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Giuseppe Ungaretti's Disanimate Modernism

For a generation of twentieth-century thinkers, the "front" came to connote more than the ravaged physical landscape of such World War I battlefields as the Somme, Ypres, Verdun, and Caporetto. For many, the front also came to represent figuratively the psychologically and spiritually desolate place in which one confronted the most pressing crises of modernity: those culture-shaping issues that had their origins in, among other things, the period's accelerated industrialization, the discovery of the unconscious, and the death of God. Over the last quarter century, Anglophone and Francophone cultural historians like Paul Fussell, Modris Eksteins, Jay Winter, Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau, and Annette Becker have argued that the First World War and, especially, conflicts along its Western Front, tested the notions of progress and ontological authenticity that had characterized Western European society at the end of the nineteenth century, finding evidence in the poetry of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and Robert Graves, and in the literature of Henri Barbusse, Erich Maria Remarque, and Virginia Woolf, among others.[1] Yet few of these scholars, or the writers whose works they cite, have concerned themselves with the devastating conflicts along the Italian front, where the country bordered the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This situation has changed in the past decade with important contributions to the field by Mark Thompson, whose English-language *The White War* describes the World War One experience from an Italian perspective, and Emilio Gentile, whose *L'Apocalisse della modernità* extends the work of such historians as Mario Isnenghi and Giorgio Rochat through a cultural analysis of the conflict. And yet there is still more to be said about the crisis of representation that troubled wartime authors and artists in Italy as they sought to depict subjectivities gravely affected by the conflict and by literary and artistic movements like Futurism that preceded and, arguably, precipitated it.

Walter Benjamin suggested in "The Storyteller" that the Great War led to an impoverishment of communicable experience — a particularly apt insight in relation to the wartime works of Italian soldier poets and painters like Giuseppe Ungaretti and Carlo Carrà. "Was it not noticeable at the end of the war,"

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[1] See Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*; Eksteins's *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*; Winter's *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*; and Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker's *14-18, retrouver la Guerre*.

Benjamin wondered, "that men returned from the battlefield grown silent — not richer but poorer in communicable experience?" (84). He noted that "A generation that had gone to school in a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body" (84). The manufactured horrors of war, Benjamin intimated, pushed death beyond the reassuring boundaries of nature and into the realm of the unspeakable. The Great War, he implied, denaturalized the relationship between human beings and the material world (a relationship that also forms the basis of language) and effectively rendered them speechless.

The silence Benjamin alluded to figuratively was, in the case of many combatants, literal. Some 20,000 Italian soldiers suffered from psychiatric maladies brought about by the conflict and prevalent among these was aphasia, the inability to produce speech in the aftermath of trauma (Gibelli 451). Reduced to little more than matériel by the war, soldiers diagnosed with aphasia were subsumed by a Taylorist system that processed them as quickly as possible in order to return them to the field, where they were utilized once again as human material in the ongoing conflict (Gibelli 452). This was equally true of soldiers suffering from other types of psychiatric problems. It was at the Ospedale Neurologico Militare in Ferrara that Carrà and Giorgio de Chirico, both soldiers suffering from depression and poor physical health, engaged in their short-lived collaboration on *pittura metafisica* (Baldacci 358-72). The war's reduction of human subjects to material is reflected in works like Carrà's *Solitudine* and de Chirico's *Il grande metafisico*, which depict solitary human figures in their most elemental forms. Participants in society's first real example of total war, Italian soldiers were regarded as little more than equipment, a fact memorably illustrated in Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, one of the only English-language novels to depict the fighting along the Italian front.[2]

As Ungaretti, de Chirico, Carrà, and other Italian writers and artists confronted firsthand a war that subordinated violently some one and a half million of their contemporaries to machines and emerging technologies, they simultaneously had to come to terms with the aesthetic legacy bequeathed to them by the "first" Futurism, with its destabilizing notions of dynamism, flux, and interpenetration that were intended to break down previously distinct

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[2] In a terse exchange about the Italians' expected retreat after their ruinous defeat at Caporetto, Henry, the novel's American protagonist who has joined the Italian military effort as a volunteer, asks a superior officer: "Tell me, I have never seen a retreat — if there is a retreat how are all the wounded evacuated?" The officer's reply makes clear the subordination of the soldiers in the field to the matériel of battle: "They are not," he says. "They take only as many as they can and leave the rest." Henry then wonders, "What will I take in the cars?" "Hospital equipment," the officer answers (*A Farewell to Arms* 187).

metaphysical categories of subject and object. As the futurists sought to "obliterate traditional distinctions between the organic and the inorganic, between sentient beings and the physical and mechanical world" (Poggi 20), their feverish embrace of the products of industrialization and apparent abnegation of the self in the name of progress raised broad questions about the reification of the individual.[3] These questions took on new meaning in the face of World War One's *Materialschlacht* — a strategy that converted the individual into an object to be used like any other (canons, ammunition) for the sake of war, and that effectively overturned Kantian notions of man as an end in himself.[4]

An important aesthetic device employed by the aforementioned figures is the representation of otherwise animate objects as devoid of life or spirit, or what we might call, after Ungaretti, "disanimation" — an Anglicization (and nominalization) of the Italian "disanimato" that appears in his wartime poem "Sono una creatura." Meaning "sfiduciato," "esanime" or "privo di vita, di anima" (*Dizionario italiano ragionato* 541), "disanimato" first appears in Italian literature with early translations of Virgil's *Aeneid* into the vernacular, where it was employed to render the Latin "exanimis" (*Aen*. 10.840). In Virgil's epic, the occasional use of "exanimis" in place of the more common (and, one might argue, clinical) "mortuus" sustains an important undercurrent of individual, human pathos throughout the poem's description of the struggle to launch a new Roman empire.[5] Dante also employs "disanimato" in the *Divina Commedia*, where it evokes the liminal state of the pilgrim as he makes his way through purgatory (*Purg.* 15.135). During the Great War, disanimation quietly conveys in a range of texts and artworks the human pathos that arises from a modern state of alienation that had its origins in the era's increasing awareness of a lack of a unitary subject, or of unified experience. Poems such as those collected in Ungaretti's *Il porto sepolto* (1916), for example, generate their own internal necessity and coherence (disturbing or ambiguous as it may be) in the absence of any external order. "Sono una creatura" reclaims the adjective "disanimato" for Ungaretti's own poetics in order to underscore an irreversible awareness of the disparity between consciousness and the objects of consciousness, or between self and world.

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[3] For more on Futurism's treatment of the relationship between humans and machines see Blum, Poggi, Salaris and Schnapp.

[4] For more on technology's role in undoing Kant's concept of rational human beings as an end in themselves, see Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* (361).

[5] See, for example, Marcello Adriani's translation, in his *Volgarizzamento dell'Eneide di Vergilio*, of "At Lausum socii exanimem super arma ferebant / flentes, ingentem, atque ingenti vulnere victum" (10.841-42) with, "Li compagni ne portavano il disanimato Lauso, sopra l'armi, piagnendo," as cited under the entry for "disanimato" in the early seventeenth-century *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*.

In this article I explore the way in which several of Ungaretti's wartime works utilize a negative poetics characterized by spectral beings and corpses to reinstate a violent process of subtraction in which life is removed, leaving behind only the shadow of the self, or an inanimate object. This disanimation mirrors the way that meaning is unhinged from language in Ungaretti's poetry, leaving only a meaningless symbol behind. In this way, his poems call attention to the ontological and linguistic crises of the early twentieth century through a dialectics of deficit. Paradoxically, I argue, disanimation also enables Ungaretti's poetry to transcend its elegiac function through an aesthetic mitigation of the violent historical moment that it describes — demonstrating, as Rebecca Comay has observed, how "worded grief can preempt the very loss that occasioned it" (3).

Born and raised in Egypt, though of Italian parentage, Ungaretti was an active participant in the vibrant, cosmopolitan culture of early twentieth-century Paris. Arriving in France in 1912, the twenty-four-year-old poet attended lectures at the Collège de France and, in 1914, graduated from the Sorbonne with a thesis on the French romantic writer Maurice de Guérin. In France, he was befriended by many of the principal authors and artists of the Parisian avant-garde, including such figures as Guillaume Apollinaire (whom he considered one of his closest friends in Paris), Pablo Picasso, Giorgio de Chirico and Blaise Cendrars. Ungaretti also developed friendships with many representatives of the Florentine and Futurist avant-garde movements, who traveled frequently to Paris to promote their own cultural initiatives. It was his acquaintance with members of these movements that led to the first publication of his poems in Italy, in the Florentine journal *Lacerba*.

Inspired by the Futurist avant-garde's call for the creation of modern artistic practices in Italy and the cultural renewal that was to attend these, *Lacerba*'s founders desired to establish a similarly vigorous, yet distinct, avant-garde movement in Florence.[6] The publication quickly became a forum in which the frequently opposing positions of early twentieth-century intellectuals were articulated and elaborated, with contributions reflecting the radically changing cultural and political climate of Italy between 1913 and 1915, the years of its publication. The values of the journal, as established in its inaugural issue, were brevity, forthrightness, vitality, creativity, and wit, along with the privileging of paradox over consistency or logic, the fragment over the whole, and individualism and rebellion over contemporary institutions and ideologies ("Introibo" 1).

Given the similarities of their values and projects, collaborations between the Florentine avant-gardists and the Futurists, based largely in Milan, were frequent. The journal maintained its distinctiveness from the latter, however,

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[6] Adamson (166-80) provides a useful overview of the role that *Lacerba* and other literary journals played in the culture of avant-garde Italy.

through its policy of welcoming numerous contributions from outsiders, including Apollinaire and Picasso, as well as other Parisian figures like the poet Max Jacob and the cubist sculptor Alexander Archipenko. Also included were regular contributions from such figures as Aldo Palazzeschi, a gifted and iconoclastic poet involved both with Futurism and the Florentine avant-garde. It was Palazzeschi who, along with *Lacerba*'s co-founders Ardengo Soffici and Giovanni Papini, encouraged Ungaretti to publish his early work in the journal (Adamson 172).

Ungaretti's participation in the experimental literary undertakings of the Florentine avant-garde contrasts with his post-World War I exploration of the relationship between classic and contemporary Italian poetry. This investigation would cause him eventually to look to the work of figures like Petrarch and Leopardi for inspiration as he pursued an aesthetic that would restore, after the rupture called for by the Futurists, a "temporal continuity" between classic Italian poetry and the poetry of the postwar period (Saccone 270). The poet's collaboration on the postwar literary journal *La ronda* (1919-1923) naturally invites us to associate him with the so-called *ritorno all'ordine*, given the journal's programmatic call for a return to classicism and rejection of the avant-garde movements that had reigned in the years before the war. But Ungaretti's project did not involve a simple return to tradition; it offered, rather, a discriminating assessment of the predicament of the Italian avant-garde.[7] He wished to restore duration — conceived of as temporal depth — and memory to the poetic word. The Futurists, who emphasized the contemporaneousness of words (expressed in the practice of *parole in libertà*) and the most provisional aspects of reality, were, Ungaretti would observe, "dimentichi che ogni atto profondamente umano (e quindi la poesia) emana dall'illusione di vincere la morte" (*Vita d'un uomo: saggi e interventi* 173). Without this illusion, Ungaretti observed further, we poets "trascureremmo di trasfondere le nostre ispirazioni in qualche sostanza di durata, e saremmo dannati a produrre opere vuote di qualsiasi mistero" (*Vita d'un uomo: saggi e interventi* 173).

Disanimation is one of the principal means by which Ungaretti's wartime poetry countered the contingent, provisory nature of Futurist and avant-garde aesthetics, as well as the contingent nature of life in the trenches. It reinstates death, absence and loss as eternal conditions — the backdrop, so to speak, against which life and art engage, anticipating the image of war made vivid by Benjamin in "The Storyteller." Among his early poems, "Chiaroscuro" (published in *Lacerba* in 1915) represents the writer's first attempt to use the spectral to explore lyrically the uncertain state of the modern, alienated subject. Written in Milan, where Ungaretti moved in the summer of 1914 following the outbreak of war, the poem alludes to the suicide, a year earlier, of his Arab

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[7] See Saccone and Baroncini for more on Ungaretti's relationship to prewar avant-garde movements and the return to order.

friend Moammed Sceab. A childhood companion of Ungaretti's in Egypt, Sceab moved to Paris with the poet in 1912, where the two lived in the same apartment building. The suicide, which Ungaretti attributed to Sceab's increasing sense of geographical and psychological dislocation, was eventually to become the central theme of a second poem of Ungaretti's of 1916 — discussed later in this essay — entitled "In memoria." Considered together and within the broader context of *Allegria di naufragi*, Ungaretti's 1919 collection of wartime poems, "Chiaroscuro" and "In memoria" function as essential interpretive keys to the poet's treatment of the conflict and its seemingly simultaneous dissolution of civilization, culture, and the self.

In "Chiaroscuro," Sceab returns figuratively from the dead and his apparition becomes an occasion for the poet to consider the tenebrous relationship between life and death. Reference to an unnamed apparition is made as the poem's speaker contemplates a cemetery, the tombs of which fade from vision in the falling darkness of evening and reemerge in the dim light of dawn. The poem's Dantesque, indistinct atmosphere, produced through a pattern of imagery revolving around the play of light and dark (chiaroscuro), establishes the cemetery as a locus of in-betweenness, its partial concealment and revelation achieved through subtle gradations of tone, expressed in a preponderance of adjectives and nouns like "nero," "giorno," "tetro," "oscurità," "torbido," and "chiaro":

CHIAROSCURO
Anche le tombe sono scomparse

Spazio nero infinito calato
da questo balcone
al cimitero

Mi è venuto a ritrovare
il mio compagno arabo
che s'è ucciso l'altra sera

Rifà giorno

Tornano le tombe
appiattate nel verde tetro
delle ultime oscurità
nel verde torbido
del primo chiaro

(*Vita d'un uomo: tutte le poesie* 15)

The function of the apparition in the poem emerges through a comparative reading of the definitive and original versions of "Chiaroscuro." In the definitive version, adopted by Ungaretti in 1919 (and reproduced above), the poet alludes obliquely to his friend Sceab, declining to elaborate on the cause of the latter's

suicide or how it has affected him personally. As a consequence, the reader remains suspended in the ambiguity established so effectively by the poem's dark imagery. In contrast, in the original version of "Chiaroscuro" (the one that appeared in *Lacerba*), the lines "Mi è venuto a ritrovare / il mio compagno arabo / che s'è ucciso l'altra sera" are followed by the verses: "È stato sotterrato a Ivry / con gli splendidi suoi sogni / e ne porto l'ombra." Unlike the indirect reference to Sceab in the final version of the poem, the additional verses in the original underscore the enduring effects of Sceab's death upon the poet. Ungaretti's evocation of the specter thus forms an aperture of sorts, with Sceab's persistent presence emerging as an effect of memory, resistant to the eradicating forces of time, culture and history.

Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913) is particularly useful in understanding disanimation because the book links the discovery of the unconscious — an event that many historians have identified as a particularly tumultuous moment in early twentieth-century culture — to the figure of the ghost, itself a form of disanimation. Freud accomplishes this by suggesting that the ghost symbolizes the existence of two states within the individual. "One," he wrote, "in which something is directly given to the senses and to consciousness (that is, present to them)," and another "in which the same thing is latent but capable of reappearing" (93). These two states, Freud argues, correspond to perception and memory, or consciousness and unconsciousness. The disconnect that Freud identifies between conscious and unconscious mental states is reproduced in Ungaretti's poetry through the device of disanimation, which fosters the poetic expression of a particular sense of self-estrangement.

The original version of "Chiaroscuro" was written in an anticipatory moment, after Italy had joined the war but before Ungaretti was mobilized. It establishes the overarching theme of *Il porto sepolto*, his first collection of poems (subsequently absorbed into *Allegria di naufragi*), published near the Italian front a few months after the poet was called to arms in 1915. In "Chiaroscuro" the poet had described somberly how he bore within himself, not unlike the tombs featured in the poem, the shadowy remains of that which had been buried ("sepolto"), namely the memory of his friend Sceab. Ungaretti explores this dynamic more fully in *Il porto sepolto*, where he establishes himself as the custodian of a sense of self, and of a culture and civilization, that were increasingly being effaced by the war. The spectral and disanimate figures in the poems evoke a world emptied of life and meaning, whose sense is restored only through the imagination of the poet. This theme is apparent in the collection's opening poem, "In memoria," another elegy to Sceab that also addresses the poet's concerns about the alienating forces of modern life and the role of poetry in negotiating these.

"In memoria" continues the melancholy contemplation of death initiated in "Chiaroscuro," absorbing and refining those rejected verses of the original version of the latter that alluded to Sceab's final resting place and to his death's

effects on the poem's speaker. Sceab's spectral presence assumes historical qualities in the poem — a transformation that enables the poet to allude to the specific cultural and psychological causes of his friend's suicide. As suggested above, Ungaretti perceived these to have their origins in Sceab's estrangement from his own culture as well as that of France, his adoptive country. Regarding the deaths of Sceab and others, Ungaretti would eventually observe that "si sentivano lontani dalla loro civiltà, senza potersene interamente staccare e senza potere interamente appartenere ad un'altra" (*Vita d'un uomo: tutte le poesie* XXVI). "In memoria" conveys this estrangement in a mournful and restrained tone not unlike that of "Chiaroscuro," contrasting Sceab's noble, colorful past with his nearly anonymous finish in a Parisian cemetery:

> IN MEMORIA
> Locvizza il 30 settembre 1916
>
> 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 abitavamo
> a Parigi
> dal numero 5 della rue des Carmes
> appassito vicolo in discesa

Riposa
nel camposanto d'Ivry
sobborgo che pare
sempre
in una giornata
di una
decomposta fiera

E forse io solo
so ancora
che visse

<div align="right">(Vita d'un uomo: tutte le poesie 21)</div>

The confrontation in "Chiaroscuro" between death and memory becomes in "In memoria" a conflict between cultural or psychological alienation — closely linked to death, yet distinct in its implication of a sort of living death — and poetry. We see this shift in the poet's observation that Sceab "non sapeva / sciogliere / il canto / del suo abbandono," which suggests Ungaretti's belief in the power of poetry (*canto* signifying either "song" or "poem") to ease grief and isolation. The verses imply that, by arbitrating anguish, poetry gives voice to that which would otherwise disappear into the void — those murky depths that in "Chiaroscuro" swallow up the cemetery's tombs. The elegiac function of "In memoria" prevents Sceab from disappearing entirely into the graveyard at Ivry. The poem's final verses, "E forse io solo / so ancora / che visse" (a reworking of the verse "e ne porto l'ombra" from the original version of "Chiaroscuro"), likewise assert Sceab's existence, and therefore thwart the very obscurity (nothingness) that they lament.

Ungaretti's inclusion of "In memoria" in *Il porto sepolto* — for the most part a volume of wartime poetry — might appear to be an anachronistic choice. The elegy to Sceab refers to experiences in the poet's life made remote by his friend's death, the passage of time, and geographical distance, as well as by the bleak conditions Ungaretti faced on the Carso as he composed it and other poems. Yet not only did Ungaretti include the poem in the collection; he selected it to open it. Moreover, through his careful notation of its place and date of composition (Locvizza, 30 September 1916), he underscores its relationship to other poems in the collection such as "Fratelli" (Mariano il 15 luglio 1916) and "San Martino del Carso" (Valloncello dell'Albero Isolato, il 27 agosto 1916) — both clearly identifiable examples of trench poetry whose principal subjects are the war and its effects on the individual. But the subject of "In memoria" — the dissolution of the self and, by extension, of entire civilizations and cultures that survive only in the poet's imagination — prefigures the apocalyptic theme of death and rebirth through poetic invention that runs throughout *Il porto sepolto*.

In Ungaretti's wartime poetry, the motif of the corpse, like that of the specter in "Chiaroscuro" and "In memoria," serves to mourn even as it paradoxically reaffirms life. The brief poem "Veglia" recounts a terrible night passed alongside a comrade's grotesque corpse, and culminates almost defiantly in an affirmation of life conterminous with poetic expression:

> VEGLIA
> Cima Quattro il 23 dicembre 1915
>
> Un'intera nottata
> buttato vicino
> a un compagno
> massacrato
> con la sua bocca
> digrignata
> volta al plenilunio
> con la congestione
> delle sue mani
> penetrata
> nel mio silenzio
> ho scritto
> lettere piene d'amore
>
> Non sono mai stato
> tanto
> attaccato alla vita
>
> (*Vita d'un uomo: tutte le poesie* 25)

Here, as in "In memoria," poetry counters the absolute nothingness of death through an act of communication: here the speaker's letters, "piene d'amore." Despite its finality — or perhaps because of it — the poem's corpse provokes an assertion of life. Stefano Velotti has described this paradox in the following terms:

Il cadavere ha questa speciale virtù: posto per un verso oltre il confine della vita, e per altro verso (nella sua visibilità) ancora a cavallo tra la vita e la morte (le due dimensioni più difficili da pensare) ci fa scorgere un "oltre" incomprensibile, che funziona da cartina al tornasole per segnalare l'elemento vitale (invisibile) in cui siamo immersi.

(Unpublished paper)

"Veglia," "Chiaroscuro," and "In memoria" all incorporate spectrality to lament the alienating forces of modern life (and especially war) that reduce humanity to nonbeing, but align poetic expression with an assertion of being.

Ungaretti's ghosts and cadavers open up the poetic text to meanings that language may only express with great difficulty, pushing, to borrow the words of Colin Davis, "at the boundaries of language and thought" (379). The fullest expression of this dynamic occurs in *Il porto sepolto*'s "Sono una creatura,"

which utilizes disanimation to describe the war's dehumanizing effects and the near inability of language to communicate such effects. Composed in the midst of the battle between Italian and Austro-Hungarian forces for Monte San Michele, a stronghold of the Austrian defense that was seized eventually by the Italians (the day after the composition of "Sono una creatura," in fact), the poem likens the frustrated cry of its speaker to a taciturn stone, suggesting a process of petrification in which the human voice is figuratively "turned to stone." Using the words "totalmente disanimata," the poem describes a condition of lifelessness and immobility, in which both language and being seem emptied of meaning.[8]

The first section of the poem opens with a simile that compares the poet's pain to the craggy peak of Monte San Michele:

> Come questa pietra
> del S. Michele
> così fredda
> così dura
> così prosciugata
> così refrattaria
> così totalmente
> disanimata

(*Vita d'un uomo: tutte le poesie* 41)

The next section repeats the figurative term of the simile and completes it by supplying the literal term:

> Come questa pietra

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[8] The word "pietra" suggests a wide variety of literary allusions, both historical and contemporary. Italo Calvino's essay "Leggerezza" addressees the notion of "petrification" in literature. Calvino writes, "In certi momenti mi sembrava che il mondo stesse diventando tutto di pietra: una lenta pietrificazione […] Era come se nessuno potesse sfuggire allo sguardo inesorabile della Medusa" (8). In contrast to the petrification enacted by Medusa's gaze, Calvino cites Eugenio Montale's artful juxtaposition of the weighty and the light in his poem "Piccolo testamento": "[…] è una professione di fede nella persistenza di ciò che sembra più destinato a perire" (11). He might well have applied this observation to Ungaretti's poem, in light of its life-affirming title ("Sono una creatura") and its final lines ("la morte / si sconta / vivendo"). Ungaretti's use of the motif also evokes the Dante of the *rime pietrose*: "Così nel mio parlar voglio esser aspro / com'è ne li atti questa bella petra, / la quale ognora impetra / maggior durezza e più natura cruda […] " (170-71). Dante also uses a simile of the stone in *Rime* C 12 ("la mente mia […] è più dura che petra") and in the *Convivio* 2.1.3 ("Coloro che non hanno vita ragionevole alcuna sono quasi come pietre"). Finally, Ungaretti's use of the simile echoes the role of the stone in the songs of the troubadors, who used it to convey the difficulty of expressing emotions. In their poetry "la pietra" always relates to death and unhappiness, and is therefore an early example of negative poetics.

> è il mio pianto
> che non si vede

Presenting its figurative term first, "pietra," the poem then expands on it, increasing poetic suspense as the reader anticipates the literal term, "pianto."[9] Where logic and syntax would suggest that the literal term of the comparison should appear first, Ungaretti's inversion of terms in the poem, together with the delayed introduction of the second term, suggests that a natural relationship between the "real" (the referent) and the "imaginary" (the linguistic sign) has been upset. The poem laments the loss of this relationship, even while simultaneously proposing a new one to take its place.

A strong pattern of tactile imagery — expressed in the adjectives "fredda," "dura," and "prosciugata" — conveys the stony peak's austerity. Through the rhythmically increasing syllabification of these words, and the repetition of the correlative "così," the first section of the poem builds to a crescendo that culminates with the word "disanimata," thereby dramatically making explicit either the peak's or the stone's inanimate qualities that were only implied by the preceding adjectives. The speaker presents the lament, linked to the word "disanimata" by the simile, as removed from the human being in which it logically ought to have its origin. Weeping — the primary meaning of "pianto" — is unique because it mediates between pure emotion and language, but it is here frustrated, going unnoticed: "il mio pianto / che non si vede." This image further communicates the speaker's alienation by suggesting that traumatic experience has led not only to an inability to communicate, but also to an erasure of the self. The full horror of the speaker's situation is communicated in these lines. The cry and, by extension, pain, that goes unnoticed forcefully communicates the poet's aphasia, which seems to result from the ineffability of experience.[10]

In "Sono una creatura," Ungaretti further underscores the diminishing power of language through the word "così." As the marker of a correlative, we might expect "così" to compare terms dialectically in order to create new and revitalized meaning. Here, the correlative suggests its opposite by marking a language that is cold, hard, and apparently drained of meaning. At the same time, it proposes a new language that has its foundation in death and is therefore appropriately ascetic. As an intensifier, "così" also works to deepen the

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[9] See Harrison for an additional interpretation of Ungaretti's inversion of syntax and how it characterizes his poetic voice (67).

[10] This symbolic value of the stone is borne out not just within the context of its comparison to the speaker's cry, or in the literary traditions to which it alludes, but also in its popular usage, where it is associated with a widely used *modo di dire — metterci una pietra sopra* — that means to discontinue discourse on a given subject. The idiom has its origins in the gravestone ("pietra") that permanently seals a tomb, and is therefore also closely related to the idea of death.

comparison between the rocky peak and the poet's pain. This intensification is extraneous, however, since the terms of the simile are clear and meaningful in and of themselves. The repetitive "così" then becomes an excessive description of the inanimate stone, suggesting a compulsive drive towards death, or towards a language that can express death, which culminates with the total dispiritedness of lines seven and eight. The lines' seemingly compulsive march towards death asks the reader to contemplate not just physical death, but also the death of meaning. And yet, the poem does successfully communicate with its audience, if only through a negative discourse that thematizes, structurally and semantically, the extreme alienation of the individual.

If the principal theme of the first two sections of "Sono una creatura" links the failure of language to death, then its third and final section counters that message by emphasizing the poet's manipulation, or escape, from death through poetic invention:

> La morte
> si sconta
> vivendo

Here, Ungaretti questions the inevitability of death, or at least its finality, by choosing to end the poem instead with "vivendo." In doing so, he raises questions about death's "authority" over life and simultaneously casts doubt upon the symbolic order of language. This is reinforced by the poem's title, "Sono una creatura," which plays counterpoint to the despondent tone of the poem and reinforces its final emphasis upon the restrained victory of life.

The tension between death and life shapes Ungaretti's wartime poetry, and finds its purest expression in disanimation. Steeped as it appears to be in the Great War's violence, disanimation would seem to represent a purely negative principle. This is not the case, however, for its very presence constitutes a confrontation with the circumstances of loss: the events of the war in particular and, more generally, the experience of modernity. Poems like "Chiaroscuro," "In memoria," "Veglia," and "Sono una creatura" represent more than just the deadening sensation felt by the poet in the face of loss, however. They also give rise to a confrontation between the emptiness resulting from loss and the plenitude produced from a dialectical discourse that eludes synthesis. The poem's narrator mourns that which has been lost — Sceab, a fallen comrade, and his own sense of self — yet those losses are precisely what make the poems possible. Mourning takes place as the emotional energy previously directed toward the aforementioned figures is displaced onto the poem itself. Yet that displacement is barely removed from the poem's narrator, who uses poetic language to reconstitute himself. Thus, by way of poetic expression, the love previously reserved for a lost object is ultimately displaced onto the self, a fundamentally positive gesture that guarantees the latter's survival.

A richly ambiguous device, disanimation is uniquely suited to the complex mental and aesthetic exigencies of a generation of Italian authors and artists. Their firsthand experiences during the Great War led them to devise new literary and visual languages capable of expressing a sensibility radically different from those associated with the prewar avant-garde movements. It is with this in mind, perhaps, that scholars of early twentieth-century Italian culture ought to evaluate the works of the postwar *ritorno all'ordine*, often associated with a revalorization of traditional aesthetic values and, in particular, with the return of the individual as art and literature's primary subject. The return of the individual, yes, but to echo Benjamin, one that now stands alone in a world radically changed by the war.

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