The Knowledge of Afterthoughts: A Comparative Reading of the Poetry of Caproni and Sereni

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The present work explores the idea that one of the forms of knowledge literature produces can be understood in terms of afterthought. It focuses on the retrospective attempts to understand that characterise two poetic collections both published in Italy in 1965, Vittorio Sereni's *Gli strumenti umani* and Giorgio Caproni's *Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso & altre prosopopee*. Sereni often laments the long years it takes him to write a poem, the despair he feels, and the shame that follows for caring so much about poetry. This fluctuation between hope and guilt, meaning and non-sense, far from being just a biographical detail, becomes what life and literature seem to have in common, and what his poetry sets out to investigate by using the resources of the 'parlato-scritto' (to use Giovanni Nencioni's term) to create a cohesive and yet open structure. Caproni's poems combine everyday discourses and poetic form to scrutinise the little we can reach, express, and communicate. The possibility of pointing at reality through deictics, or of connecting words thanks to rhyme, is carefully analysed to verify whether a residue of sense can be found in the structures we rely on to make sense of our lives despite their apparent emptiness. Sereni's and Caproni's ideas and texts are studied through a broad set of comparisons, as one of the ways in which the claim that literature can know is explored in this thesis is by using literary works to understand each other. This methodology is outlined through the figure of the critic-reader and aims at exploring a possible response that critical works may offer to the afterthoughts of literature, considering the hypothesis that we may know something better after having read a text in thinking back to certain passages that struck us, comparing them to other ones from that or other books, and to what we have learnt through our experiences.

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This work explores a possible form of knowledge literature can offer, that of afterthoughts. It claims that we may learn from books not only by reading them, but by thinking back to sentences, lines, passages that struck us, not necessarily because they contained some truth, but rather because they pointed to its possibility. This retrospective attempt to understand characterises two poetic collections both published in Italy in 1965, Vittorio Sereni's *Gli strumenti umani* and Giorgio Caproni's *Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso & altre prosopopee*. Despite being quite different, these works are often brought together as they both include features of spoken language at a time when Italian was becoming for the first time the standard for oral communication. The present work, too, acknowledges the important role played in these collections by what Giovanni Nencioni calls 'parlato-scritto' but considers the tension between these two poles as representative of the way in which these works try to understand: through distance. This tension, however, should not be understood as an opposition between the poetic form and a reality that can only be labelled as prosaic, but rather as the awareness that spoken language is a persuasive and incomplete instrument of expression, just like poetry. It is precisely because these texts are striking but not exhaustive that we turn back to them, scrutinising their meaning once more.

One of the ways in which this thesis explores what literature can know is that of using literary works to understand other literary texts. As a result, Sereni's and Caproni's collections are read in dialogue with works they may not be traditionally associated with, and this has led me to the need to outline a methodology. In the first chapter I introduce what I call the critic-reader, a figure which is portrayed through four very different texts, Roland Barthes's series

of lectures at the Collège de France dedicated to *La Préparation du roman*; George Steiner's polemical opposition *Critic/Reader*; Virginia Woolf's indications on *How one should read a book*; Walter Benjamin's exploration of *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*. None of these texts mentions the critic-reader, focusing instead, on the writer, the reader, or the translator. However, they all engage with the problem of what to do with a text that strikes us by a detail, an idea, an expression, something specific and the different solutions they give all involve, in various ways, writing. This, I claim, is a problem and a solution shared by the critic-reader. In Barthes's series of lectures, it is desire that links together reading and writing: we are attracted by a passage in a text for the same reason we fall in love, because we are suddenly aware of our own desire, a desire which is individual, intimate, and yet could only emerge through the encounter with somebody else. When writing is not connected to reading, Steiner warns us, the result is a kind of criticism for which literature is a mere starting point, a suggestion and not the centre we will never fully reach but which we nonetheless ought to keep exploring. These indications that desire plays a crucial role in our relationship with a text and that despite its impenetrability we should never substitute our own ideas for those contained in a book offer precious advice for the critic-reader, but they do not come without dangers. In particular, the writer portrayed by Barthes seems to me too willing to encounter the others to discover something about themselves, and the reader Steiner opposes to the critic has too mystical a relationship with the unreachable centre of the text. Woolf's view of the connection between reading and writing helped me with the first issue, as she reminds us that one of the commandments of readership is to compare. According to her, any passage that strikes us demands a definition, asks us 'what shall we call this?'. In order to answer this question, we have to look to other texts but also, within us, to our own life which does not mean our autobiographical adventures but rather our understanding of our experiences. In other words, through comparison Woolf invites us to explore what of our own idiosyncrasy can be not just a narcissistic distortion but a shared insight. Benjamin assisted me, instead,

with the second problem by showing a different way of dealing with texts that cannot be reduced to mere communication; if we will never grasp their meaning fully, we can nonetheless work with them in order to produce provisional answers to our questions. If the specificity of literature is not addressable in a straightforward way, I may paraphrase Benjamin's suggestion, that the critic-reader can try to shed a temporary light on some aspects by putting together various texts, their own experience, and their desire. The title of the chapter, *Fragmentary writing*, refers to the image of the broken vessel mentioned in the *Zoahr* and analysed by Benjamin, as the indication he gives as to how to glue fragments together informs the methodology of the present work: the broken pieces, he warns us, do not need to be like one another, they must match. The elements I have collected in this work are disparate, fragments of philosophical discourses, novels, plays, poems by writers that Sereni and Caproni may never have read, reflections of my own, but they hopefully all work together in delineating the shape of a vessel framing the relationship between knowledge and literature.

The second chapter, *On not being able to write*, explores Sereni's sense of guilt for caring too much about his poems, for suffering the imbalance between efforts and results, and yet never managing to conceive of a life without writing. This attachment to poetry is not just a matter of identity or social role, but is linked to the fact that by composing verse, events interact with other elements – a book randomly left open at a certain page, a voice heard in the street, a public event – and in this interaction an experience reveals some of its more intimate aspects. The way in which poetry works, I suggest, can therefore be compared to the process of constant clarification of a perception described by Edmund Husserl as the exploration of the horizon of possibilities within which an experience may actualise further meanings. The process will always reveal something new, something unexpected, and Sereni tries to capture it through a poetic structure able to frame the ongoing transformation of an experience without losing its unity. In a famous essay, Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo has identified in iteration

and specularity as the fundamental strategies that characterise *Gli strumenti umani*. In this chapter, instead, by comparing 'Via Scarlatti' with poems by Montale, Saba, Rilke, and Eliot, I focus on the spirals rather than circles, as they leave open the possibility for the process of interpretation to start again and take a different direction. As Gilles Deleuze writes about Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, the ultimate aim is not that of unifying all the different elements but of stating that a unity exists, even if it remains incomplete. Poetry and spoken language both cooperate to organise the various components in structures that remain open for us to interpret; hyperbaton, non-verbal sentences, ellipsis, indeed, are typical of both oral discourses and poems and they are employed by Sereni as they present the different features in an inverted order, deprived of the connection of a verb, or with the indication that something is missing. If Husserl seems not to be concerned by the endless nature of the process of knowing, by its inevitable incompleteness, Sereni struggles with a form of nostalgia that emerges when the past comes back, once more transformed. If this is the space of creation, it is undeniably narrow and unstable. Just as Sereni wishes to be able to write more or more easily, sometimes he wants to believe in a definitive interpretation which, however, inevitably proves itself to be a source of suffering and a waste of energy; every time he starts a sentence with 'per un' he must conclude it with a list of elements he missed out, 'per un po' d'ombra', for example, 'quanti anni di vuoto appena dopo'. Only at the end of the collection do the features we did not notice, grasp, or understand appear as a source of hope; the dead, we are told, 'parleranno', the future lies in the unexpressed possibilities of the past.

The last chapter, *Writing on nothing*, scrutinises the relationship between poetry and spoken language in Caproni's *Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso & altre prosopopee*, in order to explore what it is that we can grasp through words. The title suggests that the collection includes some prosopopoeias, and this indication is taken literally, as the analysis focuses on the texts associated with this trope. These consist of the speeches of four characters or types; a

traveller, a priest, a guide, and a gamekeeper, who find themselves in ordinary settings, a train, a plateau, an inn. They do not seem to be dead or absent people who are suddenly able to talk, as the classical definition of the figure would imply, and therefore the label placed at the beginning of the collection is scrutinised in relation to a more recent understanding of the trope, as developed by Paul de Man in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, and by Derrida in *Mémoires pour Paul de Man*. The problem at stake here is both that of the literary premisses of the speeches that constitute the poems and of their social acceptance, as the indication offered by the title is ambiguous and the fact that the characters share what they have ultimately learnt in life to a silent audience in an everyday setting is puzzling. Prosopopoeia is considered as precisely the figure that questions the premisses of any utterance. Monologues exposing the wisdom of the characters do not surprise us in Dante's *Commedia*, as a long tradition of ultramundane journeys has taught us that this is what the dead in the beyond do when they meet a poet. The urgency of the souls is justified by the fact that they are given the only or last chance to talk and, according to Auerbach, this results in speeches that seem to be uttered by people who are alive rather than dead. This, in his view, is the core of Dante's realism. By using these same elements but in a different literary and social framework, Caproni explores a different notion of the intertwining of life and death, the power of language, the nature of reality. He questions what it means for the dead to speak, for a person to communicate, for a poet to write poetry, and he does so by analysing what these characters can actually reach through their speeches. The possibilities of pointing to something through deictics, of connecting words through rhyme, of addressing the audience are carefully scrutinised to verify whether in these empty structures a residue of meaning can be found. Just as the protagonists of these poems are about to leave but ultimately, are stuck in an endless farewell, so our attempts to reach our audience or the reality surrounding us bring us back to reconsider the conditions of our existence, the rules of social interactions, the categories we rely on to make sense of our lives. Knowledge, Caproni tells us, is possible

only when we attempt to communicate, but at the same time such a communication happens only if something remains unsaid; by looking back we realise that, as Agamben puts it, 'ciò che il perduto esige non è di essere ricordato o esaudito, ma di restare in noi in quanto dimenticato, in quanto perduto e, unicamente per questo, indimenticabile'. Our task is that of finding ways to acknowledge what remains unexpressed.

In conclusion, the knowledge that emerges in the form of afterthoughts from Sereni's *Gli strumenti umani* and Caproni's *Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso & altre prosopopee* underlines that solid understanding is only possible in relation to the negative aspects of our condition, what we cannot reach, grasp, keep. However, if we keep looking back it is because these stable truths leave us unsatisfied and we turn to other forms of knowledge, more elaborate and yet provisional, but able perhaps to carry some sort of hope.

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List of Translations

No translations have been provided for passages in Italian and in French. The excerpts in Latin and ancient Greek are quoted from parallel-text editions indicated in the accompanying footnotes. Translations from German are mine, except for the following works:

Auerbach, Erich, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013)

Benjamin, Walter, 'The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism', trans. by David Lachterman, Howard Eiland, and Ian Balfour, in *Selected Writings*, I: *1913-1926*, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 116-200

—— 'Doctrine of the Similar', trans. by Michael Jennings in *Selected Writings*, II: *1927-1934*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 694-698

—— 'Pretzel, Feather, Pause, Lament, Clowning', trans. by Rodney Livingstone, in *Selected Writings*, II: *1927-1934*, ed. by Marcus Bullock and others (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996-2003), pp. 726-727

Bernhard, Thomas, *My Prizes: An accounting*, trans. by Carol Brown Janeway (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2011)

—— *Woodcutters*, trans. by David McLintock (London: Faber and Faber, 2011)

Husserl, Edmund, *Cartesian Meditation: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. by Dorion Cairns (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1982)

Kafka, Franz, 'Fragments from Note-Books and Loose pages', in *Wedding preparations in the country and other posthumous prose writings*, trans. by Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins (London: Secker and Warburg, 1954)

Introduction

> Un tout très composé, quoique d'une composition si complexe que je crains que personne ne le perçoive et qu'il apparaisse comme une suite de digressions. C'est tout le contraire.
> Marcel Proust[1]

Afterthought is quite a straightforward word, as it literally indicates the thoughts that come after. However, in other languages this idea can have different nuances. In German, for example, *nachdenken* may look like an equivalent of the English expression, but it is a verb and not a noun, and means more broadly to think, to reflect as if to remind us that every thought comes late. *Ripensare* in Italian literally means to think again, to reconsider something, but the noun it forms, *ripensamento*, has a more negative connotation than afterthought; we can look backwards for a number of reasons but if we return to a certain place it is because something went wrong, we were deceived or we were the ones who were misleading. *Après coup*, a possible French version, goes further in this direction, as it indicates what comes after an event has taken place or rather hit us; Lacan famously transformed the adjective into a noun to translate another made-up word, Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*, but in doing so his aim is to underline that when significance arrives retrospectively, it affects both the past and the present.[2] All these nuances are not alien to the meaning of afterthought in English and in this work, but for now let us focus on the simpler indication that sometimes thought comes afterwards and on the relation between this insight and knowledge. The most ambitious claim of my research, indeed, is not only that literature can know, but that the form of knowledge it produces may be understood in terms of afterthoughts. We may learn from books not only by reading them, but by thinking back to them, when their spell has broken but fragments, lines, sentences stick with us, demanding our attention. If we are struck by certain passages,

[1] The quotation is taken from a letter Proust wrote to René Blum on the 20th of February 1913 which can be read in Marcel Proust, *Correspondance*, ed. by Philip Kolb (Paris: Plont, 1984), v. 12, p. 82.
[2] See Jacques Lacan, 'Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage en psychanalyse. Conférence de Rome, 26 et 27 septembre 1953', in *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), pp. 237-322.

I believe, it is not because we necessarily found some truth in them, but rather its possibility. To find out whether we encountered something meaningful, we have to compare what we just read to other books and to what we know through our own experiences. This knowledge that comes later, these thoughts that emerge only afterwards is what I have sought in two poetic collections, Vittorio Sereni's *Gli strumenti umani* and Giorgio Caproni's *Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso & altre prosopopee*, or better said, in the comparison between these collections, my own ideas, and a series of texts that touch upon similar issues.

Indeed, the guiding idea that knowledge can take the form of afterthoughts emerges from my reading of the works of Sereni and Caproni both published in 1965. These collections are quite different not only in terms of style, but also of status, as *Gli strumenti umani* is generally considered Sereni's most important collection, while scant attention has been paid by critics to Caproni's *Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso & altre prosopopoee*, since the path it entails would not be further explored by the poet. However, they are often brought together in works that explore the transformation of literary language in the 1960s at a time in which Italian was becoming the standard spoken language.[3] Many writers include features of spoken language in their works, and, in the case of poetry, this tendency has been described as a movement towards prose.[4] As I show in the first chapter, however, in Sereni's and Caproni's collections there is no opposition between the poetic form and a reality that can only be labelled as prosaic, but rather the awareness that spoken language is a persuasive and incomplete instrument of expression, just like poetry. In their case the use of what Nencioni defines as 'parlato-scritto'[5] invites us to focus on the fact that it is distance rather than proximity between form and meaning that allows for the possibility of knowing something.

[3] See, for example, Andrea Afribo, Arnaldo Soldani, *La poesia moderna. Dal secondo Ottocento a oggi* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012).
[4] See, among others, Alfonso Berardinelli, *La poesia verso la prosa. Controversie sulla lirica moderna* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1994).
[5] Giovani Nencioni, 'Parlato-parlato, parlato-scritto, parlato-recitato', in *Di scritto e parlato. Discorsi linguistici* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1983), pp. 126-179.

As Benjamin points out, there is no possible immediate identification of the medium and the message, and what we ought to explore is instead the tension between them, bearing in mind that 'die wichtigste von diesen Verspannungen dürfte jedoch die letzte, die zwischen dem Geschriebnen und Gesprochnen sein'[6] ['the most important of these ties may, however, be the one mentioned last-that between what is written and what is said', p. 697]. Following Benjamin's indication, this research has started by exploring the tension within the 'spoken-written' in these collections, to then consider more broadly the notion of distance as a source of knowledge in relation to the works of Sereni and Caproni and the critical discourse that can be built around them.

Sereni, as I discuss in Chapter 2, often laments the long years it takes him to write a poem, the sense of desperation that this time spent waiting entails but also the shame he feels for caring so much about poetry. 'Finisce la vita per questo?',[7] the poet asks himself, contemplating the possibility that he would not be able to write anymore. This is possibly one of those cases in which simplifications are made for the sake of drama, since the question implies what Barthes would call 'une vision simpliste et dramatiste';[8] life, of course, does continue also without writing and, indeed, many carry on their existences without the need to compose poems. However, if Sereni is so attached to this practice, despite its being so painful, it is because he fears the deprivation that its absence would entail, not so much a deprivation of life but rather of a powerful tool to decipher his own experience. The problem of knowledge is, therefore, one of the crucial issues of *Gli strumenti umani*, the collection Sereni published after almost twenty years spent waiting for words which would eventually express the aspects of an occurrence which are valid beyond its personal context. Understanding

[6] Walter Benjamin, 'Lehre vom Ähnlichen', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and others (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1972-1991), II/1: *Aufsätze, Essays, Vorträge*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (1977), pp. 204-210 (p. 108).
[7] Vittorio Sereni, 'Il silenzio creativo', in *La tentazione della prosa*, ed. by Giulia Raboni (Milan: Mondadori, 1998), pp. 68-69 (p. 68).
[8] Roland Barthes, *La Préparation du roman. Cours au Collège de France (1978-1979 et 1979-1980)* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2015), p. 222.

comes after not only in the sense that awareness, like the owl of Minerva, is always posthumous, spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk, but also because in the interval between experiencing and deciphering something, a transformation occurs: aspects that before passed unnoticed suddenly become visible. This has less to do with the improvement of our ability to understand and more with the fact that, as Husserl puts it, 'das *cogitatum qua cogitatum*, ist nie als ein fertig Gegebenes vorstellig'[9] ['The *cogitatum qua cogitatum*, is never present to actual consciousness as a finished datum', p. 45]. The process of understanding consists in an exploration of the horizon of possibilities in which an experience may actualise further meanings. Sereni hopes that writing would help him in such an exploration, even if, to his dismay, it would not speed up the process. The distance between an event and its understanding becomes in his work the problem of waiting, of the time spent contemplating an absence, and of the sense of guilt for not being able to fill it; but it also leads to a renewal of his poetic style which aims to respect the contradictory, ever-changing nature of experience and aspires to self-contained poetry. For this purpose, the poet draws on the structures he finds at the intersection between spoken language and poetic form, and through hyperbaton, reticence, and nominal sentences he writes poems that are rich in information but ambiguous about the ways in which they are connected.

While Sereni's poetry deals with stratifications, time, consciousness, Caproni instead focuses on a limited set of features: four characters uttering monologues in front of an audience. The poems of the *Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso & altre prosopopoee* I analyse in Chapter 3 consist, indeed, of the speeches of four characters or types; a traveller, a priest, a guide, and a gamekeeper, who find themselves in ordinary settings, a train, a plateau, an inn. Far from being a straightforward representation of everyday occurrences, however, these poems ask us to look back to reconsider the premisses of literary work, of social interactions, and of the

[9] Edmund Husserl, *Husserliana. Gesammelte Werke*, ed. by Ullrich Melle and others (Berlin: Springer, 1950 –), I: *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge*, ed. by Stephan Strasser (1991), p. 45.

structures we rely on to make sense of our life. These characters are, indeed, indicated as prosopopoeias in the title of the collection but the texts offer no indication that they are dead or absent people who are suddenly able to speak; they tell us what they have ultimately learnt in their life without being asked about it, they are apparently surrounded by other people, but they are the only ones talking and they adopt a ceremonious style. Knowledge for Caproni seems possible only in the attempt to communicate with somebody else, but this movement towards the other and the reality surrounding us only brings us back questioning our own condition. We believe we speak and yet as de Man points out, if we turn to the self, we will realise that behind the proper name, the face, there is not a solid, stable entity but the very gesture of conferring the power of speech to someone mute; there is a prosopopoeia.[10] We may try to be straightforward but we end up taking the longest way to come to an expression, we depend on the understanding of our audience but we may realise we are alone in the room. The protagonists of these poems are about to leave and yet it seems they have no place to go to, they are stuck in an endless farewell. Caproni, indeed, is interested in the gestures and discourses that fill our days and books as they point to the paradoxical coexistence of presence and absence, or better said at the disproportion between the 'nulla', as he calls it, that constitutes reality and the little we can oppose to it. The 'spoken-written' that characterises these poems, the fact that that these speeches use the present tense, address a 'you', point to the 'here' but in the context of a poem does not make us oblivious of the distance between language and reality but rather fully aware of it.

To claim that these collections may offer a possible form of knowledge is a plain and yet ambitious aspiration which implies a number of assumptions: that it is possible to know, that we can delimit what literature is, that a doctoral thesis is the space where one can investigate such issues. Addressing these premisses would have been an enriching and yet demanding

[10] Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement', in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 67-81.

journey, and I was concerned that having started from such a distance, I would not have been able to come to the texts by Caproni and Sereni whose knowledge I wanted to scrutinise. Therefore, I have ignored some very legitimate questions people were asking me on my way, asked for a lift, and started walking only halfway along the path. However, going straight to the poems I was willing to analyse was not an option either, as I felt I had to address at least some of my premisses and, indeed, the chapters on Sereni and Caproni are preceded by one dedicated to the relationships between reader, writer, and critic, between literature and knowledge, between the spoken and the written. Ultimately, all these important issues lead to the assumption that literature knows in a different way than other discourses.

In this first chapter, drawing on Dostoevsky's scepticism that literature has anything to do with explanations, I try to justify the fact that I focus on the specific way in which literature knows in a non-literary form, that of a doctoral thesis. If literature knows in its own way, can criticism grasp and, more importantly, convey this knowledge since it has at its disposal very different means? Yes and no, I argue. Literature, I believe, does not need our explanations of what a certain passage means, nor our accounts of what we have learned by reading a book. Incidentally, this can be considered the first declination of what I mean by the specificity of literature; it does not have to produce knowledge, to make us wiser, a privilege usually not shared by criticism. However, literature may produce knowledge, and criticism can try to analyse it through three helpful tools: quotations, comparison, and close reading. The distinctive way in which literature knows can be experienced by the reader of a critical piece in the portions of poems, novels and plays quoted, it can be understood if placed next to other forms of knowledge, and it can be grasped by carefully analysing the textual mechanisms. Ultimately, the idea here is that when it comes to specificity, we need to scrutinise it closely, go back to it to remind ourselves of what it was that we first saw, confront it with something else in order to describe it. A critical piece about knowledge and literature should stay near to the texts it analyses, without obliterating the fact that it is different from

the literary discourse but nonetheless engaging with it. As the focus of this critic is specifically on the knowledge produced by literature rather than on that owned by the authors, their attitude is more similar to that of the reader who finds a book in a library than to the writer who composed it; they discuss the effects – in terms of knowledge – of a text rather than its premisses. For this reason, I suggest calling this figure a critic-reader, possibly not a very appealing expression, as is often the case with compounds, but hopefully a clear indication that I am referring to somebody who elaborates the impression they got from books, retaining, at the same time, something of the experience of reading. The texts they write are characterised by passion, a broad set of comparisons, the awareness that no literary work can be explained away. These are also the characteristics of the present work which seeks to explore what books may know firstly and most importantly by using literary works to understand other pieces of literature.

As the poems by Sereni and Caproni are compared with other texts in a possibly less traditional way, the first chapter outlines the reasons behind my methodology which are linked to the notion of the specificity of literature but also to that of afterthoughts as it emerges from *Gli strumenti umani* and *Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso & altre prosopopee*. Indeed, because the critic-reader needs to look at various texts, carefully placing them one next to the other, finding out what they have in common and where they differ, the time of waiting is one of their inseparable companions, together with a tendency to interrogate the structures that made it possible for an idea to arise. For thoughts to come after we need to give them some time, for them to emerge I need to focus on the contexts that provoked them. As this work is an exercise in afterthoughts, it unfolds slowly through analysis and comparison, and asks the reader to wait patiently, as sometimes they may have the impression that I talk about everything but the poetry of Sereni and Caproni. At other times they may wonder how these very different quotations can be brought together, as they come from distant contexts, traditions, epochs; in those moments they too would be required to focus on the structure

of this work to see whether the various texts placed one after the other actually work in my discourse. Finally, I often comment on another form of afterthoughts, that of letters, drafts, and interviews, not to trace the journey back to the composition of their poems, but to explore possibilities they may have contemplated and abandoned or considerations about their collections that emerged only afterwards.

What did I learn then by retrospectively looking at *Gli strumenti umani* and *Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso & altre prosopopee* through these various comparisons with other texts? That in both collections the knowledge that arises in the form of afterthoughts is mainly negative, as Sereni turning back sees the disproportion from the effort and its results, the long years spent trying to decipher an experience and the few poems he ended up writing, and Caproni acknowledges the little he has grasped despite the complex architectures he has built to understand and communicate reality. If their attempts to know ultimately foster the awareness that we miss out so many aspects of what we would like to understand, it is precisely to what is neglected, uncommunicated, wasted that we have to keep going back to see whether some hope is, by chance, hidden in it.

I. Fragmentary Writing. Reasons for a Methodology

Die chimärische Natur eines Inbegriffs der Erkenntnisse ist zu erweise.
[The chimerical nature of the aggregate of knowledge should be shown]
Walter Benjamin[11]

1. The critic-reader

Dostoevsky did not believe in explanations linking together causes and effects, or better said, he did not believe that literature aims at such explanations. In his view, literature is all about effects, the world in front of us, the reality we live in.[12] It is us, the readers, who need to motivate the behaviour of a certain character with one reason or another, connect dots, draw conclusions. This is possibly the reason behind his disproportionate use of *vdrug* (suddenly): if not determined by a cause, everything happens all of a sudden.[13] The function of criticism, I may add, is that of helping the readers in this process, gathering elements that are scattered in a text and presenting them in a specific, motivated order. In this process, some aspects can get lost or, on the contrary, receive great attention so that criticism is often a source of disappointment: a reader convinced by an essay to read a novel does not quite find the meditation on destiny they were promised; another cannot detect a single critic willing to address what they thought was the most relevant aspect of a certain poem. In the most extreme cases, critical pieces and literary works diverge so dramatically that we cannot believe they are related, but more often we recognise a certain resemblance, sometimes a boring

[11] Walter Benjamin, 'Wahrheit und Wahrheiten. Erkenntnis und Erkenntnisse', *Gesammelte Schriften*, IV/1: *Kleine Prosa. Baudelaire-Übertragungen*, ed. by Tillman Rexroth (1972), pp. 46-48 (p. 47).
[12] As Serena Vitale points out, in 1876 Dostoevsky was struck by a series of apparently unmotivated suicides he decided to write about but in his preparatory notes to what would become *A gentle creature*, he reminds himself to follow Pushkin's example and offer no explanation. See both her translation of *Krotkaya* in Italian and the accompanying note: *La mite* (Milan: Adelphi, 2018).
[13] See Konstantin Barsht, *Dostoevskii: Etimologiia povestvovaniia* (St Petersburg: Nestor-Istoriia, 2019), p. 109.

carbon copy, at other times a striking portrait. One reason why criticism, like translation, decays at a faster pace than source texts may be that effects are much more interesting than causes, they go in infinite directions, they provoke multiple reflections. Explanations, on the contrary, often sound quite narrow, they inevitably simplify, exclude, omit. Yet, cause-effect explanations are reassuring, as Hume taught us,[14] they allow us to organise our everyday life, to believe that we have done something for a reason, to make peace with aspects of a text that puzzle us.

The present work addresses the theoretical contribution that literary form can offer and focuses in particular on two poetic collections both published in 1965, Vittorio Sereni's *Gli strumenti umani* and Giorgio Caproni's *Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso e altre prosopopee*. Before dwelling on some of the questions which may arise from this statement– i.e., why these collections were chosen, what is meant here by theoretical contribution? – I would like to address a more preliminary issue: why do we write about literature? Is it not contradictory for a study aiming to address the specificity of literary discourse to adopt a language that can only partially adhere to such a specificity? Or, in other words, if literature is all about effects, why should we focus on explaining causes? This is a complex yet fundamental issue which I cannot hope to solve in this chapter; but while I was exploring it, a figure has emerged across different texts of the various authors I have consulted, that of the critic-reader, a paradoxical and contradictory figure taking on an equally paradoxical and contradictory task.

1.1 The reader who writes

In the second part of his course at the Collège de France, *La Préparation du roman*, Roland Barthes distinguishes between two kinds of readers: those for whom the pleasure of reading is not tormented by the desire to write, and those for whom it is. Barthes places himself

[14] See for example the section 'Sceptical doubts concerning the operations of the understanding' in David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Peter Millican (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 18-29.

among the latter: 'j'écris parce que j'ai lu', [15] he states, and devotes the whole first part of the course to analysing how from reading a book one may end up writing one. At the beginning of this journey, Barthes tells us, there is 'le plaisir, le sentiment de joie, de jubilation, de comblement que me donne la lecture de certains textes écrits par d'autres' (p. 243). It is not just the joy of reading, an expression he dismisses as suitable to name a bookshop, but rather the true happiness of a loving desire. Indeed, the framework through which Barthes investigates the passage from reading to writing is possibly his most distinctive one, that of an amorous relationship. Reading a text is like falling in love: all of a sudden, we are struck by something that others may not find that interesting or beautiful but in us produces 'une sorte d'incandescence presque éternelle et mystérieuse (c'est-à-dire que l'expliquer ne l'épuiserait pas)'. The reader writes because they have been affected by a text and would like to share this affection with others but is not able to fully express it (it is mysterious) or extinguish it (it is eternal). Like when we fall in love, the focus on a particular book is idiosyncratic; other people would pick up other texts or even the same text but for other reasons: 'être amoureux', Barthes explains us, 'c'est choisir un être parmi mille autres possibles mais précisément celui-là qui vient s'adapter à mon désir absolument individuel tel au fond que je ne peux pas le connaître avant de rencontrer cet être' (p. 243). If the text did not concern us, we would not be struck by it, but if we already knew what it reveals, we would not be interested in it. The lens of desire allows Barthes to explore the blurred bounderies between object and subject, the ambiguous space navigated by the reader who writes, a space he describes in terms of narcissistic distortion: 'pour que l'œuvre de l'autre passe en moi, il faut que je la définisse en moi comme écrite pour moi et qu'en même temps je la déforme, que je la fasse Autre à force d'amour' (p. 249). What we love is, in the end, a misrepresentation: what the text means to us, the way in which our feelings transform the

[15] Roland Barthes, *La Préparation du roman. Cours au Collège de France (1978-1979 et 1979-1980)*, p. 242. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

text. Barthes gives us an example taken this time from a different art form, music; he loves Bach's fourth partita, or better said, he loves the way in which he plays it. When he hears it performed at a different tempo by a professional harpsichordist on the radio, he realises it does not mean anything to him, 'rien ne se passe, rien ne se crée' (p. 250) he comments. Writing comes from reading, but its ultimate goal is that of rewriting.

By attending Barthes' lecture, we may wonder who this reader is who is allowed to openly prefer their own misrepresentation of a text. On the one hand, the exceptional reader that the novelist, or more generally any writer, is;[16] on the other, the common reader, if I can borrow Virginia Woolf's title. While reinventing their sources of inspiration instead of replicating them is a duty for a writer, it is part of the reader's freedom to ignore historically accurate accounts and enjoy their own version of a story. The one who should not let the force of their feelings distort a text is, generally speaking, the critic; 'reviews are pernicious', Coleridge states, 'because they are filled with personalities'. [17] The critic writes but is not a writer and should not disguise the traces of the books that affected their ideas. However, if the critic's duty is different to that of the poet and the novelist, can they enjoy part of the freedom of those who read? Or, in other words, can the critic be a reader?

1.2 Critic v. Reader

No, is George Steiner's answer to our question, the critic cannot be a reader. He explores the issue in an article published a few months before Barthes' lectures at the Collège de France, entitled '*Critic*'/'*Reader*'. His stance is explicit already from the title, where the slash means that the terms are antithetical rather than interchangeable, and, indeed, in this piece the two figures are defined by opposition. We first encounter the critic, whose distinctive

[16] See for example Adam Watt, *Reading in Proust's 'À la recherche'. Le délire de la lecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[17] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge. Lectures on Shakespeare (1811-1819)*, ed. by Adam Roberts (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 7.

motion, according to Steiner, is that of stepping back, 'in exactly the sense in which one steps back from a painting on a wall in order to perceive it better'. Among the people visiting a picture gallery, moving back to contemplate the works of art, the critic would be easily recognised because they are the one who 'makes this motion conscious to himself [sic] and to his [sic] public'.[18] This simple movement entails complex consequences: on the one hand, the critic has to explain from which angle they look at a text, clarify their unique perspective – 'no two distancing can be perfectly identical' (p. 425), Steiner underlines – and, more broadly, justify why the best way to penetrate something is looking from afar; on the other hand, the painting on the wall becomes a 'datum, a *donné*' (p. 430), it is objectified or even reified. If the critic distances themselves, the reader seeks proximity; if the critic steps back, the reader learns by heart. Because the reader's distinctive feature is invisible, private, and visceral, nobody can point to someone in a bookstore and declare 'this is a reader', just as it is not possible to describe surely what happens between a reader and a text. Intimacy is an extremely intricate matter. It entails vulnerability, 'the text can bring drastic hurt', Steiner warns us, as well as impenetrability, 'there is always more that seems to elude us' (p. 441) he states; it means being affected in unpredictable ways by something we do not entirely understand and does not only exist in relationship to us. Bedside tables are typically narrow, suitcases are easily full, coats have only two pockets; only a limited number of texts can be kept close enough to us. For this reason, the reader does not focus on a book as a whole, but rather on specific portions of it, on the fragments they deliberately learn by heart or autonomously stick to their minds. Steiner, however, does not talk about bedside tables, suitcases, or pockets, but rather of ontological contiguities, 'contact with transcendence', 'real presence' (p. 440). In other words, Steiner unfolds the complexity of intimacy following Heidegger's example and goes as far as stating that 'the true reader' must become 'a shepherd

[18] George Steiner, 'Critic/Reader', *New Literary History*, 10/3 (Spring, 1979), pp. 423-452 (p. 423). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

of the being of the text' (p. 450). The opposition between the critic and the reader is, indeed, the opposition between articulating an intention and preserving a presence, between epistemology and ontology, between the philosophy of Husserl and the ideas of Heidegger. The distance between the two figures could not be more radical.

1.3 The reader

Despite the differences in contexts and frameworks, there are striking similarities between the reader depicted by Barthes and the one portrayed by Steiner. They both recognise that no text can be exhausted by an explanation, because of the fierceness of desire according to Barthes, or the force of the work of art for Steiner. They also agree that the act of reading concerns the text as much as the reader, either because we discover in the text something about us (Barthes), or because we are modified by the text we memorise (Steiner). Both readers show no interest in assessing the value of a specific book, and they openly prefer fragments to the whole; the motion of stepping closer for Steiner's reader results in a contraction of the focus, 'which makes of the single word or short sentence the crucial units of reading, as they are of memorisation'; Barthes underlines that the desire to write 'vient non pas de la lecture en soi (il n'y a pas à définir un traité de la lecture), mais de lectures particulières, de lectures topiques qui est la Topique de mon Désir, la topique c'est-à-dire la « science » des lieux où mon désir va' (p. 244). These readers not only appreciate single words and short sentences, the places visited by their desire, but they both copy them out, and it is through this act of copying that they end up writing; 'le livre qu'on aime, on le copie sur du papier' (p. 248), announces Barthes. This statement may sound quite old-fashioned nowadays, but even in the case of cutting and pasting, we are always dealing with bits of a book, not only because copying a whole novel is exhausting or pointless when we have access to the e-book, but because we are struck only by portions of it. Quotations are a further element which can reveal, according to Steiner, the difference between the reader and the

critic, for their use and their meaning change considerably when handled by the two figures. The difference is both in quantity – the critic mainly paraphrases, the reader primarily transcribes or memorises – and in purpose: the critic's quotation aims at 'illustrative excision' from the text, while for the reader it is a means to 'complete reentry into the text' (p. 442).

1.4 The critic

Why, we may wonder, are these figures so similar? One possible answer could be that to a certain extent both Barthes and Steiner are talking about the same thing, themselves. In his essay, Steiner delineates a long series of oppositions between the reader and the critic but ultimately the difference between the two lies, I believe, in the fact that the critic may be tempted 'to make of its object not the necessary and sufficient cause of its own existence, but a mere starting point and receding suggestion', while the reader never forgets the centrality of the work of art. The tendency of criticism to read for us, to substitute itself for the work of art is one of its intrinsic features, which cannot be avoided but should be contained, and instead has been institutionalised, has become the standard in schools and universities. The main target of this article is, indeed, the status occupied by criticism in the cultural scene, 'a status', Steiner caustically claims, 'unequalled since the Alexandrian scholiasts and grammatologists' (p. 437). When he states that 'we require more and better readers', he is not concerned about bookstores closing, or what people may prefer doing on a Sunday morning. All the texts I discuss in this introduction mentions the reader, or even the common reader, but this remains a mysterious and inscrutable figure with which none of them really engages. When Steiner at the end of his essay eventually gives us some example of the readers he has in mind, he mentions 'Walter Benjamin reading Goethe's *Elective Affinities*', 'Mandelstam reading Dante and Chénier', 'Nabokov reading (not translating) Pushkin', 'Jean Starobinski reading Rousseau' (p. 452), in short, he is thinking of a specific way of engaging with texts, a way which he considers to be wrongfully neglected in the

mainstream critical discourse. 'Textual criticism is sharply critical, but in a sense almost antithetical to that of the critic's criticism' (p. 445) he declares; 'exegetic meditation on the minimal unit is the ultimate rationale of true reading' (p. 444), he adds. And with this, he is mentioning what is most characteristic of his own way of approaching texts.

To determine what Barthes' course at the Collège de France is ultimately about is less straightforward, but undoubtedly its main target is not the act of reading alone. In the opening session of 1st December 1979, Barthes quite soon distinguishes between the reader who writes and the one who exclusively reads, but the latter has to wait almost until the end of the lecture for the speaker to turn to them, appalled by their presence: 'je m'étonne toujours', he declares, 'd'avoir des lecteurs, c'est-à-dire des gens qui me lisent sans écrire, sans avoir envie d'écrire. Des lecteurs, c'est-à-dire des êtres, des âmes dont le statut est de lire et non pas d'écrire' (p. 260). Why is the existence of such creatures so surprising? Because for Barthes what is conveyed in a text, as in all forms of communication, is not a message but rather a desire, and the only way to understand someone else's desire is to identify oneself with it. He seems to suggest here that ultimately what literature wants to communicate is the desire to write, a desire which cannot be grasped except through experience. Those who are immune to the ambition of becoming writers would strongly disagree about this, defending their own specific understanding of the texts they read, and only read; this may be the reason why they are evoked to be immediately forgotten. Barthes can be surprised that such readers exist, going as far as stating that he does not understand how people who do not write live their lives;[19] but he is not interested in them, all his attention being directed to the desire to write, the hope of writing, the mania that writing finally is. Indeed, this is a course about and around writing, its sources, causes, and conditions. It is about a preparation, however, not the preparation of the novel promised in the title, or at least not of the novel as it is

[19] 'Je ne comprends pas vers quel temps ils peuvent se tourner, s'ils n'écrivent pas, s'ils n'ont pas mis l'écrire dans leur vie, vers quel temps est-ce qu'ils peuvent se tourner ?' (p. 333).

traditionally understood, but rather as a form able to reconcile haiku and Proust, fragments and structures. The preparation which this course is all about is the space between someone else's writing and our own, between the books we read and the books we write, it is the space of journals, autobiographies, notes, the space of criticism as Barthes conceives it.

1.5 The critic-reader

The features Barthes' and Steiner's readers share, the awareness that a text is irreducible to any interpretation, the consciousness that the book concerns us, the focus on fragments, are some of the key aspects of a figure extremely relevant for the present work, the critic-reader. By placing side by side Barthes, Steiner, and my own text, the purpose is not that of making Nietzsche laugh, as he always did when different figures were levelled by the conjunction 'und'; as Barthes himself points out, when he talks about *Proust et moi*, it is a 'confusion de pratique, non de valeur'.[20] However, my practice is ultimately different from that of Barthes and Steiner not only because of the difference in status, privilege, and context, but also because I am aware of some of the risks implicit in their postures.

When Barthes talks about desire in describing the relationship between the text and the reader who writes he touches upon very important elements: the pleasure of encountering a passage that speaks to us, the urge to dwell on it, and more broadly, the idea that writing is the result of an encounter, is the attempt at articulating a relationship, is the answer to a question we could not ask ourselves until we found it in a book. In his course, Barthes delineates a form of criticism that would have at its core such encounters. The 'critique pathétique', as he calls it, would start out from affective elements – 'des moments de l'œuvre, des moments forts, des moments de vérité' (p. 230) – rather than logical units and it 'accepterait de déprécier l'œuvre, de ne pas en respecter le Tout, d'abolir des parts de cette

[20] Roland Barthes, 'Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure', in *Le bruissement de la langue. Essais critiques IV* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1984), pp. 313-25 (p. 313).

œuvre, de la *ruiner* – pour la faire vivre' (p. 231). We may argue that all forms of criticism are in some ways pathetic, that the distinction between affective elements and logical units is not that definite, but Barthes' move of placing something very common in the experience of readers, the 'odd, unsought moments of powerful affective response'[21], at the centre of a critical discourse is very appealing. The problem for me lies more in the idea that necessarily for a book to be alive, it must be destroyed, and more in general in the antagonism between the reader who writes and the book they read that seems to pervade Barthes' discourse. Indeed, the amorous relationship is a powerful framework to look at the relationships we have with texts, but Barthes' concept of love derives from one of his favourite authors, Proust. The idea behind it, I may summarise, is that the subject who desires is more important than the object of desire, that our sensations, expectations, fantasies are more valuable than the nature, life, character of the person who inspired them.

The extent to which we are attached to our own interpretations – which in a way are always misrepresentation – is particularly evident in the unpleasant situations in which our explanations are challenged or disproved, or when we are disappointed that the source text does not entirely confirm what we read and loved in its translation. Barthes, however, is not talking about the fact that every interpretation is partial and subjective, he is describing an intimate relationship with a text which reveals something both about us and the book. We can think of our attachment to the fantasies we create when we overhear a conversation, we briefly notice someone in the crowd, we read a dedication in a second-hand book; these fantasies are so precious because they have to do with us more than what provoked them. Yet, we may discover that the person who signed the book has a more interesting story to tell, that the mysterious figure that disappeared few minutes ago looks less appealing now that we see them in a coffee shop, that our friend's interpretation of the exchange we both

[21] Kate Briggs, 'Practising with Roland Barthes', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 55, 4 (2015), pp. 118-130 (p. 125). See also how she experiments with these principles in *Exercise in Pathetic Criticism* (York: Information as Material, 2011).

heard is more intriguing. In other words, we may recognise that our own way of playing Bach is not necessarily more important than the version we hear on the radio, that possibly the most relevant part of a text is not the one that concerns us the most.

The present work derives from the encounter with the poetic collection of Sereni and Caproni, the pleasure that reading their texts generated, and then expanded to include passages, quotations, fragments that resonate with me and with the poems. Most of these texts have been copied out in notebooks before being used here, they have been collected in the five years of this research. They come from my experience as a reader as well as a researcher, and they inevitably reflect my own interests, passions, and desires. However, the aim of the present work is not that of offering an example of critique pathétique, the passages I quote are not only what I retained of a book, they illuminate aspects of the texts with which they are in dialogue, they foster our understanding of the subjects I discuss. For me, the fact that my desire to write was provoked by reading certain texts does not mean that this is what they ultimately wanted to communicate. I have tried to mitigate the inevitable narcissistic distortion by keeping in mind that it is us who need to write and not the text that asks us to do so.

As we have seen, Steiner's principal aim in his article is that of restoring the centrality of the text. He portrays his reader as fully aware of the 'essential disinterestedness' of the work of art, 'the raison d'être of the painting or poem or musical composition being only being' (p. 442). Steiner once again wears Heideggerian gloves to remove the canvas from the wall and examine it. For this reason, when asked about its autonomy, he answers mentioning purity and mystery, or referring to the Bible: 'the Angel was not looking for Jacob' (p. 443), he states. Unlike Jacob, however, the reader does not wrestle with the text, but after an initial reluctance – 'Jonah was a reader' (p. 450) we are told – decides to serve it. As a servant of the text, the reader becomes the shepherd, the doorkeeper of its 'ontological pulse', 'the

concomitant motion of radiance and withdrawal' of its being (p. 442). I share the idea that the critical practice should be organised around the text, a centre that would never be fully reached, but I wonder whether it is possible for this relationship not to result in contemplation. Steiner himself points us to a potential alternative solution. In his article, he occasionally puts on a second pair of gloves to handle this subject-matter, and instead of a framework involving purity, custody, and faith, we find hints of one characterised by action, decay, and catastrophe. Steiner, in fact, claims that the reader he has in mind is similar to the translator depicted by Walter Benjamin.

Indeed, if we take this well-known essay, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, and start looking for a similar conception of the work of art as not, essentially, a means of communication, we do not have to go very far: already in the first page, we are told that 'kein Gedicht gilt dem Leser, kein Bild dem Beschauer, keine Symphonie der Hörerschaft'[22] [No poem exists for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the audience], and that a poem tells very little to those who understand it. How does he know this? Because when a translation focuses on the meaning, it misses the point, they only produce 'eine ungenaue Übermittlung eines unwesentlichen Inhalts' (p. 9) [the inaccurate transmission of an inessential content]. In this essay, the act of translating a text has the same function that the fact of reading it has for Steiner; it is analysed and discussed not per se, not as an actual practice, but as the privileged angle to describe what happens when we encounter a text. Steiner and Benjamin, however, do not only follow the same procedure, they also come to similar conclusions. While Benjamin considers that 'alle Übersetzung nur eine irgendwie vorläufige Art ist, sich mit der Fremdheit der Sprachen auseinanderzusetzen' (p. 14) [all translation is only a somewhat provisional way to deal with the foreignness of languages], Steiner states that reading means recognising that 'we grasp and that which we grasp eludes us' (p. 450). They

[22] Walter Benjamin, 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, IV/1: *Kleine Prosa. Baudelaire-Übertragungen*, pp. 9-21 (p. 9). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

both focus on the single word, rather than on the structures of the syntax and they agree that what we want to know the most, can only be investigated indirectly. Furthermore, they are not interested in how a work of art is created but rather perceived, interpreted, transformed, and these aspects ought to be kept separate; the reader is not the writer, Steiner underlines, the translator is not the poet, Benjamin confirms. However, the way in which the reader looks at the text is inevitably different from the point of view of the translator; while the former learns by heart portions of a book and in this way shields its being, the task of the latter is that of searching for correspondences. In Benjamin's view, they should be found not between knowledge and reality, source text and translation, but between languages, or better said between languages and what is behind and beyond them, 'die reine Sprache'. Indeed, for him, both the source text and the translation are fragments of a greater language, just as different but matching fragments can be glued together to form a vessel. By adding a fragment, the translator gives us the possibility of better understanding the shape of the vessel, rather than the meaning of its individual pieces, but it is a precarious insight: the translation decays, the vessel breaks, and we need to start again to glue pieces together.

Benjamin agrees with Steiner that the centrality of the text should never be obliterated, and that our interpretations would never extinguish it, but through the idea of correspondences, echoes, fragments stuck together, he suggests that there is something else we can do other than preserving its being; we can use it to explore a question, a problem, a relationship. This is the perspective I have adopted in the present work.

1.6 To read is to compare

Barthes and Steiner are not alone in describing their relationship with the texts in terms of reading. Virginia Woolf collects two volumes of essays under the figure of *The Common Reader*, someone 'worse educated', less generously gifted by nature than the scholar and the critic, who reads for their own pleasure 'rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinion of

the others'.[23] The title does not refer to the ideal audience of the essays, but rather to their author; the common reader is the way in which Woolf sees herself when she approaches Montaigne, Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy or George Eliot, and, indeed, she originally wanted to call the book *Reading and Writing*.[24] In one essay in particular, the one dealing with the complex question of *How should one read a book?*, I found some elements that remind us of our critic-reader, although the figure I am sketching here is truly worse educated and less gifted than Woolf: the joy of reading books[25] and the 'further and rarer pleasure' (p. 269) of writing about them, the intimate nature of the encounters with the texts at the point that 'we find the presence of another person intolerable' (p. 268), the freedom that readers enjoy in their libraries from where 'authorities, however furred and gowned' (p. 258) are banned, the focus on words, on how they work, on their texture. However, if I include Woolf's essay in my exploration of the critic-reader, it is not to further prove that such a figure exists but to articulate a fundamental commandment of the readership I have only touched upon so far: we have to compare; and 'with those words', Woolf says, 'the cat is out of the bag, and the true complexity of reading is admitted' (p. 266).

Why do we need to compare? Because it is the way in which we try to understand why a certain passage was so striking, what 'the fast flocking of innumerable impressions' means; 'listen' the book will ask us, 'what shall we call *this*?' (p. 268). And 'this' in Woolf's view is often a very complex subject, an extremely broad problem which requires a fluid and yet precise answer. Indeed, 'the rarest qualities of imagination, insight, and judgment' (p. 269)

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[23] Virginia Woolf, 'The Common Reader', in *The Common Reader*, ed. by Andrew McNeillie (London: Vintage, 2003), I, pp. 1-2 (p. 1).
[24] See McNeillie's introduction to *The Common Reader*, p. IX.
[25] The essay contains one of the most striking depiction of the joy of reading we have found so far, which comes in the form of a dream: 'I have sometimes dreamt, at least, that when the Day of Judgment dawns and the great conquerors and lawyers and statesmen come to receive their rewards--their crowns, their laurels, their names carved indelibly upon imperishable marble--the Almighty will turn to Peter and will say, not without a certain envy when he sees us coming with our books under our arms, "Look, these need no reward. We have nothing to give them here. They have loved reading"', *The Common Reader* II, pp. 259-270 (p. 270). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

are required of the reader portrayed by Woolf, who is obviously far from being common. Comparisons, she tells us, should be 'alive and illuminating' (p. 268) but her indications about how to reach such a result are somehow vague; she points out that we need to 'have read widely enough and with enough understanding' (p. 267), trust 'the nerve of sensations that sends shocks through us' when we encounter a relevant passage, maintain our idiosyncrasy, and acknowledge that we 'learn through feelings' (p. 268). The example, however, of her essays is outstanding and instructive and it has shaped these pages. For instance, in a former version of this essay, she asks Defoe, Austen, and Hardy to narrate the 'simplest event', meeting a beggar in the street,[26] and through these hypothetical answers she outlines their unique perspectives. In its final version, instead, she refers to the 'curiosity which possesses us sometimes when in the evening we linger in front of a house where the lights are lit and the blinds not yet drawn, and each floor of the house shows us a different section of human life in being' (p. 261) to explain why, on our visit to a library, we could be tempted to get off the shelf a biography or an autobiography. In order to answer the questions books ask us, Woolf, through a subjective and to some extent creative process, looks for comparisons in two different domains, literature and life, which is less our openly autobiographical adventures, always lying under the surface of her essays, and more our understanding of the experiences living sometimes entails. This is the reason why at the beginning of this collection of essays the common reader was presented as 'hasty, inaccurate, and superficial, snatching now this poem, now that scrap of old furniture, without caring where he finds it or what nature it may be so long as it serves his purpose and rounds his structure'[27].

This fascinating figure that can create a framework able to incorporate a verse and a piece of furniture reminds us of Benjamin's warning about gluing together fragments of a vessel: they do not need to be like one another, they must match. This aspect becomes even more

[26] Virginia Woolf, 'How should one read a book?', *The Yale review*, 89/1 (2001), pp. 41-52 (p. 44).
[27] Virginia Woolf, 'The Common Reader', I, p. 2.

important when he leaves the translator to one side in order to analyse the reader. In his preparatory notes for the essay *Über die mimetische Fakultät*, he underlines the connection between 'lesen' and 'herauslesen', reading and selecting on the basis of similarity, as he puts it;[28] two activities that were even more openly intertwined in the Latin 'legere'. In *Brezel, Feder, Pause, Klage, Firlefanz*, he recalls a game he used to play as a child, consisting in trying to link up unrelated words without changing their order. The sentences produced by this game are, for Benjamin, what all readers see in front of them when they open a book: ‚nicht nur das Volk liest so Romane - nämlich der Namen oder Formeln wegen, die ihm aus dem Text entgegenspringen; auch der Gebildete liegt lesend auf der Lauer nach Wendungen und Worten, und der Sinn ist nur der Hintergrund, auf dem der Schatten ruht, den sie wie Relieffiguren werfen'[29] ['It is not just ordinary people who read novels in this way-that is to say, for the names or formulas that leap out of the text at the reader. The educated person, too, is constantly on the lookout for turns of phrase or striking expressions, and the meaning is merely the background on which rests the shadow that they cast, like figures in relief', p. 726]. The idea that words are more compelling for the shadow they cast than for their meaning is a way of expressing the opposition to a certain instrumentalist conception of language, and it brings us back to the fundamental task of the critic-reader: that of placing next to each other the striking passages of the texts they read in the hope of better understanding a question without interpreting away the contexts in which that question first arose.

1.7 The present work

My critic-reader strongly believes in the necessity to compare to articulate a provisional answer to a very broad question. I have selected different texts and glued them together in

[28] Walter Benjamin, 'Antithetisches über Wort und Name', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, VII/2: *Nachträge*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and others (1991), pp. 795-96 (p. 796).
[29] Walter Benjamin, 'Brezel, Feder, Pause, Klage, Firlefanz', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, IV/1, pp. 432-33 (p. 433).

order to grasp a picture not of the pure language, but of a possible relationship between knowledge and literary texts. In Benjamin's terms, the aim of this research is less that of creating a correspondence between a critical discourse and a poetic collection, and more that of exploring a constellation of texts echoing each other, casting shadows one over the other.[30] If we detect a big bear in the sky it is because we link together the points of light we see at night; the animal is not there, and people may struggle to identify it despite our efforts to indicate it, but at the same time if we can connect the dots in such a way is because of their specific position. The figures drawn by constellations result from the connections of individual stars and at the same time create such connections. The possible relationship between knowledge and literature I investigate in this work emerges through Caproni's and Sereni's texts, but this does not imply that they were written for this purpose. The point, in a way, is the vessel, rather than its fragments, but my vessel is different from the one described by Benjamin or mentioned in the *Zohar*; there is no pure idea of the relationship between literature and knowledge we can try to reach, no certainty that the pieces always match one another in the smallest details, no guarantee that the vessel was ever intact. The Great Bear in the sky was never a real one on earth, the tragic story of Callisto is only a myth. If the vessel is the aim and there is no assurance that it is an achievable one, its fragments is all we actually have, what constitutes this research. Quotations are at the base of my methodology, and they have different functions: in some cases, they prove my point, in others they are a way to reenter the text (p. 442), as Steiner suggests, when I fear that we have gone too far. Sometimes I include 'un texte qui produit en moi un éblouissement de langage, qui m'emporte dans le plaisir' (p. 314), as Barthes puts it, to analyse and understand it, and other times to decipher something else. I have tried to make my comparison alive and

[30] On Benjamin's notion of constellation see the 'Erkenntniskritische Vorrede' to the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, in *Gesammelte Schriften,* I/1: *Abhandlungen*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (1974), pp. 203-430 (pp. 203-237).

illuminating as Woolf taught us, excluding what felt not necessary for the structure to hold. But what is that I have glued together?

First, some of Caproni's and Sereni's poems published in 1965. *Gli strumenti umani* and *Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso & altre prosopopee* are the starting point of the present research as they struck me for another fundamental aspect I aim to explore, their use of spoken language, something I have not touched upon yet, but I will in the second part of this introduction. Bearing in mind Derrida's warning that 'tout graphème est d'essence testamentaire',[31] I have focused on these texts as they have been left behind by their authors: at the mercy of the world; and since the poets have gone away, I have asked the poems what they can know. In doing so, a particular attention has been paid to the traces they left along with their compositions in the form of titles, subtitles, prefaces, and afterword. Paratextual elements are possibly less extensively analysed in relation to poetry, but they often stick with us after we have closed a collection for some promises they made but we are not sure were kept, some retrospectively indications that leave us wondering, some suggestions that feel just right or inadequate. Sometimes, however, Caproni and Sereni appear as the subjects of sentences containing verbs like 'think', 'consider', 'believe'; with Foucault, I can say that I have used their surnames *sauvagement.* [32] And yet, in quoting their essays, letters, interviews, and even unpublished materials, in discussing their ideas, opinions, suggestions, my aim is not that of tracing back their interests, aspirations, and purposes but rather of exploring the possibilities that emerge from a series of texts grouped together by a signature. As Foucault puts it, 'le nom d'auteur n'est pas situé dans l'état civil des hommes, il n'est pas non plus situé dans la fiction de l'œuvre, il est situé dans la rupture qui instaure un certain groupe de discours et son mode d'être singulier'.[33]

[31] Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Édition de Minuit, 1967), p. 100.
[32] Michel Foucault, 'Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?', *Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie*, LXIII: 3 (1969), pp. 73-104 (p. 76).
[33] Ibid., p. 97.

In order to further understand the sets of discourses that go under the name of Sereni and Caproni, I have kept gluing together other pieces, adding different voices and interpretations, dialoguing with the scholars who have worked on these collections before me, in particular, Mengaldo, Fortini, Lenzini for *Gli strumenti umani*, Calvino, Girardi, Raboni for *Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso & altre prosopopee*. The works of these critics, published some time ago, have established a practice of reading Sereni's and Caproni's poems that is still relevant, or as Benjamin sees it, they have transplanted these texts into a different linguistic realm in a way which is not exhaustive but cannot be ignored, just as any new translation dialogues with those who came before.[34] Approaching such authoritative critics involves some risks, especially for early career women scholars, as Woolf underlines on many occasions, along with offering helpful guidance on how to handle the imbalance in such relationships. In *How should one read a book?*, for example, she warns us that such critics 'are only able to help us if we come to them laden with questions and suggestions won honestly in the course of our own reading. […] We can only understand their ruling when it comes in conflict with our own and vanquishes it' (p. 269). I have tried to follow her advice, and my way of winning my questions honestly has been that of analysing closely the poems, reflecting on their structures and stylistic features, but also reading them together with other texts, less commonly associated with *Gli strumenti umani* and *Congedo*. These comparisons have required time to be established, tested, and developed, and then space in the pages to be presented, articulated, and justified. As a result, they have become predominant in this work, and it is through them, more than thanks to secondary readings on Caproni and Sereni that the relationship between knowledge and literature has been explored.

In particular, I have examined Derrida's and Husserl's inquiries into the basis, limits, validity, and possibilities of knowledge. These inquiries have been considered in relationship with

[34] See Walter Benjamin, *Die Aufgabe*, p. 18.

Sereni's and Caproni's collections without attempting to present them as sources for these poems, for the focus of this work is again on the effects that are the texts and not on the causes that produce them. Derrida's *Heidegger et la question* was published in 1987, seventeen years after Caproni's *Congedo*, so it is with no difficulty that the notion of influence has been excluded. The same cannot be said of Husserl's *Cartesianishen Meditationen*, which not only appeared long before *Gli strumenti umani* but were also extensively commented in 1961 in *Tempo e verità nella fenomenologia di Husserl* by Sereni's friend and fellow, Enzo Paci. In this book, Paci also discusses unpublished materials and expand, in particular, the notion of intersubjectivity which is often considered underdeveloped in Husserl's work[35] and resonate with one of the most important issues at the core of *Gli strumenti umani*, that of our understanding of other people. Yet, this study never attempts to demonstrate that the link between Sereni and Paci is historically accurate, that Sereni had in mind Paci's reflections on time and relationships when he was composing his poems.[36] Instead, literature and philosophy are brought together on the basis that they investigate, from different perspectives, similar problems. Reading together literary texts and philosophical works is a well-established practice in the field of comparative literature, almost unavoidable when it comes to the relationship between knowledge and literature. Indeed, philosophical discourse is traditionally expected not only to investigate what we can know, [37] but also what poetry may understand, and one of the risks of assigning to philosophy the dominion of the gnoseological area is that of considering literature a form of philosophy by other means. However, I believe than when different means are involved, the enterprise cannot be the

[35] See for example Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible. Suivi de notes de travail*, ed. by Claude Lefort (Paris: Gallimard, 1964) and Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité* (La Haye: M. Nijhoff, 1961).
[36] Sereni and Paci studied together in Milan with Antonio Banfi who was among the first to introduce phenomenology in Italy. For an account of Banfi's and Paci's influence on Sereni see Alberto Comparini, *Geocritica e poesia dell'esistenza* (Milan-Udine: Mimesis, 2018).
[37] One of the problems that eschew the purpose of this chapter is the separation itself between literature and philosophy, which is, historically, not always accurate and, theoretically, sometimes opaque.

same, and for this reason I have focused extensively on the style of the poems, to analyse what tools poetry can use to know something.

Furthermore, the main way in which I have explored the claim that literature can know is that of using literature to read literature, Dostoevsky at the beginning of this introduction, Proust, Kafka, Dante and many others in the pages to follow. In *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, Benajmin quotes a passage from *Die Krisis der Europaeischen Kultur* in which Rudolf Pannwitz states that the translator should allow their language to be transformed by the language of the source text. Transformed in what way? 'Bewegen', he says, which means affected, concerned, moved, stricken, set in motion. As the translation which fully accomplishes their task 'muss seine sprache durch die fremde erweitern und vertiefen' (p. 20) [must expand and deepen their language by means of the foreign language], I, in a way, have taken seriously the task of considering the knowledge that may come from literature and expanded and deepened my idea of what can help us to understand a text, to include literature itself.

Finally, following Woolf's suggestion, I have compared the knowledge that literary texts may offer to the one which derives from experience. I talk about occurrences that I believe quite common, without pretending that they are universal; the curiosity to visit a place we have read about in a book to verify that the description matches the reality, the fact that we miss parts of movies because we got distracted, the idea that we would be annoyed by a passenger who on the train would start telling us the story of their life, without being asked. Furthermore, the problem of knowledge itself is not only a philosophical issue or a literary concern, but something we deal with in our everyday life, over coffee with friends, in long walks, doing the washing up. What we read can help us better understand some experiences, and, at the same time, no reading happens in a vacuum; if we are struck by a particular passage is also because it resonates with some of the issues and thoughts that have accompanied us for a while. Life is another way through which, as Woolf puts it, we win honestly our

questions, but it is not something that can be justified by a footnote, and for this reason the present work could not rely too much on the knowledge that derives from experiences.[38] Nonetheless, it was important sometimes to acknowledge its existence and investigate its function.

2. Knowledge and literature.

2.1 Convincing lies and some sort of truth

Whether literature can know truthfully, whether we should listen to the claims of poets are long debated questions. Chronicles of the complex relationship between knowledge and literature typically start from Plato and Aristotle, and, indeed, the historical path is right in front of me, but I turn away, as I would not know where to fit an accurate account of its exploration. Where should we start then to address such an arduous matter? I ask for directions from the people gathered around the same problem, but some of them are busy debating whether a poem can provide propositional knowledge, others focus on a cognitive approach to literature, and others suggest considering the notion and tasks of ethics in relation to a novel.[39] Unsure about these approaches, I take a side path suggested by Michael Wood in *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge*[40] which seems to me a useful way to navigate this

[38] The limits and possibilities of a thesis are not always easily defined, as doctoral works can vary drastically from one another; Emil Cioran famously spent the three years of his doctorate cycling, instead of writing on Bergson and was granted a four-year extension to conclude his research; see Gabriel Liiceanu, *Itinéraires d'une vie. E. M. Cioran* (Paris: Michalon, 1995), pp. 32-38.

[39] The problem of what literature knows is debated in so many different contexts and fields that we cannot hope to give a comprehensive survey of the various stances and perspectives. It is, for example, one of the crucial questions in contemporary continental philosophy, with important contributions by Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, Theodor Adorno, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jacques Derrida and many others. It is also explored in the context of analytic aesthetics and philosophy, as Peter Lamarque shows in *The Philosophy of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009). Interesting reflections on the specific knowledge literature may offer have been provided within the field of 'Literature and/as Moral Philosophy' to borrow the title of the famous *New Literary History*'s special issue (1983). More recently, however, the cognitive approach has become more prominent, thanks, for example, to work like Terence Cave,*Thinking with Literature. Towards a Cognitive Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Finally, poets, novelists, and play-writers have also discussed the limits and possibilities of literary knowledge.

[40] Michael Wood, *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). References are given after quotations in the text.

intricate field. This path also starts from afar, from the famous warning of Hesiod's Muses that 'ἴδμεν ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγειν ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα, / ἴδμεν δ' εὖτ' ἐθέλωμεν ἀληθέα γηρύσασθαι' [we know how to say many false things similar to genuine ones, but we know, when we wish, how to proclaim true things].[41] This beginning already contains the key elements of Wood's approach that convinced me, the belief that literature's ultimate goal is not that of teaching something but that, nonetheless, we may learn something by reading it, and the idea that what we could eventually know is the result of a mediation, an act of discerning convincing lies from some sort of truth. Because of this ambiguity, literature is no safe space: 'no literalist's haven where fact is always fact; and no paradise of metaphor, where fiction has no truck at all with the harsh and shifting world' (p. 61).

But how can we navigate this uncertain domain? Further down this path, I find another well-known text, a poem by W. H. Auden, we are invited to try to decipher. 'About suffering they were never wrong, / The Old Masters', is its memorable opening; alluring in its being all-encompassing, astute in mentioning suffering first and the Old Masters last, artful in choosing 'never wrong' over 'always right'. In the subsequent lines we are told that what, in particular, the Old Masters knew about suffering is its position, where it occurs in the human existence: aside; 'it takes place / While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along'. With only apparent casualness we are given an example, 'In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance',[42] but, as is often the case, the example opens new possibilities rather than closing down the discourse; the fall must have been painful but its description in this poem focuses on its being a disaster, a failure, and an amazing occurrence. Therefore, despite its linearity, determining what this text is about is not straightforward: we could say that it deals with the foregrounds and backgrounds of life, that it explores the way in which we

[41] Hesiod, 'Theogony', in *Hesiod*, ed. and trans. by Glenn W. Most (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), I: *Theogony. Works and days. Testimonia*, vv. 26-27, pp. 4-5.
[42] Wystan Hugh Auden, 'Musée des Beaux Arts', *Collected Poems*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), p. 179.

respond to most events – we ignore them – or that it promotes a fascination for the details of ordinary life, like the expensive delicate ship or the dogs and their doggy life. 'Literary meanings', Wood is persuaded, 'are undecided until a reader decides them, and […] in many interesting cases they could be decided differently. But that doesn't make them undecidable: it makes decisions indispensable' (p. 107). So, we are told, we have to decide among all the possibilities what we believe the poem means, but how can we take such a decision? One option would be to further analyse the poem in its historical context, in relation to other texts by Auden or in comparison with Bruegel's painting. Otherwise, as Wood suggests, we could ask ourselves whether the Old Masters could possibly sometimes be wrong, what suffering means for us, what we ignored the last time we were eating or sailing calmy. We could establish where we think Auden is telling a convincing lie (never wrong?) or something true (the leisure with which we turn away from the disaster) by checking whether the poem works not only within its own premises, but also against ours, and in this way, the text can help us to figure out what we do and do not know, what we only half-knew and now we are sure of, what we thought we knew and now we are uncertain about. More importantly for Wood by reading a text we may discover something we did not want to know, we would have rather not known; and, indeed, for him the fact that the Old Masters 'were not wrong enough, not as wrong as we would need them to be' (p. 63) is what Auden's poem is ultimately about.

There is, of course, a third option beyond studying the poem and interrogating it: we could nod while reading it, urge a friend who is about to visit Brussels to glance at it, lend them our copy where in the margin we have put nothing but exclamation marks. Not even Wood, however, is very much favourable to the way of reading of the (real) common reader, proclaiming it 'too a passive response' (p. 100). If reading a book is not enough and analysing it in its context does not reveal much of what a text knows, we are somehow back again in an area very familiar to our critic-reader. Woolf's suggestion that we better answer when a

book asks us 'what shall we call this?' is a similar encouragement to decide what the text means. When she states that as we read, 'we are always verifying the poet's statements, making a flying comparison, to the best of our powers, between the beauty he makes outside and the beauty we are aware of within',[43] she is also inviting us to measure the premises of the texts against our own. In her view, as we have seen, what we believe, what we are aware of within, is the result of both what we have read and what we have experienced; and life is mentioned in Wood's book too, not only as a source of comparison that helps us to interpret a text, but also as an essential element to shed light on the way in which literature knows. It is Roland Barthes who introduces this notion in Wood's discourse. We find him still at the Collège de France, this time for the inaugural lecture for the chair of Literary Semiology, and he states: 'la science est grossière, la vie est subtile, et c'est pour corriger cette distance que la littérature nous importe'.[44] This definition of literature is appealing, but as is often the case with such all-encompassing statements, not exhaustive. The dichotomy it illustrates could be easily challenged by considering all the cases in which life is straightforward to the point of being cruel, or knowledge so nuanced that trying to grasp it is strenuous. And yet, it is also true that much of our life passes by without producing any knowledge, and most of what we know is disproved by what we experience. If life and knowledge are at times actually opposite poles, how can literature help us to correct for the distance between them? By offering us 'a space where knowledge is present but not working, like a doctor spending an afternoon at the cinema' and 'life is not present but well represented, alluded to or simulated, so that it will seem we can ask questions of its very vagaries' (p. 41), is Wood's answer. The doctor is there, but not on duty, willing to enjoy the movie but ready to intervene if somebody is unwell; life, instead, waits outside the cinema as it will take up all the space, if allowed in, but we can ask the audience what they noticed as they were entering, what they saw life was

[43] Virginia Woolf, 'How should one read a book?', *The Yale review*, p. 50.
[44] Roland Barthes, *Leçon*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1978), p. 18.

doing. According to this interpretation, 'About suffering they were never wrong, / The Old Masters' is crude knowledge suddenly requested to intervene, while the details of the poems stand for the subtle life left outside; considering both at the same time is what literature teaches us.

While following the path indicated by Wood to navigate the field of literature and knowledge, I have been wondering about some questions; does the notion of fiction play any role in relationship to the idea that life should be represented rather than present? Is crude knowledge the best translation of 'science grossière' and does it have something to do with the notion of factual knowledge? Can we apply this analysis to texts 'unwilling to explain' like the 'acquainted with the night' protagonist of a poem by Robert Frost,[45] or where there is no trace of life, 'the dry stone no sound of water'? [46] Wood does not quite answer these questions nor will I in the space of this chapter. My aim here is that of defining a methodology more than a theory, although of course we cannot really separate these two elements, as any methodology is based on a specific view of what we are analysing, and any theory entails a way of approaching the domain it defines. If I have compared the knowledge of literature with that produced by philosophy and life, it is because I believe that they have something in common, but I do not know whether we would go as far as saying that the function of literature is that of mediating between these domains. However, this comparison has proved useful to articulate the theoretical questions the poems presented me, but the answers it has led me to, I am afraid, may not be what a text knows, but rather what we can know in our dialogue with a text.

More importantly, Wood's perspective allows me to clarify an aspect of our critic-reader I have, so far, touched upon but left unexplored. Barthes, Steiner, and Woolf all describe the

[45] Robert Frost, 'Acquainted with the Night', in *Robert Frost. Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*, ed. by Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997), p. 234.
[46] Thomas Stearns Eliot, 'The Burial of the Dead' in *The poems of T.S. Eliot*, ed. by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (London: Faber & Faber, 2015-18), I: *Collected and uncollected poems* (2015), p. 55.

fact of being stuck by a particular portion of a text in terms of an incandescence impossible to extinguish, a sentence we keep remembering, a shock we feel in our nerves. Are we impressed by such passages because they are true? Is truth what the critic-reader looks for in a text? No, I believe, some excerpts are striking because we sense that there could be some sort of truth in them, but they could also be astute lies. They stay with us because we need time to figure out whether we believe them or not, we copy them out to decipher better their intentions, we put them together with other statements to find out whether they are authentic or counterfeit.

2.2 On the knowledge of the form.

2.2.1 Spitzer, the world, and the sand

All the critic-readers we have encountered so far are attracted by single words and short sentences, are interested in their texture, in the way in which they work. Steiner explicitly praises the 'exegetic meditation on the minimal unit' characterising what he calls textual criticism, and I may designate as stylistics, an approach that has deeply influenced the present work. Indeed, at the origin of this way of looking at the texts lies the frustration for not being able to calmly focus on the words in themselves, or at least this is what Leo Spitzer laments recalling his experience as a student at the University of Vienna; 'we were never allowed to contemplate a phenomenon in its quiet being, to look into its face: we always looked at its neighbours or at its predecessors—we were always looking over our shoulder'.[47] Spitzer, instead, believes that the meaning of a work of art can be discovered by carefully examining its smallest linguistic manifestation, that significance lies precisely in the apparently futile. However, if it is possible to see a world in a grain of sand, how can we pick up the right one in the desert we find ourselves in? Spitzer's recipe involves categories our critic-reader is very

[47] Leo Spitzer, 'Linguistics and Literary History', in *Linguistics and Literary History. Essays in Stylistics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 1-39 (p. 2). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

familiar with; we must walk up and down the dunes, read and reread, and then read again 'patiently and confidently, in an endeavour to become, as it were, soaked through and through with the atmosphere of the work' until 'suddenly, one word, one line, stands out, and we realize that, now, a relationship has been established between the poem and us' (p. 27). We have to wait for an 'inner click' to happen, 'a feeling of inner evidence' that the detail that struck us 'is connected basically with the work of art', is the answer to a question the book asked us. This feeling is not only the result of the act of reading, but it is 'deeply anchored in the previous life and education of the critic, and not only in his scholarly education'; it requires experience along with observation, imagination along with precision, and Spitzer wonders whether the most suitable atmosphere for the click to happen would be at a breakfast table, rather than in a university classroom (p. 29).

If Spitzer laments the lack of attention to detail during his university studies, one of his own students complains about the idiosyncrasy of his method; 'here, it may be a memory from boyhood, there an inspiration you got from another poem; here, there and everywhere it is an urge in you, an instinct backed up by your experience, that tells you immediately: this is not important; this is' (p. 26), they write to him denouncing the absence of a rigorous technique, maybe because it was not served at a breakfast table but during a lecture. I am, of course, less suspicious about the fact that the interpretation of a work of art may result from the comparison with previous readings or past experiences, as this is something my critic-reader does as well. Nonetheless, attending Spitzer's lectures can be frustrating for me too, not so much for the opacity as to what makes the click possible, but for the ambitious results it is supposed to lead to; the problem in my view is less its idiosyncrasy than its all-encompassing aspiration. However, my critiques have a similar origin to those of Spitzer's student, they are rooted in the same issue; in order to recognise the grain of sand that will show us the world, we need already to have an idea of what this world looks like, or, as Spitzer puts it, 'the first step, on which all may hinge, can never be planned: it must already

have taken place' (p. 26). It is, indeed, not a linear but a circular process, building up on previous studies and encounters – 'to read is to have read, to understand is equivalent to having understood' (p. 27) is Spitzer's claim – and yet able to not only repeat itself but produce new results and original interpretations. The philological circle, however, is not only an epistemological position but also entails a degree of exclusivity and requires along with experience what Spitzer calls talent, but seems more a sort of election, a predisposition to illumination. The secluded nature of the circle is what disturbs the student: 'you see the meaning as a whole from the beginning', they write to him, present it as self-evident and take for granted that 'the reader is with you' (p. 26). Spitzer strongly refuses the idea that the study of literature should imitate that of natural science, is fully aware that his method would never pass the exam of a rigorous rationale, and declares that he 'deliberately and tendentiously' groups his observations 'in the most plausible order possible for the purpose of winning' the assent of the reader (p. 10). I share these stances, but I also agree with the sceptical student that he makes very little effort to show how an idiosyncratic point of view may come to a valid and shared conclusion and he is not afraid to rely on his authority; Lanson's famous interpretation of Rabelais, for example, is dismissed as 'simply wrong' (p. 18), without any further explanation.

However, what makes me even more dubious is another element that, according to Spitzer, makes the click possible: faith. 'Tu ne me chercherais pas si tu ne m'avais déjà trouvé' says Pascal's God proving, in my view, that the inductive and deductive ways are not as irreconcilable as one may think. Spitzer, instead, quotes this sentence to demonstrate that the decision to study the smallest linguistic phenomenon must be based on the belief that 'some light from on high', 'some *post nubila Phoebus*' exists and 'details are not an inchoate chance aggregation of dispersed material through which no light shines' (p. 24). Without knowing that this reward waits for us at the end of our journey, he states, we would never start it. And yet, how can the study of an anaphora be so rewarding? Because literature, according to him,

is 'the best document of the soul of a nation' (p. 10) and the analysis of its style the most effective way to access the spirit of the people speaking that language. Indeed, by considering the stylistic features of a text, he is not interested in the particular individual behind it, but in locating the 'shift of the soul of the epoch, a shift of which the writer has become conscious and which he would translate into a necessarily new linguistic form' (p. 11). I do not think that by analysing a text one can get close to any soul or spirit, but I employ these terms very tentatively as I am not sure of their meaning. I did not see the promise of a bright sun after the rain when I started my journey, on the contrary I was aware of a degree of chance in the aggregation of dispersed materials that is the work of art and, even more, the critical work that tries to penetrate it. For me, it is precisely this degree of chance that makes idiosyncrasy a useful resource. If any light shines, it is not from above, but from the headlamp we are wearing while examining the materials, from the torches the authors were using while assembling them or from the lamps that were on at the time the work was created. However, if I have focused so much on the stylistic features of the texts, it is because I believe too that this kind of analysis could lead us somewhere, and in particular to some sort of knowledge. My reflection on the specific knowledge that literature may offer has been paired with an in-deep survey of its means.

2.2.2 Benjamin and the horoscope

To fully justify this focus on style in relation to knowledge would imply answering a set of very difficult questions: what can language know? Does literary language provide a specific kind of knowledge, distinct, for example, from the one gained by philosophical discourse? Do we learn different things from different literary genres? I cannot hope to solve these complicated issues here, and in a way not answering this kind of questions is part of the privilege of criticism. Despite the, at times radical, transformations which have occurred in the style and purpose of Western philosophy in the last century, it still is the discipline deemed to deal with the question of metaphysics, the problem of reality, the issue of the

nature of concepts. Criticism, instead, is allowed to produce knowledge without providing justifications that involve the principles of being. It is nonetheless required to explain its premises, so I ought to give some indications about the reasons and ambitions of our stylistic analysis. As we have already seen, in *Brezel, Feder, Pause, Klage, Firlefanz*, Benjamin underlines the proximity between every act of reading and the game he used to play as a child of meaningfully linking together random words. In this text, he claims that the comparison is particularly relevant when it comes to works that are regarded as sacred; 'Der Kommentar, der ihnen dient, greift Wörter aus solchem Text heraus, als wären sie nach den Regeln jenes Spieles ihm gesetzt und zur Bewältigung aufgegeben worden' (p. 433) ['the commentaries designed to serve such texts fix on particular words, as if they had been chosen according to the rules of the game and assigned to the reader as a task', p. 726]. Instead of the mysterious but overall smooth transition between the detail and the spirit of the nation, the reader here has to handle the discontinuity of language, the fact that words are juxtaposed for no straightforward reasons. In the light of these disjunctions in language, the importance of comparisons I already mentioned in relation to Benjamin's work and my own can be better appreciated. In *Lehre vom Ähnlichen*, children are again mentioned along with augurs and priests because playing at being a windmill or seeing the future of a new-born in the stars involves, at different degrees, a certain familiarity with what he calls 'unsinnliche Ähnlichkeit'[48] ['nonsensuous similarity', p. 696]. In Benjamin's view, the gift of grasping correspondences is progressively lost in adulthood and modern times, but for those who have stopped playing and cannot write horoscopes there is still a possibility of understanding its mechanism as it informs something we are all familiar with: language; 'es ist somit die unsinnliche Ähnlichkeit, die die Verspannung nicht zwischen dem Gesprochnen und Gemeinten sondern auch zwischen dem Geschriebnen und Gemeinten und gleichfalls zwischen dem Gesprochnen und Geschriebnen stiftet. Und jedesmal auf eine völlig neue,

[48] Walter Benjamin, 'Lehre vom Ähnlichen', (p. 207). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

originäre, unableitbare Weise' (p. 208) ['it is thus nonsensuous similarity that establishes the ties not only between what is said and what is meant, but also between what is written and what is meant, and equally between the spoken and the written. And every time, it does so in a completely new, original, and underivable way'; pp. 696-697]. There is no straightforward reason for the letter *beth* to be root of the word house in Hebrew, there is no possible immediate identification of the medium and the message, and we can either ignore this truth or, every time, we have to discover anew how the different aspects of language – the meant, the spoken, the written – are connected. The word reading is, in this respect, ambiguous as we can read language as the school child reads the ABC book, focusing only on the semiotic or communicative aspects, or we can read in its magical sense, considering the letter of a text and at the same time seeing the picture puzzle forming itself in front of us; 'der Astrolog liest den Gestirnstand von den Sternen am Himmel ab; er liest zugleich aus ihm die Zukunft oder das Geschick heraus' (p. 209) ['the astrologer reads the constellation from the stars in the sky; simultaneously, he reads the future or fate from it', p. 697].

The student who was sceptical of Spitzer's explanations of his approach would not, I believe, be convinced by Benjamin's magical reading, and, instead, they could point out that the two methods are indeed very similar. The perception of the nonsensuous similarity between the sound of a sentence and its meaning is not only simultaneous as it is the linking together of the detail and the whole, but it also happens instantly, in the same brief moment of a click; it cannot be held fast, it is bound to a flash of lightning, it happens in a tempo. The astrologer, Benjamin tells us, must grasp the destiny of a person in the decisive and yet transitory moment of their birth, reading it in the ever-changing position of celestial objects. What Benjamin does not explain is how to do it, much to the disappointment of the student, and their frustration won't find consolation here as I am not about to further articulate the mechanism of the horoscope. My focus, instead, is on the fact that it is distance rather than proximity between form and meaning that allows for the possibility of knowing something.

This distance is dynamic but not always positive, and, indeed, Benjamin presents us with a much more desolate scenario compared to Spitzer, where language could still eventually spark its magic, but it is most definitely an alienating and defamiliarizing experience. 'Allegorien sind im Reiche der Gedanken was Ruinen im Reiche der Dinge'[49] ['allegories are in the realm of thought what ruins are in the realm of things'], he famously writes in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, and these ruins which we have to deal with, in language as well in life, stand not only for the lost whole, the building we would never visit, but also for the complexity of its parts and layers, whose relationship to one another we have to grasp without having access to the full picture. No fragment can account for its relationship to the whole, but its presence allows us to pay attention to such a relationship. Benjamin too encourages us to focus on the form but in order to recognise that at its best any reading is affected by nonsensuous similarity, to be aware that dots could always be connected otherwise even in the most insightful interpretation. In this respect, it is no surprise that he turns to German Romantic writers to investigate the limits and possibilities of criticism, as they scrutinise the nature of a work of art in its form. The relationship between knowledge, art, and form is for Benjamin not just a possibility for criticism but its very aim; 'Die Erkenntnis in dem Reflexionsmedium der Kunst ist die Aufgabe der Kunstkritik'[50] ['the task for the criticism of art is knowledge in the medium of reflection that is art', p. 151]. And what do we learn from art as a medium of reflection? That the difference between a book and the bookshelf it lies on is that the book already reflects on itself, self-judges itself before we pick it up and open it; and this is due to its form which 'ist die Möglichkeit der Reflexion in dem Werke' (p. 65) ['is the possibility of reflection in the work', p. 156]. Once we have opened the book and discovered its endless self-reflection, we should unfold it, continuing its work in our own distinctive way. 'Die Aufgabe der Kritik', writes Benajmin once again

[49] Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, p. 354.
[50] Walter Benjamin, 'Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik', in *Gesammelte Schriften,* I/1: *Abhandlungen*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (1974), pp. 7-122 (p. 65).

showing his interest in the ultimate aims and tasks, ‚[ist] die Vollendung des Werkes' (p. 108) ['the task of criticism is the consummation of the work', p. 177]. The word *Vollendung*, which means both consummation and completion, does not imply that we can substitute the book we read with the book we write, but rather that we can place them one next to the other, ours hopefully representing the creation of a further arbitrary meaning which will not last, a possible configuration which, by the time we put our copy on the shelf, has already decayed. The task of the critic is not different from that of the translator, nor are their means; indeed, just as the translator has to apply a different language to the source text in order to let the pure language emerge, the critic has to operate a chemical experiment on the art work which should lead to 'die Erzeugung eines Stoffes durch einen bestimmten Prozeß, welchem andere unterworfen werden' (p. 109) ['the generation of a substance through a determinate process to which other substances are submitted', p. 178]. With these indications in mind, I have considered the stylistic feature I have focused on not so much as a manifestation of Caproni's and Sereni's personalities nor a consequence of the spirit of 1960s Italy, but as further pieces to glue together along with the other ones provisionally to answer the question of what these texts can know. The details that struck me did so because of their formulations, they represent for me centres of reflection that rapidly change their meaning. I have somehow taken away the stylistic features from their contexts to create a constellation that seemed to me where they were momentarily pointing.

2.3 Knowledge and spoken language

When Benjamin in *Lehre vom Ähnlichen* analyses the various aspects of language he mentions not only the distinction between what we mean and what we say or write but also the difference between writing and speaking, and he adds 'Die wichtigste von diesen Verspannungen dürfte jedoch die letzte, die zwischen dem Geschriebnen und Gesprochnen sein' (p. 108), ['the most important of these ties may, however, be the one mentioned last-

that between what is written and what is said', p. 697]. This study takes this indication very seriously as it scrutinises how the use of spoken language in Caproni's and Sereni's collections can help us to understand maybe not how language as a whole works but the question of knowledge as it is articulated by their poems. In doing so, it focuses on spoken language in written texts, exploring a specific declination of *die Verspannung*, the tension between the spoken and the written.

2.3.1 Spoken-written

In 1976 Giovanni Nencioni published an essay entitled *Parlato-parlato, parlato-scritto, parlato-recitato*, which has shaped the discussion around spoken language in Italian studies by distinguishing the case in which a line is uttered in a conversation, quoted in a novel, or enacted on a stage. Drawing on the work of Tullio De Mauro, Nencioni complicates the opposition between the spoken and the written by underlining the importance of cross features like the register – the formal and informal use of the language does not coincide with a specific medium, or in Coseriu's terms the diaphasic is not the same as the diamesic variation[51] – and the context – in rituals what is said carries out the same function as what is written and therefore shares some of its characteristics.[52] The antithesis is further revised by considering in-between cases, for example when we compose dialogues to be staged, or in a text we cite something we have heard. Given this complex scenario, where should we turn in order to grasp what spoken language is? Nencioni's in-depth analysis shows how difficult it is to answer such a question; the 'spoken-written' does not convey intonation, gestures, the fact that people talk over each other; the 'spoken-spoken' does not reveal much about the inner reasons why we say what we say, reasons we often do not know ourselves; the 'spoken-enacted' may be considered a too-specific case as it entails a double function, within the

[51] See Eugenio Coseriu, *Lezioni di linguistica generale* (Turin: Boringhieri, 1973).
[52] Giovani Nencioni, 'Parlato-parlato, parlato-scritto, parlato-recitato', pp. 126-127. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

fictional universe of the play and in relation to the audience who, however, cannot reply or take part in the conversation. The way in which Nencioni navigates this intricate matter is that of moving away from the notion of communication to focus on that of enunciation, following Émile Benveniste's example. In his essay *L'appareil formel de l'énonciation*, Benveniste makes clear that 'c'est l'acte même de produire un énoncé et non le texte de l'énoncé qui est notre objet',[53] and this act famously implies the subjective appropriation of language by the speaker, 'la conversion individuelle de la langue en discours' (p. 81). The simple action of uttering a sentence entails profound consequences, as it establishes the speaker, the other listening to them (enunciation in his view is intrinsically dialogic), the word they both refer to; the personal pronouns 'I' and 'you', deictics like 'this' and 'that', tenses, which per se are empty signs, acquire a meaning, find a reference. Benveniste mainly focuses on what happens when two people talk but concludes the essay noticing that 'il faudrait aussi distinguer l'énonciation parlée de l'énonciation écrite. Celle-ci se meut sur deux plans : l'écrivain s'énonce en écrivant et, à l'intérieur de son écriture, il fait des individus s'énoncer. De longues perspectives s'ouvrent à l'analyse des formes complexes du discours, à partir du cadre formel esquissé ici' (p. 88).

Nencioni, in a way, responds to this invitation, comparing the spoken and written enunciations and emphasising the complexity they can entail, for example in the cases in which it is not easy to identify the sender or the receiver, or in which there is a 'ricevente tangenziale', someone who is not supposed to listen to our conversation or read our text but does or can and therefore influences our way of expressing ourselves (p. 153). One of the most complicated forms of discourse inspected by Nencioni is that of the quotation of someone else's message in the form of direct, indirect, and free indirect speech in which 'nel messaggio dell'emittente (citante) s'innesta un altro messaggio (citato), con una interruzione,

[53] Émile Benveniste, 'L'appareil formel de l'énonciation', in *Problèmes de linguistique générale II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), pp. 79-98 (p. 80). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

deviazione, complicazione delle strutture semantiche del primo a seconda del tipo d'innesto' (p. 158). His analysis of the different kinds of grafting includes examples both from the 'spoken-spoken' and the 'spoken-written' and is so detailed and technical that I cannot give a full account here but only mention a few examples. Nencioni sees no difference between a statement like 'ti autorizzo a partire' (p. 163) and 'il direttore mi ha detto che sei autorizzato a partire', as they both obtain the same result, they both satisfy the conditions set by Austin for a felicitous performative utterance.[54] Instead, in the case of 'ho sentito per caso il direttore dire "Autorizzo Paolo a partire"' or 'mi hanno detto che il direttore ti ha autorizzato a partire' (p. 164) the reported authorisation is just a 'dictum', and the receiver is a tangential one who in order to become a 'ricevente diretto' has to decide that the enunciation was directed to them and leave (pp. 165). In a novel including dialogues, the reader is 'destinatario immediato della enunciazione performativa radicale del testo', 'destinatario mediato di tutto ciò che il testo pone sul pano del narrato, del *dictum*', 'destinatario tangenziale […] del dialogo metatestuale o intertestuale' (p. 167). In other words, the novel speaks directly to us when it presents itself as a novel and asks us to accept its conventions, indirectly through the story and the universe it creates and tangentially with the dialogues between the characters. Nencioni concludes that there is no fundamental difference between the spoken and the written, as they both present the same elements in various combinations. Because in order to understand something, discrepancies are much more relevant than similarities, he invites us to focus on the 'spoken-enacted' as opposed to the 'spoken-spoken', leaving aside the 'spoken-written'. Indeed, for him the situation created on a stage is unique; the sender is ambiguous (the actor? The director? The author of the text?), someone sitting in the audience is a much more active and important receiver than someone holding a book, and the lines of the actors cannot be considered an example of reported speech.

[54] See John Langshaw Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 14.

Drawing on Nencioni's distinction, I can define the object of this work as the 'spoken-written'. However, what I mean by it is not the case of a novel including dialogues but that of a written text which incorporates some structures of the 'spoken-spoken'. My idea of 'spoken written' only partially overlaps with what Benveniste calls 'discourse', which is 'toute énonciation supposant un locuteur et un auditeur, et chez le premier l'intention d'influencer l'autre en quelque maniére' and includes all oral interactions and some written genres like memoires, pieces, didactical works, letters etc.[55] My aim, indeed, is not that of defining a specific kind of text or a function of language, nor that of clarifying the conditions of certain enunciations, but rather that of analysing a particular encounter between the spoken and the written as it occurs in *Gli strumenti umani* and *Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso & altre prosopoee*. This 'spoken-written' has no aspiration to obliterate one of the terms of the equation, Sereni's and Caproni's collections never try to give the impression that they are oral texts, nor do they forget that they are literary products. They replicate what of the 'spoken-spoken' can be conveyed by a printed text, they do not experiment with the linearity of the page or imitate the phonetic of an oral utterance, but, instead, they include some of the specific ways in which an oral discourse is organised. This focus on structures is even more evident as the encounter between the spoken and the written happens at the level of a quite formal register, the one you would use to address some strangers on a train or to refer a conversation you had with a fellow poet. Sereni and Caproni are not interested in a certain lexicon more widely used orally, but in the ways in which the medium of spoken language informs speech. The gestures we use in support of our words, the specific situation in which a conversation happens, the fact that while we are talking, we cannot change what we just said, nor can we plan too carefully what we are about to claim, deeply affect the way in which we talk; we

[55] Émile Benveniste, 'Les relations de temps dans le verbe français', in *Problèmes de linguistique générale I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), pp. 237-250 (p. 242). Benveniste opposes to this definition of discours that of 'histoire', i.e. 'la présentation des faits survenus à un certain moment du temps, sans aucune intervention du locuteur dans le récit' which can only be written (p. 239).

repeat ourselves, leave sentences unfinished, omit verbs, organise the discourse through semantics and rhetoric rather than syntax.[56] These are the features Sereni and Caproni replicate in their poems. However, repetitions, ellipsis, hyperbatons, nominal sentences, a certain use of rhetorical figures are not only to be found in the 'spoken-spoken', but also in its opposite, the 'written-written' which has become poetry. The coexistence in their texts of a literary anaphor and repetition due to the need to reformulate what has been said, in our view, does not aim at bringing poetry back to its oral origins. By placing these two systems one next to the other, these collections reflect on their similarities and differences, on what they can grasp and what eschews them. Spoken language is for us the tool that helps these texts to ask anew some old questions, such as who is speaking, to whom, what are they referring to; it is a particularly effective tool as, according to Benveniste, it is the one that institutes the 'I', the 'you', the 'there'.

2.3.2 Written-spoken

Our analysis of spoken language relies on categories elaborated by linguistics (Benveniste, Nencioni, Berretta), but the questions I try to answer are of a different kind. In the case, for example, of the 'interruzione, deviazione, complicazione delle strutture semantiche' produced by reported speech, I follow such interruptions, deviations, and complications of the discourse in order to investigate what these combinations of words may signify, rather than exploring their perlocutionary consequences. The figure of the 'ricevente tangenziale' interests me not only as a specific kind of receiver of written dialogues, but as a possible counterpart of the reader of any text, as they were never ultimately meant directly for us. This way of interrogating linguistic categories to test their validity outside their original contexts has an illustrious predecessor in Jacques Derrida, who dedicates one chapter of *De*

[56] For a detailed description of the diamesic variation entailed by the spoken language in Italian see Monica Berretta, 'Il parlato italiano contemporaneo', in *Storia della lingua italiana*, ed. by Luca Serianni, Pietro Trifone (Turin: Einaudi, 1993-94), II: *Scritto e parlato* (1994), pp. 239-270.

la grammatologie to the relationship between *Linguistique et grammatologie*. He famously scrutinises Ferdinand de Saussure's notion of the sign in order to question the predominance of the spoken over the written, as a more direct way of accessing meaning; 'l'unité immédiate et privilégiée qui fonde la signifiance et l'acte de langage est l'unité articulée du son et du sens dans la phonie', he writes, 'au regard de cette unité, l'écriture serait toujours dérivée'.[57] The derivative nature of the written, its being a sign of a sign deplored by de Saussure is, instead, praised by Derrida, as it shows the 'infidélité radicale et a priori nécessaire'[58] lying at the core of any signs. According to him, the 'spoken-spoken' is never really available to us, but we only have at our disposal what we could call the 'written-spoken', as the structure of writing informs all communication; the meaning always eschews us, is never definitely there even when we face one another in a conversation. In *Signature, évènement, contexte* Derrida focuses on reported speech, showing again that it is not only a specific mode of language but its very rule ; 'tout signe, linguistique ou non linguistique, parlé ou écrit (au sens courant de cette opposition), en petite ou en grande unité, peut être cité, mis entre guillemets ; par là il peut rompre avec tout contexte donné, engendrer à l'infini de nouveaux contextes, de façon absolument non saturable'. The fact that we can extrapolate portions of a discourse and quote it over and over without exhausting its meaning questions the very idea of an original context where a fragment holds its true meaning, showing instead that 'il n'y a que des contextes sans aucun centre d'ancrage absolu'.[59]

[57] Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, p. 45.
[58] Ibid., p. 59.
[59] Jacques Derrida, 'Signature, évènement, contexte', in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Édition de Minuit, 1972), pp. 365-393 (p. 381). In this essay Derrida discusses also Austin's notion of happy performance as opposed to the unhappy one, a notion Nencioni too refers in his analysis of the reported speech. Derrida notices that on the one hand 'la possibilité du négatif (ici, des infelicities) est une possibilité certes structurelle, que l'échec est un risque essentiel des opérations considérées', on the other 'dans un geste à peu près immédiatement simultané, au nom d'une sorte de régulation idéale', this risk is excluded 'comme risque accidentel, extérieur, et ne nous apprenant rien sur le phénomène de langage considéré' (pp. 384-85). Derrida, instead, invites us to take more seriously the possibility of failure when it comes to language.

While I can happily avoid expressing my opinion about the state of metaphysics or the nature of being, Derrida cannot and does not want to, and his analysis of linguistic categories ultimately aims at destabilizing a series of hierarchical opposition, such as the spoken over the written, presence over absence, life over death. 'La déconstruction', Derrida underlines, 'ne consiste pas à passer d'un concept à un autre mais à renverser et à déplacer un ordre conceptuel aussi bien que l'ordre non conceptuel auquel il s'articule'.[60] There is no fixed focus in Derrida's system but only movable ones, that can always be displaced, renamed, and replaced. If the infinite iteration of portions of texts in various contexts may remind of the broken fragments constantly glued together to create new vessels, Derrida's and Benjamin's methods are rooted in very different beliefs about the nature of language. The distance between their positions can be measured confronting their views on the task of translation, as they emerge from Derrida's close reading of *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* in his essay *Des tours de Babel*. Derrida and Benjamin both agree that a text can and wants to be translated because of its incompleteness, because of the changes occurring throughout time, but while Benjamin thinks that a translation cannot be further translated, Derrida claims that no text can be called original. According to Benjamin the translator aims at the link between form and content in the source text, shedding light on the way in which meaning and letter are no longer dissociated in pure language, but is unable to reproduce such a link in their translation. For Derrida, instead, all texts are both translatable and untranslatable, they exist in this movement which will never rest in the coincidence of form and meaning. While Benjamin suggests the interlinear version of the sacred text as the prototype of all translation, Derrida opens the Bible at the page of the tower of Babel. He notices that Babel is both a proper name and therefore untranslatable, and a common name which means confusion, 'la confusion des langues mais aussi l'état de confusion dans lequel se trouvent les architectes devant la structure interrompue'; furthermore, as Voltaire points out, 'Babel ne veut pas seulement

[60] Ibid., p. 393.

dire confusion au double sens de ce mot, mais aussi le nom du père, plus précisément et plus communément, le nom de Dieu comme nom de père. La ville porterait le nom de Dieu le père, et du père de la ville qui s'appelle confusion'.[61] Once again, Derrida shows us that when we look for a stable foundation, for a certain origin, we are always caught in a process of infinite referral, we end up with incomplete, undecidable, contradictory fragments.

Derrida's analysis has helped me to avoid the risk of idealising the spoken language and of considering the encounter between the spoken and the written as a way of eschewing the limit of language. In Sereni and Caproni's poems the spoken is not more authentic, more direct, more expressive than the written; it is a different way of organising the discourse that once printed, once iterated in another context, can produce a new meaning. In particular in the case of Caproni, Derrida's scrutiny of the *guillemets*, both as an element of a sentence and as a structure of the language, has proved very useful to shed light on the single poems as well as on the whole collection. However, when it comes to my methodology, once again it is Benjamin that has shaped my way of considering the relationship between the spoken and the written, not in terms of *differance* but of *Verspannung*. Does this mean that I too believe that the meaning and the letter can sometimes or somewhere not be dissociated? Not really, but my focus is more on the vessel momentarily glued together rather than on the process of infinite iteration of its component. Furthermore, the idea that there is a tension between the components of the language serves my practice of comparison and allows me to navigate the long-debated issue of whether the rhetorical figures are deliberate deviations from the norm and, therefore, represent an exceptional use of language. In the twentieth century, the classical vision of rhetoric as *écart* has been contested, in particular, on the wave of the Nouvelle Rhétorique,[62] the work of the group μ,[63] and the structuralism which from different

[61] Jacques Derrida, 'Des tours de Babel', in *Psyché. Inventions de l'autre* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1998), pp. 203-235 (p. 204).
[62] See Chaïm Perelman, Lucie Olbrects-Tyteca, *Traité de l'argumentation. La nouvelle rhétorique* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1958).
[63] See Groupe μ, *Rhétorique générale* (Paris: Larousse, 1970).

perspectives have shown that rhetorical figures are to be found not only in the speeches of the orator but also in the communication of mass media, and that they deal with the irrational as well as the rational.[64] The 'spoken-written' I analyse in this work is an ideal example of the fact that rhetoric informs both spoken language and the poetic tradition with various meaning and different uses. Once again, however, I avoid answering the ultimate question about the nature of this relationship, to focus instead on the tension it produces in Sereni's and Caproni's collections.

2.3.3 1960s Italy

Spoken language, in its written form, is a fundamental component of the poetic grammar developed in Italy after the Second World War[65] also in response to what Isella has defined 'l'evento, del tutto eccezionale, di una lingua, come l'italiano, che per la prima volta da lingua di cultura andava imponendosi sia pure confusamente come lingua di comunicazione'.[66] Indeed, the 'parlato-scritto' characterises several poetic collections of the time, from *Laborintus* by Edoardo Sanguineti (1956) to Montale's *Satura* (1971), from Luzi's *Nel magma* (1963) to Caproni's and Sereni's works published in 1965; its function, however, changes quite significatively in these various works. By reading *Gli strumenti umani* and *Congedo* in this context, it is possible to further underline an aspect I have already touched upon, the fact that in these books the two terms of the equation, the spoken and the written, are considered of equal importance. This element emerges not against examples of idealisation of the *voix*, as in Derrida's analysis, but rather of an overrated consideration of the poetic form and, in the case of Montale, even of the poems he used to write. In *Satura*, for example, we read:

> Riemersa da un'infinità di tempo
> Celia la filippina ha telefonato

[64] See for example, Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957).
[65] For a detailed analysis of Italian poetic language see Andrea Afribo, Arnaldo Soldani, *La poesia moderna. Dal secondo Ottocento a oggi*; on the 1960s and 1970s in particular see Enrico Testa, 'Lingua e poesia negli anni Sessanta', in *Gli anni '60 e '70 in Italia. Due decenni di sperimentazione poetica*, ed. by Stefano Giovannuzzi (Genoa: San Marco dei Giustiniani, 2003), pp. 21-43.
[66] Dante Isella, 'La lingua poetica di Sereni', in *La poesia di Vittorio Sereni. Atti del convegno*, ed. by Stefano Agosti et al. (Milan: Librex, 1985), pp. 21-32 (p. 30).

per aver tue notizie. Credo stia bene, dico,
forse meglio di prima. 'Come, crede?
Non c'è più?'. Forse più di prima, ma...
Celia, cerchi d'intendere...
Di là dal filo,
da Manila o da altra
parola dell'atlante una balbuzie
impediva anche lei. E riagganciò di scatto.[67]

The figure of aposiopesis ('Forse più di prima, ma... / Celia, cerchi d'intendere...'), typical of the spoken language, embodies here the reticence in front of the death, mimes the stammer, mentioned at the end of the poem, that prevents Celia to reply. Irony, however, tones down the pathos of the situation, the dramatic moment in which someone returns from a past life to urge the poet to face and communicate the loss of his wife. Irony prevents Montale to fully plunge into the situation: he does not really engage with the voice talking to him, for it belongs to 'Celia la filippina', this epithet already underlining the imbalance of their relationship, the hierarchy lying in their class difference. The woman paradoxically touches upon one of the core elements of Montale's poetry: the loss of the beloved. However, the knowledge acquired in the previous collections has vanished, the memorable formulas employed in the past seem now useless, substituted by the play with clichés and phrases repeated in circumstances of mourning to the point of being meaningless, i.e. 'she has gone to a better place'. For this reason, Montale's well-known device, the address to the 'tu', is now ironically employed: the poet does not ask the beloved to save him, to be the miracle that opens up new possibilities, but only tells her about a phone call, his embarrassment, his inadequate answer.

To include elements of spoken language is for Montale a way of manifesting his disbelief in poetry, in its ability to communicate. As Citati points out, in *Satura* he realises that 'come tutte le altre nostre lingue, anche la lirica è soltanto un "mezzo parlare", al quale bisogna rassegnarsi perché "chi parla per intero" è incomprensibile'. He opts for a highly ironic and

[67] Eugenio Montale, *L'opera in versi*, ed. by Rosanna Bettarini and Gianfranco Contini (Turin: Einaudi, 1980), p. 307.

grotesque tone, 'semplifica lo stile: mortifica il timbro: corteggia, forse perfino troppo da vicino, le ultime invenzioni della lingua parlata; come se i suoi versi fossero scritti, per venire immediatamente dimenticati, sul margine di una fattura o sul rovescio di un biglietto del tram'.[68] Through the 'spoken-written', Montale describes a situation in which he would rather not find himself, a reality in which poetry does not last, its categories do not hold anything firmly. This scepticism towards the poetic form is voiced from an extremely prominent position, as his first collections, *Ossi di seppia* (1925), *Le occasioni* (1939), and *La bufera e altro* (1956) have been regarded as the epitome of poetry and their author as the personification of a poet.[69] Like Celia, many would call him to ask him a precise answer, an exact formulation for the reality they are experiencing and Fortini is right in pointing out that Montale acknowledges all of this in *Satura*, as we have to imagine that the person picking up the phone is not a generic lyric subject but the author of the collection, or better said 'il personaggio che dice io è quello che Montale Eugenio ritiene debba nascere dall'incontro di una figura pubblica e stabilita di autore da premio Nobel anno 1971 e di una saggezza ora desolata ora feroce e sempre impotente di fronte ai massimi problemi'.[70] Because of this tension between what the poet would like to express and used to communicate and the fact that he manages only to denounce the limits of poetry, his use of the spoken-written can be considered a manifestation of the tendency of the poetic discourse towards prose.

[68] Pietro Citati, 'L'ultimo Montale', in *Il te del cappellaio matto* (Milan: Mondadori, 1972), pp. 208-211 (p. 211).
[69] Fortini's description of Montale's critical acclaim is particularly vivid: 'perché chi non viva in Italia potrà difficilmente immaginare la colluvie di articoli, scritti, studi, ricerche erudite, indagini lessicali, ingegnose ipotesi di lettura, cui l'opera di Montale è stata sottoposta nel corso degli ultimi anni e fiorita negli ultimi mesi al sole di quello che è stato detto una specie di culto della personalità tributato al più established dei nostri poeti […] che, tanto per dare un esempio, un serio critico e studioso discuta con sottigliezza il valore lessicale del corno da scarpe (*shoe-horn*) nominato in una poesia montaliana del 12 dicembre 1966 e ormai da tre anni si trascini una disputa soporifera, cui anch'io ho purtroppo contribuito, per sapere se in una breve poesiola delle *Occasioni* sia o no possibile leggere in trasparenza lo schema della ballata classica - tutto questo, voglio dire, riguarda magari la storia della critica, è soprattutto documento di costume'; Franco Fortini, 'Satura nel 1971', in *Nuovi saggi italiani* (Milan: Garzanti, 1987), pp. 103-124 (pp. 105-106).
[70] Franco Fortini, 'Satura nel 1971', p. 109.

The label of 'poesia verso la prosa' has been employed in several critical works on contemporary Italian poetry[71] also to describe Caproni's and Sereni's collections of the 1960s. However, the idea of poetry moving towards prose entails an opposition between the two terms that cannot be found in *Congedo* and *Gli strumenti umani*, and to illustrate this point we can consider another phone call, the one we find in *Una visita in fabbrica*:

> C'è vita, sembra, e animazione dentro
> quest'altra sacca, uomini in grembiuli neri
> che si passano plichi
> uniformati al passo delle teleferiche
> di trasporto giù in fabbrica.
> Salta su
> il più buono e inerme, cita:
> *E di me splendea la miglior parte*
> tra spasso e proteste degli altri – *ma va là* – scatenati.
>
> La parte migliore? Non esiste. O è un senso
> di sé sempre in regresso sul lavoro
> o spento in esso, lieto dell'altrui pane
> che solo a mente sveglia sa d'amaro.
> Ecco. E si fa strada sul filo
> cui si affida il tuo cuore, ti rigetta
> alla città selvosa:
> – Chiamo da fuori porta.
> Dimmi subito che mi pensi e ami.
> Ti richiamo sul tardi –.
> Ma beffarda e febbrile tuttavia
> ad altro esorta la sirena artigiana.[72]

In this long poem, Sereni visits a factory and reflects on the alienation of the assembly line, describes the workers' condition, and asks himself what the role of intellectuals and literature in the industrial world can be. Towards the end of the poem, he meets a group of workers who seem particularly lively and animated despite the fact that they wear identical uniforms and are forced to conform to the rhythm of the production chain; one of them quotes Leopardi provoking laughs among his colleagues, and this contrast of the literary reference in the context of the factory is underlined also by the different registers of Leopardi's line

[71] See for example Alfonso Berardinelli, *La poesia verso la prosa. Controversie sulla lirica moderna* and Ronald De Rooy, *Il narrativo nella poesia moderna. Proposte teoriche & esercizi di lettura* (Florence: Cesati, 1997).
[72] Vittorio Sereni, 'Una visita in fabbrica', *Poesie*, ed. by Dante Isella (Milan: Mondandori, 1995), pp. 128-29. All Sereni's poems are quoted from this edition, further references are given after quotations in the text.

and the very colloquial expression *ma va là*. By witnessing this exchange, Sereni asks himself what 'la miglior parte' is, and concludes that it does not exist in the factory: labour is the contrary of life, it inevitably consumes or destroys the best part of us, and what it gives to the workers, the bread of others, has a bitter taste for those who are aware of the exploitation. This idea is expressed again through a literary reference as Sereni quotes the words with which Cacciaguida predicts Dante the painful experience of exile: 'Tu proverai sì come sa di sale / lo pane altrui'.[73] At this point, the poetic subject feels the urge to call his beloved, to be reassured that life exists outside the factory whereas the hooter denies his attempt to escape alienation. As in *Satura*, the phone call plays with clichés, in this case the clichés of love discourse, the need of being reassured, the impatience of knowing that the other still loves us and thinks about us. However, because it is uttered in the context of the factory, this stereotypical speech succeeds in reminding us that the sphere of love, feelings, and emotions is denied in the workplace. It is not a fully satisfactory achievement for Sereni, who senses this poem to be inadequate in addressing the complexity of the issues raised by industrialization, complaining about the lack of a language that would allow him to fully achieve such a purpose; 'questa lenta morte organizzata, che non ha niente di tragico, entrata in noi, giorno per giorno a piccole dosi', he states, 'e non servono le armi umanistiche di vecchio stampo, anche le parole di un poeta (e quale poeta!) sono armi spuntate, non si è all'altezza della situazione'.[74] If the literary language alone is not able to fully convey the experience of the factory, spoken language is not a solution either; their combination, however, can help to express the complexity of reality, exploring rather than eschewing the limits of language. Instead of going in the direction of prose, Caproni and Sereni are, as Robert Frost puts it, after a 'poetry that talked', able to convey the tone of a conversation.

[73] Par. XVII, vv. 58-59; all quotations from Dante are taken from Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi (Turin: Einaudi, 1975).
[74] This quotation is taken from a letter Sereni wrote to Mario Boselli on the 16th of December 1961 which can be read in Vittorio Sereni, *Poesie*, p. 543.

To illustrate what he means by the 'sound of sense' or better said the 'sentence sounds',[75] Frost gives 'the example of two people who are talking on the other side of a closed door, whose voices can be heard but whose words cannot be distinguished. Even though the words do not carry, the sound of them does, and the listener can catch the meaning of the conversation'.[76] Neither the spoken nor the written can fully express the experiences they try to grasp, at their intersection, however, something can be caught, the meaning produced in the way in which the discourse is built and for this purpose the structure of the spoken language and that of poetry are both equally valid and insufficient. The following chapters aims at further exploring this and other persuasive and yet inadequate ways of trying to understand.

[75] Robert Frost, *Robert Frost. Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*, p. 684.
[76] Robert Frost, *Robert Frost on Writing*, compiled by Elaine Barry (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1973), p. 153.

II. On not being able to write.

Dass ich das nicht weiß,
hängt wohl mit meiner Unfähigkeit zu schreiben zusammen.
[The fact that I do not know this is probably connected with my inability to write]
Franz Kafka[1]

1. Waiting to know.

1.1 *A note to* Gli Strumenti umani.

In the nearly twenty years which separate the two collections, *Diario d'Algeria* (1947) and *Gli strumenti umani* (1965), Vittorio Sereni went from being a soldier to being a teacher, to finally becoming a senior manager at 'Mondadori', one of the most powerful publishing houses, while around him Italian society was changing at a similarly radical pace, entering the reign of late capitalism. Sereni's poetry, too, diverted from the path followed in the 40s, a path leading to the dry landscape of a prisoner-of-war camp in Africa in which very few objects were to be found and nominated (*campo*, *tenda*, *filo di ferro*, *sentinella*). *Diario d'Algeria* recounted the years 1942-1945, focusing in particular on the poet's confinement and exploring the experience of captivity as a personal, historical condition as well as a universal and metaphysical one. The whole collection is inscribed in a circle: the geometrical shape represents the camp and its limited extension but also the narrowness of the temporal and spatial confines within which we live and that we cannot eschew. *Gli strumenti umani*, instead, tell a different story, the story of a bourgeois walking down the streets of Milan, visiting a factory, unexpectedly meeting someone at a filling station: a metropolitan, middle-class landscape has replaced the rarefied universe of the prisoner of war.

[1] Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher, 1910-1923* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1983), p. 13.

Facing the critical moment of publishing his latest collection, Sereni attempts to acknowledge the changes that have occurred over the previous twenty years, and writes a note to be included in the first edition of *Gli strumenti umani*. Poets' notes are often succinct. They may merely indicate where the poems previously appeared, like the 'note bibliographique' at the end of Yves Bonnefoy's *Les planches courbes*; or hint at references, debts, influences, possibly followed by footnotes as in the case of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. In other cases, they could even start by stating the obvious, like William Carlos Williams's assertion that 'Paterson is a long poem in four parts', before briefly sketching a possible interpretation: '–that a man in himself is a city, beginning, seeking, achieving and concluding his life in ways which the various aspects of a city may embody – if imaginatively conceived – any city, all the details of which may be made to voice his most intimate convictions'.[2] Sereni's note to *Gli strumenti umani* starts in the same objective tone as Williams', a poet akin to him in many respects: 'tutti i testi compresi nel volume appartengono al periodo 1945-1965'; then it continues adding that for certain poems it would be possible to give a more specific indication, a smaller range of years – '45-57 for 'Uno sguardo di rimando', '58-60 for 'Appuntamento a ora insolita' – but never indicates a precise date of composition. These long years have not been spent searching for the perfect form, the exact word, a more refined style, Sereni specifies, but rather in witnessing the growth of the text from a starting point, a given experience, 'una data di partenza', to a (provisional) end, a particular poem, 'un punto di arrivo', through a series of accidental circumstances, thoughts, events. The note acknowledges that many lines or sentences are borrowed from authors of the past, or the present, but the labels indicating the original owners are missing, sometimes even the quotations marks have been removed. Sereni's justification is lapidary: 'risulteranno individuabili nella stessa misura in cui sono

[2] William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, ed. by Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1995), p. 11.

affiorati e entrati nel discorso'.[3] 'Stop here, or gently pass'[4] William Wordsworth may have said.

This brief text placed at the end of the collection was not to last: it disappeared from the second edition, where Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo was entrusted with providing a critical postface. We know from Gérard Genette that postfaces, like all paratextual elements, are thresholds, 'zone indécise entre le dedans et le dehors',[5] but Mengaldo's essay has become with time less a vestibule where one can stay a little longer or quickly leave, and more an integral part of the experience of reading *Gli strumenti umani*. It is an insightful piece, highly valued by Sereni himself, and it appears in a remarkably fortunate edition, part of a prominent series by Einaudi, famously characterised by a minimalist front cover and therefore known as 'la bianca'.[6] Having read the poems, the readers are invited to look back and attend to the rhetorical figures expressing iteration and repetition, the stylistic feature used by Mengaldo to delve into Sereni's poetic universe; the circle, which was at the centre of *Diario d'Algeria*, we are warned, has become a mirror.

1.2 A draft.

Very recently, however, among Sereni's documents and drafts, a longer version of his postface has been found by Giulia Raboni, which more extensively displays his thoughts, feelings, and anxieties at the time in which his work was about to be printed. In this version, the poet comes back to the crucial question of dates: 'è importante per i suoi possibili sviluppi

[3] Vittorio Sereni, *Poesie e prose*, pp. 24-25.
[4] William Wordsworth, 'The Solitary Reaper', *William Wordsworth*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 319-320 (p. 319).
[5] Gérard Genette, *Seuil* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987), p. 8.
[6] *Gli strumenti umani* was first published by Einaudi in 1965, and re-published ten years later with the addition of the poem *I ricongiunti* and Mengaldo's essay, 'Iterazione e specularità in Sereni'. In 1995, Dante Isella edited the critical edition of Sereni's poems, but *Gli strumenti umani*, as a singular collection, was still read in the 1975 Einaudi's edition, reprinted several times. Only very recently, in October 2018, the collection was published by another publishing house, Il saggiatore, with an introduction by Chiara Fenoglio, breaking the bond between *Gli strumenti umani* and Mengaldo's essay, lasted more than 40 years.

l'accenno fatto alla cronologia'. Why is time so important for this book? Sereni does not tell us, he only stresses that when writing a poem he can wait: 'non mi preoccupo, ad esempio, di esprimere un'emozione rispetto a un fatto pubblico e collettivo nel momento in cui esso si verifica e si svolge'. The poet does not rush into writing about events as they happen, and one may object that, by doing so, he fails to contribute to shape the way in which such events are perceived, analysed, and assimilated. Sereni implicitly overcomes this objection by stating that for him poetry has nothing to do with history nor does its value lie in its impact on society. It is not even a matter of personal belief or preference: it is simply not an option for him, due to the internal rules governing his writing, which he can but obey. And yet this is not a hypothetical objection, but one which was made very often after the war, when literature was insistently asked to commit. Sereni himself has seen this point raised several times, in particular by the poet, critic and dear friend Franco Fortini, and we can perceive a certain pique in his protracted analysis of the notion of *engagement*, the role played by ideology in the creative process, the idea that all art should be avant-garde. In this first version of the postface, Sereni touches upon some of the major elements which inform the debate around literature in the 60s, but this note is more interesting when it affords a glimpse into Sereni's own attitude towards the very experience of waiting. Indeed, this remark is not restricted to this note alone: generally, he achieves his best results while grounding discourses in his life rather than adventuring into more theoretical debates.

If Sereni's own meditation on the experience of waiting is why it is worth looking at this draft, in truth it is not an extensively or overtly developed meditation, which is possibly why this version of the postface was ultimately discarded. Indeed, in this text only one sentence comments on the extensive amount of time needed to write a poem, and what that time means for him; and it is a typically Serenian statement, i.e, an ambivalent one, as is often the case with an accurate account of one's experience: 'in senso positivo ciò significa necessità di maturazione di un motivo; in senso negativo, lentezza, pigrizia, impotenza, remora

psicologica, paura'. The negative aspects openly overcome the positive ones, not only because they are more vividly depicted but also because there is, Sereni tells us, no real joy in waiting: at best, the poet can recognise that the amount of time required in his creative process is necessary for a motif to develop, he can savour a rational fulfilment which does not quite reach psychological and emotional levels. 'Regole interne'[7] he calls them, but obeying a law is in many cases unpleasant. Furthermore, it implies a lack of agency, an absence of control. This emerges quite clearly when Sereni opposes his inductive method to the deductive one of those who take as starting points ideas and not experiences. He never really aspires to change sides, to neglect existence, a notion so dear to him, to renounce the knowledge he can grasp from life; however, on many occasions he does wish to follow his path a bit faster, to write more and more quickly, to exorcise the feeling of being lazy, impotent, scared. He lacks faith, faith that the time spent waiting is meaningful, that the poem is in fact growing in silence, faith in poetry to be worth suffering for; but he also lacks detachment, the capacity to accept things as they are, the ability to recognise that writing is just one of the activities to which one can dedicate oneself. And not even the most important one. Sereni is at the same time frustrated by his difficult relationship with the muse, and ashamed of lacking what he regards as strength, the strength of caring less, knowing that life continues even when one stops writing. He cannot totally believe in literature, nor break its spell.

1.3 Expectations about the future and rage.

It is an arduous task to entirely understand others' inner conflicts from the outside, especially when they concern lack of self-confidence in those we value the most: if they only could see themselves in the way we see them, we often think. Sereni's friends themselves tried to

[7] Vittorio Sereni, *Prose e poesie*, p. 25.

persuade him many times that his creative process was idiosyncratic, that the laws he bitterly contested were the reason why his poetry was the way it was, and nobody would ever have wished his poetry to be any different. After Sereni's death, Mengaldo strove to state that his life had been fruitful, rewarding, or complete because of the voice he could still hear, the voice of Sereni vividly protesting, acknowledging his tireless dissatisfaction, his feeling of being unfulfilled and unfulfillable: 'era anche questo uno dei tanti suoi tratti irriducibilmente giovanili che più lo facevano amare',[8] Mengaldo concludes. Indeed, restlessness, a strong feeling that rules should be different, a bitter dissatisfaction with a life which from afar seemed more accommodating, are often associated with the young, but they are also distinctively rooted in Sereni's own youth. *Frontiera*, his first collection, is pervaded with expectations about the future veiled by the suspicion that waiting will never be rewarded, that crucial encounters, decisive experiences will be missed. *Diario d'Algeria* confirms this suspicion: Sereni finds himself confined in Africa in fairly good conditions (he was a lieutenant and officers were better treated) while the resistance movement was fighting to liberate Italy from nazi-fascism. This experience of being exiled at such a momentous time in Italy's history would leave him with an overwhelming sense of guilt, but also a deep-seated rage which would eventually erupt, as in 'Il male d'Africa', a text curiously included in *Gli strumenti umani*, and in the second edition of *Diario d'Algeria*, both published in the same year.

The starting date for this poem is 1958, when the writer and intellectual, Giansiro Ferrata, is about to visit Algeria and before leaving asks his friend for information about the country. Sereni recounts the opposite journey to that which Giansiro will soon begin, the journey which took him back from Africa to Milan and realises his story lacks a moral:

> Questa ciarla non so se di rincorsa o fuga
> vecchia di dieci o più anni
> di un viaggio tra tanti... – s'inquietano i tuoi occhi –
> e nessuna notizia d'Algeria.

[8] Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, 'Ricordo di Vittorio Sereni', in *La tradizione del Novecento. Nuova serie* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1987), pp. 357-76 (p. 358).

No, nessuna – rispondo. (p. 94)

Sereni recognises that he is not able to coherently articulate his experience in Algeria, and his discourse results in outdated chit-chat. Despite having left the prisoner-of-war camp, he is still stuck in the same circle, he constantly returns to the same questions, unable to find any answers.[9] What is the meaning of an experience devoid of experience? When he was confined in a spectral landscape, 'paludi del sonno / corse a volte da un sogno' (p. 74), he could only record his impressions and thoughts in a lyric diary. Now, instead, that he is in Milan, 'lungo i tristi / cavalcavia di Milano' (p. 92), he can talk to friends and through the dialogue try to decipher his own past. Giansiro, however, reacts with anxiety to the incomplete recounting of Sereni's experience, a recounting he solicited expecting a different, possibly less personal and more generic, outcome. Instead of offering a new understanding of the rather meaningless events Sereni lists, the conversation rapidly escalates. Sereni is ashamed that all he got from the past are 'trafitture del mondo che uno porta su sé', stings or stabs of the world you bear long afterwards, when you are in Milan and the younger generation is striving to dance. Giansiro in an outburst of rage emphasises that they are the younger generation, because they have been deprived of their youth:

Siamo noi, vuoi capirlo, la nuova
gioventù – quasi mi gridi in faccia – in credito
sull'anagrafe di almeno dieci anni… (p. 94)

This point sounds rather intimate, visceral and if we look more carefully at Giansiro, we will notice a striking resemblance, as if the poet were talking to a mirror. When Sereni writes about the imbalance he feels, in the process of writing, between efforts and results, waiting and fulfilment, it resonates with the sense of having consumed 'la miglior parte' as Giacomo

[9] Maybe the impossibility of reaching a conclusion is the reason why this poem has been reiterated in both collections, in the hope that different contexts could shed light on its undefined content. Other explanations have been provided, some more prosaic than mine. Mengaldo, for example, argues that Sereni having removed some poems from the second edition of *Diario d'Algeria* because they more rightly belonged to his first collection, *Frontiera*, the collection was then too short to be published and therefore he had to look in his more recent production to find someone to add. At the end of the day, a collection is simply a series of printed pages.

Leopardi once called it, and still not knowing what to do with that experience. He can no longer hope for the future to be rewarding, nor entirely renounce the temptation of connecting past and future, learning the lesson Simone Weil tried to teach us: 'accepter le passé sans demander de compensation à l'avenir'.[10]

1.4 Biographical v. comparative readings.

At this point, someone could protest against the trajectory I have just drawn, linking together Sereni's biography, and his youth in particular, to his writing and his attitude towards literature. It is a very legitimate protest. These days very few miss biographical criticism, in the form of which Sainte-Beuve would approve, and when personal experience is linked to a particular line or sentence, such a connection sounds suspicious. Considering someone's work as the logical result of the marks life left on them is not only a short-sighted approach but potentially a violence inflicted to both life and literature, condemned to march together even when they would diverge. I have already explained in the first chapter of this work how the comparison between literary texts, theoretical reflections, and life experiences helps me to define the specific knowledge that literature may offer. In the case of Sereni's work, however, that of experience is not a notion that I add in order to answer the questions the text asks us, but something he declares to be the source of his poems. Before we go back to our exploration of his waiting for words and the relationship between writing and time, it is worth pausing here to clarify how I interpret the fact that life and literature are often presented in step in many of Sereni's pages. My thoughts on this relationship follow the insightful and significant steps of many other critics, [11] in a chain that leads back to and includes the author himself; and it is with Sereni's own considerations that I should start.

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[10] Simone Weil, *La pesanteur et la grâce* (Paris: Plon, 1948), p. 14.

[11] See Franco Fortini, '*Gli strumenti umani*', in *Saggi italiani* (Milan: Garzanti, 1987), pp. 172-189; Giovanni Raboni, 'Sereni: una vita prossima e lontana', in *La poesia che si fa. Cronaca e storia del Novecento poetico italiano 1959-2004*, ed. by Andrea Cortellessa (Milan: Garzanti, 2005), pp. 163-180; Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, 'Vittorio Sereni', in

Not only does Sereni write poetry about his experiences, but he also often comments on the relationship between the two. When reflecting on his own writing, along with the torture inflicted by waiting for lines, he inevitably mentions his need to always refer to his life. The draft of the postface to *Gli strumenti umani* is no exception, and, indeed, it is one of the aspects through which he measures the distance from his latest collection and *Diario d'Algeria*. However, his most insightful contribution to the topic may be considered a text placed at the very end of another book published by Sereni in the 1960s, *Gli immediati dintorni*.[12] It is not easy to decide what *Gli immediati dintorni* is. Sereni tells Giacomo Debenedetti, the critic and friend entrusted to write the preface, that he would like to see it defined as a 'diario intermittente' (p. 355). It is a composite book, consisting of translations, verses, narratives, essays, poems, gathered to give a sense of Sereni's intellectual journey between 1945 and 1962. Most of the materials constituting the volume had been already published, but the last piece, 'Il silenzio creativo', was specifically written by Sereni shortly before the publication of the book.

In this text too, Sereni addresses the discomfort he feels about writing so little over such a long period of time, but if in the draft of the postface his malaise was expressed in a succinct sentence, in *Il silenzio creativo* it takes over, flooding it. The discomfort starts pouring out from the title itself, from the irony lying under the oxymoron, as Sereni strongly opposed all his life the idea that silence might be a sign of creativity rather than failure. It continues to flow through the opening sentence where the declares: 'conosco uno scrittore che giunto all'età matura non fu più capace, per anni e anni, di scrivere un rigo'. He lists the various ways in which the friends of this writer tried to comfort him: in turn, they reproached him for being

Poeti italiani del Novecento (Milan: Mondadori, 2009), pp. 745-752; Luca Lenzini, *Verso la trasparenza. Studi su Sereni* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2019).

[12] *Gli immediati dintorni* was published by Il saggiatore in 1962. Sereni kept collecting materials also afterwards and already in 1968 started working on a second edition which, however, was published posthumously in 1983, edited by his daughter Maria Luisa Sereni. These texts are now included in the critical edition of all his prose pieces, Vittorio Sereni, *La tentazione della prosa*, further references are given after quotations in the text.

impossible to satisfy, questioned the true claim that he actually had not written a single word, described his silence as rather positive, a virtue, a proof of courage. In another climax, the harshest but also, according to Sereni, the most accurate reaction comes last: it is that of a certain V. 'violento e sboccato', who considers the writer a failed one: 'Quello? Ma quello è come uno che non è più capace di...' (p. 67). Sereni ponders the case of this fellow miserable writer and asks himself whether one should accept the loss of writing or fight against it. Even imagining that there is an alternative to acceptance seems to him contemptible and irritates him, provoking one of his typical outbursts announced by the famous 'ma':[13] 'Ma che male c'è se uno non scrive più? C'è qualcosa di vergognoso in questo? Di vergognoso non c'è che la vergogna di vergognarsi dello stato d'impotenza' (p. 68), he declares exasperated. If Sereni cares so much about writing, even against his own will, is because its loss does not only affect his identity or social role but deprives him of a powerful tool to decipher what of his own experience can be communicated to and shared with others. His aim, indeed, is not that of reaching a deeper or more authentic self-knowledge, but of verifying which elements of an occurrence can be valid beyond its personal context. To use literature to find this out implies, I believe, the intuition that life and writing may have something in common, and the desire to explore such intersections. But what is it that experience and literature share? Thomas Bernhard's answer to this question is possibly the most straightforward one, the idea of pretending; 'hätte ich, was alles zusammen heute meine Existenz ist, nicht tatsächlich durchgemacht, ich hätte es wahrscheinlich für mich erfunden und wäre zu demselben Ergebnis gekommen'[14] [had I not actually experienced everything that today constitutes my existence, I probably would have made it up and obtained the same result], he writes towards the end of his life in the first of the five volumes constituting his unfinished autobiography. This work is full of similar statements about the interchangeable nature between experiencing

[13] See Franco Fortini, 'Le poesie italiane di questi anni', in *Saggi italiani*, pp. 96-149 (p. 127n).
[14] Thomas Bernhard, *Die Autobiographie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2004), p. 110.

and making up, but the more convincing proof of this intersection is the very representation of Bernhard himself as the typical Bernhardian character, the one we have learned to know very well by the time we come to read his autobiography. For Sereni, instead, life and literature share something different but still linked to our relationships with those around us: a sense of guilt. Both experience and writing seem to revolve around black holes: they convey our energies and attempts at making sense, but most of the time leave us with only provisional, insufficient explanations and a bitter taste of failure. However, if literature may seem the ideal realm in which to test the idea of pretence due to the (infamous) notion of fiction, we may wonder why it is also the right context to explore the idea of guilt. Sereni's answer is that we do not choose to be born, but we choose to write; if we regret what we were not able to understand or do in our life, how should we feel about the things we missed and did not achieve in a work nobody asked us to write? Literature is superfluous and yet we deeply care about it, it is unnecessarily difficult to produce and yet we pursue it, it keeps us waiting and yet we are not able to leave.

1.5 Literature, life, and the sense of guilt.

All the texts I have touched upon so far, 'Il male d'Africa', 'Il silenzio creativo', the postface to *Gli strumenti umani*, deal with the intersection between life, literature, and the sense of guilt, as Sereni is ashamed at not being able fully to make sense of his experiences, or to write faster or, even better, to accept that he may not compose a poem anymore. In the most metapoetic text of *Gli strumenti umani*, 'I versi', Sereni addresses the fact that his poems are grounded in the sense of guilt but writing them does not lead to any relief:

> Se ne scrivono ancora.
> Si pensa a essi mentendo
> ai trepidi occhi che ti fanno gli auguri
> l'ultima sera dell'anno.
> Se ne scrivono solo in negativo
> dentro un nero di anni
> come pagando un fastidioso debito

che era vecchio di anni.
No, non è più felice l'esercizio.
Ridono alcuni: tu scrivevi per l'Arte.
Nemmeno io volevo questo che volevo ben altro.
Si fanno versi per scrollare un peso
e passare al seguente. Ma c'è sempre
qualche peso di troppo, non c'è mai
alcun verso che basti
se domani tu stesso te ne scordi. (p. 149)

The poet ironically expresses his surprise in realising that verse is still being written; and not only written, but being recollected in those moments when we are exposed to clichés devoid of any truth, like the ritual wishes of luck and joy on New Year's Eve. Indeed, this is the condition in which every line is created, 'in negativo': poems consist not of black words standing on a white page, but rather of white letters surrounded by a black background, and maybe this is how they should be printed. Creation is only possible within a 'nero di anni', an expression that echoes Giovanni Pascoli's description of an approaching storm as 'nero di nubi'. Gianfranco Contini in a famous essay saw in this line by Pascoli the Italian equivalent of the 'une blancheur de colonnes', the example chosen by Charles Bally to define impressionism in poetry, for the shift in the focus from the noun to the adjective, from the object to its colour, from the essence to the accident.[15] It is the black that counts, that makes years indistinguishable like clouds. Sereni, however, is not observing the sky, listening to the owl's call, and discovering the uncanny in nature. He is scrutinising his own experience to find out that years are not units of time that can be distinguished and recalled individually but only the overall impression they have left on us, the sense of their long-term darkness. When it comes to unsettling debts and distressing legacies, time passing is not quite fair, not quite right, for it is disrupted by guilt, by its burden that it makes arduous to move forward. From this blackhole produced by a disturbing debt, no linear narration can emerge, but only voices, objections, laughter. No, Sereni tells us, replying to a criticism we cannot hear, being aware of it does not make 'felice l'esercizio', nor did he want his writing to be like that, despite

[15] See Gianfranco Contini, 'Il linguaggio di Pascoli', in *Varianti e altra linguistica* (Turin: Einaudi, 1970), pp. 219-245.

the laughable ambition to create Art. He wanted something different for himself. By writing lines in order to shrug off a burden, and move on to the next one, one suddenly realises the disproportion between burdens and lines; and this discrepancy is both quantitative and, more disgracefully, qualitative. Burdens and lines have different effects on time and on the way in which we deal with it, that is through memory: too often, we forget the treatment and we remember the illness.

1.5.1 Too many burdens.

But what is it that the poet wanted? 'Far better' suggest Peter Robinson and Marcus Perryman in translating this poem,[16] considering this passage, I believe, to deal more with aspirations in life rather than in writing. 'I wanted far better' is something that Little Chandler could have exclaimed, had Joyce allowed him to speak in the first person. Indeed, after having met an old fellow, the protagonist of one of the stories of *The Dubliners* realises how fascinating a life in London looks like, but also how vulgar his friend is, and ends up recalling his past aspirations and reconsidering his own potential. Of course, he dreams of being a writer, and he can even hear critics praising the 'wistful sadness' that pervades his yet to be written poems. The encounter awakens within him a 'dull resentment against his life' to which literature seems to be the answer, the vindication. Publishing a book is for him a way out, the solution that comes to his mind when he thinks of escaping from his little house, from the furniture he still has to pay for and in the end keeps him where he is.[17] Peter Robinson agrees with Little Chandler or better said with Adrian Stokes,[18] from whom he derives the idea that art is a means of reparation for events in our life, in particular traumatic ones. And this idea informs his interpretation and translation of Sereni's poems. If 'far better' alone

[16] Vittorio Sereni, *The Selected Poetry and Prose of Vittorio Sereni*, ed. and trans. by Peter Robinson and Marcus Perryman (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 159.
[17] James Joyce, 'A little Cloud', *Dubliners*, ed. by Hans Walter Gabler and Walter Hettche (New York: Garland, 1993), pp. 228-242 (p. 232, 241).
[18] See the interview with Ian Sansom in which Robinson talks about the fundamental role of Stokes and Sereni in the developing his idea of literature just after his traumatic experience in Italy; Peter Robinson, *Talk about poetry. Conversations on the art* (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2007), pp. 24-25.

seems scant evidence of such an interpretation, it is worth examining another line: 'No, non è più felice l'esercizio'. Where I see a poet lamenting his unsuccessful attempts to express himself adequately in poetry, and, at the same time, underrating his activity as a simple exercise, Robinson sees a poet for whom 'the task's no longer happy', where 'task' implies a certain consideration of a profession that has its own duty, and 'non è più felice' is interpreted as a failed aspiration to happiness, rather than accomplishment. Furthermore, Robinson engages with this poem, and in particular the line 'si fanno versi per scrollare un peso' in an essay dedicated to his relationship with Sereni's poetry. It was, indeed, after a traumatic experience he had when he first visited Italy, that he met Sereni's work, which according to him encouraged him to use poetry to face his own traumatic past, to shrug off his burden.[19]

1.5.2 The fraud of literature.

As we have seen in 'Il male d'Africa', Sereni, indeed, uses his poetry to investigate certain aspects of his experience that weigh on him, but he does not gain much relief from his writing. Sereni possibly wanted far better for his life, not to have wasted his youth in a prisoner-of-war camp in Algeria, to have had more time to write, but, I believe, poetry is never regarded as a compensation or a reparation for what he did not have. In the conclusion to the series of lectures on 'The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism', Eliot states that when he writes, 'what happens is something *negative*', touching upon what I think is at the core of 'I versi'. 'The accompanying feelings', he explains, 'is less like what we know as positive pleasure, than a sudden relief from an intolerable burden'. In these lectures, Eliot refuses to consider poetry akin to mysticism: the outcome of poetry, he states, is just words arranged on paper and it inevitably results from a long incubation within the poet so that it

[19] '[La poesia di Sereni] mi diede la chiave per rifuggire un minimalismo poetico di indizi e tracce, cioè da una poesia che indica ma non dice, più o meno derivata dalla poesia francese che segue tuttora il simbolismo. Io avevo invece bisogno di scrivere qualcosa che affrontasse quell'esperienza, certo con tatto e delicatezza, ma senza evasione'. Peter Robinson, 'Vittorio Sereni nella vita di un poeta inglese', in *Vittorio Sereni. Un altro compleanno*, ed. by Edoardo Esposito (Milan: Ledizioni, 2014), pp. 343-353 (p. 346).

'cannot be suspected of being a present from a friendly or impertinent demon'.[20] I may add that it is also the kind of relief produced by poetry that seems to be different, for it is negative in nature, lying in the removal of a burden rather than in a positive achievement: it is a remedy that does not erase the past, the pain, the pressure on our daily life, it does not make us forgetful, realised, restored. Indeed, Sereni tells us, that if we forget something, it is the relief and not the pain, for the relief makes us aware of the many burdens that still press on us.

The difficult relationship between hope for fulfilment and deception is also explored in 'Il fantasma neroazzuro', another prose piece of *Gli immediati dintorni*, in which Sereni asks himself why we care so much about football. He describes his experience as a supporter, in particular the dull association he makes while watching a match between his own destiny and the results of the game: our future and that of our favourite team seem inextricably intertwined, what happens in the field suddenly becomes extremely relevant for us. Despite our attempts to be rational, we end up wondering whether they feel the way we do, picturing athletes as contemporary mythological figures.[21] By the end of the match, however, the fever has disappeared, 'per far posto a un senso amaro di vacuità e quasi di rimorso non appena le gradinate si svuotano e l'enorme catino ormai silenzioso è l'immagine stessa dello sperpero del tempo' (pp. 81-82). Not only do we realise that our destiny cannot be revealed by a football match, but we feel guilty for having believed this and even more for having wasted our time with this hope. However, it is precisely for this reason that football 'assomiglia stranamente alla vita, al lavoro e all'arte stessa'. Why? Because the fluctuation between connection and alienation, hope and despair, meaning and non-sense does not occur only at the stadium, but constitutes the very rhythm of existence as well as of writing. 'La passione', he notices, 'muore nelle ceneri di un tardo pomeriggio domenicale e da queste, di domenica

[20] Thomas Stearns Eliot, *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. by Jewel Spears Brooker and others (London: Faber and Faber, 2014-2019), IV: *English Lion, 1930–1933*, ed. by Jason Harding and Ronald Schuchard (2005), pp. 574-694 (pp. 685-686).
[21] As it is often the case in *Gli strumenti umani*, see for example 'Mille miglia' (p. 117)

in domenica, non si sa come, risorge'. Can this repetitive mechanism be broken by a moment of true fulfilment? Sereni considers the very best scenario: 'la tua squadra vince la Coppa dei Campioni e poi diventa campione del mondo. Che cosa c'è più di questo?'. Nothing, but the best is not enough, 'macché, tutto è già ricominciato, tutto è da rifare' (p. 82), 'non c'è mai / alcun verso che basti'.

In order to further illustrate this point, we can look again at Bernhard, as, in the 1960s, he was dealing with a similar fluctuation between hope and despair. After the publication of his first novel, *Frost*, in 1963 he experiences a brief happiness before falling into a pit of terrible despair. He decides to abandon literature, never again to choke on the error of believing in writing as his hope, and takes a job as truck driver, making beer deliveries for the famous Gösser brewery: 'von der Literatur wollte ich nichts mehr wissen, ich hatte alles, was ich gehabt hatte, in sie hineingestopft und sie hatte mich dafür in die Grube geworfen. […] Es schien mir, als sei ich, indem ich *Frost* geschrieben habe, einem ungeheuerlichen Betrug zum Opfer gefallen'[22] ['I didn't want anything to do with literature anymore, I had put everything I had into literature and literature responded by throwing me into the pit. […] It seemed to me that in writing *Frost* I had fallen victim to an enormous fraud', p. 40]. Bernhard earns his living as a truck driver and for months is happy, but then inevitably this joy too comes to an end. He suddenly hates his job and gives it up from one day to the next. Sereni is similarly restless, similarly aware that nothing will be quite forever, similarly aware that this is what literature and life have in common. Literature can never be a solution and, instead, could be a waste of time. Bernhard reacts with rage to this possibility while Sereni feels ashamed, but both contemplate the joy of a life relieved of the burden of words without being able to embrace it fully. And yet the question is not so much what happened to their lives once they

[22] Thomas Bernhard, *Meine Preise* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2009), p. 34.

realised that literature is a fraud, but rather what happened to their work, for this is the reason we took an interest in them.

1.6 The invention of the spoken-written.

1.6.1 The task of the autobiographical writer

So, going back to 'I versi', how to interpret the 'ben altro' the poet wanted before realising that what happens in writing is something negative? If we decide that it has less to do with life than with literature, we can look for a possible answer in the draft of the postface to *Gli strumenti umani* that was mentioned earlier. In this text Sereni acknowledges how his vision of poetry has changed in the nearly twenty years after the publication of *Diario d'Algeria*. He describes himself as an autobiographical poet, which, he explains, means that he cannot write about things he has not directly and personally heard, seen, or experienced. This time we have to picture Sereni not in a stadium, but in a cinema seat:

> accade allo scrittore di base autobiografica quello che accade a un particolare spettatore di film: colpito da un'immagine si sofferma mentalmente su quella e la rimugina interrogandola tra sé e sé, e con ciò perde il filo della vicenda filmata; non lo perdono, invece, altri spettatori, cui non è occorso di operare quella selezione istintiva e che rimangono dunque in grado di seguire punto per punto la vicenda stessa. Si potrebbero poi confrontare le immagini complessive dell'uno e dell'altro tipo di spettatore e quasi sempre accadrebbe di rilevare un notevole sfasamento tra esse.

There are certain episodes that capture the writer's attention and stay with him, turning over in his mind, while the projection continues, and other scenes pass by, unnoticed. Life as a whole cannot become a piece of art, a selection must occur: writing acts as a sort of disruption on experience, it breaks its flow. Life and literature can briefly converge but must then diverge, following their own paths. Sereni presents the autobiographical writer as a particular kind of spectator, but we may object that his representation of the audience lacks accuracy: we all miss bits in a movie because a certain scene reminds us of something else, we all ask our interlocutors to repeat what they just said because we were distracted by

something, we all burn the bread we forgot in the toaster.[23] The writer, however, seems to indulge longer in those moments, neglecting the rest of the movie, missing the point of the whole conversation, ignoring the smell of the burnt bread; and more importantly, sitting in that cinema seat he seems to do something qualitative different from the other spectators, for he transforms his experience into something else. Invention is, indeed, for Sereni the decisive element that distinguishes art from the stories we need to tell about our lives, so vital for us that we keep getting distracted. Precisely in this importance we all attribute to our stories, lies one of the major risks for the writer whose primary source is their autobiography: 'infatuazione autobiografica', Sereni calls the risk of thinking that writing about one's experience automatically guarantees the fulfilment of one's duty. Did Sereni suffer from such an infatuation? After mentioning it, he invites the reader to consider a passage from 'Il silenzio creativo': 'vedi […] la frase: "una volta mi fermavo a un'ipotesi più semplice: che la cosa da dire fosse in fondo o un momento o un luogo della propria esperienza (esistenza) *da salvare*".[24] The quotation is striking because it seems to us not quite to prove the point: the idea that writers may be tempted to justify their activity solely based on the fact that they talk about their life is quite different from the aspiration of saving a fragment of our experience we do not want to lose by writing about it. What these two thoughts do have in common, however, is the direction they both point to, that of considering writing as a private matter. And in this same direction, we may say, goes Robinson's belief that literature has a power of reparation, for many who have written with eternity in mind have done so out of a discomfort over their personal lives or the more general constraints of existence, namely its caducity. However, if this idea of literature as a private task is to be found somewhere in 'I versi', we believe, it is in the 'ben altro' Sereni aspired to and does not want anymore. Ultimately, we may say, 'I versi' is a poem about personal burden but set in a public context, with people

[23] On distraction see Alessandra Aloisi, *La potenza della distrazione* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2020).
[24] Vittorio Sereni, *Prose e poesie*, p. 29. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

laughing or wishing one another well on New Year's Eve: writing is not only a private matter, nor can it any longer take the form of a lyric diary.

In the 1950s, indeed, Sereni invites a third contributor into the discussion between life and literature, a contributor he calls invention, as he feels the need to combine his experience with disparate elements encountered while he was reflecting on something that happened to him or while he was doing something else. It is only through this stratification, he believes, that the autobiographical writer can test whether their life can actually transform, create, and communicate, whether it can become art. Inviting invention into the conversation between life and literature is one of the major innovations of *Gli strumenti umani*, or better said, within *Gli strumenti umani*, for the first poems still aim to save fragments of Sereni's experience- We may wonder what the reasons for such an invitation are. Considering the political and social context of the 1950s and 60s, we may be tempted to ascribe it to a broader reflection on the relation between the private and the public or the political, but in the draft to the postface to the collection, the poet denies such a connection: 'ora io non vorrei mai che mi si riconoscesse il merito, *tout court*, di avere allargato la mia sfera di interessi fino alla socialità o coralità, fino alla sociologia e perché no? al socialismo' (p. 30). No, it is not because of socialism that his vision of poetry has changed, it is because of an inner dissatisfaction, the same dissatisfaction he experiences when the football team he supports becomes the world champion just until, a few months later, a new championship starts, and everything must be redone. 'Assomiglia stranamente alla vita, al lavoro e all'arte stessa', he stated about football and now we can further understand why. No transcription of life, no transformation into a poem lasts very long, not even a season, and not because it is eventually forgotten but because when we read it again we realise that many things are missing, that things were quite different. No fragment of existence can be definitely saved because it changes with us: our interpretation and understanding of our experiences are always in progress. If everything related to life is only provisional and precarious, if any aspiration for eternity would be

frustrated, the autobiographical writer can only hope that writing about a personal experience would lead to something else, that the intersection between life and literature would be creative: 'ritengo che il problema o la crisi o la sensazione di vuoto, di sazietà, di ripetizione con cui deve costantemente misurarsi lo scrittore a base autobiografica', Sereni states, 'lo porti continuamente a prospettarsi ogni possibile via di trasformazione, sviluppo, trasposizione e magari trasfigurazione (non necessariamente sublimazione, anzi il meno possibile) della propria materia, cioè dei propri moventi' (p. 29). It is by variously combining our experiences with a book randomly left open at a certain page, a voice heard in the street, a public event, that it is possible, according to the poet, to develop or prove the fertility of what happened to us.

Invention plays a crucial role in the way in which, for Sereni, literature knows but if Roland Greene selects this among the five words he scrutinises in order to investigate the age of Shakespeare and Cervantes, it is because its meaning can vary considerably. Indeed, when Augustine talks about *inventio* he means discovery, 'the finding of what is already there instead of (or more emphatically than) the purposive act of conception or creation'. Greene explains this interpretative process by considering what he calls its 'material counterpart', 'the Invention of the Cross by Saint Helena in the fourth century, in which the wood on which Christ died was supposedly recovered as a relic'.[25] In the early modern period, instead, people are less confident that everything is already there and just needs to be uncovered, and this 'rhetorical process received from classical antiquity' becomes the 'figure that represents the confrontation between two factors, the human capacity to touch reality and that reality itself'; for artists and rhetors the relationship with the world is not given, but needs to be determined each time anew. If invention is conceived as discovery, it aims at inert objects, at the knowledge that comes from the past and through memory can be brought into the present;

[25] Roland Greene, *Five words. Critical semantics in the age of Shakespeare and Cervantes* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 27.

if it is considered as conception, instead, it explores a more dynamic phenomenon, that of experience, and 'creates fictions in the present destined to be encountered in the future'. (p. 20). By adding this notion among the categories he uses to consider literature and its relationship with life, Sereni shares its early modern understanding, as he is interested in deciphering his experiences by writing poems that allow such occurrences to grow. And because there is no cross that can be retrieved, no definitive text that can be interpreted, Sereni as his counterparts of the age of Cervantes and Shakespeare has to solve a series of issues, 'where matter comes from, how it envelops consciousness, and how it might make consciousness possible' (p. 27) suggests Greene, but also what form can express the ever-changing relationship between the poetic subject and reality, its movement open to the future.

1.6.2 Multiple layers

In his constant query for ways in which an experience can be developed, transformed, or even transfigured, in the 1950s Sereni starts exploring the resources of the 'spoken-written'. Indeed, in order to select the aspects of a personal occurrence that can be shared by others, discussing them with someone else can be more fruitful than writing entries in a lyric diary; as we have already seen, in 'Il male d'Africa', Giansiro openly challenges the poet's interpretation of his youth, ultimately disclosing the crucial issue at the core of the poem, the fact that only lack enables appropriation. Because dialogues touch upon Sereni's major concerns, conversations in *Gli strumenti umani* are often animated; cries characterise the exchange with Giansiro, 'quasi mi gridi in faccia', 'quasi grido a mia volta' (p. 94) as well as 'Pantomima terrestre', 'gli grido dietro' (p. 181). In this text, the poet raises his voice both to reach his friend who is climbing the stairs, and in response to his provocative statement

'dimmi se non è stupenda la vita'. Their conversation includes one of the quotations without sources or footnotes mentioned in the closing note of the collection:

> E lui per rami di scale, mezza faccia già disfatta
> mezza in ombra, canzonandomi con parole d'autore: *¿le gusta*
> *este jardin que es suyo? Evite...*
> dal basso gli completo la frase: *que sus hijos lo destruyan*
> rifacendogli il verso.

The exchange takes the shape of the twisting of the stairs, the movement between shadow and light, up and down, mocking and mimicking, the self and the Other. In reproducing the speeches, the poet acknowledges that they are uttered in specific conditions that affect them, but at the same time transfigure these circumstances, and the spirals become the way in which relationships are established, between the landscape and the two friends, among them, between their conversation and the dialogue imagined by Malcolm Lowry. 'Spoken-written' means for Sereni the intersection between spoken language and the poetic form, the structures they share, but also the issues they both investigate through their different means. Stairs, for example, can be found in poetry in the form of the so called 'verso a gradino', a stylistic feature which recurs quite often in *Gli strumenti umani* and here becomes a further element in which the knowledge that comes in steps is represented. 'Sembra allora di capirlo a che si ostinano / dove puntano che cosa vogliono o non vogliono / che cosa negano che scappatoie infilano / i motori nella giostra serale' he states at the end of the poem:

> con quelli che fingono a ogni giro di andare via per sempre
> con quelli che fingono a ogni giro di arrivare
> dentro un paese nuovo per cominciare ex novo
> – e i primi lampi
> lo scroscio sulle foglie
> l'insensatezza estiva (p. 182).

The fragmented line leads us to a fundamental point, that of the senselessness of the summer which may be the ultimate rejection of the initial hypothesis that life is wonderful, as in

Sereni's poetic universe it is often regarded as the season of plenitude, of solid joy. However, while the poet seems to understand where the cars are heading, we may be quite puzzled that we ended up with lightnings, leaves and the non-sense of a specific time of the year. The syntax does not help us to clarify connections here, and, indeed, in this collection Sereni does not rely on its resources as they imply a unified point of view and a hierarchy between the elements of a sentence in their being divided into principal clauses and subordinates. The poet, instead, ask us to connect the dots, observing the cars turning around while they pretend at each turn to leave indefinitely or to have reached the place where to start anew, following the steps of the poem; the initial suggestion that life is stupendous, the quotation implying that if you like your garden you should not let your children destroy it, and the storm revealing the senselessness of the summer. None of these elements can be forgotten, as, for Sereni, they are all true but how are they related? The inconclusive, open answer may be a further common element between our everyday conversations and the poems we like.

As well as with other people, the poet in *Gli strumenti umani* talks to himself and sometimes he does both. When in 'Pantomima terrestre' Sereni presents evidences to disprove the idea that life is wonderful, 'eccoti di giorno in giorno la mia acredine /la mia insofferenza di gente in gente', he has to admit in brackets that his listing is not complete, '(ma queste brezze tra le secche e le rapide / tra i diluvi e le requie dell'essere questi balsami...)' (p. 181). There are sometimes balms in between shallows and rapid, along with the bitterness and the intolerance and Sereni is fully aware that it is this coexistence of contradictory elements that makes the task of defining life so challenging and frustrating. The 'spoken-written' allows us to access also the aspects that are not said out loud, that we usually omit in order to win an argument or out of embarrassment, cowardice, or avoidance. In 'Appuntamento a ora insolita', for instance, the poet does not want to deceive his interlocutor by acknowledging that there is no space for her in the utopia of the socialist city and prefers to dismiss the idea that he

himself will be able to see it: 'Non / arriverò a vederla le rispondo. | (Non saremo / più insieme, dovrei dire)'. At the beginning of this text, the poet finds himself walking down the streets of Milan in a working day, an exceptional moment of suspensions of his professional duties further underlined by the fact that it occurs after a storm. He is reflecting on the shining nature of the city due to the sun lights reflected by the drops of rain and by the shopwindow he is looking at, when a woman materialises herself next to him:

> La città – mi dico – dove l'ombra
> quasi più deliziosa è della luce
> come sfavilla tutta nuova al mattino...
> «... asciuga il temporale di stanotte» – ride
> la mia gioia tornata accanto a me
> dopo un breve distacco.

The personification of joy interrupts the interior monologue and the idyllic contemplation of the landscape by reminding the poet that the light he is admiring is just the result of the storm, and the real issue at stake is not the deep thoughts and interesting comparison one can draw in a day off but the compatibility between political struggles and emotions. The woman is clearly a double of the poet, she literally emerges from his reflection on the shop window and her function is that of forcing him to admit what he is obliterating. By the end of the text, Sereni finally concedes that joy exists, 'non è vero che è rara, – mi correggo – c'è' (p. 140), it is an excruciating wound, 'la si porta come una ferita / per le strade abbaglianti. È / quest'ora di settembre in me repressa / per tutto un anno, è la volpe rubata che il ragazzo / celava sotto i panni e il fianco gli straziava' but also a powerful weapon 'potrei / con questa uccidere, con la sola gioia...'. However, by the time he fully expresses his thoughts on the role that joy could play in the revolution, she has disappeared; 'Ma dove sei, dove ti sei mai persa? // «È a questo che penso se qualcuno / mi parla di rivoluzione» / dico alla vetrina ritornata deserta' (p. 141). The text is built around the figure of reticence, a further example of the intersection between spoken language and poetry. According to Quintilian, the trope

has two fundamental functions, to display emotions and contrive a transition;[26] sometimes we cannot finish a sentence as we are too angry or anxious or afraid to say something, others it is because both life and our discourses about it do not consist of logic connections or straightforward chains of causes and consequences and in order to carry out our existences as well as our speeches we often have to step over few ellipsis marks. In this poem, the figure both allows the dialogue to happen and denounces its limits; the personification of joy materialises herself in the text in the space left open by the unfinished sentence of the poetic subject ('come sfavilla tutta nuova al mattino... / «... asciuga il temporale di stanotte»') and disappears once the subject has clarified this notion within himself, hinting at its enormous power, but possibly unsure about the consequences of such awareness ('potrei / con questa uccidere, con la sola gioia...'). Reticence also shapes the relationship the poem establishes with the readers, as it points out uncertain connections and complex emotions but offers little guidance on how to navigate the hollows they entail. As Prandi points out, this figure assigns us a demanding task, that of 'congetturare un messaggio direttamente sulla base di un vuoto irreversibile di contenuto, un silenzio assoluto'.[27]

Not only phrases are sometimes left unfinished in *Gli strumenti umani*, but they often lack the verb. Nominal sentences represent a further feature shared by both spoken language and poetry and probably the most straightforward example of Sereni's tendency to rely on the semantics rather than the syntax to structure his poems. As Benveniste underlines, the nominal element, which is the assertive component in a non-verbal sentence, does not carry the determinations that verbs imply and therefore 'l'assertion aura ce caractère propre d'être intemporelle, impersonnelle, non modale, bref de porter sur un terme réduit à son seul

[26] See Quintilian, *The orator's education*, trans. by Donald Andrew Russell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), IX, 2, 54-57, pp. 64-67.
[27] Michele Prandi, 'Una figura testuale del silenzio: la reticenza' in *Dimensioni della linguistica*, ed. by Maria-Elisabeth Conte, Anna Giacalone Ramat, Paolo Ramat (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1990), pp. 217-239 (p. 220).

contenu sémantique'.[28] It is the verb that tells us when a statement is uttered, in which mode, and by whom, but also what is the relationship between the moment of the assertion and that of the event it is describing or commenting. Lacking these indications, nominal sentences situate themselves 'hors de toute localisation temporelle ou modale et hors de la subjectivité du locuteur';[29] they are rich in information but ambiguous about the ways in which they are connected. However, the same can be said of any encounter, experience, and memory, which, according to Sereni, need to be analysed, developed and transformed in order to reveal their potential meaning. Nominal sentences are to be found in almost every poem of *Gli strumenti umani*,[30] but it is when they appear at the beginning of a text that they more evidently display the process of constant unfolding implications that characterises the collection. 'Lietamente nell'aria di settembre più sibilo che grido / lontanissima una sirena di fabbrica' (p. 123) is the starting point of 'Una visita in fabbrica', while 'Il male d'Africa' revolves around 'una motocicletta solitaria. / Nei tunnel, lungo i tristi / cavalcavia di Milano / un'anima attardata' (p. 92) and the poem dedicated to Saba starts with 'berretto pipa bastone, gli spenti / oggetti di un ricordo' (p. 136). These may be the features that at first strike us when we visit a factory, we meet a friend, or we remember a fellow poet, but they do not tell us much about the consequences of industrialisation, what got lost in our youth, the essence of the person who once was alive. Therefore, these beginnings are followed by the poet's initial reaction to the elements that have emerged, and his responses take the form of a perplex 'mah!' (p. 92), a wondering in the form of a question, 'non dunque tutte spente erano le sirene?' (p. 123), or a protest 'ma io li vidi animati indosso a uno' (p. 137). Sereni's reactions still do not solve the issues at stake in these texts, as we need invention to further

[28] Émile Benveniste, 'La phrase nominale' appareil formel de l'énonciation', in *Problèmes de linguistique générale I*, pp. 151-167 (p. 80).
[29] Ibid., p. 160. For a description of nominal sentences in Italian see Bice Mortara Garavelli, 'Fra norma e invenzione: lo stile nominale', *Studi di grammatica italiana*, I (1971), pp. 271-315.
[30] On Sereni's use of non-verbal sentences see Lorenzo Tomasin, 'Una costante sereniana', *Lingua e Stile*, XL, 2 (2005), pp. 237-262.

transform these elements, we need the rest of the poems. At no point, the features that are initially gathered are presented as more authentic or close to the experience we want to decipher, and we will never fully grasp, for the focus lies on the process not in its individual moments. 'Penso al corpo gettato nella fiamma', he writes in the draft of the postface to *Gli strumenti umani*, 'che nelle successive fasi della sua combustione suggerisce immagini che sempre più si scostano dalla sua fisionomia iniziale ma continuano a serbare qualcosa di questa, prima di essere cenere' (p. 31). For this reason, the object threw into the fire can be presented at the beginning of a poem already in the process of its combustion, incapsulated into the poet's meditations, questions, realisations, as in the case of 'Ancora sulla strada di Zenna';

> Perché quelle piante turbate m'inteneriscono?
> Forse perché ridicono che il verde si rinnova
> a ogni primavera, ma non rifiorisce la gioia?
> Ma non è questa volta un mio lamento
> e non è primavera, è un'estate,
> l'estate dei miei anni (p. 113).

In this text, the poet is struck by the movement of the plants, troubled by his car passing by, or better said he is surprised by his own reaction, by the fact that he is touched by such a detail. There are many ways in which, in the unpublished draft, Sereni refers to the elements that force him to write, sometimes they are described as neutral, 'moventi', 'sensazioni, ricordi, emozioni, sentimenti e vicende' or more technical 'materiali da costruzione' (p. 28), in other cases, they become painful 'lesioni o ustioni o ferite' (p. 30), or 'urticazioni' (p. 29) as Fortini once called them. This poem is an example of the latter, as the tenderness induced by the plants provokes an unfavourable comparison between the cycle of season and that of joy. However, we should not stop at this traditional juxtaposition between the rhythm of nature and the destiny of human beings, it is not time to complain or write a *complainte* as it is not the season of hope, but that of maturity. This movement from the landscape to the subject and again from what is personal to what may go beyond one's experience

characterises the poem as a whole, which explores the notion of change at many different levels, political, historical, individual, natural and through various emotions; while journey continues, tenderness turns into despair, indifference and finally pity, where the poem stops but not the process of trying to understand or the car, 's'impunta un attimo e poi si sfrena / fuori da sonni enormi / e un altro paesaggo gira e passa' (p. 114).

1.7 Husserl and the faces of the die.

To better understand the movement that the process of knowing something entail, it is helpful, I believe, to consider some ideas elaborated by Edmund Husserl in his *Cartesianische Meditationen* and investigated by Enzo Paci in *Tempo e verità nella fenomenologia di Husserl*. In illustrating his vision of knowledge, Husserl does not talk about 'urticazioni', wound or bruns but often refers to a material object, such as a die, which stands in front of us:[31] only some of its faces are visible but it appears to us to have other, unseen sides. Therefore, concludes Husserl, 'das *cogitatum qua cogitatum*, ist nie als ein fertig Gegebenes vorstellig' (p. 82) ['The *cogitatum qua cogitatum*, is never present to actual consciousness as a finished datum', p. 45] as any object comes with a sense yet to be actualised, something implicit, invisible, that we need to unfold, make explicit, visible, clear. That perception is in itself incomplete and unstable is not a new discovery, but rather an uncomfortable truth that has been contemplated by many philosophers, from Plato to Descartes, from Hume to Kant. Husserl, however, takes a specific stand regarding this matter, by focusing on the unseen faces of the die, which are not simply invisible, but rather implicated and not perceived.[32] To be conscious of something

[31] In this brief sketch of Husserl's theory of knowledge many fundamental elements are missing. First, what Husserl, borrowing a term from the sceptics, calls 'epoché' meaning the radical decision philosophers ought to make of 'bracketing' any convictions they may have, included that an external world exists. Through the pheonomenological epoché, we discover that indubitable is only our own existence as conscious beings and that anything belonging to the world exists for us in that we experience it and judge about it. Thus, 'der transzendentalen Erfahrung' as Husserl calls it, is discovered, the realm of transcendental-phenomenological self-experience. See Edmund Husserl, *Cartesianische Meditationen*, pp. 58-65. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

[32] See what Husserl with a rather odd vocabulary calls 'Appräsentation' and 'Apperzeption' (Ibid., pp. 138-141).

means to acknowledge that there is always more than what meets the eye, an empty, unfilled component in experience wherein lies something which Husserl calls 'Intentionalität' and which can be compared to what Sereni means by fertility when in the draft to the postface to *Gli strumenti umani* he states that the task of poetry is that of 'sviluppare la fecondità supposta dei movimenti', 'verifica della fertilità su cui si è puntato nel dare credito ai movimenti' (p. 30), 'intima fertilità, una capacità, appunto, di trasformazione e metamorfosi' (pp. 28-29). These further possibilities accompanying any perception constitute, according to Husserl, a horizon, which can be internal to the object, like the unseen faces of the die, or external to it. Indeed, we never experience an object alone, there is always a background, a space around it, and there is always a horizon of the past, possible recollections that can be awoken. If we can never hold the object firmly in our mind, we can explore this infinite horizon of approximation: 'das *cogitatum qua cogitatum*', he concludes, '*klärt* sich erst durch diese Auslegung des Horizontes und der stetig neu geweckten Horizonte' (p. 82) [the *cogitatum qua cogitatum* becomes 'clarified' only through explication of the given horizon and the new horizons continuously awakened', p. 45]. Sereni's exploration of the combination and connection of an experience with other facts and data, 'l'intuizione di certi nessi', may be conceived as an exploration of the horizon of possibilities in which that experience may actualise further meanings. Furthermore, the metaphor of the movie, employed by Sereni to represent the world we perceive, can resonate with Husserl's description of the realm of phenomena as a flux: 'das Reich der Bewusstseinsphänomene', he writes, 'so recht das Reich Heraklitischen Flusses ist' (p. 86) ['the realm of phenonema of consciousness is truly the realm of a Heraclitean flux', p. 48]. There is no way we can stop the flow by throwing stones of solid and stable knowledge into the river of phenomena, but looking at the river we realise that a sense of identity lies within it. If the idea of horizon underlines more that any experience happens in space, the image of the river draws our attention to the temporal character of phenomena which keep unfolding in time.

Through our exploration of the notion of life and its relation to writing we are back to the problem of time with which the present discourse started. To conclude our reflection, we ought to return to the draft to the postface to *Gli strumenti umani*, to Sereni's discontent for the long years that take him to write, for his activity that is often discontinuous, for the interval between departure and arrival that are in many cases too long. In this text, however, there is a passage in which Sereni seems to contemplate what his friends have kept on telling him, that such intervals are necessary: the various materials merge in time, in the flow of a continuous synthesis. He even ventures an almost positive depiction of the process:

> più in generale: penso al passato non come a un rifugio, a una fase su cui ripiegare con i versi o come a una fonte ineffabile di ciò che si scrive; ma come a una potenzialità di cui cogliamo i segni in noi stessi, come a uno stimolo rimasto insoddisfatto e che aspetta il nostro intervento per compiersi o consumarsi, come a un anonimato che assume identità e figura nel nostro presente. E in questo senso noi siamo produttori di futuro per la potenzialità che emana da noi e accenna alle cento altre figure diverse da noi che avremmo potuto esprimere – se non ne avessimo scelta una, quella che fa la nostra storia di singoli – e non abbiamo espresso. (p. 32)

When Sereni talks about experience, he indeed talks about the past because there is, and there cannot be any simultaneity between life and our understanding. However, in this passage he is not just including himself among the acquaintances of the owl of Minerva, which famously spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk. What the poet is stating here is that in the interval between experiencing and deciphering something, a transformation occurs, in a way that may remind us of the surprise of the translator who, according to Benjamin, comparing a text with its latest translation realises that the text has changed: not only our understanding of it, but the very life of language is different. This transformation Sereni talks about, however, does not happen independently from us: the unsatisfied impulse needs our intervention to be fulfilled or worn out. Again, it may be appropriate to compare Sereni's statement with some ideas developed within the phenomenological tradition, but this time I will ask for Paci's help. In *Tempo e verità nella fenomenologia di Husserl*, published in 1961, Paci takes a famous passage from Augustine's *De vera religione* and underlines three main points '1) Noli foras ire, in the ipsum redi; 2) in interiore homine habitat veritas; 3) et si tuam

naturam mutabilem inveneris, trascende te ipsum'[33] [1) Do not go outside, come back to yourself; 2) truth dwells in the inner self; 3) and if you find that your nature is changeable, transcend yourself]. He considers these to be the main points of phenomenology: the transcendental reduction, the act of bracketing any beliefs to discover that the only thing we can be sure is that we exist as conscious beings, that, therefore, the truth lies within our field of consciousness and that, finally, experiences unfold in time because our consciousness is itself temporal. Time, therefore, is not only an external element, it is a fundamental component of consciousness: what Husserl calls 'das innere Zeit Bewusstsein' (p. 81) is described by Paci 'un senso del continuarsi del passato nel presente verso il futuro, una corrente di vita' (p. 61) flowing inside us.[34] Our task is precisely to explore this stream of past, present, and future characterising our consciousness, a stream flowing in the direction of a *telos*, that for Paci is intimately related to the meaning of history and the improvement of society. For Sereni, instead, the creative, transformative relationship with the past is as an intimate, personal matter, whose outcome is just a few poems. More importantly he is more doubtful of the fluidity of this flow, as for him it mostly consists in an awful amount of time spent waiting and in a deep sense of guilt. Indeed, for him the awareness that full understanding of an experience is out of reach is not something that he just acknowledges but also a problem, a crisis, a sense of emptiness, a feeling of satiety, of repetition, a source of frustration.[35] However, he agrees that this is all what we have, if any understanding can ever be reached is our own one, if any future is possible it must be sought in the past, if there is any hope, is in the waiting.

[33] Enzo Paci, *Tempo e verità nella fenomenologia di Husserl* (Milan: Bompiani, 1990), p. 134. References are given after quotations in the text.
[34] When an internal consciousness of time is mentioned, the name of Proust would be almost inevitably followed: this is true for Paci's book, but also for the present work, as we will see later on in this chapter.
[35] Husserl was less frustrated by this lack of full understanding also because he was more interested in 'die transzendentale Analyse als eidetische', aiming at essences, rather than at individuals or concrete facts. See Edmund Husserl, *Cartesianische Meditationen*, pp. 103-106.

2. The time of waiting.

2.1 The sense of a beginning

In this excursus to delineate Sereni's vision of poetry, an important step is missing. We have been through a fundamental essay, 'Il silenzio creativo', an unpublished draft of the postface to *Gli strumenti umani*, and a poem, 'I versi', all dealing with the arduous question: why do we write? But there is another place where the author's intention is usually particularly evident, where the readers are warned of what they may or may not expect from the book they picked up: its very beginning. If we were to venture a more ambitious project aiming to give the sense of a beginning, mirroring Frank Kermode's work,[36] we could start by noticing that opening lines in literature are often more easily remembered and repeated than endings. This may be because beginnings are promising in nature, and promises have the ability to retain their fascinations even after they have been broken. Opening lines of novels are probably the most memorable and among them some remarkable case studies are to be found: the enigmatic assertion that Joseph K. was arrested one morning without having done anything wrong, the plain indication that 'it was a bright cold day in April' which does not reveal much of the specificity of the year, 1984, the recollection of the facility of falling asleep which strikes us in the context of the most sleepless movement of Western culture etc. In the case of poetry, this broader project would likely find, readers are less inclined to trust evocative beginnings, they want to know quite precisely what the book is about, at the point that in its classical form a proem should declare the subject matter in the very first words (Μῆνιν', 'Ἄνδρα', 'arma virumque', 'le donne, i cavallier, l'arme, gli amori'), even before invoking the Muses, Apollo, the readers or dedicating the book to some powerful gentlemen. Why do we not easily trust poets' promises? Why do they have to plead for our benevolence, listening,

[36] Frank Kermode, *The sense of an ending. Studies in the theory of fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

or mercy? While we wait for this study to be conducted and published to find the answers to these and many other questions, we may consider a couple of contemporary examples of this relatively unexplored field of poetic beginnings. Proems have certainly become old-fashioned, but text opening a poetic collection still acts as a declaration of intent. What is this book about? the readers keep asking but the answer may be less straight-forward than in the past. Andrea Zanzotto, for example, is unable to reduce the exorbitant variety of themes, figures, and elements which characterises *Il galateo in bosco* to a single word, and therefore opts for a list: 'Dolcezza. Carezza. Piccoli schiaffi in quiete. / Diteggiata fredda sul vetro. / Bandiere piccoli intensi venti/vetri. / Bandiere, interessi giusti e palesi',[37] and the listing continues for several more lines. Giuseppe Ungaretti, instead, offers an extremely concise indication to the readers of *L'allegria*, inviting them to scrutinise the white space surrounding the poem: 'Tra un fiore colto e l'altro donato / l'inesprimibile nulla'.[38] Eugenio Montale is possibly aware of the impatience of someone opening his first poetic collection, *Ossi di seppia*, and starts by asking for a moment to explain the kind of poetry he believes in: 'Ascoltami',[39] he says to us; while Umberto Saba tells the story of a cloud in the sky to warn the reader that life is ephemeral and that he knows that from a long literary tradition addressing the issue; he gently calls the poem 'Ammonizione'.[40] Other cases are less straightforward and the opening poem has the function of showing the poet's attitude, the posture behind the poems: it becomes a sample, a poem alike the others, but more evidently, more explicitly.

How does *Gli strumenti umani* begin? From the end, one could say. We can imagine a reader who in 1965 is looking forward to plunging into Sereni's latest collection, and is surprised to find something quite familiar at its very beginning. Where has she already read the first poem,

[37] Andrea Zanzotto, *Le poesie e prose scelte*, ed. by Stefano Dal Bianco and Gian Mario Villalta (Milan: Mondadori, 1999), p. 551.
[38] Giuseppe Ungaretti, 'Eterno', *Vita d'un uomo. Tutte le poesie*, ed. by Leone Piccioni (Milan: Mondadori, 1970), p. 5.
[39] Eugenio Montale, 'I limoni', *L'opera in versi*, pp. 9-10 (p. 9).
[40] Umberto Saba, 'Ammonizione', *Tutte le poesie*, ed. by Arrigo Stara (Milan: Mondadori, 1988), p. 17.

'Via Scarlatti'? The succinct postface to *Gli strumenti umani* does not say where, does not mention any former publication of the poem. We can portray this reader looking for her copy of Sereni's previous collection, *Diario d'Algeria*, and this is not an easy task, a book bought nearly twenty years before can hide anywhere. Finally, while holding it, she finds 'Via Scarlatti' right at the end of *Diario d'Algeria*. She recalls the first impression of these verses, she remembers thinking that they were quite different from the rest of the collection, a thought fostered by the short note warning that this was the only poem composed after the author's captivity in Africa. And while we are imagining, we can choose this reader to be a very scrupulous one, the kind of reader that a few weeks later, in her weekly visit to the bookshop, notices that a new edition of *Diario d'Algeria* has just been published, and opens it to find out that 'Via Scarlatti' is not there anymore, 'ho voluto collocar*la* in apertura a *Gli strumenti umani* Sereni tells her in the inevitable note. If, back in 1965, she put the first edition of *Diario d'Algeria* back on the shelf maybe too quickly, if she left it on the side table to do something else, if she did not spend more time pondering this unexpected ending, it is not only because this is an imaginary reader but not an ideal one, but also because the poem works well as a conclusion to the prisoner-of-war journey. Via Scarlatti is indeed the street where Sereni moved with his family after returning from Algeria. More importantly, a poem about waiting fits perfectly in a diary of absence. Why do we feel that 'Via Scarlatti' also belongs to *Gli strumenti umani* then? We had better read the poem to look for some answers:

Con non altri che te
è il colloquio.

Non lunga tra due golfi di clamore
va, tutta case, la via;
ma l'apre d'un tratto uno squarcio
ove irrompono sparuti
monelli e forse il sole a primavera.
Adesso dentro lei par sempre sera.
Oltre anche più s'abbuia,
è cenere e fumo la via.
Ma i volti i volti non so dire:
ombra più ombra di fatica e d'ira.
A quella pena irride

uno scatto di tacchi adolescenti,
l'improvviso sgolarsi d'un duetto
d'opera a un accorso capannello.

E qui t'aspetto. (p. 103)

Sereni is back, he is *qui*, here, in an urban setting which contrasts with the desert landscape we have encountered so far in *Diario d'Algeria*. In the first two lines of the central stanza, 'non lunga tra due golfi di clamore / va, tutta case, la via', there are at least three unfamiliar elements in a collection which as yet has displayed troop-trains, tents and the wind blowing: a street, houses, and noises, which are, we could argue, the essential components of a city. If the sea immediately evokes water, beaches and the sound of the waves, the city is made of streets, buildings, and a distinctive, constant noise, as Sereni has learnt walking down Corso Buenos Aires or crossing Piazza Duca d'Aosta, the two 'gulfs' next to via Scarlatti. There is a further inevitable element of the urban landscape everybody familiar with modern literature expects to see: the crowd, anonymous, indistinct, in pain. It appears a few lines later but in a blurred representation: Sereni is unable to describe the faces of the people gathered in the street, they are a mass of shadows burdened by an existence consisting only of exhaustion and rage, or better said, they are the projections of that burden, its result: 'ombra più ombra di fatica e d'ira'. These features, the city, the anonymous crowd, the pain, are widespread in modern literature but they do not always carry the same meaning. We may wonder what could have been Montale's reaction reading a line like 'Ma i volti i volti non so dire', he who twenty years earlier had stated: 'So l'ora in cui la faccia più impassibile / è traversata da una cruda smorfia: / s'è svelata per poco una pena invisibile. / Ciò non vede la gente nell'affollato corso'. Which expression could have crossed Montale's own impassive face? The poet would have recognised here a familiar issue which was at the core of *Ossi di seppia*: ineffability. Indeed, in his poem, Montale displays a deep knowledge of the crowd, of the pain hitting even the most imperturbable person, but he also admits that this truth is barely sustainable by language: he knows the negativity of existence but words betray in vain his inner

awareness, 'il vento che nel cuore soffia', at the point that he wishes for silence ('la più vera ragione è di chi tace') or the appeasement produced by sobbing ('il canto che singhiozza è un canto di pace').[41] However, Sereni's ineffability is of a different kind: the indistinction which for Montale stands at the level of language, for Sereni lies in the reality that he ought to describe; it is the blurring of the faces that makes it impossible to define them. In addition, looking at the street he does not only see the alienation of the crowd, but a life made up of various, contrasting elements. By reading 'Via Scarlatti', Montale could smile complacently in noticing an echo of his own poetry, in particular in the opening line where his most distinctive feature is displayed, 'quel fatale e contagiante *tu*', as Sereni describes it;[42] but he would also recognise that he is not the only model, that another collection had played a major role in shaping this text: Saba's *Canzoniere*. Indeed, it is in this book and, in particular, in the section written between 1910 and 1912, called 'Trieste e una donna' that Sereni could find a less polarised description of reality, nuances and gradations instead of sharp contrasts. It is between these two poles, Montale and Saba, that we need to situate 'Via Scarlatti' in order to understand what Sereni is trying to do with *Gli strumenti umani*, which differs from *Diario d'Algeria*.

2.2 Making sense of the form.

The city depicted by Saba is a highly contradictory space, where joy and pain merge in the landscape, where industrialisation, sex workers, 'il vecchio / che bestemmia' coexist with *contrade*, *muriccioli*, *galline*. His poems too are full of contrasts: 'Trieste', he writes in one of his most beautiful texts, 'ha una scontrosa / grazia', 'intorno / circola ad ogni cosa / un'aria strana, un'aria tormentosa / l'aria natia',[43] expressing in a very delicate and graceful manner, how alien and excruciating the place we come from can be, or, in psychoanalytical terms,

[41] Eugenio Montale, *L'opera in versi*, p. 36.
[42] See Vittorio Sereni, 'Dovuto a Montale', *La tentazione*, pp. 144-149 (p. 146).
[43] Umberto Saba, *Tutte le poesie*, p. 89.

how uncanny the most familiar actually is. In this representation, sounds play a crucial role, but this time it is not the sound of the city or the sea that washes over the houses of Trieste, it is the sound of the poem; Saba has his own distinctive musicality, his own voice, and in his hands a form that may remind us of Leopardi's 'canzone libera' meets melodrama.[44] A similar musicality can be heard also in 'Via Scarlatti'. Where? Where we read: 'ma l'apre d'un tratto uno squarcio / ove irrompono sparuti / monelli e forse il sole a primavera. / Adesso dentro lei par sempre sera.' Rhymes play a crucial role in Saba's poetic system, as well as in Montale's one, but with a fundamental difference: while Saba chooses simple, plain rhymes, difficult because obvious, Montale opts for sophisticated ones, difficult because rare, mixing regular patterns with imperfect or disguised forms; whereas Montale rhymes *àsoli* with *caso*, Saba matches *fiore* with *amore* or *sera* with *primavera*, as, for example, in the opening stanza of 'Verso casa', another poem belonging to 'Trieste e una donna':

> Anima, se ti pare che abbastanza
> vagabondammo per giungere a sera,
> vogliamo entrare nella nostra stanza,
> chiuderla, e farci un po' di primavera?

After a day spent wandering in the city, the poet tries to persuade his soul to go back home, close the door of their room and rest. The initial appeal is followed by a long stanza in which the necessity of quietness is argued through the description of Trieste and the journey they just accomplished; unsuccessful, the poet tries, in the final three lines, a different strategy, promising his soul a reward, waiting for them in the calm of their room: 'Della più assidua pena, / della miseria più dura e nascosta, / anima, noi faremo oggi un poema'. [45] The only counterpart to pain and misery, the only consolation Saba can offer this soul is that of form, of composing poems, something which was already evident in the structure of the opening verses: a quatrain consisting of regular hendecasyllables, the epitome of the Italian line, the

[44] On Saba's own use of melodramatic schemes see also his use of Carmen as *senhal* for his wife, Lina, in *Carmen* and other poems.
[45] Umberto Saba, *Tutte le poesie*, p. 90.

most traditional rhyme scheme, ABAB, with simple rhyme words and a light rhythm that contrasts with the painful address to the soul. At the end of his journey through Paris and through the *Petits Poèmes en Prose*, Baudelaire too has a conversation with his soul. He asks his *âme* where it would prefer to live, where it would be happier: in Lisbon? in the Netherlands? in Batavia? in the Baltic Sea? at the Poles? Pressed, the soul explodes: 'N'importe où ! n'importe où ! pourvu que ce soit hors de ce monde !'.[46] There is no refuge available for Baudelaire, no quiet room to lock himself in, no form to trust, but only the hope of an escape, the need of eschewing the boundaries of existence and literary genres. When Baudelaire, in the preface to the book, asks 'quel est celui de nous qui n'a pas, dans ses jours d'ambition, rêvé le miracle d'une prose poétique, musicale sans rythme et sans rime, assez souple et assez heurtée pour s'adapter aux mouvements lyriques de l'âme, aux ondulations de la rêverie, aux soubresauts de la conscience ?'[47] Saba would raise his hand in dissent, believing that, indeed, there is no more powerful way of expressing the various aspects of existence than rhyme, which ties together contradictory elements like *sera* and *primavera*, *pena* and *poema* through what Montale has once identified in the *Canzoniere* as 'la magia delle sillabe che si ricercano l'una con l'altra'.[48] Can we really believe in this magic, can form ultimately be the good taken out of the evil of life?[49] The question cannot be easily answered, and even Saba's solution contains a certain degree of ambiguity. His capacity of employing traditional devices with ease is what is most striking in his poems, puzzling especially those who regard both form and spontaneity with great suspicion. Montale distinguishes between a kind of poetry like his own which is the result of excavations, 'macerazioni', long accumulations throughout time

[46] Charles Baudelaire, 'Any where out of the world', *Œuvres completes*, ed. by Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1975-76), I (1975), p. 209.
[47] Ibid., p. 8.
[48] Eugenio Montale, 'Umberto Saba', in *Sulla poesia*, ed. by Giorgio Zampa (Milan: Mondadori, 1976), pp. 194-207 (p. 199).
[49] See what Saba writes in the poem 'Porto': 'Solo un pensiero a me era nocente. // Cercavo a quello un angolo ridente. / Molti, all'ombra di pergole, ne aveva / la mia città inquieta. Mi premeva / isolarmi con lui, mettere assieme / versi, cavare dal suo male un bene' (Umberto Saba, *Tutte le poesie*, p. 504).

and space, and 'una poesia facile, in apparenza, come il respiro',[50] which is Saba's own. Sereni agrees with this dichotomy: 'in lui nessuna problematicità apparente tra ispirazione ed espressione',[51] in me, we could finish the sentence, inspiration and its expression are separated by several years. Montale and Sereni may envy Saba's spontaneity, but they are also aware that effortlessness is only apparent, especially when it comes to poetry or to a romantic who has encountered psychoanalysis. Saba's poems are never a parody of tradition, they are not ironic, but they are not naive either: they are pervaded with humour and pain, they often consist of the same 'scontrosa / grazia' he attributes to Trieste.

'Ma l'apre d'un tratto uno squarcio / ove irrompono sparuti / monelli e forse il sole a primavera. / Adesso dentro lei par sempre sera'; Sereni plays with the same old clichés hinted at by Saba: life is made of lights and shadows, spring is the season of hope, evening the metaphor of death. However, what all of a sudden breaks in is not just a sentimental representation of a group of kids, called, indeed, 'monelli', or the most poetic among the seasons, it is also the traditional devices we have encountered in Saba's poem: rhymes and hendecasyllable. The poet rightfully reproduces Saba's match of commonplaces and traditional devices, beautifully expressing the banality and complexity of the street scene. However, in order to solve the identical problem of making sense again of the obvious, i.e. both clichés and regular forms, Sereni adopts a different strategy from Saba's: intensity instead of extension. Traditional elements are not presented from the beginning in the hope that the reader will progressively get accustomed to them again, but they are used in strategic moments in order to make them suddenly visible anew. Whereas Saba rhymes *sera* and

[50] Eugenio Montale, *Sulla poesia*, p. 204. This article deeply irritated Saba, not because he did not agree with this opposition, but because he felt that in a piece that should have been dedicated to his poetry, Montale was indeed talking too much about himself. We know about this episode of narcissism (on both sides) because Montale complains about it in a letter to Svevo: 'ho pubblicato (sul Quindicinale) *sette* colonne di lodi a Saba e ho ricevuto dal poeta una lettera molto molto *piquée*, in cui afferma che ho parlato affatto di lui ma di me stesso (!!!)', Italo Svevo, Eugenio Montale, *Carteggio. Con gli scritti di Montale su Svevo*, ed. by Giorgio Zampa (Milan: Mondadori, 1976), p. 20.

[51] Vittorio Sereni, 'Saba e l'ispirazione', in *Poesie e prose*, pp. 968-972 (p. 970).

primavera several times, most of them at a distance, in quatrains, Sereni does it only once, and in a so-called 'rima baciata'. While Saba largely employs hendecasyllables, Sereni only places them in key positions. The impression we get while reading the *Canzoniere* is that of being taken on a journey through the city, the poet's childhood, his relationship with his wife, a journey in which life is seen from the outside because the inside, the self is the ultimate mystery we could never grasp: 'tutto, se chiedo posso avere,' writes Saba in a later poem, 'fuori / quel mio cuore, quell'aria mia e quel tempo'.[52] Sereni, instead, takes us on a journey through the very process of trying to understand reality, an ongoing movement following an experience which keeps changing; hendecasyllables and rhymes are not given from the beginning, but they are conquered in the same course. In 'Via Scarlatti' these traditional devices seem to appear when Sereni finally finds the definition he was looking for: 'monelli e forse il sole a primavera. / Adesso dentro lei par sempre sera' provisionally express what the street is, another hendecasyllable, 'ombra più ombra di fatica e d'ira', fixes the blurring crowd, three more of these line forms and an assonance nominate the elements contradicting the pain of the mass: 'uno scatto di tacchi adolescenti, / l'improvviso sgolarsi d'un duetto / d'opera a un accorso capannello'. The metre gives a precise structure to this stanza, with hendecasyllables opening and closing it, and marking its turning points. This structure, however, is not rigid, does not consist of separate blocks because the process of approximation to what via Scarlatti actually is, is restless. The opening line, 'non lunga fra due golfi di clamore', is an exquisite hendecasyllable, but incomplete: the sentence lacks both subject ('via') and verb ('va') which we encounter following the *enjambement* in the second line. The eternal evening that seems to have fallen on via Scarlatti, on the one hand, contrasts with the renewal embodied by the children and the spring; on the other, it introduces the theme of darkness which is expanded in the following lines ('abbuia', 'fumo') and culminates in the mass of shadows populating the street. However, even the negativity of this

[52] Umberto Saba, *Tutte le poesie*, p. 504.

representation is not definitive: the pain is mocked by teenagers wearing heels, and by a small crowd gathered around an opera duet. Furthermore, the rhyme 'duetto' : 'aspetto' links together the last part of this stanza with the final line of the poem ('e qui ti aspetto'), which resumes its very beginning ('con non altri che te / è il colloquio'). 'La contradiction' notices Simone Weil, 'est l'épreuve de la nécessité', the only 'critérium du réel',[53] the most compelling feature of life, could add Sereni, who aims to respect the contradictory nature of experience but also aspires to self-contained poetry.

As we have seen, one of the ways in which Sereni achieves unity through loose connections is the 'spoken-written'. 'La linea del "parlato"', he writes in the draft of the postface to *Gli strumenti umani*, 'permette la pluralità dei livelli d'intonazione e dunque ammette anche l'inserimento a tempo debito, dal punto di vista dell'invenzione omogeneizzante, di espressioni – parole singole e brani interi – che per sé stessi poco hanno a che fare col "parlato" o non hanno più niente a che fare con esso (vedi accenno iniziale all'inserimento di frasi o versi ripresi da altri)' (p. 32). Dialogues and monologues, written to follow the intonations of spoken language, hold together a wide range of elements, from everyday discourses to quotations in foreign languages, creating a structure that allows for variety but also incompleteness. This 'linea del parlato', however, is not quite visible in 'Via Scarlatti' as it is a poem written in a moment of transition between two poetic styles and does not fully embrace either of them. Moreover, beginnings are never entirely representative of the books that follow, they can show only a limited number of features and sometimes even omit the most important ones. Not only 'Via Scarlatti' could have been the conclusion of *Diario d'Algeria*, but also the opening poem of a different collection, revolving around an absent woman or the topography of Milan. It is, instead, the first text of a work dedicated to the time of waiting and its structures and, in this context, it draws our attention to the fact that

[53] Simone Weil, *La pesanteur et la grâce*, p. 115.

when ties are loose, the order in which elements are presented acquires a particular relevance. The way in which the arguments are introduced always influences our understanding of a subject, but I may say that poetry, or at least that of Sereni, goes further than that, that it lies in the creation and subversion of such orders. Having Sereni presented first via Scarlatti and then commented, 'I can only dialogue with you, and here I wait for you', it would have felt like the whole poem was about the street, and the poet's relationship with it; via Scarlatti could have been the reference of both 'te' and 'qui'. Instead, having Sereni declared at the beginning that the only possible dialogue was with the 'you', and he was waiting there, and then described via Scarlatti, we might have thought that the poem was about the contrast between someone gone and what is left to the poet, only a place. These would have been totally different poems. Instead, Sereni tells us that he can only dialogue with a 'you', presents to us via Scarlatti, and then himself waiting, asking us to wonder what is the role of experience in mediating between beginnings and endings, between the absent but still driving 'you' and the place where the poet is waiting, between memory and knowledge.

The discontinuity caused by asides, insertions of other elements, and changes in the word order is the key feature of a further figure that characterises both poetry and spoken language: hyperbaton. The trope, which literally means to step across, informs the structure of 'Via Scarlatti', but can be found at all textual levels of *Gli strumenti umani*, often in series, as, for example, in these lines from 'Nel sonno':

> Per tutta la città, nelle strade
> per poco ancora vuote un assiduo raschiare,
> manifesti a brandelli, vanno a brani
> le promesse di ieri e lungo i marciapiedi
> è già il tritume delle cicale scoppiate.

The various elements of the landscape keep getting in the way of a clear sentence, 'per poco ancora' intervenes between the deserted streets which separate the city and the scraping or, possibly, the manifestos. The difficulty of deciphering these lines is also due to the fact that verbs merely indicate that something is or is already, creating connections without giving us

much information, or, on the contrary, are chosen for they semantic rather than syntactic value; the manifestos in pieces point out that the promises of yesterday are in shreds, and through this mediation we come to the squashed cicadas, since, as Ariosto reminds us, 'di cicale scoppiate imagine hanno / versi ch'in laude dei signor si fanno'.[54] In the *Institutio oratoria*, Quintilian claims that the first four words of Plato's Republic, 'κατέβην χθὲς εἰς Πειραιᾶ' were the result of much redrafting, as sometimes terms have to be postponed or anticipated to find their proper position. Sentences, in his view, are like structures of unshaped stones; 'non enim recidere ea nec polire possumus quo coagmentata se magis iungant, sed utendum iis qualia sunt, eligendaeque sedes' ['we cannot cut or polish words to make them fit together better when juxtaposed; we have to take them as they are and choose places for them'].[55] The same can be said about the way in which Sereni's experiences enter his poems; they are not adjusted to fit into the discourse, but they find their position in a structure that can hold them together while creating a new design. However, navigating these uncut and unpolished materials is not straightforward, as we need to step across and at the same time we have to look back to make sure we are not leaving anything aside.

In the text that would replace Sereni's postface to *Gli strumenti umani*, Mengaldo scrutinises the collection in search of a line or a text that can be considered the epitome of the entire work, as, in his view, the particularity of poetry is that 'è sempre, nello stesso tempo, rappresentazione, allegoria di altro e allegoria di se stessa'. We are not far away from the grain of sand in which one can see the world and, indeed, the name of Spitzer is mentioned shortly after this statement together with the inevitable 'click' which in Mengaldo's words becomes 'il momento privilegiato di riconoscimento intuitivo delle macrostrutture nelle microstrutture'.[56] And repetition is, for him, the stylistic feature that proves to be the most

[54] Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando furioso*, ed. by Cristina Zampese (Milan: Rizzoli, 2018), XXXIV, 77, v. 7, p. 95.
[55] Quintilian, *The Orator's education*, VIII, 6, 64, pp. 462-463.
[56] Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, 'Iterazione e specularità in Sereni', in *La tradizione del Novecento. Prima serie* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1975), pp. 359-86 (p. 361). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

revealing structure of the entire collection. The critic shows how it informs all aspects of Sereni's poems, he finds it in the use of alliteration and in rhetorical figures like conduplicatio, anaphora, epiphora, correctio, polyptoton; he sees it in word choices like *ancora*, *tornare*, and *ritornare*, and in certain motifs such as that of spring or travelling, in the recurrent toponomies. He recognises it in the circular structure of 'Amsterdam', in which the description of the city is framed by two almost identical lines; 'per questo è una e insondabile Amsterdam', 'per questo è sui suoi canali vertiginosa Amsterdam' (p. 172). The elements in between, the bridges, the streets, the houses constitute a variety which is only apparent, the city may be vertiginous in its canals, but is still an impenetrable unity. Among the various meanings the figures of repetition carry in *Gli strumenti umani*, for Mengaldo this is the most significative one, that it confirms what we already knew. Ultimately Sereni knows that he did not fight to liberate Italy from the nazi-fascism and his visit to the Anne Frank House can only reiterate his sense of guilt. For this reason, Mengaldo believes the poet would agree with MacLeish's epigraphic line 'The more I have travelled the less I have departed' (p. 379). As we have seen, Sereni writes to know his past, to verify the fertility of certain occurrences, as he puts it; he explores what, after many years, an experience may reveal, after he read different books or encountered other people, and in this sense Mengaldo is right when he states that 'l'esperienza nuova non tanto si offre nella sua vergine novità, e per questo vale, quanto per le stratificazioni di passato che essa contiene, per il gioco di ritorni, rifrazioni e conferme tra presente e passato che propone' (p. 360). Furthermore, this compulsion to re-examine, re-consider the past may remind us of someone who is not able to forgive themself for something they did. In this sense, the sense of guilt is not only what literature and life have in common, but it becomes the framework to understand how knowledge works. Afterthoughts, however, as I am trying to show, are complex matters; they entail the reassuring and paralysing awareness that no detail can dramatically change the picture, but also the hope to find new aspects that were not visible before. Circles are fundamental

structures of Sereni's poetry which often resumes the past only to come to the same conclusions; the noise of Giansiro's motorcycle opens and closes 'Il male d'Africa' but the dialogue does not clarify the meaning of the poet's imprisonment. However, if Sereni writes it is because of the hope that the elements that fill the time of his waiting may lead to subtle shifts, micro revelations, slightly different endings. Circles may be the ultimate conclusion of his poetry, but hyperbatons are what makes it possible, and they should be carefully analysed for what they may reveal of the relationship between time and writing.

2.3 What is missing.

As noticed above, the figure of the circle marks *Diario d'Algeria*, representing both the camp and the hole that the impossibility of joining the resistance movement left on the poet. In the first edition of the collection, the last section, called 'Ma se tu manchi', included three quite different poems but all dealing with what makes us wait: absence. The problem of writing in relation to lack and hope was addressed by the last of these texts, 'Via Scarlatti', but also the first one, also titled 'Ma se tu manchi'.[57] 'Troppo il tempo ha tardato', announces Sereni, 'per te d'essere detta / pena degli anni giovanili', disclosing at the very beginning of the poem what it is that the title announces is missing: the specific way in which pain is experienced when we are young. Having scrutinised himself, he must admit that no, the discomfort he feels cannot be expressed in the way he used to describe it, time has transformed it into something new. However, it is the memory of this lost pain that takes over, occupying the two central stanzas of the poem and bringing back images and stylistic features typical of *Frontiera*, his first collection. What was youth for Sereni? It was a city at sunset ('illividiva la città nel vento'), it was a flooding of sunlight among pages leafed over

[57] In the second edition of the collection, published in 1965, the whole section which consisted of three poems disappears: 'Via Scarlatti' is moved to *Gli strumenti umani*, while the other two texts are included in the portion entitled *Diario d'Algeria*. As all the poems of this section have no title, but are called by their first line, 'Ma se tu manchi' appears in this edition as 'Troppo il tempo ha tardato'. If in discussing this poem, I still use the previous title, it is both because I refer to the first edition, and because it focuses on waiting rather than time.

while the watch was ticking ('eri nel tichettio meditabondo / d'una sfera al mio polso / tra le pagine sfogliate / una marea di sole'), it was a landscape which immediately took a human form ('un'indolenza di sobborghi chiari / presto assunta in un volto'), it was the voracity of desire that made the body shudder ('ma un occhio lustro ma un tratto febbrile'). What was the pain of youth then? It lay in pointed questions about one's contribution ('che porti / tu, che offri?'), in friends disappearing ('sorridevo agli amici, svanivano'), in an overall feeling of melancholy ('dietro route fuggite / smorzava i papeveri sui prati / una cinerea estate') (p. 82). Youth, we are told through these figures, is a 'pending' experience, ready to be transformed, change, become something else, but unsure whether the transformation would actually happen or be decisive. Sereni, however, is not only exploring an existential issue, but a poetic one, as the tension of his youth points distinctly towards writing; 'eri nel tichettio meditabondo / d'una sfera al mio polso / tra le pagine sfogliate / una marea di sole', writes the poet describing the overwhelming encounter with the pages of great pieces of literature. Condensed into four short lines, there is, on the one hand, the awareness of the constraint of time right there on our wrist (too much to read, process, understand), and, on the other, the beauty and the joy of expanding our horizons ('una marea di sole'). For someone willing to write, what lies heavily is not only the question of what such experience will leave, but also to which words, lines, images it would lead.

In the midst of the desert, surrounded by ghostly figures, in an atemporal dimension, Sereni acknowledges that these are not the questions that torment him anymore, and that the pain inflicted by them seems now even inconsistent, fragile. 'Il prigioniero può archiviare la gioventù come se appartenesse alla preistoria della sua esistenza', comments Lenzini, 'solo ora, però: dopo che ha sperimentato a pieno la negatività del suo stato, e averla espressa'.[58] It is only at the end of a collection dedicated to the exploration of absence that he can register

[58] Vittorio Sereni, *Il grande amico. Poesie 1935-1981*, annotated by Luca Lenzini (Milan: Rizzoli, 1990), p. 209.

the lack of one of his dearest myths, that of youth; and it is not an easy recognition because the memory of the life preceding the imprisonment, the years spent in Luino, plays a crucial role in *Diario d'Algeria*. For the prisoner-of-war, indeed, the past is the ultimate promise of happiness, the only alternative left to the monotony of a routine constrained in space and deprived of present and future. And yet, it is not a very solid alternative: elsewhere in the collection Sereni describes it as a 'sogno improvviso di memorie' (p. 62), bringing his own hope close to the very definition of fragility, a dream about a shadow. Despite being frail, the promise of youth casts its radiant halo over the pages of this collection until the very end. In the last stanza of 'Ma se tu manchi', Sereni faces the consequences of its loss: 'ma se tu manchi / e anche il cielo è vinto / sono un barlume stento, / una voce superflua nel coro' (p. 82). Without the hope represented by the past, plunged in a situation in which even the sky is defeated, the poet is drained, his voice superfluous. His youth was painful precisely because it was hopeful and now that he cannot hold on to that pain, the negativity of his condition seems absolute.

'Ma se tu manchi' is, in many respects, comparable to the text which previously closed the homonymous section of *Diario d'Algeria*, 'Via Scarlatti': it is a poem about absence, it addresses a 'you', it deals with both the complexity of experience and the difficulty of writing, ending recalls the beginning. But these are also the features that underline the differences between the two texts and explain why they finally ended up in two separate collections. The two poems, as we have already stressed, consist of two apodictic stanzas separated by a list of elements, recollected, or witnessed, and they even share some images, like, for example, that of the sun breaking through ('una marea di sole', 'il sole a primavera'). And yet these recurring elements are treated in very different ways. The city, for example, in 'Ma se tu manchi' is about to disappear, dissolved into the darkness of the evening or sublimated into a human figure; in'Via Scarlatti', the urban landscape lies in 'gulfs of cries': it is described in metaphors but never loses its palpability. In both texts the voices of other poets resonate, as

a well-established tradition of text exegesis has remarked: behind 'è cenere e fumo la via', Isella and Martignoni have seen the most sophisticated Italian poet, D'Annunzio, who in the *Elegie romane* describes Villa Chigi plunged into 'cenere, fumo ed ombre';[59] whereas Finzi has read 'venivano ombre leggere' along with 'umbrae ibant tenues' by Virgil.[60] However, while in 'Via Scarlatti' the literary register seems one among many others, in 'Ma se tu manchi' it acts as a filter: the watch, for example, is never mentioned as such, it is called a 'sfera', with its most mundane element, the 'ticchettio', described as 'meditabondo'. 'Tacchi', instead, probably the least poetic term in 'Via Scarlatti', is accompanied only by their young owners; the most striking pairing in terms of lexicon is 'sparuti / monelli', but the contrast lies not in the juxtaposition of prose and poetry but in the children themselves, who are playful and disobedient, as many kids are, but also gaunt, as is often the case after a war. Furthermore, the two texts open with unusual sentence structures: 'troppo il tempo ha tardato / per te d'essere detta / pena degli anni giovanili', 'con non altri che te / è il colloquio'. In the first case the syntax is ambiguous and serves several focal points: the adverb 'troppo' is anticipated so that it occupies a prominent place in the line and in the text, the very beginning, but it also strengthens the idea of coming late by postponing the verb 'ha tardato'; the enjambement drives our attention to 'te' which is in between the two main elements of this first stanza, time and pain, and could refer to both. In the opening of 'Via Scarlatti' too, the standard word-order is subverted but it points more straightforwardly to the 'te': it precedes the verb and the subject of the sentence, and it is further emphasised by the negation as well as its position at the end of the line. As we have seen, the reference behind this 'you', however, cannot be found in the poem, not even ambiguously in between time and pain, and we need to look outside the text to decipher it. By reading the poem at the end of *Diario* we may think that once back, Sereni has realised that his poetry is only possible in dialogue with

[59] Vittorio Sereni, *Poesie*, annotated by Dante Isella and Clelia Martignoni (Turin: Einaudi, 2002), p. 94.
[60] Gilberto Finzi, 'L'Europa in Algeria e la musa di Sereni', in *La poesia di Vittorio Sereni (Se ne scrivono ancora…)*, ed. by Alfredo Luzi (Ascoli Piceno: Stamperia dell'Arancio, 1997), pp. 129-136.

his past hope, and that he is still waiting for the myth of his youth to come back. At the beginning of *Gli strumenti umani*, instead, we have to look forward in the collection to find out what is that the poet is after. Lenzini defines this opening text as 'un attimo di intima confidenza, e, insieme, un moto transitivo, il cui referente d'ora in poi è destinato ad entrare dal vissuto, nella compagine stessa dei testi'.[61] 'Via Scarlatti' still maintains the intimate nature of the diary entry, but points to the new direction of Sereni's poetry, that of the scrutiny of his experience in post-war Italy which can be understood in phenomenological terms; 'percepisco davvero quando appercepisco', Paci writes, 'quando la cosa non è un dato chiuso, una sostanza chiusa, ma vive in me e per me con tutte le sue relazioni presenti e assenti, più o meno presenti ed assenti'.[62] 'Via Scarlatti' in a way shows us in its structure that experience is something internal, it happens within the coordinate of the subject who can only know the portion of the world that has penetrated within them. Furthermore, that of understanding a place, an encounter, an event is an ongoing process, a task even, in which we have to unfold what is implicit, absent; 'la riduzione ci fa scoprire che ogni percezione […] è un compito da svolgere e da sviluppare', Paci states (p. 99). If in 'Ma se tu manchi' the poet acknowledges that it is not possible anymore to write sustained by the hope cast by the past, and express his discomfort that a certain way of reading himself and the reality around him is no more credible, 'Via Scarlatti' deals, instead, with the never-ending dialogue Sereni has with himself about the landscape, the other, and what is absent here is the interpretation yet to come, the way in which he will make sense of the same elements again in the future.

2.4 On nostalgia I: the present is already gone.

'Credo che tu abbia capito, a me piace più 'Ma se tu manchi' di questa tua ultima, che certo è più visibile e perfetta di movimenti', writes Alessandro Parronchi to his friend and fellow

[61] Sereni, *Il grande amico*, p. 213.
[62] Enzo Paci, *Tempo e verità nella fenomenologia di Husserl*, p. 99.

poet, Sereni, comparing the two poems we are considering here.[63] We all find most striking the lines, the passages, the excerpts that contain something of our own sensibility, aesthetic, or experience. In the less visible world, the objects not immediately discernible, the nebulous atmosphere depicted in 'Ma se tu manchi', Parronchi could recognise something of his own selective, sophisticated, and secluded poetry, which was also the dominant Italian poetic style of the 30s and 40s. Therefore, he prefers it to 'Via Scarlatti'. Without fitting into the frame of hermeticism, *Frontiera* and *Diario d'Algeria* are certainly influenced by that context, in a way that *Gli strumenti umani* is not. Parronchi recognises that his friend in 1946 is taking a new poetic path, and that he is accompanied in it by new friends. The name of Saba, for example, starts appearing quite often in Sereni's letters: 'non ha parole che io ricordi' (p. 78), confesses Parronchi; 'io avverto tutti i pericoli che un rinnovato amore per Saba può comportare ('Via Scarlatti' ne è forse un indizio, anche se non è una poesia alla Saba)' admits Sereni, but adds 'per me ha invece versi memorabili. Versi proprio? Direi movenze piuttosto' (pp. 82-83). If the dialogue between the two does not go much further than this around the name of Saba, it develops more extensively around two other major poetic figures: Rilke and Eliot.

It is not the first time Sereni's poetry is associated with that of Rilke, the comparison was already made in 1941 by Carlo Bo in an article about *Frontiera*.[64] Parronchi, however, disagrees with Bo's interpretation, considering Eliot a more relevant reference for his friend's work. Sereni is not persuaded; he is more familiar with Rilke's poetry, he states, and what he likes about Bo's analysis is that it rightly points to the Rilke of *Das Stunden-Buch* rather than of *Duineser Elegien* or *Die Sonette an Orpheus* as a model for *Frontiera*. Parronchi, however, is mainly interested in Sereni's latest production, where he sees a glimpse of modernity he does not see in the Prague-born poet; 'in Rilke la natura ha parlato ancora per simboli', he notices, 'le

[63] These quotations are taken from a series of letters Parronchi and Sereni exchanged between January and March 1946 which can be read in Vittorio Sereni, Alessandro Parronchi, *Un tacito mistero. Il carteggio Vittorio Sereni-Alessandro Parronchi (1941-1982)*, ed. by Barbara Colli and Giulia Raboni (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2004). References are given after quotations in the text.
[64] Carlo Bo, 'Tre libri di poesia', in *Nuovi studi* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1946), pp. 227-234.

verità nuovissime, i contenuti che ha rivelato […] appaiono ancora in geroglifici, un'acqua che stringe la gola dopo aver dissetato. E da questo la poesia moderna è libera, e anche la tua lo è'. Modernity for him means diving into reality, even when it is only a waste land, acknowledging its elements without transfiguring them. This is the only form of poetry that does not leave a bitter aftertaste, a suffocating feeling after we have enjoyed it, but it is not the kind of poetry Parronchi himself can compose, 'eppure sento questo mio come un difetto, come il piano dal quale, vivendo, dovrò necessariamente staccarmi' (p. 78). In these letters, two friends face one another, measuring similarities and distances, and next to them two poets deal with the complex legacy of hermeticism, whose features and models seem not only antiquated but even a form of escapism. Parronchi quite rightly thinks that Sereni has the energy and the resources to renovate his poetic language, to be modern, but does not know that from this moment on their letters would become less frequent and intense, as Sereni prefers interlocutors he would not approve of, amongst which, Fortini. Both the friendship and the intellectual exchange would be affected by the upcoming transformation in their lives and poems. If in 1946 Parronchi cannot foresee this future, he insightfully analyses the current status of Sereni's poetry. In a later letter, Sereni eventually agrees on considering the dichotomy represented by Rilke and Eliot in relation to that specific, crucial phase of his work. In his hands, however, even the most openly literary problems take the form of inner conflicts: 'sento che un mio problema centrale può dibattersi tra questi due nomi' (p. 82). He finally admits that his poetry is going more in the direction indicated by Eliot rather than Rilke, and adds that Parronchi is right also in preferring *Ma se tu manchi* over *Via Scarlatti*, maybe in a burst of nostalgia for a way of writing poetry which is not available anymore or maybe in an attempt to reassure an old friend while their routes are openly diverging.

In order to unravel the meaning of this inner conflict, it may be useful to set aside Parronchi's disapproval and consider the legacy of *Das Stunden-Buch* in *Diario d'Algeria*. There is a certain

similarity between Sereni's collection and the second section of Rilke's early work, entitled *Das Buch von der Pilgerschaft*; the journey the poet undertakes in *Diario d'Algeria* shares with a pilgrimage the hope, the waiting, the doubt, but has a very different outcome, as Sereni remains caught in limbo instead of reaching the intended destination. Parronchi is right in stating that Sereni does not use symbols, as in his collection reality is selected, filtered but not transfigured but I believe he dismisses Rilke's legacy a bit too quickly. In *Diario dAlgeria*, a certain atmosphere, a particular form of looking back which is nostalgia resonates with the *Stunden-Buch*. The most difficult moments of Sereni's imprisonment, for example, lead to detached and yet bitter recognitions, such as 'Non sanno d'essere morti / i morti come noi, / non hanno pace' (p. 78), which can be compared to the conclusions reached by Rilke in his darkest hours:

> Ich liebe meines Wesens Dunkelstunden,
> in welchen meine Sinne sich vertiefen:
> in ihnen hab ich, wie in alten Briefen,
> mein täglich Leben schon gelebt gefunden
> und wie Legende weit und überwunden.[65]
>
> [I love the dark hours of my being, in which my senses sink; in them I have found, as in old letters, my daily life already lived, and as a legend, distant, overcome]

As Svetlana Boym points out, 'nostalgia (from *nostos* – return home, and *algia* – longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy'.[66] Here it is the gaze fixed on oneself as another, on the inside as an outside; it is the feeling of not owning one's present because it has already gone. For Rilke the romance that comes with it is positive, since the detachment makes space for 'zweiten zeitlos breiten Leben', a second timeless, broad life, while the eternity Sereni contemplates in Algeria consists of death, endless repetition, non-existence. The detachment from the overcome present, therefore, leads to a deep sense of

[65] Reiner Maria Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by Ernst Zinn and Ruth Sieber-Rilke (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel-Verlag, 1955-66), I: *Gedichte. Erster Teil* (1955), p. 254.
[66] Svetlana Boym, *The future of nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. XIII.

dispossession, which would eventually allow the poet to abandon the myth of his youth; all Sereni can hope for in *Diario d'Algeria* is for his life in Luino to come back, but now he knows that even if it was present again, it would still be distant.

2.5 Where to begin.

At that point in his poetic journey, Sereni is stuck: he cannot renounce the going back to his experience, as he is convinced it is what poetry should investigate, but if he wants to write again he needs to find a different source of hope, a new way of dealing with the relationship between past and present. An indication in this sense comes from Eliot, who literally helps Sereni begin a new poem. 'Non posso che confessarti che i primi due versi (che non sono poi, io credo, i migliori)', Sereni writes to Parronchi about *Via Scarlatti*, 'sono nati nella suggestione del primo verso di *East-Coker*: in my beginning is my end'.[67] The second of Eliot's quartets is also about a coming back, not to a place where he had lived before the war, but to the village of his ancestors. What the American and the Italian poets see in their returns, is similar: a street, houses ('va, tutta case, la via', 'in succession / houses rise and fall'), ashes, the dusk ('Oltre anche più s'abbuia, / è cenere e fumo la via', 'old fires to ashes', 'now the light falls / across the open field, leaving the deep lane / shuttered with branches, dark in the afternoon'[68]), but they interpret these analogous elements in different ways, and build divergent poetic frames to encompass them. Looking at East Coker, Eliot recognises that time is an unending cycle of creation and destruction: the street is not a series of buildings we pass by going to somewhere else, but the place we should stop to contemplate the life and death of the houses. This idea informs the landscape as well as the poem which has a strong circular structure, opening with 'in my beginning is my end' and closing with 'in my end is my beginning'. Furthermore, these lines are filled with repetitions and the poet even

[67] Vittorio Sereni, Alessandro Parronchi, *Un tacito mistero*, pp. 73-74.
[68] Thomas Stearns Eliot, 'Four Quartets', *The poems of T.S. Eliot*, I: *Collected and uncollected poems*, pp. 177-209 (p. 185). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

(ironically?) comments on this technique: 'You say I am repeating / something I have said before. I shall say it again. / Shall I say it again?' (p. 189). Since there is no progression, evolution, or development and past, present, and future are only unstable distinctions, Eliot invites us to look closer at the pattern as 'the detail of the pattern', he declares, 'is the movement' (p. 184). Taking the example of music, he keeps repeating themes and phrases with variations, observing how the meaning changes through repetitions and recapitulations. We are asked to read this poem not only from beginning to end but also from the end to the beginning, and in this process, we are warned that no truth can be stably secured by words. 'Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning, / every poem an epitaph' (p. 208), as is stated in the last *Quartet*: in this respect a line is not different from a street; art is subjected to the same process of creation and destruction as everything else. In *East-Coker* Eliot explores the same and yet slightly different idea when he presents himself

> trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
> is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
> because one has only learnt to get the better words
> for the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
> one is no longer disposed to say it. (p. 191)

The poet presents us with a classical definition of ineffability: that experience can be fully expressed only when it is too late. When the words are finally there, our urge or need to say something has disappeared, or we have changed, and we do not want to give voice to what we were. A common corollary of this recognition is the restless wondering about how things would have been different for us, were we to have had better words at our disposal. Eliot, however, is not interested in the consequences that ineffability has for our lives, but rather for the most intimate of our relationships, that with language. The *Quartets* depicts the moments we realise that words fail us, or we glimpse into the nothingness that accompanies us everywhere despite the fact we do our best to ignore it; for example, when we sit in the tube, the train 'stops too long between stations / and the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence' and we 'see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen / leaving only the

growing terror of nothing to think about' (p. 189). However, the awareness of the negativity of our condition is accompanied by something else: faith, the invitation to be humble, knowing that 'before the beginning and after the end' there is a dimension where 'all is always now' (p. 183), where the pattern is complete and never decays; the real eternity that is not to be found on earth or in a poem, but nonetheless exists. Indeed, Eliot advises us not to rely too much on the past: 'at best only a limited value / in the knowledge derived from experience', he states, and adds that he is not interested in hearing 'of the wisdom of the old men, but rather of their folly' (p. 188). In the *Quartets*, knowing does not seem a cumulative process, but rather a path with many gaps, jumps, and recurrences: it occurs more in the form of revelation, than as a consequence of a long rumination. Indeed, the ultimate goal of life, which is also where the whole *Quartets* stops, is 'a condition of complete simplicity', which clearly contrasts with the idea of knowledge as a stratified movement. Just before this closure, Eliot states: 'we shall not cease from exploration / and the end of all our exploring / will be to arrive where we started / and know the place for the first time' (p. 208). The search is important, but the focus is on what lies beyond it, on the place we will know anew when the cycle is completed, a place which is outside time, before birth and after death.

Sereni is persuaded too that we should not 'cease from exploration', and that the outcome of such an exploration will be to arrive where we started, but for him this means to register the two-folded nature of the sense of guilt, the disillusion, and the hope that a different interpretation would arise. Incidentally, the problem is always the negative that poetry originates from and eventually leads to, the negative Eliot oversteps, and Sereni is too aware of. Indeed, in *Gli strumenti umani* the complete circle is not that of eternity but of the tautology of lines like 'una sera d'estate è una sera d'estate' (p. 180) or 'niente come l'inverno / di mezza montagna / dice che l'inverno finirà' (p. 131). These statements, indeed, only certify what is, without adding any information about the summer evening of the end of winter; these revelations do not bring us any further. The only truth we can hold firmly is that things are

what they are, and we will never be able to fully explain their essence in other words. 'In my beginning is my end' means that solid understanding is ultimately very narrow and mainly about the negativity of our condition. However, just as in the *Quartets* we find represented both the eternal, solid dimension and the waste that characterises our everyday life, so in *Gli strumenti umani* does not only reiterate the unshakable awareness of our fundamental exclusion from full knowledge and experience; everyday Sereni wakes up, visits places, establishes relationships, reads books, and feels the urge to explore their meaning. The routine is identical in nature but not in its manifestations, and the poet wants to see what such variations can teach him; he cannot stop revising his conclusions, he is never fully satisfied by an idea, a concept, or a single interpretation: every experience demands to be further analysed, read, explored, to be seen anew. The *Quartets* and *Gli strumenti umani* share, in a way, the same juxtaposition of two opposite dimensions but they invest them with different values, as eternity for Sereni is only conceivable as exclusion and experience for Eliot cannot teach us anything valuable. The hope that sustains the writing, therefore, lies in two antithetical figures, the circle in the *Quartets* and the spiral in *Gli strumenti umani*. As Barthes states, 'le symbolisme de la spirale est opposé à celui du cercle ; le cercle est religieux, théologique ; la spirale, comme cercle déporté à l'infini, est dialectique : sur la spirale, les choses reviennent, mais à un autre niveau : il y a retour dans la différence, non ressassement dans l'identité'.[69] While Eliot aspires to a pattern that never decays, Sereni hopes that the spiral creates a displacement in the repetition. Phenomenology once more would encourage him to follow this spiral path; 'la coscienza relazionale', Paci states commenting the *Cartesianische Meditationen*, 'ha la "meravigliosa possibilità" di riportarsi a sé stessa, di "ritornare a se stessa", di cogliere in sé l'originario. Lo coglie si badi bene per *oltrepassarsi*, per dare un senso di verità al mondo, per *ridurre*, quindi, il mondo feticizzato a progressiva conquista della vita, a sempre più "riempito" vivere storico secondo un'idea teleologica' (p. 93). Sereni,

[69] Roland Barthes, *L'obvie et l'obtus. Essais critiques III* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992), p. 150.

however, as we have seen, is never so enthusiastically sure that he is going in the right direction, but in the long years spent waiting, this is the only hope that can think of.

2.6 On nostalgia II: only the past is present.

In his letters after the war, Sereni often laments that he feels drained, and is especially scared by a scenario, that of frostbite, affecting at first the extremities, but slowly progressing towards the centre, compromising his vital functions. 'È un fatto che da tempo i miei occhi non *vedono* più: difficilmente una cosa mi sta davanti nella sua verità' confesses Sereni to Saba, deploring his inability to face the world in front in him; 'la sola fiducia che mi rimane è nella memoria', he adds, 'in quelle vie segrete che portano le cose davanti agli occhi a distanza di anni con un colore un significato improvviso come se apparissero per la prima volta'.[70] To know a place for the first time for Sereni is now possible only through memory. Inevitably, the name of Proust emerges in this letter, but only briefly, cursorily, as Sereni knows that Saba would not approve of any discourse about stratifications and afterthoughts; indeed, he recalls having been already reproached by Saba on this subject, because analysing retrospectively a situation, a line, a word would diminish their honesty. Once again, we witness in an epistolary exchange between two distinguished poets dynamics that are not indeed very different from those we ordinarily experience; we cannot mention certain topics with certain friends, we would better keep them for us, or share them with someone else, to avoid misunderstandings, frustration, or disappointments. We have already seen Sereni glossing over his admiration for Saba in his letters to Parronchi, and now he avoids discussing with Saba the role of memory in writing a poem. But if he instead wanted to debate the issue to whom could he turn looking for sympathy? Someone we have mentioned above, someone

[70] The letter, written on 19th August 1946, can be read in Vittorio Sereni, Umberto Saba, *Il cerchio imperfetto. Lettere 1946-1954*, ed. by Cecilia Gibellini (Milan: Archinto, 2010), p. 39.

not scared of stratification: Montale. To investigate their relationship, however, we will set aside letters to focus on what can be considered the most precious and the least straightforward way to access anything: the essay.[71]

In 1977, several years after *Gli strumenti umani* was published, Sereni writes a piece entirely dedicated to a poem by Montale, significantly called 'Il ritorno'. It is a fascinating essay because it takes its cue from a question many readers often wonder about: do the places described in poems really exist outside the text? Sometimes when we encounter certain passages, we would like to act as a reporter who, having heard an incredible story, wants to verify it, and starts looking for witnesses. At the beginning of his essay, Sereni offers us his testimony about the place, Bocca di Magra, indicated in smaller font under the title of Montale's poem. His inspection of the scene occurs thirty-six years after 'Il ritorno' was written, but he underlines that his account is reliable because it comes from a privileged point of view, that of someone who has spent many summers in the place. He is not like us, who possibly have never heard of Bocca di Magra and decide to visit it out of a fascination for Montale's text; he is not an occasional tourist, he knows the place through his repeated visits, he knows it through its stratification in time.

Sereni comments on the various elements 'Il ritorno' refers to, explaining what they looked like when Montale wrote the poem and what they resemble now. 'Il barcaiolo Duilio', for example, existed, and was a real boatman who used to ferry people from one riverside to the other: 'il Duilio conosciuto in carne e ossa è morto da molti anni e quello del traghettatore non è più un mestiere da quando un grande ponte ha congiunto le due rive'[72] adds Sereni. What may seem just a banal, straightforward game of spotting differences between two

[71] On the specific knowledge the essay can offer see György Lukács, 'Über Wesen und Form des Essays. Ein Brief an Leo Popper', in *Die Seele und die Formen. Essays* (Berlin: Egon Fleischel, 1911), pp. 1-39 and Theodor W. Adorno, 'Der Essay als Form', in *Noten zur Literatur I* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1958), pp. 9-49.
[72] Vittorio Sereni, 'Il ritorno', in *Poesie e prose*, pp. 1022-1026 (p. 1024). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

canvases, one portrayed in the poem and one recollected in the mind, progressively touches upon a question which is extremely relevant for our exploration of Sereni's work and the relationship it establishes between life and literature: how can we know a place? We may think that places exist in space, and therefore we can visit them again, Sereni tells us in the second part of the essay, but when we return, we do not recognise them, they have changed: indeed, places only exist in time, they are what we have experienced in a specific moment, and therefore they are as volatile as any instants. On this point Sereni asks for Proust's help, quoting the very end of *Du côté de chez Swann*, when Marcel realises that the reality he had known does not exist anymore: 'les lieux que nous avons connus n'appartiennent pas qu'au monde de l'espace où nous les situons pour plus de facilité. Ils n'étaient qu'une mince tranche au milieu d'impressions contiguës qui formaient notre vie d'alors ; le souvenir d'une certaine image n'est que le regret d'un certain instant ; et les maisons, les routes, les avenues, sont fugitives, hélas, comme les années'.[73] Inevitably, in comparing Montale's representation of Bocca di Magra and his own experience of the place, Sereni too is writing an essay about regret. At a certain point, Sereni states that he is compiling an 'inventario di esseri, aspetti e cose scomparsi o mutati', a pretty long list of missed or changed features, because nothing has lasted from Montale's Bocca di Magra, nothing but the 'sole / che chiude la sua corsa', and the 'trauma di ogni ritorno sul posto, [che] incalza e preme, mette alle corde, si impone con una febbrilità non diversa dal *fu così? rispondi* di un'altra poesia'. 'Was it really like this? Answer', may be what the reporter could impatiently tell Sereni, a witness who does not respond in a satisfactory way, keeps eluding the more straightforward yes or no answers, and, instead, prefers to add on elements, in particular quotations of other texts by Montale.

'Was it really like this?' may seem a simple question to the reporter, but it is indeed the question Sereni spends years pondering about, to come up only with a doubtful answer and,

[73] Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. by Pierre Clarac and André Ferré (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), I: *Du côté de chez Swann. A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, p. 427.

sometimes, a poem. In truth, this is an essay about regrets, and how we deal with our past experiences, but it is also an essay about the literature that is written about places, memory, and losses in the hope that it can help us navigate such difficult issues. The nostalgia that emerges from this text is of a different kind from the one we have seen in *Diario d'Algeria* through the lens of Rilke's poem: it is not the feeling that our present is already past, but rather that the past is present again but in a different form. It is a complex feeling made of grief, disappointment, and excitement, but it is also where Sereni can see a change happening, an aspect becoming clear, a poem being composed. A couple of years later, he would give the following definition of nostalgia: 'immaginazione non accorata ma smaniosa del tornare, che intendo come energia, impulso a riportarsi con occhi come nuovi su campagne strade viottoli e borgate che da tempo non parlano più...'.[74] Nostalgia is now considered a faculty of the imagination, the possibility of finding life where everything seemed dead, of seeing something for the first time; it is a tool to verify the vitality, the fertility of an experience. Regrets fuel the exploration of the possible, and in this exploration sometimes we realise that memory and desire are intertwined: 'memoria che ancora hai desideri' writes Sereni in the poem 'Gli Squali', making us wonder whether a memory without desire is conceivable.

Sereni may be a disappointing witness when it comes to establishing what Bocca di Magra looked like when Montale wrote 'Il ritorno', but he is a very precious one, if, instead, we want to investigate the relationship between life, time, and literature. What he analyses in this essay is not just Montale's going back to Bocca di Magra or the text he wrote about it, but also the relationship between the poem and the place as Sereni has experienced it: 'uno spazio condivisibile e condiviso, lo spazio sul quale una poesia, un testo, s'incontra in una storia di altri e la diventa. Si dice di solito, piuttosto banalmente, che entra a far parte del paesaggio, e in questo si prolunga e vive'. We may be fascinated by Bocca di Magra as it is portrayed in

[74] Vittorio Sereni, 'Il sabato tedesco', *La tentazione*, (pp. 203-224), p. 205.

'Il ritorno' and wish to go beyond the poem, to see the reality that inspired it, but Sereni knows that the text had a fundamental role in shaping our experience of the place, it has worked inside us together with our own experiences, it has become part of the landscape. He is not just talking here about the influence of a fundamental model for him, but more in general of the encounter, within us, of a place and a poem. 'Poesie dunque come persone?' he asks (p. 1024) and hints here at one of the ways in which traditionally the relationship between poems, people and places has been conceived: the 'congedo', the last stanza of a *canzone* in which the text is personified and invited to reach the poet's beloved. This feature, which we will encounter again later as it appears already in the title of Caproni's collection, underlines here Sereni's aspiration not only to express his own experience, but to communicate it to somebody else, to create a dialogue, even to affect our interior landscape. Memory, desire, invention, vitality are nothing if they do not reach a reader, and yet the time one could hope for a poem to visit the beloved and made her fall in love with the poet seems to have gone. 'Più che cercarlo' he notices 'una poesia presuppone un destinatario' (p. 1025) as he does not ask the poem to look for a reader outside the wood, he knows he can only write in dialogue with somebody else and wait. Sereni's poetry depends on this frail presupposition.

2.7 Time to know.

But what is Montale's own experience of coming back? In 'Il ritorno' he stands on the riverside looking around and suddenly noticing elements of the landscape that appear in the text introduced by 'ecco'. It is a 'livid' day, characterised by contradictions, as the mist and the southwester, or the sandy dunes which quickly appear and disappear in their fight with the water. The poet notices the boatman crossing 'in lotta coi suoi remi', and, beyond him, the other side, where he recognises a house, with spiral staircase, polychrome glass, and a veranda. Suddenly we are not at Bocca di Magra anymore, as these are the distinctive features

of his summerhouse in Monterosso, where he used to spend his time with his beloved Annetta, who also appears here: 'eccole che t'ascoltano, le nostre vecchie scale', [75] sighs Montale in the bittersweet recognition that the stairs have become old, but they are still theirs. Memories, however, are not always lightly ambivalent, especially when they involve someone we have loved and lost, and the apparition of Annetta generates a quite dramatic escalation: through a reference to the *Zauberflöte*, the Erinyes are evoked, and with these figures of vengeance against broken oaths, emerge also Montale's obsessions, nightmares, and regrets. Abruptly we are not inside the house anymore, we are outside, back in Bocca di Magra: 'sulle rive una bufera / di strida s'allontana', the sun sets, the poet faces 'il tuo morso oscuro di tarantola' and declares, 'I am ready'.

This is a way of linking together the various elements mentioned in the poem, but it is not the way chosen by Montale, who in 'Il ritorno' renounces the help offered by syntax: the text, indeed, consists of twenty-six lines but only one sentence with the verb at its very end. The repetition of 'ecco' creates six uneven spans dedicated to a series of features, simply juxtaposed without any indications about their connection, which, we would eventually realise, are the elements the poet is ready for. The poem may be compared to the string of a bow at the moment of its highest tension as we read it without stopping, almost holding our breath until the end, pressed by these 'ecco' which ask us to look at things we cannot really see but somehow materialise in front of us. And in this hurrying through the text, we go from Bocca di Magra, to Monterosso, to a further dimension we may call metaphysical only if we intend it as contiguous to the palpable world: the Erinyes may come from the past, from the memory of the gramophone the poet and Annetta used to listen to together, but they are also part of the landscape, the storm of screaming receding over the shores, which is at the same time a harbinger of worse to come, including, but not limited to, the imminent

[75] Eugenio Montale, *L'opera in versi*, p. 178.

war. The tension in this poem is palpable and able to summon distinct temporal and even existential layers, but does the arrow dart in the end? Storms, breeze, whirlwind, and sudden changes in the weather often disclose the possibility of a change in Montale's poetry, a miracle as he would have called it earlier on, an epiphany, illumination, or revelation, as he would probably phrase it by the time he was writing 'Il ritorno'. And yet the wind changes very fast, presenting an opportunity and almost immediately taking it away. Our rush towards the end, our eagerness to find out where all the apparitions will lead us, culminate with the mere presence of the poet, an implicit 'eccomi', as Sereni thinks, concluding the series of 'ecco'.

What is the relationship between the poet we find at the end of the text stating that he is ready, and the elements mentioned before? Or better said, what does this coming back tell us about the relationship between the present and the past? Let us focus on the main figure memory brings back, Annetta. According to Bozzola, she is 'latrice di un dolore dapprima puntuale, intenso, come una puntura, ma poi invasivo e interno, come il veleno della tarantola che si diffonde nel corpo e che forse conduce alla morte'.[76] Coming back shows Montale how pervasive are the effects of the past, how it forever circulates in our blood, and this is possibly the truth he is finally ready to face. 'Il trauma ('il morso oscuro di tarantola')', comments Sereni, 'esplode puntualmente nel cuore dell'estasi rivelandone il fondo ancipite': trauma has substituted the miracle in Montale's poetry and when the revelation comes it is not to announce what is about to happen or what could have happened, but what was always there, like the verb we only meet at the end of the text but whose effects already circulated in the body of the poem. If the string of the bow is at its highest tension but the arrow does not dart, it is because 'la poesia è già tutta consumata in quella preparazione' (p. 1025). The poet is ready, but he has been poisoned.

[76] Sergio Bozzola, *Seminario montaliano* (Rome: Bonacci, 2006), p. 14.

In a way, 'Via Scarlatti' also ends with the poet saying 'eccomi', presenting himself here, waiting; but because of its spiral movement the poem is not worn away in the preparation for a revelation which only leads to the awareness of the trauma. The 'tu' Sereni addresses in the opening line is a clear mark of Montale's influence, and as such was criticised by Saba; 'è la maniera di Montale', he writes in a letter, 'ed in lui sta *benissimo*, ma *in lui solamente*'.[77] However, Sereni handles this feature in his own way, as the 'you' is certainly internalised and ultimately finds its value in its relationship to the poet, but it maintains a degree of autonomy, its meaning remains partially open, if only for the fact that Sereni is less confident that his poetry can express any truth, less familiar with a reality made of sharp contrasts. He, indeed, has not experienced Bocca di Magra when only a boatman could take you to the other side of the river, when you could only hope for something to happen, someone to come in order to overcome the water, the gap, the precipice in front of you. No, Sereni is accustomed to bridges, he goes back and forth, noting the things that happen between the start and the end. At the end of 'Il ritorno', all the features of the landscape together with the elements of the past have disappeared, the sun sets, the evocation of Annetta has led to the recognition of her loss. Only the poet stands in the dark. In 'Via Scarlatti', instead, Sereni tries to create a dialogue, even if only internal, between places, memories, texts, lost lovers, and the poem that results from this attempt does not consists of the sum of these elements, but of the very act of going through them.

'Il est frappant que même le cercle n'entoure pas, ne totalise pas, fait plutôt des détours et des coudes', Deleuze realises by reading *La recherche*. The circle does not work because it is not able fully to embrace the complexity of one's experience and contain it in its circumference. Rather than drawing circles, according to Deleuze 'toute l'œuvre consiste à établir des *transversales* qui nous font sauter d'un profil à l'autre d'Albertine, d'une Albertine

[77] Vittorio Sereni, Umberto Saba, *Il cerchio imperfetto*, p. 175.

à une autre, d'un monde à un autre, d'un mot à un autre, sans jamais ramener le multiple à l'Un, sans jamais rassembler le multiple en un tout, mais affirmant l'unité très originale *de* ce multiple-là, affirmant sans les réunir *tous* ces fragments irréductibles au Tout'.[78] These remarks, I believe, could apply to *Gli strumenti umani* too, but this may be due to the fact that I share Deleuze's focus on knowledge rather than time in works we analyse. 'Chez Proust, les clochers de Martinville et la petite phrase de Vinteuil, qui ne font intervenir aucun souvenir, aucune résurrection du passé, l'emporteront toujours sur la madeleine et les pavés de Venise' (p. 9): more than involuntary memory, for Deleuze *La recherche* is about knowing, which happens in time but is not ultimately about time. Sereni seems to agree, as he states in an interview that the steeples of Martinville confirmed something he always knew; 'la poesia per me dovrebbe nascere all'intersezione dei piani, affatto disparati tra loro, dalle vicende vissute: dalle più futili come dalle più gravi. Ma in modo che gradatamente le mie e le altre assumano lo stesso colore, la stessa natura. Per questo ci vuole tempo e pazienza'.[79] Poetry for him is not about the possibility of forgotten aspects being present anew but rather of different elements merging and revealing what in personal experience may be meaningful for others. However, the focus here is less on what Sereni may have learnt from Proust, and more on what happens if he read his work through the lens of the problem of knowledge. What, for example, does 'Via Scarlatti' teach us about knowing something? That knowledge is internal, but it happens in relation to a landscape, that it is about reaching somebody else while writing about this attempt. Placed at the beginning of *Gli strumenti umani*, this poem warns us that we have to consider the relationship between knowledge and places, people, the self, the act of writing.

[78] Gilles Deleuze, *Proust et les signes* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1996), pp. 152-153. Further references are given after quotations in the text.
[79] Vittorio Sereni, 'Esiste il mal d'Africa?', *Le Carte Parlanti*, June 1947, p. 18.

3. On disappointment

3.1 Loving to know

By opening with a reference to the 'tu' which traditionally refers to the beloved, 'Via Scarlatti' hints to the last aspect linked to this knowledge that rises in the time of waiting I will analyse in this chapter, the role played by desire. In a poem written around the same years (1945-1948), and particularly dear to Sereni, who quotes it twice in his essays,[80] Saba offers a valuable insight on this matter. The opening of 'Il pettirosso' is as definitive as that of 'Via Scarlatti': 'Trattenerti, volessi anche, non posso.' This forceful verse is followed, at a distance, by a 13-lines stanza describing the life of the robin in the wood, his ambiguous friendship with the blackbird, his feelings; 'si sente ingordo libero feroce; // e là si sgola' concludes Saba, and together with the bird's cry we can hear an echo of the 'improvviso sgolarsi' of the opera duet of Sereni's text. The two poems share the same textual strategy with the first and last verses floating in the white page and between them a longer stanza. The same structure, however, in the hands of two distinct poets may disclose very different meanings. Saba's text starts with the awareness that reality is a slippery matter despite our will to securely hold onto it, and the subsequent description of the robin is addressed to a 'you' who has a naive vision of life in the wood. Classical idyllic elements ('boschetto', 'impeto gioioso', 'la bella stagione')[81] reveal an uncanny nature, until the final climax presents us with a greedy, free, and ferocious robin; instead of singing peacefully, shouts itself hoarse, as to reject anyone willing to catch it, even through a net which is only conceptual, that of sweetness. 'Leggere queste storie di uccelli', warns us Sereni, 'equivale a leggere in una differente versione una storia d'amore', and, pointing to the opening line, 'trattenerti, volessi anche, non posso', he

[80] See Vittorio Sereni, 'Gli uccelli sono un miracolo' and 'Umberto Saba. Le vite che quasi non parlano', in *Poesie e prose*, pp. 972-984.
[81] Umberto Saba, *Tutte le poesie*, p. 571.

adds: 'di quante cose e persone e momenti della vita non lo si potrebbe dire?'[82]. Can this be said of 'Via Scarlatti' as well?

'Suis-je amoureux? Oui, puisque j'attends', Roland Barthes offers us this quick test to unravel our feelings. For him, the love relationship consists of disproportion: the lover's fatal identity lies in the act of waiting, while 'l'autre, lui, n'attend jamais'.[83] The lover can decide to play the part of the one who does not wait, busying themselves elsewhere, but any attempts to arrive late fail, and in the end the lover is inevitably punctual, even ahead of time. Saba, in a way, plays this game of pretending not to care, but the robin is not tricked by it. His message is straightforward: desire cannot be contained; the subject is not able to keep a beloved who by the end of the poem proves all their strength and disruptive power. Desire, however, is not straightforward and forces the discourse to go back, to reconsider its premises. By closing the poem, the last line, 'e là si sgola', proves to the addressee how uncanny nature can be, and, at the same time, makes us question the poet's opening statement. 'I could not keep you', Saba declares in the first line, 'even if I wanted to', suggesting that his will is of secondary importance compared to the acknowledgement of its limits. The robin's cry, however, sounds like a rebellion precisely against that dismissed will: desire, once hidden, gains strength, the robin seems to think. Sereni, instead, points out quite explicitly that all what he is doing is waiting. And yet, in a way, he too hides his desire, not by denying it, but by refusing to delimit its object; as we have seen in 'Via Scarlatti' the poet waits for something which cannot be exactly defined, the beloved, the past, the meaning of an experience. If in commenting 'Il pettirosso', he stresses that this is a love poem but the dynamic it entails could be extended to include other things, people, and moments of one's life, it is because for him the love relationship is a metaphor for what we can reach, grasp, hold of the reality in front of us; 'aimer, c'est chercher à *expliquer*, à *développer* ces mondes inconnus qui restent

[82] Vittorio Sereni, 'Umberto Saba. Le vite che quasi non parlano', p. 982.
[83] Roland Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977), p. 49.

enveloppés dans l'aimé' (p. 14), writes Deleuze in his analysis of *La recherche*. Sereni shares not only this idea that a love relationship is a problem of understanding, but also the awareness that it consists of the effort of deciphering ghostly figures, and therefore would never lead to solid possessions. In a letter to another fellow poet, Attilio Bertolucci, who lent him his own copy of *La recherche*, Sereni writes: 'se vorrai sapere qualcosa di più del sottoscritto rileggi la pag. 76 del III di *Sodome et Gomorrhe* quando l'avrai ricevuto di ritorno'.[84] Gabriella Palli Baroni who edited these letters points us to the page in which Marcel describes his rides after leaving Albertine painting at Saint-Jean de la Haise. At first, he feels connected to her despite the distance or because of the distance but then he starts questioning what it is that he is connected to. 'Mon sort était de ne poursuivre que des fantômes, des êtres dont la réalité, pour une bonne part, était dans mon imagination', he realises, 'il y a des êtres en effet — et ç'avait été, dès la jeunesse, mon cas — pour qui tout ce qui a une valeur fixe, constatable par d'autres, la fortune, le succès, les hautes situations, ne comptent pas ; ce qu'il leur faut, ce sont des fantômes'. For these people, who are not interested in what has a measurable value, that of dealing with ghosts is not an easy task; 'ils y sacrifient tout le reste, mettent tout en œuvre, font tout servir à rencontrer tel fantôme. Mais celui-ci ne tarde pas à s'évanouir ; alors on court après tel autre, quitte à revenir ensuite au premier'.[85] As encountering ghosts is so demanding in terms of energies and sacrifices, expectations can be very high and lead to impatience, scorn, and, ultimately, misunderstanding;

> Di là da un garrulo schermo di bambini
> pareva a un tempo piangere e sorridermi.
> Ma che mai voleva col suo sguardo
> la bionda e luttuosa passeggera?
> C'era tra noi il mio sguardo di rimando
> e, appena sensibile, una voce:
> *amore* – cantava – *e risorta bellezza*...
> Così, divagando, la voce asseriva
> e si smarriva su quelle
> amare e dolci allèe di primavera.

[84] Attilio Bertolucci, Vittorio Sereni, *Una lunga amicizia. Lettere 1938-1982*, ed. by Gabriella Palli Baroni (Milan: Mondadori, 1994), p. 38.
[85] Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, II : *Du côté de chez Swann. À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, p. 427.

Fu il lento barlume che a volte
vedemmo lambire il confine dei visi
e, nato appena, in povertà sfiorire.

'L'equivoco', in a way, is a poem which shows the downsides of the hyperbaton, as the elements that get in the way prevent any understanding. The woman the poet sees beyond a group of children is an ambiguous figure, as she cries and smiles at the same time; her gaze is indecipherable and the poet tries to interpret it by turning to himself, to his own categories ('il mio sguardo di rimando'), memories ('una voce'), and poems. Indeed, the words sung by the voice are taken from a draft by Sereni, 'o amore, pensavo, e scomparsa bellezza / così spontaneo volgendo / a una qualunque presenza / così sicuro di trovarla accanto' (p. 504). It is precisely the recollection of these lines in which the poet turns to whoever is present, confident that he will find his beloved next to him, that gives rise to disappointment, as this time the passer-by refuses to be identified with somebody else. Sereni is not as lucky as Baudelaire for whom a glimpse of a woman in the street leads to a rebirth, 'un éclair… puis la nuit! – Fugitive beauté / Dont le regard m'a fait soudainement renaître';[86] the 'barlume' in his case disappears without offering any illumination. In a letter to another fellow poet, Franco Fortini, Sereni explains the last lines of this poem as follows, 'se mi rifaccio all'intenzione direi che *in povertà* ha il valore di giudizio su cosa che pareva anche moralmente – seppure – ricca e si rivela invece banale, sciatta, futile, vuota di contenuto, *povera*', and adds, 'è la vendetta proustiana dell'amore che fatalmente si riconosce valido solo per quanto il soggetto ha sofferto, gioito, mentre l'oggetto si spoglia, intristisce, perde consistenza'.[87] There is a certain irony in the fact that Sereni mentions a potential moral enrichment in the encounter with the other but then considers the beloved as a mere source of sensations and experiences, with no intrinsic value. The poet is disappointed by his encounter with the

[86] Charles Baudelaire, 'À une passante', *Œuvres completes*, I, p. 92.
[87] This letter, written on the 7th of May 1958, is kept at the Archivio Fortini in Siena. Thanks to the AHRC Travel Grant and the Isaiah Berlin Bursary, I had the opportunity myself to spend some time studying this and other letters of the 'Fondo Franco Fortini'.

passer-by, not because he does not get to know her, but because it reminds him that his expectations would never be fully met by reality; in response to this awareness, he focuses on his memories and aspirations and undervalues the deceiving object of his desire. 'Trattenerti, volessi anche, non posso', Sereni could tell the passer-by, for once I have scrutinised you, you lose you value. In a short story written in the same years he was working on *Gli strumenti umani*, Sereni acknowledges that he is often reproached as he stares at people, women in particular, but denies that gender has anything to do with this unwanted gaze; 'lo sguardo immesso in altre esistenze che schiudono all'immaginazione non distingue tra uomini e donne', he states, 'caso mai sta qui l'indecenza, nell'intrusione che immagina e immaginando prolunga situazioni, inventa atmosfere, suppone vicende, infine ne è parte, o tenta'.[88] We are not far away from the unknown worlds enveloped in the beloved which Proust, according to Deleuze, sets out to decipher, but we are also very close to the way in which Sereni, as we have seen, describes how we get to know a place through a poem, 'si dice di solito, piuttosto banalmente, che [la poesia] entra a far parte del paesaggio, e in questo si prolunga e vive'. However, by shifting the attention from the landscape to a person, the love relationship as a metaphor for what we can grasp can make more explicit the limits of this idea of knowledge as necessarily intrusive, as the process of prolonging the other within oneself. This is also a problematic aspect of Husserl's philosophy as for him the only way in which we can know something which is alien to us is to bracket it and to turn to ourselves; since we cannot eschew the limits of our understanding, we can only hope to find within ourselves what we put aside. 'Ridurre', Paci explains, 'vuol dire sospendere la tesi del mondo perché il mondo, posto tra parentesi, faccia vivere me *nella mia vita propria* e presenti sé stesso, di fronte alla mia vita propria, come l'*altra vita propria*, come *Alter-ego*. *L'altro* è un riflesso di me ma è anche, poiché è l'altro *rispetto a me*, un *analogo a me*' (pp. 132-133). It is the notion of 'Intentionalität' that makes it possible for the other to appear as a mirror or analogous to the

[88] Vittorio Sereni, 'L'opzione', *La tentazione*, (pp. 161-189), p. 164.

self, as it guarantees the existence of a common ground, a shared direction; the ego and the alter-ego, indeed, can together 'presentificare un senso, costituire il primo nucleo intenzionale di una comunità che tende a un *telos*' (p. 143). The risk here, I believe, is that by stressing the existence of a common direction, we forget the desires and aspirations of the individuals; 'come il passato si fa presente nella misura in cui risveglio l'*assopito*, così l'altro si fa presente a me come altro e in me si costituisce' (p. 146) explains Paci, but the other can be more than an involuntary recollection, can take a different path, can disagree with our interpretation. In imagining that there can be harmony among individuals, we should not forget the importance of disappointment when it leads to a sense of openness rather than self-centred superiority.

Gli strumenti umani, as I have been trying to show, is more interesting when circles become spirals, when unexpected elements find their way into the texts and shift our perspective, when the knowledge is incomplete, desired rather than achieved. These are also for Sereni the moments in which the task of deciphering his own experience and the sense of guilt for not being able to firmly hold any conclusion leave space to the hope that it could be a shared responsibility, that someone else may grasp something he does not quite see. Sereni never trusts women for this, but he can count on friends; Giansiro, for example, is necessarily a double of the poet but he displays a degree of autonomy that the personification of joy does not share. Plants too are first noticed because of their similarity with the poet, but then they are allowed to silently contradict his assumptions, by representing, for example, a circularity which is nourishing rather than suffocating, as in 'Ancora sulla strada di Zenna', or by simply existing outside his domain;

> Addio addio ripetono le piante.
> Addio anche a me tocca ora di dirti
> con la stessa tenerezza
> e intensità, con la stessa
> umiltà delle piante
> che a stormire però continueranno
> fuori dallo sguardo immediato (p. 171)

The poet's gesture of saying goodbye shares the intensity and tenderness of the movement of the plants, which, however, will be there also without the poet's gaze, in a dimension we do not often get to contemplate in this collection: the future. If women are deceptive in being distant from what Sereni had imagined, plants remind him that it is possible to have something in common while leading in different directions. In a text included in *Gli immediati dintorni*, Sereni underlines that he does not believe in a straightforward relationship with nature, both because plants are not something we necessarily pay attention to anymore and because they are similar to us but not the same as us; 'quando ci stupiscono con la loro apparizione e con la loro analogia di fondo con le linee fondamentali della nostra sorte, siamo sempre più portati a considerare la loro esistenza come autonoma e parallela alla nostra, come un'ipotesi che si sviluppa diversamente rispetto a una origine comune, che tende ad altro sogna altro gesticola altro s'inquieta di altro, ma in modo tanto più semplice, netto, lineare'.[89] There is a sense of reassurance in his recognising that other hypotheses may develop from the same premisses, that other worries, dreams, gestures are possible and they do not necessarily represent an impoverishment.

3.2 On waste

Is it possible then to imagine a different form of love in which desire does not imprison the other, and the inevitable disappointments and misunderstandings are not conceived as a form of deception? In 'Fragments d'un récit', Philippe Jaccottet describes the effort required by the compulsion of turning back to make sure nothing has been lost; 'Je redescendrai le chemin de la journée / de peur d'avoir laissé quelque chose derrière / moi. Me comprendras-tu ? Je n'ai pas le moyen / de rien perdre, car je voudrais ne pas vieillir, / mais simplement mûrir de toutes mes années'. The poet does not know how to let go and wishes that the

[89] Vittorio Sereni, 'Targhe per posteggio auto in un cortile aziendale', *La tentazione*, pp. 100-102 (p. 102).

burden of his experiences and memories would kill him, without forcing him to get older. He wonders, however, whether the 'you' would understand him, as the process of burying himself in his past makes him suspicious of interpretations which would inevitably leave something out. '(Il répond que c'est vivre avarement sa vie, / qu'il ne croit pas à un amour s'il ne gaspille…)'; the answer appears in brackets and is mediated by the voice of the poet, further underlining how narrow this view is.[90] Love, life, and knowledge are not possible without waste, and Jaccottet is not the only one who struggles to acknowledge it. 'Ma dove c'è rifiuti, / dice uno allarmandosi, c'è vita' is a disturbing realisation that emerges in 'Il piatto piange' (p. 167). Sereni, however, is not scared of getting older, but rather drained by the never-ending process of understanding as for him not leaving anything behind would imply deciphering an experience in all its aspects. Indeed, what makes the time of waiting so excruciating for him is the uncertainty of its outcome, the doubt that, despite his efforts, he would not be rewarded with solid knowledge. In the years he spends waiting, therefore, sometimes he would like to believe in an interpretation, in a secure path, in an idea that is able to mobilise all the others, but he inevitably ends up regretting this hope; 'in quante per una che venne / si sono mosse le nuvole' (p. 115), he writes in 'Finestra' with a turn of phrase, that of 'per un', which is often employed in *Gli strumenti umani* to express the bitter consequences of the desire for clarity. 'Per una traccia certa e confortevole / sbandavo, tradivo ancora una volta', Sereni acknowledges in 'Nella neve', and, indeed, after a moment in which it seemed possible to penetrate it, 'duro si rifaceva il caro enigma' (p. 109). Sometimes the focus is on the inconsistency of the element we believed in, 'per una voce irrotta nella stanza...' (p. 154). 'e per un niente / nella sua nebbia si ritroverà / dalla parte del torto' (p. 167). In other cases the poet stresses the opportunity we missed while believing we found the key that would explain it all without sacrifices; 'per un po' d'ombra che fa / più vive le acque più battute le siepi più frenetico giugno / quanti anni di vuoto appena dopo',

[90] Philippe Jaccottet, *L'effraie, et autres poésie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), p. 39.

states Sereni accusing love and its promises to make sense of a life, 'c'era sino a poco fa / un così bel sole – e per pigrizia o noia / o distrazione non siamo usciti a goderlo. / Vedi come hai sporcato la mia vita / di tremore e umiltà' (p. 162).

As we have seen, it is only at the very end of *Diario d'Algeria* that Sereni can retrospectively abandon the hope represented by his youth, 'solo ora, però: dopo che ha sperimentato a pieno la negatività del suo stato, e averla espressa', as Lenzini points out. Similarly, it is only in the last poem of *Gli strumenti umani*, after having strayed and betrayed many times for a sure and comfortable trace, that Sereni finally contemplates the idea that hope lies in what was not pursued, what did not fit into the picture, what made our interpretation incomplete. 'I morti', he states in 'La spiaggia', 'non è quel che di giorno / in giorno va sprecato, ma quelle / toppe d'inesistenza, calce o cenere / pronte a farsi movimento e luce'; if we allow elements of non-existence, ashes, lime, to stay with us they would possibly surprise us. 'Non | dubitare, – m'investe della sua forza il mare – / parleranno' (p. 184) are the very last lines of *Gli strumenti umani*, which ends unexpectedly with a future tense and the indication that somebody else will speak. This hope comes from the sea that in its wideness and fluidity embraces many possibilities but also from the residues we wished were instead solid wholeness. Something must be burnt, lost, wasted if we want to find in the past the traces of the future.

On the very idea of waiting, its relationship with time and with our expectations, Pirandello writes penetrating pages in his short story, 'La camera in attesa'. The bedroom of the title is that of Cesarino, a second lieutenant missing in action, but more importantly the brother of three sisters, the son of an elder mother. These women all wait for him to come back, changing the bed sheets every two weeks, the nightgown twice a week, as if he had actually been sleeping at his room. These women all wait for him to come back but Pirandello questions what the meaning of such a statement is, for 'quel che fa la vita', he states, 'è la

realtà che voi le date'.[91] The kind of reality these women are creating is one in which Cesarino is doing the exact same things he used to do before leaving. And this is not an isolated exception: every time someone leaves, we all expect them to come back unchanged, failing to realise, Pirandello warns us, that the person we know has died in the very moment of their departure. So, in a typical Pirandellian paradox, this mother and her daughters are actually luckier than the parents whose children come for a visit from time to time but are unrecognisable: Cesarino cannot disappoint his relatives anymore. Sereni would not agree with the very premises of Pirandello's discourse, that life consists in our interpretation of its events, and yet exploring the connection between past, present, and future he confronts himself with the very notion of expectation. Would he be willing to welcome the new Cesarino? This is his what he considers his task and, in a way, it is where his hope lies. At his best, Sereni is waiting to be disappointed.

Following his example, we should appreciate that opening Sereni's last collection, *Stella variable* (1979), we do not find the dead speaking but the poet still in via Scarlatti reflecting on his condition. This time he is inside the house, 'nella casa dove sei / venuto a stare, già / abitata / dall'idea di essere qui per morirci / venuto', surronded by friends with uncanny smiles, 'questa volta sicuramente / stai morendo lo sanno e perciò / ti sorridono' (p. 188). Death is very much present in this text but once more it is investigated in a movement that goes from the outside to the inside, from the house to the friends to the poet's self-awareness. To listen to the speeches of the dead, we should turn to a different work by another poet, a very short collection which is easily neglected by critics and for this reason could retrospectively prove to be a precious source of knowledge.

[91] Luigi Pirandello, 'La camera in attesa', *Novelle per un anno*, ed. by Mario Costanzo (Milan: Mondadori, 1985-90), III.1 (1990), pp. 428-439 (p. 433).

III. Writing on nothing

L'attention est la forme la plus rare et la plus pure de la générosité.
Simone Weil[1]

1. The importance of hesitation

When it was first published in 1965, the *Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso & altre prosopopopee* was largely read as an extension of Giorgio Caproni's previous collection, *Il seme del piangere* (1959).[2] It is, indeed, a thin book, whose completeness is even questioned in a note by its author, and one which can easily be attracted into the orbit of the larger planets that are *Il seme del piangere* or, later on, *Il muro della terra* (1975). Because of this movement towards one or another pole of Caproni's work, scant attention has been paid to the few poems constituting the *Congedo*. If you finally decide to listen to the friend who has been insisting for a while that you should read this Italian poet and ask them where to start, they probably would not pick his shortest and less studied collection. And they would be right, not because it is not worth reading the *Congedo* but because it is not in many ways representative of Caproni's work; it indicates a path that the poet himself will no longer follow. As I am about, instead, to focus quite extensively on this singular moment of his production, you may wonder why I am handing to you this collection, leaving on the shelf his major ones. Indeed, if somebody were looking for a comprehensive introduction to Caproni's poetry,[3] this

[1] The quotation is taken from a letter Simone Weil wrote to Proust wrote to Joë Bousquet on the 13th of April 1942 which can be read in Simone Weil, Joë Bousquet, *Correspondance*, (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1982), p. 18.

[2] See, for example, Giovanni Raboni, 'Caproni o dell'esilio', in *La poesia che si fa*, ed. by Andrea Cortellessa (Milan: Garzanti, 2005), pp. 131-146 (p. 132): 'L'amara paradossalità che caratterizza il *Muro della terra*, lampeggia in più di un testo nel libro di dieci anni prima [*Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso & altre prosopopee*] che era stato recepito a suo tempo come un bellissimo prolungamento del *Seme del piangere*'; and Silvio Ramat, 'Sostanza felice di Giorgio Caproni', in *L'intelligenza dei contemporanei* (Padua: Rebellato, 1968), pp. 119-125 (p. 119): 'Dal primo libro delle *Finzioni* che accoglieva poesie di un Caproni appena ventenne – 1932 – a questi, per ora, ultimi versi del *Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso*, non corre, forse, a ben vedere, una distanza abissale'.

[3] For an extensive overview of Caproni's poetry see, for example, Adele Dei, *Giorgio Caproni* (Milan: Mursia, 1992) and Luigi Surdich, *Giorgio Caproni. Un ritratto* (Genoa: Costa & Nolan, 1990).

chapter would not do, as it aims at exploring issues of form and formality, meaning and nothingness by putting his poems in dialogue with a variety of texts from Dante to Derrida. Among these, there are also some poems written by Caproni before or after the *Congedo*; for all its uniqueness, this collection is not extraneous to issues and features explored in other works, in particular it seems to share many stylistic devices with the section of *Il seme del piangere* entitled *Versi livornesi*, and at the same time to introduce motifs and questions that will constitute the substance of his poetry from *Il muro della terra* onwards. However, more than for its transitional nature, the *Congedo* is analysed here for the possibilities it entails and which will not be accomplished by his subsequent work. Each way followed also entails individual paths that will no longer be attempted. In the case of poetry, the 'way' to be followed is particularly uncertain; indeed, it is more an attempt than a stable achievement. In this respect, what Kafka states in one of his aphorisms is particularly true, 'es gibt ein Ziel, aber keinen Weg; was wir Weg nennen, ist Zögern'[4] [There is a destination but no way there; what we refer to as the way is only hesitation]. This whole chapter may be seen as an exploration of such hesitation.

What do we encounter following this hesitation? The poet announces it already in the title of the collection: a farewell, some ceremonies and prosopopoeias. Possibly one of the reasons the friend who urges you to read Caproni's poetry would not advise you to start from this specific collection is its title. The poet, indeed, has a gift for naming books with evocative titles (*Come un'allegoria*, *Stanze della funicolare*), quotations from Dante (*Il seme del piangere*, *Il muro della terra*), references to characters of operas (*Il franco cacciatore*, *Il conte di Kevenhüller*); in the case of the *Congedo*, 'secca è la vena de l'usato ingegno' (*Rvf* 292, v. 13)[5] we may say with Petrarch, as Caproni seems unable to find a phrase that could summarise or represent its

[4] Franz Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II. In der Fassung der Handschrift*, ed. by Jost Schillemeit (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2002), p. 322.
[5] Petrarch's poems are quoted from Francesco Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, ed. by Marco Santagata (Milan: Mondadori, 1996).

content, and instead opts for the title of one of the poems followed by the indication 'other prosopopoeias'. However, it was not always like that; at the Cabinetto Vieusseux there is a folder, classified as 'CM', in which very different materials are gathered – former versions of poems, notes, restaurant receipts – and among them there is a piece of paper Luca Zuliani estimates to be the very first draft of the collection. According to this piece of paper, Caproni initially called the book *Le prosopopee*, later corrected to *Prosopopee*. On the same page, he annotates a definition of the term taken from Tommaseo's dictionary: 'prosopopea: figura con cui s'introduce a parlare persone lontane o morte, ed anche cose inanimate, come se fossero vive e presenti in persona'.[6] If this notion was initially identified as the unifying element of the book and is then relegated to the second part of the title, almost as an afterthought, it may be because of the disparity between the label placed at the beginning of the collection and the texts that it contains. Indeed, the protagonists of these poems – a guide, a priest, a gamekeeper – are characters or types rather than, strictly speaking, prosopopoeias. And, indeed, by the end of the collection the term has disappeared; in the closing note, Caproni does not mention the dead or inanimate objects, but claims that what he has staged, even if only partially, are the voices he can hear in his head: 'forse questo Congedo è ancora incompiuto', he writes, 'se il brusio che sento nella mente è quello non di un solo altro mézigue che, nelle brevi pause in cui m'è concesso di dare ascolto alle "voci" (ci son tante cose da fare, nel mondo) sta preparandosi per entrare in iscena. Può darsi che un giorno io trovi il tempo di portare questo libro a compimento. Ma chi si fida della speranza? Per questo mi sono deciso, intanto, a licenziarlo com'è' (p. 271). The tone of this note is quite dismissive, similar in this respect to the text we find at the end of *Gli strumenti umani* in which Sereni tells us that we have to identify ourselves the references hidden in the poems. While Sereni does not add footnotes or quotations marks, Caproni declares that he

[6] Giorgio Caproni, *L'opera in versi*, p. 1497. Thanks to the AHRC Travel Grant and the Isaiah Berlin Bursary, I had the opportunity myself to spend some time studying this and other drafts at the Cabinetto Viesseux.

writes poetry when he is not busy teaching or dealing with the things one has to do in life,[7] and while it is possible that in the future he will have time to finish this collection, for now he publishes it as it is. Some readers could be annoyed to discover, at the end of the book, that what they hold in their hands may be only a provisional configuration that ought to be revised; Caproni, however, was right in not trusting his own hope as he will not return to this collection, nor stage these voices in subsequent texts. Furthermore, this note may be upsetting, but it also points to the kind of knowing I am exploring in this work, elaborated but provisional, articulated and yet fragile.

The figure of prosopopoeia has disappeared, but what is that has replaced it? It is not easy to tell, as Caproni mentions a buzzing in his head, voices he can hear, and the word *mézigue*, which means *moi* in argot, that he has taken with him from a book he has just finished translating, *Mort à credit* by Louis-Ferdinand Céline.[8] The term appears for the first time in this collection in the dedication of the poem 'Lamento (o boria) del preticello deriso' and will become later on one of Caproni's privileged ways to express the circumspection we ought to employ when talking about the self as a self-contained, univocal notion. For example, in a 1989 interview he states that the aim of poetry is that of digging to find something that may be shared by very different individuals, '*una* verità che possa valere non soltanto per me ma per tutti gli altri *mézigues* (o me stessi, di proposito uso l'*argot*) che formano il prossimo (l'Altro diciamo pure), del quale io non sono che una delle cellule viventi'.[9] The closing note to the *Congedo*, however, does not seem to believe that indicating the 'I' with an argot word alone is enough to express the intricate relationship between oneself and places next to it the idea of going on stage, of voices that are both the product of the self and alien to it, the notion of

[7] In the 1960s, Caproni was working as a primary school teacher, while Sereni had left his teaching career to become a manager in one of the most important publishing houses, Mondadori. They both lament the lack of time to write, and while this may be a common complaint among poets, it acquires a specific connotation in modern times, despite the privileges that both Caproni and Sereni share.
[8] Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Morte a credito*, trans. by Giorgio Caproni (Milan: Garzanti, 1964).
[9] Giorgio Caproni, 'Su e giù come un minatore', in *Il mondo ha bisogno dei poeti. Interviste e auto commenti 1948-1990*, ed. by Melissa Rota (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2014), pp. 408-416 (p. 413).

'brusio'. Just like the label of prosopopoeia placed at the beginning of the collection, none of the categories mentioned at its end is able to impose itself as the definitive one. A reader may be surprised at Caproni's difficulty in finding a single key to access the *Congedo*, considering that the book consists of only twelve poems, written between 1960 and 1964, and an appendix called 'Versi spersi' where two texts of the 1950s are collected. However, a short collection is not necessarily a homogeneous one, and, indeed, looking at the representation of the self there are at least three different ways in which the subject is approached. Four quatrains describe what an unknown man does: '…l'uomo che di notte, solo' (p. 241), '…l'uomo che se ne va' (p. 242), 'Non porterà nemmeno / la lanterna' (p. 246), '…l'uomo che nel buio è solo' (p. 249); these texts are mixed with four poems reproducing the speeches of four different characters, so that by opening the collection first we read two quatrains, then longer and shorter texts in alternation, and finally two characters' discourses. The last four texts consist of the meditations of a lyric 'I', and one of them, 'I ricordi' includes, with a few changes, the opening quatrain, presenting it as a song he used to whistle.

Not only are the prosopopoieas announced in the title not to be found, strictly speaking, anywhere in the collection, but even the texts we are asked to associate with this figure represent only a third of the poems. However, if this notion is not able to hold together the book as a whole or to inspire more texts in this or other collections, it nonetheless plays a specific function within Caproni's work, which, I believe, is worth further exploring, that of articulating the question of the relationship between the 'I' and the others within the broader issue of the relation of language with reality. The male protagonist of the quatrain inhabits a desolate universe, characterised by dimness and loneliness; he finds himself alone in the dark drinking, realising that 'non ha / nessuno, nell'oscurità, / cui accostare il bicchiere' (p. 249). The physical slips into the metaphysical, so that, for example, he 'spinge il cancello e rientra / – solo – nei suoi sospiri' (p. 241). He seems to be resigned to his condition, he does not turn back as he knows 'd'aver più conoscenze /ormai di là che di qua…' (p. 242), he is not

bothered to bring the lantern with him, 'là / il buio è così buio / che non c'è oscurità' (p. 246). The last four texts of the collection, instead, mention specific places, 'Cantiere Orlando' (p. 260), and people, 'Otello, il Decio, il Rosso, / l'Olandese. Il Vigevano' (p. 259), 'la Gina', 'il Corallo', 'Ottorina' (p. 262), further specifing their individuality by adding the article before their name. However, all these elements belong to the past which is never a source of relief for Caproni, they may have been a solid reality once, but now they prove to be inconsistent or unreachable, and this is what matters. 'C'è il mare ancora', states the poet in one of these texts, 'e ancora /verde c'è l'Orologio, fermo / – con Giano – sulla stessa ora'; 'c'è ancora Toba', he adds, and the sign 'SCUOLE ELEMENTARI / PIER MARIA CANEVARI' 'c'è ancora / (là, dietro San Martino: /ma quasi non si legge più)'. All these elements that are still there, unchanged, are not accessible: 'sono stato là / dove non si può tornare' (p. 265), he explains. This exceptional visit does not bring him the consolation that the past still exists somewhere, but rather the awareness that what stably remains is only the contradictory feeling of pain, 'tutto l'inverno / (il brivido; il caldo) / del mio infantile inferno' (p. 266). 'I nomi s'allontanavano / vuoti' (p. 260), the poetic subject comments in 'Scalo dei fiorentini'; names are echoes of the past rather than specific references and he decides to walk away from them, 'mi sono allontanato', he states, and adds 'nessuno m'ha richiamato / – nessuno – indietro' (p. 261). In 'I ricordi', somebody asks him whether he remembers certain people or episodes, but he replies that 'io i ricordi / non li amo' (p. 262). The poet knows that the three friends playing cards with him 'avrebbero fino all'alba / […] senza un perché / continuato ad evocare anime', just like the 'divagare / perpetuo' of the sea, and decides to leave without even saying goodbye; 'scostai la sedia. / M'alzai. / Schiacciai nel portacenere / la sigaretta, e solo / (nemmeno salutai) / uscii all'aperto'. 'Il gibbone' focuses on the sense of strangeness that the poetic subject feels, the sense of not belonging; 'No, non è questo il mio / paese', are the opening lines of the poem, which presents the speaking voice as lonely and estranged, despite the crowd that comes and goes around them. An alternative to his condition seems to exist,

'nell'ossa ho un'altrà città / che mi strugge', and it is right there but already gone, 'è là. L'ho perduta'. We realise that the voice is speaking from a graveyard, where they have not found any liberation or peace; nothing, not even death, can shorten the distance from the city, nothing can make up for its loss. In the closing note, Caproni notes that the city could be 'Genova vista di sera dalla Madonna del Monte. Ma potrebbe anche essere una chimerica città dell'anima, chissà' (p. 271). In the prosopopoeias, reality is neither a metaphysical or chimerical place, nor something that existed only in the past. It is an everyday setting, the train carriage where we usually sit to reach our destination, the inn where we go to meet friends and play cards, the plateau on the mountain where we rest while hiking. The protagonists of these poems interact with these environments as well as the people around them, trying to find out what is still there and what has gone. Their speeches are uttered in the first person, but they are not intimate as when the poet recalls his childhood; these characters are, indeed, strangers but do not embody the generic man portrayed in the quatrains. They describe what they do while speaking, but they are not reduced to either their actions or words.[10]

In his analysis of the structure of the collection, Stefano Ghidinelli suggests that what Caproni wants us to acknowledge is the 'reversibilità delle alternative categoriali in base a cui organizziamo la nostra esperienza'.[11] We keep changing our mind, and yet we demand a text to give us a clear indication as to what to expect. Caproni, instead, shows us that sometimes the self seems something we can only observe from the outside and from afar, in short poems set in an indefinite time and vague space; other times, we look at it from the inside, counting those who have gone and the place which is not real anymore; occasionally we may want to

[10] As well as different, these poems are also similar; in recalling the story of their lives, both the gamekeeper and the priest mention too places of Genoa and Livorno; however, as Mengaldo notices, 'questi luoghi e persone indicati con tanta precisione e una volta realissimi, ora, lontani nel tempo e in bocca a terzi finiscono per allontanarsi, sbiadire'. Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, 'Per la poesia di Giorgio Caproni', in Giorgio Caproni, *L'opera in versi*, pp. XI-XLIV (pp. XXIX).

[11] Stefano Ghidinelli, 'Dove non si può (non) tornare. Architettura della "galleria" del *Congedo*', in *Giorgio Caproni. Lingua, stile, figure*, ed. by Davide Colussi and Paolo Zublena (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2014), pp. 203-219 (p. 207).

explore what does it mean to be here now, to be oneself and another at the same time. The poet was right in dismissing 'Le prosopopee' to choose what seems more a working title, which gives some indications for us to interpret, about a mood, 'cerimonioso', a gesture, 'congedo', and a trope. Retrospectively looking at this unique episode of his production, this was an elaborated and unconscious farewell to a specific poetic practice that was never his own, and yet its possibility felt compelling.

2. Prosopopoeia

2.1 The frustration of literary premisses.

Plato tells us that in attempting to defend himself, Socrates has to explain an activity he knows he is very much disliked for, going around inquiring for anyone, 'καὶ τῶν ἀστῶν καὶ ξένων' [both citizens and strangers],[12] who appears to be wise. Not only may people not want to be bothered, but an unsolicited inquiry is even more annoying when its inevitable conclusion is that the person who is questioning us is wiser, as he knows that he does not know. 'Amici, credo che sia / meglio per me cominciare / a tirar giù la valigia' (p. 243), these are the opening lines of the poem 'Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso' which leave us wondering why this traveller feels the urge to share them with us. We would rather not be addressed by strangers (since when are we friends?), we travel with our own concerns, hopes, thoughts and we would like to be left alone with them. The bewilderment worsens as the traveller thanks us for keeping him company and for the pleasant conversation, as we have not said a word. We are not aware of any Socrates among us, nor have we heard anyone asking the traveller about his wisdom, but we end up knowing everything about it. The same

[12] Plato, 'Apology', in *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus*, trans. by Harold North Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), pp. 63-147 (p. 128). Translation mine.

can be said about the other prosopopoeias: in 'Prudenza della guida' we are accompanied by a guide who instead of conducting us over the mountain, advises us to rest on a plateau where they summarise the journey we have made so far and reflect on the uncertainties of the way remaining and the opportunity of keeping going. The description of the landscape has theoretical and existential implications and we may wonder how we ended up being lectured about the meaning of life when we only wanted to hike. 'Non credo che questo sia / il fischio del bracconiere. / C'è troppa nebbia. Comunque / (qui son le carte) finite / voi la partita' (p. 250), announces the gamekeeper in 'Il fischio', but it takes him a long time to leave as he describes how he gets ready, tells us the story of his life and reflects on the porous boundaries between the inside and the outside. 'Sono un povero prete. / Guardatemi. Che pretendete / da me […]?' (p. 254) asks us as the priest in 'Lamento (o boria) del preticello deriso', 'nothing' may be our answer as we do not know who this person is or why is telling us about his hope that God actually exists.

It could seem unfair to question too much the premisses of a literary text, and, in a way, it misses the point, like a child asking about every details of a story we are trying to tell, why the character is there, why is she called that way, or a grown-up suggesting that the wolf, once he had discovered where the grandma lives, should have eaten Little Red Riding Hood straight away ending the tale there. My aim here is not that of discussing the suspension of disbelief, or the extent to which logic guides our action or those of the protagonists of fairy tales, but rather of reflecting on the frameworks in which plots and characters are inscribed, on their meaning and acceptability. One way in which in modern times all-encompassing reflections on one's life have been justified is that of epiphany: a trivial detail, a banal incident instead of passing unnoticed, as many others, is able to suddenly link together thoughts, occurrences, and memories dismantling our dearest, fundamental convictions.[13] Caproni,

[13] On the role of epiphany in modern narratives see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

however, does not opt for this solution, nothing, as far as we can see, has triggered the wisdom of these characters, their accounts are not marked by surprise, they are not sudden revelations but long meditated answers. In this respect, they are more similar to the all-encompassing reflections on one's life we find in Dante's *Commedia*, justified as the responses to the pilgrim as he travels through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. The souls he encounters recount their earthly existence, share their wisdom, justify their choices through speeches that can be fairly long. If the willingness to share what one has ultimately learnt in one's life is strange or even annoying in the ordinary contexts of the *Congedo*, it appears normal in the extraordinary setting of the *Commedia*. 'Sì col dolce dir m'adeschi, / ch'i' non posso tacere; e voi non gravi / perch'io un poco a ragionar m'inveschi', (Inf. XIII, 55-57) says Pier della Vigna, allured by the unique opportunity of talking to someone who is alive and will eventually go back among the living. Caproni's characters share the urgency to speak of the souls, as they too seem persuaded that their brief encounter with strangers would be their only or last occasion to talk. Furthermore, the scenes depicted by both Dante and Caproni are not static, but the movement they entail does not lead to any change. The beyond portrayed by Dante, although it will reach perfection only with Judgement day, consists of a unified order reflecting God's design in its fulfilment, and with the exception of the penitents in Purgatory, the souls will be in the same place, repeating the same action forever; 'di qua, di là, di giù, di sù li mena' famously writes Dante of the infernal windstorm buffeting the lustful, and adds 'nulla speranza li conforta mai, / non che di posa, ma di minor pena' (Inf. V, 43-45). In Caproni's poems, instead, the setting suggests that a change is about to happen, the traveller is about to get off the train, the guide to reach the peak of the mountain, the gamekeeper to go outside, but these transitions carry no hope of a change. To the card players who allegedly try to persuade him to stay inside, the gamekeeper replies that 'Tanto, / in tutti noi non resta / – sola – che la certezza / già da tempo in me sorta: / chi fabbrica una fortezza / intorno a sé, s'illude / quanto, ogni notte, chi chiude / a doppia mandata la porta' (pp. 252-

253). The outside is not more threatening than the inside, the peril is already here with us, within us, and there is no way out. The priest is not more comforting as he declares, 'prego (e in ciò consiste / – unica – la mia conquista) / non, come accomoda dire / al mondo, perché Dio esiste: / ma, come uso soffrire / io, perché Dio esista' (p. 258), his accomplishment being the aspiration rather than the certainty that God exists. 'Ora che più forte sento / stridere il freno, vi lascio / davvero, amici. Addio. / Di questo sono certo: io / son giunto alla disperazione / calma, senza sgomento. // Scendo, buon proseguimento' (p. 245) concludes the traveller, and nothing at the station where he is about to get off seems likely to disprove his belief, no further development is possible.

These statements taken from the final verses of Caproni's poems show a certain similarity, not only because they summarise what these characters have learnt, achieved, accomplished ('son certo', 'la certezza', 'la mia conquista') but also because of their style, the way in which these people speak. Dante, instead, is praised by Auerbach for his ability to express the individuality of the figures he portrays through their speeches. In the chapter of *Mimesis* he dedicates to *Inferno* X, he famously focuses on the relationship between structures and their inhabitants, God's design and individual stories, the eternal and changeless fate of the souls and the various ways in which their destiny was fulfilled. About the representation of reality in Western literature, which is the main subject of the book, Auerbach notices that in the case of Dante is twofold; 'Die Wirklichkeit der Erscheinungen Farinatas und Cavalcantes', he writes, 'wird wahrgenommen in der Lage, in der sie sich befinden, und in ihren Äußerungen' ['the reality of the appearances of Farinata and Cavalcante is perceived in the situation in which they are placed and in their utterances', p. 191]; and adds: 'in ihrer Lage als Bewohner der brennenden Särge drückt sich das Urteil aus, das Gott über die ganze Kategorie von Sündern, zu der sie gehören, über die Ketzer und Ungläubigen gefällt hat; in ihren Äußerungen aber erscheint ihr persönliches Wesen in voller Kraft' ['in their position as inhabitants of flaming tombs is expressed God's judgment upon the entire category of

sinners to which they belong, upon heretics and infidels. But in their utterances, their individual character is manifest in all its force' (p. 192)]. It is this latter aspect that fascinates Auerbach the most, not the changeless existence of the soul but rather 'die lebendige Welt menschlichen Handelns und Leidens, und näher der individuellen Taten und Schicksale' ['the living world of human action and endurance and more especially of individual deeds and destinies' (p. 191)],[14] as Hegel puts it. This fascination for individual characters is grounded on a notion Auerbach first explored in a 1938 essay,[15] that of *Figura*, the idea that everything which happens on earth is figural, potential, requiring a fulfilment to be found in the beyond. Once it finds its completion, an earthly occurrence reveals its most decisive aspects, without, however, losing its literal and historical meaning, as, in his view, happens, instead, in the cases of symbol or allegory. The characters Dante meets in the beyond know, through God's judgement, the true reality of their beings; their experience is not undermined by this understanding, and, instead, finds in it a direction, a meaning. However, according to Auerbach, in the portrayals of the *Commedia* something in the relationship between the framework and its component shifts: we care about the characters not as inhabitants of flaming tombs but as people talking, not as sinners but as individuals, we are interested in the beyond not as it reveals God's knowledge but the experience of its inhabitants. 'Der gewaltige Rahmen zerbrach durch die Übermacht der Bilder, die er umspannte' (p. 193) ['the tremendous pattern was broken by the overwhelming power of the images it had to contain', (p. 202)] is Auerbach's conclusion. The power of the representation of these characters is such that, despite their inhabiting flaming tombs and fully knowing their essence and destiny, 'wirken sie nicht tot, was sie doch sind, sondern lebendig' ['the impression they produce is not that they are dead – though that is what they are – but alive']. Dante's realism lies for Auerbach in his representing the dead as living beings, in the sense of liveness that his

[14] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto, 2015), p. 183. Further references are given after quotations in the text.
[15] See Erich Auerbach, 'Figura', *Archivum Romanicum*, 22 (1938), pp. 436-489.

portraits express. The focus here is not on the coherence of the discourse with its premisses, settings, and structures but rather on the proximity to our experiences; this is, I may say, another way in which these powerful speeches break the framework that surrounds them. 'Nachahmung der Wirklichkeit ist Nachahmung der sinnlichen Erfahrung des irdischen Lebens, zu dessen wesentlichsten Merkmalen doch seine Geschichtlichkeit, sein Sich-Verändern und Sich-Entwickeln zu gehören scheint' (p. 183) ['imitation of reality is imitation of the sensory experience of life on earth – among the most essential characteristics of which would seem to be its possessing a history, its changing and developing', (p. 191)]. Despite their changeless existence, these characters suffer, move, and remember their past, and this, according to Auerbach, is the very essence of our experience in this world. However, if life on earth is characterised by change and development, what should we say about the protagonists of Caproni's poems who proclaim that inside or outside, at this or the next station, on the plateau or at the peack it will be the same? Do they not live on earth despite finding themselves in train carriages, inns, halfway up a mountain? To decipher what we can infer from the experience of the characters of the *Congedo*, I will not follow Auerbach's approach and compare literature and reality, but I will keep these figures where they first and foremost exist, on the page. It is within, and not beyond, the literary structure that I will look for some answers.

2.2 Subtitles and stratifications.

As we have seen, there is no pilgrim or Socrates interrogating Caproni's characters, the only indications that may help us to understand what is happening are offered by titles; they tell us who is speaking ('Parla il guardiaccia', 'Prudenza della guida') and even comment on the nature or style of the discourses ('Lamento (o boria) del preticello deriso', 'Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso'). Furthermore, we have the indication, added almost as an afterthought to the title of the collection: prosopopoeia. Afterthoughts, such as subtitles for

example, are easily forgotten, overshadowed by what is written in the brighter, larger font. Maybe because it shares the destiny of everything that closely follows titles, scant attention has been paid by critics to this trope in relation to the *Congedo*. Subtitles, however, can be extremely revealing not so much maybe of the content of the book, but of the way we ought to read it; we should take *Middlemarch* as the 'Study of Provincial Life' that it is, we are invited to ask ourselves whether we are 'Serious People' willing to attend a 'Trivial Comedy' before adventuring into *The Importance of Being Earnest*, we are reassured that 'All is true' in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*. Subtitles can play a particularly important role when the literary premisses of a discourse are not straightforward. Dostoevsky, for example, underlines that 'The Meek One' is 'A fantastic story', not because the text displays magic creatures but because it follows closely something as intangible and indefinite, the feelings and thoughts of a man. In the foreword accompanying the publication of the short story in *The Diary of a Writer* in 1876, Dostoevsky imagines that in the room where the protagonist of the short story keeps vigil alongside the dead body of his wife, there is, concealed, a stenographer. Had they taken notes of the man's reflections, Dostoevsky is convinced, these would be less smooth and finished than the text we are about to read but would present the same psychological sequence. The story, therefore, is realistic and truthful, and the stenographer hidden under the bed or in the wardrobe is its only fantastic element.[16] Dostoevsky is not worried about the fact that the characters he portrays never existed, that the room they share could not be found anywhere in Moscow; in other words, he is not concerned by the relationship between literature and reality. The issue for him is not the setting or its inhabitants, but our way of accessing them, the way in which we hide and secretly listen to someone's reflections, our position within the literary universe. And what Dostoevsky ultimately tells us is that our relationship with this world is extremely mediated. He does not

[16] See the 'Short preface by the author' in *The best short stories of Fyodor Dostoevsky*, trans. by David Magarshack (New York: Random House, 2001), pp. 215-217.

present himself as a direct witness of the life of these characters but as someone who has rewritten the notes of an imaginary stenographer; the way to get to a realistic and truthful story, Dostoevsky tells us, is long and intricate. The notion of prosopopoeia mentioned at the end of the title of Caproni's collection carries, I believe, a similar function of inviting us to reflect on the way in which we conceive literary structures and on their stratified nature. Indeed, this figure notably raises the question of the conditions in which a speech can be uttered, but does so by casually giving voice to those who are usually mute.

In the *Institutio oratoria*, Quintilian compares a discourse devoid of rhetorical figures with a dead body, stating that 'motus est in his orationis atque actus, quibus detractis iacet et velut agitante corpus spiritu caret' ['this is where the movement and action of oratory are to be found; without these things it is dead, and there is no breath, as it were, to animate the corpse'].[17] According to him, this inanimate text can be enlivened the most by the trope which is specialised in giving voice to the dead and the absent ones, prosopopoeia. The power of this trope is therefore impressive and twofold, not only does it allow to bring the gods down from heaven, raise the dead and make cities and nation speak, but it animates the text in which it appears. How does the trope perform this latter task? Quintilian discusses two examples by Cicero, from the first oration against Catiline; he starts with 'etenim si mecum patria mea, quae mihi vita mea multoest carior, si cuncta Italia, si omnis res publica sic loquatur: "Marce Tulli, quid agis?"' ['If my country, which means much more to me than my own life, if all Italy, if the whole commonwealth were to say this to me: "What are you doing, Marcus Tullius?"']][18] which he considers less harsh, *mollior* and opposes to a bolder, *audacious* example, 'quae tecum, Catilina, sic agit et quodam modo tacita loquitur: "nullum iam aliquot annis facinus extitit nisi per te"' ['she addresses you, Catiline, and though silent

[17] Quintilian, *The orator's education*, IX, 2, 5, pp. 36-37.
[18] Cicero, 'In Catilinam I-IV', *Orations*, III. *In Catilinam 1-4. Pro Murena. Pro Sulla. Pro Flacco*, trans. by Coll MacDonald (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), pp. 1-168 (I, 27, pp. 60-61). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

somehow makes this appeal to you: "For some years now you have been behind every crime, involved in every scandal"', (I. 18, pp. 50-51)]. According to Quintilian, the difference in strength between these two examples depends on their degree of stratification. The personification of the country is, in one case, presented as hypothetical (*si*), while in the other it directly addresses Catiline, making an appeal to him although the way in which the speech is uttered remains unclear ('quodam modo tacita loquitur'). Prosopopoeia is considered to be more effective when it is not framed by a structure, when the personified figure bursts into the text without being announced; its strength lies in its ability to inform the text as a whole, without having to justify how it does so.

A figure that is sensed to work better when we do not pay too much attention to the way in which we happened to listen to the speech of a city would appear particularly suspicious to someone interested, instead, precisely on shedding light on the hidden structures that inform language. This may be the reason why in 1979 Paul de Man focuses on prosopopoeia to analyse not only how rhetorical frameworks work but also on what basis any discourse about the self is grounded. It is indeed in the context of an essay on autobiography that he first analyses the trope, as if the most ambitious gesture of language were not anymore giving voice to Rome but saying 'I'. It is not easy to summarise de Man's view on prosopopoeia in a few lines, not only because it develops through a close analysis of Wordsworth's *Essays upon Epitaphs*, addressing what it states as well as what it omits, but also due to his methodology, as he enjoys exploring undecidable situations, revolving doors, simultaneous occurrences. Autobiography, for example, we are told, is not 'a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts', however, he adds, 'just as we seem to assert that all texts are autobiographical, we should say that, by the same token, none of them is or can be'.[19] In order to navigate such intricate issues, I will need to sacrifice part

[19] Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement', p. 70. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

of the ambiguity and complexity of de Man's discourse, to focus on a few passages which, despite their twists and layers, can be regarded as possible points of conclusion. For instance, after recognising different theories of autobiography, he states that his interest in this form lies not in the fact 'that it reveals reliable self-knowledge – it does not – but that it demonstrates the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions' (p. 71). In a way de Man agrees with Quintilian that certain structures are more persuasive than others when their premisses are not closely questioned. If compared to fiction, autobiography seems a 'simpler mode of referentiality, of representation, and of diegesis' (p. 68), it gives the impression that one is just talking about oneself; we do not need a stenographer hidden under the bed to justify why we know what we thought in a specific situation. Clearly, we should not trust such confidence, but this is not the point of de Man's essay; it is the very mechanism of believing that any manifestation of language can be straightforward that interests him, not the outcome of such a belief. Indeed, according to him, it is precisely where we perceive language to be more direct, truthful, and unequivocal that we should look for the cracks. There cannot be peace in language because of what de Man calls 'tropological substitutions' and which I may describe as a constant slipping, with no place to rest or hold firmly. If we turn to the self, we will realise that behind the proper name, the face, there is not a solid, stable entity but the very gesture of conferring the power of speech to someone mute, there is a prosopopoeia; 'voice assumes mouth, eye, and finally face, a chain that is manifest in the etymology of the trope's name, *prosopon poien*, to confer a mask or a face (*prosopon*)'. Through the vividness of depiction, the reader forgets the structure behind the speaking face, the memorable name, the fact that it is the result of the action of a rhetorical figure. As is typical of de Man's approach, we are invited to reflect not on the common understanding of the trope but on its literal meaning, shifting our focus from the idea of giving voice to that of conferring a mask, and then from the notion of face to that of figure, in a slipping chain that

he summarises as follows: 'our topic deals with the giving and taking away of faces, with face and deface, *figure*, figuration and disfiguration' (p. 76). Not only does de Man agree with Quintilian that prosopopoeia is stronger when not introduced by a conditional sentence but he goes further by suggesting that the function of the trope is precisely that of making us forget that such an introduction exists. De Man's aim here is not that of reminding us that cities and nations cannot actually speak but rather questioning the status of every utterance. In his work, nothing is interesting per se, analysed in itself; what counts is what is revealed of something else, how a mechanism can be representative of the functioning of something other. In his hands, therefore, prosopopoeia becomes not only the trope of autobiography but of language as a whole, showing that no statement is ever transparent, references are always opaque; 'quodam modo tacita loquitur' can be said of any verbal interaction, we are all silent and yet somehow speaking. The conditional sentence should be restored as a preface to any utterance. 'We reenter a system of tropes at the very moment we claim to escape from it' (p. 72) is the lesson prosopopoeia can teach us.

De Man's stance on the relationship between single utterances and the structures framing them can be regarded as the opposite of what Auerbach says about *Inferno* X; while the speeches of Farinata and Cavalcante are able to convey their personal characters and because of that break the teleological framework of God's judgment, 'Autobiography as De-Facement' points out that not only is eschewing the tropological nature of language impossible, but its very attempt is even dangerous. De Man compares the language of trope to the coat of Nessus, the robe dyed with the blood of the centaur by Deianira in the hope of regaining the affection of his husband, Hercules. The coat 'was supposed to restore the love which she lost, but the restoration turned out to be a worse deprivation, a loss of life and of sense' (p. 80), as Deianira eventually causes the violent death of her husband as well as her own, inadvertently serving the revenge of Nessus. When language exploits all its resources to reach vividness, we are told here, it collapses into its own fiction, giving voice

to the dead does not reveal the power of individual utterances but the inconsistency of the notion of self-expression. The danger of attempting to go beyond the language of tropes lies in the fact that it inevitably leads to the recognition of a loss, and although de Man aligns life and sense, he seems more concerned by the latter, by the fact that Deianira has no means to understand the plot of the centaur and when she realises what happened, she is lost and desperate. 'As soon as we understand the rhetorical function of prosopopoeia as positing voice or face by means of language', he writes, 'we also understand that what we are deprived of is not life but the shape and the sense of a world accessible only in the privative way of understanding' (pp. 80-81). The face we encounter, the voice we hear are always posed by language and we have no access to any other kind of person or form of expression; the coat we have at our disposal is always poisonous, but as long as we do not put it on, we can still believe it will serve our purposes. Language works because we forget how it functions, what we miss out, what we cannot reach. Life is still possible, but it cannot take a different shape. For both Auerbach and de Man closure is not to be found even where we are sure it is going to happen: neither in the beyond where the story of one's life is supposed to reach its conclusion, nor in the everyday use of language in which we believe we deal with meaning and not its endless substitution. The lack of alternative that the impossibility of closure implies, the fact that we are stuck is something de Man openly addresses, but it can also be inferred from Auerbach's analysis of the afterlife. The definition of realism he provides is quite puzzling, as he states that it consists in portraying the dead as they were alive, as no experience can ever change our condition or the lens through which we interpret the world. Dante is surprised that the souls he encounters in the afterlife have a body, even though not the physical one which with they will be reunited after the Last Judgement, and addresses this complex matter several times. However, it is not from their appearances that he often guesses the identity of the inhabitants of the beyond, but rather from their speech. Glauco Cambon notices that they way in which Farinata addresses Dante 'O Tosco che per la città

del foco / vivo ten vai così parlando onesto' (Inf. X, 22-23) is 'a recognition of their common language in the most unlikely of places' and adds that 'speech is the bond between the living and the restless dead'.[20] Both Auerbach and Cambon read the familiarity of such speeches as positive, either as the showcase of the person behind the sinner, or as a proof that language is 'the specifically human act', that '*loquor, ergo sum*' (p. 24). However, what these speeches do not show us is how the dead are different, other from the living, what kind of beings talk from the beyond. Therefore, Dante's characters can be considered prosopopoeias both in the sense that they are speaking dead, and that with their discourses they make us forget the reality of their condition.

Caproni seems to be aware of how this rhetorical figure works, and by placing the label of prosopopoeia at the beginning of the collection, he asks us to keep in mind the framework in which these speeches are uttered, but also to meditate on the relationship between life and death. This latter aspect, however, is more subtle if compared to the *Commedia*, but also to the initial configuration of the collection. In 1961 Caproni writes a letter to the fellow poet Alessandro Betocchi in which he mentions that he is working on a new collection entitled 'L'uscio dei morti' whose prologue would be the 'Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso', 'un poemetto dove mi piacerebbe descrivere una mia calata nel limbo e un mio incontro con i morti, divenuto loro concittadino'.[21] Had Caproni written this book, we would navigate it pointing more decisively towards the model of Dante and the long and illustrious tradition of poets visiting the beyond. The urge of the characters to share their wisdom would feel less eccentric, as these, we have been told, are the kind of discourses one hears in the afterlife. In 'Shelley Disfigured', de Man scrutinises once more the notion of prosopopoeia and notices that 'to read is to understand, to question, to know, to erase, to deface, to repeat – that is to

[20] Glauco Cambon, 'Dante and the Drama of Language', in *The World of Dante. Six Studies in Language and Thought*, ed. by S. Bernard Chandler and Julius Molinaro (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966), pp. 3-24 (p. 20). Further references are given after quotations in the text.
[21] Excerpts of the letter can be read in Giorgio Caproni, *L'opera in versi*, p. 1500.

say, the endless prosopopoeia by which the dead are made to have a face and a voice which tells the allegory of their demise and allows us to apostrophize them in our turn'. [22] We give voice to the dead for them to answer the fundamental questions, the meaning of one's experience, the consequences of dying. However, the title Caproni discusses with Betocchi already casts some doubts on the feasibility of reaching the beyond. 'L'uscio dei morti' suggests more a liminal space than a removed dimension the poet is exceptionally admitted to explore. Contemplating the front cover of this unwritten book, we may wonder whether we would find the door open or closed and whether it would be us to cross the threshold or rather the dead. In this respect, it may be not so surprising that in the collection we actually get to read we never know what happens once the traveller gets off the train, we are not aware of any souls he may have eventually encountered, and instead we listen to more speeches by different characters describing the same threshold. To renounce an ultramundane journey, to take, instead, a train to Genoa, means to renounce the framework of exceptionality and dramatic encounters which would have struck our attention and justified the urgency of the speeches of the protagonists of Caproni's poems. However, by choosing common settings and everyday language the poet can further explore the reciprocity at the core of prosopopoeia, the idea of being a fellow citizen of the dead; inside a train carriage or an inn, the notions of life and death, the question of who is visiting and who is staying appear to be less obvious or definitive than in the beyond. Prosopopoeias are given voice for us to articulate the fundamental issues of silence and meaningful communication, being and what Caproni calls 'nulla'.[23] Through their speeches they invite us to pay attention to what we always fail to scrutinise: everyday language, ordinary settings, the notion of life. And what we may learn, by looking closer at our environment and discourses,

[22] Paul de Man, 'Shelley Disfigured', in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, pp. 93-122 (p. 121). Further references are given after quotations in the text.
[23] 'Io ammetto il nulla', he declares for example in an interview, 'ma non mi sento di affermare che non c'è altro che il nulla' see *Il mondo ha bisogno dei poeti*, p. 446.

is that despite the familiarity of the settings and the words, we are the passers-by or guests, that the speeches we are so surprised to hear from a stranger we have just met are indeed the answers to questions we forgot we asked.

2.3 Integrity and returns.

After having analysed prosopopoeia as the figure of positing meaning and then pretending that it was always there, de Man comments that 'no degree of knowledge can ever stop this madness, for it is the madness of words', and adds 'what *would* be naïve is to believe that this strategy, which is not *our* strategy as subjects, since we are its product rather than its agent, can be a source of value and has to be celebrated or denounced accordingly' (p. 121). This is an interesting statement from someone who has worked quite extensively on unveiling the functioning of language and leaves us wondering what it is that we are supposed to do with the mechanism of prosopopoeia, given that we are not allowed either to praise or condemn it. The poems included in Caproni's collection may be considered a possible answer to this issue, as they are not a celebration or a censure of the rhetorical figure, but rather an exploration of its effects. Prosopopoeia is the premise for these speeches which ultimately aim at delving into something else, into the proximity of our everyday experience to the nothingness, or, as Calvino puts it, into 'il senso del limite e della precarietà di ciò che è, alla frontiera del non essere'.[24] Premisses deeply affect the way in which we explore certain issues; in this case, the notion of prosopopoeia, I believe, shapes the tone of the collection.

This is not to say that the attitude of the *Congedo* is a direct consequence of the label placed at its beginning, as if it were enough for Hemingway to call his book *For whom the bell tolls* to write in the style of John Donne. And, indeed, the poet who is most frequently associated with prosopopoeia, Guido Cavalcanti, would be quite surprised to see what the trope has

[24] Italo Calvino, 'Il taciturno ciarliero', in *Saggi 1945-1985*, ed. by Mario Barenghi (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), I, pp. 1023-1027 (p. 1024).

become in the hands of Caproni. Prosopopoeia, 'la chiave figurale del Cavalcanti' according to Marti,[25] entails in his poems a complex set of rhetorical strategies, going from the personification of Love to body parts endowed with the capacity of speech, from the appearance of the 'spiritelli' to the sudden animation of writing tools. All these different speakers, however, repeat the same dramatic truth, that the experience of love is ultimately characterised by pain. 'Noi siàn le triste penne isbigotite, / le cesoiuzze e 'l coltellin dolente, / ch'avemo scritte dolorosamente / quelle parole che vo' avete udite', (XVIII, vv. 1-4)[26] state the writing tools, underlining both their own miserable nature ('triste', 'dolente') and the sufferance that writing entails. In the sonnet XII, facing the perspective of further agony and torment, the desperate soul invokes the beloved for some some relief, 'Donna, or ci aiuta, / che gli occhi ed i' non rimagnàn dolenti!' (vv. 7-8). If the possibility for the poet to give voice to the body's components and functions, as well as objects and abstract ideas, may be regarded as a proof of the power of his poetry, the extensive use of the figure dissolves the integrity of both the self and language, eventually serving a rhetoric of disconnection and isolation. The fundamental experience Cavalcanti tries to convey is that of 'l'angosciosa vita mia / che sospirando la distrugge Amore' (XIII, vv. 3-4). Once more when we try to eschew the limits of our speeches, asking body parts to convey the meaning we cannot express ourselves, we end up reaffirming the deficiency of language and expanding it to realms that were untouched by it. When Cavalcanti turns to the experience of the body, he discovers that, like words, it does not entail coherence, integrity, or organic unity. As Robert Harrison puts it, embodiment for him consists of 'a finite relationship to an infinite world',[27] sensations themselves are wounds able to cause 'a chronic, incurable laceration of the inner self'. If the

[25] *Poeti del Dolce stil novo*, ed. by Mario Marti (Florence: LeMonnier, 1969), p. 157.
[26] All quotations from Cavalcanti's corpus are taken from Guido Cavalcanti, *Rime*, ed. by Giorgio Inglese and Roberto Rea (Rome: Carocci, 2011).
[27] Robert Harrison, 'The Ghost of Guido Cavalcanti, Revisited', in *Guido Cavalcanti tra i suoi lettori*, ed. by Maria Luisa Ardizzone (Florence: Cadmo, 2003), pp. 119-129 (p. 123). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

body is a membrane, a 'transitive boundary at which the world touches the self and the self feels, perceives and suffers the presence of the world' (p. 124), in Cavalcanti's case it easily breaks when facing the violent intrusion of external reality. It is like having a wound in the heart, the poet tells us, showing the death behind the apparent liveness, 'una ferita / che sia, com' egli è morto, aperto segno' (VIII, vv. 13-14). For this reason, in an earlier study, Harrison suggests that we talk of Cavalvanti as a ghost, as 'he was deeply haunted by the immanence of his own death, by the self's ontological insubstantiality, and by the failures of representation to reach the other side of finitude'.[28]

The characters portrayed by Caproni are similarly haunted by the ubiquitous presence of death, the eagerness of things to disappear, the limits of language, but they remain calm, affable, considerate, their speeches intact, well structured, with a distinct musicality. 'Il prato, / qui sul pianoto, è ospitale / più che altrove: ideale, / anzi (così a mezza quota: / prima che la mente sia vuota / del tutto) per riprendere fiato' (p. 247), is the alluring announcement of the guide wishing to advance no further. 'Intanto (scusate: ci vuole, / col freddo che m'aspetta) / lasciate ch'io mi versi ancora / – ultimo – quest'altro bicchiere' (p. 250), the gamekeeper declares apologetically, while the traveller, as we are told already in the title, likes to be ceremonious: 'Vogliatemi perdonare / quel po' di disturbo che reco. / Con voi sono stato lieto / dalla partenza, e molto / vi sono grato, credetemi, / per l'ottima compagnia' (p. 243). Precisely because of their structure and musicality, these speeches give us the impression that they omit more than they include, that the glass, the plateau, the apology are ultimately not the point. As Calvino puts it, these poems are animated by 'una parlantina divagatoria, indugiante sui dettagli in modo che i versi, nel loro movimento di enjambements e rime quasi casuali, girino intorno a un nucleo lirico-drammatico che resta nell'ombra' (p. 1027). The *omissis* here, the centre we never come close to, is precisely that the drama has

[28] Robert Harrison, *The body of Beatrice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988), p. 69.

already taken place and the lyric has already tried to express it. The membrane of the body has already been broken by the pressure of the world which in Caproni's case is not the burden of plenitude, the excess of perception, the overwhelming exposure to reality, but rather the weight of the nothingness which has infiltrated every aspect of one's life. The glass, the plateau, the apology are all what is left, along with the musicality and the structures of the speeches; the realism of the details and the affability of the discourses are the way in which Caproni deals with the inconsistency of reality. Calvino underlines that this poetry 'esclude ogni possibilità di idillio, il "qui e ora" non è per Caproni una condizione di cui ci si possa pacificamente compiacere' (p. 1026); these characters have not found peace, they cannot rest, finally enjoying their condition. Like Cavalcanti, Caproni is a poet of despair, but of a different kind; the traveller calls it, 'disperazione / calma, senza sgomento' (p. 245), it is the despair that originates from knowing that pain is everywhere and yet it is not everything, that nothing can ever change and yet we keep moving, that language is meaningless and yet we want to communicate. Desperation, especially in relation to the discovery of the inconsistency of being, tends to find quite dramatic or emphatic forms of expression; instead, to articulate it in an affable, even ceremonious way, one must be a long-time acquaintance, someone who has overcome the shock of the discovery and counts it among the certainties of their life. As Mengaldo puts it, to find this kind of expression 'succede a chi il nulla non lo scopre improvvisamente per strada con un terrore d'ubriaco, miracolo rovesciato, ma a chi con lui convive giornalmente e lo dà per scontato';[29] in other words, it does not happen to Montale who in *Forse un mattino andando* turns and sees 'il nulla alle mie spalle, il vuoto / dietro di me',[30] but rather to Caproni who knows that the nothingness awaits beyond every door, can be found at the bottom of each glass, springs from any conversation. It is perhaps a less common form of despair, similar to what Durs Grünbein in one of his poems calls

[29] Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, 'Per la poesia di Giorgio Caproni', pp. XLII-XLIII.
[30] Eugenio Montale, *L'opera in versi*, p. 40.

'Verzweiflung in moderaten Ton' [despair in moderate tone],[31] and which Pietro Citati regards as the only effective way to express affliction in modern times. In 1963, Citati writes an essay criticizing what he calls 'arte nevrastenica', the kind of art that dips its pen into the nervous system, exploring its ramification and reproducing its tension, shocks, shivers, and breakdowns. While writers focus on the manifestations of neurosis, he states, 'coloro che sono veramente perseguitati dalle angosce si nascondono. Hanno assunto il volto beatifico della persona normale, tarda e poco sensibile, che dispone i propri pensieri lungo il filo rassicurante della logica convenzionale'.[32] Caproni's characters wear precisely this delightful smile, and foster the same illusion of rationality, of a reassuring discourse, of an anaesthetised sensibility. Elena Lombardi suggests that the discontinuity that prosopopoeia produces in the language of Cavalcanti can be read in relation to what Roman Jakobson defines as 'contiguity disorder', the 'loss of the syntactical structure underlying words'.[33] In Cavalcanti's poetry nothing is able to hold together the different elements constituting the sentence, they stand one next to the other isolated, unconnected; what is lost in his poems is the meaning produced by the whole. Caproni, instead, manages to link together words in a way that seems to imply solid structures behind them: syntax, metrics, musicality, courtesy. And yet these structures still in place, still operating stand in the middle of nothing, denounce the limits of rationality instead of proving its strength.

This integrity that comes after the drama has taken place, however, is not something Cavalcanti is totally unfamiliar with, and if this aspect perhaps does not emerge from his poems, it is nonetheless an important aspect of the fortune of his figure. For him too, in a way, it is a posthumous achievement. Cavalcanti is, indeed, the protagonist of the ninth story recounted on the sixth day of the *Decameron*. We find the poet in the graveyard at Santa

[31] Durs Grünbein, *Strophen für übermorgen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2007), p. 183.
[32] Pietro Citati, 'L'arte nevrastenica', in *Il te del cappellaio matto*, pp. 339-343 (p. 341).
[33] Elena Lombardi, 'The Grammar of Vision in Guido Cavalcanti', in *Guido Cavalcanti tra i suoi lettori*, pp. 83-92 (p. 90).

Reparata facing the 'brigata' of Betto Brunelleschi, who has been trying to persuade Cavalcanti to join them. The group of noblemen tease the poet, asking him about the impact of his philosophical inquiries; 'Guido tu rifiuti d'esser di nostra brigata; ma ecco, quando tu avrai trovato che Iddio non sia, che avrai fatto?',[34] is their malicious question. Cavalcanti enigmaticly replies 'Signori, voi mi potete dire a casa vostra ciò che vi piace', leaps over a lofty tomb and goes away. The young men wonder what he meant by that, as many critics have done afterwards, because the statement makes apparently no sense. The members of the 'brigata' conclude that he must have lost his mind, they call him 'smemorato' as he had failed to notice that where they stand 'non avevano essi a fare più che tutti gli altri cittadini, né Guido meno che alcuno di loro'. Messer Betto, however, points out that 'queste arche son le case de' morti; le quali egli dice che son nostra casa' (p. 538) and suggests that the poet's reply should be understood by reflecting on the distinction between the dead and the living. Cavalcanti, therefore, can still be associated with the figure of prosopopoeia, as he casts doubt on the actual liveliness of those we hear speaking. He is the only one who has not forgotten about the settings and invites us to acknowledge the fact that we stand among tombs. In this posthumous appearance, however, the poet is not disassembled in his body parts or functions anymore, he shows an easiness, a wittiness that his poems often lack and that, according to Calvino, proves that lightness and gravity are not necessarily mutually exclusive principles; 'l'agile salto improvviso del poeta-filosofo che si solleva sulla pesantezza del mondo', demonstrates for the critic that 'la sua gravità contiene il segreto della leggerezza'.[35] The protagonists of the *Congedo*, I believe, have learnt this lesson.

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[34] Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. by Vittore Branca (Milan: Mondadori, 1985), p. 537. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

[35] Italo Calvino, 'Lezioni americane', in *Saggi 1945-1985*, I, pp. 626-753 (pp. 638). In this text, Calvino reads through the lens of lightness not only the episode narrated by Boccaccio but also Cavalcanti's own poems. Indeed, he considers his poetry as an example of the strand of literature for which language is 'un elemento senza peso, che aleggia sopra le cose come una nube, o meglio un pulviscolo sottile, o meglio ancora come un campo d'impulsi magnetici' (p. 642). He is not alone in speaking about lightness in relation to Cavalcanti's poems, especially when it comes to his use of metrical structures and lines, but I personally read the *Rime* more

Boccaccio is not alone in shaping the fortune of Cavalcanti's figure by portraying him in his work, there is another very famous example I have mentioned here and there: *Inferno* X. Dante's portrayal of the poet also revolves around the relationship between life and death, but rather than a character, Guido takes the form of a spectral presence. When Harrison invites us to read Cavalcanti as a ghost, he does not only analyse what haunted his poems, but also the texts visited by the poet's posthumous figure, in particular Dante's corpus.[36] Indeed, among the flaming tombs, the pilgrim does not meet Guido, but speaks, instead, with his father who is puzzled to hear Dante referring to his son in the past tense: 'Come?', he asks, "dicesti 'elli ebbe"? non viv'elli ancora? /non fiere li occhi suoi lo dolce lume?' (Inf. X, 67-69). As the poet hesitates, Cavalcante assumes that Guido is no longer alive and collapses into the tomb. Much has been written about this exchange, not only because absences, omissions, lacks are often more revealing than presences, mentions, references but also because the misunderstanding seems to derive from a vindictive attitude of the pilgrim. One is haunted by what is unresolved, what has not been overcome; but what is tormenting Dante here? Gianfranco Contini suggests exploring the question focusing on the fact that the person who undertakes this exceptional ultramundane journey is a poet. His essay 'Dante come personaggio-poeta della *Commedia*' famously starts by scrutinising who says 'I' in the *Recherche*; 'è l'autore? È altro dall'autore?',[37] asks Contini, who is not interested in establishing the difference between fiction and autobiography, but rather in the way in which the specific, historical, unrepeatable experience of an individual may be linked to the comprehensive knowledge of a universal subject. For him, what ties together the contingent and the transcendental in Proust's novel is the fact that the person who says 'I' is a writer whose task is that of transforming observations into representations. Since the same elements can be

as an exploration of the heaviness of language, of its relation with body parts and functions rather than clouds and dust.

[36] See Robert Harrison, *The body of Beatrice*, pp. 81-90.

[37] Gianfranco Contini, 'Dante come personaggio-poeta della *Commedia*', in *Un'idea di Dante. Saggi danteschi* (Turin: Einaudi, 2001), pp. 33-62 (p. 33). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

found in the *Commedia*, whose protagonist is an individual subject, a universal pilgrim, and a poet, Contini suggest reading certain episodes of Dante's text in a Proustian light, bearing in mind that what is at stake here is not only the problem of the salvation of the souls but also the issue of literature, of its resources and limits, of its ultimate aim. When halfway through the essay, he comes to *Inferno* X, he focuses on the moment immediately preceding Cavalcante's despair, when assuming that Dante's ultramundane journey is due to his 'altezza d'ingegno', he wonders why his son is not accompanying the poet. Dante explains that 'da me stesso non vegno', and adds, in the pernicious past tense, 'colui ch'attende là, per qui mi mena / forse cui Guido vostro ebbe a disdegno' (Inf. X, 59-63). Different guides help the pilgrim in his journey waiting for him at different distances: very close to the poet there is Virgil, standing beside him until he is ready to resume the journey, awaiting in the Earthly Paradise there is Beatrice, willing to help him when reason alone seems not be enough to understand what Dante will experience, and finally at the very end of the way, there is God. Contini explores the possibility that the dialogue in absentia between Dante and Cavalcanti revolves around a lack of faith not on 'chi tutto discerne' (Purg. XIV, 151), or the classical tradition but on the strength and possibilities of poetry. The issue at stake here, the critic believes, is a rhetorical one.

Cavalcanti and Dante have not always been antagonists, they were fellow poets, both interested in renewing the language of poetry, addressing a specific audience, and exploring the philosophical and gnoseological implications of love. In 'Io mi senti' svegliar dentr'a lo core', Dante sees 'monna Vanna and monna Bice', his and Guido's beloved, 'venire inver' lo loco ov'io era / l'una appresso dell'altra maraviglia'[38] and in commenting this text in the *Vita nuova*, he refers to Cavalcanti, as 'mio primo amico' (p. 203). Along with Giovanna and Beatrice, the text also stages Love talking to the poet, and this, retrospectively, seems to alarm

[38] Dante Alighieri, *Le opere* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2015-2017), I.1: *Vita nuova, Rime*, ed. by Donato Pirovano and Marco Grimaldi (2015), p. 206. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

Dante who interrupts the narration of his life to address the reader and justify the use of prosopopoeia. Chapter XXV begins with the concern that someone could cast doubt on his poetry, 'di ciò che io dico d'Amore come se fosse una cosa per sé, e non solamente sustanzia intelligente ma sì come fosse sustanzia corporale: la quale cosa, secondo la veritate, è falsa; ché Amore non è per sé sì come sustanzia, ma è uno accidente in sustanzia' (p. 207). By representing Love walking and speaking, Dante is stating something false, neglecting the difference between accidents and substance. The objection is serious and expressed using the language of syllogism, but the poet replies shifting this perspective and presenting the issue from the point of view of poetry; Dante's argument seems to be that what is unacceptable for a philosopher, may be pursued by a poet. He claims that prosopopoeia is an intrinsic part of poetic language and presents examples taken from the most illustrious tradition, the classical one. It is not the tropes themselves that we should question, according to Dante, but their use; Virgil, Ovid and Homer were always aware of the meaning they veiled, 'però che grande vergogna sarebbe a colui che rimasse cose sotto vesta di figura o di colore rettorico, e poscia, domandato, non sapesse denudare le sue parole da cotale vesta, in guisa che avessero verace intendimento' (pp. 214-215). This art of unveiling is also perfectly mastered by Dante and his 'primo amico', but the same cannot be said, according to the *Vita nuova*, of all their contemporaries. Maybe it is because nobody ever asked about it, that Dante does not disclose what is behind the emphasis placed on the convergence between him and Cavalcanti to whom the book is dedicated. And yet, the two poets were going in different directions; Beatrice and Giovanna could walk together along the street, but they stand for very different views of love; bounded with *caritas*, assisted by rationality, and able to produce beneficial effects, according to Dante, an overwhelming experience, which affects the sense and leaves the subject fragmented and speechless, for Cavalcanti. Their paths diverge even more when Dante leaves the realm of lyric poetry to venture in the description of the beyond, where no degree of falsity is allowed. What separates the two poets then is not only their

opposite understanding of love, but their very different idea of poetry. Dante asks us to believe that there is nothing to unveil in his ultramundane journey, that it entails deeper and broader implications, but it remains real, just as Beatrice is revealed to be, at the same time, 'donna, donna amorosa e santa'. According to Contini, what Cavalcanti 'ebbe a disdegno' is precisely this idea that we can escape the system of tropes, the figurative nature of language. 'La renitenza di Guido non è solo quella, pur probabile, dell'ateo che rifiuta la grazia, ma quella del poeta contento alla letteratura e ai suoi stilemi di metafore', he states. However, just as in the *Vita nuova* Dante was too keen on placing his poetic practice next to Cavalcanti's, in the *Commedia* he is a bit too quick in distancing himself. He too enjoyed literature as a system of tropes, he too compared Beatrice to an angelic figure, and this is what he is condemning; Dante 'fa ammenda in Guido di una teologia adoperata come tropo' (p. 51) is Contini's conclusion; or at least the poet tries to, because, as we have seen, liberating oneself from the suspicion that language cannot reach anything else outside the linguistic domain is not that easy. Also in the case of *Inferno* X, the posthumous figure of Cavalcanti can be associated with prosopopoeia, he is not allowed to speak, but manages nonetheless to cast doubt where we think our foundations are the most stable.

Caproni knows that theology can only be conceived as a trope. The priest's ultimate 'conquista', as we have seen, is a pun, playing on the shift from a causal clause to a final one; 'Prego', he states, 'non, come accomoda dire / al mondo, perché Dio esiste: / ma, come uso soffrire / io, perché Dio esista' (p. 258). God does not inhabit the solid reality of the indicative but rather the narrow space of possibility offered by the subjunctive. These lines introduce both a theme and a way of exploring it that Caproni would further develop in the following collections, where many attempts would be made to locate God, who, maybe annoyed by Caproni's insistence, in *Il franco cacciatore* would give the following 'Indicazione': '– Smettetela di tormentarvi. /Se volete incontrarmi, / cercatemi dove non mi trovo. // Non so indicarvi altro luogo' (p. 406). However, the *Congedo* does not focus on this quest, but

rather on the problem of unveiling what language hides. The collection, I may say, is also haunted by prosopopoeia as the trope is mentioned at the beginning to then disappear, but its acknowledgment in the title is not an attempt to exorcise its ghost. Its function is similar to that of the *guillemets* that allows the return of the word *Geist* in Heidegger's work. As Derrida points out in *De l'esprit. Heidegger et la question*, in 1927 the German philosopher sets out not to use the word *Geist* anymore, but a closer look at his work reveals that he does not keep his own promise: the term comes back surrounded by quotation marks. The word is allowed to enter the discourse again, but its position within the text is ambiguous, 'même quand on l'accueille, le mot se trouve contenu sur le pas de la porte ou retenu à la frontière, flanqué de signes discriminants, tenu à distance par la procédure des guillemets'.[39] Referring to categories of the speech act theory, Derrida underlines that what Heidegger excludes is the use of the word, which returns in the form of a mention, as if he were quoting someone else's discourse or borrowing a term he wanted to use in a different sense. Just like de Man, Derrida likes to analyse elements of a text for what they can reveal not only of their specific context, but more broadly the functioning of language and the characteristics of being. In this light, the *guillemets* do not only show Heidegger's duplicity, but more importantly our own, as any utterance is haunted by another discourse; metaphysics can be hidden, suppressed, excluded, but will always return. The quotation marks are a way of acknowledging its presence and work our way around it. 'Le mot « esprit » revient', writes Derrida, 'il n'est plus rejeté, évité, mais utilisé dans son sens déconstruit pour désigner quelque chose d'autre qui lui ressemble et dont il est comme le fantôme métaphysique, l'esprit d'un autre esprit'. Through the signs standing guard to the word *Geist*, through the ghostly surface of the term we can grasp a different meaning, 'l'esprit visible dans sa lettre, à peine lisible, devient comme la silhouette spectrale mais déjà lisible, elle, d'un autre'. This reading through the quotation marks and through the letters carries, however, an important

[39] Jacques Derrida, *De l'esprit. Heidegger et la question* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1987), p. 52.

consequence, that of recognising that the ghostly silhouette may be not just a characteristic of language; 'la spectralité', notes Derrida, 'ne serait pas plus un accident de l'esprit que du *Geist,* de la chose et du mot' (p. 45).

Caproni, as we have seen, is fully aware that the glass he is drinking from, the people he is talking to, the inn he is sitting is may be about to disappear; he is not so much concerned perhaps by the 'fantôme métaphysique', but he feels the nothingness eroding our everyday communication and reality. If he inscribes the collection as a whole within the notion of prosopopoeia, if he places it between quotation marks, it is because he wants to see through language and through our everyday life to catch a glimpse of what resists, what is left and what has gone. As we have seen, the quatrains are set in abstract scenarios, and the discourses of the lyric 'I' all denounce the inconsistency of names and places, the only way in which reality is admitted in the collection to be explored is when it is mentioned by the prosopopoeias. If Auerbach understands the relation between literature and reality in terms of mimesis, Caproni is more interested in scrutinising what they have in common. Not only does reality return, but it comes back intact, surrounded by the quotation marks and not hidden under a cross, as Heidegger would suggest writing *Sein*. Caproni through the prosopopoeia looks at the issue of everyday discourses and settings as a whole, as a structural problem. 'Sono tutti personaggi', he declares in an interview, 'che apparentemente non credono più a nulla se non alla morte, ma che nel profondo riescono invece a conservare, nel caos, una loro unità e dignità di uomini, sia pure unicamente e paradossalmente basata sul puro e semplice dovere di vivere'.[40] The paradoxical unity and dignity among those who despair, the erosion of the nothingness, the failure of language are what these characters try to convey by annoyingly addressing us in a train carriage, an inn, or while we hike.

[40] Giorgio Caproni, 'Due domande a Giorgio Caproni', in *Il mondo ha bisogno dei poeti*, pp. 61-62 (p. 62).

3. Reaching out

3.1 Courtesy, dialogue and death

If it may seem weird that someone starts exposing what they have ultimately learnt in their life without been asked, it is even more difficult to justify the fact that one does so by addressing an absent audience. In 'Antropologia poetica?' Nencioni is amused to notice that talking to someone who is not there is so unacceptable that scholars are eager to demonstrate that 'il monologo del vecchio teatro è in realtà un dialogo del personaggio sdoppiato o una indiretta allocuzione al pubblico degli spettatori'.[41] But it is not just critics who cannot conceive of an address to absent ones, the linguistic norm does not allow us to start a conversation if nobody else is there, for a message to be sent needs both the sender and the receiver; 'il vero colloquio *in absentia*, così frequente e così (possiamo dirlo) naturale nella poesia moderna', Nencioni writes, 'sarebbe assurdo nella realtà quotidiana appunto perché non è un atto di comunicazione previsto dal sistema della lingua parlata, non è un atto costitutivo dei rapporto sociale' (p. 170). He states, however, that there are cases in which talking to those who are absent is considered admissible, 'in situazioni non fittizie, cioè non poetiche, ma reali, sociali', he specifies, and mentions 'il congedo rituale od oratorio dal cadavere presente, la lamentazione, quelle iscrizioni sepolcrali in cui si attarda l'uso dell'*alloqui cinerem*, e la preghiera pubblica e privata'. Talking about the dead is forbidden in social contexts, as Della Casa reminds us in the *Galateo*, 'né a festa, né a tavola si raccontino historie maninconose; né di piaghe né di malattie né di morti o di pestilenze né di altra dolorosa materia si faccia mentione o ricordo' and adds that 'anzi se altri in sì fatte rammemorationi fosse caduto, si dee per acconcio modo et dolce scambiargli quella materia, et mettergli per

[41] Giovanni Nencioni, 'Antropologia poetica?', in *Tra grammatica e retorica. Da Dante a Pirandello* (Turin: Einaudi, 1983), pp. 161-175 (p. 171). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

le mani più lieta et più convenevole thema'.[42] Talking to the dead, instead, is sometimes acceptable and it is in these occasions that, according to Nencioni, the poetic discourse finds its origin. 'Le forme del codice poetico', he states, 'sono tutte riconducibili a remote forme di comunicazione sociale' (p. 174). Poetry, therefore, should not be considered something totally divorced from our lives, needs, and modes of expressions, but rather as a form that is still able to fulfil archaic functions which have become otherwise socially unacceptable.

Caproni, in a way, agrees with Nencioni, and explores the relationship between poetry and everyday forms of communication for what they tell us about our need to talk to the absent ones, although not in the form of a poetic anthropology, but rather through the figure of prosopopoeia. As we have seen, this trope too addresses the dead in order to talk about what we are not allowed to discuss while eating or celebrating something, and in doing so it questions the boundaries and the structures we rely on to make sense of our life. As de Man, puts it, a 'latent threat' seems to inhabit prosopopoeia, 'namely that by making the dead speak, the symmetrical structure of the trope implies, by the same token, that the living are stuck dumb, frozen in their own death'.[43] This unsettling aspect of the figure is further underlined in the *Congedo* by the fact that it is associated with the gesture of the farewell to a silent audience, which, as Nencioni points out, is the way in which we talk to the absent ones. However, these texts, I believe, do not ask us to redraw boundaries by establishing whether the dead are the protagonists of these poems or the people they talk to, but rather to consider the unsettled nature of any confines; death is the paradoxical coexistence of presence and absence, Caproni tells as, and as such is the funding element of any communication and community. All the elements the *Congedo* touches upon, the spoken-written, the ceremonious style, the monologue, the farewell, are explored through the bracketing that the figure of prosopopoeia implies in order to analyse how they navigate the undecidable space between

[42] Giovanni della Casa, *Galateo*, ed. by Gennaro Barbarisi (Venice: Marsilio, 1999), p. 61.
[43] Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement', p. 78.

disappearance and persistence, nothingness and being, the self and the other. These issues are scrutinised by the poet also in the following collections, but from a different perspective; for example, in *Il muro della terra*, a poem entitled 'Condizione' describes a situation we are familiar with by now;

> Un uomo solo,
> chiuso nella sua stanza.
> Con tutte le sue ragioni.
> Tutti i suoi torti.
> Solo in una stanza vuota,
> a parlare. Ai morti. (p. 303)

However, this condition that could be considered the same in which the gamekeeper, the priest, the guide and the traveller find themselves is described here rather than explored, analysed from the outside rather than the inside. In *Il Conte di Kevenhüller*, the poet meets the dead returning from the beyond, but we do not get to hear their discourses, we are left with the description of their contradictory nature:

> Apparivano tutti
> in trasparenza.
> Tutti
> in anima.
> Tutti
> Nell'imprendibile essenza
> dell'ombra.
>
> Ma vivi.
>
> Vivi dentro la morte
> come i morti son vivi
> nella vita. (p. 601)

These 'rapidi raccourcis e movienti ellittici' (p. 1027), as Calvino defines them, characterise also the quatrains of the *Congedo* and similarly investigate the slipping of the physical into the metaphysical and the condition of the generic man. The prosopopoeias, instead, scrutinise the intertwining of presence and absence in everyday settings, through the discourses of specific characters. If we feel more involved in these scenes, however, it is not just because they are familiar but also due to the functioning of dialogue itself. Caproni is particularly interested in the capacity of language to create shared structures and explores it by writing

down speeches that follow the intonation of spoken language. Indeed, as Benveniste points out, while speaking we institute a 'you' we talk to, determine the 'now', the present time of our utterances, and point to the 'here', the specific context that shapes our ideas and words.[44] The protagonists of these poems, therefore, interact with the space surrounding them, pointing to the world, instead of describing it, 'qui dove siamo giunti', 'qui sul pianoro' (p. 247), 'qui sono le carte', 'è lì a quel chiodo' (p. 250), 'ne parleremo insieme, / qui al mio rientro' (p. 252). The prosopopoeias keep going back to the objects and the space around them, and these references structure their discourses as well as the poems. 'Porgetemi per cortesia, / è lì a quel chiodo, il fucile / ed il mio cartucciere' (p. 250) asks the gamekeeper; after a while he reiterates his request, 'vi ripeto: il fucile!', and, later, adds 'porgetemi anche le cartucce' (p. 251). However, the spoken-written nature of these speeches questions the capacity of language to actually institute anything. If the gamekeeper has to insist on his demand, it is because this cannot be satisfied, the more he asks us to grab something the more we turn around and see that there is nothing to reach. Once more, it is when an expression seems to be more direct and unequivocal that we can see the cracks on the surface of language. Halfway through the poem, the gamekeeper warns his friends about the stove:

> Traetene la conclusione
> che più v'aggrada. Io …
> Non so se voi crediate in Dio,
> o altro. Per conto mio
> – occhio! La stufa fuma
> e può annerirvi la piuma
> annerendo la stanza –
> tutto ciò ha un'importanza
> relativa (p. 252).

The discourse continues after the interruption without any hesitations, the warning has not affected the tone or the syntax, as if it never actually occurred. A whole stanza of the 'Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso' is dedicated to the traveller moving his suitcase:

[44] Émile Benveniste, 'De la subjectivité dans le langage', in *Problèmes de linguistique générale I*, pp. 258-266.

(Scusate. È una valigia pesante
anche se non contiene un gran che:
tanto ch'io mi domando perché
l'ho recata, e quale
aiuto mi potrà dare
poi, quando l'avrò con me.
Ma pur la debbo portare,
non fosse che per seguire l'uso.
Lasciatemi, vi prego, passare.
Ecco. Ora ch'essa è
nel corridoio, mi sento
più sciolto. Vogliate scusare) (p. 244)

The following stanza begins with the traveller trying to find the thread of his discourse, 'dicevo', he states, but he never stopped speaking; everything in these poems, we are told, happens within language.

The same ambiguity characterises also the relationship between the prosopopoeias and their audience. The speakers are very confident in their knowledge and wisdom, 'so bene che', 'so anche che' (p. 254), 'sicuri segni mi dicono', 'sento / però che', (p. 243), 'amici, posso anche sbagliare / ma questo, comunque, vi dico' (p. 251); at the same time, however, they seem to depend on their audience, on their understanding, 'ma, amici, non mi fraintendete' (p. 255), 'vi prego, non mi deridete' (p. 257), 'credetemi' (p. 243); they ask for their permission, 'lasciatemi, vi prego, passare' (p. 244), 'lasciatemi perciò uscire' (p. 253), 'lasciate ch'io mi versi ancora' (p. 250), 'lasciatemi' (p. 254), 'chiedo congedo a voi' (p. 244); they keep apologising, 'vogliatemi perdonare' (p. 243), ' vogliate scusare' (p. 244), 'scusate' (p. 243), 'ma io, / scusate, non mi so spiegare / troppo bene' (p. 255). Despite the silence surrounding them, the protagonists of these poems are sure that somebody is there, and they adjust their speeches and attitudes accordingly. The traveller of 'Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso', for example, addresses his ceremonious discourse to the passengers of the train coach, nominating each of them individually, 'congedo a lei, dottore', 'congedo a te, ragazzina', 'congedo, o militare / (o marinaio!', 'ed anche a lei, sacerdote, / congedo') (p. 245). The people willing to reach the summit of the mountain are courteously encouraged to rest, in a sort of classical invitation to *medietas,* but also warned about the dangers of vanity, 'alziamo

perciò il bicchiere, / tranquilli, e brindiamo. / Ma attenti! non ne traiamo / vanto' (p. 247). In 'Il fischio', the gamekeeper gives instructions, 'finite / voi la partita', orders, 'vi ripeto: il fucile!', with little sympathy for the anxious expressions of his friends, 'vi vedo, o m'inganno, tremare / agli angoli, la bocca?' (pp. 250-51). In 'Lamento (o boria) del preticello deriso' the priest finds himself in an unknown setting, facing an unspecified audience that, however, seems to be particularly hostile and challenging; 'che pretendente / da me – che ne sapete', he states and adds 'non fatemi interrogazioni / spavalde. Non mi deridete', 'lasciatemi. Che mai volete / da me' (p. 254). Once more, however, we have to trust the words of these characters that somebody is actually there with them, as we only get to read their monologues.

Talking to a different kind of silent audience, Derrida acknowledges the absence of his dear friend, Paul de Man, 'ce soir nous pouvons à peine ce que pourtant nous pouvons — et devons. Non sans mal. Nous parlons et nous pensons ici pour Paul de Man, avec Paul de Man. Mais sans lui'.[45] It is the spring of 1984 when Derrida gives a series of lectures at Yale, dedicated to the scholar who recently died, addressing precisely that, the discourse about those we have lost, about death, memory and legacy. Derrida can hardly believe that he is talking in memory of Paul de Man, something that on the one hand implies that the scholar is not there anymore, and on the other, testifies that he is still present in the recollections and in the words of his friends. We never really believe, argues Derrida, in either death or immortality, and it is the undecidable space in between definitive disappearance and eternal existence that we have to navigate. Derrida recalls 'Autobiography as De-facement' and comments that the impossibility of closure that de Man describes in relation to prosopopoeia, in the case of mourning means that no exhaustive story can be told, no memory can be totally consumed; just as we are not able to conceive the total absence of death or the complete

[45] Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires pour Paul de Man* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1988), p. 26. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

presence of immortality, we cannot forget altogether about a friend as they were not related to us or remember all about them as they existed only in relation to us. If *deuil* is possible, and Derrida notices that when talking about true mourning de Man puts quotation marks around mourning and not true, it does not consist of appropriating somebody else's life to transform it in a function of ourselves, something that exists only within us, failing to acknowledge that the other will always eschew the limits of our narrative. But it does not lie either in an absolute respect of the alterity of those who are dead, at the point that we banish any recollections, ideas, thought of them, as they are unreachable when, instead, they will always be with us. 'Si la mort arrive à l'autre et nous arrive par l'autre, l'ami n'est plus *qu'en nous*, *entre nous*. En lui-même, par lui-même, de lui-même, il n'est plus, plus rien. Il ne vit qu'en nous', writes Derrida, underlining that nothing can save us from death, but that death does not necessarily mean that the friend cannot be found anywhere else; they are still in us, within us. The self, however, is not a stable or durable place, '*nous* ne sommes jamais *nous-mêmes*, et entre nous, identiques à nous, un « moi » n'est jamais en lui-même, identique à lui-même', he notices and adds, 'cette réflexion spéculaire ne se ferme jamais sur elle-même, elle n'apparaît pas *avant* cette *possibilité* du deuil, avant et hors de cette structure d'allégorie et de prosopopée qui constitue d'avance tout « être-en-nous », « en-moi », entre nous ou entre soi'. Prosopopoeia is the figure of the trace of the other in us, of the other's irreducible presence, their being in us, between us. This trace is left by our friend before their death, because once we recognise that we are mortal, that friendship and finitude are intertwined, we realise that our relationship to the other constantly carries 'une signature de *mémoires d'outre-tombe*' (p. 49). Prosopopoeia is the trope of this signature, of the other talking in us, before us but at the same time is the figure of our own address to the dead, and, indeed, Derrida states that what he is doing in his series of lectures is precisely a prosopopoeia, 'dans le mouvement de ce trope, nous nous tournons vers lui, nous nous adressons à lui qui s'adresse à nous, et le

mouvement d'amour ne compte pas moins que son arrivée — ou non — à destination, à la bonne adresse' (pp. 47-48).

In the *Congedo* too the focus is not on the outcome of our addressing the other and the reality surrounding us but on its very attempt, as Caproni is aware that the nothingness always overcomes what exists. 'Non fidatevi', Calvino warns us, 'di ciò che si presenta come emblema d'un elementare attaccamento alla vita, ciò che è, è poca cosa mentre il resto (il tutto, o quasi) è ciò che non è, che non è mai stato, che non sarà mai' (p. 1023). In an interview, the poet claims that 'il bozzetto e le scene popolari non mi hanno mai interessato letterariamente. I gesti e le parole della gente sì'.[46] However, he consciously distances himself from the techniques of Italian Neorealism,[47] as for him what should be portraited in poetry is both the gestures and discourses that fill our days and the nothingness that streams from our common speeches, from our everyday little experiences. Through the words, the characters point to subjects, entities, places but these ultimately remain sounds; desperately trying to reach something, gesture becomes a 'gesticolazione sonora', [48] as Raboni points out. Once written down, our experiences reveal the little they consist of: an exclamation, the act of moving the suitcase, the attempt of reaching the rifle, of addressing our audience. They cannot compensate for the vastness of what is not there, never was or ever will; they are not ultimately reassuring but they are familiar, even proving themselves particularly dear when we realise that it is all that we have. Along with cruel and merciless findings, there is also beauty, tenderness in the attempts to speak, to reach out.

The complexity of our relationship with the other as well as with reality is further underlined by the fact that these speeches are characterised by a ceremonious style. To be ceremonious means to take the longest way to come to an expression and this is particularly evident in the

[46] Giorgio Caproni, 'Molti dottori e nessun poeta nuovo', in *Il mondo ha bisogno dei poeti*, pp. 91-96 (p. 94).
[47] See Giorgio Caproni, *Era così bello parlare. Conversazioni radiofoniche con Giorgio Caproni* (Genoa: Il melangolo, 2004): 'Anzi non l'ho mai amato, non ho mai creduto al Neorealismo', p. 60.
[48] Giovanni Raboni, 'Caproni o dell'esilio', p. 137.

use of parenthetical clauses, 'conosco, / né posso esimermi, quello / ch'è il mio preciso dovere' (p. 250), ' in tutti noi non resta / – sola – che la certezza / già da tempo in me sorta' (p. 252); and anastrophes, 'senza potervi nascondere, / lieve, una costernazione' (p. 244). Not only is the completion of the sentence delayed, but the change in the word-order affects our understanding, focusing our attention on the dislocated elements. This longer way to expression is also made by indirectness, 'il mio occhio già vede / dal finestrino' (p. 243); prudence, 'amici, credo che sia / meglio per me cominciare / a tirar giù la valigia' (p. 243); circumspection, 'da quanto mi è giunto all'orecchio / di questi luoghi' (p. 243); modesty, 'quel po' di disturbo che reco' (p. 243); courtesy, 'porgetemi per cortesia' (p. 250); emphasis, 'ma voi, senza una ragione / al mondo, voi perché ora' (p. 250). Sometimes the characters are openly ironic, as in the case of the priest declaring 'tutti voi avete / – e vi ammiro – il piede / saldamente posato / sulle cose concrete' (p. 254); or when the traveller underlines that only courtesy prevented the people on the train to fully express their hate, depicting with a friendly tone the violence and aggressiveness that are concealed in social interactions:

> Abbiamo avuto qualche
> diverbio, è naturale.
> Ci siamo – ed è normale
> anche questo – odiati
> su più d'un punto, e frenati
> soltanto per cortesia.
> Ma cos'importa. Sia
> come sia, torno
> a dirvi, e di cuore, grazie
> per l'ottima compagnia. (pp. 244-45)

Along with spoken language, monologue, and death the ceremonious style is a further structure that deals with the vacuum that characterise our daily life and the little we can oppose to it. It shows how distance can be a source of safety, respect, frustration, rage; it underlines how taking the longest way to express something is the only way in which we can hope to communicate. Indeed, when we talk, we are always ceremonious, we inevitably utter monologues, our expressions are ultimately odd, however these are the tools at our disposal to try to reach the other.

Benveniste underlines that the personal pronouns 'I' and 'you' do not refer to a definitive concept or a specific individual, but are, instead, empty forms, filled in by the conversation. The person who speaks uses the first-person referring to themselves and institutes their addressee as 'you'; when the latter will have the possibility of replying, the roles would reverse. What de Man calls the symmetry of prosopopoeia, becomes in Benveniste's analysis of deictics, reciprocity; 'c'est cette condition de dialogue qui est constitutive de la *personne*', he writes, 'car elle implique en réciprocité que je deviens *tu* dans l'allocution de celui qui à son tour se désigne par *je*'.[49] In Caproni's poems, however, the exchange between 'I' and 'you' never occurs, as the speeches are written down and informed by a monological, ceremonious structure. Girardi sees in the address to the audience without getting any audible answer another gesture revealing an absence where we thought there was a presence; 'per tale assenza dell'Altro', he writes, 'il discorso cade come disperato monologare pronunciato nel vuoto'.[50] However if these discourses never reach their audience in the poems, they might communicate with the readers. Once more if we have to look for any reversibility in the conditions of the speaker and the audience, we have to look inside us, as we are at the same time the ones saying 'I' and those addressed. These poems ultimately ask us to consider the trace they left within us, their 'signature de *mémoires d'outre-tombe*', as Derrida puts it. However, we may wonder what is that the poetic form can specifically communicate, what it grasps of the little we can oppose to nothingness.

[49] Émile Benveniste, 'De la subjectivité dans le langage', p. 260.
[50] Antonio Girardi, 'Metri di Giorgio Caproni', in *Cinque storie stilistiche* (Genoa: Marietti, 1987), pp. 99-134 (p. 125).
[50] Pietro Citati, 'L'arte nevrastenica', p. 341.

3.2 The hoax of poetry

One of the ways in which poetry specifically explores the issues of ending, reaching the audience, and reflecting on the structure of language is the 'congedo' which breaks the fiction of a poem by addressing the text and asking it to reach the beloved. Traditionally, it is the last stanza of a 'canzone' or a 'ballata', and it is in this context that the feature is discussed by Giorgio Agamben. In 'La fine del poema', he takes the opposite path to that I explored in the previous chapter, stressing the importance of endings over beginnings. According to him, 'l'intima necessità di quegli istituti poetici, come la *tornada* o il congedo, che sembrano destinati unicamente a notificare e, quasi, a enunciare la fine del poema'[51] proves the fact that something important happens at the end of a poem and we should pay particular attention to it. Indeed, for Agamben, it is only in the last lines that the fundamental purpose of the poem emerges: 'che la lingua riesca a comunicare se stessa, senza restare non detta in ciò che dice'.[52] Possibly, it is because they realise that much of what language tries to communicate remains unsaid that certain poets feel the urge to extend the space of the 'congedo' to include the whole poem. 'Perch'i' no spero di tornar giammai' is a well-known example of a poem which entirely consists of the dialogue between a poet and their text. Cavalcanti urges the 'ballatetta' to bring its message to the beloved in an appeal which the approaching of death makes acutely dramatic; 'Tu senti, ballatetta, che la morte / mi stringe sì, che vita m'abbandona; / e senti come 'l cor si sbatte forte / per quel che ciascun spirito ragiona' (XXV, vv. 17-20). Since for Caproni, instead, death is a fundamental aspect of our condition, he handles the issue of what language can reach with a light touch. 'Con quanto garbo, con quanta comunicatività e leggerezza', Calvino underlines, 'egli ci apre davanti la vertigine dell'assenza!' (p. 1027). The ease with which he shows the inconsistency of the structures we

[51] Giorgio Agamben, 'La fine del poema', in *Categorie italiane* (Venice: Marsilio, 1996), pp. 115-119 (p. 116).
[52] Ibid., p. 119.

rely on may be connected to his in-depth awareness that poets should not be taken too seriously. 'Il grande tema della poesia come inganno', writes Mengalo, 'è tanto più pregnante in questo poeta perché la sua poesia mette in scena una realtà realissima' (p. XVIII). By listening to the speeches of the prosopopoeias, on the one hand, we find ourselves in a train carriage, inside an inn or outside on a plateau, but on the other, we are always aware that we inhabit the space of a poem. Caproni reproduces the modulation of spoken language and at the same time does everything he can to remind us that we are reading poetry, he employs regular line forms, organises the discourses in stanzas, places rhymes at the end of verses. These features do not only underline that we are dealing with poetry, but they represent further structures Caproni analyses looking for a residue of meaning. Rhyme, in particular, seems to carry a substantial structural function; 'se si usa la rima', declares the poet, 'deve avere la stessa funzione portante delle colonne che reggono l'architrave in architettura e che in musica hanno le consonanze e le dissonanze'. He often gives the example of *Inferno* I, in which the key elements of the canto are displayed at the line-ends: 'sinonimie, intanto (la via e la vita) che diventano sinonimi (vita, smarrita), la selva diventa sinonimo di paura, poi dura, oscura, e così via'.[53] In a similar way, the story of the priest can be summarised by the sequence *carriere* : *dovere* : *infrangere* : *piangere*, *lutti* : *frutti* : *tutti*, and the traveller's journey is contained in the string *nebbione* : *stazione* : *costernazione* : *religione* : *destinazione* : *disperazione*, while the set *bracconiere* : *bere* : *dovere* : *vedere* : *cartucciere* : *bicchiere* : *vedere* : *bere* : *sapere* further proves gamekeeper's point, that what he found at the bottom of the glass would not be disproved by any trip outside the inn. These words placed at the line-end play a crucial role in determining the meaning of the poems but the connections they established are of a specific kind. 'Amitié obscure de la rime', warns us Derrida, 'alliance, harmonie, assonance, consonance, appariement insensé d'un couple. Le sens naît d'une paire, une fois, aléatoire et

[53] Giorgio Caproni, 'Conversazione a Sanremo', in *Il mondo ha bisogno dei poeti*, pp. 321-324 (p. 322).

prédestinée'.[54] Rhyme takes a similarity of sound as an excuse to put two words one after the other, and yet manages to create a link between the two terms. This ambiguous friendship, for example, ties together *dico* and *nemico*, and we may wonder whether Caproni is reminding us that the ultimate danger that language singles out is our own expression, in a similar way in which Fortini suggests that among the names of our enemies we should write our own.[55] *Solo* has no friends as it rhymes only with itself, while other relationships are so tight that the same rhyme comes back in different texts; *Dio*, we discover, is always inevitably linked to *io*, and it is hard to say which entity is more controversial for Caproni. Along with its structural function, this capacity of rhyme to explore paradoxes makes this feature precious for a poet interested in portraying the contradictory nature of our existence and, here in particular, the ambiguous intertwining of spoken and poetic language. Indeed, if rhymes on the one hand can be considered the epitome of poetry, on the other Caproni often uses the so-called 'rime facili', built using desinences and suffixes, something that Dante would have regarded as cheating.[56] As the long strings quoted above also show, verbs often rhyme thanks to their conjugation (*brindiamo* : *traiamo* : *conosciamo* : *dimentichiamo* : *abbiamo* : *sappiamo*), and nouns and adjectives because they are formed through suffixes (*sessuale* : *intestinale* : *viscerale* : *portuale* : *mortale*; *saggezza* : *stoltezza* : *altezza* : *debolezza* : *certezza* : *sicurezza*). Due to their 'ease', these rhymes do not abruptly interrupt the speeches of these characters, nor do they complicate their utterances as Montale likes to do, placing 'qualche storta sillaba e secca come un ramo'[57] at the line-end. However, the intense use of desinences (*-are*, *-ere*, *-ire* etc.) creates assonances and consonances among different sets of rhyme forcing the discourse of the prosopopoeias

[54] Jacques Derrida, *Politiques de l'amitié; suivi de L'oreille de Heidegger* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1994), p. 192. See on this Clare Connors, 'Derrida and the Friendship of Rhyme', 33: 2 (2011), pp. 139-149.
[55] See Franco Fortini, 'Traducendo Brecht', *Tutte le poesie*, ed. by Luca Lenzini (Milan: Mondadori, 2014), p. 238.
[56] When in the *De vulgari eloquentia*, Dante bewares the readers of when using rhyme he states 'tria ergo sunt que circa rithimorum positionem potiri dedecet aulice poetantem: nimia scilicet eiusdem rithimi repercussio' ['there are, then, three ways of placing rhymes that are inappropriate for a poet in the high style: one is hammering on the same rhyme']; Dante Alighieri, *De vulgari eloquentia*, ed. and trans. by Steven Botterill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), II, 13, pp. 86-87.
[57] Eugenio Montale, 'Non chiederci la parola', *L'opera in versi*, p. 23.

to keep going back, every seven to twelve syllables, to the same sounds. If on the one hand the 'rime facili' make the discourse flow more smoothly, on the other, their frequency gives the impression of an obsessive repetition, of a counter discourse within the speeches of the characters, 'un discorso autonomo', as Girardi puts it, 'anche se parallelo, rispetto al discorso enunciato nelle sequenze sintattiche'.[58] This other discourse created by the reiteration of identical or very similar sounds further fosters our awareness that we are not hearing the discourses of the individuals we may find in the *Commedia*, but rather of the people with delightful smiles on their face and an appearance of fortitude and composure described by Citati.[59]

The use of short lines, the abundance of 'rime facili', the metrical form alluding to the *canzonetta* characterise also *Il seme del piangere*, and in particular the section entitled 'Versi livornesi'. In these poems, Caproni tries to capture the youth of his mother, depicting her walking along the streets of Livorno, cross stitching, cycling, getting married. 'Per lei voglio rime chiare, / usuali: in -are', he writes, 'rime che a distanza / (Annina era cosí schietta) / conservino l'eleganza / povera, ma altrettanto netta. / Rime che non siano labili, / anche se orecchiabili' (p. 201). The poet seems to believe here in the possibility for rhyme to create solid connections between words and through these to express some of the qualities of Annina; despite sounding easy, simple, these rhymes are not fleeting, they work through the distance, just as the poet does by portraying something he never witnessed himself, the life of his mother before he was born. In another text, he addresses his hand typing the poem on a typewriter, 'mia mano, fatti piuma / fatti vela' he says and adds, 'e bada, prima / di fermare la rima / che stai scrivendo d'una / che fu viva e fu vera' (p. 194). The reality, the true existence of Anna Picchi is something the poetic tools should be aware of and respect by not stopping until some features of the dead mother are transferred onto the page.

[58] Antonio Girardi, 'Metri di Giorgio Caproni', p. 126.
[59] Pietro Citati, 'L'arte nevrastenica', p. 341.

However, the frequency with which the poet reiterates that rhyme has this ability to evoke life casts doubt on the strength of his belief; 'se infatti quest'identità fosse concessa pacificamente', writes Girardi, 'non sarebbe necessario invocarla e perseguirla con tanto accanimento'.[60] Furthermore, as Calvino points out about Cavalcanti's prosopopoeia of his writing tools, by electing instruments and gestures of their own activity as the subject of the artwork, poets remind us that what they are ultimately doing is nothing but writing.[61]

The *Congedo* is much more sceptical not only of what language can express, but also of the existence of 'una / che fu viva e fu vera'. The shift from the autobiographical material to the notion of *mézigues* and the fact that the voice of the narrator has been replaced by that of the characters mark the distance from the collection, but so does also the use of rhyme. 'Ho usato la rima quasi per estrema disperazione', Caproni states, 'era un afferrarsi sapendo che uno si afferra al niente'.[62] Indeed, in the *Congedo* the long strings of almost identical word-endings only occasionally let us stop on specific terms, or make us aware that a verse has ended and another one has started; sometimes, it is even difficult for us to separate the various discourses of the prosopopoeia. Along with friendships created by semantics, an increasing number of relationships seem to be kept together only by grammar. Despite its lightness and musicality, the structural use of rhymes may be considered another example of an attempt to hold onto something, revealing instead a lack of points of references. The poet is extremely aware that poetry offers no solutions, but nor do our everyday discourses. Connecting words is a gesture similar to that of reaching for something on the table or addressing somebody next to us. Rhyme represents an attempt to establish relations between words, but has to face the slippery nature of reality. Ramat reads in Caproni's poetry a 'febbrilità, infine disperata, nel cercar di bloccare, per mezzo del rapporto di rima (o di

[60] Antonio Girardi, 'Metri di Giorgio Caproni', pp. 122-23.
[61] See Italo Calvino, 'La penna in prima persona (Per i disegni di Saul Steinberg)', in *Saggi 1945-1985*, I, pp. 361-370.
[62] Giorgio Caproni, 'In via Pio Foà con candore e sgomento', in *Il mondo ha bisogno dei poeti*, pp. 206-210 (p. 207).

assonanza) la trama di un reale che tragicamente gli si dissolve al tatto, alla pronuncia'.[63] In the second volume of *Capitalisme et schizophrénie*, in a chapter dedicated to 'la ritournelle', Deleuze and Guattari present 'un enfant dans le noir, saisi par la peur, [qui] se rassure en chantonnant'; suddenly we are 'chez soi', a space that was created by drawing a circle around a fragile and uncertain centre, 'voilà que les forces du chaos sont tenues à l'extérieur autant qu'il est possible', is their comment, 'et l'espace intérieur protège les forces germinatives d'une tâche à remplir, d'une œuvre à faire'; and now the circle is open, 'pas […] du côté où se pressent les anciennes forces du chaos, mais dans une autre région, créée par le cercle lui-même', [64] the region of the future and of the cosmic forces. According to Deleuze and Guattari, these are not three subsequent movements but rather the aspects that simultaneously constitute the refrain; 'tantôt, tantôt, tantôt', they write, 'tantôt, le chaos est un immense trou noir, et l'on s'efforce d'y fixer un point fragile comme centre. Tantôt l'on organise autour du point une « allure » (plutôt qu'une forme) calme et stable : le trou noir est devenu un chez-soi. Tantôt on greffe une échappée sur cette allure, hors du trou noir'.[65] Caproni agrees that we sing and speak to reassure ourselves that we actually exist, that we are still there despite being surrounded by the forces of chaos; he is also fully aware that the calm and stability we create are built around a fragile centre. We can make ourselves at ease in this black hole, exchange polite observations, give the impression of strong integrity, and this is precisely what the poet sets out to analyse in this collection. However, his exploration of the paradoxical status of poetry as well as everyday utterances, of language as well as reality does not contemplate the possibility of moving on, of opening the circle, thanks to this allure of calm and stability. The traveller does not get out the train, the gamekeeper does not exit the inn, the guide never leaves the plateau; rhyme creates space and musicality but leaves us

[63] Silvio Ramat, 'Poeta della rima', *Per Giorgio Caproni*, ed. by Giorgio Devoto and Stefano Verdino (Genoa: Edizioni di San Marco dei Giustiniani, 1997), pp. 145-153 (p. 150).
[64] Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie. 2 Mille plateaux* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980), p. 295.
[65] Ibid., p. 296.

enclosed in obsessive repetition. 'La stasi è anche il movimento', comments Sereni, 'o il movimento illusorio che si produce nella stasi'. What is true for the movement of poetry is also valid for the motion of life, or as Sereni puts it, 'questo andirivieni tra vuoto accertato e sussulti di illusioni è la vita, è l'esistenza, e ne costituisce il diagramma: si misura col nulla e al tempo stesso dà al nulla una faccia e una voce che lo contraddica'.[66] This is the dimension we cannot eschew nor cease to explore, and it ultimately represent what life and poetry have in common. Indeed, as Mengaldo points out, the intertwining of life and death is not a cerebral, abstract hypothesis but the reality of our life, 'l'aggrovigliato e tragico regno degli opposti, che è quello del sogno ma anche quello della morte', he states, 'dove le contraddizioni non si risolvono ma si rigenerano per tornare a convivere, non è come potrebbe sembrare, la mente ma l'esistenza nella quale viviamo' (p. XLIV).

4. The literal path

In attempting to persuade his students that Kafka's short stories are funny, David Foster Wallace suggests reading them literally; 'the claim is that Kafka's funniness depends on some kind of radical literalization of truths we tend to treat as metaphorical. I opine to them that some of our deepest and most profound collective intuitions seem to be expressible only as figures of speech, that that's why we call these figures of speech *expressions*'. The suggestion, we are told, works, the students end up engaged, they consider, with respect to 'Die Verwandlung', what we mean when we call somebody 'creepy' or 'gross', or approach 'Ein Hungerkünstler' in terms of 'tropes like *starved for attention* or *love-starved* or the double entendre in the term *self-denial*'.[67] As is often the case with such tricks, teachers feel a deep sense of guilt as they know that, because of them, important aspects are being missed out, while the

[66] Vittorio Sereni, 'Giorgio Caproni', in *Genova a Giorgio Caproni*, ed. by Giorgio Devoto and Stefano Verdino (Genoa: Edizioni di San Marco dei Giustiniani, 1982), pp. 267-270 (p. 269).
[67] David Foster Wallace, 'Some remarks on Kafka's funniness from which probably not enough have been removed', in *Consider the lobster. And other essays* (London: Abacus, 2007), pp. 60-65 (p. 63). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

students are convinced by their reading of the texts. Wallace tries to backpedal, underlining that Kafka's short stories are not jokes, that comedy entails also tragedy, joy is intertwined with desperation, but the result of this attempt is uncertain. The problem of the misunderstanding of Kafka lies for him in the fact that children are trained 'to see jokes as entertainment and entertainment as reassurance', whereas instead Kafka's central joke tells us 'that our endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home' (p. 64). His art is like a door which we keep pounding, 'not just wanting admission but needing it, we don't know what it is but we can feel it, this total desperation to enter, pounding and pushing and kicking, etc.', and when the door finally opens 'it opens outward: we've been inside what we wanted all along'; '*das ist komisch*', he concludes (p. 65).

Caproni's poems are not funny, but they share with Kafka's short stories the belief that life is an endless farewell, that we are constantly about to leave but that there seems to be no other place to go. Furthermore, the *Congedo* shares Wallace pedagogical strategy of taking literally specific features of language. The figure of prosopopoeia, as we have seen, placed at the beginning of the collection invites us to closely scrutinise the hypothesis that language and death can be intimately related. Analysing the 'radical literalization of truths', as Wallace calls them, however, seems to produce a sense of anxiety not only in the teachers who realise how much of a literary text they are not able to convey to students, but in anybody becoming aware of the tight structures of both language and existence. 'Ich stehe auf der Plattform des elektrischen Wagens und bin vollständig unsicher in Rücksicht meiner Stellung in dieser Welt, in dieser Stadt, in meiner Familie' [I stand on the tram's platform and I am completely insecure about my position in this world, in this city, in my family], realises the protagonist of Kafka's short story, 'Der Fahrgast', and adds 'Ich kann es gar nicht verteidigen, daß ich auf dieser Plattform stehe, mich an dieser Schlinge halte, von diesem Wagen mich tragen

lasse, daß Leute dem Wagen ausweichen oder still gehn, oder vor den Schaufenstern ruhn'[68] [I cannot defend the fact that I stand on this platform, that I hold on to this loop, that I let myself be carried by this carriage, that people avoid the wagon or walk quietly, or rest in front of the shop windows]. As in the case of the speeches we read in the *Congedo*, we do not know why this passenger is telling us this, and, indeed, he even acknowledges that he was never asked about it, 'Niemand verlangt es ja von mir, aber das ist gleichgültig' [No one asks me to do so, but it does not matter]. It is irrelevant because the literal writer investigates precisely the obvious, and invites us to take the inspection very seriously. The literal path goes in between the discovery that we are not going anywhere and the necessity of moving, the awareness that we cannot justify why we do what we do and the urge to keep going. No solution can be offered to the contradictory nature of our experience, only the rigorous observation of its movement, between hope and despair, nothingness and a sign that something is still there. 'Les choses restent énigmatiques et pourtant non arbitraire : bref, une nouvelle logique, pleinement une logique, mais qui ne conduise pas à la raison, et saisisse intimité de la vie et de la mort',[69] as Deleuze writes about a strand of literature that includes Kleist, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Beckett, and Melville; and commenting on Bartleby, he adds that he is not 'une métaphore de l'écrivain, ni le symbole de quoi que ce soit', 'il ne veut dire que ce qu'il dit littéralement' (p. 161). Not only those taking the literal path look for a different kind of logic, able to conceive contradictions and movements that do bring us much further, but they also do not scrutinise the self through the lens of psychology. Indeed, we do not know much about the scrivener, 'no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography',[70] we are told, we can only try to decipher his 'formule', as Deleuze calls it. The prosopopoeias, as we have seen, are types rather than individuals, they are indicated by their function rather

[68] Franz Kafka, 'Der Fahrgast', in *Die Erzählungen* (New York: S. Fischer, 2011), p. 23.
[69] Gilles Deleuze, 'Bartleby, ou la formule', in Herman Melville, *Bartleby. Les îles enchantées. Le campanile* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012), pp. 161-190 (p. 179). Further references are given after quotations in the text.
[70] Hermann Melville, 'Bartleby the Scrivener. A Story of Wall Street', *Selected writings of Hermann Melville* (New York: Random House, 1952), pp. 3-47 (p. 3).

than a proper name and the typical character depicted by Kafka, as Marthe Robert underlines, 'n'est pas fait non plus pour intéresser, il ne se distingue ni par un caractère attachant, ni par une psychologie subtile, ni par l'art de faire vivre passions et idées'.[71]

The sense of oppression that these literal readings may induce is also linked to the fact that for all that truth they make us aware of – that life and death are intertwined, that existence consists of contradiction, that we are types along with individuals – they fail to address other important aspects. It is not just the teacher that leaves out fundamental aspects of a literary work, we all ignore some elements in order to gain knowledge. However, what we missed out may not just be what we do not explore, investigate, interrogate but the very objects of our analysis, even when we look at them very closely. In scrutinising the figure of the 'Gehilfen' in Kafka's and Benjamin's works, Agamben underlines that these ambiguous characters seem there to help but do not show any specific skill nor they offer any particularly useful insights through their enigmatic speeches. If these helpers are not able to suggest any practical solutions within the storyline, they can, however, reveal us something about what gets lost. 'In ogni istante, la misura di oblio e di rovina, lo scialo ontologico che portiamo in noi stessi eccede di gran lunga la pietà dei nostri ricordi e della nostra coscienza', he states. However, what is forgotten 'non è inerte né inefficace', but, like these characters, it accompanies us everywhere we go and keeps addressing us. 'Ciò che il perduto esige', he explains, 'non è di essere ricordato o esaudito, ma di restare in noi in quanto dimenticato, in quanto perduto e, unicamente per questo, indimenticabile'.[72] Caproni, as we have seen, aims at depicting the intimate relationship that our everyday discourses entails with the 'nulla', pointing out the little we can grasp through the structure we rely on to make sense of our life, the vast absence surrounding any trace of presence. However, these discourses are suspicious, not only because, as we have seen, they are delivered by prosopopoeias addressing

[71] Marthe Robert, *Seul, comme Franz Kafka* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1979), p. 17.
[72] Giorgio Agamben, 'Gli aiutanti', in *Profanazioni* (Rome: Nottetempo, 2005), pp. 31-38 (p. 38).

an absent audience, but also because of their clarity and calm to the point that Calvino questions the fact that they were actually uttered; 'più che la parlantina d'un uomo verboso', he writes about the traveller, 'somiglia al monologo interiore d'un silenzioso che sogna di parlare con gli altri come mai gli è riuscito in realtà' (p. 1027). If Dante asks us to believe in his ultramundane journey or, as Singleton states, 'the fiction of the *Divine Comedy* is that it is not a fiction',[73] Caproni asks us to imagine that we talk exhaustively of the fact that we keep failing to grasp the reality in front of us. The fiction is not so much to imagine that the dead could speak but rather that their discourses would fully express what they have ultimately learnt in their life, how to deal with the little that resists the nothingness. Agamben states that through the 'congedo' language tries to communicate itself without remaining unsaid, but Caproni shows us that if nothing remains unsaid there is no communication. The dead will speak, Sereni assures us at the end of *Gli strumenti umani*, but not even their discourses will be exhaustive, Caproni tells us in the *Congedo*; the problem of acknowledging what remains unexpressed cannot be solved once for all, but is an everyday duty that literature may possibly help us navigate.

[73] Charles S. Singleton, *'Commedia'. Elements of Stucture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), p. 62. On the issue of the fiction of the *Commedia* see Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

IV. Afterword

Finished *Antigone*, married Bishop.
Anne Carson[1]

Afterthought, we have seen at the beginning of this work, is a more neutral term compared to 'ripensamento' or 'après-coup', but the journey we have undertaken through the work of Sereni and Caproni has shown us that it entails both positive and negative connotations. When we look back, indeed, the only solid knowledge we can discern is that of the negativity of our condition, the fact that when we thought we were progressing we were instead going around in circles, when we believed we understood something we were mistaken, when it seemed to us we were saying everything, we were actually silent. And yet, the very movement of looking back implies that these undisputable beliefs leave us unsatisfied, that we aim also at forms of knowledge that are more ambiguous and uncertain but could possibly carry some sort of hope.

Only at the end of a collection in which he has scrutinised his own experiences and expectations, Sereni conceives the relationship between the past and the future in terms of open possibilities by allowing a certain degree of autonomy to elements outside his consciousness. The 'toppe d'inesistenza, calce o cenere / pronte a farsi movimento e luce' are a fragile source of hope as they present the fact that what is wasted, lost, forgotten is still right next to us as positive, while in the rest of the collection it appeared to be a source of frustration. Sereni is fully aware of the complexity of the process of knowing something and every time he tries to find a unifying key that would make sense of all aspects of an experience he discovers himself to be deceived, either because the key does not open all the doors, or it

[1] Anne Carson, 'Short Talk on Afterwords', *Short talks* (London, Ont.: Brick Books, 2005), p. 75.

is a mere tautology. The task of following the ramification of an occurrence is for him extremely painful as it results in many years in which he waits to understand and to write.

Caproni, instead, never aims at a full understanding, as for him there are only little elements that resist the pressure of nothingness. The structures we rely on to make sense of our life are completely empty, and only by carefully scrutinising them we can hope to encounter a residue of meaning, a word that can be communicated, a connection that can be drawn, a relationship that can be established. These findings are elaborate and provisional, while the awareness of the inconsistency of reality is straightforward and certain. And yet knowing that an obsolete construction might possibly work again, that what is silent might eventually speak, does not solve the issue that it is a never-ending process whose outcome will never be exhaustive communication.

As I glue the last piece, the vessel suddenly breaks, and I have to start over again to combine fragments to create another provisional whole that could address what has remained unexpressed in my analysis of these poems and the issues they raise. Looking back at these collections, other meanings emerge, all incomplete. The difficult and promising task of the critic-reader lies in this, in fact that, as Barthes puts it, 'quoi qu'on dise de l'œuvre, il y reste toujours, *comme à son premier moment*, du langage, du sujet, de l'absence'.[2]

[2] Roland Barthes, *Critique et Vérité* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966), p. 78.

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