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Introduction: The Great War and the Modernist Imagination in Italy¹

Since the publication of Eric Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes* in 1994, it has become commonplace to speak of a "short twentieth century" — the "secolo breve," to use the Italian expression that became the title of the 1995 Rizzoli translation of Hobsbawm's book. This expression explicitly recognizes the ruptural and age-defining impact of the First World War. In fact, in this reading of modern European history, which has by now become common, the Great War marks the beginning of a period of often violent transformation that closed (at least in Hobsbawm's account) with the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the first Gulf War. Cultural historians have also remarked on the transformative effect of the war on everyday life, as the subtitle of Modris Eksteins's *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (1989), reminds us. As Eksteins remarks, values such as speed, newness, inwardness or transience precede the war; indeed, these values were also some of the keywords of pre-war European Modernism. And yet, in order for them to take hold beyond the confines of intellectual circles and artistic debates, "an entire scale of values and beliefs had to yield pride of place, and the Great War was [...] the single most significant event in that development" (Eksteins xiv). More recently, Antonio Gibelli has made a similar argument specifically for Italy, describing the war as "an accelerated and violent course in modernity" (10) that transformed the relationship between individuals and state, produced and expanded new technologies and new forms of social organization, blurred the boundaries between natural and artificial, and revolutionized the perception of space and time.² Eksteins and Gibelli provide the two poles within which the essays of this volume move: on the one hand, they aim to investigate the transformative impact of the war on all aspects of cultural life; on the other, they remain rooted in the specificities and particularities of Italy.

Following the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71, the forty-odd years of general peace in Europe — interrupted now and then by the flare-up of conflicts on its Balkan fringes or on its imperial edges, as in the case of the Italo-Turkish War of 1911-12 — may have lured its populations into a false sense of security

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² Unless otherwise noted, all translations are ours.

that made the outbreak of the Great War all the more shocking. However, the specter of war had never disappeared from the European scene. Indeed, on the eve of the armed conflict, the discourse of the artistic and literary avant-garde was thoroughly steeped in the rhetoric of war and had been so for quite some time. Before they were mobilized, writers and artists already saw themselves locked in a deadly struggle with enemies that, as Milton Cohen writes, included “the forces of artistic reaction, the hostile press, the conservative academies, the reactionary critics, the smug, self-satisfied bourgeoisie” (160). These battles, as Cohen points out, were not new to the 1910s, for they had evolved through skirmishes throughout the nineteenth century. Yet, by the early 1910s, as the modernist innovation intensified, its language turned increasingly to war and violence (160), as evidenced by the 1909 Futurist manifesto, a text that exuded aggressiveness and famously declared war “the sole cleanser of the world” (Marinetti, *Critical* 14). From the “slap in the face of public taste” invoked by Burliuk, Kruchenykh, Mayakovsky and Khlebnikov in their manifesto of the same title (Caws 230), to the “blasts” launched against numerous adversaries, including England and France, in Wyndham Lewis’s Vorticist manifesto, aggressiveness became an integral component of the language of an avant-garde intent on attacking the institutions of bourgeois life. In this context, modernists across Europe greeted the mobilization of 1914 with enthusiasm, either welcoming the war as a “purifying fire” that would “clean out” Europe’s decay and bring about palingenesis and regeneration, or finding creative inspiration in life at the front (Cohen 163; Griffin 153). The war constituted an opportunity for avant-garde artists to take the fusion of art and life to its extreme consequences, while the technological innovations it fostered challenged artists to find the appropriate idiom to represent this new reality. At the same time, the toll taken by the war on European modernists in terms of artists killed or severely wounded, both physically and psychologically, was immense. With rare exceptions, the war destroyed the modernists’ mood of buoyant optimism about the future and their beliefs about the war’s role in bringing about that future. These sentiments were replaced by the representation of trauma and by an apocalyptic imagery, which highlighted the loss of idealism undergone by artists as the war came to be experienced in its full atrocity (Cohen 165). Finally, as Cohen notes, Modernism itself became a war casualty: it did survive, but it lost its international character and became permeated by the classical values of balance, restraint and order (165). Thus, the relationship between war and Modernism was complex and multi-directional. The modernist rhetoric of war permeated the discourse of interventionism and served to justify the war effort both during the conflict and in retrospect, during its aftermath; yet, at same time, the reality of war in the trenches and on the battlefield, and the very real consequences for individual lives, profoundly affected and shaped the various forms of modernist poetics. Indeed, the war brought into relief the untenability of any simple and straightforward distinction between “tradition” and “the

modern.” In this regard, analyzing discourses of legitimation of the war, Jay Winter points out the convergence of the formal experimentation championed by the avant-garde during the pre-war years and a more conventional approach, steeped in traditional values — such as patriotism, propaganda and the glorification of the war dead — which were disseminated by elite and popular culture before and during the war (Winter 3).

An approach that takes into account the many facets of the cultural responses to the First World War is particularly suitable to an analysis of the Italian situation and will contribute to a rethinking of how Italian Modernism reacted to and was shaped by the First World War. Mario Isnenghi’s influential book, *Il mito della grande guerra*, systematically explores the attitudes and reactions of Italian intellectuals before and during the war. What characterizes the Italian situation vis-à-vis that of the rest of Europe is the vocal and active support for intervention on the part of a large number of avant-garde and modernist intellectuals, writers and artists — a support that, to a certain extent, influenced their response to the actual war experience. For the modernist intellectuals who supported Italian intervention, the war represented the realization of a series of myths which had been at the center of the aesthetic-political debate since the beginning of the century and which, to an extent, had defined the relationship between art and politics since then. These coalesced around a cluster of themes: the religion of the fatherland, the critique of the ruling class and of the bourgeoisie, the quest for a new social order, the aspiration to a spiritual, cultural and moral renewal (Adamson 264). The interventionism championed by the Italian cultural elites was linked particularly to an avant-garde culture steeped in the “mito della Grande Italia,” as Emilio Gentile calls it. This myth manifested itself in radical nationalism and in the call for a political, moral and cultural revolution that would regenerate the Italians, form a solid national conscience, and prepare Italy to be a protagonist in history and a leader in modern civilization (*La Grande Italia* 92). As Gentile rightly notes, this myth of national regeneration was at once cultural and political, as the rebellion against bourgeois culture extended to liberal democracy and took the form of a totalizing aspiration to a national regeneration inspired and led by art (*L’apocalisse* 191-92). Indeed, the sometimes complementary and sometimes contradictory interpretations of the war before, during and after actual military engagement — the “fourth war of Independence,” the “capitalist war,” the “mutilated victory,” the cradle that nurtured the Fascist spirit, to name only a few — all hinge around the perceived need of forging a national identity and a mission for Italy and its people. In this sense, in Italy the avant-garde legitimized the war and vice-versa. For the war became the event that defined a generation of avant-garde intellectuals and sanctioned the reconciliation between art and the praxis of life which, according to Peter Bürger, was at the core of the avant-garde experience. As some of the essays in this volume demonstrate, the reflection on and the representation of the war catalyzed some of the defining

issues thematized by Modernism, such as the relationship between the artists and the institutions of culture and between the artist and tradition; the question of cultural memory; the role of the sacred; the mythical and the metaphysical with respect to positivist discourses of modernity; the status of technology within modern society (Somigli e Moroni 12). Above all, the war put into question the role of the modern intellectual. Ultimately, the ability to verbalize or visualize war determined the status of the artists and their capacity to understand, confront and survive the forces of modernity that they had helped to unleash.

I. *Intellectuals and the Legitimation of the War*

When in 1914 F. T. Marinetti published the Italian translation of his 1913 poem *Le Monoplane du Pape*, he astutely changed the subtitle of the book from the “political novel” of the French version to the more pointed and topical “prophetic novel.”³ If not the war itself, the poem certainly anticipates the rhetorical strategies that served, in the various intellectual circles favoring intervention, to legitimize Italy’s entry into the war. Pitting the youthful Italian volunteer “red shirts” against the ultra-Catholic Austrian soldiers along a frontline very much like the one that two years later would divide the two nations, Marinetti imagines a conflict that is cultural and religious before it is political, opposing, on the one side, a liberal, secular, vigorous Italy still steeped in the values of the Risorgimento (hence, the reference to the Garibaldinian uniform), and, on the other, a bigoted, senescent Austria-Hungary, about to collapse under the weight of its traditions and superstitions. Indeed, the notion of a conflict not only between two blocks of nations united by political and military alliances but, rather, between two opposing and perhaps incompatible views of the world, orients much of the discourse surrounding intervention. The essays in this section consider some articulations of that fundamental distinction.

More often than not, the rejection of the obligations of the long-standing treaty linking Italy to the central powers, Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was legitimized, not on the basis of the material and political benefits resulting from an alliance with the countries of the Triple Entente, but rather on the basis of the cultural and even “racial” incompatibility between Italians and the peoples of the Germanic nations, and of the close genetic links of Italy to France. As Cristina Gragnani explains in her essay, the war propaganda re-activated and endowed with new meaning an opposition that, already in the 19th century, had fractured European culture along broad trans-national lines: the opposition between *civilisation* and *Kultur*, between — at least from the point of view of the interventionist majority that favored an alliance with France — the

³ The date of publication of the translation is, however, controversial. As Cammarota notes in his bibliography of Marinetti’s writings, the volume was apparently not distributed before May 1916, although excerpts appeared in various periodicals between September 1914 and October 1915 (57).

Latin cult of measure, harmony and dialogue, and the Germanic cult of order, strength and hierarchy.⁴ Indeed, Gragnani's essay shows the resilience and the power of this rhetorical strategy by noting how it cut across cultural, political and generational boundaries, remaining productive both before and after Italy's entry into the war. For instance, this cultural opposition orients the narrative of sacrifice for the nation in Anna Franchi's novel-pamphlet *Il figlio della guerra* (1917), and it grounds the interventionist discourse of the contributors to the avant-garde journal *Lacerba*, in particular of its editor Giovanni Papini, even though his aggressive nationalism and cultural elitism is otherwise quite distant from Franchi's socialist and feminist politics, which have solid Mazzinian and Republican roots.

The same rhetoric underlies also the poetic production of the leading writer in the interventionist campaign, Gabriele D'Annunzio, well after Italy joined the war. Marja Härmänmaa's analysis of D'Annunzio's *Canti della guerra latina*, written between 1914 and 1918, demonstrates how the opposition between the civilizing mission of the Latin peoples — among whom Italians stand out as heirs of Roman culture — and the barbarism and bestial savagery of what she calls the "Teutonic 'Other'" serves to tie together a number of different strands of the interventionist discourse, from the critique of Giolittian non-interventionism to irredentism. A perhaps more complex version of this opposition is to be found in Pirandello's short story, "Berecche e la guerra" (1915), the subject of Michael Subialka's contribution. Here, the protagonist's disillusionment with the German culture that had formed him and his generation (significantly opposed to that of his son, who vehemently supports France and volunteers to fight in its army) does not translate into an adversarial and dogmatic form of patriotism — although Berecche does feel the stirrings of an ambiguous "Latin sentiment" — but rather into a nationalism that is both capacious enough to value the contributions of other cultural traditions to that of the nation, and honest enough to acknowledge that Italy's motives for intervention may be as material and pragmatic as the motives that led Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire to precipitate the war.

II. *Writers and Artists at War*

As Winter notes, the art and literature produced during and in response to the First World War were characterized by an apocalyptic stance, which, by focusing on eschatology, utilized the language of the sacred to recast its message (145). Incorporating and elaborating some the darkest and most pessimistic responses to modernity characteristic of Western Europe's culture of the *fin de siècle*, the apocalyptic imaginary outlined by Gentile as constitutive of the cultural responses to the war (*L'apocalisse*) found its ultimate expression in the

⁴ Such categories were of course considered exactly in the reverse in the German cultural world. See for instance Eksteins 76-82.

crisis of the ability to transmit experience. According to Walter Benjamin, who gave voice to this crisis in his essay “The Storyteller,” the First World War had marked the culmination of a process of erosion of the ability to communicate experience, and this erosion, he felt, characterized the modern age. At the end of the war, Benjamin observed, men “returned from the battlefield grown silent — not richer, but poorer in communicable experience” (84). Yet many intellectuals who had had a direct experience of the war refused to be silenced by it. Their narrations foreground a meta-narrative element, as war writing became bound up with a reflection on the modes of communicating experiences that appeared to be incommunicable. As the traumatized self of the soldier/narrator/witness had to find a suitable voice to express the sense of destruction, de-humanization, loss and existential precariousness brought about by the war, the narrative of the conflict became bound up with modernist modes of writing, to such an extent that, in the Italian case, some of the works that defined literary Modernism were associated with war writing. These were characterized by intense subjectivity, fragmentation and linguistic experimentation, all part of an effort to convey the sense of ontological doubt and existential instability and a larger sense of crisis. The front became a physical as well as a metaphorical locus, a “psychologically and spiritually desolate place,” as Allison Cooper argues in her essay, “in which one confronted the most pressing crises of modernity.” In particular, she focuses on the notion of disanimation in relation to Giuseppe Ungaretti’s war poetry. During the Great War, Cooper argues, disanimation conveyed the feeling of alienation arising from an awareness of a lack of unitary subjectivity or experience, caused by the mechanization of the conflict. It also emphasized the dehumanizing effect of the war and the inability of language to communicate that effect, thereby foregrounding the ineffability of the war experience, which reduced human beings to aphasia and posited an erasure of the self. Yet, Cooper argues, Ungaretti’s language of loss, founded in death and born of aphasia — physical, emotional and epistemological as well as verbal — is ultimately turned into a reconstitutive tool that guarantees survival. Similarly, in his analysis of Camillo Sbarbaro’s *Trucioli*, Alberto Comparini notes how the poet resists the mechanical and de-humanizing character of the war by anchoring his self to nature, thus defeating the cycle of death engendered by the conflict and claiming for nature a metaphysical dimension capable of restoring the relationship between the self and the world fractured by war.

The magnitude and novelty of the war experience, as Umberto Rossi notes in his article on Gadda, Comisso and Malaparte’s accounts of the rout of Caporetto, required a rethinking of the literary strategies employed to convey its narration. A radically modern experience on a technologized battlefield, Rossi argues, lent itself to modernist modes of narration. These could be highly subjective journals or memoirs, as in the case of Gadda and Comisso, or a reportage by a collective subject — “il popolo dei soldati” — as in Malaparte’s pamphlet *Viva Caporetto!*

Those avant-garde artists and writers who had actively supported the Italian intervention as the war broke out in Europe often used the narration of the conflict as an ideological tool to foreground an artistic agenda strictly interrelated with those ideas of palingenesis and national regeneration that had underpinned the interventionist cause. As Davide Bellini demonstrates in his essay, Ardengo Soffici's war memoir, *Kobilek*, sought to construct a war narrative that could convey a cross-class experience aimed at a wide readership. With *Kobilek* Soffici moved away from the avant-garde rhetoric that had characterized *Lacerba* and towards a rethinking of the modes for narrating the conflict, modes that would incorporate the immediacy of the journal entry into a more structured account. Such a mixed narrative economy allowed the space for a reflective narration, which explored not only the war action, but the psychology of the soldiers as well as their regional characteristics, to such an extent as to become, Bellini argues, the self-narration of a whole national community (see also Isnenghi, *Il mito della grande guerra* 193-95).

Reporting his experiences on notebooks, sheets, articles and *tavole parolibere*, Marinetti — Stefano Bragato explains — adopted a novel strategy, entailing a diversification of textual production, intended for capturing different aspects of the war experience and aimed at conveying them to different audiences. Each medium was utilized with a strategically different purpose and contained cultural and stylistic references aimed at a variety of backgrounds. With Marinetti, as with most modernist writers engaged directly with the war, reporting from the front became an ideological as well as a literary operation. The presumed autobiographical character of the war narrative was assumed to confer authority to the description of the events, yet Marinetti's prose appeared to be blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction. The narration itself of the war assumed a central role and, as such, became more important than the facts it recounted. Being turned into a propaganda tool, which required a rethinking of compositional strategies and autobiographical techniques, the writing self underwent an operation of textualization, in line with the avant-garde pledge to reduce the distance between art and life. Thus reality became aestheticized.

The futurists demonstrated that the self-promotional techniques deployed during the war had far-reaching influence, but also that the artistic idiom developed by futurist artists to represent the war had an ideological as well as an iconographic malleability which exposed it to appropriation by the international avant-garde in different political contexts. In her article, Maria Elena Versari traces the influence of Carlo Carrà's *Futurist Synthesis of War* on El Lissitzky's *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (1920). The futurist visual experimentation gained currency in post-revolutionary Russian art as an innovative art form that suited the values of the Russian revolution. In particular, the Russian artists that championed the futurist style, such as Lissitzky and Malevich, acknowledged its potential to speak to the masses, pointing to the force that emerged from the

Russian Revolution. The transposition of the visual language of war in Carrà's work to that of the Russian Revolution in Lissitzky's *Beat the White with the Red Wedge*, a powerful syncretic assemblage of war symbols and revolutionary metaphors, shows the continuity between the language of war and post-war political and ideological propaganda, demonstrating how the war fought in the trenches and on the artistic front resulted in an internationalized idiom whose main quality was the ability to speak to the masses.

III. *The Internal Front*

As we noted above, much of the historical research of the last quarter century has emphasized the transformative effect of the war on every aspect of everyday life. While these transformative effects may have been felt more sharply by the men in the trenches and on the battlefields, they also affected the lives of those who stayed behind — the internal front, as it were, to which the essays in this section are dedicated. Indeed, as Enrico Cesaretti shows in his reading of Pirandello's short stories that directly reference the war, the account of the rupturing impact of the conflict on the daily life of the men and women on the home front — the fathers and mothers, friends and lovers, children and siblings of the men on the theater of war — constituted a privileged means to articulate some of the central themes of modernist literature, from the difficulty of endowing individual experience with order and meaning to the sense of the fragility of the subject in the face of forces beyond their control.

Stephen Kern has famously argued that the over-exposure to physical and sensorial stimuli on the war front translated into daily reality the fragmentation of modern experience already expressed in the arts by the Cubist avant-garde (287-312). While Kern's thesis is undoubtedly true, the role played by the Futurist avant-garde in giving form to the war experience should not be underestimated, especially in the case of Italy. In an essay on the soundscape of the war, Selena Daly has in fact convincingly suggested that the pre-war theorization and practice of an aesthetic use of the sounds and noises of modernity — think of Russolo's famous "noise-tuners" — offered the Futurists "a defense mechanism employed at the front in order to cope with the extremity of the situations unfolding around them." In her contribution to this volume, Daly considers how, at the same time, the war allowed Italian audiences to integrate into *their* experience Futurism itself, which went from being a phenomenon usually met with general scorn and ridicule by mainstream readers and gallery- and theater-goers, to being a respected and widely celebrated cultural movement. If the vehement patriotism of the Futurists — many of whom served (and in some cases died) in the war — reassured the public regarding the seriousness of what it had until then generally considered as little more than artistic buffoons, this credit in turn became an incentive for Marinetti and his fellow avant-gardists to develop new ways of reaching their audiences, culminating with the short-lived experience of the Futurist political party.

Visual media were another important instrument in the process of turning the war events into coherent narratives to influence public opinion. “The Great War was the first event to be multiplied iconographically by the extensive use of photography,” writes Gibelli (11), and the same can be said perhaps even more persuasively for the twentieth-century visual medium par excellence: cinematography. Sarah Pesenti Campagnoni’s essay documents the growing importance of photography and cinema on several levels, to support the war effort and the process of memorialization in its aftermath. The Italian army, like its European counterparts, quickly understood the potential of visual media to produce a “channel of empathic communication with the audiences on the internal front,” and thus developed numerous strategies to use cinema and photography as means to legitimize the war effort and to amplify the crucial themes of sacrifice for the nation and support for the troops at the front. The essay also discusses the difficulties encountered in this effort — what the author calls the “invisibility of modern warfare,” characterized by mostly empty battlefields and long periods of inaction in the trenches, so that the crucial event of the encounter with the enemy remained invisible and the recounting of it was entrusted to the testimony of the survivors rather than to images captured on film.

IV. *Gendering the War*

In an essay on British women and World War I, Claire Buck has compared the marginality, until recent years, of women’s writing about the conflict, to the marginality to which they were pushed back in the workplace after 1918, when the men returning from the front reclaimed jobs and occupations temporarily taken over by women during the shortage of male labor power caused by conscription. Her provocative statement holds true for Italian culture as well. Frequently invoked as either victims to be avenged by their male protectors or as themselves nurturers of their menfolk fighting at the front, women seldom managed to make their voice and position heard in a significant and, perhaps more importantly, lasting way. In this respect, the debate that flourished in 1916-17 in *L’Italia futurista* on the “*donne del posdomani*” (“women of the future”), to quote an article by Rosa Rosà, is instructive. Rosà lucidly identified in the war a turning point in the recognition of the equality of women with men: “There is no need to say again that at this point women have replaced men in jobs that up until now we believed only men could perform, and enjoy salaries that until now women had never managed to get through *honest* work. Women are useful now — very useful” (113).⁵

⁵ “Inutile ripetere, che in questo istante milioni di donne hanno assunto — al posto di uomini, lavori che fin ora si credeva solo uomini potessero eseguire — riscuotendo salari che fin ora il lavoro *onesto* della donna non aveva mai saputo ottenere. Sono utili ora, le donne, utilissime.”

And yet, this utopian moment, as Silvia Contarini describes it in *La Femme futuriste* (312), comes to an end with the war and its aftermath. Indeed, Contarini's observation regarding the "disappearance of the question of women from the social and political scene" of post-war Italy can be applied not only to the Futurist movement, which in this sense egregiously failed in its self-avowed role of renewer of Italian social and political life, but to Italian culture as whole. In the words of social historian Anna Bravo, "old roles were resumed, and the women forced back into traditional peasant silence, leaving the men to monopolize the claim to war honours" (qtd. Wood 17).

The intellectual experience of Eva Kühn Amendola, the subject of Lucia Re's essay, offers a good example of the contradictions produced by this moment of fluid and unstable gender relations. Born in Lithuania and educated in Russia, England and Switzerland — and thus a true representative of the cosmopolitanism characterizing pre-war European intellectual life — Kühn settled in Italy after marrying Giovanni Amendola, who would become an influential politician and anti-Fascist. During the war she contributed to numerous Futurist periodicals, writing under the pseudonym of Magamal. Her creative and political writings witness to the great effort made by women intellectuals to use Marinetti's movement to re-think gender norms and roles; but they also point to the failure of that project in the face of the visceral masculinist ethos of their male colleagues, the ambiguities of the Futurist political program, and, perhaps more importantly, the increasing closure of public space to women after the war.

More often, women were invested with a powerful symbolic function, as the (passive) object at stake in the struggle with the enemy: the female body — be it that of a lover or of a mother — is in effect the symbolic site of national identity. This is the case, for instance, in two works otherwise characterized by remarkable thematic and aesthetic differences: F. T. Marinetti's *L'alcova d'acciaio* (1921), with its celebration of the "guerra-festa," and Giani Stuparich's *Ritorneranno* (1941), an elegiac Triestine *tranche de vie*. As Katia Pizzi argues, the two works find a common ground in an ideological discourse that situates women firmly back in the private space of the maternal, thus re-establishing the gender binary threatened by the war in the ways so clearly perceived by Rosà. The nation itself is turned into a female figure in need of protection on the part of the male soldier.

A more faceted and complex version of this conflation of woman and nation is to be found in Annie Vivanti's novel *Vae Victis!*, based on her 1915 play *L'invasore* and inspired by the reports of war rapes during the German invasion of Belgium. As Barbara Meazzi shows, Vivanti's narrative shifts the focus from the consequences of the rape and ensuing pregnancies on the victims to the social body: the "contamination" of the body of the two women is quite literally the contamination of the national community — something that can be avoided only through a further violation of the female body, either through abortion or

suicide. Nonetheless, through their choices (in particular Chérie's decision not to abort the enemy's child), Vivanti's women are given agency. As Allison Scardino Belzen rightly notes, "as stand-ins for Belgium, they were vanquished. As female characters, they found the strength to absorb and respond to the violence committed against them by the Germans" (141). Thus, as the war turned the female body into a parallel battlefield of competing ideologies of nation, race, gender and the self, modernist female writers offer "an embodied, feminist critique of trauma and the identity politics of war and war narratives" (Goodspeed-Chadwick 1). In this context, the female body stands in as a "textual marker" or symbol of female identity, which allows for the creation of a space for female characters and foregrounds female views and experiences that have traditionally been foreclosed (Goodspeed-Chadwick 1-5).

V. The War Between History and Myth

The immediate post-war years saw a process of mythologization of the war, particularly on the part of the veterans engaged in the process of elaborating the war experience both on a personal and political level. The testimony of artists, writers and intellectuals also contributed substantially to the memorial culture of the war, which was extensively used in post-war discourses of national identity and reconstruction. In this particular context, the body of the soldier underwent an extensive narrative processing aimed at dealing, on the one hand, with the wounding, mutilation, shock and trauma experienced in the trenches and, on the other, with the symbolic resignification acquired by the soldier's corporeal sacrifice on the altar of the nation. As Ana Carden Coyne has argued, after the war, the soldier's body, particularly the wounded and maimed body, became associated with discourses of national and cultural reconstruction and was incorporated in memorial culture and rituals (see also Wittman). This process is exemplified by the mythologizing of the one-legged cyclist Enrico Toti, whose disabled body, as Jennifer Griffiths argues in her article, became a symbol of national struggle in the Great War. As a war hero whose disability preceded the war and who died in battle, he occupies a peculiar position both in the memorial culture of the First World War and in the sacralization of the soldier's body. Acclaimed as a hero throughout and after the war and during the fascist years, he was the subject of several monuments that made use of neoclassical and Christian artistic idioms, thereby creating a mythical language of heroism and sacrifice that associated his body with metaphors of the nation.

The avant-garde artists returning from the war used their experience to rethink the connection between art and politics and reassess the integration between art and the praxis of life, particularly in its critique of the institutions of bourgeois art. As Walter Adamson notes, the war reconfigured the strategic outlook adopted by avant-garde modernists, who moved away from self-supporting groups and towards alliances with revolutionary political movements or regimes antagonistic to prevailing capitalism or commodity culture (344). In

Italy, the return to order that characterized the international post-war artistic scene was expressed in terms of a return to tradition as the reinterpretation of the classical heritage in strong national terms, allowing for a politicization of aesthetics which was key in the alignment of the avant-garde with Fascism during the inter-war years. In that respect, as Simona Storchi shows in her essay, Ardengo Soffici was a crucial figure in the theorization of the interconnection between aesthetics and politics, which he used to claim a strong role for the artist as the spiritual guide of the new nation emerging from the war. As Storchi demonstrates, Soffici used his magazine *Rete mediterranea*, published in 1920, as a platform to voice his politicized version of aesthetics, using his position both as an artist and as a veteran to gain legitimacy for his aesthetic-political program.

The development of a memorial culture of the Great War during the fascist regime is well documented (Griffin; Gentile, *Il culto del littorio, La grande Italia, Le origini*). Fascism used the war as an ideological repository, incorporating it in the construction of its own mythology and self-justification. Fascism also used the memorial culture of the war in the ritualization processes which underpinned its sacralization of politics, as Emilio Gentile has defined the vision underlying the complex system of myths, symbol and rituals at the core of the political practice of the fascist regime (*Il culto del littorio*). However, after the Second World War and the fall of the fascist regime, the interpretation of the Great War underwent a revision. The culture of the left in particular, as Silvia Contarini and Pierpaolo Naccarella explain, carried out a critique of the Great War and of the motivations for intervention. In their article on the treatment of the First World War in the communist periodical *Rinascita* between the 1940s and the 1960s, they chart the fluctuations in the assessment of the war within Italian communist historiography, which reflected changes in party leadership and the evolution of the politics of the PCI in the post-war years. Throughout the three decades of *Rinascita* which the two authors analyze, the war was assessed negatively, mainly as a fundamentally imperialist and bourgeois war, which in Italy was imposed on a population that was either passive or actively against it, and which caused profound damage to the country, particularly the South. Yet, throughout the post-World-War-Two years, the First World War was also seen as having had a positive function, as it contributed to an awakening of the masses and to their development of a political awareness. In any case, Contarini and Naccarella note that the interpretations of the Great War carried out in *Rinascita* over three decades tended to serve the political needs of the present. Such processes of revision and reappropriation contributed, together with the memorial culture, to the transformation of the Great War into a *lieu de mémoire*, as noted in Mario Isnenghi's multi-volume work on memory places in Italian culture. According to the social framing of the collective memory of the event, the Great War became bound up with the construction of the post-war nation, engendering a process of memorialization in which the memory of the war was

kept alive while at the same time progressively removed from the reality of the war itself and turned into a political myth (Isnenghi, "La grande guerra").

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