guiding role for civilizations and the masses that only have the power to destroy.

The need to study the behavior of Crowds derived mainly from awareness or rather the concern of the Crowds’ collective violence. Le Bon’s work on the crowd and its psychology came as a derivative of contemporary philosophy and social thought that had a long history in France and which applied scientific observation specifically during the end of the nineteenth century. In his work *Origins of Crowd Psychology*, Robert A. Nye considers Gustave Le Bon to be the “most influential and colorful contributor” to the psychological theory of collective behavior. Moreover, Nye makes a very important distinction between recent research and Le Bon’s consideration of the crowd. For Nye, while recent research suggests that “urbanization, crime, and collective violence are not historically interrelated phenomena, it cannot challenge the essential conviction of those who lived through those times of change [during the 1870s] that such causal relationships did exist” (2).

While my personal position invites to challenge Le Bon’s theory regarding the crowd’s behavior, my chapter aims at understanding the influence of Le Bon’s theory on politicians and intellectuals in Italy at the turn of the twentieth century. Such a study becomes important in understanding the political policies during that time period especially when considering that according to Le Bon, the unguided crowd could lead to disaster and that individuals who become part of a crowd become in need of a

---

guide/leader to channel their energy that may otherwise lead to a state of chaos. In Le Bon’s words:

Leur [des foules] domination représente toujours une phase de désordre. Une civilisation implique des règles fixes, une discipline, le passage de l'instinctif au rationnel, la prévoyance de l'avenir, un degré élevé de culture, conditions totalement inaccessibles aux foules, abandonnées à elles-mêmes. Par leur puissance uniquement destructive, elles agissent comme ces microbes qui activent la dissolution des corps débilités ou des cadavres. (12)

Their rule is always tantamount to a barbarian phase. A civilisation involves fixed rules, discipline, a passing from the instinctive to the rational state, forethought for the future, an elevated degree of culture—all of them conditions that crowds, left to themselves, have invariably shown themselves incapable of realising. In consequence of the purely destructive nature of their power crowds act like those microbes which hasten the dissolution of enfeebled or dead bodies. (xix-xx)

According to Le Bon, when they become part of a crowd, individuals lose their individuality. They also lose their will and opinion. These individuals who constitute the crowd become irrational, hysteric and easy to manipulate. Le Bon makes the observation that: “Dès qu'un certain nombre d'êtres vivants sont réunis, qu'il s'agisse d'un troupeau d'animaux ou d'une foule d'hommes, ils se placent d'instinct sous l'autorité d'un chef, c'est-à-dire d'un meneur” ‘As soon as a certain number of living beings are gathered together, whether they be animals or men, they place themselves instinctively under the authority of a chief” (63; 118). The crowd, considered as an irrational block, creates a vacuum that calls to be filled by an individual who will play the role of a leader. In contrast to the theory of the enlightenment of the “common interest” and the “general will,” Le Bon sees that the leader’s will and interest is what counts. He continues by saying that,

Dans les foules humaines, le meneur joue un rôle considérable. Sa volonté est le noyau autour duquel se forment et s'identifient les
opinions. La foule est un troupeau qui ne saurait se passer de maître. (63)
In the case of human crowds the chief is often nothing more than a ringleader or agitator, but as such he plays a considerable part. His will is the nucleus around which the opinions of the crowd are grouped and attain to identity. He constitutes the first element towards the organisation of heterogeneous crowds, and paves the way for their organisation in sects; in the meantime he directs them. A crowd is a servile flock that is incapable of ever doing without a master. (118)\(^\text{10}\)

This change in the character of those individuals requires the existence of a leader. As a result, what counts is the will and opinion of the leader whose role becomes indispensable since an unguided flock, as we have seen earlier, would cause a disaster.

In contrast to the enlightenment which looked optimistically at masses, we can say that Le Bon’s consideration of the crowd derives from a pessimistic point of view. During a time of political change where masses played a vital role in social, political, and economic changes, the negative consideration of the crowds would be considered rather pessimistic. This pessimism was equally shared by Le Bon and Italian intellectuals (both fascist and anti-fascist) in Italy after World War I. For Le Bon, in 1871 Paris surrendered to Germany after being under siege from September 1870 to January 1871 marking the end the Franco-Prussian War. The treaty of Frankfurt was signed on May 10, 1871. France ceded Alsace and eastern Lorraine to Germany. The German army would occupy northern France till an indemnity of five billion Francs was paid. That year marked the end of the French empire of Napoleon III to be replaced by the Third Republic. While in Italy 1861 marks the Unification of the

\(^{10}\) While the purpose of this paper is not to make a comparison between the original and the English translation of Le Bon’s work, the information added in translating this passage from French to English would be worth exploring in the future.
Italian State – a date that has been optimistically looked at by many Italians; the years that followed, culminating in the First World War between 1914 and 1918 and which led to Mussolini’s rise to power, were mostly marked by a general sense of pessimism.

The adhesion – or not – of the intellectuals to the Fascist Party depended merely on whether they saw in the fascist regime a possibility to move the crowds in order to present a solution to the dis-unification of Italians. While, before 1914, judging the success of the unification project was only subject to personal interpretations, the expression of “mutilated victory” of Italy in the First World War seemed to be one that was shared by various politicians. The expression was then transformed into a general sense of pessimism and belief in Italy’s backwardness. John Agnew traces the roots of the metaphor of backwardness in his article, “The Myth of Backward Italy in Modern Europe,” published in 1997. One of the very important points Agnew makes deals with one of the reasons why Italy has become prone to be characterized in terms of backwardness: “its apparent failure to live up to earlier promise” (34). He goes as far back as Machiavelli’s observations in The Prince of “the civic corruption of his epoch” as compared to “the civic excellence of the ancient Romans” (35). What is important to my discussion here, is Agnew’s analysis of the “failure of unification to live up to expectations” in adding “a further blow to the fragile Italian collective identity” (35). Agnew sees that the pessimism experienced by Italians following the failure of unification came to add up to an already sensed feeling

---

11 Refer for example to Dr. Napoleone Colajanni’s work in Progresso Economico. (L’Italia di oggi. Serie 1, N. 1-3.) that appeared in 2 volumes in 1913 where his thesis focuses primarily on the economic progress of united Italy through empirical data to explain his optimism. Colajanni clearly states that the purpose of his work is to counter-argue the quite pessimistic points of views which prevailed in the Italian public sphere especially coming from Italian economists and publicists towards the end of the nineteenth century.
of backwardness that has been embedded for a long time in, what would be called in psychological terms, the Italian collective subconscious.

Moving forward in time, the work of Roger Griffin might serve as an explanation of the role of such a sense of backwardness and pessimism in bringing about fascism. As a political theorist, Griffin tries to find a definition and examination of fascism. In his *Modernism and fascism: the sense of a beginning under Mussolini and Hitler*, Griffin speaks of the familiarity of the factors that generated “the acute malaise of the Italian fin-de-siècle” (Griffin 196). He provides a long list of problems that includes historical, traditional, cultural, social, economic, educational, religious and legal aspects of the Italian society all doomed to failure. Fascism emerged in the early twentieth century in a time where a deep sense of backwardness was prevailing. Griffin states that “What spread among the educated elites was […] a deep sense, not just of Italy’s chronic backwardness and weakness in relation to the European ‘Great Powers’, but of the failure of the liberal system as a whole to provide adequate, […] basis for modern civilization in Italy or elsewhere” (197). This may provide a very good explanation for how, although disappointed in Giuseppe Garibaldi’s project, intellectuals who adhered to fascism found in such a repressive regime a solution to the same problem sensed by all Italians: dis-unification.

Looking at different literary movements and different political groups in Europe in general and specifically in Italy reveals a general consensus created among intellectuals on one side and politicians on the other about the need to lead the masses. Whether it is D’Annunzio or Marinetti, whether fascist or anti-fascist intellectuals, there is a common ground on which these divergent political views came to intersect
in their consideration of crowds: conceiving it as an irrational body that needs guidance. The disasters experienced by the new Italian nation during the First World War made the call for a “good” leader an urgent matter. There seemed to be an unannounced call for both intellectuals and politicians to protect crowds from harming themselves and others.

The need to lead the crowds also emerged from a general doubt that was then sensed by intellectuals who considered the crowds unable to make the “right” choice. Le Bon’s call for leading the crowds implies his doubt in the actual existence of such leadership or at least its failure to be effective. While the leadership implied by Le Bon is in a person, such leadership is criticized in Antonio Gramsci’s scattered writings especially in the Prison Notebooks between 1925 and 1935. Gramsci does not only criticize such leadership in discussing the concept of hegemony, he takes it further to calling for the role of the intellectual to counter such hegemony. As Renate Holub explains it in her *Antonio Gramsci: beyond Marxism and postmodernism*:

Gramsci’s concept of the ‘intellectual’, which equally resists definition, is a way for Gramsci to begin to conceptualize, not primarily the production, but the directed reproduction and dissemination of an effective hegemony, a differentiated yet also directive and value-laden channeling of the production of meaning or signification. A counter-hegemony would, as a result, also depend on intellectual activities. (Holub 5)

Gramsci’s concept of the role of the intellectual to counter-hegemony suggests contesting a predominant economic group that coercively operates through various institutions to maintain the status quo by depending on intellectual activities that would “produce, reproduce and disseminate values and meanings attached to a conception of the world attentive to democratic principles and the dignity of
humankind” (Holub 5). Gramsci’s intellectual activity implies intellectuals coercively operating through the same institutions to counter the already present hegemony. I would call it an intellectual hegemony to counter the already existing repressive hegemony.

Gramsci’s call for intellectual activity could be paralleled with the analysis of the “circulation of elites” even within democracies, provided by Gaetano Mosca. Mosca’s theory of the “circulation of elites,” or the political class of elite influenced fascists and I would add anti-fascists as well. Mosca himself was not a supporter of fascism. He was one of the senators who signed Croce’s MAFI in 1925. In his The Ruling Class, Elementi di Scienza Politica, first published in 1896 – only one year after Le Bon publishes his Psychology of the Crowds – Mosca declares that the domination and power of an “organized minority” over “the unorganized majority” given it obeys a “single impulse” becomes “inevitable” and “irresistible.” According to Mosca, obeying such a single impulse transforms single individuals who constitute the minority into a powerful totality capable of ruling each individual in the majority standing “alone before the totality of the organized minority” (53). Mosca sees then a clear distinction between the ruling class, as he imagines it to be, “the totality,” powerful in this case, and the “majority,” unorganized and closer to what Le Bon describes as masses or crowds. He also sees that this separation of a population into a majority of ruled class and a minority of a ruling class is somehow a natural occurrence since “the human being’s psychological tendencies are always the same.” According to him, whatever political changes may occur to a society those who belong to the ruling class will always seek to “acquire a group spirit”, becoming “more and
more exclusive and learn[ing] better and better the art of monopolizing to their advantage the qualities and capacities that are essential to acquiring power and holding it” (Mosca 68). It is hard not to see Mussolini later playing that role monopolizing the majority class. Mosca later refers in his work to the majority class as “masses,” and to “monopolizing” as “methods of propaganda.”

Mosca’s influence on fascism, despite his opposition to the regime, lies in providing the tools to lead those masses. It is quite interesting how later in his work the words “masses” and “propaganda” start to appear and replace words like “majority,” “lower class,” and “lower society.” Mosca speaks about “masses sentiments,” “discontent of the masses” (156), “conservative and ‘misoneistic’ 12 masses” (171). While all references to masses that are found in his work concern emotional aspects, he gives the tools to the governing class on how to manipulate those masses. He says:

Once the ruling nucleus is organized, the methods that it uses to win the masses and keep them loyal to its doctrine may be widely various. […], both methods of propaganda that are based upon the gradual persuasion and education of the masses and methods that involve the resort to force yield good results. Force, in fact, is perhaps the quickest means of establishing a conviction or an idea, though naturally only the stronger can use it. (Emphasis is mine). (190)

Both propaganda and force methods are then, according to Mosca, the ways the ruling nucleus should apply to win the masses. Interestingly enough, those were exactly the two methods applied by fascism.

Intellectuals during this time period, whether fascists or anti-fascists, agreed on the role of propaganda in manipulating the masses. Their agreement on the violence

12 Or “chary of novelties” (Mosca 171).
crowds are capable of generating did not contradict their belief in the fragility of those crowds. It wouldn’t then be extreme to claim that the consensus on the principal of the nature of the crowds did not automatically imply a political orientation. A group of intellectuals saw fascism as a realization of some of their ideals, a possibility to “liberate” the crowds. The Fascist Front of the intellectuals was created and culminated in the signing of 250 intellectuals of MFI in 1925. Although other intellectuals had remained so far “politically” silent, the signing of the MFI by other intellectuals made them break this silence. In response to the MFI written by Giovanni Gentile, Benedetto Croce immediately wrote, collected signatures, and published the MAFI. Anti-fascists, so far inactive politicians, did not accept the position taken by their fellow intellectuals as propaganda tool in the hands of the regime. Being conscious of the importance of the role of intellectuals as leaders of the crowds, they gave up their principle of political inactivity for a higher call: emancipation of the crowds from being misled.

An analysis of the two Manifestos is indispensable to compare the position of both fascist and anti-fascist intellectuals regarding the crowds and their consideration of the unification of Italy in 1871. It is important to see how they agreed on their consideration of the crowd while they disagreed in their judgment of the validity of the Unification of Italy that should have initially realized the dream of the Risorgimento.

*The Manifesto of the Fascist Intellectuals* was first published in *Il Mondo*, the PNF newspaper, on 29 March 1925. On 21 April 1925, the celebration day of the Founding of Rome, the MFI was then re-published by most Italian newspapers. The Manifesto presented the ideological précis of the Conference of Fascist Culture, held
at Bologna by 400 intellectuals and was chaired by the Neo-idealist philosopher Giovanni Gentile. The Manifesto publicly proclaimed the alliance between Culture and Fascism, excluding therefore intellectual critics who saw a need to separate the fascist regime from culture: only 250 intellectuals out of the 400 who attended signed the MFI.

*The Manifesto of the Fascist Intellectuals* addresses three main points: Origins, fascism and state, and the fascist government. In the first section, Giovanni Gentile – and all the other 250 intellectuals who signed the MFI – declared that fascism is both “a recent movement and an ancient movement of the Italian spirit, deeply bound up with the history of the Italian nation.” In the MFI, Gentile referred to two historical moments linked to the Great War. According to the MFI, the origins of the Movement went back to about 1919 “when a band of men, returned from the trenches and resolved to fight vigorously against the demo-socialist politics that then prevailed.” The main disappointment of fascists was when those politics let the moral value that came out of the victory of the Great War be either denied or go to waste. It is important to see how the MFI defines the cause of the problem as a representational one. The waste of the moral value of the great war was caused by the way demo-socialists represented the war to the Italian people: “they let it go to waste by representing it to the Italians, from a petty individualist and utilitarian point of view.” The result was a division created between individual and state’s interests. In the MFI there is a clear separation between individuals and the state. To the state (King and Army), the MFI attributes adjectives such as prestige, symbol, higher level, authority. In the MFI, a relationship is established between the individual and the state which are
defined as in “presumptuous and threatening opposition.” To the individual are attributed adjectives and expressions such as “unleashing of passions and baser instincts,” “inciting of social fragmentation, of moral decadence, of a selfish and irresponsible spirit of rebellion against all law and discipline.” According to those intellectuals, fascism offered the reconciliation between those two opposing extremes:

Fascism was a political and a moral movement. Its politics was like a gymnasium of self-denial, a campaign for the sacrifice of the individual to an idea in which the individual might find his life’s purpose, his freedom and his entire law – the idea which is the Fatherland, an ideal which is realized historically without ever being exhausted, a specific and well-defined historical tradition of civilization, but a tradition that never remains in the past as a dead memory but becomes a personal force in the citizen’s mind, aware that there is a goal to attain, a tradition which is therefore a mission. Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals

The second section of the MFI is a representation of the religious character of fascism that results from the method fascism used in its struggle between 1919-1922 as a minority in a Liberal Parliament. In this section there is a clear contrast between the state during those years described as “hybrid socialism – democratic and parliamentary” which adapts an “individualist version of the idea of politics, and the state “whose idea had worked so forcefully in the heroic Italian era of [Italian] Risorgimento” (Manifesto of the Fascist Intellectuals).

The MFI then shows the contrast between the state where a minority sought the realization of a great project – pointing to the Risorgimento – of “making people who had gained their independence and unity into Italians,” and fascism which took strength from the same idea. This part of the MFI could be very well paralleled with Le Bon’s notion of the leader being hypnotized by an idea which becomes religious. Later in this chapter, I discuss this parallel between Mussolini as a fascist leader and
the leader which Le Bon speaks about in his *Psychology of the Crowds*. Fascism took
then strength from this great idea, “which attracted a rapidly growing number of the
young because of the fascination that comes from any religious idea that calls for
sacrifice […] for the only purpose that could justify it – the life and greatness of the
Fatherland.”

The *MFI* then discusses the role of violence in creating a change before
moving to the last section where the nature and role of the fascist government are
discussed. The *MFI* presents the role of “breaking the law in order to set up a new law,
a force armed against the State to establish the new State and to restore an
“enthusiastic pre-War unanimity.” In this section, the *MFI* discusses the end of the
squadrons and law-breaking to be replaced with order. The word *tradizione* [tradition]
is repeated twice. Many words implying subordination are repeated such as
“subordinazione,” “inferiore,” “rispetto,” “rinuncia,” “velleità.” Moreover, the word
freedom is not unconditionally mentioned: “è libertà ma libertà da conquistare
attraverso la legge, che si instaura con la rinuncia a tutto ciò che è piccolo arbitrio e
velleità irragionevole e dissipatrice.” (“It is freedom, but freedom to be won through
law, freedom established by renouncing all petty willfulness and wasteful, irrational
ambition” *Manifesto of the Fascist Intellectuals*).

In response to the issuing of the *Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals*, anti-fascist
intellectuals decided to break the silence and respond by signing the *Manifesto of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals* that Benedetto Croce wrote and published in Il Mondo on May 1st
1925. In this Manifesto, anti-fascist intellectuals underlined the importance of
confining their political role and that of all intellectuals in general to their duty as
“citizens” rather than “intellectuals.” In the Manifesto of Anti-fascist Intellectuals, they underlined the importance of separating their civic duty from their intellectual duty. According to them, announcing their political inclination to the crowds automatically implies being followed by them which may have a negative impact. While fascist intellectuals addressed the masses (and other fellow intellectuals) in Gentile’s _MFI_, anti-fascist intellectuals excluded the crowds completely – as interlocutors- from their _MAFI_ to address an ideological problem with their “fellow” intellectuals:

Intellectuals — those who cultivate science and art — may exercise their right and perform their duty as citizens by joining a party and serving it faithfully. But, as intellectuals, their sole duty is to focus on raising all men and all parties equally to a higher spiritual sphere — through research, criticism, and the creation of art — enabling them to fight the necessary battles with even more beneficial results. (_Manifesto of the Anti-Fascist Intellectuals_)

It may be well argued that Le Bon warned against intellectuals’ involvement in leading the crowds in his work and that consequently his theory should not be considered part of the debate that took place between fascist and anti-fascist intellectuals in their respective manifestos. In his work he says: “Les meneurs ne sont pas, le plus souvent, des hommes de pensée, mais d'action” [leaders are not, most frequently, men of thought, but men of action] (64). Yet the reading of the _MFI_ clearly shows that a merge between the intellectual and the politician, according to those intellectuals, to be indispensable. Such a merge was not a political innovation

---

13Interestingly enough, such a separation is not made by Gramsci as I mention earlier in this paper. Gramsci’s intellectual, in contradiction to what anti-fascist intellectuals state in their Manifesto, has an important role to play to counter hegemony. The issuing of the Manifesto of Anti-fascist Intellectuals and the writing of Antonio Gramsci provide evidence to the inevitability for the intellectual of being involved in politics.
introduced to the public at the hands of Mussolini; it had already been accepted in Garibaldi’s project to unite Italians. After having united Italians to form one nation, and with the formation of parliamentary groups, politicians were already aware that war alone could not unite the masses. There was a need for an intellectual or rather ideological approach to persuade the masses who had the power to form and change governments. The battle had to be an ideological one. It would not be then surprising to read what fascist intellectuals wrote in their *MFI*: “Against such state, fascism has stood out with the strength of its idea which, thanks to the appeal that any religious idea that calls for sacrifice usually has, drew around it a rapidly growing number of young people and became the party of the young.” The old project of Garibaldi to unite Italy had to be performed through ideas.

Fascism would not have then found a fertile soil without the Risorgimento to pave the way to the 1871 unification, and the disappointment that came with it. Massimo d’Azeglio’s famous aphorism, “abbiamo fatto l’Italia, ora bisogna fare gli italiani,” had remained in the background even after Mussolini rose to power. While the sense of pessimism I mentioned earlier in this chapter resulted from the fact that Italians were already “made” in such diverse ways that seemed for many to doom Unification to failure, the dream in an Italian state implied searching for alternatives. The fascist alternative was in re-making Italians by eliminating their political differences – and consequently eliminating the liberal state.

Mussolini presented himself as the leader Le Bon speaks about while the idea of modernism was the one energizing him. After all, his plan for Italy was, in his own words, “work and discipline” (Mussolini, xii). In her *Fascist Spectacle: the aesthetics*
of power in Mussolini's Italy, Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi discusses how “Le Bon provided political leaders with devices to neutralize the dangers of the Crowds” (22). The leader who “has most often started as one of the led,” only to be later “hypnotized by the idea, whose apostle he has since become” (Le Bon 140). Fascist intellectuals’ use of the expression “religious character of Fascism” is not a hyperbole in this case. Indeed power – in Le Bon’s words – had “taken possession” of Mussolini “to such a degree that everything outside it vanished, and that every contrary opinion appeared to him an error or superstition” (Le Bon 140). Mussolini’s hypnotization with the idea of power was then religious.

Moreover, both Falasca-Zamponi and Paxton refer to the role of Le Bon’s writings in forging Mussolini’s conception of the masses as “an Artistic Object.” According to Paxton, “Le Bon's conceptualization of the crowd and his call for a strong leader particularly inspired Mussolini’s interpretation of his own role as artist-politician and influenced his opinion of the ‘masses’” (17). In this matter, it would be indispensable to my discussion to refer to Futurism which presented more than just an artistic and cultural avant-garde revolution. Futurists in their rhetoric addressed the crowd rather than other intellectuals. In the masses futurists saw a possibility not just for a cultural change but a political one as well.

While on the political level, Italian fascism was successful in its propaganda that aimed at moving the masses, on the intellectual level, however, intellectuals did not all seem to agree with its manipulative principles and tools. F.T. Marinetti, founder of the Futurist Movement was the first to turn his back to the regime. In the early 1920s Futurism and fascism seemed a “natural alliance,” – F.T. Marinetti was one of
the intellectuals who signed the *MFI* in 1925. This alliance was destined to change when fascism started to move to its later stages: “[A]s the regime became entrenched in power, it shed its revolutionary image and, accordingly, its association with futurism. Although Marinetti was inducted into the Fascist Italian Academy, fascist aesthetic policy became increasingly conservative, and its ties with futurism were eventually severed” (Pugliese 25). Futurists could not compromise their revolutionary principal just to serve the modern aesthetic appearance Mussolini wanted for the Italian state. Leading the crowds to a revolution that would change the future seems to be the point where both fascism and Futurism met only for a short period of time.

An argument that could be legitimately argued is that the division, around which my chapter is constructed, between the masses and the intellectuals, was not the main current existing in the early twentieth century in Italy. A quick look at Antonio Gramsci’s insistence on the active role that should be played by any intellectual seems to be in contradiction with Le Bon’s insistence on the need that the masses have for a leader. Gramsci’s call for the organic intellectual has been motivated, however, by the same crisis felt by Le Bon among others who diagnosed it as a condition that could only find remedy in a leader. The only difference is that the solution proposed by Gramsci lay in the masses regarded as conscious individuals. For Le Bon the solution had to be in the education of the masses to elevate them beyond their unconscious level. Intellectuals’ role would be to provide guidance to make the “correct” choice. fascist politics later aimed at manipulating those crowds in order to take advantage of their force and power when gathered as masses.
Fascists relied on modern propaganda in order to persuade the masses. The contradictions that were obvious between the different stages they went through did not seem to present an obstacle for them to pursue their goal. These same contradictions are actually considered by Le Bon a condition for the triumph of mobilizing beliefs: “L'absurdité philosophique de certaines croyances générales n'a jamais été, je le répète, un obstacle à leur triomphe. Ce triomphe ne semble même possible qu'à la condition qu'elles renferment quelque mystérieuse absurdité.” (“The philosophic absurdity that often marks general beliefs has never been an obstacle to their triumph. Indeed the triumph of such beliefs would seem impossible unless on the condition that they offer some mysterious absurdity”; Le Bon 76; 153). The whole dynamic is summed up in the idea leading the leader and the leader using his persuasion to direct the crowds.

Later discussion of the psychology of the crowd by Elias Canetti presents an affirmation of the crowd’s need for direction. Although, in Crowds and Power, Canetti discusses the psychology of the crowd from a different angle than does Le Bon, Canetti focuses on the crowd’s need for direction as one of the “attributes of the crowd”:

[The crowd] is in movement and it moves towards a goal. The direction, which is common to all its members, strengthens the feeling of equality. A goal outside the individual members and common to all of them drives underground all the private differing goals which are fatal to the crowd as such. Direction is essential for the continuing existence of the crowd. Its constant fear of disintegration means that it will accept any goal. A crowd exists so long as it has an unattained goal. (29)
The goal had already been established by the Risorgimento: uniting Italians, but underneath the main goal laid a dream for a strong Italy, the question had to be under which leadership. The goal needed to be impersonated in a leader. In his later comparison between the role of a leader and an orchestral conductor, Canetti adds: “there is no more obvious expression of power than the performance of a conductor” (394). “He [the conductor] has the power of life and death over the voices of the instruments” (395); “The complexity of the work he performs means that he must be alert. Presence of mind is among his essential attributes; law-breakers must be curbed instantly” (395). Canetti suggests that the leader is basically able to perform his role not due to his superpowers but rather due to the empowerment that his role attributes to his person. In the light of such analysis offered to us by Canetti, we can look at one of the suggestions of what a leader should look like offered by Gabriele D’Annunzio. Although influenced in his expression about the “Superman” by Nietzsche, Gabriele D’Annunzio’s “superman” is more linked to the class elite than is the Nietzschian one.

In 1919-20 D’Annunzio was more famous than Mussolini. Paxton describes him as “Mussolini’s most serious rival” and gives him the title of the “writer-adventurer”. In his work *Il fuoco* (1900) the main character becomes “conscious of the higher mission to use his creative gifts to mobilize the masses for the rebirth of Italy” (Griffin 198). D’Annunzio later tries to play this double role: the intellectual-warrior. As Paxton states, D’Annunzio “was already notorious in Italy not only for his bombastic plays and poems and his extravagant life, but also for leading air raids over Austrian territory during World War I” (Paxton 59).
Violence and beauty become synonymous not only in the world of D’Annunzio but also among intellectuals in general. It is not surprising that after an intense humiliation in the First World War, despite being on the winning side of the Allies, the fascist rhetoric relied on the need to regain dignity through battle. Gabriele D’Annunzio refused all the limits imposed on the reality of the middle-class man and that has come as a consequence of the unification of the Italian State. According to D’Annunzio, beauty and heroism were both challenged in Italy in the beginning of the twentieth century. From this condition emerged the need for a new aristocracy elevated above the “common mass” through the cult of beauty and through the active and heroic life. A new elite needs to define itself as elevated above the “masses.” The importance of the discussion of D’Annunzio’s thought is how he saw such an elite responsible not only of guiding the Italian masses but to also extend its dominion beyond the Italian territory to engage in an imperial conquest similar to the one that existed during Ancient Rome.

While fascist intellectuals created the merge between the intellectual and the politician, Gabriele D’Annunzio created a merge between the intellectual and the warrior. Since the D’Annunzian cultural imperialism found in the Ancient Roman Empire a good symbolic representation, the superman or hero had to be not just an intellectual but most importantly a warrior. The recall of the Roman Empire as an ideal consequently entails the violent takeover of and imposition upon what regarded as “lower” cultures – an aspect that interestingly reappears in late nineteenth - early twentieth century Italian colonialism. D’Annunzio represents in this way a merger between the politician and the intellectual.
Although D’Annunzio came to be called “the John the Baptist of Fascism”, the belief in the need for a leader that mobilized both D’Annunzio and Mussolini and brought them to convince the people of such a need would be better called “the John the Baptist” that paved the way to fascism. This need seems to be agreed on by all Italians especially after the “mutilated victory” of Italy in World War I, which comes as mostly a culmination of this need and the call for dignity.

The emergence of the Futurists in the first decade of the 20th century, with their refusal of weakness and their call for violence make us look earlier than WWI to find origin to the call for dignity in the Risorgimento and the call for patriotism. Paxton announces that “Well before 1914 newly stylish anti-liberal values, more aggressive nationalism and racism, and a new aesthetic of instinct and violence began to furnish an intellectual-cultural humus in which fascism could germinate” (Paxton 32). In contrast to D’Annunzio’s position regarding the revival of the Roman Empire, Futurists called for the destruction of museums and libraries in their Futurist Manifesto published in 1908. Futurists were “young anti-bourgeois intellectuals and aesthetes. The Futurists were a loose association of artists and writers who espoused Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s ‘Futurist Manifestos’, the first of which had been published in Paris in 1909.” Interestingly enough, the Futurists were very enthusiastic and eager for “the adventure of war” in 1914 (Paxton 6). Despite their disagreement with D’Annunzio on the way the past should be looked at, the Futurists agreed with D’Annunzio on the need for applying violence.

The Futurists called for continuous change. They even went to the extreme of asking their young followers to destroy their legacy and create their own. In the
Futurist Manifesto issued by F.T. Marinetti we read: “The oldest among us are thirty; so we have at least ten years in which to complete our task. When we reach forty, others, younger, and more courageous will very likely toss us into the trash can, like useless manuscripts. And that’s what we want!” (Marinetti 16). Obviously this message is the opposite of the one for which D’Annunzio or fascism called. Yet an agreement still existed among the three: the recognition of the need to lead followers and the taking into account of the existence of audience in huge numbers, or better say masses.

As Le Bon suggested, and with the rise of modern propaganda to facilitate it, Futurists applied the use of imagery to persuade their audience. The language used in their Manifestos is worth looking at; in the first founding manifesto Marinetti uses images such as “infernal fires,” “mighty flood,” and “young lions” to portray violence and other images such as “graveyards,” “corpses,” “public flophouses,” “poison,” and “rot” to describe his critique of the veneration of the past. These images are also represented in the futurist architecture where the main theme is a vertical launch as opposed to the classical and artistic rounded shapes. The use of such images recalls Le Bon’s comment that even words are powerful in the images they produce in the minds of the crowds (Le Bon, Book I, Chapter II).

Fascism applied images in its propaganda to attract crowds as well. This use of the modern propaganda has represented for some scholars a reason to consider fascism a modern phenomenon. Still other scholars such as Roger Griffin would ask the

---

14 These words were used in the first founding Manifesto of Futurism. In: F.T. Marinetti. *Critical Writings*. pp. 11-17.
question: “Fascism and Modernism: ‘Aporia’ or Paradox?” (Griffin 18). What is of interest here is the solution that fascism seemed to offer for the crisis that modernism triggered: certainty in a time of uncertainty. The contradiction that Griffin notes in his *Modernism and Fascism* is actually proposed because of the adherence of Futurists to fascism. The contradiction is embedded in the fact that Marinetti, founder of the Futurism which would be considered “one of the most radical forms of aesthetic modernism,” would find in Mussolini’s “peculiar brand of nationalism” a possibility and thus “a vehicle” for his Futurist war on the decadence of “pastism” (Griffin 18-19).

In the *MAFI*, Croce reproaches the fascist intellectuals for deserting their role of “enlightening” the masses. According to him, expressing their adhesion to a political party only leads to “cultivating” a partial number of the crowd while ignoring another. Culture in such rhetoric seem to be defined as a religion that needs to protect and remain divided from politics. Similarity between fascist and anti-fascist values is striking in this case. Ruth Ben-Ghiat’s words describing fascism as a way “to represent a last defense of the moral, the transcendental, and the personal [which] proved extremely persuasive to Italian intellectuals in the early 1930s” (Ben-Ghiat 294) could very well apply to anti-fascist intellectuals during that period.

Divergence among fascist and anti-fascist intellectuals can then be based on the conception each has of the role of the intellectual. Besides the fact that the Anti-fascist intellectuals refused the fascist intellectuals’ position for the threat it represented to the “fragile” crowds, there seemed to be a consensus among intellectuals and politicians around the strength of these crowds and what they were truly capable of. In Le Bon’s *Psychologie des foules* preface he states that: “Crowds,
doubtless, are always unconscious, but this very unconsciousness is perhaps one of the secrets of their strength” (140). This fear again recalls Thomas Carlyle’s worries about “the masses full of beer and nonsense” (Paxton 35). Intellectuals’ opposing decisions, whether to speak or stay silent, hold in their core a common acknowledgement of the inevitability of being followed by the crowds.

Anti-fascists seem to take Le Bon’s position that says that intellectuals should not play the leading role. Although Le Bon calls for the need of a leader, he also stands against tyranny. According to him, this position should not be played by intellectuals: “The tyranny exercised unconsciously on men’s minds is the only real tyranny because it cannot be fought against” (Le Bon 167). Le Bon’s words lead his reader to see no harm in providing a leader for unconscious crowds. That leader is himself somehow unconscious and led by another higher ideal. When it comes to intellectuals, they remain fully conscious and thus their manipulation of the crowds becomes very effective. While a political leader would lead the will and bodies of those unconscious crowds, an intellectual leader would lead the conscience of the individuals who constitute the crowd. Le Bon almost warns his reader from a conscious leader capable of manipulating individual’s consciences: “Tiberius, Ghengis Khan, and Napoleon were assuredly redoubtable tyrants, but from the depth of their graves Moses, Buddha, Jesus, and Mahomet have exerted on the human soul a far profounder despotism” (167-168). A political leader becomes almost replaceable. He is only occupying an empty space created by the loss of will when individuals come together. An intellectual leader becomes then more manipulative than a political one.
This distinction between the political leader and an intellectual one goes in accordance with the distinction Le Bon makes between “collective psychology” and “individual psychology” of men when they “form part of a crowd engaged in action”. According to him, their intelligence becomes “affected with this differentiation”. He continues saying that “intelligence is without influence in collectivities, they being solely under the sway of unconscious sentiments” (179). The differentiation is thus between intelligence and sentiments and for Le Bon the first is led by intellectuals while the other should be led by politicians.

It may be argued that Le Bon’s consideration of the masses is not a negative one since he dedicates a section to instruction and education in the first chapter of his book. Le Bon seems to be calling for the education of the crowds to allow them to make good judgments and to save them from the state of unconsciousness. This kind of calling is completely opposite to the education program that the fascist regime sought to impose on the Italian masses. This consideration would place Le Bon at the opposite side of what fascism aimed to accomplish. Le Bon speaks about the role of analytical thinking. He is very critical of the education system that relies on recitation and that does not allow a space for judgment and initiation on the part of the student. According to Le Bon, this kind of education system is only capable of producing “angry crowds” that are unsatisfied with their condition and that abandon their “champs et ateliers” (Le Bon 52-53).

However, Le Bon’s perception about the crowds is the one I have at the center of the argument proposed by this chapter and not Le Bon’s whole work. Although Le Bon and the Futurists’ works were chronologically published before fascists came to
power, it would be invalid to place those theories as the basis of what develops later into fascism. As I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, the fear of the masses is what paved the way to studies concerning the masses (Le Bon’s work), to thinking of ways to benefit from the energy of those masses (Futurism), and to the emergence of movements that aimed at controlling the masses (fascism). As Paxton has stated in his *Anatomy of Fascism*:

> It is wrong, however, to construct a kind of intellectual teleology that starts with the fascist movement and reads backwards, selectively, rounding up every text or statement that seems to be pointing toward it. A linear pedigree that leads directly from pioneer thinkers to a finished fascism is pure invention. For one thing, nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century rebels against conformist liberalism, such as Nietzsche, and against reformist socialism, such as Sorel, are not seen whole if we pick out the parts that seem to presage fascism. Fascist pamphleteers who quoted from them later were wrenching fragments out of context. (Paxton 38)

So, instead of starting with fascism and reading backwards, I have looked at the emergence of the fear of the crowds and moved forward to see how it was manifested in several literary and political movements. The local disappointment in the Italian unification coincided with the crisis that modernists faced expressed in the lack of certainty that was promised to them by the enlightenment. Although aware of the impossibility of reaching such assertion, the need for certainty remained at the base of the disappointment of modern intellectuals.

Despite Croce’s political position as an anti-fascist, he was against expressing his political position prior to the publication of the *MFI*. The masses were led by a political leader (Mussolini) who – according to Le Bon’s theory – could not harm the conscience or the real essence of the individuals who constitute the crowd. Since Le
Bon specifically states that “the leaders” he speaks about “are more frequently men of action than thinkers” (140), the role of the intellectual as perceived by Croce and with him all the anti-fascist intellectuals who signed the *MFI* – had to remain outside the political realm since it had to remain a conscious leading role. It is to note that a contradiction seems to be present here between the role of “the thinkers,” as depicted by fascist intellectuals on one side, and Le Bon and anti-fascists intellectuals on the other. Le Bon’s “thinker” does not seem to be in accordance with the way fascist intellectuals saw themselves, or maybe they saw fascism as a realization, or possibility for reconciliation between the political and the intellectual. According to Le Bon, the reason why politicians need to be leaders is in the certainty this position requires: “They are not gifted with keen foresight [an attribution that is most probably linked to thinkers], nor could they be, as this quality conduces to doubt and inactivity” (Le Bon 140). Foresight, doubt and inactivity are thus qualities that can only be attributed to intellectuals and that would interfere with their playing the role of leaders of the crowds.

This chapter is mostly concerned with the convergent area around which divergent groups circulated in the early twentieth century in Italy. As I have shown through the presentation of various intellectual currents and political expressions present during this time period, fascism cannot be then placed at the center of this study. While Paxton says, “Fascism was an affair of the gut more than of the brain, and a study of the roots of fascism that treats only the thinkers and the writers misses

---

15 Croce will play a major role in the writing of and collecting signatures for the Manifesto of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals.
the most powerful impulses of all” (42). What I have shown in this chapter is that an ideological agreement on the rationality of the crowd has been at the center of many positions whether on the intellectual, political, or economic level. In contrast to what Paxton says, the study of thinkers and writers only misses the point when fascism is placed at the center. In this chapter I presented through textual analysis of many texts, especially the two Manifestos issued by fascist and anti-fascist intellectuals, a suggestion to place attitudes toward the crowd at the center of the currents that existed during the first half of the twentieth century in Italy.
Chapter 4 – Giuseppe Ungaretti: From Historical Crisis to the Harmonious

Polyphony Buried in the Secrets of Poetry

Si chiamava
Moammed Sceab

Discendente
di emiri di nomadi
suicida
perché non aveva più
patria

Amò la Francia
e mutò nome

Fu Marcel
ma non era francese
e non sapeva più
vivere
nella tenda dei suoi
dove si ascolta la cantilena
del Corano
gustando un caffè

E non sapeva
sciogliere
il canto
del suo abbandono

L’ho accompagnato
insieme alla padrona dell’albergo
dove abitavavamo
A Parigi
dal n° 5 della rue des Carmes
appasito vicolo in discesa

Riposa
nel camposanto d’Ivry
sobborgo che pare
continuamente
in una giornata
di una decomposta fiera

E forse io solo
so ancora
che visse

(Ungaretti, In Memoria, 30 September 1916)

*In memoria*, written when Ungaretti decides to commemorate the tragic death of his dear friend Mohammed Sceab, reminds us of the way cultures and nations intersect and relate to one another in the Italian author’s life and become expressed in his polyphonic creative work. Mohammed Sceab commits suicide when he becomes unable to reconcile with the polyphonic nature of his identity. Yet, Ungaretti’s acceptance of this polyphonic nature and his later decision to express it in his poetry helps him escape death. Moreover, he sees in his poetry an act of social and civil engagement, which goes hand in hand with intellectuals’ awareness during the early twentieth century of their role in creating change and building their societies. In 1963 Ungaretti sums up his reason of including this poem at the beginning of his collection *Il porto sepolto*: “*In memoria*, […], è il simbolo d’una crisi della società e degli individui che ancora perdura, derivata dall’incontro e scontro di civiltà di verse e dall’urto e conseguenti sconvolgimenti tra le tradizioni politiche e il fatale evolversi storico dell’umanità.” [*In memory*, […], is the symbol of a crisis of the society and individuals which still persists, derived from the encounter and clash of different civilizations and from the impact and eventual disruptions between the political traditions and the inevitable historical evolution of humanity] (Saggi e scritti vari 819). Interestingly enough, Ungaretti is often known for his support of the fascist regime or more specifically for his support of Mussolini.¹ This known fact leads to an

¹ In 1927 G. Ungaretti published his essay “Originalità del fascismo” where he praised “la magnificenza che lievita in questo nostro movimento” ‘the rising magnificence in this movement that is ours’. In this same essay he praised Mussolini who, according to Ungaretti, having originated from
assumption that he would not have been a champion of cultural diversity. However, Ungaretti’s poetry, as I shall demonstrate in this chapter, holds the secret of an attempt to re-establish a certain balance, at least to stay alive, against the inevitability of history, even if he could not bring his friend back to life.

In this chapter, I shall discuss Ungaretti’s creative work as a case of poetics of relationships and connections. His poetics, primarily autobiographical in nature, reflect his view of Egypt and the Mediterranean in addition to his views of Italy and France. I shall demonstrate such an argument by first looking at Ungaretti’s depiction of the macaronic character of Alexandria. I then move to his awareness of the existence of a gap, also shared by other critics at the beginning of the twentieth century, between theorizing about art and feeling art. Such an awareness explain Ungaretti’s attempt through his work to fill such a gap by producing poetry that reflects life rather than art that theorizes life. From this perspective we can understand Ungaretti’s suggestion to read his poems collected in *Vita d’un uomo* as a concrete reflection of the dialogic nature of his life. In this way, we can then read *In memoria*, in addition to being a creative moment in the author’s life, as an attempt to become one with the other while proposing a different solution to his friend’s torment in the very act of poetry composition.

4.1. Ungaretti’s Autobiographical poetry

Ungaretti’s poetry, as a totality, is autobiographical. Each single poem, when put into dialogue with other poems, reflects the author’s autobiography. Although

---

the people, educated by the people in a nation like Italy where the most pressing problems are the ones of the masses “s’è costantemente appoggiato al popolo” “he had constantly supported the people” (*Scritti letterari* 153).
Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea that dialogism belongs primarily to the realm of the novel, his discussion about polyphony and dialogism are essential when analyzing Ungaretti’s work. Like other cases I am examining in this dissertation, Ungaretti’s autobiography displays a multi-voicedness. Moreover, the dialogism of Ungaretti’s work offers a lens through which to view the multi-voiced nature of the colonial experience in Alexandria, which works in opposition to the more monologic voice of colonialism.

We have been discussing cases of poets that go against the polarized view of East/West. Here again, we see someone who is interested in the multiple voices as part of his intimate formation.

As early as 1942 Ungaretti began to conceive of his individual poems as different voices that constitute the trajectory of the human life.\(^2\) From the fragments on slips of paper, in the trenches of WWI, to the elaborate sestine canzoni that point to his integration in a poetic tradition that spanned the Mediterranean, Ungaretti’s poetic life consists in a search to find his place and coexist in an embrace of multiplicity. In 1969, Giuseppe Ungaretti’s collection of completed works appeared under the title *Vita d’un uomo* [Life of a Man]. A few months before the author’s death in Milan, in June 1970, he flew to the University of Oklahoma where he was awarded the first Books Abroad International Prize for Literature currently known as The Neustadt International Prize for Literature. Luciano Rebay in the Encomium read in honor of the awarded author asks this question: “Why did Ungaretti adopt for his *opera omnia* this inclusive title?” The Encomium that will be later published at the end of the same

\(^2\) In his 1963 essay “Ungaretti commenta Ungaretti” ‘Ungaretti comments on Ungaretti’ we learn that Ungaretti considered giving this title to his whole work as early as 1942 (*Vita d’un uomo, saggi e interventi* 815-828).
year as a special issue of *Books Abroad*\(^3\) sums up Rebay’s accurate reading of Ungaretti’s reflections on the role of the poet. According to Rebay, Ungaretti never conceived of the poet as an abstract entity who is separate from humanity. Throughout his career Ungaretti had proven that even at times of tragic loneliness, he had been “an integral part, and often the most alive, most vigilant part of humanity” (552-553).

Ungaretti’s choice in 1969 to collect his works under the title *Vita d’un uomo* already holds in the title an understanding of each poem as a single utterance that cannot be read unless in dialogue with other utterances.

Ungaretti’s poetry holds then an autobiographical nature. “Il carattere, il primo carattere di tutta la mia attività è autobiografico.” [The character, the first character of all my activity is autobiographical] (*Vita d’un uomo* 815). By reading the collection of his works we can get a glimpse of the diversity of relationships the author built during his life and career. Between 1969 and 1970 *Vita d’un uomo* will be reprinted two times. In the preface to the third edition Leone Piccioni wonders how much attention was payed by critics to the fact that the birth of Ungaretti’s poetry occurred in “un clima di rapporti letterari e culturali” [a climate of literary and cultural relationships]. What is special, according to Piccioni to such a climate is its secluded nature (he uses the word “appartato”). For Piccioni such a secluded nature allowed Ungaretti’s birth to be born outside of the Italian battles and polemics of his time. Ungaretti did not have to choose which Italian literary front to belong to and in this way his poetry was born free and independent (xv). Piccioni’s discussion of Ungaretti’s literature and Italian literary polemics of the time is intrinsically linked to the location in which the author’s

---

Ungaretti’s 24-year residence in Egypt put him in very close proximity with various nationalities and cultures in addition to his Italian culture. Among the three Italian writers I address in my dissertation, in addition to F.T. Marinetti and Enrico Pea, Ungaretti is the one who lived the longest in Egypt between his birth in 1888 and until he moved to Paris at the age of 24 after having shortly transited in Italy, his «terra promessa» [promised land], as he calls it in various works. Born in February 1888 to two Italian parents from Lucca, Antonio Ungaretti and Maria Lunardini, Ungaretti experienced in his own home the diversity of the city. He loses his father at the age of two and is later brought up both by a Sudanese and a Croatian nannies. In addition to the fairy tales the young Ungaretti used to hear from his Croatian nanny, his mother was also a source of fabulous stories about her native Lucca which becomes intrinsically linked to Alexandria:\(^4\) “A casa mia, in Egitto, dopo cena, recitato il rosario, mia madre ci parlava di questi posti./ La mia infanzia ne fu tutta meravigliata” [At my home, in Egypt, after dinner, finished the rosary, my mom used to tell us about these places./ My childhood was totally enchanted by them] ([*L’Allegria* 95]). The influence of various cultures on the education of the young Ungaretti\(^5\) will continue when he joins l’Ecole Suisse Jacot and meets Mohammed Sceab, his Lebanese friend “descendant of nomads.” Through his friend, Sceab, he is...
later introduced to Enrico Pea’s *Baracca Rossa*, and to the French Thuile’s house between the desert and the sea.\(^6\)

The role played by the “years of formation” is not just limited in its secluded nature away from the European side of the Mediterranean with all the literary polemics taking place either in Italy or in France. Egypt and Alexandria in particular, as I will discuss in details in the following chapter, offered a place where intellectual expression came as the result of relationships and dialogue. Taking into account this special nature of the city of Alexandria, where the poet was born and raised, we can read his collected work from a different perspective. Each poem, when placed in dialogue with other poems, is held together by the co-existence of multiple voices inspired by the polyphonic nature of the city of Alexandria. His *Vita d’un uomo* is then a collection of “close worlds” in dialogue with each other. Only a poet who genuinely experienced human interactions across continents, and, deeply moved by these interactions, composed verse that reflected them, could incorporate such polyphony into his creative work.

Furthermore, Ungaretti’s decision to be engaged, through his poetry, in a process of portraying ethnic diversity challenges our understanding of his support of the fixed identity fascism sought to stress and regulate. As I mentioned earlier, Ungaretti was known for his fascist sympathy and specifically his support of Mussolini. He does after all sign the 1925 *Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals* discussed in the third chapter of this dissertation. Yet a close look at his writings complicates our

\(^{6}\) Refer to the fifth and last chapter of this dissertation where I discuss in details the role both of the Thuile brothers and *La Baracca Rossa* in the formation of Enrico Pea’s art and ideas.
understanding of his support of Mussolini. In 1957 he writes an essay in memory of poet and novelist Umberto Saba (1883-1957) under the title “Peregrinazione con Umberto Saba” [Peregrination with Umberto Saba]. In this essay Ungaretti recalls the 30 to 40 years of friendship shared with Saba, the Italian novelist and poet who grew up in a Trieste Jewish Community.7 Ungaretti remembers the incident of his arrest for his connection wit Saba after his return to Rome in 1939 for a short visit, following the reinforcement of the racial laws in Italy. The incident reflects Ungaretti’s rejection of the fascist racial discrimination laws, his, nevertheless, contact with Mussolini asking for help, how the authorities finally confiscated his party membership card, how the whole incident reflected an unfair situation, and how he shares his friend’s “dolore” [pain] at the end. He recalls his friend Saba “che non avrebbe più potuto gestire la sua bottega di libri antichi, e che temeva per la sua famiglia e per sé anche più gravi persecuzioni” [who could no longer manage his small shop of old books, and who feared for his family and for himself of even greater persecutions] (675). After his arrest, fearing for his family and children who he had left in Brazil without any source of income, Ungaretti asked for Mussolini’s help. Ungaretti then continues: “diede ordine che gli lasciassero tranquillo. Mi tolsero solo la tesserae” [he gave orders that they leave me in peace. They only took away my membeship card] (675). Ungaretti finally recalls how his friend Saba felt guilty and apologized to him: “È stato per colpa mia, perdonami” [It was my fault, forgive me] to which Ungaretti responds: “No, caro, non è stato per colpa tua” [No, my dear, it was not your fault] (676). The essay

---

7 The Cosmopolitan city of Trieste, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was later annexed to Italy after the end of World War I.
continues with Ungaretti’s reflections on Saba’s pain and his citing of the latter’s poetry expressing such a deep familiarity with pain.

Through Ungaretti’s work we get to understand how the very act of writing poetry becomes a conscious decision to avoid indifference, a most detested vice according to him and also to Gramsci. His individual experience allows him to reinforce multiple voices while seeking their harmonious coexistence. Ungaretti, like Enrico Pea, is representative not only of Italian expatriates who resided in Egypt in early twentieth century but of other individuals, like Mohammed Sceab and Umberto Saba, whose identities could not be contained within the limits of one single nation.

The reading of Ungaretti’s poems in this chapter is an invitation for us to reflect on Ungaretti’s poetry as a closed system where various voices, in addition to the poet’s own, have taken equal parts in its formation. In addition to his poetry, the consideration of the multivoicedness of the author’s own life might better guide us to avoid theoretical generalizations or, in Bakhtinian language, a monologic analysis of Ungaretti’s artistic work.

4.2. Alexandria, an Encounter or a Relationship with a Macaronic City

Alexandria plays a vital role in the author’s formation and work. On this land where the desert comes to meet the Mediterranean he grew up listening to his mother’s stories about his land of origin. More importantly, he was educated like other expatriates and Egyptian elites in a French school where he received his French education and came in contact with many French intellectuals preparing him to later study in Paris. Carlo Bo underlines the gap we have in understanding Ungaretti’s formative years. Bo suggests that Ungaretti’s no longer extant writing in Egyptian
journals might have provided a better understanding of “le origini e i primi segni della sua educazione francese” [the origins and his first signs of French education] (xii). But information about Ungaretti’s French education is not the only thing we are missing. What matters to our discussion about the relationship between the French, Italian, and Egyptian voices in his work can still be retrieved in his Vita d’un uomo either as he intended it to be (a collection of poetry)\(^8\) or what is left to us in his other writings, such as Il deserto: Quaderno Egiziano [The desert: an Egyptian notebook], to understand the polyphony of his work and the city that inspired it.

At the age of 24, Ungaretti leaves Alexandria for Paris and then travels to Versilia and Milano. He is later displaced in the trenches of WWI and, through his first-hand experience with war atrocities, composes the free verse poems later published in 1917 under the title Il porto sepolto. Ungaretti’s travels intensify when he becomes a travel correspondent in 1931 for “Gazzetta del Popolo” (in Turin) for four years and to give lectures about Italian contemporary literature. For three years he continues to travel between France, Belgium, Holland, Spain to be finally invited to give a series of lectures in South America in 1936 where he will stay for seven continuous years (Piccioni LIX). But right before those busy years of travel, assuming the “role of the poet-journalist,” as Maurizio Cucchi refers to him in the introduction to his Il deserto: Quaderno Egiziano 1931, Ungaretti returns to his Egypt, ironically after having realized two days before the trip that in order to go back to his place of birth and formative development he needs a “stamp” on his passport.

---

\(^8\) It is to note that Ungaretti chose Vita d’un uomo as a title for his collection of poems only. His prose is then collected, after his death, under the title Vita d’un uomo, as well.
Ungaretti’s reaction of frustration (he negatively speaks about the bureaucracy he goes through to get his passport stamped before embarking from Italy), his mixed feelings about the people walking on the streets as soon as he gets in a taxi in Alexandria, his contemplation of the beauty of Egyptian women who only show their eyes under their traditional dresses, and his dismay at the gaucherie of some women in their failed attempts to be westernized would not be different from the reaction of any native Egyptian who returns to his Alexandria after twenty years of residing abroad. Such mixed reactions that Ungaretti has at his first encounter with the city, after a long absence, do not keep him from ending his first diary entry dated July 9th 1931 with a confirmation of his status as a native of the polyphonic city:

«Com’è disordinata questa città! Tutte queste lingue che s’incrociano; queste insegne, italiane, francesi, arabe, greche, armene, delle botteghe; l’architettura; il gusto! Quale Merlin Cocai s’è divertito a inventarla? Non so quale rancore m’invade, d’amarla, questa mia città natale!» (20) [“How disorderly this city is! All this crisscrossing of languages; this multitude of shop signs in Italian, French, Arabic, Greek, Armenian; the architecture; the taste! What mad Merlin [Cocai] created it for fun? A strange resentment overtakes me for loving this city of mine, this city of my birth!”] Re, 172

By referring to Merlin Cocai to describe his “city of birth,” Ungaretti sums up the character of Alexandria as a place where there is an intersection and “mad”

9 co-existence of many cultures. Through Ungaretti’s statement, Alexandria becomes the center where Italian and French art – integral parts of the author’s own existence - come to meet again yet in an Egyptian context. Alexandria’s macaronic aspect is not just expressed in “the crisscrossing of languages;” Ungaretti extends the notion of

---

9 The word “mad” does not exist in Ungaretti’s original statement cited above, yet Lucia Re has rightly chosen to include it in her English translation of the passage (Re 172).
macaronic to include architecture and taste as well.¹⁰

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the poem *L’Histoire maccaronique* de Merlin Cocai (a pseudonym for Teofilo Folengo) attracts French critics for being both a prototype to Rabelais and «digne de faire entrer […] dans [leur] Collection des *Classiques Français*» [worthy of being included in [their] Collection of French Classiques] (I). Cocai’s original poem, first published in Venice in 1517 was written in Latin mixed with Italian and Mantuan¹¹ patois; it appears in the French translation in 1606. Cocai establishes then the macaronic art, style or genre which consists, as G. Brunet announces in the Notice to the 1859 editions: «à entremêler au latin des mots de l’idiome vulgair plaisamment latinisés, et à donner ainsi au style une tournure facétieuse ou grotesque» [in blending Latin with vulgar idioms which are pleasantly Latinized, rendering thus the style facetious or grotesque] (vii). Brunet notices that Folengo’s macaronic style is not random but portrays the many voices – local dialects, Italian and Latin syntax – in coexistence, dialogue, and dynamic development.¹² Ungaretti extends the macaronic style to include architecture and taste “l’architettura; il gusto!” We can’t help but wonder: what aspect, in addition to language, makes

---

¹⁰ Cocai’s macaronic style extending from language to taste and other signs, as understood by Ungaretti, is also a reflection of the extension of the boundaries of the study of language towards the beginning of the twentieth century. I, however, leave this discussion to another occasion.

¹¹ Mantua or Mantova, a city and comune of northern Italy in Lombardia, southwest of Verona, holds in its origin and character mixed influences even after the composition of Cocai’s work. Originally an Etruscan settlement, it was ceded to Austria in 1714 and was finally returned to Italy in 1866.

¹² Brunet cites Cocai’s (or Coccaie’s as he refers to him) definition of his Macaronic art from the latter’s *Apologetica in sui excusationem*: “Ars ista poetica nuncupatur macaronica, a macaronibus derivata: qui macarones sunt quodam pulmentum farina, caseo, botiro compaginatum, grossum, rude, et rusticam, ideo macaronices nil nisi grasseninem, rudilatem, et vocabulazzos debet in se continere… Fuit repertum Macarenicon cause ubique ridendi” ‘This ars poetica is called macaronic after macaroni, which is a thick and unrefined rustic dish made of a mixture of flour, cheese and butter. For this reason, macaronic verse should only contain that which is coarse and crude, along with vulgar words’ (xi-xii; Jeanneret 218).
possible a comparison between Alexandria and Cocai’s work famous for being a
goliardic and grotesque epic where religion, politics, literature, science, popes, kings,
princes, clergy and people are all mixed in an ingenious parodic satire (xv)?

To answer this question, one needs to take into consideration the cities
Ungaretti has inhabited and which he uses as reference in his statement. The idea of a
city with a defined identity is, after all, a modern concept in Europe especially with
Haussman’s new Paris that inspired Egyptian’s architecture especially in Khediveal
Cairo.\(^\text{13}\) As opposed to the merging of identities in a hybrid form to create a “bastard
city,” as Flaubert had described it earlier,\(^\text{14}\) the distinctly chaotic aspect of Alexandria
experienced initially with a complete shock by Ungaretti, besides recalling Cocai’s
macaronic work, is rightly attributed to a comparison Lucia Re assumes he made
between the “distinctly unordered and undisciplined” city and Paris or Rome “which
had just undergone in 1930 a process of radical urban reordering and rationalization in
the fascist spirit.” Furthermore, Re rightly notes that, despite the shock and
resentment, Ungaretti’s reaction is “immediately turned into déjà-vu” and, despite
being resentful, the author recalls a certain “sense of belonging” (172). Ungaretti’s
mixed reaction to his native city cannot be then understood on one single level. Both
his ideas of the city and his feelings about it are intertwined in his Quaderno Egiziano.

Understanding the multilayered and dialogic co-existence of several voices in

---

\(^{13}\) See the introduction of this dissertation where I discuss the role of the opera as an integral part of
Khedive Ismail’s imagination of the city of Cairo as an integral part of Europe in the context of the
legacy of Mohamed Ali’s modernization of Egypt. For a further discussion of Khedive Ismail’s decision
to build a modern city along the same architectural lines and aesthetics as Paris after his visit to
Haussman’s "new" Paris in 1867, refer to: C. Myntti. Paris Along the Nile: Architecture in Cairo from

\(^{14}\) In the introduction to this dissertation I refer to Gustave Flaubert’s Voyage on Orient where he uses
the term “bastard” to describe the city: “bâtarde, mi-arabe, mi-européenne” ‘bastard, half European half
Arab’ (77). Refer to the introduction of this dissertation (13-15).
the author’s description of the city of Alexandria is not just a passing interest for
Ungaretti. This interest extends to the whole land of Egypt as he experiences it in his *Il
povero nella città*. For Ungaretti, this multilayered dialogism is deeply embedded in
his linguistic experience of Egypt, expressed as the coexistence of contrasts on the
very “streets of his Egypt”:

Ho tanto girovagato per le strade del mio Egitto. Il matto e il povero nella mente dell’Arabo sono un po’ la medesima idea: l’uomo che non fa conti e non ha vincoli, che è armato d’una forza occulta; l’uomo che governano una debolezza e una forza smisurata; l’uomo che è debole come è uno all’inizio e al termine dell’avventura terrena: quando si nasce e si è per forza nudi e dopo, quando si è sprecata, in pochi o molti anni, la ricchezza immensa che è la vita.

[I wandered a lot around the streets of my Egypt. The Fool and the poor in the mind of the Arabic are somewhat the same: the man who does not make calculations and has no constraints, who is armed with a hidden force, the man who is ruled by a weakness and an immeasurable strength; and the man who is weak as one is at the beginning and at the end of the earthly adventure: when one is born and is necessarily naked and then, when the immense wealth that is life is wasted in a few or many years.] (*Il povero nella città* 17-18)

For Ungaretti, the intersection between the Arabic and the Egyptian in the formation of the identity of residents of Alexandria can be understood in their respect for the figure of the *faqir*, the poor person, from whom they expect a miracle to happen, in whose undecipherable actions they see a living sign of the sacred and a symbol of freedom: “ma soprattutto il *faqir* è […] il segno vivente del sacro, uno che è libero perché è protetto da gesti e da parole strani, incomprensibili; di più: uno che è sorto a simbolo di libertà” [but above all, the *faqir* is […] the living sign of the sacred, one who is free because he is protected by his strange and incomprehensible words and actions; even more: one that has become a symbol of freedom] (18). Like other Egyptians, Ungaretti embraces the undecipherable character of the city and life in
general. He expresses his admiration of Egyptians’ belief in palmistry, in the belief in this art that deals with the interpretation of intersecting lines on the palm of the hand, finally in the belief in the possibility of reading the invisible (18).

Ungaretti is not just an outsider, flâneur, or European foreign traveller, who encounters a “bastard” and hybrid city; this would clearly be an oversimplification of his experience and obviously his art, deeply formed in “the streets of his Egypt.” As for Egyptians, for Ungaretti, too, “[i]l segno stesso della stabilità, della resistenza al tempo […] non è che una tenda” [the actual sign of stability, of resistance to time […] is nothing but a tent] (20). Attempting to conduct an intercultural interpretation would always run the risk of leaving something out.\textsuperscript{15} As such, the need to find a methodology that “includes” all these voices, that situate Ungaretti and his works in the ephemeral, undecipherable, middle space of intercultural relations. To include all these voices in our interpretation of Ungaretti’s work is not only necessary to understand his travel prose. Even his poetry carries this multiplicity of voices that are attempts by the modern author to compose poetry that portrays life.

4.3. The Gap: on the Shortcomings of the Critics

La quistione (sic) delle lettere è grave per una Nazione, forse non meno di qualsiasi altra. Essa merita dunque d’essere toccata solo nei punti vivi, e ci si arriva sempre e solo esaminando e con serenità le opere. [The question of the letters is crucial for a nation, perhaps no less than any other. It therefore deserves to be touched only at the living points, and you can only get there by calmly examining the works.] (\textit{La Critica alla Sbarra} 252)

Ungaretti since the beginning of his career is aware of an existing gap between

\textsuperscript{15} James Clifford announces in his 1992 article “Travelling Cultures,” “every focus excludes; there is no politically innocent methodology for intercultural interpretations” (97).
theoretical approaches and artistic ones in the representation of realities. As early as 1928 he publishes his essay “Di un difetto della critica” [On the Shortcoming of the Critics] where he underlines the state of “divorzio” [divorce] between art and critics (Scritti letterari 182). Ungaretti’s work has always reflected on the existence of a gap that is still being discussed today in the fields of Literary Theory and aesthetics. Still today, scholars in the humanities face the dilemma around theorizing about art and studying art, between theorizing about art and “feeling” art.

Ungaretti’s discussion about a gap between art and its critics is at the heart of an ongoing discussion in literary circles of his time. Ungaretti refers, for example, to the French literary critic Jean Paulhan, who wrote an article (cited by Ungaretti) that holds the same title, “Di un difetto della critica.” Paulhan in this article criticizes the contemporary critics for going “all’opposto della verità” [against truth] (183).

Moreover, during the same time, the same discussion emerges out of the work of the Bakhtin Circle in 1928. P.N. Medvedev in The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics dedicates the first chapter of his work to the discussion of this gap. Medvedev points to sets of immediate problems confronting Marxism (being the only available doctrine to profoundly set the

---

16 In an interview, conducted in the 1960s, after having expressed his admiration for Croce’s work “di grande importanza” ‘of huge importance,’ Ungaretti states his doubt about Croce’s understanding of the world of poetry and art in general. Marco Sabatini has collected interviews conducted by the RAI Radiotelevisione italiana, Direzione tecniche e servizi tematici educativi, Rai education in: Sabatini, Marco, Gianni Barcelloni, Paola Leone, Pasquale Misuraca, Gabriella Sica, Riccardo Tortora, and Giuseppe Ungaretti. Poeti E Scrittori Italiani Del Novecento: 2. Roma: Rai Trade, 2006. The interview has also been made available on Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=weZWrK2zG3Y&feature=autoplay&list=LP3OBX0qq_f0A&playnext=5

Ungaretti continues in that interview by stating the existence of a distance between art theory and art in general. ‘Teorizzare sull’arte e sentire l’arte, c’è una certa distanza’ ‘Between theorizing about art and feeling art, there is a certain distance.’ According to him, Croce was never capable of “feeling” art.
bases and firmly establish the study of ideologies) when applied to the concrete study of various branches of ideological creation, art and literature included. By approaching the branch of literary scholarship, Medvedev is very critical of attempts by literary scholars to access literature with a pre-set ideological approach (from above). As an alternative he suggests dialectical materialism as “a basis for achieving the desired synthesis of philosophical world view and the concrete historical study of specific phenomena of art, science, ethics, religion, etc.,”(6). Ungaretti, like Medvedev, blamed the critics for representing such a break between the study of ideologies and the study of art.\footnote{Art among other branches of ideological creation like ethics, science and religion, as Medvedev states in his mentioned work.}

Ungaretti’s suggestion to “calmly examine the works” and Bakhtin’s methodology of dialogism\footnote{Ungaretti’s response to critics who do not consider art to be alive may be an inflection of his fascism. As I discuss in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, the call for an active participation in society has been an area of convergence among intellectuals.} help us formulate a response to complaints in the inter-war period concerning what Ungaretti considered as a gap between theorizing about art and feeling art. But while in Medvedev “the solid principles of dialectical materialism” serve as the only route to reach “the desired synthesis of philosophical world view,” Bakhtin’s methodology of dialogism is based on a continuous co-

\footnote{It is to note that among scholars of Bakhtin, to this day there is a debate around the authorship of the Medvedev text in question that they attribute to Bakhtin. In this chapter I choose to maintain a distinction between the two authors based on Medvedev’s notion of “the desired synthesis of philosophical world view and the concrete historical study of specific phenomena of art, science, ethics, religion, etc., [which] is only possible on the basis of the solid principles of dialectical materialism” (6). This insistence on a “desired synthesis,” in my opinion, contradicts Bakhtin’s notion of continual dialogue (social or else) as opposed to the Marxist notion of social struggle. Mededev suggested dialectical materialism rightly moves the study of literature to its concrete social base where it is actually created. Consequently, I see in Bakhtin’s dialogism a better response to the gap in question by providing a methodology that encompasses the Marxist dialectical materialism while allowing other approaches to be equally valuable in uncovering the polyphony of the literary creative work.}
existence that does not dissolve into a synthesis or hybrid existence. Bakhtin actually underlines the absence of a “dialectical development of a unified spirit” in Dostoevsky’s novel and sees in such an absence the existence of “many consciousnesses, which do not merge in unity of a developing spirit” (21). Ungaretti’s world-view is more inclined to a vision of continual co-existence and dialogue (in Bakhtinian sense) rather than Medvedev’s synthesis. Nonetheless, I still see in Medvedev’s discussion of the gap in the study of art from above a very relevant observation that goes hand in hand with Ungaretti’s critique of Croce’s views.

Ungaretti’s statement in 1931 in the Preface to L’Allegria about his desire to leave this book as a diary explains my analysis of his creative work with all that exists beyond the limits of his artistic work. In 1933 he cites again his own words in an essay under the title “Le prime mie poesie” [my first poems] where he reiterates his first consideration of his poems: “Questo vecchio libro è un diario” [This old book is a diary] (267). The poems being in dialogue within a secluded climate or system, again using Piccioni’s description, would not be possible without a certain balance that maintains the coexistence of all these voices and experiences in dialogue. The word he uses this time to express the idea of balance and coexistence is “proporzioni” [proportions] where the author’s voice becomes an integral part in the act of creation. He continues: “Senza mai negare le necessità universali della poesia, [l’autore] ha sempre pensato che, […], l’universalità s’accorda colla voce personale del poeta nelle proporzioni dei propri temi” [without denying the universal needs for poetry, [the

---

author] always thought that, […] the universality is reached through the poet’s personal voice in the proportion of its themes] (267). The idea of a proportion of themes will be then understood in the context of seeking a universal poetry that still holds an Italian character.

Words such as balance, measurement, and others that imply a proportionate coexistence are frequently used by Ungaretti and noted by his critics. Again, this attempt to balance a world in crisis is a reflection of his attempt to balance his own intimate world to avoid the crisis, which leads his friend Mohamed Sceab, and many others, to death. His poem *I fiumi* also part of his collection “Il porto sepolto” expresses the poets awareness of the coexistence of many influences in his formation. Those influences, instead of clashing with one another, fuse together like water. In this poem, Ungaretti starts and ends with the Isonzo river, located on the eastern sector of the Italian front in World War I, and where the poet realizes his belonging to the universe despite fighting on the Italian front: “Questo è l’Isonzo/ e qui meglio/ mi sono riconosciuto/ una docile fibra/ dell’universo” [This is the Isonzo/ and it is better there/ that I have known myself/ a compliant thread/ of the universe]. The experience of the war, central to the author’s becoming conscious of his place in history, helped him reflect on the influences that made him. He continues the poem by going back to his origins, to the Tuscan river, il Serchio: “Questo è il Serchio/ al quale hanno attinto/ duemil’anni forse/ di gente mia campagnola/ e mio padre e mia madre” [This is the Serchio/ to which have reached/ two thousand years ago, maybe/ my country people/ my father, and my mother]. In the rest of the poem, Ungaretti also lists the Egyptian Nile and the French Seine that have been intrinsically linked to his consciousness:
Questo è il Nilo
che mi ha visto
nascere e crescere
e ardere d’inconsapevolezza
nelle estese pianure

Questa è la Senna
e in quel suo torbido
Mi sono rimescolato
E mi sono conosciuto
Questi sono i miei fiumi
Contati nell’Isonzo”

[This is the Nile
that has seen me
be born and grow
and burn in unconsciousness
on its extending valley

This is the Seine
in its unrest
I have been mixed up
And I have discovered myself
These are my rivers
Recounted in the Isonzo] (Il porto sepolto 43-45)

The shortcoming of the critics, discussed by Ungaretti in his 1928 essay,
rightly placed the blame on the critics of his time for not being able to fill the gap
between theory and art in their critical approach. Nonetheless, Ungaretti’s poems, like
I fiumi, and also In memoria, provide us with a concrete example of the author’s
attempt to reach such a balance. In the preface to the 1997 third edition of Vita d’un
uomo. Saggi e interventi, (a collection of Ungaretti’s essays which first appears in
1974), Carlo Bo discusses such an “equilibrio unico” [unique balance] maintained by
Ungaretti throughout his career as an attempt to avoid conclusions (xiv, xvii). It is a
balance that maintains the coexistence of different cultures that formed the author
without having one prevail over the other.
But while Bo’s consideration is restricted to the balance between France and Italy, *I fiumi* offers us other places and cultures that formed Ungaretti and that appear in his work. Bo discusses in depth how Ungaretti successfully maintains his role as mediator between two cultures without changing either one or the other (xiv). Such a restriction to the French and Italian components while not including the Egyptian might be explained by the fact that Bo includes it in a preface to a collection of Ungaretti’s works between 1918 and 1970. After all, Ungaretti leaves Egypt in 1912. However, it does not explain how the cultural and personal relationships that were built in his native city of Alexandria have continued to exist in his work and memory throughout his career.

Ungaretti’s poetry presents us then with another case of Italian literary work, concretely built across national boundaries, that points us towards polyphonic intercultural relations. The analysis of Ungaretti’s writings as an articulation of such polyphony might better guide us to form a hypothesis of Italian-Egyptian cultural relationships that were formed in early twentieth century Egypt. Only a methodology that studies those texts “from below” enables us to understand creative poetry where different voices can co-exist in one poem while maintaining their distinct nature, culture and identity.

4.4. Ungaretti’s polyphonic *Vita d’un uomo*?

Ecco, secondo le diverse epoche e le personalità diverse, l’artista ha sempre espresso gli istinti comuni dei viventi, la fame e la libidine, gli immutabili istinti di conservazione e purtroppo insieme di distruzione, ma ha espresso anche un suo bisogno religioso di conoscere le ragioni casuali e le ragioni finali del vivere, ma ha anche espresso un suo bisogno di sentirsi unito a tutti i suoi morti, e a tutti gli scomparsi e a tutta la realtà dell’universo oltre la notte dei tempi; ma ha anche
espresso il maraviglioso piacere che anche una natura desolata è in grado d’offrire.
[Here, based on different times and different personalities, the artist has always expressed the common instincts of living beings; hunger and lust, unchanging preservation instincts which are unfortunately also instincts of destruction, but has also expressed his religious need to know the random reasons and final reasons of life, but has also expressed his need to feel united with all his ancestors, with all those who have disappeared and with the whole reality of the universe beyond the darkness of times, but has also expressed the wonderful pleasure that even a deserted nature is capable of providing.] (Ragioni d’una poesia)\textsuperscript{21}

In his essay “Ragioni d’una poesia” published as an introduction to his collection of poems Vita d’un uomo (1969), Ungaretti refers to the misinterpretation of the works of the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky\textsuperscript{22} (1821-1881). In contrast to the then-fashionable psychoanalytical misinterpretation, Ungaretti suggests a re-reading of Dostoevsky’s creative work where the apparent crowd in the Russian author’s work is always “la stessa persona che gira su se stessa, e il suo moltiplicarsi è derivato dalla vertigine del suo giro.” [the same person who turns around itself, and its multiplication comes only from the dizziness resulting from its rotation] (LXVIII). Ungaretti then interprets such a multiplication as the mystery or secret (word frequently used by Ungaretti throughout his career) found in Dostoevsky’s work. It reveals the uselessness of attempting to logically define this crowd/person or to attribute to it an ability to control its own circumstances. Ungaretti’s admiration of Dostoevsky’s work goes hand in hand with his 1927 essay “Dostoievski nazionalista and imperialista” where he comments on the Russian author’s articles published between 1873-1877 and

\textsuperscript{22} Ungaretti spells Dostoevsky’s name in many different ways: he alternates between Dostoievski, Dostojevski, Dostoevski, and Dostoevskij. Instead of providing a unified spelling for the name of the Russian author, I will cite his name as it appears in each text. When not citing, I will use Dostoevsky to spell his name.
which reveal “di quale potenza critica, di quale buon senso, Dostoievski fosse possessore” [how much critical ability and good sense Dostoevsky possessed] (174). He also published in 1922 “A proposito di un saggio su Dostojevski” [Regarding an essay on Dostoevsky] (47-49) and a 1935 essay, “Dostoievski e la precisione” [Dostoevsky and precision] where he criticizes attempts to compare the Russian novelist’s work to the French novel (50-53). The critical debate surrounding Dostoevsky’s novel and Mikhail Bakhtin’s suggested response to such a debate provides an important methodological approach that helps us understand Ungaretti’s work.

Mikhail Bakhtin in his 1929 work *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, attributes the notion of polyphony to the novel in general and to Dostoevsky’s novel in particular. This approach comes as the result of noting that the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky’s novel is “the plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses and the genuine polyphony of full-valued voices” [emphasis in the original] (4). Bakhtin’s suggested consideration of Dostoevsky’s creative work and world serves as an attempt to understand “the profound organic cohesion, consistency and wholeness of Dostoevsky's poetics” (8). Bakhtin’s approach emerges as a reaction to the inability of previous critics to find a vantage point from which to study Dostoevsky’s work. Previous critical approaches, according to him, have mainly oscillated between passionate philosophizing with the characters and a dispassionate psychological or psychopathological analysis which have only misled their

corresponding critics to assumptions around Dostoevsky’s incompleteness or rather vertiginous world.²⁴

Similarly, the understanding of Ungaretti’s *Vita d’un uomo* in its wholeness, as a closed system, requires such a fresh approach. Like Dostoevsky, Ungaretti’s world is profoundly personalized. He perceives each poem, conventionally understood by critics to represent different stages of a personality that only partially account for his whole trajectory that will be eventually synthesized in the final work of the author. In addition to the study of the poem as “*the living voice of an integral person*” [Bakhtin’s emphasis], the logical relation between each poem becomes part of the unity of a represented event (9). In Ungaretti’s complaint about the gap between theory and art we can read his own consideration of poetry as a medium for his own thought where ideas and feelings are interwoven together yet still in dialogue with the environment in which they are created. Using Bakhtin’s words to describe Dostoevsky’s creative world, each word expressing Ungaretti’s thought carries the feeling of the event and becomes itself part in the event taking “on that special quality of an ‘idea-feeling,’ an ‘idea-force,’ which becomes responsible for the unique peculiarity of the ‘idea’” in his creative world. *In memoria* becomes linked to the French colonization of the east and the poet’s stay in Paris where he sees his friend Mohammed Sceab for the last time. *Same way I fiumi* becomes linked to the poet’s displacement in the trenches during World War I. Finally, Ungaretti’s personal choice to publish these poems in a diary form, (the title of each poem is actually followed by a date and place), marks his

²⁴ It is important to note that Ungaretti in his “Ragioni di una poesia,” in his later essays consistently points to “vertiginous” character of Dostoevsky’s main character (50).
conscious decision to place them in dialogue giving *Il porto sepolto* such a novelistic character.

**4.5. Ungaretti’s Poetry and Social Engagement**

Ungaretti’s critics seem to play a major role in the author’s defining of his own work. Like in the case of Dostoevsky, Bakhtin’s reflections on the polyphonic novel are, after all, heavily embedded in its attempt to encompass all monologic critical approaches that have continuously failed in describing its dialogic nature. Ungaretti, on the other hand, becomes aware of the negative role played by critics in defining his own work and, as such, changes his own announced approach to literature. Mario Diacono in the introduction to the 6th edition of Ungaretti’s *Vita d’un uomo, saggi e interventi* (1997) traces such attempts by critics and Ungaretti’s response to them. What matters to our discussion is Diacono’s observation on the internal evolution in Ungaretti’s critical writing between 1937 and 1941. As noted earlier, this is the time Ungaretti spends in South America to give a series of lectures. During such a stay, away from Italy and Egypt (and France), Ungaretti is capable of observing himself in the act of observing life through his poetry. In response to the charge of indifference leveled against him by critics he writes an essay which discusses his poetry as a contestation of civic indifference.

In 1933 Ungaretti explains from Brazil the creative process and environment in which his poetry is invented. Liberated from all pre-existing literary forms, the word acquires its meaning through its direct adhesion to life in general and to the author’s own experience of life in particular. In his essay “Le prime mie poesie,” which
appears in the collection of his *Vita d’un uomo, saggi e interventi*, Ungaretti discusses the creative process of his early poems composed in the trenches:

Nella trincea, nella necessità di dire rapidamente, perché il tempo poteva non aspettare, e dire con precisione e tutto come in un testamento, e di dirlo, poiché si trattava di poesia, armoniosamente – in tali condizioni estreme, trovai senza cercarla, quella mia forma d’allora nella quale il più che mi fosse possibile volli resa intensa di sensi la parola intercalata di lunghi silenzi – quella mia forma che seguendo semplicemente il ritmo del mio respiro, doveva portarmi ad intendere più tardi la virtù naturale dei metri classici.

[In the trenches, forced by the necessity to rapidly say, because time could not wait, to say precisely and all as if it was a testament, and to say it, since it dealt with poetry, harmoniously – in such extreme conditions, without the need to search for it, I found my form that I used back then. As much as possible I wanted to make the word intensely charged with meaning, with long silences inserted in the middle – such a form of mine based on the simple following of the rhythm of my breathing, allowed me to later understand the natural virtue of classic metrics] (268)

It is necessary for Ungaretti to traverse time and geographic space in order to describe himself experiencing the act of breathing while hastily composing his poems.

He becomes, in the Bakhtinian sense, engaged in the aesthetic activity of observing himself from afar. Even prior to his travels to Brazil (1936-1942) he had already considered in 1931 his earlier diary entries from the perspective of Alexandria. This self-observation from an outside perspective becomes a theme in his work. Ungaretti is observing himself while experiencing life and experiencing the act of creative composition. The poet’s work leaves us then material to reflect on variations in the author’s positioning either as the subject at the center of his poetry or at the periphery observing himself in the act of writing. Using Bakhtin’s vocabulary, Ungaretti varies in going “beyond the bounds of the axiological context in which [his] lived experience
had actually proceeded.” In his attempts to “make sense” of his experience he understands the necessity of locating identity and existence within certain limits.

His 1918 poem *Girovago*, published in his collection *l’Allegria*, marks such a continuous movement and search for a stable destination. His words, “In nessuna/parte/di terra/mi posso/accase» [In no/place/on earth/I can/settle down] marks this continuous search for a home where he hopes to “settle down.” In addition, it also marks the failure of different places to allow him a fresh start «Godere un solo/minuto di vita/iniziale» [Enjoy at least/a minute of life in its/beginning] (85). The word “Beginning,” becomes essential in Ungaretti’s language. It is a location, although carrying the meaning of time, that is free from any pre-defined meaning or theoretical explanation. It becomes a location to exist and understand existence from below.26

In addition to observing oneself, Ungaretti is also observing himself being observed by other critics to whom he responds. Ungaretti responds to his critics, strict observers of fascism, who accuse him of solipsism an indifference to social problems (Diacono xxv). By announcing his poetry a matter of life, “non come un giuoco, non come un divertimento, non come una distrzione” [not a game, not an entertainment, not a distraction] (268), he also assumes the role of an intellectual conscious if his role at this specific point of history. His poetry created in the trenches out of “torment” and “responsibility” becomes his best defense against his critics. By underlining the nature

25 To listen to Ungaretti reading the poem go to: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8PZ6bGV8_cl&feature=bf_prev&list=LP3OBX00q_f0A (Minute 21).
26 Which also reminds us of Medvedev’s method seeking to study art (specifically literature) from below. Art, as an ideological creation, does not only equal “some inner process of understanding, comprehension, and perception.” According to Medvedev “it in fact unfolds externally, for the eye, the ear, the hand. It is not within us, but between us” (8). In this way, if we attempt to read Ungaretti’s poem as an ideological creation, we need to read it as an object of social intercourse, “the medium in which [it] first acquires its specific existence, its ideological meaning, its semiotic nature”(8).
of his poetry, heavily embedded in reality, Ungaretti defends his position as an active and responsible engaged citizen. By portraying his role as a responsible poet, Ungaretti’s depiction of the suffering is not only limited to his own. As a poet conscious of his reality his poetry extends to the depiction of the misery of the others. Through his own reflection on the very nature of his poetry it becomes impossible to think of him as indifferent. He ends his essay with few rhetorical questions, in one of which he asks if it would make sense for someone who cares so much about reality to be “indifferente alla grande miseria che negli ultimi anni s’è precipitato sul mondo” [indifferent to the extreme misery in which the world has fallen in the last few years] (269). In fact, Ungaretti’s consciousness of his reality, as his 1916 poem dedicated to his friend Mohammed Sceab demonstrates such a consciousness of the extreme agonies that are not only his but also of the others.

4.6. Mohamed Sceab – Becoming one with the Other

In the “Nota introduttiva” [introductory note] to his Vita d’un uomo. Tutte le poesie (1969), Ungaretti tells his readers about the identity of his Lebanese Muslim friend, Mohamed Sceab to whom he dedicates the opening poem of Il porto sepolto. Of Sceab Ungaretti says: «Era un ragazzo dalle idee chiare e prediligeva Baudelaire. […] L’altro suo autore era Nietzsche, che lo aveva addirittura soggiogato.» [He was a young man with clear ideas, he preferred Baudelaire […] Nietzsche was his other preferred writer who had eventually led him to depression] (507). In 1970, Luciano Rebay portrays Sceab’s death as one of the marking events in the author’s life.27 As I

will show in this section, Ungaretti’s friendship with Mohamed Sceab is not a mere
detail of the author’s life that needs to be studied beyond the limits of the author’s
creative work. It is a friendship – also shared by Enrico Pea – that becomes an integral
part of the authors’s poetry.

Ungaretti’s first section of collected poems in *Vita d’un uomo* is *L’Allegria*
which is divided into four sections: *Ultime, Il porto sepolto, Naufragi*, and *Girovago*.
As I mention earlier in this chapter, the first poem in the section *Il porto sepolto* is “In
Memoria” where the poet remembers Mohammed Sceab, his young Lebanese friend
and colleague. While this poem is in memory of his friend who commits suicide,
including it as one of the utterances that constitute his own autobiography marks
Ungaretti’s awareness of the role of human relationships built during his life in
forming his work intrinsically linked to his own existence.

The poet’s desire to leave a “happy memory” of his life does not exclude those
sad memories that become an integral part of his longing for an eternal cheerfulness
(translation of allegria). After all, the first poem in the collection is “Eterno” and such
a longing for the eternal is plunged in a prayer (last poem is “Preghiera”) where the
author makes his request for an eternal beginning: “Il naufragio concedimi signore/ di
quel giovane giorno al primo grido” [“Grant me Lord the shipwreck/ of that new-born
day upon my first shout”] (97, 133). Between such a beginning and a prayer for a new
beginning, Ungaretti tells us through his poetry about *Il porto sepolto*, the ancient port,
initially intended to be the port of Alexandria, discovered by the engineer Jondet (*Vita
d’un uomo saggi e interventi* 817). The hidden port is not a mere place or idea, it
becomes a hidden location in a close proximity to the official port of Alexandria
where all his friendships merge together. Ungaretti does place his memory of Mohamed Sceab at the beginning of the collection of *Il porto sepolto* but we learn from Ungaretti’s later writing that the place is also meaningful to his friendship with Enrico Pea and the French brothers Thuile.

Enrico Pea in his *Vita in Egitto* (1949), discussed in the following chapter of this dissertation, also tells us about this old port buried under water and of which the Thuile’s sister narrates the story.\(^{28}\) The young girl tells Pea about his friend, Ungaretti. She laughs at Ungaretti’s “bizzarria” [peculiarity] for pretending he can reach the port when the water is clear (40). But while the Thuile’s sister laughs about it, Pea still understands the value of such a hidden place. The hidden port even becomes a reference point for him when, on the day he embarks leaving Egypt on a Thursday at the end of March 1914, he reflects on the importance of experience to be able to cross it without being entangled through its stones.

“Ma noi, ora, invece, sulla tolda del vapore, per non essere accecati dal bagliore, alla bocca del porto, eravamo a rivolte le spalle alla prora del bastimento, lentamente messo in moto dalla perizia dei piloti, verso l’uscita del porto.

Lentamente, ché le antiche scogliere, sprofondate sotto l’acqua limacciosa di questo porto, sono invisibili, e lo smarrirsi di un attimo da quel presentire che i piloti si tramandano col sangue di padre in figlio: quasi divinatore senso, delle vie aperte nel fondo tra i moniliti millenari, lo smarrirsi di un attimo basterebbe, per vedere la nave incagliarsi nelle rovine del porto sepolto, di cui la dolce sorella dei Thuil (sic), mi parlava.”

[Yet, us, now, instead, on the deck of the ship, in order not to be blinded by he glare, coming from there, at the mouth of the harbor, we were turning our backs towards the bow of the vessel, slowly set in a skilful motion by the pilots, towards the exit of port.]

---

\(^{28}\) Refer to the following chapter of this dissertation where I discuss in detail Pea’s visit to the Thuile’s house and his conversation with their grandmother and sister.
Slowly, because the ancient cliffs, sunk under the muddy water of the harbor, are invisible, and losing one instant of caution that has been handed down by the pilots through blood from father to son: a sense almost of a soothsayer, to foresee the open passages at the bottom between thousand-year-old monoliths, losing one instant would be enough, to see the ship get stuck in the ruins of the buried port, of which the sweet sister of the Thuil sister, had talked to me. (Vita in Egitto 199)

In Pea’s words we find a confirmation to the need to embark across the relationships that have all been buried at the port of Alexandria. Between Enrico Pea and Ungaretti, the French Thuiles, and Mohamed Sceab, this chapter portrays the multivoicedness of Ungaretti’s work, which carry all those various distinct existences in a closed system as a “segreto” [secret] as he likes to call it, to become representative of all the voices that met on the African side of the Mediterranean.

In a 1963 essay “Ungaretti commenta Ungaretti” Ungaretti discusses his *Il porto sepolto* in terms of such a secret. He even announces that such a hidden port has become a symbol of his whole poetry. Right after talking about the hidden port of Alexandria, Ungaretti speaks about the importance of his relationship with Enrico Pea and Mohammed Sceab for the understanding of his life and poetry.29 In 1905 Ungaretti attends the French "Ecole Suisse Jacot" where Mohammed Sceab was a colleague of his (Rebay 556) and to whom he becomes linked in a double way: Ungaretti tells us that Sceab was among the “subversive” young people in Alexandria, who gathered in Pea’s *Baracca Rossa* and was also a friend from school. “Eravamo uniti nelle speranze di un mondo organizzato con maggior giustizia ed eravamo uniti

---

29 “Una grande importanza nella storia della mia vita e nella storia della mia poesia deriva dall’incontro, ad un certo momento nella mia giovinezza, con Enrico Pea ad Alessandria d’Egitto.” ‘A huge importance to the story of my life and the story of my poetry come from my meeting, at some point during my youth, with Enrico Pea in Alexandria of Egypt’ (Vita d’un uomo: Saggi e interventi 817)
dai ricordi di infanzia e dalle aspirazioni letterarie che avevamo l’uno e l’altro” [we were united in the hopes of an organized world with greater justice and we were united by the childhood memories and the literary ambitions that we had both had] (818). Yet Ungaretti announces that their ambitions were expressed differently and this was due to their different heritages. While Ungaretti believed in the poetry of the unexpressed, his friend believed in poetry that is totally related to the mind (818). Such a division between Sceab and Ungaretti around the understanding of poetry explains Ungaretti’s views about art in general in his discussion about feeling art and theorizing about art discussed in the section “The Gap: on the Shortcomings of the Critics” in this chapter.

In 1912, Ungaretti leaves Egypt and goes to Paris via Italy. He studies at the College de France and Sorbonne. It is during that stay in Paris that Mohammed Sceab, after having shortly joined Ungaretti in his residence in Rue des Carmes, commits suicide in the summer of 1913. While Ungaretti loses his best friend, his attempt to remember him in his poem becomes also an attempt for him to resolve his own crisis. Sceab was not the only young man Ungaretti knew to have committed suicide. In his 1963 essay Ungaretti continues to tell us about how their two different conceptions of poetry (his and Sceab’s) had dictated different destinies for both of them. Either Ungaretti, Sceab, or the other young people who “si troncarono la vita” [cut short their own lives] share something in common: “Eravamo […] per ragioni diverse, degli uomini che non erano avviati in un modo naturale a compiere il loro

---

30 Bergson, Bédier, Lanson are among his teachers. In addition, he meets Apollinaire and other avant-garde artists such as Braque, De Chirico, Cendrars, Jacob, Leger, Modigliani, Picasso, etc.
destino” [We were […] for various reasons, men who were not naturally directed to carry out their own destiny] (818).

In such a way we can understand Ungaretti’s rejection of the historical man, the pre-destined man and theoretical attempts to understand his place in history or to resolve his crisis when he is not capable of fitting in it. For him the understanding of his situation and shared crisis (in addition to Sceab’s and other young men who commit suicide) by only recurring to the mind could only lead to their death. It is the same logic that had driven him to join the war in 1914 “Sembrava che la Guerra del 1914, sembrava a me, sembrava forse a tanti, queste crisi le dovesse risolvere” [It seemed that the 1914 war, it seemed to me, seemed most probably to many, that it would resolve these crises]. Death wether through suicide or through war is revealed for Ungaretti as a useless solution. He is later capable of separating the crisis from death: Lucia Re in her “Alexandria Revisited” refers to this poem to underline how “the erotics of rootlessness in Ungaretti is always in the shadow of loss and death.”

According to Re, Sceab’s feeling of being “déraciné,” experienced as sheer tragedy, was a syndrome of which Ungaretti was well aware. Yet what I would like to add here is that Ungaretti does not stop at the level of “knowing” the shared feeling between him and his friend of being “déraciné.” As much as he does not stop at his critique of Croce at the level of criticizing a failed rationalization and theorizing of art. By acting in contrast to being indifferent, Ungaretti reacts through his poetry.

A poetics of relationships and connections marks then Ungaretti’s creativity. The poet’s “knowing” of Sceab’s torment does not only find souce in his relationship and experience with the idea or feeling of agony that leads his friend to death, but
more importantly in his relationship with his friend himself. He announce his regret of joining the war later when he says “le guerre non risolvono mai nulla, si sa” [wars solve nothing, it is obvious]. While he is conscious that war had solved non of his existentialist problems, he finds through poetry the unexpressed secret of healing (819). His poetry, however, does not talk about how to resolve such a dilemma; it carries in its deep nature, or secret, the ability to solve the crisis.

Luciano Rebay in his 1962 *Le origini della poesia di Giuseppe Ungaretti* discusses Ungaretti’s friendship with Mohammed Sceab in the context of the poet’s awareness of his need to build connections in order to stay alive. After telling us about Ungaretti’s reading of other poets in a quest to be in harmony with them, Rebay moves to underlining one of the special traits of the author’s notion of harmony which means, according to Rebay, for Ungaretti, “giungere a trovare in sé la consapevolezza di un’affinità personale, di un’aderenza, non solo con pensieri e idee, ma anche con persone e cose da cui sia stato attratto.” [to be able to find in himself the awareness of a personal affinity, adhesion, non only with thoughts and ideas, but also with people and things by which he came to be attracted] (19). Persons and things become then equally important in realizing this harmony in Ungaretti’s world.

In Ungaretti’s world, in addition to persons, things also become important while holding in them some kind of fluidity. Referring to *In memoria*, Luigi Martellini, in his 2011 article *Un viaggio verso le origini (L’ultimo Ungaretti)*, speaks of “effetti ottici, di squarci paesaggistici, di assenti presenze” [optical effects, landscape lacerations, absent presences] found in this particular poem (8). He then goes on listing various images that intersect in this poem and that all find origin in the
desert, the weather, the voices, and even the silences that Ungaretti have experienced in Egypt. Things in their fluidity become similar to water and also to life in which Ungaretti almost jumps and becomes emerged before coming out to describe his experience in writing.

Ungaretti’s poetry in addition to portraying “Moammed Sceab” who commits suicide “perché non aveva più/ patria” [because he had no more/ a homeland], tells us about the writer’s nostalgia for the land where he spent his childhood and youth. In a previous, obviously failed, attempt to belong to his homeland, Mohammed changes his name into Marcel “because he loved France.” He becomes tortured with his suspended identity: “ma non era francese/ e non sapeva più/ vivere/ nella tenda dei suoi” [but he wasn’t French/ and he could not anymore/ live/ in his people’s tent/]. To this point, we can understand the existentialist condition that leads Sceab to end his life. However, Ungaretti’s poetic expression reveals more details about the spiritual condition of his dear classmate and friend: “E non sapeva/ sciogliere/ il canto/ del suo abbandono.” [And he did not know a way/ to melt/ the chant/ of his abandonment]. Sceab’s story remains untold outside of Ungaretti’s work: “E forse io solo/ so ancora/ che visse.” [And perhaps only me/ still know/ that he one day lived]. Ungaretti’s ability to “know” seems to be of a shared condition. Sceab’s silent pain leads to his death while in Ungaretti’s work we can “feel” his life.

Ungaretti’s narration of Sceab’s suicide marks the author’s awareness of his role as an intellectual against the worst vice of his time, “indifference.” Ungaretti is fully aware of such a “deep” condition of his friend who commits suicide. Mohamed Sceab’s torment is felt and experienced by Ungaretti rather than intellectually
conceived. The memory of his death remains embedded in his mind as «stimuli più commoventi del [su]o animo» [the most moving stimulus of his soul] (xxvi). In addition to his poetry, Ungaretti later clearly states his understanding of his colleagues, Sceab included, torment. According to him they took their own life because they felt estranged from their civilization. They were neither capable of being totally separated nor capable of belonging to another. They failed to recognize the secret meaning of their identities’ polyphony.

Ungaretti’s suggested secret (or mystery since he tends to use both terms interchangeably) of a poetry of relationships can be the only response to failed colonial theoretical attempts to define identities. Mohammed believed in the illusion of the need to change his name to Marcel in order to become French. Ungaretti and many intellectuals of the time probably lived the same illusion. Ungaretti who was born and raised in Egypt and who probably knew the streets of Alexandria and the African shore of the Mediterranean better than the ones in Lucca until he was twenty four years old, and even older, never spoke of himself as an Egyptian. Yet such constructions were not a mere choice by either Sceab or Ungaretti. Sceba’s attempt to change his name was just the result of his attempt to apply one of the colonial theories of the time.

Mohamed/ Marcel becomes a yet another example of a francophone’s disillusionment with traces of the French colonialist assimilation project. In his Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890-1914 (1961), Raymond F. Betts focuses on the shift in French colonial theory between 1890 and

---

31 Leone Piccioni recalls the author’s words in the Preface to Ungaretti’s Vita d’un uomo (xiii-lv).
1914 from the idea of assimilation (important during the decade of the French revolution) to the one of association, which “emphasized the need for variation in colonial practice.” The policy of association, as a way to mend the former assimilation with its rigidity and universalism, lay in its allowing of the “evolution of native groups along their own lines […]” (106). The change in political policy had the purpose of maintaining French presence in the colonies and for us a proof of the failure of older policies. Yet, what matters to our study is that human cases such as Sceab reveals the persistence of failures of colonial theories. Ungaretti lives and writes at the heart of change in French colonial theory from assimilation to the one of association. Sceab’s suicide, while marking the failure of the French colonizing theory of assimilation also predicts the eventual failure of French colonial theory of association.

Whether it is the cultural policies of the French in the colonies or the eventual fascist policies that aimed at defining and regulating identity, Ungaretti’s work provides evidence that culture and identity cannot be constructed from above. Sceab’s suspended identity between a nomad and a French is not of hybrid character since the very notion of hybridity implies an already existing demarcation of characteristics between different nationalities and identities which synthesize in a hybrid existence. Sceab could not go back to the tent of his nomad ancestors because he was never one. What has been defined by him as a failure to “return” is probably an illusion since there was no origin to return to in the first place.

4.7. From Ungaretti to Pea, a friendship in the colony

In the context of studying cultural relationships that resulted from the long presence of Italian intellectuals in Egypt, it is important to note that such ties besides
being created between Italian individuals and Egyptian nationals, has also been possible between Italians from different backgrounds and social classes. As such, looking at cultural relationships between Italians from different backgrounds in Egypt becomes also indispensable in our discourse where national identity appears to be secondary in those Italians’ conception of their role as intellectuals. The intense relationship between Enrico Pea and Giuseppe Ungaretti has been a research subject for decades. The correspondences between the two authors dating between the years 1909 and 1923 present witness not just to an intellectual and artistic relationship but to one of genuine friendship as well. In an introduction to Giuseppe Ungaretti’s *Lettere a Enrico Pea*, Giorgio Luti comments on the perspective of Ungaretti that emerges from the letters acquired by the Fondazione Primo Conti di Fiesole that are later annotated by Joole Soldateschi and published in 1983. In his introduction, Luti speaks about «un modo dolce e insieme aggressivo di stabilire un contatto totalizzante che agisce in parallelo sia nella sfera dell’amicizia privata sia in quella del sodalizio artistico, secondo un sistema utilitaristico che non può non sorprendere.» [both a sweet and aggressive way of establishing a comprehensive contact that acts in parallel either in the realm of private friendship, or in the one of artistic fellowship, following a utilitarian system that wouldn’t surprise] (5). Luti goes on to explain on which levels has the relationship between Ungaretti and Pea been “comprehensive.” He speaks of Ungaretti’s occupation of Pea’s business, offering help to Pea in the most meticulous daily details and his transformation into Pea’s literary agent by offering him suggestions concerning poetics, language, and writing style. As I show in the
following chapter, Pea will also speak of Ungaretti’s friendship that becomes central to the former’s art and world-view.

**Conclusion:**

Non-solitary poetry, one of relationships, can sum up Ungaretti’s definition of his own poetry. The presence of the other as an integral component of Ungaretti’s poetics extended to the presence of another other (the recipient) as part of the recitation of the poem. In the introduction to his *Il porto sepolto* Ungaretti marks such a crucial characteristic of his poetics: “Questa poesie non sono fatte/ per la lettura cogli occhi. / Appartengono alla musica. / Vanno ascoltate dalla voce/ viva, lenta” [These poems are not made/ to be read by the eye/ They belong to music/ The are to be heard from a voice/ that is alive and slow]. Yet such an awareness of the existence of the other as an integral component both of the creation and performance process, as I have demonstrated earlier, can only be developed organically.

Ungaretti in the beginning of his career seems to oscillate between notions of national identity formation. His earlier work and political positions mark attempts to belong to some of the already established identities (either the colonial French or the Post-unitary Italian identities). As such, Ungaretti becomes representative of yet another case where the Italian-Egyptian relationship falls out of the Orientalist scheme when dealing with literature by Italians who were born, raised and who lived in Egypt. Ungaretti’s life and literature invites us to be cautious when conducting a postcolonial reading of his texts. Notions such as identity, nation, colonial and especially one of power dynamics are to be handled with utmost care. As such, Ungaretti’s work, while composed in Italian, should not be limited to an Italian reader. Furthermore, being
composed at a time when Italy takes military action to fulfill its colonial aspirations in the horn of Africa and Libya, cannot be criticized as exoticizing nor Orientalizing Egypt, an integral part of the colonizing project, either.

Unlike Pea’s work, discussed in the next chapter, where the autobiography, written from a distance in time and space, becomes the actual location for the author to observe himself – or consume himself in Bakhtinian sense - as a character, Ungaretti’s poetry present a perpetual quest on part of the author to stay alive, to describe such an unstable status known to modern writers without aiming at reflecting a specific ideology in his writing. In such a way his writing is a perpetual attempt to avoid Mohammad Sceab’s source of death. When Ungaretti announces that Sceab’s second preferred author was Nietzsche, “che lo aveva addirittura soggiogato» [who had actually repressed him] he makes a clear reference to the connection between Sceab’s concrete death and the death of Nietzsche, the author, leaving us to reflect on Ungaretti’s attempts to keep the author (himself in this case) alive\(^\text{32}\) (Vita d’un uomo, Il porto sepolto 21). Ungaretti’s perpetual “girovagare” [wandering] in search for a fresh start besides being a reflection of his modern-time disillusionment with the politicized regulated notions of nation, identity, and culture inevitably invites us, readers, to be part of the creation process of his work. Analyzing Ungaretti’s and consequently his work’s existence as dialogue enables us to encompass a theoretical approach which becomes limiting in his situation. Such a fitting route to understand his creative work as an utterance that responds to all the varying realities

\(^{32}\) This position clearly contradicts French literary theorist Roland Barthes’ rejection of the consideration of the author’s biography for example in the interpretation of the text in his later 1967 essay “The Death of the Author.”
conventionally conceived in a binary renders him representative of other expatriate
intellectuals not only of his time but who still exist today.
Chapter 5 - Enrico Pea, the worker who writes

This is just announcin’ that Italy has a writer, and it is some time since I told anybody that ANY country on earth had a writer. Like Confucius, knocked ’round and done all sorts of jobs. Writes like a man who could make a good piece of mahogany furniture. (Pound 1941)¹

With these words, Ezra Pound introduces Enrico Pea to the public on his Radio Speeches broadcast from Radio Rome in World War II on October 26, 1941. Before making this statement, Ezra Pound announces to the audience that he had translated Pea’s first autobiographical novel Moscardino (first published in 1921) into English. He also stresses many times that “the book must be good or [he] wouldn’t be more convinced of the fact AFTER having translated it, than [he] was before.” He promises to send a copy of his translation – of which Pea never made a penny - ² “as soon as the barriers are down […] for the enlightenment of the American public.” Pound also notifies his audience that until that English translation was made available, if anyone wants to learn how to write Italian they should read the first chapter of the book that has been withheld from the English speaking public for 20 years, in Pound’s words, has been “20 years in jail.” The little available critical material on Pea’s work, compared to the diversity of literary forms that he chooses to compose his work, whether lyrical or prose, shows us that his creative work³ has been indeed “in jail” for longer than 20 years.

² Pound goes on comparing Enrico Pea to James Joyce and T.S. Eliot saying: “Well neither had Joyce nor Eliot when I started trying to git (sic) someone to print ‘em” (#2 (October 26, 1941) U.S.(A47))
³ The interest, though limited, of Italian critics in Pea’s work starting in 1940 might be linked to Pound’s praise of the novelist work: Enrico Pea’s primary texts appear to the public as early as 1910 (Fole). Yet a critical reading of his work will not appear until 1943 with Aldo Borlenghi’s critical work, Enrico Pea.
This chapter sheds light on Enrico Pea’s prose especially on three out of five of his autobiographical novels. *Moscardino* will be given as title by Garzanti in 1944 for all four sections of the author’s autobiographical novel: *Moscardino (1922), Il Volto Santo (1924), Magoometto (1942), and Il Servitore del Diavolo (1931)*. There will be later suggestions among critics, which I obviously support, to include *Vita in Egitto* (1949) as a fifth section to the author’s autobiography. Rather than attempting to study Pea’s entire literary production, I have limited myself to discussing three out of these five novels: *Moscardino (1922), Il Servitore del Diavolo (1931), and Vita in Egitto (1949)*.

The three novels I analyze in this chapter cover Pea’s biography starting with his grandfather’s story, passing by his moving to Egypt, until the day he leaves with his family back to Italy on a Thursday, end of March in 1914 (*Vita in Egitto* 199). As Pound puts it in his WWII broadcast: “*Moscardino* is the name of the kid who is tellin’ about his granpop, a nickname, like Buck.” The first half of *Moscardino* actually occurs before young Pea is born. Throughout the three sections I analyze in this chapter Enrico Pea recounts his childhood story, his moving to Egypt, his struggle as a worker and his contact with other workers (including women servants), his contact with Alexandria’s anarchists in *La Baracca Rossa*, his fascination and later rejection of the patronizing and almost intellectual bullying of Giuda (an anarchist yet bourgeois intellectual and teacher at the Free Popular University hosted by *La Baracca Rossa*), his journey to learn how to read and write through a translated

---

4 This first section is the one translated by Ezra Pound and which is printed later in Italy in 1955 by arrangement with New Directions in New York.
version of the Bible in his Lucchese dialect (also marking his own access to the Bible through close reading and experience rather than imposed clues by the church), his transformation from an illiterate to a writer, his conscious choice of a style that reflects life rather than ideology, and finally his return to his native Italy in 1914. After his return to Italy, Pea looks back to all his memories, reconstructs them and starts publishing them in the order that is made available to us.

In the context of these case studies that expand the boundaries of a Post-Colonial approach to Italian literature produced in Egypt, Enrico Pea’s autobiographical work presents an excellent case relevant to our understanding of transnational intellectual communities. A close reading of his texts uncovers an awareness that resists the imposition of ideologies that he came in contact. Whether it be the anarchist groups that he frequented during his residence in Alexandria of Egypt, or the post-unitary and later fascist nationalist thoughts attempts to regulate Italian identity, Pea’s work reflects a conscious challenge to the directionality of ideology. Pea is the only writer addressed in this dissertation who was not subjected to state schooling. Those schools, whether in Italy or abroad, functioned during this time period, as Gramsci asserts, as a state apparatus to sustain the status quo (diffusing nationalistic thoughts in Europe and supporting the colonial presence in the colonies). As the reader will notice throughout this chapter, the postcolonial discussion is substituted with a discussion of what denies the notion of separation between East and West in Pea’s writing. While aware of the existence and functioning of those paradigms, Pea consistently denies them through his observations, experiences, and his awareness of his position as an autodidact.
On the one hand, Pea’s discussion of his position as an autodidact can be paralleled with Antonio Gramsci’s reflections on this term and can also lead us to consider him as an organic intellectual representative of the Italian working class of Alexandria. On the other hand, we can see Pea’s philosophical critique of traditional intellectuals’ position in regards to the masses in characters (especially women), places, landscapes, and conversations presented in dialogue (with reference to Bakhtin’s dialogism). Pea’s formed world-view stresses a sense of balance, coexistence, and misura which is also reflected in his unique style in writing. All of which reflect the rich layers of relationships the author experienced during his 18-20 years residence in Egypt (1895/6-1914). From such a perspective, Pea’s autobiography becomes crucial in understanding how those years spent in Egypt had marked his transformation from a skilled yet illiterate worker to a writer and intellectual whose work represents a counter-hegemonic effort against colonial and separatist attempts.

5.1. Egypt at the center of an Italian autobiography

Enrico Pea (1881- 1958), unlike the other two Italian authors I discuss in my dissertation (F.T. Marinetti and Giuseppe Ungaretti), was not born in Egypt. Born in the Tuscanian town of Seravezza, the province of Lucca became his reference to what he called home and nation. At the age of 14, in 1895, the young Lucchese emigrant embarked to reach the Egyptian side of the Mediterranean to later become one of the

---

5 According to Felice del Beccaro in the introduction to Enrico Pea’s *Vita in Egitto* Pea’s and his older brother join their mother in 1896 in Egypt where she finds work. He returns definitely to Italy in 1914 (6,8). Scholars, however, have not been consistent about the dates of Pea’s moving to Egypt and out of Egypt. Ernesto Travi in *Umanità di Enrico Pea* sets the date somewhere between 1895 and 1899.
very few actual working-class Italian modernists. During his “colorful lifetime,” Enrico Pea had been a peasant and a sailor before moving to Egypt to work as a house servant, foundry worker, a mechanic in a naval shipyard, and a railroad worker. After having suffered from serious work injuries he started a small business in marble, wood, and wine to finally work, after moving back to Italy, as a theatrical impresario. In Alexandria, a shack/warehouse named La Baracca Rossa, became a meeting place for workers travelling from all over Europe.

While I leave the discussion of La Baracca Rossa to another section later in this chapter, it is important to note that it is in this shack that Pea met modernist poet and writer Giuseppe Ungaretti who would “patiently” edit his work and whose friendship would become a source of inspiration and human support for both of the Italian expatriates. In the introduction to the collection of letters between Ungaretti and Pea, Lettere a Enrico Pea, Giorgio Luti points to the recognition of Pea’s unique artistic method during a time where “l’impostazione marinettiana sembrava ormai prevalere su di ogni altra ipotesi rinnovativa” [the imposition of Marinetti’s style seemed to prevail over any other transformative hypothesis] (5). Luti points to a letter from Paris dating February 26th 1913 where Ungaretti commented on Pea’s writing suggesting the following:

“[…] sei l’artista più compiuto, più intensamente artista ch’io conosca. Non per farti una lode, per dirti da quale sincerità parta quella mia lettera, e perché io ti vorrei pregar di tenerne conto. Tu non sei né un dannunziano né un pascoliano, vieni dopo di loro ed è logico che tu non li ignori; ma se tu approfitti della loro esperienza, tu ti togli

6 Antonio Penacchi (b.1950) and Vincenzo Guerrazzi (1940-2012) present some of the rare examples of working-class modernists.  
7 term used by Italian journalist and writer Giuseppe Prezzolini and recalls Marinetti’s use of the same term to describe his birth in Egypt.
l’espressione dal fondo più sconosciuto dell’emozione e della visione, e vorrei se ne accorgessero in Italia […]”

[you are the most accomplished artist, the most intense artist I know of. Not in order to praise you, to tell you how sincere this letter of mine is, and I want to beg you to take note of it. You are not a follower neither of Dannahuiznor Pascoli, you come after them and it is logic that you know about them; but if you take advantage of their experience, you deduct the expression from the bottom that is the most unknown to the emotion and the vision, and I would want people to notice it in Italy […]]. (49)

During his stay in Egypt, Pea started writing his autobiography. Through his work, he left his readers a detailed account that went as far back as recounting the life and death of his grandparents. While in Egypt, conscious of his position in history, after having frequented literary figures, political intellectuals and activists in Egypt, Pea started producing his own literature. His abundant production, mainly narrative, included poetry and four plays.⁸ Pea’s autobiography was centered around one focal and historical point: his life in Egypt. It is after all in Egypt that he started writing even about his life in Lucca. Pea’s first autobiographical novel Moscardino, while published in 1922, was composed during the author’s stay in Egypt. Sergio Pacifici in his The Modern Italian Novel refers to the novel as “brief, somewhat disconnected […]], less a novel in the conventional sense, than a prose poem, whose unity is its unique cadence, at first lyrical and, toward the end of the book, biblical” (21). As I demonstrate in the section “The Architectonics of Pea’s Writing,” this unusual structure of Pea’s novel can be read in parallel to Bakhtin’s reflections on the autobiographical novel. The autobiographical element becomes also a reflection of Pea’s awareness of his role as intellectual. As such, I also consider this position in

⁸ Giuda (1918), Prime piogge d’ottobre (1919), Rosa di Sion (1920), and La Passione di Cristo (1923)
parallel to Gramsci’s reflections on the importance of autobiographical accounts in the section “The self-taught autodidatta versus the traditional intellectual”.

*Moscardino* is divided into two main sections. The first section has been described as telling the story of three brothers, Pea’s grandfather and his two brothers. Central to this section, however, is Cleofe, the servant who comes from the mountains to work in Signora Pellegrina’s house (Signora Pellegrina is the mother of the three brothers who dies the same day Moscardino’s grandfather attempts to commit suicide). While the second section of the novel focuses on Moscardino’s grandfather who had just returned from the mental institution and who takes care of the young boy while his mother works as a maid in the city, Pea continues to refer to his grandmother Cleofe, her sickness, and finally her death.

As I point out in the section “From Amina to Sabina – Mediterranean and women workers across time and space,” the author is able to access his memory of his grandfather together with imagining his grandmother, Cleofe, during his stay in Egypt. It is through close relationships built in the Mediterranean city with other working-class women that he is capable of recalling his past and filling the gaps about who he is while creating fictional characters, such as Sabina the other servant who was married to his unnamed grandfather’s brother to whom he refers as Il Taciturno or the silent one.

The years Pea spends in Egypt become central then to the understanding of the author’s work and thought. Recent studies⁹ have revisited Pea’s writings to present

---

evidence of texts that complicate the colonial reading of Italian cultural relationships. Nevertheless, understanding the intellectual work of this author should not only be restricted to his writings. The cosmopolitan nature of the Egyptian Mediterranean city of Alexandria, in addition to offering a supportive environment to intellectual elite from different parts of Europe, offered an excellent medium for the Egyptian and foreign working class to form a strong community and to come to an awareness of their shared status as workers across regional and national boundaries. In addition, Pea’s work and life reveal his deep understanding of the importance of human relationships as a rich medium for dialogue and revelations about life in general.

Only in dialogue Pea manages to construct a world-view from the base/bottom up rather than through ideologies that approach daily events from a distance. As early as Moscardino, the first autobiographical novel we can detect Pea’s early decision to become an intellectual and writer dedicated to social equality through his depiction both of Cleofe, his grandmother’s silent struggle as a servant for a bourgeois family, and the depiction especially of Sabina, the other servant who works for the parish priest. As we move forward in time, we note that the author’s personal relationships were not only restricted by working class, national or gender boundaries. A close look at Pea’s intellectual consideration of the French Thuile brothers in his 1942 novel Vita in Egitto and his consideration of Giuda, the anarchist intellectual who becomes his guide and master early on in his life as depicted in his 1932 novel Il Servitore del Diavolo, is also considered later in this chapter. Pea’s reflections on the role of the intellectual together with a critique of the traditional intellectual that could be paralleled with Gramsci’s discussion of traditional intellectuals versus the organic
becomes an epicenter for the understanding of Pea’s development as a thinker and the meaning of his focus on women workers whose oppression becomes a common ground across the Mediterranean. The dialogues resulting out of many intimate instances throughout the novels, whether intentional or not, turn out to be the author’s main stylistic trait. Through those intimate relationships, his work becomes original in providing us with insights into the building of culture and an understanding of life from the vantage point of the less privileged.

Pea’s unique situation as a worker, writer and intellectual, most importantly an intellectual who sought to organize knowledge acquisition by offering his *Baracca Rossa* to host classes of the *Università popolare di Alessandria*, becomes representative of the Italian working community that was an integral part of the Colony of Alexandria. In contrast to the up-till-now existing assumptions that Europeans residing in Egypt were the economically and socially privileged, Pea and the characters we observe in his writings challenge those notions. As Lucia Re notes in her “Alexandria Revisited Colonialism and the Egyptian Works of Enrico Pea and Giuseppe Ungaretti,” contrary to the stereotypical assumption that Pea would be affluent as a European migrant to an overseas colony, the young Italian immigrant lived in Alexandria’s affluent section only as a servant in the household of an “Austriaco avaro e tiranno” [“avaricious and tyrannical Austrian”]. Giuseppe Ungaretti, whose work I discussed in the previous chapter, provides another example like Pea. Both Enrico Pea and Giuseppe Ungaretti lived in the poor neighborhood of Moharam-Bey. Within walking distance from the Mediterranean shore of Alexandria, they shared with other poor European laborers the harsh reality of Arab and Jewish
laborers.

Finally Alexandria of Egypt offers Pea and other Italian nationals a place free of cultural and intellectual restrictions where their own identity and ideology can be developed from the bottom up. Pea’s life experience becomes also reflected in his choice of locations of his work. Besides presenting an exemplary case of coming to consciousness of his position in history, time, and culture through contact with a different culture in Egypt, it is always in a third unexpected place\(^{10}\) that Pea and his characters are able to deconstruct such clichéd notions as “patria” [nation], class, love, and religion. “Vedi destino, doveva tornare a me l’amore italiano mentre la convivenza internazionale in questa Babele d’Egitto m’aveva convinto dell’inutilità e del danno delle patrie”\(^{11}\) ‘you see destiny, Italian love had to come back to me while my international residence in this Babylon of Egypt had convinced me of the uselessness and the damage of homelands’ (\textit{Vita in Egitto} 34). In an Italian protestant translation of the Bible, given to him by a non-Italian speaker in Egypt, his love for his country, Italy, generally defined in a nationalistic sense, is specifically experienced as

\(^{10}\) Not to be confused with American sociologist Ray Oldenburg’s use of the term “Third Space” in his \textit{The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community}. New York: Marlowe, 1999. Print. Oldeburg uses the German word \textit{Gemütlich} referring to the inclusive nature of the group (56) which provides a sense of belonging (64). Not to be confused either with Postmodern political geographer and urban planner Edward W, Soja who also developed a theory of Thirdspace in his \textit{Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places}. Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1996. Print. In his book, Thirdspace becomes “an-Other” space, a radical zone created and populated by the marginalized (10).

Homi K. Bhabha’s third space, although offering a medium for contradiction to be highlighted, becomes a location for dialectical thinking to take place leading to his notion of hybridity. The colonial struggle, consequently, becomes resolved in hybidity. While such approach is applicable in some situation, Pea’s work and the direction of my dissertation stresses cases that do not synthesize into hybridity but into coexistence and more importantly into continuous discovery of their changing existence.

\(^{11}\) It is interesting in this passage how Pea links nationalism to religion and then to his interest in literature: “Mi doveva venire più tardi la voglia di Dio bestemmiando, la voglia alle lettere e la curiosità del credere e del negare da un libro comprato in un tempio di protestanti” (\textit{Vita in Egitto} 34).
regional. By reading the Bible translated in his own version of Italian (Lucchese dialect) Pea’s love for his country intensifies: “Credevo che si placasse la nostalgia che mi tormentava ed invece si acuitava in me l’amore del paese.” [I thought it would calm the nostalgia that tormented me but it sharpened the love for my country instead] (Vita in Egitto 34). It is in Alexandria that Pea comes to an awareness of his italianità, to which he refers as “Italian love” and which he finally translates as a sense of belonging to his city of Lucca rather than a belonging to the Italian peninsula. He also realizes that such a sense of belonging is not artificially constructed. In the translator’s language Pea picks up “il sapore del [su]o paese” [the taste of [his] home-town] (34).

Diodati, the protestant translator of the copy of the Bible that Pea acquires in a protestant temple in Alexandria turns out to be “like him” an exiled rebel from Lucca (35). What matters to Pea is a sense of familiarity found in the stories he reads in that Bible. The sense of familiarity that is mainly embedded in the stories it recalls from his native Lucca. Aware of the inability of existing literature to deal with those nuances, it is finally on the African side of the Mediterranean that Enrico Pea becomes aware of his role as a working class writer and intellectual. Inspired by his enthusiasm for literature he learns how to read and write in order to compose literature that could give expression to life, and especially of the working class, as he saw it.

5.2. Enrico Pea between the self-taught and the organic intellectual

Il modo di essere del nuovo intellettuale non può più consistere nell'eloquenza, motrice esteriore e momentanea degli affetti e delle passioni, ma nel mescolarsi attivamente alla vita pratica, come

12 “Ma, dappoiché mi avevano detto del Diodati lucchese ribelle alla chiesa, lui che era stato battezzato dallo stesso Papa e da un Re quando Lucca non aveva ancora le mura attuali, mi pareva che dovessero quei fatti narrati dalla Bibbia, che andavano dalla creazione del mondo in poi, servire a negare almeno l’esistenza del Dio e a mettere in berlina il Vangelo e la Chiesa” (35).
Gramsci here is representing the potential development of an intellectual towards an investment in practical life. Enrico Pea through his work and biography meets this intellectual from the other side as a previously illiterate worker who is self-taught. Both are endeavoring to mix up experience, personal observations, and practical life with literate culture in the elaboration of their theoretical and literary works. Enrico Pea becomes representative of the self-educated intellectual who acquires his knowledge by actively “mixing up” (mescolarsi), to use Gramsci’s expression, personal observations with the practical life. In this way, Pea builds his life experience and his art from the bottom up or from below\(^\text{13}\) while being consciously critical of traditional intellectuals unable to reach out to the masses.

Pea’s way of acquiring knowledge from life’s practicality is contrasted with what he refers to as the “abbecedario,” the person who acquires knowledge through the institutionalized education system. The differentiation between the self-educated

\(^{13}\) Refer to my definition of the term “from below” in the introduction to my dissertation. Such recurrent term that carry a reference to the economic base also acquires a different understanding of the base in the Gramscian notion of the organic intellectual. Throughout my dissertation I focus on how the writers in question present evidence to literature composed from below not by giving voice to the economically underrepresented but by becoming themselves representative of the culturally underrepresented during a political time where their nation relied on propaganda that stressed the European supremacy. Some of these writers, such as Marinetti, were themselves main agents in such propaganda.
(autodidatta) and the Regular Student (studioso regolare), according to Pea, relies on the sources of knowledge acquisition. While both types read books, the self-educated acquires knowledge from below (life experience, conversations with other people) while the regular student acquires it through an organized and institutionalized education system whether a school or a professional institution.

Pea’s consideration of himself as an “autodidatta” reminds us of Antonio Gramsci’s earlier (or perhaps later?) discussion of the self-educated in his Prison Notebooks. Gramsci presents a clear definition of the self-educated as «quelli che sacrificano una parte o tutto il tempo che gli altri appartenenti alla loro generazione dedicano ai divertimenti o ad altre occupazioni, per istruirsi ed educarsi» [those who sacrifice part or all their time, which others of the same generation dedicate to entertainment and other activities, to instruct and educate themselves]. Would that mean that rich people can also be self-educated in this case? According to Gramsci, this is not the case. As part of his discussion of arguments related to culture, Gramsci relates access to education to the economic situation of the person seeking it. He dismisses the commonplace assumption that attributes a self-educated status to all educated persons and stresses the importance of making education available to the poor who had no other choice but to be self-educated.

In Egypt, like in other parts of Europe, there was a growing interest among

---

14 The term “autodidatta” is not used in the earlier sections of his autobiography. Considered first as a triology under the titles Moscardino (1922), Il volto santo (1924), and Il servitore del diavolo (1931), Magoometto (1942) to his autobiography is later added Vita in Egitto (1949) discussed in this chapter. Antonio Gramsci’s discussion of organic intellectuals in contrast to the traditional intellectuals appears in his Quaderni del carcere ‘Prison Notebooks’ written between 1929 and 1935 and only published between 1948 and 1951.
intellectuals, especially anarchists, in establishing Free Popular Universities. This interest came as the result of a growing awareness among intellectuals of their responsibility to counter the state’s hegemony supported by the state education system. As Anthony Gorman notes in his “Anarchists in Education: The Free Popular University in Egypt (1901),” the Free Popular University was “the most radical initiative in education in Egypt before the First World War and part of a broader pattern of anarchist activity that would play a significant role in the development of the labor movement, grassroots political activism and progressive thought in the early years of the twentieth century” (304). In Egypt where Egyptian intellectuals (traditional and organic) agreed on the importance of educating the masses as a way of bringing awareness against the British colonizer, there was a sensed support and enthusiasm for this initiative. Gorman cites the positive responses among several Egyptian newspapers (like the nationalist daily al-Liwa’ and al-Ahram) which called upon Egyptian teachers and educated persons to offer their services to the newly established university and even linked such volunteer work as service offered to the building of the nation [watan] (311). All these specific details about the special character of the Free Popular University in Egypt need to be taken into consideration when looking at Pea’s role in supporting it by hosting its classes in his Baracca

---

15 It is noteworthy that the idea of a popular university was the product of a European movement at the turn of the 20th century which was interested in popular instruction as a tool for proletarian emancipation. For a further discussion of the Free Popular University in Egypt refer to: Anthony Gorman, “Anarchists in Education: The Free Popular University in Egypt (1901).” Middle Eastern Studies, 41:3, 303-320
In 1916 Antonio Gramsci ferociously attacks the Università Popolare at Turin (founded in 1900) for being a “cold flame” that has miserably failed in attracting the public due to problems of organization and instructive criteria. In fact, the Egyptian Free Popular University was inspired by the Italian model. It was part of a whole wave of establishing free universities that rely on public funding and the use of voluntary teachers (Gorman 306). However, while Gramsci criticizes the libertarian movement and links its success to the failure of other competing cultural forces, he still points to its positive traits, clearly proposing suggestions for the Italian education system. He links libertarians’ success to their individual initiative, personal activity. Moreover, they find more satisfaction in their personal work, they are less overwhelmed with bureaucratic hindrances and they live freely since they become valued based on their hard work. Pea’s work shows an awareness of his position as a self-educated man who did not have the option or wealth to take advantage of the institutionalized education system.

Gramsci’s main critique is directed at the already existing state in its inability to satisfy the desire of the underprivileged to access education. Gramsci’s insistence on the fundamental importance of consciousness transformation in order to achieve the desired social change went hand in hand with his blame of the state’s education system.

---

16 While I leave the discussion of La Baracca Rossa to the end of this chapter, it is noteworthy that this place served as a classroom for students from various backgrounds and nationalities that attended the Free Popular University founded in 1901.

17 “Il principio che una forza non vale tanto per la propria ‘forza intrinseca’ quanto per la debolezza degli avversari e delle forze in cui si trova inserita, non è tanto vero come in Italia” “The principle that a force does not find its value in its own “innate power” as much as the weakness of its adversaries and of the forces in which it is included, cannot be applied better than in Italy” (Argomenti di Cultura Quaderno 8)
system. In the context of his consideration of creating a counter-hegemony to the already imposed ideology of the ruling class, Gramsci’s desired consciousness had to arise from people’s actual working lives. By reading Pea’s work, we get to observe an example of consciousness transformation that extends to the creation of literary work that seeks to counter the already existing status quo.

The status quo in the case of European communities residing in the colonies was not only meant to sustain European economic superiority. International schools (especially French schools) in the colonies, besides supporting the idea of the inevitability of the Colonial situation, sought to support the myth that the education they provided to their students placed them socially above the colonized population. It is noteworthy that those schools did not offer education in Egypt merely to the French community but also admitted Italian, Egyptian, Greek, and other students from various communities.¹⁸

Pea’s humbly recognizes himself as a self-taught in his last autobiographical work *Vita in Egitto* (1949).¹⁹ In this work, Enrico Pea reflects on the role of the intellectual with his critique of the French bourgeois novelist Jean Léon Thuile in his consideration of the role of literature. Such a critique is also reflected in his expressed definition of the autodidatta/abbecedario dichotomy at the beginning of the novel. The novel starts with a scene at the Thuile’s house in the desert, east of Alexandria, close

---

¹⁸ F.T. Marinetti, for example, whose work I discuss in the second chapter of this dissertation, attended the Jesuit School in Alexandria. In one of the letters from the rector of the school to his father on June 15th 1891, F. Cattin complained to Marinetti senior, a prominent lawyer of Alexandria that the young boy made unacceptable comments and read authors whose name he should not even mention. In this letter, he specifically announced his attention on the “honor of the family” and that the father should treat the subject urgently.

¹⁹ *Vita in Egitto*, published in 1949 was completed in 1944 but was lost (probably during the bombing by the Germans of the Teatro Politeama of which Pea was director). Cfr. Felice del Beccaro, introduction to: Enrico Pea, *Vita in Egitto* (1949) p.11.
to the sea and to Egypt’s border with Lybia. Pea’s clarifies that the initial purpose of the visit was to seek collaboration and advice for his play that will be published later in 1918 under the title of *Giuda*. The short lived collaboration with the French novelist Jean Léon Thuile is soon transformed into harsh criticism of the middle class in general and middle class intellectuals in particular.

In *Vita in Egitto* Pea recalls fragmented memories of his stay in Egypt. His obsession with the main character of his play *Giuda* is at the center of the plot of the autobiographical novel. The whole novel presents the development of the author’s architecturing of his main character based on his own development as an intellectual. Such intellectual development becomes also linked to his meeting with the French Thuile brothers – that he spells Thuil in his novel. The novel starts with his visit of the Thuile brothers and an explanation of the failed collaboration and ends on the day he embarks back to his native Italy while observing the now abandoned house of the French intellectuals.

The reason for the failed collaboration between Enrico Pea and the French novelist Jean Léon Thuile is that Pea understands the novelist to embody “la spregiudicatezza razionalistica, il sovvertivismo intellettuale, la morale del libero pensatore falsamente rivoluzionario, conservatrice ed atea.” [the rationalistic ruthlessness, intellectual subversion, the conservative and atheist morality of the free yet falsely revolutionary thinker] (45). Accompanied by his close friend, Giuseppe Ungaretti, to the mourning house of the French brothers (Henri Thuile had lost his beloved wife) Pea was hoping to get advice from the brothers on his book about
The collaboration between Pea and the novelist, Jean Léon Thuile, ends abruptly “come se si fosse trattato di un cattivo matrimonio scoperto all’indomani delle nozze” [as if it had to do with a bad marriage discovered the next day of the wedding] (41). Pea ends up spending the visit with Thuile’s sister and, more importantly, their grandmother. The scene is followed by reflections about social classes, the intellectual, the Bible, Pea’s memories and finally the modern novel.

The failed collaboration between Pea and Jean Léon Thuile exposes the writer, living in close proximity to the working class, to class differences not only in banal utterances but in a deeper inability of the French bourgeois writer to speak for the working class. Besides forcing his vision of including Jesus in a book about Giuda, what Pea never intended in the first place, Thuile made Jesus speak like a French academic: “dialettico, sottile, sensuale, e paganizzante, d’un paganesimo decadente” [dialectical, sharp, sensual, and paganizing, of a decadent paganism] (42). Pea’s vision of Jesus was, on the contrary, not as much of a composed and monologic person. According to Pea in the figure of Jesus many aspects had to co-exist in dialogue. Appealing to the masses was not the final aim of his mission. The revelation of Jesus’ divinity, according to Pea’s understanding, relied on his actions not his words – as Thuile suggested. According to Pea, while Jesus “conquistava le masse e operava miracoli, si preparava al martirio” [conquered the masses and performed miracles, he was getting ready for martyrdom] (42). In such conception of the divinity Pea formed his own understanding of the Bible contrary to the official as well as the atheist

20 Giuda or Judas Iscariot - the disciple who betrayed Jesus according to the story of the Bible but whose story Pea had decided to approach differently.
Moreover, Pea’s intellectual disagreement with his collaborator was also attributed to a deep social class division. Jean Léon Thuile, leaves for France for the summer to find a publisher for his new book. Pea, on the other hand, like other poor inhabitants of Egypt, remains in the city. He shares “naturally” the poverty of those poor, indigenous, and *i fellah*,\(^{21}\) “i veri artefici del benessere di questa cosmopolita popolazione che infesta le due grandi città: Cairo ed Alessandria.” [The true makers of the wealth of this cosmopolitan population which infests the two big cities: Cairo and Alexandria” (43). While a bourgeois French intellectual like Thuile would write about them, such knowledge would remain “false,” in Pea’s opinion, or distant from experience.

Moving forward in the novel, *Vita in Egitto* presents a collection of the relationships Pea builds during his stay in Egypt. His struggle with the intellectuals, either anarchists or traditional ones, is contrasted with the genuine relationships he builds with regular people across various social classes. As stated earlier, Pea had attended the Università popolare in Alexandria founded by the anarchists. However, instead of considering himself an anarchist,\(^{22}\) Pea distanced himself ideologically from them by suggesting a remote encounter with them; he uses words such as “contatto anarchico” [contact with the anarchists] or “frequentare” [to frequent] to describe such

---

\(^{21}\) *Fellah* in Arabic means peasant. The root of the word is *falaha* which means “to work the land.” While Egypt was turning into a capitalist society, *fellah* became equivalent to being poor. For this reason Pea rightly translates the word as “quelli che lavorano la terra e non la posseggono” ‘those who work the land without owning it’ (43).

\(^{22}\) “Fui chiamato: ‘simpatizzante’ che è il primo grado (anche l’anarchia ha i suoi gradi), ‘compagno’ l’odore diventato più tardi” ‘I was called ‘sympathizer’ which counts as the first grade (also anarchy has its own grades), ‘fellow’ I later became’ (*Vita in Egitto* 77).
distanced encounter. Throughout his stay in Egypt, while being fully immersed in various circles, he always maintained a position of observer of life and of people as a rich source of treasures. He describes his relationship with Pietro Vasai, an anarchist he meets in Alexandria, as an access point to that person’s life that he describes as «una miniera» [a mine] (152). By placing those life experiences and what may seem like fragmented thoughts, Pea manages then to draw a picture of the cosmopolitan city of Alexandria from the bottom up through the casual juxtaposition of memories to convey his thought.

He juxtaposes, for example, the scene of his intimate conversation with the Thuile’s grandmother with his reflection on his style as an autodidatta: “Non voglio fare l’elogio dell’autodidatta che sarebbe il mio elogio, so bene che quel che l’autodidatta sa, lo sa sempre male, imperfettamente, imparato come l’ha così alla rinfusa” [I do not want to praise the autodidact for that would be my praise, Yet I know well that what the autodidact knows, he always knows it badly, imperfectly, since he has haphazardly learned it] (36). Not always capable of using the exact, perfect words to express his thoughts, the juxtaposition of his memories becomes his way to convey these thoughts. The valued traits of Pea’s intellectual are being creative and alive.

Contrary to traditional intellectuals who form a separate social group or who are provided mainly by the peasantry, Pea’s “autodidatta” can find support across various socio-economic classes. According to Pea, each profession has a small percentage of “self-educated” group that understands the profession or knowledge to
the core. Pea becomes a representative of a new social group emerging from the interactive dynamics of a colonial situation and a rising awareness among European working class. Situated at the intersections of political, cultural and intellectual tendencies that competed during this time period, Pea manages through his autobiography to place all these intersecting realities in dialogue with one another. Gramsci’s definition of the organic intellectual is not very far from Pea’s case, capable of giving homogeneity and awareness of the role of its respective social group in the economic class in addition to social and political classes. While not fluent in intellectual language, as he himself confirms, Pea finds in literature to be the perfect medium for such utterances to take place.

The autobiographical novel, and especially one that is composed by an author situated at a distance in time, space, and culture from his own story becomes the perfect medium of intellectual expression for the autodidatta. Gramsci’s Argomento di Cultura offers a convergent opinion about the autobiography. Right before discussing the autodidatta he also provides a “justification for the autobiography” from such a perspective leaving room for those realities that do not belong to existing categories in order to find expression in such creative literary form.

In Gramsci’s section on Giustificazione dell’autobiografia, he starts with an already existing conception of the autobiography as being “an act of pride” where the

---

23 “Tuttavia tra mille di questi dottori diventati tali ad orologeria, dieci forse sono veramente i dotti e questi dieci capirebbero i dubbi, le fatiche e forse anche scuserebbero la superbia e gli errori di chi ha dovuto arrampicarsi senza guide e senza strumenti sopra la montagna di vetro. E forse anche questi dieci sono essi stessi autoditati del sublime che hanno dovuto conquistare da sé, mentre alle altre novecentonovanta mediocrità, la scuola e l’orario non han dato il tanto di più che è quel che conta” (36)

writer assumes his own life worth narrating for its “originality.” Eventually however he moves to another perspective of the autobiographical novel, this time a political dimension. [One knows that their own life is similar to thousands of other lives, yet for some reason it reached an outlet that the other thousand could not reach and haven’t in fact reached] (119). Narration, according to Gramsci, creates such possibilities, suggests the process, and points to the outlet. Gramsci’s revolutionary consideration of the autobiography turns such narrative form into a political and more importantly philosophical essay. It becomes an application of philosophical ideas that obviously contest dominant normative principles. «È certo che l’autobiografia ha un grande valore storico, in quanto mostra la vita in atto non solo come dovrebbe essere secondo le leggi scritte o i principî morali dominanti» [It is certain that the autobiography has a great historical value, in the way it shows life in action not just as it should be according to the written laws or to dominant moral principals] (119). As such, according to Gramsci, the autobiographical novel becomes a declaration of non-compliance, the function of which might become apparent later after an eventual turning of the tables\textsuperscript{25} takes place. While the general lines of history, understandably written by the dominant, becomes useless in understanding history after an overthrow occurs, autobiographical texts finally offer an explanation of the gradual mutation of the situation on the “molecular” level (119).

From such a perspective, Pea’s autobiography becomes crucial in understanding how the years spent in Egypt mark his transformation into a writer and

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Rovesciamento} in Italian. Understandably, Gramsci is not using none of politically or ideologically charged words such as revolution or coup to indicate an overthrow.
intellectual. While struggling to make a living in Alexandria, Pea becomes aware of the universality of the struggle of the working class and particularly that of women workers. Enrico Pea practiced various hard manual labor that led him to the realization of the meaning of “bread and salt.” This struggle to learn how to read and write also brought him to the conclusion of the inevitability of an eventual shift in the position of intellectuals.

In the context of creating counter hegemony, the role of the intellectuals is crucial to the Gramscian thought. The contribution Gramsci made to Marxist ideology was rooted in the directionality of consciousness. Instead of an elite group of intellectuals acting for the working class, intellectuals needed to be organically created from social groups (not only the working the class) that constitute to social base. Traditional intellectuals were also encouraged to still participate in bringing consciousness to the masses. As a result, two types of intellectuals are put forward in Gramsci’s work. Consequently, intellectuals gain a class positioning vis-à-vis the base or superstructure depending on the way they access knowledge (self-education “autodidatta” versus educational institutions “abbecedario”).

From this perspective, Pea’s final section of his autobiographical work finds its final articulation of his awareness of his position as an organic intellectual who has organically formed his knowledge from the base. The scene he recalls from his visit to Jean Léon and Henri Thuile and his conversation with their grandmother demonstrates a critical position with regards to abstraction as opposed to practicality and
experience.\textsuperscript{26} Pea ends up spending his visit with the two women in the house: Thuile’s grandmother and sister. In the other room are the brothers Thuile and his friend Giuseppe Ungaretti. All three men are browsing through books in the huge library filled with contemporary books. Pea asks the grandmother whether those books have provided her comfort in such a desolate place in the middle of the desert: “Certo in questa casa così grande, lontano dalla città […] quei libri saranno un grande conforto” [Surely in such a big house, far from the city […] those books would be of great comfort] (\textit{Vita in Egitto} 33). She replies “yes,” by nodding her head, yet her other facial expressions convey another message which fill the author with doubt regarding its truth. After repeating his question she finally admits: “Se le fossero [di conforto], mio nepote (sic) non sarebbe così…” Alludeva al nepote poeta che non trovava più gioia in nulla” [‘If they were to be [of any comfort] my grandson wouldn’t be this way…’ She was referring to her poet grandson who found happiness in nothing] (33). According to her, the importance of those compiled books can only be measured by their practical use in bringing comfort. According to her, and to Pea, they had miserably failed.

5.3. From Amina to Sabina – The Mediterranean Sea and women workers across time and space

“Mi avete cucita col refe nero, Don Pietro. Mi avete cucita col refe nero alla vostra tonaca, come uno dei tanti bottoni di cencio. Il refe nero invisibile sul nero della tonaca: non si scorgono i punti. Ma è destino che io sia vostra serva, anche adesso che ho preso marito. Servire, servire sempre: me non mi hanno servita mai.” (\textit{Moscardino} 49)

\textsuperscript{26} An experience that comes as a result of practical experience rather than an intellectual assumption as Aldo Borlenghi discusses in his 1943 study of Pea’s work. “Insomma, questa esperienza è veramente, più che cosa intellettuale, un fatto pratico” ‘After all, such experience remains actually, rather than an intellectual matter, a practical fact’ (7).
[“You have sewed me up with black thread, Don Pietro. You have sewed me to your tunic, like a rag button. Black thread don’t show on black cloth, no one will see the stiches. But it is fate that I am your servant, even now that I am married. Wait, wait, serve always. Nobody ever waits on me, ever has waited on me.”] (Moscardino 52-53)

The words are uttered by Sabina, one of the two female characters in Enrico Pea’s first novel Moscardino published in 1922. The poetic autobiographical novel reveals a grandfather through his grandson’s eyes. Sabina works as a servant for Don Pietro Galanti, the wise, silent and composed priest of the bourgeois family’s parish.

Sabina is married to Moscardino’s great uncle, “Il Taciturno” or “The man of few words,” translated in Ezra Pounds’ English version as “Grumpy.” She kisses Il Taciturno by the well and he soon becomes obsessed with her. Il Taciturno’s few words throughout the novel are contrasted with Sabina’s forward gestures in the garden by the well and finally by her long speech given at the end of the first half of the novel. Not only does she come to the realization of her never-ending status as a servant… everyone’s servant… even after she is married to Il Taciturno, she also finds a voice and words to express it.27

“I was evidently meant to stay bundled up in black thread and mend long black socks work out heel and toe by priests, sew on black rag buttons, patch soutanes, mend pockets, brush the nap of priests’ hats, and their hat cords and bat-wings.” (45).

Pea’s narration at times challenges the reader to distinguish which of the two female characters is speaking, Sabina or Cleofe – Moscardino’s great grandmother. Sabina’s speech, also representative of Cleofe’s situation, would appear to have some

---

27 Pea seems to announce her destiny embedded in her name. The name Sabina recalls the Sabine tribe which used to live in central Italy when Romulus and Remus established the city of Rome. According the the myth, Romulus arranged mass kidnapping of the Sabine young women at then end of a party in order to provide wives for the citizens of Rome.
importance in Pea’s retracing of his roots. Cleofe, the second female character, the beautiful and quiet girl, came down from the hills to work in a dark house with three men and their aging mother. Cleofe catches pneumonia after giving birth to her first and only child. The red-skinned doctor – another middle class man obsessed with the other servant, Sabina – recommends a trip to the sea to help Cleofe recover from her illness.

It is by the sea that Sabina finds her own voice. It is by the sea that she speaks not only for herself but for Cleofe: “And if I go out for a walk and to breathe of clean air with healthy people, first you jump on me, then my husband, and finally Don Lorenzo as if I was married to all of you three” (53). It is by that Tuscan shore of the Mediterranean that Sabina utters her words, 8.5 km from where Enrico Pea was born in 1881 in Serravezza, a town in the Tuscan province of Lucca; and it is by the Egyptian Mediterranean shore of Alexandria that Enrico Pea hears the story of another Italian-speaking Arab servant. Amina’s story is not very much different from the ones he imagines for Cleofe and Sabina. Giving voice to Sabina’s words suggests the author’s consciousness as an organic intellectual, representing workers across gender differences and as a self-taught writer composing literature from the base up.

In *Vita in Egitto* Amina, the Italian-speaking Arab servant girl, tells the young Pea, then also a servant, while he is waiting for his friends (her Greek masters) to wake up, about her story and the jealousy of her masters. Sabina’s story will be retold with more intensity through Amina. Chronologically speaking, Pea does not seem to demonstrate awareness of Sabina and his grandmother’s oppression and struggle until such reality is made real when uttered by Amina in Alexandria of Egypt. While
haunted by her masters’ jealousy, Amina finds in a foreign language an outlet to recount her oppression: after losing her virginity to her first master, an Italian, she is sent to be a slave and to offer “company” to the youngest brother at the house of the Greek merchant. “Una serva araba” [An arab servant] she told Pea, “non la sposa nessuno [no one marries her]. Her status as a servant becomes a permanent condition that can never change. Instead of revolting, Amina decides to “adapt.” In contrast to the fictional Sabina both Cleofe and Amina give up and adapt to their servitude.

Such awareness of the exploitation of women, recorded as early as his 1922 novel, Moscardino, becomes personal. While Sabina is part of the novel’s plot, the exploitation of his great grandmother, Cleofe, at the hand of his bourgeois family is at the center of the plot. Whether it is Cleofe, Sabina, or Amina, their bodies become an additional location of social injustice brought about by the bourgeoisie.

The oppression of the female characters in his work intersect with his own oppression as a worker. Time is abolished from the equation to allow such injustice to be conceived in space. Both Cleofe and Sabina’s bodies become a common place for the bourgeois men they serve. Both their marriages are merely a continuation of their role as servants in houses filled with sinister men. And in defiance with the national sentiment of the time Pea lives in, their story is not local to Lucca or Italy, it is the story of other servants Pea meets later in Alexandria and witnesses their story. Such abolition of time in Pea’s work make Cleofe, Sabina, and Amina’s stories all accumulate into one story of women oppression.

Finally, Pea’s writing reveals an understanding of such international injustice to be actually an economic one. He formulates such understanding organically. Having
recognized himself part of the oppressed group of the city he comments: “Il popolo io lo conosco bene: è quello che lavora nei campi da secoli. Che lavora con me al porto, all’officina, dentro la caldaia. Ed è come me, oppresso da un’ingiustizia sociale” ‘The people, I know them well; they are the ones who have been working in the fields for centuries. They are the ones who work with me in the harbor, in the mechanic shop, in the boiler room. They are, like me, oppressed by a social injustice’ (Vita in Egitto 116; Re 17). Both Moscardino (where Sabina and Cleofe’s story are told) and Vita in Egitto (where we hear Amina’s story) are composed after Pea’s real conversation with Amina takes place. In this way, both Sabina’s fictional words and Amina’s words lend themselves to be read as in dialogue with each other.

5.4. The Architectonics of Pea’s writing

Pea’s work shifting between the poetry, drama, and autobiographic novel becomes marked by a very personal and unique style. He gets criticized for the use of artificial devices of punctuation - or lack of - and his not-too-moderate use of local versigliese dialect. In his Vita in Egitto, Pea refers to his writing technique by using

---

28 In Mikhail Bakhtin’s thought, the term “architectonics can be understood as concerned with questions of building, of the way something is put together. Architectonics provides the ground for Bakhtin’s discussion of two related problems […] The first is how relations between living subjects get ordered into categories of “I” and “another.” The second is how authors forge the kind of tentative wholeness we call a text out of the relation they articulate with their heroes. More particularly, architectonics also provides a conceptual armature for his later, more partial readings of specific works and authors, in all of which, in one way or another, the relation of parts to wholes figures prominently. Bakhtin, M M, Michael Holquist, and Vadim Liapunov. Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990. Print.

29 In a letter to Enrico Pea dated “Cairo, December 3rd 1909,” Giuseppe Ungaretti writes: “Carissimo, ho ricopiato tutti i tuoi versi: per la punteggiatura, che mancava completamente, è stato un lavoro paziente” ‘My dear, I recopied all your verses: as for the punctuation, which was completely absent, it has been a patient work’ (Lettere a Enrico Pea 25).

30 Pea is already aware of his overuse of the Versigliese dialect. In his 1955/56 letter to Ezra Pound Pea mentions the American poet’s meeting with him. Pound arrived with a long list of Versigliese words that he could not translate into English. (Refer to “Grazie Ezra Pound” in: Memorie e Fughe 132-134). Moreover, Pound’s correspondences with Pea between 1941 and 1958 highlight his struggle with the
a-not-so-common verb that derives from the word “architecture”: “Io continuai per mio conto a meditare il dramma, ad architettare la trama di Giuda” [I continued in my way of meditating the play, and to design Giuda’s plot] (46). Ezra Pound, who approaches the Italian author in 1941 to translate Moscardino into English, announces his fascination with Pea’s style and its proximity to his own criteria in writing. In a long letter sent on June 15, 1941 Pound speaks about his fascination with the difficulty of Pea’s writing technique: “un Italiano (sic) che scrive in conformità ai miei criteri” ‘an Italian who writes in compliance with my criteria’ (Caro Pea 289). The letter comes just a few days after his first letter where he sends to Pea his request to translate his work and that he ends with «Non sapevo che l’arte narrative in Italia era giunta…» ‘I didn’t know that narrative art had reached Italy…’ (289).

**Vita in Egitto** offers an excellent resource for the study of Pea’s architectonics. His main characters, the landscape, the intellectual background, and even the conversations taking place in his work become integral components of a well crafted creative work. Not a single detail is lost from his observant eye and his dissection of each detail he encounters in life allows us to understand his textual components as utterances born in the presence of others before finding their way to his creative work. Moreover, his use of the autobiographic form is unique in the way he conceives himself as a main character at the center of his work.

Pea’s autobiographical work summarizes the story of his consciousness.

---

31 It is ironic though that Pea is denied education in a convent in Pisa at the age of nine due to eye sight weakness.
uniquely acquired through his self education. There is no doubt that Egypt becomes
the intersecting locality both in space and time essential for such coming to
consciousness to take place. Yet one element in Pea’s poetics is essential in
understanding the aesthetic value of his work: while his autobiography is composed on
several stages during his life and reflects his development as a human before his
development as a writer, Pea is consistently outside the time and location he is
narrating. Such outsidedness is what enables him to turn his life experience into an
aesthetic artistic autobiography. Mikhail Bakhtin reflections on the autobiography
become essential for our discussion of Pea’s artistic writing in this case.

In the third chapter of his *Art and Answerability*, Bakhtin points to a very
interesting detail regarding the transformation of a life event or story into an aesthetic
work. According to Bakhtin an autobiography cannot be a replication of one’s own
life: “my own existence is devoid of aesthetic value, devoid of plot-bearing
significance, just as my physical existence is devoid of plastic-pictorial significance. I
am not the hero of my own life” (Kindle Locations 3072-3074). In this way
*Moscardino* is not just equal to the young Pea who experiences his grandfather’s
madness, who is subjected to his master’s oppression or his teacher’s intellectual
bullying, It is the conscious Pea observing from outside and experiencing young Pea’s
experiences who incarnates all those inner feelings in an aesthetic form. In Bakhtinian
terms, Pea goes “beyond the bounds of the axiological context in which [his] lived
experience had actually proceeded, in order to be able to make the very act of
experiencing— the incarnate being of [his] inner life— an object for [him]self.”

Whether it is from Egypt or from Italy, Pea consistently assumes a different position
within a different axiological horizon from the time and location he is narrating. Or even as I point later in this chapter from his level of self perception and the perception of his role models (his anarchist teacher, Giuda, for example).

In Moscardino, in the scene by the sea, participants’ various utterances raise to the level of an aesthetic event when finally the two separate consciousnesses of Sabina and Don Pietro provide the minimum requested participants for the event to come to life. According to Bakhtin’s a minimum of two participants becomes conditional for the establishment of an aesthetic event. It presupposes according to him “two unmerging consciousnesses” (22). According to such definition, the scene by the sea is undeniably an aesthetic event taking place in the presence of Sabina and Don Pietro as two participants. By placing them in dialogue with one another whether orally or aesthetically Pea’s characters and readers get involved in eye-opening conversations through words uttered for the first time. Likewise, The wise words of the Thuile’s grandmother (to which I refer in the previous section of this chapter) and the conversation between her and Pea provide such eye-opening experience.

Right at the center of the plot of the first autobiographical novel, the sea becomes a common space for the intersected destinies of all the characters to meet. Cleofe in her therapeutic trip to the shore is accompanied by the baby girl, her two masters, the red-skinned doctor, the family’s Parish priest, and his servant Sabina. By the Mediterranean shore all the characters gather in a time of ecstasy, confession, and truth. The sea becomes, as early as Pea’s first novel, a common space for travel and the shaking of conventions, a common space for memory and forgetfulness, a common space for meeting and separation, and, finally, a common space for physical and
mental healing.

Mobility becomes key for such expression and dialogue to take place. Sabina does not reveal her thoughts in her husband’s house, her master’s house, her master’s garden by the well, or at church (the only locations between which the characters circulate throughout the novel). The open space of the sea offers her words a common medium free of “cultural-semantic and emotional intentions.” The highly charged semantics of these conventional locations, dictated by the hegemony of a bourgeois single and unitary language, are contrasted with the Mediterranean, which connects various regions, nations, and consequently classes. This explains Don Pietro Galanti’s surprise when he hears her words, which have never been uttered before in any of his familiar contexts. His words, like Sabina’s, also gain a new level. In mentioning the memory of Sabina’s mother, Don Pietro gets excited and loses “that serenity so habitual to him even in difficult moments” (46). Again, only the open space by the sea allows us to read Don Pietro’s words from a new perspective. The possibility of reading the existence of an ancient love for Sabina’s mother is hinted to the reader through the intersecting scene of Don Lorenzo’s love words to Cleofe.

What is involved here is a very important, what we witness is the construction of a new literary scene shows the Mediterranean shore as an open space for dialogue. The sea is no longer a medium of escape from an oppressed reality, or separates two distinct realities. Besides a fundamental liberation from spaces charged with cultural significance - the house, the church, the garden attached to that same house - the sea serves as a way of positioning two various discourses on the same level in order to allow for a dialogue to happen. It is a shift from a monologue of the oppressed Sabina
followed by another monologue of the oppressor Don Pietro to a mutual communication, or at least an attempt to conduct one.

Sabina initiates the discussion with a speech filled with metaphors that resonate with her world of servitude, a world of “sewing,” “thread,” “rag button,” “cloth,” and “stitches,” against which she is rebelling. She manages initially to drag Don Pietro into using the same metaphors. He replies that “life is a black thread bobbin” but soon he switches to a speech about “old age,” “benevolence,” and “good Christian qualities” to convince her – probably as he has earlier convinced himself – of the need to accept her fate. The sociohistorical condition under which Sabina makes her speech renders her revolution impossible. Nevertheless, Pea writes her words around 1910, at least two generations after the setting of that scene, from Mediterranean Alexandria, where he is located outside the object of his creative understanding—in time, in space, and in culture. From such a vantage point of the African shore of the Mediterranean Pea is able to propose the possibility for such open space to work as a medium through which to articulate the experiences of the oppressed.

In order for Sabina’s profound words to see the light, Pea’s style challenges the notion of the novelist to be a mere observer of his characters from a distance. In addition, the scene becomes also a depiction of more than one event. As such, the novel challenges us, the readers, to expand our understanding of a historical and cultural...
autobiographical reading of the novel. While the narrator is not part of the scene, he is still consciously present and participating through the intersection of several languages. In addition to the multiple voices of the characters, Pea offers us a lyrical depiction of the sea by which the characters are gathered:

Un mare più chiaro dell’erba verzicante in primavera: sfiorato da un venticello così dolce. Mare rigato tutto a soichetti, appena appena composti e scomposti, come se un pettine d’oro fatato passasse invisibile a rigare di bianco e d’azzurro la pagina di questo libro eternamente favoloso sgomentatore di umani. (46)

A sea paler than spring grass feathered by so gentle a breeze. […] A sea streaked by little furrows, unpatterend as soon as formed, as if a golden comb passed invisible, lining the white and blue, a page of the book eternally fabulous upsetting all men’s calculation. (Pound 41-42)

Sabina’s exchange is contrasted with Don Lorenzo’s monologue (one of the three brothers). In contrast to Sabina’s words, Don Lorenzo’s words are destined to drown in silence. In a “tiny lowered voice in the shadow near Cleofe” he utters the most amorous pages from the book of Sunday prayers for the month of May that the faithful can say to the Virgin Mary (42). He only dares to express his feelings to Cleofe, his brother’s wife, after the older brother (Pea’s grandfather), in an explosive act of jealousy where he wounds himself, ends up locked in a mental hospital. Although Cleofe and Don Lorenzo lived in the same house in such close proximity, the open space of the sea “reflected in [Cleofe’s] tobacco-coloured eyes” was a more intimate space for him. And Pea let us know that it was “the first time Don Lorenzo dared to speak so near to her” (43). Yet Don Lorenzo’s words remain at the level of a

---

33 The section: “petals blown off, deflowered” does not appear in the original text. It is not clear whether Ezra Pound’s translation is not faithful to the original text or it offers the translation of a line that is later removed by Pea in a later edition. The line completely alters the serenity of the scene. 
monologue, unlike Sabina’s words; and thus are not destined to be part of a dialogue, which is essential for such an utterance to be heard:

“Don Lorenzo’s words were heard, perhaps, and carried away by the angels who form the crown of mortal praises about Maria Regina. They were absorbed in space as if they had not been uttered aloud” (43).

While depicting Don Lorenzo’s love experience, Pea does not miss observing “men scratching for mussels in shore with iron pincers” or “washerwomen” with their baskets on head planting their poles in the sand to dry their laundry in the sun. The scene reaches its highest polyphonic expression just before Sabina utters her revolutionary words. The various images, gestures, sounds, words, and even “Il Taciturno”’s silence become interwoven together with the sea becoming the central point of intersections: “All this festooned wash moved a little. As the sea by the beach, as the wings of the gulls, as the mussel fishers, as Cleofe’s bosom, as the voice of Don Lorenzo, as the passion of the red-faced doctor and Sabina’s carnal response, as the suspiscion of Don Pietro Galanti and the churning of curses held in by the cowardice of a taciturn husband” (44).

As such, Pea’s language offers “a fundamental intersecting of languages” related to differentiated social groups. In addition to their depiction in isolation of each other Pea portrays them in dialogue with one another. The long speech given by Sabina by the shore, while not leading to any synthesis or an end to the struggle, bears some premises of a dialogue between the working class and the clergy. It depicts the struggle within the oppressed-oppressor relationship while allowing each participant to express themselves to the fullest.
The depiction of events, taking place at unexpected locations, has the same function in *Vita in Egitto*. While Ungaretti, the poet, and the novelist continue to browse the books, where Pea was originally hoping to find inspiration, such inspiration comes in his least expected place, in the scenery:

[I]o stavo davanti al nuovo spettacolo: sbalordito da questa scena grandiose e terribile: sabbia, pietre, e silenzio: ecco un altro scenario per il mio dramma. E nessuna nuvola: tutto fermo d’intorno, aria e cose. Appena una fiatatà di brezza dal mare fa deviare a oriente il fumo che vien su da una tenda beduina aperta da questa parte… (37)

I was standing in front of the new sight: stunned by this magnificent and terrible scene: sand, rocks, and silence: here is another scene for my drama. And no cloud: all was still around us, air and things. Just a gentle breeze from the sea diverts eastward the smoke coming up from a Bedouin open tent.

At some point, the voices coming from the room to his ears while observing “uno scenario che teatro al mondo mai avrà di uguale splendore” [a scenery, which no theatre on earth will ever equate its splendor] become an even source of distraction. In silence, both he and the grandmother spend time in the balcony that surrounds the house. From that balcony, at the margins of the house, Pea is able to observe the desert, that he tries to forget, the sea, and also a glimpse of the city of Alexandria where he sees life! By observing the city from a-far, he notices what he calls “il nostalgico senso della vita” ‘the nostalgic sense of life’ (39). The Thuile’s younger sister is also observing the scene that becomes a sign of hope, standing between Pea and her grandmother. Pea leaves the house with a book in mind, yet inspired by the women in the house rather than his originally sought collaborator.

5.5. From Religion to Literature – a Mediterranean *Misura*

Nel corso della mia vita spesso ho riveduto la sua casa [del Thuile] di legno sulle palafitte in riva al mare. Ho vive le impressioni della prima
visita, […]. Ma più che tutti ho nel cuore la nonna. Dei libri allineati negli scaffali in quella casa sul mare, nulla ricordo. A due altri libri ho ripensato spesso: a quello che la nonna teneva aperto sulle ginocchia, largo e giallo con le lettere ad abbecedario, e a quello che vidi manoscritto con la copertina paurosa. Il ricordo del primo libro e la serena figura della bella nonna hanno cooperato alla mia rigenerazione.

(Vita in Egitto 46)

During the course of my life I often revisited [Thuile’s] wooden stilt house by the sea shore. Alive are my impressions of the first visit, […]. But most of all I keep the grandmother in my heart. From all those books aligned on the shelves of this house by the sea, none I remember. I have frequently thought of two other books however: the one that the grandmother held open on her knees, large and yellow, and the one of which you saw the manuscript with the scary cover. The memory of the first book and the serene appearance of the beautiful grandmother have contributed to my regeneration.

I have demonstrated in earlier sections how Pea’s coming to consciousness of his role as an autodidact intellectual is reflected on his depiction of the most oppressed people in his work (Amina, Cleofe, and Sabina). Such awareness, formed in Egypt, is intrinsically linked the author’s spiritual journey that also starts in Egypt and becomes reflected in the architectonics on his work. Through his own journey in understanding the Bible, we notice a shift in Pea’s consideration of the role and composition of literature. Pea’s first encounter with the Bible was as an “autodidatta” ‘self educated’ (discussed earlier in this chapter). Such approach allowed him a new way of interpretation of the scriptures that lead him to admire the story of Giuda rather than reject it. While recalling the moment he bought his first Bible from a protestant translator who did not speak his language, Pea reflects on the stubbornness of a self-educated person.34 By recognizing such negative aspect of the autodidatta,

34 “Non c’è di peggio dell’autodidatta che ha faticato tanto ad imparare cose che allo studioso regolare sono venute in testa progressivamente con l’ordine graduale dello studio e questi non ha dubbi e spesso non ha passione ma, l’autodidatta, si fa per sua natura superbo e tenace della conquista e crede sua e non è facile smontarlo, convincerlo dell’errore” (Vita in Egitto 35).
acknowledging himself as one, he chooses to avoid it.

As much as Pea was critical of bourgeois intellectuals, he managed to develop an equally critical position of “stubborn” opponents of state, colonial, and intellectual hegemony who prescribe a certain road for revelation. Pea seems to realize he had fallen prey to the common attitude shared by most of the intellectuals with their divergent political and social positions of locating culture in the superstructure and attempting to illuminate the ignorant masses. The Bible he purchased from the Protestant temple was the translation of Italian Calvinist theologian and translator from Lucca, Pea’s hometown, Giovanni Diodatti. Pea read the Bible looking for controversies: «pensavo che la lettura del Vangelo tale e quale è, fosse sufficiente per smascherare il Papa, l’Unigenito e sua Madre.» Most importantly, he becomes also aware of many other controversies related to New Testament “facts” that he heard in the Temple where he bought the Bible. Pea describes his feeling in regards to these discoveries as “mi avevano inorgoglito” ‘made me proud’. He was convinced at that Temple that Giuda could not be a traitor for thrity dinars.

It is to note that the Thuile’s house, mentioned at the beginning and the end of Pea’s Vita in Egitto, marks a shift in Pea’s understanding of the role of words in print (whether the Bible or novels). Pea arrives at the Thuile’s house wishing to get advice about writing another book like the ones sitting on the shelves of the French brothers’ library. Their grandmother reveals to him a truth about life instead. These books are all about ‘modern literature” they are “too many” according to her. At least there
would be one, he replies, that could cheer up your grandson’s spirit!\(^{35}\) Her response becomes an eye opener: “Se così fosse… Ma quelli sono tutti libri inutili” ‘If it was this way… then they are all useless’ (33).\(^{36}\) Remembering this conversation at least thirty years after, Pea leaves us, the readers, wondering about his reflection on these words. Were these words an eye opener when the conversation happened or the revelation happens when the author recalls the event as an external observer? After all, the tragedy of Giuda is published and staged in 1918 causing massive scandal.\(^{37}\)

His position changes eventually\(^ {38}\) when he finally realizes that what remains from his visit to the Thuile house was a person rather than an idea: their grandmother who had only read the Bible and felt that other modern books her grandsons accumulated were not for her: “Non sono libri per me. Per me è sufficiente questo” ‘They are not books for me, this one is enough’ (33). From all the books that the Thuile’s rich library held, Pea could only remember their grandmother’s Bible as a source of life. He also remembered one of Jean-Léon Thuile’s books – the one for which he travelled to France to find a publisher – as source of death. His reflections on such visit in the past, while reading it in the context of his fascination of the Diodatti

---

\(^{35}\) He means Henri Thuile who had just lost his wife.

\(^{36}\) Later in the novel, Pea revisits the Thuile’s house, now that they had left. Henri Thuile is cured from his agony through another love, a love miracle, stressing the fact that the books were still useless: “L’altro, il fratello Henri poeta, malato d’amore, come abbiamo detto al principio di queste istorie, un miracolo d’amore lo ha salvato. Risanato sul punto estremo di una pazzia che pareva inguaribile.” ‘The other, the brother Henri the poet, lovesick, as we have said at the beginning of these stories, a miracle of love had saved him. Healed when he was at the verge of insanity that seemed incurable’ (190).

\(^{37}\) "The play, written in an expressionistic language filled with violent imagery, reversed Christian Orthodoxy and was seen as blasphemous because it made a hero of the figure of Judas as the legendary king of the Jews - opposed to Roman imperialism – while accusing Christ of cowardice in inducing his people to submit to oppression” (Re 181).

\(^{38}\) In the introduction to Vita in Egitto, Felice de Beccaro attributes Pea’s later writing of La passione di Cristo (1923) to the author’s passage from a skeptic atheism to a religiosity mixed with ancestors’ superstition (10).
revolutionary translation and the Temple interpretation offered to him in Egypt is clearly contrasted with the calmness and wisdom of that old lady. His controversial discovery, aside from being read as a submission to yet another authority, reveals a mistrust in the acquiring of knowledge through already made ideologies, truth is to be found in human relationships: “Ora so perché la Chiesa non mette il Vangelo nelle mani del popolo senza dirgli prima come deve capire. Ma allora mi pareva che lo facesse per malizia” ‘Now I know why the Church does not put the New Testament in the hand of the people without telling them first how to understand it. But then, I had the impression it was doing it out of malice’ (36).

In such context we can read Don Pietro’s words in Pea’s early work *Moscardino* as a representative of the church limited view of the relationship between class struggle, history and faith. Don Pietro, by relating his existence to God’s will, is submitting to it while reflecting his unawareness of his position in history. While agreeing that “Life is but a black bobbin,” he refuses Sabina’s suggestion to change it: “But God measures the measure. I am seventy-one, Sabina.” To Sabina’s revolutionary words, Don Pietro is asking her to follow his example and her mother’s example and to “submit:” “Don’t be in a hurry, don’t curse your servitude.” Sabina, aware of her past, on the other hand, is protesting her fate. She is trying to challenge the course of history. As such, in addition to the dynamics of a dialogue reflecting a class ruling over the other, the level pertaining to two humans understanding the relationship between their situation, history, and faith is introduced.

Don Pietro’s interpretation was not enough to convince Sabina who “ascoltava indispettita, come se mordesse il freno di una disciplina divenuta oramai
insopportabile” ‘listened to him with irritation as if champing on the bit of a discipline grown insupportable’ (50; Pound 54). Such discipline, unable to give life and happiness to Don Pietro could not convince Sabina to be source of happiness and life. As much as modern literature, unable to give happiness to Henri Thuile who suffered after he lost his wife could not convince Pea of creating yet another one to be of no use. Sabina, the young progressive woman, like Pea, becomes a representative of a social class that refuses to abide by rules that were never a source of happiness for their followers. The inability of the Sabina and Don Pietro to communicate finally leads their words to drown in silence or should I say in tumult as “the wind turned icy and harsh.” The final word is given to the sea, which “roughened and cast off the gulls, impatient at having tolerated them on its rump for so many hours” (46).

The whole discussion crafted in the middle of the novel becomes then an utterance that finds meaning when understood as being in dialogue with events that had earlier taken place in the novel. The reader cannot separate Sabina’s words from Cleofe’s situation. In fact, Sabina – who might be fictional in this case, in addition to representing Pea’s social class, also represents a progressive outlet for Cleofe and for other male characters. Sabina is only referred to as “the woman who had kissed Il Taciturno by the well” until Pea’s grandfather (Cleofe’s master, husband and oppressor) attempts suicide by eviscerating himself. Once Sabina enters the house Pea announces her name for the first time to the reader. Her arrival to the house marks the turning point for the destinies of all the characters: Mrs Pellegrina, the great grandmother dies before taking communion, Pea’s grandfather is sent to the manicomio, Don Lorenzo can express his sexual obsession with Cleofe without fear in front of his
dying brother, and eventually a doctor arrives to take care of Cleofe’s health. As much as Sabina’s whole existence marks a turning point for all the characters as much as Cleofe’s arrival, at the beginning of the novel, had maintained the status quo.

In this context, a speech about “measure” or “misura” acquires different stratifications of meaning. Throughout the novel, the changing definition of the notion of “misura” will reflect a changed conception of reality. A shift from its consideration as one of God’s revelations announced to believers – from the superstructure to the base, to a concept that varies according to social classes’s formation of reality. Finally, in Vita in Egitto a concept of nature’s balance is reached. “But God measures the measure” is uttered by Don Pietro in response to Sabina’s speech where she attempts to break the status quo of her servitude. “The measure” attributed to God in Don Pietro’s speech is later later attribute by Moscardino to the rich. Interestingly enough, it is in such varying measure that Pea finds origin to his poverty although originally coming from a rich family: «In every rich family” according to him, “there are at least two, if it is made of four who should be locked up.” The parents, hesitant to lock up their children up hoping for their impossible healing, allow them to waste all their parents savings and to eventually bear poor kids. Social injustices find finally origin either in poor interpretation of God’s measuring or of poor measuring decisions.

5.6. La Baracca Rossa – a sea of relationships by the Mediterranean

La Baracca Rossa era un edificio, a un piano da terra, a cui si accedeva da una scala di legno, esterna, che dava sopra un lungo ballatoio, ombbrato dalle rame di un grosso albero chiamato Albero del Pascià. L’albero era abitato da un vecchio camaleonte che qualche volta si prendeva lo svago di fare le sue passeggiate sulle finestre della Baracca, e per l’occasione si tingeva di rosso. […] Su quell’albero gli uccelli non nidificavano perchè avevano paura del camaleonte.
La Baracca Rossa was a building, at ground floor, accessible by an outside wooden staircase, and which overlook a long balcony, it was shaded by a large tree called Tree of the Pasha. The tree was inhabited by an old chameleon who sometimes took the leisure of walking on the windows of the Baracca, and sometimes turned red. Afraid of the chameleon, birds were not nesting on that tree.

La "Baracca Rossa" famosa di via Hamman el-Zahab, malfamata per la gente scomunicata e sovversiva che da tutte le parti del mondo ivi si dava convegno con i propositi ribelli alla società e a Dio. (Vita in Egitto 192)

La Baracca Rossa famous [place] of Hamman el-Zahab street, infamous for the excommunicated and subversive people who gathered in it from all parts of the world intending to rebel against society and God.

In this final section I analyze Pea’s Il servitore del diavolo (1931) where La Baracca Rossa become central to the plot. Unlike the magical depiction of cosmopolitan Alexandria found in colonial literature the fourth section of the autobiographical novel shows the Mediterranean city as a place where all contradictions coexist. “L’Egitto, dove vivevo allora, è il paese di Gesù, ma è anche il paese di Giuda discepolo tristo…” ‘Egypt where I lived back then, is the country of Jeuss, but also the country of Judas, the sad disciple…’ (365). Having participated in workers’ circles during his stay in Alexandria and especially having built human and intellectual relationships in the famous meeting space of La Baracca Rossa, Pea becomes critical of canonical contemporary literature.

Like the Mediterranean, a meeting location between several cultures and nations, La Baracca Rossa, a small warehouse for wine and marble served as a meeting place for anarchists from all over Europe and as a classroom for the first Free Anarchist Università Popolare in Alexandria. In Pea’s warehouse there was a huge
room, painted in a “un colore di fuoco” ‘a color of fire’ which gave the idea to his friends to call the place La Baracca Rossa given Pea’s socialist ideas.\(^{39}\) We also learn from Pea’s depiction of the place that also the exterior was painted in a mixture of black tar and red paint.

Works on Pea mainly refer to La Baracca Rossa as a meeting place where the author comes in contact with people from various places in the world between Bulgaria, France, Greece, Russia, and of course Italy.\(^{40}\) The ambiguity enveloping the place and Pea’s attitude towards it becomes vital in our discussion of the portion of his life spent in Cosmopolitan Alexandria and the relationships he built in this city. The place is only mentioned in his 1931 autobiography Il servitore del diavolo (where it becomes a central location of the novel plot) and later in his 1949 Vita in Egitto. In the first novel\(^ {41}\) he insists on not being identified as the founder and owner of the warehouse. Only later in his Vita Egitto he directly admits: “Di quella “Baracca” io ero il fondatore e il padrone” ‘I was the founder and owner of this Baracca’ (192). The question around La Baracca’s ownership seemed to reach its peak during summertime in Alexandria, when the black tar, used to paint the roof of the Baracca, melted by the effect of the sun heat staining the clothes of the passing bys. They would then knock on the door to complaint but would either find no one to respond or the person who

---

\(^{39}\) Enrico Pea’s friendship and the gathering place of La Baracca Rossa will become an integral part to Giuseppe Ungaretti’s life. Refer to: Walter Mauro Vita di Giuseppe Ungaretti, (1990), (9).

\(^{40}\) It is to note that most critics never refer to the ambiguity enveloping Pea’s attitude towards this place or even avoid mentioning his attitude towards it. Cf. Umberto Olobardi, Saggi Su Tozzi E Pea, (1940). (215-216, 220-223, 228, 235); E. De Micheles, Narratori Antinarratori, (1952) (15-17); Ernest Travi, Umanità di Enrico Pea, (1965), (45-46, 76-77, 96-99); and finally Lucia Re “Alexandria Revisited: Colonialism and the Egyptian Works of Enrico Pea and Giuseppe Ungaretti” (174-182).

\(^{41}\) Il servitore del diavolo (1931) becomes the 4\(^{th}\) section of his autobiography that appears under the title Moscardino (also the title of the earliest section published in 1922). Magoometto (1942) which ends up being the 3\(^{rd}\) section of the collection happens to be composed later.
opened the door would speak in a foreign language not even knowing who is the owner. Adding to the negation of his ownership of the place by omission, Pea goes as far as denying it by commission: he tells his readers that he even conducted a quest to find its owner by asking the neighbours whom he befriended and who hated the place. From them he could only reveal the identity of the two builders of the place, two Italians, one from Trani (Puglia) and the other from Canicatti in Sicily.

While offering shelter to anarchists, excommunicated and the exiled from all over Europe, Enrico Pea attributes this place to mixed feelings of fascination, fear, and even disgust. *La Baracca Rossa* was a place for gathering and exchange of ideas, yet for Pea it rather represented a place for intellectual bullying, something he will eventually learn to overcome by the end of *Il servitore del diavolo*. He recalls the motto in the conference hall of *La Baracca Rossa* that read “Nè Dio, nè Padrone” ‘No God, No master’ (284). Despite his attempts to live up to such ideals, his relationship with his master, a regular frequenter of the place and his master’s friend, Giuda, who continued to intellectually fascinate the young Pea, exposed their hypocrisy. They rejected any master, yet they both continued to exercise an oppressive dominance over their servants. Giuda especially, a great promoter of free thinking, would go as far as beating up those who opposed him intellectually.

While preaching freedom and class abolition, Giuda is depicted as a rather racist, arrogant, and cruel person. Pea recalls the story of the Barberino, another faithful black servant, who is trained by Giuda to cook quails and to deny the existence of God. While bragging about the transformation of his servant and student, Barberino, Giuda recalls the time and effort it took him to train such a primitive man
who had no “sense of human civilization” (369). While highly informed of his servant’s past as husband of five wives, owner of his land despite his poverty, Giuda is unable to see the negative effect the arrival of the Europeans had on his African village where he lived freely, praying five times a day, and singing while awaiting his crop to grow. Giuda becomes a typical colonizer who is still subject to the simplistic illusion that the Europeans where greeted upon their arrival at the colonies with songs and dance. More importantly, he becomes unable to apply his theories promoting class abolition and social equality on his reading of history. Pea becomes aware of these details when he remembers his attempts to accept Giuda’s statement about the Europeans becoming the colonized masters and the misleading assumption that the colonized Africans willingly served them (371).

The scene where Giuda makes his colonial remarks ends with Pea reflecting upon the words of his master’s friend while observing Giuda’s tactless interaction with nature. Upon leaving La Baracca Rossa, Giuda is observed by Pea gazing at a bush of roses; he insensitively grabs a bunch of their petals and green leaves then crushes them between the palms of his hands. The action comes as a surprise to Pea who just heard the man speak about civilization and finesse. He observes the leaves fall to the ground “tutte macolate, come cianciucate da una vacca” ‘all slaughtered as if chewed up by a

---

42 Pea transcribes the song Barberino used to sing when he first joined the service of his master. The rhyming simple song words referring to nature, hard work, and faith is judged by Giuda to be “stupid.” The song words are: “Il campo è lavorato/ Il seme è sotterrato/ Chi lo feconderà?/ Quanti chicchi ti darà?/ L’acqua lo nutrirà/ Il sole lo scalderà/ Se Iddio lo veglierà/ Uno, cento ti darà./ Così è, così sarà:/ Chi ha pazienza lo vedrà.” “The field is worked/ the seed is buried/ who will fertilize it?/ How many grains will it give you?/ Water will feed it/ the sun will warm it./ If God will watch it/ One, one hundred it will give you/ This is the way it is, this is the way it will be:/ Who has patience will see’ (371).
cow’ (373). At this point, Giuda is exposed to the eyes of Pea as Lucifer. Pea even goes as far as trying to see “se verso l’osso sacro ci fosse stato l’accenno della coda” ‘If around the sacred bone there was a sign of a tail’ (373). The marginalized observant position acquired by Pea, considered earlier to be the ignorant poor European immigrant, becomes a vantage point from which his master is exposed.

In 1931, Pea recalls those events that happened as soon as he arrives to Egypt around 1897. He writes from the perspective of one liberated from the fears he had when he first moved to the big city from the mountains of Siravezza, his town that he remembers as having deprived him of bread, yet which he could neither repudiate nor curse (377). In addition to Giuda’s hypocrisy, racism, and senseless interaction with nature, Pea observes his cruelty: Giuda orders his servant to beat up a homeless holy man who decides to burn a book on the street after he could not find the name of God in it. Pea resists quietly to participate in beating and locking up the old man – observing him earlier had brought him warm memories about his hometown and his grandfather’s books. As a result, Pea is criticized by Giuda and blamed for his lack of progression. He accuses him of being “ancora troppo contadino” ‘still too much of a peasant’ to be able to lie (382) and to trick the old homeless.

43 In this context we can understand the meaning of title of this section of his autobiography Il servitore del diavolo who is not just his master but also his master’s friend, Giuda. The parallel between La Baracca and hell will continue to be accentuated. At some point in the novel, when recalling a night when La Baracca Rossa opened its doors to a highly diverse crowd of refugees and poor speaking different languages, Pea compares it to hell: “L’anticamera dell’inferno non deve essere dissimile, quando arrivano da ogni parte del mondo creature di ogni età, ancora vestite coi panni del loro paese, abituali, non quelli d’occasione di cui i parenti l’hanno vestite dopo il trapasso. Fogge e colori di tutte le curiosità, e capegli e ciuffi, a trecce, a rapa. E il viso color d’oliva a certuni e a certune: e ad altri di colore zafferano. E andature sollecite e pigre. Teste schiacciate come gli abitanti dell’Epiro. Tarbùsch sulle ventitre alla turca. E baffetti francesi. E barbe armene. E donne troppo vestite, e troppo nude indipendentemente dal clima del loro paese.” (397)
44 The term “osso sacro” refers to the coccyx, the small, triangular bone at the base of the spinal column in humans and some apes.
Adaptation becomes the key question during his stay in Alexandria and while he frequented La Baracca Rossa. While the wooden shack offered him a great place to learn and get educated (he even observed others enjoy the ideas taught in that place) 

“Soltanto [lui], pesce fuor d’acqua, respirav[a] male, in questa Baracca Rossa, e [si] sforzav[a] all’adattamento” ‘Only him, like a fish out of the water, breathed heavily, in this Baracca Rossa, and was forcing himself to adapt’ (402). His wit becomes his source of adaptation. Pea’s worst fear of being called a peasant seem to be overcome at the moment when his other option is to be like Giuda, a liar, who understands the beauty of “free thinking,” yet eats merrily after having beaten up an old man, and who betrays his friend by courting his wife in his absence (384). Being called a peasant - what he considered earlier to be more serious of an offense than being called a “bastard” or “son of a bitch” (380) – seemed a better choice for him. He even laughs in surprise later when he is called bourgeois by a Russian woman he meets at La Baracca Rossa after he expresses his rejection of free love (414). All fascinating, and I would very much like to read this piece! I think this deserves a slower, more focused brief overview, perhaps near the beginning. His original offense when hearing the word contadino is finally overcome and even accentuated in his expressions to scandalize frequenters of La Baracca Rossa: he finally contributes to building a cremation oven when one of the young frequenters of the Baracca commits suicide. Yet he refuses to sign a will where all attendants requested to be cremated after their death. When Bilbao, the sailor who frequently sat next to Pea in lectures, expressed his anger at Pea’s decision not to follow the groups’ request to be cremated, he confronted him with a sense of wit saying he wanted to contribute to their burning “to make them
happy” without it being necessarily his own decision (444-445). At this point, he become intellectually liberated from his servitude.

By the end of *Il servitore de diavolo* we observe a complete change in Pea’s character that results from his contact with all various characters at *La Baracca Rossa*. He becomes liberated from his master (what originally attracted him to anarchists’ intellectuals) but having been a servant himself and having built strong relationships with other servants, he builds his own ideology from below. As such, we can trace the development of Pea as a character from the beginning of the novel to the end. He even goes as far as attempting – we learn it in his later work *Vita in Egitto* – together with his friends (sons of his Cretan masters) to realize “l’ambizioso sogno di riabilitare Giuda” ‘the ambitious dream to rehabilitate Giuda’ (56).

Rehabilitation rather than destruction, sowing rather than eradicating, constructing rather than demolishing, and building relationships rather than enemies can sum up the life and philosophy of Enrico Pea. He arrives in Egypt, a young Italian immigrant, afraid to be called a peasant and who is fascinated by the amount of knowledge offered to him at *La Baracca Rossa*. *Il servitore del diavolo* ends with a skilled worker capable of expressing himself and even contesting those who belittle him (450-451). *Il servitore del diavolo* ends on a sad note where Alexandria becomes a prison from which he fails to escape:

Mi pareva di essere un condannato ai lavori forzati, in un paese sconosciuto. A quanti anni di questa pena sono stato condannato? E perché sono stato condannato così senza pietà? Mi adatterò anch’io, come tutti gli altri, che sono contenti e mangiano il loro pane […], e ridono, senza accorgersi nemmeno della carcere che li tiene schiavi? (451)

It seemed I was sentenced to hard labor, in an unknown country. To
how many years have I been sentenced? And why have I been condemned so mercilessly? Me too I shall adapt, like all the others, who are happy and eat their bread [...] and laugh, without being even aware of the prison that holds them slaves.

The exit from the prison is finally offered in his later work *Vita in Egitto* (1949) where he recalls *La Baracca Rossa*, finally admitting his ownership of the place and depicting it as a meeting place where he comes to meet his dear friend Giuseppe Ungaretti. Pea’s biography, like the Mediterranean situated in the middle of the plot of *Moscardino*, is situated at the intersection of two worldviews. Pea, being himself a worker aware of his place in history as descendant of a bourgeois family assumes that middle position where he is capable of functioning as a mediator between these two worldviews. In Egypt, Pea observes a shared position of the status of oppressor as well as oppressed across nationalities. As such Pea’s work reveals to us that the general use of series of oppositions, like European versus the indigenous, colonizer versus the colonized and oppressor versus the oppressed, need to be handled with caution.

**Conclusion:**

The Mediterranean becomes a space for immigrants and travellers between continents, between Europe and North Africa, between a recently unified Italy and a newly modernized Egypt. Between Italy’s conception of itself as a European unified country (1861) and Egypt’s attempts to become part of Europe eclipsed by British colonialism (1881). As such, the Mediterranean cosmopolitan city of Alexandria becomes a reflection of that common space to be crossed back and forth by many Italian writers, their families and their ancestors seeking work and refuge in Egypt. A
common space, a reality that can only be captured in a polyphonic prose where time loses its chronology in a back and forth telling of the story. Where meaning can only be captured not only in a fragmented speech but in a fragmented silence as well. Pea’s modernist novel offers an exit together with a hope in a self conscious working class (peasants included) capable of expressing itself and being involved in a conscious dialogue where it challenges the old paradigm even if the time has not yet come to break it down.
General Conclusion

In this dissertation I have demonstrated how the study of the representation of Egypt in Italian literature produced at the turn of the twentieth century requires an inter-disciplinary approach that matches the polyphony of the works produced during that time period. Such an approach, as I have demonstrated in my chapters, highlights the polyphonic nature of modernist literature where an autobiographical approach reveals a diverse life. Throughout my analysis of the primary texts, I have focused interchangeably on the historical situation both in Egypt and Italy, the cultural and intellectual environment and finally on the autobiographical aspect in these texts. Those aspects are crucial to our understanding of the formation of the identity of the writers in question which became either reflected or refracted in their creative works.

The historical and political conditions surrounding the production of the literary works I have dealt with in this dissertation are intrinsically linked to the Italian colonial aspiration at the turn of the 20th century. My contribution, in addition to exposing the racist and imperialist nature of some of these assumptions, is to challenge the framing of some of the writers who produced those works as racist and imperialist. My initial intention that has directed me to conduct this research, given present day world changes, has been to research and understand how early intercultural projects contributed to the nation-building and colonialism that eclipsed them. As such, my dissertation has consistently stressed the need to move beyond the contestation, inequality, and otherness implied by the concept of colonial encounter to illuminate cultural negotiations both among Italian writers and residents in Egypt in post unitary
Italy and among Egyptian intellectuals and their Italian counterparts before and after Italian unification.

Crucial to my discussion in this dissertation has been the focus on the cultural and intellectual environment in Egypt during the 19th century. In chapter 1, I specifically examined three representative texts – *Turban and the Hat*, *An Imam in Paris*, and *Aïda* – that respectively revisit the colonial past, take part in nation building projects, and highlight the limits of a postcolonial approach in considering the multilayered dimensions of cultural interactions. By closely reading SonAllah Ibrahim’s historical novel *Turban and the Hat* I specifically discussed his approach to history from a perspective that challenges official narratives dealing with French Expedition to Egypt between 1798 and 1801. In his novel, written in a diary form through the eyes of a young Egyptian scholar Ibrahim managed to brightly interweave discussions between the fictional narrator and various historical and fictional characters. Such an approach to history reflects an awareness among intellectuals in present day Egypt (the novel was published in 2008) of the need to uncover the complex and multilayered character of history against the oversimplified and monologized official narratives.

In addition to Ibrahim’s *Turban and the Hat*, in this chapter I also analyze Rifa’a Rafi al-Tahtawi’s travel account *An Imam in Paris*, written during his sojourn in Paris where he was sent by Mohammed Ali in 1826 as part of the nation-building project. I finally ended this chapter by pointing to a lively debate that arose around Edward Said’s analysis of Verdi’s opera *Aïda*, first performed at the Khedivial Opera
House in Cairo on 24 December 1871. Far from disagreeing with Edward Said’s reading of the opera as an orientalist text, I took off from where Said ends and introduced the consideration of all interpretations as plausible given the polyphonic character of the opera’s unique composition environment and multidimensional aesthetics.

In chapter 2, I analyzed Marinetti’s writings in light of his early life in Egypt in order to suggest a new approach to the reading of his work. In this chapter I specifically focused on Marinetti’s first futurist novel *Mafarka le futuriste* (1909), Marinetti’s autobiographical account in *Scatole d’amore in conserva* (1927), and the accounts of his trip to Egypt with his wife in 1930 which later appear under the title *Il fascino dell’Egitto* (1933). By focusing on these texts, I attempted to read Marinetti’s futurist work, not in light of the historical “catastrophe” known as fascism but in light of the changes experienced by the author as they became manifested in his literature. The language used by Marinetti in his writings, as I have demonstrated, reveals the African and Arabic components of his identity that formed during his life in Alexandria. These components have up till now been ignored – despite his referral to it on many occasions - in favor of his Italian colonial identity that formed and was expressed in his writings later during fascism. In addition to the analyzed literary texts I also referred to other primary texts such as Marinetti’s early correspondences with his Egyptian French school rector, correspondence with his brother, and the Futurist Manifesto as a way of uncovering other angles of the author’s biography in order to
understand the fluidity existing between national boundaries manifested in Marinetti’s identity and later in his futurist work.

In Chapter 3 I move to the Italian intellectual environment during early twentieth century and especially during fascism. In this chapter I discuss how the apparent divergence among intellectuals, expressed in the issuing of two opposing Manifestos, *Manifesto of the Fascist Intellectuals* signed by Giovanni Gentile in 1925 and the *Manifesto of anti-Fascist Intellectuals* signed by Benedetto Croce in the same year, harbored – when deeply examined – an agreement on the evaluation of the nature and role of crowds. The politically charged environment in Italy during fascism forced intellectuals (whether fascist or non-fascists) to express their political position. In cases such as Gramsci, his intellectual position cost him years in prison. Between Crowds theory and Gramsci’s discussion of the role of the intellectual, I introduce my discussion of the last two writers analyzed in this dissertation. From this perspective we are invited to revise the consideration of their call to express life in art not as an inflection of fascist sympathy but rather as an expression of intellectuals general awareness of their role towards the masses. In this way, we cannot understand the abundance of literary production during the time period analyzed in this dissertation (both of the Egyptian and the Italian side) without shedding light on writers’ awareness of their role as intellectuals, their critique of other intellectuals’ work, and finally their consideration of their connection to the public.

The early twentieth century, both in Egypt and in Italy, has been charged with political changes that it becomes almost impossible to understand the nuances of the
texts and their meaning without situating them in a political context. Even in the case of Ungaretti, it becomes impossible to understand his rejection of the historical man and his rather inclination to write about the human across nations and cultures without first situating his intellectual and human suffering in a historical and political context. While there are voices in academia, especially in Egypt, that discourage the dealing with politics in the study of literary texts (it has been the case since I studied as a college student in Cairo, Egypt starting in 1995), I would like to stress that such approach deprives students from accessing the literary text and might even lead to missing the main point of many of the texts.

In chapter 4, I discussed Ungaretti’s creative work as a case of poetics of relationships and connections. His poetics, primarily autobiographical in nature, has been a reflection of his view of Egypt and the Mediterranean in addition to his views of Italy and France. I first looked at Ungaretti’s depiction of the macaronic character of Alexandria, then moved to his awareness of the existence of a gap, also shared by other critics at the beginning of the twentieth century, between theorizing about art and feeling art. In this chapter I argued that this awareness explains Ungaretti’s attempt through his work to fill such a gap by producing poetry that reflected life rather than art that theorizes life. From this perspective we can understand Ungaretti’s suggestion to read his poems collected in *Vita d’un uomo* as a concrete reflection of the dialogic nature of his life.

In the 5th and final chapter of this dissertation I looked at Enrico Pea’s prose especially at three out of five of his autobiographical novels. *Moscardino (1922), Il*
Servitore del Diavolo (1931), and Vita in Egitto (1949). The three novels I analyzed in this chapter cover Pea’s biography starting with his grandfather’s story, passing by his moving to Egypt, until the day he leaves with his family back to Italy in 1914.

Throughout these novels, Enrico Pea recounted his childhood story, his moving to Egypt, his struggle as a worker and his contact with other workers (including women servants), his contact with Alexandria’s anarchists in La Baracca Rossa, his fascination and later rejection of traditional intellectuals, and finally his journey to learn how to read and write through a translated version of the Bible in his Lucchese dialect. After his return to Italy, Pea looks back to all his memories, reconstructs them and starts writing about them.

Throughout this dissertation, dealing with the autobiographical aspect in my consideration of the texts has been crucial to acknowledge the interdisciplinary and polyphonic character of modern literature. By conducting a close reading of literary texts, correspondence, historical texts and scholarly work dealing with Italians in Egypt, I have contributed to the uncovering of the rich layers of diverse relationships of people who produced such literary works. In cases where the works in question were not available in English, I included my own translation of the passage or text in question whether from Arabic, Italian, or French into English. I have looked at the various texts in question as literature formed “from below” to refer to intercultural relations on the ground, as it were, relations that often existed undetected, below the radar of national ambitions to dominate cultural representation and self-definition giving readers an opportunity to modify our preconceived ideas about intercultural
possibilities and potentials born in this period. Despite their varying political
identifications, economic conditions, and creative works, I have demonstrated that
Marinetti, Ungaretti and Pea can be seen as intellectuals who, aware of their position
in history, contributed to produce a view that defies national and colonial
developments in their respective societies.

In this dissertation I have proved the importance to take into consideration the
historical situation both in Egypt and Italy, the cultural and intellectual environment
and finally the autobiographical aspects which all intersect, skew, or just remain in
parallel in the formation of the identities of the writers I have addressed and their
respective creative work. In this way, Bakhtin’s dialogism has served as a great tool to
theorize the aesthetic formation of those texts. In such a way, we witness how Modern
literature gradually shifts into reflecting the polyphonic nature of the cultural and
linguistic environment Mediterranean intellectuals shared

As a an intellectual involved in teaching and research, I consider processes of
Italian and Egyptian nation-building in the late nineteenth century pertinent to today’s
historical and cultural context. Both Egyptian and Italian intellectuals during the late
nineteenth century were focusing on their nation-building projects. As an Egyptian
Italianist and comparatist, my intention is to uncover both narratives in order to place
them in dialogue rather than privilege one over the other. With such considerations in
mind, I hope that my research may serve, in some small way, to loosen the hold that
nations have over their literatures or to simplify the approach to cultural figures
through the lens of the colonial dichotomy of the oppressor and the oppressed or what Said calls the lies and mythical abstractions of “East” and “West.”
WORKS CONSULTED


Collalto, Massimo di, La Donna Nella Famiglia e Nella Società. Conferenza, etc. Milano; Roma: 1888. Print.


