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NATURE VERSUS NURTURE: THE CONCEPTUALISATION OF FASCISM IN PRATOLINI'S *UN EROE DEL NOSTRO TEMPO*, MORAVIA'S *IL CONFORMISTA*, AND THEIR CRITICAL RECEPTION

Abstract: Vasco Pratolini's *Un eroe del nostro tempo* (1949) and Alberto Moravia's *Il conformista* (1959) share an odd similarity: these novels were harshly dismissed by their contemporary critics and represent two of the least successful works of these otherwise widely celebrated writers. Both texts featured a fascist character as main protagonist, a common feature that contributed to their problematic reception. What most critics failed to notice, though, is that through their protagonists, these novels set out an interrelated reflection on the nature of Fascism that contrasts an essentialist interpretation of it with a psycho-sociological one. By relying on both close-readings and the study of postwar critical reception, the article shows the limits of Pratolini's work, which conceptualises Fascism in accordance to a deviancy trope, and re-interprets Moravia's novel as a coherent narrative revolving around the theme of implication in Fascist crimes.
Key Words: interpretations of Fascism, deviancy, abnormality, implication, responsibility, cultural memory.

Introduction

Alberto Moravia and Vasco Pratolini are inescapably linked to Fascism. Not only did the two writers live through the years of the dictatorship, but the beginning of their literary careers was closely intertwined with the development of Fascist culture. Throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, Pratolini was an active presence in literary and political magazines such as *Il Bargello*, *Campo di Marte*, *Incontro*, and *La ruota*, and he published his first works, *Il tappeto verde* and *Via dei magazzini*, in 1941. As Frank Rosengarten noted, this period was not marginal at all in Pratolini's formation, but, on the contrary, it profoundly shaped "the human and literary values that were to inspire his creative work in the postwar years" (29). Moravia was the author of the main literary sensation of the *ventennio*—*Gli indifferenti* (1929)—which projected him into the literary scene of his time and allowed him to collaborate with important newspapers such as *La Stampa* and *La Gazzetta del popolo*. Moravia's relationship with the regime was complex, multifaceted, and in the end, ambiguous: it included episodes of censorship and racial discrimination but also, as reconstructed by Simone Casini, "una serie di compromessi, di cedimenti" ("Moravia e il fascismo" 191) as shown in the letters he wrote to Mussolini and Ciano to defend both his literary works and his career.

Besides their personal involvement in the cultural life of the dictatorship, Pratolini's and Moravia's relationship with Fascism is due to the fact that,

throughout their postwar production, they often chose to revisit this period and craft stories set during the *ventennio*. Their fictional explorations of Fascism include novels of great critical success, such as *Gli indifferenti* (1929), *Il quartiere* (1944), *Cronache di poveri amanti* (1947), *La romana* (1947), and *La ciociara* (1957), which provided the Italian postwar generation with a set of highly acclaimed literary representations of life under Fascism and World War II. Two of their historical novels, though, did not receive the same praise. When they were first published, *Un eroe del nostro tempo* (1949) and *Il conformista* (1951) were met with harsh criticism. But was such a negative reception justified? And more importantly, was this adverse opinion strictly due to the ways these fictional stories were constructed, or did it have something to do with the specific angle from which they addressed Fascism?

At first glance, the two novels seem to have little in common. *Un eroe del nostro tempo* is set in 1945-46 in an unspecified contemporary Italian city, and it narrates the morbid relationship between Virginia, the thirty-three-year-old widow of a Fascist supporter, and the young neofascist Alessandro, known as Sandrino, who is just sixteen years old. The two meet in a flatshare after World War II completely shattered their lives: Virginia lost her parents, who were killed during an Allied air-strike, and her husband, Ezio, who was killed by the partisans. Sandrino, despite his young age, was exposed to the brutality of warfare after he joined the Fascist Social Republic out of an act of devotion to the memory of his father, a volunteer who had died in the war against Ethiopia.

Through these two characters, Pratolini depicts the postwar condition of the vanquished of the Italian Civil War, who are left to face a hostile society. Virginia is a lonely and sad woman who feels that "l'unica certezza che le si offriva era l'ostilità. E il dolore" (*Un eroe del nostro tempo* 21). Sandrino is rancorous and resentful, and he cultivates bitter dreams of revenge. Struggling to find a place in postwar society, he is allured by neofascist circles and criminal activities. Virginia and Sandrino are drawn together as a result of the mutual grief they feel for the family members they lost and their common Fascist ideals. The woman, incapable of seeing the wrongful nature of the love she feels for such a young man, becomes obsessed with Sandrino (10, 14, 75). After sleeping together on New Year's Eve 1946, the two begin a clandestine affair in which Sandrino quickly displays a sadistic, manipulative, and abusive behaviour using Virginia to gain financial advantages for his own political goals. Their story ends in tragedy: when Virginia reveals that she is expecting a child from him, the young man brutally murders her.

Il conformista, instead, takes place in the years of the regime, and it narrates the life of Marcello Clerici, a man who, after having been the victim of abuse in his childhood, becomes a secret agent for the Fascist intelligence service. In the long prologue that opens the book, Marcello is thirteen years old and is growing up in an indifferent bourgeois family. Bullied at school for his feminine attitudes and largely neglected by his parents—the mother is only interested in her lovers;

the father, who is obsessed with politics, loses his mind and will later be locked in an asylum—Marcello develops feelings of guilt and an unsettling sense of being different, "[c]ome a scoprire in se stesso un carattere del tutto anormale di cui dovesse vergognarsi, che dovesse mantenere segreto" (24). This feeling of abnormality increases when Lino, an ex-priest who now works as a chauffeur, enters his life. Sexually attracted by the young boy, Lino begins to harass Marcello, and, after luring him into his apartment with the promise of giving him a revolver, he tries to abuse him. It is only thanks to the revolver that Marcello manages to escape, opening fire on his assailant.

With a leap of seventeen years forward, at the beginning of part one, readers find out that Marcello now works for the political division of the Fascist secret service. Despite the burden of his childhood and the painful awareness of having killed a man, Marcello is now a refined, accomplished, grown up man "perfettamente sicuro di sé, del tutto maschile nei gusti e negli atteggiamenti" (86). Well integrated in Fascist society, he finally feels that "adesso egli era veramente un uomo come tanti altri" (86). The plot revolves around Marcello's new mission: he is ordered to go to Paris and, using his upcoming honeymoon as a cover-up, to make contact with Edmondo Quadri, his former university professor of history, who is now a leading figure of the anti-fascist movement abroad. Initially, Marcello only needs to identify Quadri, so that other agents can spy on him; but even when the plan changes (184) and he knows that his act will lead to the murder of the professor, he remains committed to the order.

In Paris, Marcello and his wife Giulia spend some days with Quadri and his younger wife Lina. Despite the unexpected experiences he has in the European metropolis—including a sudden infatuation for Lina—Marcello identifies the professor for the Fascist agents, who murder him together with his wife a few days later.[1] The epilogue of the novel brings readers to 25 July 1943, when Marcello, who now has a daughter, goes out to observe the fall of the regime he has served for many years. During this chaotic night, he discovers that the event that profoundly marked his whole life was actually a misunderstanding: Lino is still alive, which means that for decades Marcello tormented himself with something that had not happened (325). The Clericis then decide to leave Rome for fear of potential retribution. On the road, however, they are targeted by an American plane that strafes their car and kills them all.

Despite their evident differences in setting and plot, *Il conformista* and *Un eroe del nostro tempo* present a significant similarity: they both narrate Fascism from within by adopting a Fascist—and therefore negative—character as the

[1] The episode directly refers to the murder of Moravia's cousins, the anti-Fascist activists Carlo and Nello Rosselli. Moravia, who wrote the novel in the same months in which a new trial exonerated some of the perpetrators of the murder, confirmed this reference in a letter to his aunt, Amelia Rosselli, mother of Nello and Carlo. Moravia's letters and his relationships with the Rossellis have been thoroughly reconstructed by Simone Casini ("Introduzione").

protagonist of the story. The use of this antihero, which aligns the two novels with what since the 2010s it has become common to define as "perpetrator fiction" (Crownshaws; McGlothlin; Pettitt), was perceived as extremely problematic in postwar Italian culture. As a result, many critics approached the two novels with great scepticism and were ready to dismiss them as a failed attempt to narrate Fascism—an interpretative viewpoint that closely resembles the reception of other fictional works about perpetrators, such as Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes* (2006). The partiality of these criticisms is attested by the fact that the novels were lambasted for opposite reasons: as we are going to see, Pratolini was accused of departing from his traditional approaches, having written a dark tale that diverged too drastically from the uplifting stories he had successfully narrated in his early works; Moravia, instead, was criticised for treading the same path, always re-writing the same book about the vices of the Italian bourgeoisie. This dismissal was not only unfair, as later commentators have observed (Piantini 184, 188; Biondi 421; Sørensen 94), but it also prevented Italian postwar critics from discussing the specific conceptualisations of Fascism that the two texts put forward and the important implications they had for Italian memory culture.

This article aims to retrieve the conceptualisation of Fascism that Moravia and Pratolini proposed in the works hereby examined by developing a close reading of their texts in a dialogue intertwined with their postwar critical reception. The analysis will show that *Un eroe del nostro tempo* and *Il conformista* put in narrative forms a series of politically and ethically charged questions about Fascism, originating two opposite but interrelated interpretations of this phenomenon. The two novels grapple with a series of common issues questioning whether Fascism should be conceptualised through an essentialist reading focused on the deviant nature of its supporters or through socio-psychological interpretations revolving around the mechanisms that produce consensus. By confronting the history of the reading and misreading of these texts, the article shows that postwar critics failed to engage with the representation of Fascism that the texts put forward, thus developing a reductive assessment of these novels.

The enquiry follows a chiasmic structure. It begins by reconstructing the critical reception of *Un eroe del nostro tempo*, showing that its re-evaluation was strongly linked to a renewed consideration given to its conceptualisation of Fascism. This political content is then fully explored through a close reading of the novel, which shows that the text puts forward an essentialist reading of the Fascist phenomenon. Subsequently, notions introduced in the examination of Pratolini's work are used to study *Il conformista* and disentangle the lines of reasoning through which Moravia creates a coherent—although often misunderstood—account of the process of implication in Fascist crimes. The investigation then goes back to the critical reception, offering a new explanation of the reasons why postwar critics did not appreciate Moravia's novel. Working as a conclusion, the last paragraph contrasts the two conceptualisations of Fascism

identified in Pratolini's and Moravia's works, connecting them with broader trends of postwar culture.

Reading *Un eroe del nostro tempo* in Postwar Italy

The critical reception of *Un eroe del nostro tempo* began a month after its publication, with a review by Pietro Pancrazi in the *Corriere della sera*. In this influential piece, which exerted a significant impact on postwar critics, the reviewer recognised Pratolini's talent as a storyteller stressing that his last work "si legge veramente d'un fiato." Yet, the critic observed that the novel presented too many flaws that would necessarily puzzle seasoned readers. These shortcomings were due to the fact that Pratolini did not follow "la sua musa" and decided to diverge from the kind of fiction he was truly adept at writing. For Pancrazi, Sandrino is undoubtedly a complex character, since he displays a mix of criminal attitudes and positive traits, such as the compassion he feels for both his mother and his father's memory. Nevertheless, his figure remains unconvincing because only the scenes underlining Sandrino's positive characteristics respond to Pratolini's "umore vero" as an artist, his "intimo sentimento," and "la [sua] poesia," while the wicked and violent features he attributed to his young protagonist are artificial and sound spurious in a writer whose capacity "di oggettivare, di rappresentare cose uomini e fatti fuori di un suo intimo sentimento […] è scarsa" (Pancrazi, "L'ultimo Pratolini").

More than twenty years later, Pratolini talked about this review and the repercussions it had on the reception of his novel. In an interview he gave to the *Corriere della sera* for a piece about the most misunderstood books ever written by ten prominent Italian writers, Pratolini claimed that this first negative review ultimately oriented the way other critics approached his novel "echeggiando il verdetto emesso da Pietro Pancrazi" ("Il mio libro incompreso"). Undoubtedly, after the first unfavourable review, there was a plethora of negative articles, and several of them tended to replicate some of the points made in the *Corriere della sera*. For instance, in the short piece that Luigi Russo wrote in *Belfagor*, *Un eroe del nostro tempo* was presented as "un cambiamento di rotta" that went against Pratolini's core poetics, which for Russo revolved around Florence's working-class neighbourhoods, the dreams of their inhabitants, and their acts of kindness. By narrating a story centred on a criminal, Pratolini shifted from "la cronaca con la C maiuscola" that readers had appreciated in his previous works and fell, instead, into the "cronaca nera," which is something that artists and poets should avoid (Russo). Niccolò Gallo reproposed a similar judgement in an article in *Società*, devoted to the Italian fiction of the postwar years, arguing that with its focus on a negative character, *Un eroe del nostro tempo* constituted an "involuzione in un genere romanzesco di carattere psicologico" that was "lontanissimo" from Pratolini's lyrical temperament (39). Giancarlo Vigorelli's review in *La fiera letteraria* did not follow the exact same pattern proposed by Pancrazi—although it ended with a comparison between Pratolini and the French

writer Raymond Radiguet, which is exactly how Pancrazi concluded his article—but still resulted in a condemnation of the novel. In the critic's opinion, Pratolini misused the title of Mikhail Lermontov's work—the 1840 romantic novel *A Hero of Our Time*—to narrate a story where all characters, perhaps with the exception of Virginia, are excessively stereotyped. For Vigorelli all the violent events that the novel narrates were too predictable, since they were too similar to the crime stories that postwar newspapers regularly reported and that had already been at the centre of films such as Pietro Germi's *Gioventù perduta*.

The recurrent emphasis that postwar reviewers put on Pratolini's diversion from his "true poetics" shows the rigid dogmatism that characterised postwar Italian literary critics, who tended to adhere to essentialist, fixed, and prescriptive assumptions about what a writer should be like and interpret literary texts on the basis of preconceived ideas concerning their authors' previous works—in the case of Pratolini, above all the idea that his novels should be a kind of uplifting *cronaca* about the Florentine working class. Such conservative dogmatism prevented a full understanding of the novel: it compelled postwar critics to repeat easy formulas instead of looking closely into an unsettling book that, while being the product of an unambiguously anti-Fascist writer, was putting its readers in close proximity to Fascism. As a result, postwar reviewers showed a limited engagement with the political dimension of the novel and largely overlooked the conceptualisation of Fascism that the text developed. The clearest sign of this reluctance to openly address the memory of Fascism was offered by Pancrazi's and Vigorelli's reviews, in which Sandrino is not even a neo-fascist but just a criminal, the member of a lost generation of youth who is generically affected by postwar tensions and the traumas that World War II brought up (Pancrazi, "L'ultimo Pratolini"; Vigorelli).

Yet, the fact that postwar reviewers were bewildered is not surprising, since it is true that *Un eroe del nostro tempo* was unlike anything that Pratolini had written up to that point.[2] Some reviewers, such as Aldo Borlenghi in *Avanti!* and Oreste del Buono in *Inventario*, recognised a potential in such change of direction—while confirming an overall negative judgement on a novel whose protagonist was too "estraneo" from Pratolini's sentimental world (Borlenghi) and whose plot was too strongly affected by "l'aridità, la violenza della cronaca" (Del Buono, "Vasco Pratolini," 135). The significance of this novel became evident only two decades later to scholars such as Giorgio Pullini, Ruggero Jacobbi, and Francesco Paolo Memmo who worked on Pratolini's later works. From their perspective, it was clear that *Un eroe del nostro tempo* was a fundamental step in Pratolini's narrative development, since the novel anticipated

[2] Giancarlo Bertoncini has offered a thorough analysis of the narrative features that differentiate *Un eroe del nostro tempo* from the novels that Pratolini published prior to this work (90-91). A concise version of the same argument was also developed by Cesare Cases in the article discussed at the end of this paragraph.

the works that the Tuscan writer would publish within the following fifteen years, preminently those forming the *Trilogia italiana* (Pullini 131-32; Jacobbi 8; Memmo 81). This critical perception was already expressed in Asor Rosa's assessment, according to which *Un eroe del nostro tempo* constituted an "indispensabile trait-d'union" between *Metello* and Pratolini's previous works (*Vasco Pratolini*, 169).

The first critic to discuss the distinctive features of the novel in a positive light was Cesare Cases, who laid the first stone for the reappraisal of the text. In an article devoted to *Metello,* published in *Società* in 1955, the critic recognised that, because of its focus on a restricted group of characters, its lack of lyricism and positive uplifting moments ("solarità"), and the absence of an elegiac poetics of memory that recollects the personal past of the author, *Un eroe del nostro tempo* visibly differed from Pratolini's previous works (78). In contrast with all the other postwar critics, though, Cases welcomed such innovations and claimed that, despite being "il meno pratoliniano dei suoi libri" (78), it was undoubtedly the novel by Pratolini that he preferred (70). This preference was due to the specific cultural operation that Pratolini attempted when deciding to narrate Fascism through a focus on a Fascist protagonist. For Cases, the novel forced its readers to confront "[le] forme più vistose della decadenza italiana: quelle tanto per intenderci che hanno il loro equivalente politico nel fascismo" (71), and it did so through the use of a complex antihero character that opened important heuristic perspectives on the nature of Fascism and the question of the "diseducazione italiana," which made Fascism possible (75). It was by focusing on the political content of the novel and seeing the text as a useful analytical tool to think about Fascism—in other words, using Astrid Erll's terminology, by approaching the novel as "a medium of cultural memory" (68)—that Cases re-evaluated *Un eroe del nostro tempo* as an accomplished work. Following Cases' intuition, it seems important to focus in the next sequences of the inquiry on the text itself and examine what it tells us about the nature of Fascism.

A Symbolic Antihero

To penetrate into the conceptualisation of Fascism that Pratolini articulated in *Un eroe del nostro tempo*, it is crucial to focus the analysis on its protagonist and try to answer an apparently simple question: who is Sandrino? Undoubtedly, as Pancrazi and Vigorelli noticed, Sandrino is a criminal: not only does he manipulate Virginia and steal her savings, but he also gets involved in illegal trafficking through which he hopes to support the creation of neo-fascist armed groups—although the whole operation ends up being a scam and the young man loses all the money he stole from the woman. Similarly, Sandrino's political affiliation is beyond doubt. He is a fascist: he firmly believed in his father's ideals, for which he was ready to fight during the Civil War, and, in postwar society, he strives to take an active role in neofascist activities, harbouring thoughts of revenge that he explicitly confesses to Virginia: "tornerà la nostra ora.

Vendicheremo suo marito e i trecentomila caduti come lui, fino all'ultimo. Ne fucileremo dieci per ciascuno dei nostri" (25).

Furthermore, it is evident that Sandrino is a violent man or, as the narrator puts it, "una forza di natura che trovava nella violenza il suo equilibrio" (154). The occasions in which he makes use of his physical force with unsettling sadistic pleasure are numerous. For instance, during his sexual intercourses with Virginia, he holds her chin with violence "da darle dolore" (43) a gesture he repeats on New Year's Eve when the two are out together in a carriage ride across the city and Sandrino grabs her chest "ferocemente […] finchè [ella] rovesciò il capo sulla spalliera, accasciata dal dolore" (51). The episode that epitomised Sandrino's instinctive raptures of uncontrolled violence takes place on 1 January 1946, after their first night of love. The two lovers are strolling outside when the woman starts playing with the snow and urges Sandrino to chase her, getting him involved in a snowball fight with some kids. Virgina feels unencumbered and is amusing herself when, all of a sudden and with no apparent reasons, the man hits her violently—later in a café Sandrino will say that he felt ridiculed by her behaviour (47-48). After this episode, despite her love for him, Virginia begins to fear Sandrino, imagining that the man "l'avrebbe assalita e percossa, forse l'avrebbe uccisa" (62).

Yet, things are much more complicated than what this negative portrayal would suggest. To all the characters who have to deal with him—as well as for the readers—Sandrino appears above all as an enigma: a mysterious figure filled with contradictions who is endowed with a series of attributes that make him stand out and appear at once extremely attractive and disturbingly unsettling. This contrasted depiction already emerges from the first description the narrator offers of him, filtered from Virginia's perspective:

> Ella lo guardava; per prima cosa pensò che doveva essere forte […]. Forte lo era anche all'apparenza. Un uomo, quasi, per la larghezza delle spalle e del torace. Il maglione che aveva indosso lo modellava. Ma la faccia era la sua, di ragazzo, con quel che di patito e di tenero proprio dell'adolescenza. L'ombreggiatura agli angoli della bocca sottolineava la femminilità dei lineamenti, meravigliosamente armoniosi. Aveva la fronte alta, gli occhi grandi e celesti, il naso dritto, delicatissimo, dalle narici leggermente rilevate. Gli orecchi appena staccati e rosei; la bocca piccola, ancora di bambino, con le labbra del color del sangue vivo. V'era nella sua espressione—e la bocca e lo sguardo li determinavano—candore e voracità insieme. Appariva un ragazzo furbo e bellissimo, precocemente cresciuto […].
>
> (Pratolini, *Un eroe del nostro tempo*, 15-16)

From his first appearance, Sandrino is characterised through a series of contrasts: he is a teenager with the body of a grown-up man and the smile of a child; he is strong but has an almost "feminine" outlook; he conserves a kind of purity but also displays a voracious greed. These contradictions are the constitutive elements of a character who is both enticing and repulsive, who, on the one hand, is capable

of exercising a mesmerising attraction to women thanks to his striking beauty, his vitality, and his childlike candour, and, on the other hand, is able to control and subjugate them not only by virtue of his physical strength but also through his cunningness, manipulative cleverness, and ability to deceive.

Virginia is not the only woman who falls victim to Sandrino's bewitching power. Before the widow moved to the house, another flatmate, Bruna, had indeed been tempted by the charm of this boy. Bruna is in her early twenties and grew up in a working-class family of committed Communists. During the Italian Civil War, she joined the Resistance smuggling weapons and clandestine anti-Fascist newspapers across the city. It was during these undercover operations that she met the partisan Falerio, who later becomes her husband—in their relationship, the two embody that conception of love nurtured by mutual political values that, as noticed by many critics, Pratolini tends to advocate through his most idealised positive characters (Asor Rosa, *Scrittori e popolo*, 175; Memmo 79; Bertoncini 94). When Bruna finds out that Sandrino has joined the Fascist forces, she arranges a meeting with him, hoping to recruit him into the anti-Fascist side. Their conversation quickly turns into a teasing game in which Sandrino shows not only his commitment to the Fascist cause, but also his desire to seduce Bruna. The woman pretends to flirt with him, on the conviction that, if the man dares to molest her, she would take the chance to kill him. But when Sandrino tries to kiss her, Bruna finds herself unable to resist (99). When recounting the story to Virginia, telling how she eventually fought against Sandrino and managed to escape his attempt to rape her, Bruna confesses a disturbing secret that haunts her conscience and that has weighed as a burden on her relationship with her husband to whom she did not have the strength to confess the truth: for a long moment she liked kissing Sandrino, and she enjoyed giving in to temptation (99).

Through the character of Sandrino, *Un eroe del nostro tempo* offers a rich conceptualisation of Fascism's multiple faces. In the novel, Fascism is presented as a destructive and unscrupulous force with clear gendered implications: it is a phenomenon that glorifies youth, masculinity, and physical strength and that is intrinsically linked to a proclivity for violence and criminal actions. The contradictions that characterise Sandrino's descriptions—what Bruna calls when speaking to him "cotesta capacità di simulazione che hai, di cambiare da un momento all'altro" (148)—which numerous postwar critics have discussed as flaws in the construction of a plausible literary character, are an integral part of this conceptualisation. They embody Fascism's chameleonic nature, its adaptability, and its capacity to bring together various political and ideological currents—a tendency that Alessandro Campi defines as Fascism's eclectic and syncretic character (xxvi) and that in the last phase of the regime led to what Emilio Gentile calls an "ingorgo idelogico" (226).

More importantly, Sandrino embodies Fascism's mesmerising power, its seductive capacity to allure and ensnare others, which Pratolini translated into a gendered plot revolving around Sandrino's implausible seductive power. The

novel makes clear that such attractiveness is above all a corrupting force that stains one's consciousness and makes others complicit in the immoral wrongful acts that Fascism causes. This is epitomised by Bruna whose reticence towards her husband progressively grows into a tormenting sense of guilt for her deceitful lack of transparency. As she confesses to Virginia:

> […] da un anno e mezzo io gli sto mentendo, come la più borghese delle mogli. Cioè lo tradisco da un anno e mezzo, un minuto dopo l'altro. […] verrà a sapere che per un anno e mezzo gli ho taciuto un fatto che via via che i giorni passavano sentivo sempre più come una colpa. Falerio saprà che le infinite volte che abbiamo discusso a proposito di Sandrino, le mie parole erano insincere, che tutte le volte che gli rispondevo lo tradivo.
>
> (Pratolini, *Un eroe del nostro tempo*, 102)

Having given in, even just for a moment, to Fascism's attractiveness—to what Susanne Sontag identifies as the fascinating power of its aesthetics—Bruna is forced into a corrupting downward spiral that makes her more and more vulnerable to Sandrino's power. The man, with impressive clairvoyance, understands that Bruna did not open-up with her husband. Hence, he begins to blackmail her and forces her to lie more and more to Falerio (105-06), leading her into a path of dishonesty that stands for Fascism's corrupting power.

Having looked more closely to the protagonist of the novel, it is necessary to pose once again the question from which this analysis has started: who is Sandrino? Giansiro Ferrata, in his review in *L'Unità*, had no doubts about the answer that should be given: "È un mostro Sandrino? Sì, un mostro," This conclusion—which is the same that Bruna reaches: "è più che perverso, è mostruoso" (Pratolini, *Un eroe del nostro tempo*, 95)—seems a logical deduction as there is indeed something demonic in this candid young boy endowed with extraordinary strength, charming beauty, a proclivity to sadistic violence, and the exceptional ability to subjugate and manipulate others.

This point is especially important to assess how the novel conceptualises Fascism. If Sandrino is a monster, it suggests that Fascism is a deviant aberration, the incarnation of the evil forces that are part of life, and, therefore, the product of the actions of specific individuals who embody such monstrosity by virtue of a wicked and abnormal nature. The development of the plot and the conclusion of the story can be interpreted as a reflection on this problem.

The Nature of Fascism

The second part of the book opens with Bruna's confession to Falerio. Once the truth is re-established between them and Bruna is freed from Sandrino's blackmail, the two ex-partisans conclude that something must be done with the boy. They decide that he should be sent to a reform school. Despite agreeing on this, Bruna and Falerio disagree on the explanation that should be adopted to interpret Sandrino's behaviour, putting forward two divergent theories that have dense consequences for the interpretation of the whole story. While for Bruna,

who observed Sandrino from close proximity, the young man "è soltanto un delinquente" (124), her husband thinks that this would be a reductive reading:

> E Falerio commentò: "La società l'ha reso qual è. Lui era soltanto un ragazzo irrequieto, pieno di istinti, pieno di vita. Gli hanno fatto credere che il male fosse il bene e viceversa, e lui non ha avuto la possibilità di riflettere […]. Ha bisogno di cadere, di ruzzolare per cominciare ad aprire gli occhi."
>
> (Pratolini, *Un eroe del nostro tempo*, 124)

In Falerio's eyes, Sandrino's behaviour cannot be attributed to his nature and his alleged innate proclivity for evil. It is the Fascist society in which the young boy grew up and the wrong models he received from his family that made him what he is.

Through the conversation between Bruna and Falerio, the novel puts forward two alternative perspectives to interpret Fascism and its supporters—and, in so doing, it echoes the debates that took place in the late 1940s around the so called "questione dei giovani," meaning, as Luca La Rovere has reconstructed, the public debate about how much Fascism had shaped the education of the generations that grew up under its rule (138). In Bruna's view, Fascism, which Sandrino embodies, is linked to a deviant personality. For Falerio, instead, Fascism is not a question of intrinsic personal traits but the effect of a social construction. Falerio believes that Sandrino is not inherently evil, and he could be redeemed if only he had a right prompt "che lo investa personalmente" (124).

This prompt comes in the form of a young girl, Elena, the daughter of an anti-Fascist writer who was deported to Mauthausen, and who is the third woman to be ineluctably attracted to the "hero" of the story. When the two meet, Sandrino has lost trace of Virginia who suddenly moved out of the flatshare. Every commentator, apart from Asor Rosa (*Vasco Pratolini* 205), has understandably regarded this new character as an artificial literary device—Bertoncini, for instance, has pointed out the clear "latitudine stilnovistica [ch]e la rendono latrice di salvezza" (94). Nevertheless, this encounter is crucial for the construction of the message of the novel. Through the relationship with Elena, Sandrino is offered the opportunity of a redemption that could prove Falerio's explanation of Fascism to be right. Undoubtedly, thanks to Elena, Sandrino makes significant progress: for the first time, he experiences affection that has nothing to do with the cruel forms of masculine domination that he liked to exercise on Bruna and Virginia, and he also displays some positive emotions that, until that point, he was only able to manifest towards his mother. In particular, he opens himself to a new form of sincerity that requires a harsh struggle "che Sandrino sostenne contro la propria natura abituata al calcolo, alla finzione" (185). As a result of Elena's love and her pedagogy, the protagonist disavows many of his political ideas up to the point that he believes that he has become "il nuovo Sandrino che Elena gli aveva augurato di essere" (202). The tragic conclusion of the story, however, suggests the impossibility of such redemptive transformation.

After weeks in which Sandrino has not seen her, Virginia re-appears in his life. The woman re-gained access to her late husband's money, and she is ready to support Sandrino again and be his lover, for as long as he would like. When the man manifests his lack of interest, with a dramatic revelation, Virginia announces that she is pregnant with his baby. Feeling trapped in a life that he does not want and overwhelmed by the burden of his past, "dal cerchio che si era nuovamente chiuso attorno a lui" (212), Sandrino opts for the only possible choice he sees to regain the freedom he thought to have conquered with Elena. With cold blood he savagely kills his ex-lover by repeatedly driving her head into the bars of a nearby gate.

This unsettling conclusion has shocked most of the postwar critics, who condemned the scene as excessively and unnecessarily pulp. It is important, however, to reflect on the implication that this action has. To do so, it is necessary to consider the novel's last paragraph:

> Allora, riprese il cammino, imboccando il viale su cui era passato poco prima di fianco a Virginia. Si sentiva liberato d'ogni angoscia […]. Ecco, egli aveva da percorrere una strada lunga e diritta, tutta oscurità, tutta neve, a capo della quale, lontanissima e tuttavia visibile, da toccare s'egli avesse allungato una mano, c'era Elena che gli sorrideva.
>
> (Pratolini, *Un eroe del nostro tempo*, 221)

Several critics were puzzled by this conclusion, which they interpreted as an opening to Sandrino's potential future redemption. Bertoncini, for instance, argues that with this murder Sandrino "compie un gesto di eliminazione del proprio passato (Virginia appunto) e del proprio futuro di fascista (il figlio che Virginia aspetta da lui)" which grants to him "un ipotesi di riscatto" after "una lunga espiazione" (95). For Memmo, too, the novel ending is "fiducioso" since it implies that Sandrino's redemption is still possible, and it entails that he is ready to give up on Fascism (80-81). Similarly, Leandro Piantini defines the conclusion as "tragica, ma al tempo stesso ambigua" since through the murder Sandrino has seized the opportunity of a "futura rigenerazione" (189).

In these readings, Virginia is interpreted as the embodiment of Fascism, as a burden that tries to anchor the protagonist to the past and from which, therefore, Sandrino must sever all ties in order to gain the possibility of having a future in postwar society. According to this interpretation, Virginia would play a role akin to that of many female prostitutes of postwar cinema, whom Danielle Hipkins has called Italy's other women, who must be expelled—usually by being murdered—to re-establish male identity and enable a redemptive pattern through the projection on the female body of undressed feelings of guilt and shame (69-74). Following this reasoning, *Un eroe del nostro tempo* would be a story about the potential for redemption in a young man tainted by Fascist education. This reading, however, is not consistent with other textual elements that, if considered, lead to a very different interpretation.

To develop this alternative reading, one needs to go back to Elena's first appearance. Sandrino has just come out from an altercation with Bruna and Falerio, who threatened to denounce him to the police for the money he had stolen from Virginia. Enraged and painted into a corner, Sandrino meditates to kill Falerio. It is at this point that Elena appears. Conversing with the girl, the man calms down, leaving the narrator to wonder whether "È questo l'omicida?" (159). Days after, Sandrino goes back to this moment and confesses to Elena that "Quando ti ho incontrata avevo in testa un proposito. Ora sono felice di essermi mancato di parola" (181). From the first moment, therefore, Elena is the force that prevents Sandrino from committing the ultimate crime, the suppression of another's life—importantly, we know from Bruna that during the Civil War Sandrino did not kill and did not take part in military actions, which is the reason why the two partisans believe that he should be given a second chance (103). The encounter with Elena saves Sandrino from becoming a murderer and offers him the opportunity of a fresh start. This redemption, however, would be possible only if the young man could change. When Sandrino discloses his love for Elena, the girl, despite being enamoured of him, is still divided because she does not know if Sandrino is now different from the fascist he used to be. To these doubts, the young man gives the answer that Elena hoped to hear: "Non credo di dover compiere nessuna azione dimostrativa… Te ne persuaderai giorno per giorno" (201). The brutal killing of Virginia cannot be seen as part of this process of self-improvement, but, on the contrary, it is the demonstrative action that Sandrino was not asked to commit and that certifies the impossibility of his transformation.

In the final words of the novel, the narrator, through a free indirect speech, shows that the protagonist believes in the possibility of this transformation, but the vicious crime he has just committed testifies that this can only be Sandrino's self-illusion. Far from showing that he has slowly started to change, the man has given a sensational demonstration that his evil nature is stronger than any redemptive opportunity—and the fact that Sandrino still believes that he can have Elena after what he has done is the clearest proof of his corrupted unredeemable nature. This interpretation is backed up by Asor Rosa who argues that the conclusion, perhaps even against Pratolini's intention, cannot stand for "un'espiazione promessa" (*Vasco Pratolini* 207) but attests instead the "naturalistic" assumptions that inform "il personaggio centrale che è, intenzionalmente, tutto natura" (194). The conclusion shows that, rather than Falerio's social constructivist theory, it was Bruna's interpretation of Fascism, as the product of a delinquent personality, that proves correct. As Elena's father once said, "Mica si scappa da noi stessi" (212). The trajectory of the protagonist of the story shows that Fascism is inherently linked to an aberrant individual nature from which one cannot escape and that cannot be changed. Hence, the narrator was right to argue at one point: "Questo era Sandrino. La sua natura era il suo carcere" (142).

The Dialectic of (Ab)Normality

The clash between the two divergent interpretations that pervades Pratolini's novel, i.e.: Fascism either as the product of an individual evil nature or as a social construct, lays at the core of Moravia's *Il conformista*. From the prologue about Marcello's childhood, readers are prompted to question whether the protagonist of the story can be deemed "normal." Marcello is immediately presented as a child in whom "altri istinti più profondi e ancora oscuri" are dwelling (21). The boy likes to play with weapons, is attracted to violence, and is "crudele senza rimorso nè vergogna, del tutto naturalmente" (22). He enjoys destroying flowers and massacring lizards (24), and during these games he ends up killing a cat (34). As a result of these inner dark impulses, young Marcello begins to doubt his own normality and he aspires to social situations that can prove that he is like everyone else, yearning for "un desiderio di normalità; […] una voglia di essere simile a tutti gli altri dal momento che essere diverso voleva dire essere colpevole" (45). For this reason, Marcello likes being at school which gives him "un'idea di ordine, di disciplina" (46)—a fact that anticipates his embracing of Fascism as the re-use of some of the regime's most famous keywords attests. For the same reason, when his friend Roberto refuses to join the animal-cruelty games that he sadistically enjoys, Marcello is overcome by rage and assaults him (28) since the friend, by rejecting his invitation to share and therefore normalise his acts of violence, "lo inchiodava alla propria anormalità" (27).

The prologue of the story forces readers to pose the same question that was asked in the analysis of *Un eroe del nostro tempo*: who is the protagonist of this book? Is he normal or not? Is he a malevolent child perverted by a wicked nature? Is he, as young Marcello concludes, "un anormale segnato da un destino solitario e minaccioso e ormai avviato per una strada sanguinaria" (35)? Or, on the contrary, is there nothing wrong with the protagonist and is he just an ordinary person? Moreover, another set of questions concerns Marcello's sexual orientation: will this young boy, who gives signs of a non-heteronormative masculinity, grow up as a homosexual man?[3]

The development of the story continues to repropose these questions. The first impression readers gain about thirty-year-old Marcello is that of a man who is completely different from the child he once was, having overcome all the psychological complexes he once had. Marcello, who now has the strength to go into a public library and read a newspaper report about Lino's death without feeling affected by his past, has grown into a man "del tutto normale" (84). His

[3] Moravia knew the danger of binary conceptualisations of normality and sexual orientation and how these are inevitably social constructions—and, indeed, the second part of the novel can be read, as we are going to see, as a deconstruction of normative assumptions about both normality and gender norms. Yet, the fact that the prologue questions both the normality and heterosexuality of the protagonist clearly stems from a heteronormative paradigm that disturbingly equates homosexuality with abnormality. On this problematic point see the last paragraph of this article.

maturation was due to a "consapevole volontà […] di uscire dall'anormalità e farsi uguale agli altri" (84). As a result, through the years, the "istinti insoliti e, forse, anche anormali" that characterised his childhood were replaced by "una certa mortificata e grigia normalità" (86). This repeated characterisation of Marcello as an ordinary man, though, may just be an obsessive self-portrayal through which the man tries to convince himself of his own normality. In fact, Marcello cannot still rule out that his abnormality is like an old wound: now it may appear healed, but "forse, sotto la pelle intatta, l'antica infezione covava tuttora in forma di ascesso chiuso e invisibile" (85). This worrying doubt finds confirmation when, judging by his emotional reaction to an anonymous letter that arrives at his house, Marcello is forced to recognise that "si era dunque sbagliato […] la ferita non soltanto non era rimarginata ma era anche molto più profonda di quanto avesse sospetatto" (114).

The novel keeps suggesting that, despite the efforts to appear normal, there is something wrong with Marcello. The man indeed is at times erratically dominated by a sudden hatred that "imprevisto come un mostro che emerge da un mare immobile, poteva affiorare, sulla morta superficie della sua consueta apatia" and that results in unmotivated homicidal compulsions (94). Marcello's abnormality is eventually confirmed through a comparison with his wife. Giulia, who comes from a petit bourgeois family, is above all "una ragazza normale, del tutto comune" (105) who has no doubts about her own normality "per esserci dentro fino ai capelli" (121). By contrast, Marcello is attracted by normality and compelled to reflect on it "perchè ne era escluso" (121)—a speculative attitude that shows, as Marino Biondi, Tommaso Soldini, and Simon Levis Sullam have argued, that Marcello represents the specimen of the intellectual (Biondi 411; Soldini 83; Levis Sullam 108). By comparing himself with Giulia, Marcello concludes that to be as normal as she is "bisognava esserci nati, oppure…" (121), proposing, at this stage of the novel, an essentialist understanding of normality as in intrinsic feature of one's character.

Reflecting on Marcello's (ab)normality is crucial to understanding his political choices and, consequentially, the conceptualisation of Fascism that the novel puts forward. As the prologue and the first part of the book attest, Marcello is—or at least feels himself to be—abnormal: he has a deviant personality marked by unconventional impulses that push him towards violence, cruelty, and other immoral behaviours. At a young age, he committed a murder for which he feels guilty, an episode that clearly testifies to his unordinariness. Moreover, despite his upcoming marriage, his sexuality remains ambiguous. Yet, in contrast with the protagonist of *Un eroe del nostro tempo*, Marcello does not join Fascism as a direct result of his deviance. On the contrary, he embraces the regime to hide his abnormality: he becomes part of the Fascist system in order to side with the majority and ally himself with the power that dominates his society.

Marcello is not a fanatic, and he disdains the emphatic language of Fascist propaganda. As a matter of fact, if he honestly thinks about it, he must admit that

“non c’era quasi nulla nel regime che non gli dispiacesse profondamente” (93). Nonetheless, he is a Fascist because being a Fascist offers to him the clearest proof of his normality thanks to “una fede […] che egli condivideva con altri milioni di persone” (89). Supporting the regime appears necessary to him because this is what his fellow Italians do and, as he has known since the time of his childhood, “quello che tutti facevano era normale ossia bene” (25). Thanks to his political conformism, Marcello “faceva tutta una cosa sola con la società e il popolo in cui si trovava a vivere, non era un solitario, un anormale, un pazzo, era uno di loro, un fratello, un cittadino, un camerata” (89). His political support for the totalitarian regime is the sign of his correct and mature integration in the society of his time, the sign of his normality.

Yet the question remains: is Marcello normal or is he just a deviant who is obsessed with the idea of appearing normal? If this is the case, as it would seem based on the first part of the novel, Marcello’s desire to conform to normality that makes him a Fascist would only be a mask to cover his true abnormal self, and his Fascism, therefore, would still be the result of a perverted nature. After all, Marcello has shown signs of deviations from an early age; he has killed a person when he was just a kid; and then he has become a secret agent involved in a political murder. Are not these the signs that nothing in his life is normal? To answer this new question, it is necessary to analyse the second part of the book, which complicates any simple distinction between normality and abnormality.

In Paris, reality manifests itself in all its ambiguities, and it becomes evident that normality is an unfathomable notion that cannot be fully grasped. It turns out that Giulia has a past that is very different from the life that Marcello imagined she had: as a young girl, she was the victim of abuse perpetrated by a family friend (169-74) and, for a short time, she was in love with a woman (249). Marcello, against everything he advocated until that day, falls in love with Quadri’s wife Lina, and for a moment would be ready to lose the life he patiently constructed to follow this new feeling (228-29). In the French capital, nothing is what it seems to be and even the line separating pure love from sexual attraction is unrecognisable—and so Marcello realises that the love he felt for Lina was only an illusion (246). The same process of disintegration of boundaries concerns gender and social norms: Lina, although married, flirts with Marcello and has a fling with Giulia. Moreover, a labyrinthine game of dissimulations is established between Marcello and the Quadris, with the former pretending to be just a civil servant on his honeymoon and the latter pretending not to know that he is a spy. The unpredictable events that take place in the chaos of Paris constitute, as Roberto Tessari has argued, Marcello’s encounter with non-conformity (68) and they problematise the very notion of normality. This process finds its apex in the epilogue of the novel. When Lino re-appears revealing that he survived the shooting—only one newspaper reported his death because of a misunderstanding—Marcello realises that the murder he thought he had

committed, which has tormented his memory, appearing to him as the uttermost sign of his abnormality, was just another illusion (Moravia 318).

This second part allows readers to give an answer to the question that permeated the novel about the nature of the protagonist, showing that, despite what Marcello believed, there was nothing wrong with him. Throughout his life, the man explains his actions as an effort to abandon a state of abnormality, but the development of the story reveals that this was the wrong way to see everything. First of all, as the experiences in Paris prove, normality is always an ambiguous and relative concept that cannot be essentialised—an idea that is reinforced when Marcello observes the fall of Fascism, which shows that "quella normalità che [Marcello] aveva ricercato per anni […] adesso si rivelava puramente esteriore e tutta materiata di anormalità" (296). Normality can only ever be a social construction. Moreover, and this is the crucial lesson that Marcello gains from his last meeting with Lino, it was the very idea of his abnormality that in the end was not abnormal at all. Marcello realises that what can be truly called "normalità era proprio questo affannoso quanto vano desiderio di giustificare la propria vita" (319). Hence, all the actions that he committed, the support he gave to the regime, his enrolment in the secret service, and the participation in Quadri's murder, which he attributed to his desire to redeem himself from Lino's murder and from the sense of abnormality that came from it, would have happened anyway even if during his childhood "non fosse avvenuto nulla, proprio perché in ogni caso avrebbe dovuto perdere l'innocenza, e conseguentemente, avrebbe desiderato riacquistarla" (319). Marcello, therefore, was normal in feeling abnormal, and this psychological state was not, as he had always thought, the key to understand his actions.

Fascism as a Social Mechanism

At the end of *Il conformista*'s intricated reflection on the meaning of normality, we find that Marcello, despite everything he thinks about himself, is not a deviant personality but a very ordinary person afflicted, like many others, by a sense of lost innocence and a longing to fit into a system in order to avoid exclusion. This understanding of the protagonist's nature has crucial implications for the conceptualisation of Fascism that the novel puts forward, since it entails that Marcello's participation in Fascism and its crimes does not stem from his supposedly deviant personality. In the light of this, another explanation must be sought out, and the novel suggests that Marcello's actions can be explained through the choices he made throughout his life (233). As Gert Sørenses argues, Marcello's life "non è predestinata fin dai tempi di un'infanzia oscura," but it is rather the result of a "scelta esistenziale" (97): hence, when Marcello accepts his mission in Paris, "non lo fa perché viene costretto, ma perché ha voluto farlo in vista dell'impunità garantita in anticipo dal regime" (100).

Yet, even the emphasis that Sørenses correctly puts on Marcello's free-will is not enough to understand the message of the novel. Once the idea of Marcello's

abnormality is removed from the picture, what the novel makes incredibly clear is that if throughout his life the protagonist chose to integrate himself in Fascist society, he did so because in this way he could have a good career, obtain a certain status, and make financial gains for both himself and his family. These are reasonable goals. Afterall, Marcello is nothing more than a compliant citizen who wants to work, protect his family and his society, and follow the law; however, having to do so under a totalitarian regime, he unavoidably becomes complicit in the crimes that his society perpetrates. As Marcello clearly grasps at one point:

> Gli uomini normali non erano buoni, pensò ancora, perché la normalità veniva sempre pagata, consapevolmente o no, a caro prezzo, con complicità varie ma tutte negative, di insensibilità, di stupidità, di viltà quando non addirittura di criminalità.
>
> (Moravia 120)

The killing of Quadri in which he gets involved, therefore, "non era che il prezzo di sangue di simile normalità" (208). The murder is a key step in Marcello's career: it allows him to keep a well-paid job that enables the newly-wed couple to realise their material dreams, buy a five-bedroom house with a nice garden and a large bedroom, equip it with modern electric appliances, and start a family—a house that makes Giulia utters with joy "ci vivremo e saremo felici," a sentence that encapsulates the materialist and petty-bourgeois attitude that supports the compromise with Fascism (281). Rather than the remote events of his childhood, it is his agency and the benefits he gains from the regime, that fuelled Marcello's sense of guilt.

In *Il conformista*, Moravia addresses the question of Fascism's nature through a story that makes large use of psychoanalytical tropes about childhood traumas and repressed sexual desires, and that hints, therefore, at a pathological explanation of this political phenomenon centred on the deviant personality of its supporters. The development of the plot, however, discards this interpretation, and it conceptualises Fascism as a social phenomenon that involves ordinary citizens—the middle class, the bureaucrats, the state apparatus, the intellectuals—making them complicit in the crimes that underpin everyday life under the regime. Importantly, Marcello is not the Quadris' material killer, but an agent who makes such murder possible. By indirectly participating in a hideous crime, the protagonist of the story constitutes a perfect example of what Michael Rothberg has called an "implicated subject," meaning an individual who is not the direct perpetrator of injustices but one who, through his or her actions, makes such injustices possible (1). Thanks to its focus on an individual who compromises with the regime to conquer a state of normality and gain material returns, the novel makes visible the diffused social factors that underpin Fascist political violence. [4]

[4] Throughout the novel, the implication of ordinary citizens in Fascist crimes is first of all presented as the implication of the bourgeoisie. This idea also sustains a reading of the text

As such, the novel constitutes the most powerful and lucid depiction within Italian literature of the network of complicities that allows the Fascist regime to function. To support this reading, however, it is necessary to follow the steps that were proposed in this analysis and untangle the complex interplay between normality and abnormality that the novel lays out. Furthermore, this reading necessitates a re-evaluation of the emphasis that is typically placed on the psychoanalytical aspects of the story, such as Marcello's repressed homosexuality, his Oedipus complex, or his projected guilt for Lino's murder, as central tenet to interpret the novel. Notably, Bernardo Bertolucci's 1970 cinematic adaptation has made this change of focus in the interpretation of the novel particularly difficult. The film, without completely removing references to the process of implication described in the text, re-centred the story on its psychoanalytical dimension especially through a re-writing of the conclusion.[5] Yet, even before Bertolucci's masterpiece, the interpretation that this article proposes proved very hard to be developed in postwar Italy, as we are going to see by considering the novel's critical reception.

Misreading *Il conformista* in Postwar Italy

Moravia's fame in the Italian literary scene meant that, when *Il conformista* was published, it immediately attracted critics' attention, and the number of reviews soared. The first article to be published was a descriptive piece by Domenico Porzio, which appeared in *Oggi* on 3 June 1951. Despite a trivialising title—"Divenne una spia fascista per aver ammazzato un gatto"—Porzio's article was positive and greeted the novel as a major work. With the reviews by Pancrazi and Carlo Bo that followed suit, the assessment became more mixed. The critics praised the text as an accomplished novel but also drew attention to several of its limits. For Pancrazi, the plot was crowded with too many "strabilianti e anche fantomatiche cose" and, similarly to previous works by Moravia, gave excessive emphasis to sexual vices, a fact that for the critic showed that the writer became "il conformista di se stesso" ("L'ultimo Moravia"). For Bo, the plot followed a logic that was "meccanica, irreale," since most of the events it narrated had "un risultato fisso," which, as in other works of this author, "è sempre quello del male" (2). Criticisms became harsher with the reviews by Geno Pampaloni and Emilio Cecchi. The former, in a small piece in *Belfagor*, argued that Moravia "ha sprecato

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as a criticism of the implication of the readers of its time in capitalism and consumerist culture, which resonated with the transformation of Italian society in the postwar era.

[5] Even some of Bertolucci's most refined experts overlook the process of implication that Moravia describes in his novel. For instance, Sergio Rigoletto criticises the novel for its alleged "dramatic determinism," a reading that disregards the centrality given to Marcello's agency (138). Similarly, Christopher Wagstaff argues that the novel revolves around four principal threads, which are those of fate, Freudian psychoanalysis, homosexuality, and existentialism, and leaves no space for an interpretation centred around the idea of implication (78).

le sue migliori qualità […] in un romanzo che è difficile non definire sbagliato" because it just reproposed a series of typified figures that he had already explored in his previous works; Pampaloni concluded that Moravia "è rimasto prigioniero nei bassifondi del suo romanzesco" (366). In a review for *L'Europeo*, Cecchi contended that in this novel Moravia gave "l'impressione di essersi un po' troppo scatenato" having crafted a text that was too abstract, lacked real emotions, and for the many clichés it deployed was nothing more than "convenzionale letteratura" (12).

By the end of May 1951, a preponderantly negative consensus was established, which insisted on the novel's lack of originality vis-à-vis Moravia's previous production. In the following months, other unfavourable reviews followed. Franco Fortini published a piece in which he defined the text as an unaccomplished novel, stressing—quite reasonably—that *Il conformista* was negatively affected by an unresolved tension between its historical dimension and the expressionist/psychoanalytical one (64). Much less balanced appear the comments of other critics who carried out a demolition of Moravia's work. For Muscetta, the novel constituted "un documento (importantissimo, in verità, e raccapricciante) della sua [di Moravia] tragedia di scrittore" and the last sign of his "estrema involuzione." Giuseppe Bartolucci's review in *L'Avanti!* was unambiguously subtitled "libro inutile che conferma l'involuzione di uno scrittore." In a long essay in *Inventario,* Oreste del Buono deemed the book ridiculous, since it appeared to him so overcharged with "scelleratagini, porcherie e crudeltà sconfinata" that it produced an effect of "comico inconsapevole" ("Moravia e la buccia di banana" 120). Finally, Mario Alicata, Valerio Volpini, and Gaetano Trombatore reproposed the criticism that we have already encountered, which is that Moravia wrote a novel that simply reproduced the themes and tropes typical of his production. For the former, the novel testifies to a state of "stagnazione" (271) in Moravia's production that can only be explained by the author's "mancanza di senso del ridicolo" and "mancanza di senso della misura artistica" (272). For Volpini, it was evident that Moravia "ha ormai ridotto la sua vocazione letteraria ad un fatto precisato e schematizzato." For Trombatore, the text showed that the protagonist of Moravia's novels was always, "costantemente, monotonamente," the same indifferent bourgeois that he had already portrayed in *Gli indifferenti* (9).

There are many reasons why the novel was lambasted. It seems evident that a strong moralism influenced Italy's postwar critics, who found it difficult to appreciate a novel that talks openly about sex while deconstructing gender norms. Moreover, Moravia's choice of having a Fascist agent as main protagonist, together with the little edifying depiction of international anti-fascism that he offered through the figure of Professor Quadri, irritated several readers.[6] Yet, in a

[6] On the criticism of untimeliness and inefficacy that Moravia levelled against international anti-fascism through the representation of Professor Quadri see Biondi (426-35).

piece that reconsiders the novel vis-à-vis Moravia's biography and his personal remorse for his involvement with Fascism, Levis Sullam has recently suggested that many of these criticisms may have also been elicited by the very content of the text. By pointing out the indirect complicities of a regime's civil servant, *Il conformista* "agitava i fantasmi del rapporto degli italiani e degli intellettuali con il fascismo" (111) and was hinting at the broader question of the "implicazione degli intellettuali nel regime" (114), a topic that inevitably remained painful and problematic for many postwar intellectuals, including several reviewers of the book, who had previously operated within the Fascist cultural system.

Leaving aside the potential bad faith of some of these reviewers, which is something difficult to prove, a close analysis of the critical reception enables us to demonstrate that postwar critics largely misunderstood Moravia's novel because they were incapable to grasp the overall argument of the text regarding Marcello's implication in Fascist crimes. Many reviewers failed to see, or did not want to accept, that conformity in a totalitarian state necessarily results in a certain level of shared responsibility in injustice. This assumption entails, in its most extreme formulation, that accepting the normality of Fascism and complying with it, can make people implicated in murder—an unsettling social dynamic that Moravia masterfully depicted in his novel. This reading, however, was unfathomable for postwar reviewers.

Pancrazi, for instance, close-read the passage in which Marcello equates normality and complicity but he could only argue that here "Marcello parla storto o pazzo" ("L'ultimo Moravia"). Trombatore, too, completely missed the link between social compliance and participation in injustice, and he therefore lampooned a main protagonist who, compelled by the desire of being like everyone else, "si dà alla delinquenza politica" (9). Similarly, Cecchi resorted to irony to comment on Marcello's implication in Quadri's murder, a fact that he deemed "un paradosso di conformismo" (12). For Tumiati, Marcello could not be deemed a conformist because he was "un caso patologico" and he was pushed to commit "azioni decisamente e inequivocabilmente anormali, o addirittura delittuose." These comments reveal a failure to grasp the social mechanisms that the novel describes, in which the dictatorial power normalises and justifies injustice, making, therefore, the contribution to a political murder something consistent with the desire to be normal. The same misreading characterises Del Buono's extremely harsh review, in which the very fact that Marcello enrolled in the Fascist police was seen as a mistake, a blatant absurdity, since the reviewer found this choice incompatible with Marcello's desire for normality ("Moravia e la buccia di banana" 118).

These comments show that postwar scholars misconceived the overall message of the novel as they were unable to see—or preferred to disregard—that those who indirectly supported the regime by complying with its normality were implicated in Fascist crimes and had therefore a certain degree of responsibility for them. Refusing to accept this social dynamic as a sound interpretation to

explain the functioning of Fascist society, postwar reviewers were meant to find the novel incoherent and confusing and, as a result, they chastised something that they could not actually understand.

Conclusion: Fascism as a Hermeneutic Issue

For more than a century, Fascism has posed profound hermeneutic challenges and interpretative difficulties for anyone attempting to grapple with its complexities. As Campi contends, there has been something "costitutivamente enigmatico, eccentrico, storicamente sfuggente ed eccezionale" in the Fascist phenomenon, which has constantly generated an interpretative urge to understand it and define it (lxv). This was the case from the outset and, during the *ventennio*, anti-fascist intellectuals—leaving aside here the contribution that was given to this issue by the Fascist ones—put forward a series of contrasting interpretations to understand the genesis and essence of Mussolini's dictatorship. As Pier Giorgio Zunino argues, the work done in the 1920s and 1930s by Antonio Gramsci, Piero Gobetti, Filippo Turati, Giustino Fortunato, Gaetano Salvemini, Benedetto Croce, Palmiro Togliatti, and others who witnessed the rise and reign of Mussolini's dictatorship, had a lasting impact on how Fascism was interpreted in the decades to come (*Interpretazione e memoria* 5). In the postwar years, this initial interpretative work coalesced into the so called three classic interpretations, belonging to the Liberal, Marxist, and Radical-democratic traditions (De Felice, *Le interpretazioni*, 12-13; *Il fascismo* 386-87). The former saw Fascism as a European disease that had been exacerbated by the First World War and, at least in the version of this interpretation promoted by Benedetto Croce, as a parenthesis in national history.[7] The Marxist interpretation considered Fascism as the latest and most reactionary stage of a desegregating capitalist order that aimed to suppress the revolutionary aspirations of the working-class. Finally, the Radical-democratic perspective saw Fascism as a phenomenon strictly linked to the historical underdevelopment of specific national systems.[8]

Yet, besides these political traditions that informed the historiographical debates, the hermeneutic work that aimed to interpret and understand Fascism was also carried out within the broader cultural sphere. As Charles Leavitt has argued, it was first and foremost through the use of metaphors, such as those of parenthesis, disease, flood, childhood, and discovery, which circulated across an intermedial network of various cultural products, that postwar Italy negotiated a relationship with its Fascist past (13). The two novels that this article has analysed

[7] De Felice stresses that in the version of this theory developed in Germany by Friedrich Meinecke the idea of parentheses is absent (*Il fascismo* 392).

[8] The question of the interpretation of Fascism generated a vast discussion both in the Italian and international scholarship. Besides De Felice's work, which also discussed the catholic and totalitarian interpretations and those stemming from the social sciences, key contributions in this area are Pier Giorgio Zunino's works (*Interpretazione e memoria*; *La Repubblica e il suo passato*).

are part of this process, and they attest to the significance in postwar culture of another trope, which tended to conceptualise Fascism as a form of deviance.

This conceptualisation has not given rise to a coherent interpretation of Fascism and, within postwar historiography, one can only find loose traces of this perspective. Surely, the idea that Fascism constituted a deviant abnormality has some parallels with the Liberal interpretation of the moral disease—and, indeed, Gerhard Ritter, one of the promoters of the Liberal view, contended that with the advent of Nazism "il demoniaco del potere, anzichè sparire, salì in verità alla condizione di pieno satanismo" (quoted in De Felice, *Le interpretazioni*, 34). Traces of the deviancy trope can also be found in Guglielmo Giannini's journalistic production in *L'uomo qualunque,* where Fascism tended to be treated as a form of "banditismo politico" (quoted in La Rovere 114). Yet, this metaphoric conceptualisation cannot be ascribed to specific political families but must be connected, more broadly, to postwar anti-fascism that often presented, as De Felice has pointed out, "un'accentuata tendenza a risolvere in chiave demonologica" their assessment of Fascism (*Le interpretazioni* 11) at least until the 1960s (241).

Rather than in the political and historiographical discourses, the most overt manifestations of the conceptualisation of Fascism as deviance can be found in cultural production where the trope has often been developed through gendered representations that followed a strong heteronormative paradigm.[9] This conceptualisation, which as Christopher Wagstaff points out, was already active in Rossellini's depiction of Gestapo officers as homosexual in *Roma città aperta* (81), became particularly productive after the sexual revolution of 1968, as it can be seen by looking at Italian cinema of the following decade. David Forgacs has shown that in those years films by Luchino Visconti, Liliana Cavani, and Pier Paolo Pasolini resorted to sexual perversions, usually embodied in sadism and homosexual acts of sodomy, to present Fascism and Nazism as a scandalous form of absolute corruption. In these works, the idea of perversion, which generally, as Forgacs puts it, served to "mark out a large number of sexual activities or desires as aberrant, abnormal, or pathological in relation to norms of straight, normal, healthy sex" (216), acquired a political dimension to describe Fascism as something "transgressing, disturbing and destabilising" (217). As Christopher Wagstaff notices, the use of homosexuality to represent fascism was not merely a matter of sexual orientation but a trope used to deny Fascism's "moral or political acceptability" (80). In other words, the development of these gendered homophobic representations constituted specific examples of a more general trend that tended to depict fascism as a departure from some given norms, meaning as a form of deviancy and abnormality.

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[9] For examples of this representation in postwar literature see Bartolini, *The Italian literature of the Axis War*, 77.

The analysis of *Un eroe del nostro tempo* and *Il conformista* has shown that the deviancy trope was already active in the discourse on Fascism developed in the late 1940s. The two novels probe this interpretation questioning whether Fascism should be conceptualised as the product of the actions of abnormal persons or, on the contrary, as the result of social and psychological dynamics that shaped ordinary people into instruments of a repressive and unjust political power. In the reading that this article developed, each of these texts eventually opts for an opposite solution. *Un eroe del nostro tempo* presents Fascism as a violent and destructive, but also as a fascinating and corrupting force that is inherently linked to the demonic nature of its supporters. *Il conformista* plays with the idea of Fascism's abnormality only to discard it, and it conceptualises Fascism as the result of the psychological impulses to conform—especially among members of the bourgeoisie—and as a totalitarian system that implicates ordinary citizens in a network of complicities and co-responsibilities.

These divergent interpretations are reflected in the titles that the two writers chose for their works. By focusing his attention on "a hero of his time," Pratolini crafted a depiction of Fascism centred on the persona of the protagonist and on how the latter embodies a series of negative qualities that made him intrinsically a fascist. According to Asor Rosa, it was exactly in Sandrino's wicked nature that Pratolini "ha creduto di ravvisare […] la caratteristica che ne faceva, un eroe dei tempi, il rappresentante di una certa realtà italiana, avvertendo con acutezza che anche una forza di natura può essere il prodotto di una società" (195). As a result, the critic continues, Sandrino does not represent the tragic experience of a whole generation but "quello molto meno significativo di un gruppo di giovani fanatici dominati da instinti perversi" (213). In so doing, Pratolini's novel condemns Fascism, but, as noticed by Oreste Macrì, only through a demonisation (17-18) that results in a moralist conceptualisation which did no help readers understand Fascism as a historical reality.

Moravia constructs his novel as a reflection on the deviancy trope, but, as we saw, he concludes the story in favour of Marcello's normality, showing that the Fascist regime could function only thanks to compliant ordinary individuals who accepted to play their part within the machine of the totalitarian state in the hope of gaining social status and financial returns. Such representation objects to moralist interpretations of Fascism as deviancy and allows readers to reflect on the involvement of common citizens in the injustice perpetrated by Fascism as well as on the responsibility that stems from such involvement. Again, this conceptualisation is reflected by the title. As Moravia wrote in the paratext he prepared for the book's first edition:

> In tutti i tempi entrare a far parte di una società o comunità, condividerne i miti e le ideologie, ottenerne l'assistenza, comportano sempre un prezzo molto alto sia di rinunzia alla libertà di pensiero e di azione, sia, addirittura, di complicità criminale. Questo romanzo

vuole essere la storia del prezzo pagato da un conformista moderno per ottenere di appartenere ad una società inesistente.

(quoted in Pavolini 5)

With this novel, Moravia denies that Fascism is the result of individuals' deviant nature, and he elucidates that it is only through ordinary people's involvement and participation that a dictatorship can function.

In postwar Italy, however, few were ready to accept this perspective. After World War II, the Italian memory discourse was centred around notions of redemption and rebirth that, as Filippo Focardi has argued, led to emphasise the war of resistance against Fascism and downplay the idea of collective responsibility for the past (*La guerra della memoria* 10; *Il cattivo tedesco* xviii).[10] La Rovere has offered a detailed account of the numerous attempts to foster a sense of responsibility for Fascism in the postwar public arena, and he has concluded that the Italians eventually opted for a memory discourse that "attenuando il senso di colpa collettivo, permettesse al paese di sperare in un nuovo inizio" (18). Within the Italian collective memory crafted during the postwar years, which disregarded the idea of responsibility for the past (Bartolini, *The Italian literature of the Axis War*, 26; "The memory of Italian Fascism" 308), *Il conformista*, with its emphasis on the implication of ordinary people in Fascist crimes, remained largely unintelligible and was inevitably misunderstood and, therefore, chastised. By contrast, Pratolini's demonisation of Fascism according to the deviancy trope has proven to be much more productive, remaining a viable perspective to narrate Italy's dictatorial past throughout the decades. Nonetheless, this ahistorical, moralistic, and less troubling interpretation of Fascism did not aid the critical reception of *Un eroe del nostro tempo*, which was dismissed by postwar critics due to its use of a fascist perpetrator as the main protagonist. The fact that two novels developing such an interconnected but eventually divergent representation of Fascism were met with similar negative responses underscores the strong reluctance of postwar culture to confront Italy's Fascist past through the medium of literature.

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[10] The Italian memory of Fascism and World War II has been the object of a vast scholarship. For an overview of some of its general tendencies see the interviews to Luisa Passerini, Filippo Focardi, John Foot, Robert Gordon, and Philip Cooke in Bartolini, "The memory of Italian Fascism."

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