

**Violence Resistance Tolerance Sacrifice in Italy's Literary & Cultural History:  
An Introduction**

**Abstract:** In this introduction to the study on “Violence, Resistance, Tolerance, and Sacrifice in Italy's Literary and History,” we present the volume's nineteen essays, contextualizing them within a theoretical, historical, cultural, and literary framework. Violence is present in nature, human history, nations, communities, and every human. Each one of us must contend with the inhuman aspect present within ourselves. Just as it occurs in all nations, violence has shaped Italy's history and culture in all their manifestations. As educators and scholars, we ought to be aware of the overwhelming presence of violence in all human endeavors and artifacts as we ponder intellectual, emotional, and practical ways to counterbalance it, as the volume's essays have sought to show and its title suggests.

**Key Words:** Violence, Resistance, Tolerance, Sacrifice, Forgiveness.

“(For what can war but endless war still breed?)  
Till truth and right from violence be freed [...]”  
(John Milton, “To my Lord Fairfax” 1694)<sup>1</sup>

“Non c'è pace tra le nazioni  
senza pace tra le religioni.  
Non c'è pace tra le religioni  
senza dialogo tra le religioni.  
Non c'è dialogo tra le religioni  
senza una ricerca sui fondamenti delle religioni.”  
(Hans Küng, *Ebraismo* 5)<sup>2</sup>

*1. Does Everything Begin with, and Unfold, through Violence?*

About three years ago, when this volume's three editors announced the topic for

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<sup>1</sup> Here is Milton's sonnet: “On Lord Fairfax, on the Siege of Colchester”: “Fairfax, whose name in arms through Europe rings,/ Filling each mouth with envy or with praise,/ And all her jealous monarchs with amaze,/ And rumors loud that daunt remotest kings,/ Thy firm unshaken virtue ever brings / Victory home, though new rebellions raise / Their Hydra heads, and the false North displays / Her broken league to imp their serpent wings./ O yet a nobler task awaits thy hand / (For what can war but endless war still breed?) / Till truth and right from violence be freed,/ And public faith cleared from the shameful brand / Of public fraud. In vain doth Valor bleed,/ While Avarice and Rapine share the land.”

<sup>2</sup> The same threefold emblematic statement is also found in Küng's *Cristianesimo*, 5, and *Islam*, 5

*Annali* 2017, we were convinced that the proposed topic was timely; after three years of reflecting, reading, and editing, while also following contemporary events close to us and faraway, we are all the more aware that the topic's choice was wise and that the essays published in this thirty-fifth volume of *Annali d'italianistica* may help Italianists and humanists reflect, not just in a detached intellectual manner but also in a personal, engaged, and ethical mode, on the phenomenon of violence.<sup>3</sup>

Violence is a frightening occurrence. It was present at the very beginning of the universe as we know it and of humankind, is part and parcel of our history, and, to varying degrees, affects each one of us personally from the beginning to the end of our lives. Ancient, modern, and contemporary thinkers have seen violence at the core of all human undertakings. Thus, from ancient philosophers — Heraclitus (“We must recognize that war is common and strife is justice, and all things happen according to strife and necessity” Diels and Kranz 22B80)<sup>4</sup> — to Petrarch (“Sed sic sine lite atque offensione nil genuit natura parens”; “Mother Nature gave birth to nothing without struggle and injury” *De Remediis Utriusque Fortune* 2.7.65, p. 534) and beyond, it has been argued that violence, struggle, and war are ubiquitous.

As ancient as humanity, religion itself is oftentimes viewed as enmeshed with violence. Moses, David, and Saul were leaders and warriors. So was also the prophet Muhammad. And yet, while the Hebrew Bible presents the *lex talionis* (the eye-for-an-eye code of justice), it also commands not to hate one's brother, to love one's neighbors (Lev. 19.17-18), and nowhere does it say to hate one's enemies. As far as Islam is concerned, the Quran describes wars and battles, but it also contains many verses urging forgiveness, and among God's

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<sup>3</sup> While some scholars argue for a restricted and focused understanding of violence, here violence is being analyzed in its broadest significance, affecting the self (self-inflicted violence), the other, the community, and the society at large in countless ways, physically, emotionally, intellectually. The victims of violence are by and large the most vulnerable members of society — children, women (*Companion Reader on Violence against Women*), the elderly, the poor, the disenfranchised, the helpless, the innocent — and the least empowered societies, such as nations torn by factions, rebellions, and wars. The World Health Organization and related associations provide a wealth of data concerning the victims of violence, e.g.: worldwide, more than one million people die of violence every year, while the United States leads the world in the rate at which its children die from firearms (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/gun-violence-children-america-us-study-deaths-injuries-statistics-a7797621.html>).

<sup>4</sup> The philosophy of Heraclitus (c. 500 BCE - c. 475 BCE) is obscure, and the quotation above needs to be contextualized within the philosopher's complex view: “Though the logos is as I have said, men always fail to comprehend it, both before they hear it and when they hear it for the first time. For though all things come into being in accordance with this logos, they seem like men without experiences, though in fact they do have experience both of words and deeds such as I have set forth, distinguishing each thing in accordance with its nature and declaring what it is. But other men are as unaware of what they do when awake as they are when they are asleep” (Diels and Kranz 22B1).

names are “The Beneficent” and “The Merciful” (Surah 1.1). Neither a leader nor a warrior like the biblical Moses, Saul, David, or like Muhammad, Christ, who “was born into a society traumatized by violence,” as Karen Armstrong writes (136), enjoins his followers to love one’s enemies. And yet, even in the Gospels one comes across such striking statements as “I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10.34) and “The one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one” (Luke 22.36).<sup>5</sup>

Nature, the physical space within which humans live, appears in its frightening aspects (earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, volcanic eruptions, etc.) almost as often as in its benevolent and nurturing manifestations. Thus, from the beginning of humankind’s history to the present time, violence in all its manifestations and human responses to it — resistance, tolerance, compassion, sacrifice — have accompanied and even guided human beings as much as, or likely even more than, its opposite: peace. Human responses to violence include not only additional violence and resistance to it, but also acceptance, tolerance, compassion, sacrifice. Here then are some of the questions which the phenomenon of violence forces us to consider: What is violence, where are its roots, and how can it be assessed? Should humans pursue it, seek to resist to it, control it, and overcome it? Or should they allow themselves to be overcome by it in some form of sacrifice? Should sacrifice itself (including its symbolic and discursive forms) be used to control and redirect violence within a community?

## 2. *What Is Violence?*

Violence is present at the beginning of time. Faith tells Christian believers that God created everything from nothing, a notion hardly comprehensible to human beings. But precisely because it is unimaginable to think of a creation from nothing, the Bible itself portrays God involved in several acts of creation, by word and deed, making at the beginning heaven and earth, which was without form and void, like an abyss. As God hovered over the abyss, which was dark, a mighty wind swept over the surface of the waters (Gen. 1-2). Did the biblical God employ any form of violence in His act of creation? Did He struggle to create heaven and earth, separate light from darkness, the waters above from the waters below, and make every living being and finally man and woman? If the biblical God did not become involved in violence and struggle — a struggle, however, to which the biblical text refers — a literal reading of the Scriptures certainly tells us that the Creator worked and that at the end of the six days of creation he rested.<sup>6</sup> But rest presupposes labor, from which humans are never

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<sup>5</sup> One should bear in mind, furthermore, that wars and violence have predominantly, if not exclusively, been perpetrated by males, as Armstrong reiterates throughout her study: “Civilized man was essentially a man of war, full of testosterone” (29).

<sup>6</sup> Scriptural scholars emphasize the extent to which the biblical traditions present in Genesis — the Yahvist (J), the Elohist (E), and the Priestly (P) — seek to overcome the

delivered after the biblical curse (Gen. 3.14-19) because it is part of divine malediction brought about, in the biblical account, by the primogenitors' disobedience and hubris and can be viewed as a form of struggle relatable to Heraclitus's notion of a continuous strife in all earthly and human affairs. In fact, labor and strife are unending phenomena in human life. Such modern thinkers as Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) argue that "the modern age's emancipation of labor will not only fail to usher in an image of freedom for all but will result, on the contrary, in forcing all mankind for the first time under the yoke of necessity [...]," that is, a modern reshaping of ancient slavery (*The Human Condition* 130). And even if — Arendt goes on writing — humans' emancipation from labor, "the only strictly utopian element in Marx's teachings," were to take place, "the development of automation [...] will not turn [the utopia of yesterday] into the reality of tomorrow, so that eventually only the effort of consumption will be left of 'the toil and trouble' inherent in the biological cycle to whose motor human life is bound" (130-31), precisely as Danila Cannamela argues in her essay on contemporary consumerism.

While operating with markedly different notions of primordial forces and agency, and without being in contrast with the biblical narrative of creation, modern science's view of the beginning of the universe also emphasizes violence. We read in fact (<http://science.nationalgeographic.com/science/space/universe/origins-universe-article/>) that "our universe's origin centers on a cosmic cataclysm unmatched in all of history — the big bang. This theory was born of the observation that other galaxies are moving away from our own at great speed, in all directions, as if they had all been propelled by an ancient explosive force. Before the big bang [...] the entire vastness of the observable universe [...] was compressed into a hot, dense mass just a few millimeters across [...] theorized to have existed for just a fraction of the first second of time." Then, "some 10 billion to 20 billion years ago, a massive blast allowed all the universe's known matter and energy — even space and time themselves — to spring from some ancient and unknown type of energy." "Expansion has apparently continued, but much more slowly, over the ensuing billions of years." "[...] as time passed and matter cooled, more diverse kinds of atoms began to form, and they eventually condensed into the stars and galaxies of our present universe."<sup>7</sup>

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struggles of the gods in creation myths among the peoples surrounding Israel (Rad 64-65). And yet, biblical references to the Leviathan (*e.g.*, Job 3.8), the serpent (Gen. 3), and the Dragon of Revelation (12.3) allude to primordial mythological narratives of creation. God himself is often celebrated as a warrior god, as Armstrong writes (114-15) quoting Psalm 109.5-6: "When he grows angry he shatters kings, he gives the nations their deserts; smashing their skulls, he heaps the world with corpses."

<sup>7</sup> "A Belgian priest named Georges Lemaître first suggested the big bang theory in the 1920s when he theorized that the universe began from a single primordial atom. The idea subsequently received major boosts by Edwin Hubble's observations that galaxies are

Just as violence, in its extreme form, marked the birth of the universe at its very beginning, analogous, extreme, violent forces control the universe also at the present time. In 2011 *Science Daily* reported, “Astronomers recently discovered the most massive black holes to date. Found in two separate nearby galaxies roughly 300 million light years away from Earth, each black hole has a mass equivalent to 10 billion suns.” The same source provides a short explanation of black holes: “Black holes are made of matter so dense that even light can’t escape their intense gravitational fields. Exploding stars — known as supernovae — can create relatively small black holes only a few times more massive than the sun, but researchers think these monster black holes are formed in different ways, such as multiple smaller black holes merging into one, or by swallowing vast amounts of stars and gas while galaxies are forming. The gigantic black holes discovered by [scientists] Ma and her colleagues are so enormous they are capable of consuming anything within a region five times the size of Earth’s solar system.”<sup>8</sup> More recently, in January 2015, *Science Daily* announced an even more extraordinary discovery of a new quasar: “Shining with the equivalent of 420 trillion suns, the new quasar is seven times brighter than the most distant quasar known (which is 13 billion years away). It harbors a black hole with mass of 12 billion solar masses, proving it to be the most luminous quasar with the most massive black hole among all the known high redshift (very distant) quasars.”<sup>9</sup> That is, this recently discovered quasar devours daily, between breakfast and supper, millions of stars comparable to our sun. Might a plunge into a huge black hole, similar to an apocalyptic fall, be destined to conclude humankind’s journey after the first, biblical, primordial fall, marking also the end of life and history as we know it? Or will a rogue and loose meteor, escaping all attempts of our highly technological society to stop it, hit the Earth, cause havoc, put an end to our civilization, or even wipe out the Earth from the universe? Or, rather, will it be the frightening task of humans themselves to cause the destruction of the entire universe through a most unfathomable act of violence? Or have we not already begun the annihilation of the natural world surrounding us through countless acts of violence?<sup>10</sup>

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speeding away from us in all directions, and from the discovery of cosmic microwave radiation by Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson.” “The big bang theory leaves several major questions unanswered. One is the original cause of the big bang itself. Several answers have been proposed to address this fundamental question, but none has been proven — and even adequately testing them has proven to be a formidable challenge” (<http://science.nationalgeographic.com/science/space/universe/origins-universe-article/>)

<sup>8</sup> This information comes from <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2011/12/111206115258.htm> (accessed March 3.6.2015).

<sup>9</sup> This news release, dated February 25, 2015, appears in *Science Daily*: <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/02/150225142452.htm> (accessed March 3.6.2015).

<sup>10</sup> Eco criticism has developed, and is further expanding, an impressive body of knowledge on the violence humans perpetrate on the habitat.

Whatever conception we are willing to accept — God's violent or non-violent creation, or the cataclysmic primordial big bang, which could be read as the scientific version of the biblical creation narrative — the world in its immensity; the ocean, rivers, and waters; and the earth we inhabit — all of them keep us in awe of their beauty and fearful because of their violence. And here lies the very problematic condition of nature: precisely the oceans, rivers, mountains, valleys, rains, and air which make our lives possible, can — and in fact, do — cause major destruction and oftentimes wipe out hundreds or thousands of people.

And yet, all these natural phenomena, per se very frightening, do not constitute the most terrifying manifestation of violence, which consists of the fact that we humans inflict violence on the natural world, upon other human beings, even upon ourselves, as modern history, the history of the twentieth century, and of the ongoing century have demonstrated, and still demonstrate, beyond any doubt.

All these considerations bring us to the fundamental question: Why do we humans cause so much violence upon Nature, other humans, and upon ourselves?

### 3. *The Violence within Each One of Us*

In philosophical terms, violence defines human identity. Drawing on Heidegger, who analyzes ancient classical literature and quotes Sophocles's *Antigone*, **Giusi Strummiello**, one of the contributors to this volume, synthesizes this argument in her study entitled *Il logos violato*:

[...] l'uomo è essenzialmente violento, è definito dalla violenza non solo nel suo operare (e quindi in modo accessorio e accidentale), ma anche e soprattutto nel suo stesso essere. Questa è pertanto la vera definizione greca di uomo: non animale razionale (una definizione "zoologica", per Heidegger [...]), ma ciò che vi è più di violento, e perciò di più inquietante.

(*Il logos violato* 94)

Strummiello sees this violence as intrinsic and centrifugal: it initiates within the self and moves outside toward everybody else and everything else (94). Reflections on violence should therefore acknowledge the responsibility that each individual bears for perpetuating and disseminating forms of personal or collective violence even when such involvement seems indirect and distant from our sphere of agency.

According to this view, it is imperative that every reflection on violence begin with a personal acknowledgement: Each individual lies at the origin of violence. It is not society that is primarily responsible for violence, nor the family, nor the other; that is, it is not true that everybody else is responsible for violence except me. As long as I continue saying, "I am not responsible for any form of violence," I refuse to accept my role in the countless forms of violence

tearing apart the society, the city, and the family within which I live. Thus, each one of us must recognize the role we have played — first, individually; second, collectively — in perpetuating and disseminating violence in all forms and degrees.<sup>11</sup>

Contemporary society at large, and many of us individually, have lost the understanding, the sense, the awareness of sin. For our society, which has become secular; for those of us who are non-believers; and even for those of us who are believers, sin has by and large become an alien concept that has lost most of its resonance, or it is a belief that has not taken hold of our deepest selves.<sup>12</sup>

A concept related to that of sin and, like sin, on the verge of becoming hackneyed, is that of injustice. We know that almost everything in the world can be viewed as unjust. We may even be able to concede that we have been unjust or we are ready to state that we have suffered some kind of injustice, and yet we may even be convinced — rightly and wrongly — that we can do nothing about the many injustices of the world.

Violence is different. Nowadays it is rampant and destroys the natural world, nations, societies, families, individuals, our own selves. When it affects others, it often does so in terrifying ways that call into question our own sense of safety and well-being. In brief, while we may have lost the sense of sin, its significance, or its consequences; and while we may even have become inured to the most grievous manifestations of injustice, unfairness, and inequality, we have not yet lost sight of the impact of violence on our lives and the lives of others — at least not yet.

In her contribution published in this volume, “Violenza dell’umano / (Non)violenza dell’inumano,” **Giusi Strummiello** focuses on the innateness of violence while reflecting on the notions developed by Theodor W. Adorno, Emmanuel Lévinas, Judith Butler, and Slavoj Žižek. Violence — Strummiello argues — brings about a rupture within the individual, separating each one of us from one’s own humanity; violence breaks individuals apart from the community to which they belong; thus, violence constitutes the breach that distances what is human from what is inhuman. At the same time, precisely because of its pervasiveness, violence points to each individual’s unavoidable dependence on other human beings. Through its opposite, i.e., non-violence, we recognize human precariousness and fallibility as we state our right not to be hurt and the need to resist the impulse to offend. One becomes human — Strummiello argues — precisely by inhabiting that living space between the

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<sup>11</sup> Some of these reflections are derived — with adaptations to our specific field of inquiry, Italian studies — from several philosophers, historians, theologians, including the excellent study by Strummiello, titled *Il logos violento. La violenza nella filosofia*.

<sup>12</sup> For an extensive treatment of the problem of evil, from ancient to modern time, see the volume edited by Peterson, *The Problem of Evil*.

right not to be offended and the need to resist the urge to offend. But while Butler — Strummiello points out — sees a horizontal rapport between the self and the Other that allows for solidarity, non-violence, and tolerance, Žižek perceives an unbridgeable breach between the self and the Other, whom he envisions as a faceless monster. Faced by these starkly different philosophical positions, Strummiello considers also the role of human laws in controlling human violence, as she points out that violence needs to be opposed while reaffirming the possibility for love to assert itself.

#### 4. *Violence in the History of Humankind: Past and Present*

Insofar as violence is present in the universe, in the nature itself of the Earth that humans inhabit, and in each individual, one must also confront the all-pervasiveness of violence in human history, which has always been marked by turbulence and war. Historians unanimously agree that humankind's history forms a narrative of warfare — a bloody story all but briefly interrupted by transitory moments of truces rather than genuine peace. Although the human generations of the Western world may think that they have experienced, and are still experiencing, decades of peace since WWII, the twenty-first century has begun to unfold precisely as Hannah Arendt (1906-75), writing in 1969, characterized the twentieth century: namely, as “a century of violence,” of which “wars and revolutions” have become the “common denominator” of human existence (*On Violence* 3).

Until the arrival of the secular state, usually linked to the American Revolution first and then to the French Revolution, wars were fought for political, economic, and aggrandizing purposes, oftentimes under the disguise of religion. In a fascinating book entitled *Fields of Blood. Religion and the History of Violence*, Karen Armstrong demonstrates that all of humankind's history is a history of violence — indeed, of bloody violence — and that this violence cannot be attributed, neither exclusively nor primarily, to religion. Religion — she argues — has been a constitutive concern of every political power responsible for war until the rise of secular states, that is, as mentioned above, until the American and the French Revolutions. During the last 250 years, after the separation of religion from the state, wars have continued even with the modern secular state, indeed with a virulence that by far exceeds anything seen before. Unquestionably, modern technology has increased, and it still further increases, the deadliness of war to an extent unimaginable to previous generations and even hardly comprehensible to us, the living.<sup>13</sup> And while wars

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<sup>13</sup> In *The Sociology of War and Violence*, Malešević writes that “the modern era (the last three centuries) account for 90 per cent of all war casualties from the beginning of proper warfare in 3000 BCE to the present day.” He further points out that this slaughter is occurring “at the same time that human life is nominally most valued. In other words, there is an inherent discrepancy between a normative universe that cherishes human life

beget even more violence, they do not necessarily bring about better forms of government, and they invariably incite to violence the non-human aspect of every individual: the hideous aggressive side of every human being.

5. *Italy's Literary Culture as a Manifestation of Violence, Acceptance, Tolerance, Sacrifice*

Italy, with its extensive coastline, has fully participated in the past and recent history of warfare and violence that have devastated the peoples of diverse ethnicities and faiths on the three continents bordering the Mediterranean.

Italy's literary culture begins most auspiciously with the *Laudes creaturarum* (*Antologia della poesia italiana* 22-24) by St. Francis, who wrote or dictated this joyful hymn, almost certainly accompanied by music, by summoning every element of creation. St. Francis praises God "cum tucte le sue creature" — through and with all creatures — as he admires the beauty, splendor, and usefulness of the inanimate world (no animal is referred to explicitly in the poem) without pointing to nature's destructive forces; in fact, the whole world is portrayed as united by a natural kinship of brotherhood — the fire is called "brother fire" (v.17) — and sisterhood: water (v. 15) and death (v. 27) are viewed as sisters, while the Earth is sister and mother (v. 20). His first explicit mention of human beings may be read as emblematic of their most essential and positive attribute: to be able to forgive and bear sickness and tribulations:

Laudato si', mi' Signore per quelli ke perdonano per lo tuo amore  
et sostengo infirmitate et tribulatione.

(vv. 23-24)

(May you, my Lord, be praised through those who forgive for your love  
and bear sickness and tribulation.)

To forgive implies a previous offense and thus a prior form of violence, which cannot always be avoided because of human weaknesses, and which bears on that aspect of the "inhuman" constitutive of every human, as we have seen above. Thus for St. Francis "sickness and tribulations" partake of a continuum of manifestations of the fallen human nature affecting every individual. Shortly afterward, he praises God even for the final moment of human life, death, the sum and conclusion of all forms of human sufferings striking at the core of

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and scorns war and violence while simultaneously practicing killing at an exceptional and unprecedented rate" (120). In a recent book — *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon* — Brooks examines what happens to a society — American society and, by necessity and extension, the world at large — when traditional boundaries between war and peace disappear and wars, skirmishes, guerrilla clashes, and neighborhood shootouts seem to spread everywhere and affect every living human being. Violence caused by easily accessible guns has become truly universal.

human existence:

Laudato si', mi' Signore, per sora nostra morte corporale,  
da la quale nullo homo vivente pò skappare:

(vv. 27-28)

(Praised be, my Lord, for our sister, which is the death of our mortal bodies,  
a death no living human being can avoid.)

In brief, St. Francis addresses all painful aspects of human existence, from direct violence inflicted upon humans by other humans to life's countless trials and tribulations as well as death, calling blessed all those who bear everything in peace ("Beati quelli ke'l sosterranno in pace" v. 25) because God will crown them ("sirano incoronati" v. 26). According to St. Francis, therefore, two are the possible outcomes in human life: that of those who bring about violence and refuse tolerance and sacrifice — "guai a'quelli ke morranno ne le peccata mortali" ("woe to those who will die in mortal sin" v. 21) — and that of those who forgive, accepting suffering and embracing sacrifice: "beati quelli ke [sora nostra morte corporale] trovarà ne le tue sanctissime voluntati / ka la morte secunda no'l farrà male" ("blessed are those whom [death] will find in your most holy will, because eternal death will not harm them" vv. 30-31). Thus, St. Francis's hymn contains in a nutshell some of the major themes of this volume: the presence of violence in the world, the need for humans to accept and tolerate it — he even speaks of forgiveness — and the possibility for all human trials and tribulations, even death, to become a redeeming sacrifice. But the certitude of a "second death" befalling the wicked bears out, at the same time, a belief in a justice that opposes uncontrolled violence.

It is precisely the issue of justice, or what we may call a controlled response to violence, that several essays in this volume address and problematize, particularly as it relates to some of the most grievous historical events and phenomena of the twentieth century: fascism and the persecution of Jews, the mafia, and terrorism. If we move outside the boundaries of Christian faith and onto more secular terrain, a "second death" coincides with silence or with the normalization of these tragic events. In his gloss of the writings by W. B. Sebald (18 May 1944 – 14 December 2001), Slavoj Žižek succinctly addresses what is at stake in the search for a compensatory principle that is truly just: "When a subject is hurt in such a devastating way that the very idea of revenge according to *ius talionis* is no less ridiculous than the promise of the reconciliation with the perpetrator after the perpetrator's atonement, the only thing that remains is to persist in the 'unremitting denunciation of injustice'" (*Violence* 189). Analyses of violence are inevitably tasked with unpacking what remains after the trauma and what cannot be completely subsumed, much less naturalized, by compensatory mechanisms or overarching theoretical frameworks. Redemption is, at least from a secular standpoint, always unfinished business.

What St. Francis outlines in his "Laudes creaturarum" and is further

developed in the writings of the first Franciscans (*Fonti francescane*), lies at the basis of Dante's poetic rendition of the spiritual other world, as **Ellie Emslie Stevens** illustrates in her "Eschatological Inversions in Isaiah and Dante: From Malicious to Redemptive Violence," which focuses on the employment of the term and concept of "violence" in the prophet Isaiah and the *Divine Comedy*. In Isaiah's holy mountain, in Dante's Earthly Paradise, and in the Dantean Paradise, no violence exists; by contrast, the souls in Dante's Hell are continuously affected by violence, a parodic reversal of what they practiced on Earth. Thus Dante fully develops the fundamental Christian principles already present in St. Francis's *Laudes creaturarum*: those who have embraced Christ's violent, bloody, and redemptive death — the souls in Heaven but also those in Purgatory — either exult in their eternal glory or welcome and even rejoice in their transforming purifications. By contrast, the souls in Hell, who have refused Christ's redemptive sacrifice by inflicting violence upon others and rejecting forgiveness, are forever condemned to eternal punishment. In this manner rewards and punishments create a system of justice, redressing what was amiss on Earth.

In brief, while violence always generates violence, forgiveness may bring about peace. The essays that follow will likewise reflect on the phenomenon of violence, albeit from varying perspectives.

Just as violence affects the beginnings of Italy's literary culture, violence is at work also in some of Italy's most glorious moments: Humanism and the Renaissance. "Cain rules the world. If anyone doubts it let him read the history of the world": This statement of Léopold Szondi (1893-1986) depicts the "murderous inclination" described as an "innate aggressive drive," inextricably rooted in the mind of "the human beast" since primordial times — a human tendency that, according to his views, can only be "repressed but never" eradicated.<sup>14</sup> Szondi's depiction of the ferocity of human nature may be read to introduce appropriately the essay of **Marta Celati**, "Violence and Revenge in Fifteenth-century Political Literature." Her inquiry focuses on the accounts of famous early Renaissance conspiracies written by some of the masterminds of the *studia humanitatis*: the *Porcaria coniuratio* by Leon Battista Alberti, the *De bello Neapolitano* by Giovanni Pontano, the *Coniurationis commentarium* by Angelo Poliziano, and the *Porcaria* by the lesser famous Orazio Romano. These writings focus on Stefano Porcari's insurrectional plot against Pope Nicholas V in Rome, the revolt attempted against Ferdinand of Aragon in Naples, and the Congiura de' Pazzi conspiracy against the Medicis in Florence. As Celati remarks, the major motivation that inspired these writings was the fact that their authors "were deeply engaged in the political life of their states" and therefore

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<sup>14</sup> A psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and psychopathologist, Szondi wrote, among other books, *Kain: Gestalten des Bösen* (literally, Cain: Forms of Evil). All quotations are taken from Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1).

felt “mostly committed to composing literary works in support of political rulers.” Celati’s inquiry shows how this “*corpus*” of writings is entirely “political,” since its intent is to achieve effective “propagandistic aims” that would favor the targeted rulers. Consequently, the conspirators’ actions are cast within a climax of “verbal violence” and of gruesome images, chosen first and foremost to degrade the attackers to the rank of ruthless criminals, and subsequently to refer to them as de-humanized savage beasts with an innate ferocious instinct, whose extent Pontano describes with the Latin term *immanitas*. By contrast, the violent and repressive response orchestrated by the rulers against whom the conspiracy was perpetrated is praised by the humanists as noble, righteous, and necessary, fully revealing their noble ethical standards.

The next essay, by **Olimpia Pelosi** — “Offerire a Dio il nostro corpo come vittima mortificata”: violenza mistica in Isabella Cristina Berinzaga (1551-1624), Maria Domitilla Galluzzi (1595-1671) e Chiara Isabella Fornari (1697-1744)” — focuses on a twofold aspect of violence. The first springs from within as a self-inflicted pain, while the second derives from without: the suspicious and vigilant eye of the post-Tridentine Roman church. The contrastive analysis of these three women’s spiritual writings points out similar patterns such as their violent and abusive familial background, their perception of feminine corporeality as negative and abject, their total submission to male spiritual directors, their compelling need to offer their bodies as sacrificial victims while pursuing a perfect *imitatio Christi*, and last, but not least, their new perception of the divine as an embracing, loving infinity.

Concerning secular affairs, the tumultuous time of “violent conflicts” undertaken by the Serenissima between 1494 and 1529, and the deeply rooted violence which surfaces in the plays of Angelo Beolco (also known as Il Ruzante), are the topics that **Linda L. Carroll** deals with in her “‘Tanto che l’arò amazò’: Violence in Angelo Beolco’s Plays and in His Associates’ Lives.” Carroll outlines the escalating violence which pervades the playwright’s production, also pointing out that in one of his plays, entitled *Bilora*, “violence culminates in the only known on-stage murder in Italian Renaissance comedy.” Carroll contextualizes Beolco’s violent literary choices within a well-documented historical frame of murderous political infighting among hostile factions and with a detailed description of the climate of destructiveness that “roiled” Venice and its territories.

War is also the theme of **Lucia Gemmani**’s inquiry: “Violenza ludica ed erotica per esorcizzare la guerra: i giochi nell’*Adone* di Marino.” The essay presents the poet of the *meraviglia* as *poeta ludens* who metaphorizes and demystifies the devastating fury of conflicts by converting it into a ritualized game in Cantos V, XIII, XV, and XX of his *Adone* (1623). Gemmani extrapolates from the so-called “poema di pace” a multiplicity of violent elements disguised under symbolic, parodic, mythopoetic, and sacrificial components. The essay’s interpretive strategy clearly shows that Marino’s

lyrical universe is a protean space where concepts of “war and game” are strictly intertwined in a “one-to one” connection.

Bridging Baroque literature tales with their postmodern cinematic adaptation is the scope of **Cristina Mazzoni**’s contribution: “Violence in Fairy Tales: Basile’s *Lo cunto de li cunti* and Garrone’s *Il racconto dei racconti*.” Her investigation compares and contrasts Giambattista Basile’s *Pentamerone* with its cinematic adaptation by Matteo Garrone in 2015. Mazzoni observes that, although Basile’s fairy-tale collection is “saturated” with a baroque sense of “violence, cruelty, blood, and death,” all its violence is counterbalanced and softened by a form of ludic “humor” that the writer infuses in his narrative universe. On the contrary, Garrone’s film version (which is limited only to three tales) is constructed on a significant “intensification of violence” which appears to be pervasive, escalating, and more prolonged when compared to its literary archetype. Mazzoni notices that in the cinematic adaptation of *Lo cunto* there is neither a happy ending, nor a hope of salvation. The viewer is in fact overwhelmed by a “prominence” of “graphic and disturbing” images that evoke a sense of negative and uncanny spatiality, where sacrificial patterns are connected with a somber sense of magic and “destructive” violence, “especially as it is directed” toward feminine characters.

Moving to the nineteenth century, **Roberto Risso**’s essay, “‘Vogliamo noi rubare il mestiere al boia?’ Storia e violenza nel romanzo storico del primo Ottocento,” examines the “presence and function of violence in the *ventisettana*” edition of Manzoni’s *Promessi sposi*. Risso points out that violent imagery unravels already in the novel’s introduction, through the baroque metaphors of the “Guerra illustre contro il Tempo” and of the “Historia [che] passa in rassegna” gli anni “già fatti cadaveri [e] li schiera di nuovo in battaglia.” Manzoni’s novel is defined as a story permanently fueled by violence “at all levels: verbal [...], psychological [...], collective [...], historical.” Risso shows how this very violence reverberates, as an archetypal model, on the second generation of Italian historical novelists such as D’Azeglio, Grossi, Tommaseo, Guerrazzi, and Cantù. Fully involved in the passionate climate of the Risorgimento, Manzoni’s disciples take to the extreme the images of “active and reactive” violence, emphasizing its cathartic and patriotic function.

Next, **Maurizio Capone**’s essay, “Nievo al cospetto di Napoleone: condanna etica e razionalizzazione storica della violenza napoleonica nelle *Confessioni d’un italiano*,” further expands on Risso’s reflections in that it is centered on Ippolito Nievo, the author who inherited the tradition of the “romanzo storico” and modified it in the light of the changed historical context. *Le confessioni* was written between 1857 and 1858, on the threshold of Italy’s unification, and was published posthumously in 1867. In the analysis of the several violent episodes contained in the novel, particular attention is devoted to the “double” brutal “fact” of “violence perpetrated by Napoleon’s troops” that involves at once a building and a woman, both representing the past: the castle

of Fratta and an elderly noblewoman. Capone indicates that the novel bears an “ambivalent” attitude toward violence. On the one hand, Nievo’s “robust” elaboration of a personal “philosophy of history,” which nearly anticipates the modernist novel, allows him to firmly condemn gratuitous and self-referential violence; on the other hand, he is inclined to accept and justify brutal and even ferocious “historical violence” finalized to just cause of freedom and political independence. Modern readers may see this attitude as verging on the Marxian idea of “violence as lever of history.”

As we reach the twentieth century, a set of questions emerges when we cast a comprehensive view on the essays collected in this volume, and — an equally instructive task — interrogate the interstitial spaces and areas of convergence produced by their different perspectives and focus: Can we harness vulnerability to empower the Self rather than to harm the Other? What would this harnessing look like in a secular context? That is, can it be thought outside the confines of religious self-sacrifice or self-immolation? Vulnerability is here defined as “precarious life,” along the lines conceptualized by Judith Butler in relation to a non-violent ethics or, as she put it, “one that is based upon an understanding of how easily human life is annulled” (xvii).

In his essay “Rifiuto dell’io, intolleranza del vuoto e sacrificio narcisistico in Clemente Rebora,” **Francesco Capello** exposes a pseudo-altruistic “underside” of sacrificial self-identity that is seldom brought to light as it inevitably clashes with claims of personal ethical conduct and motives. In a vein reminiscent of Derrida’s meditation on the economy of the gift, yet original in its application of psychoanalytic theory, Capello’s analysis reveals the deeply self-interested nature of sacrificial discourse where the “gifting” of the self can actually disguise, as it does in Rebora’s case, a fundamentally narcissistic operation that refuses to grant autonomy to the Other.

Capello’s hermeneutical stance prompts us to consider an element of wider import for this volume. The point is not to call into question the sincerity or validity of religious belief but rather to explore the discursive suture (historically far from seamless) of religious and secular sacrificial constructs as it emerges (or is deployed) in different contexts and towards different ends.

The contradictions that arise in attempts to impose a Christological model upon secular phenomena such as violence and war are brought into stark relief in the essay “Curzio Malaparte and the Tragic Understanding of Modern History” by **Franco Baldasso**. His analysis of Malaparte’s radical rejection of post-war narratives of collective sacrifice and national redemption, articulated by Catholics as well as Communists, points to the limitations of such a model. The disturbing Christological figures in the novel *La pelle* “underscore the tragic fallacy behind totalitarian secularization of religious concepts” and provide a vivid account of the redemptive impossibility of the horrors of WWII. In a way that is not devoid of irony, Malaparte’s own fascist past seems to have found a discursive barrier in the epistemological tabula rasa conjured by *Kaputt* and *La*

*pelle*.

If textual violence in its negative “disfiguring” connotations is deliberately amplified by Malaparte, it is recovered and recoded positively in the essay that follows. The “figure” reconstituted in **Andrea Sartori’s** essay, “Antonio Barolini (1910-1971): Loss and Community against the Ethics of Power,” is one of melancholia: the translated text as a site that commemorates a loss that cannot be fully mourned and attempts to “domesticate” material violence — to control it by displacement. Multiple losses — of an original language, country of origin, and of a personal friend killed by the Nazis during the Resistance — are inscribed onto the object: a text written by Barolini in his native Italian language, subsequently translated into English by his wife Helen, and finally rewritten in Italian from the translation, hence becoming the “pre-text” for a critique of totalitarian violence and of essentialist political discourses.

In “Violenza, potere e corpo politico in Calvino: *La decapitazione dei capi*,” **Luca Pucci** probes the relationship between power and violence through a critical re-examination of four essays published by Calvino in 1969 — fragments of a novel that he envisioned but later abandoned for fear that it might be taken literally or misunderstood in the charged social and political atmosphere of the *anni di piombo*. Pucci’s essay links Calvino’s meditation to the analytical frameworks of Giorgio Agamben and René Girard, identifying several points of convergence among the three authors. This reading strategy furthers our understanding of Calvino’s oeuvre but also — and of special relevance for the theme of this volume — unpacks and magnifies the often opaque yet extremely productive mechanisms of ritualized violence.

As we have seen, several essays in this volume, albeit from different perspectives and with varying degrees of historical specificity, analyze forms of violence that are rooted in, or operate against the background of Italian fascism. In this respect **Luciano Parisi’s** essay, “Raccontare la violenza: le ragioni di Giacomina Limentani,” is no exception as it focuses on literary and musical texts that evoke painful memories of the persecution of Jews under the Italian dictatorship. The number of traumatic layers examined, however, is multiplied in Parisi’s essay as the act of victimization it describes is the gang rape by a fascist squad of a Jewish teenage girl. Indeed, the frequency with which violence against women, and violence related to gender difference, occurs in conjunction with discrimination based on other categories of difference such as race, ethnicity, and religious affiliation, prompts us to reflect on the overlapping spaces of vulnerability of the subject and on the mechanisms of justification that often accompany and facilitate the aggression toward vulnerable groups.

To “accompany” and to “facilitate” here do not mean to imply that the discursive and symbolic levels are to be kept separate from physical or material violence when one measures the impact or identifies the causes of violence. This point is underscored by **Michela Meschini** in her essay, “Molestie sociali e prigionie morali: la doppia esclusione della donna nella letteratura postcoloniale

italiana,” where the concept of “molestie morali” (Hirigoyen) that describes subtle, if no less pernicious, forms of aggression is used precisely to extend the sphere of injury to “non-material” and “invisible” practices. Meschini fruitfully links these practices to the notion of “systemic violence” elaborated by Žižek, a violence that permeates society and allows the system to function in a seemingly anonymous and automatic fashion: “[...] something like the notorious ‘dark matter’ of physics, the counterpart to an all-too-visible subjective violence” (2). The female characters in the novels by Ornella Vorpsi and Ubah Cristina Ali Farah illustrate this perverse relation of inside/outside for, as Meschini argues, the internalization of systemic violence crystallizes into a kind of moral prison of “divieti, limiti, riduzioni, e stereotipi — in cui la donna è costretta ‘normalmente’ a vivere e a costruire la propria individualità.”

A very different theorization of the relationship between systemic violence and vulnerability is presented in the essay by **Massimiliano L. Delfino**, “A Cinematic Anti-Monument against Mafia Violence: P. Diliberto’s *La mafia uccide solo d’estate*.” Here the cinematic language of docudrama and the biological field of immunization merge to “inoculate” the spectator and, by extension, the body politic of Italian society. Much like a vaccine, a controlled exposure (in this case, viewing) to the source of violence (mafia’s killings) aims to build stronger defenses against mafia culture. Vulnerability, it seems, can be deployed as strength by the organism at the individual as well as collective level. Indeed, Delfino’s essay prompts us to reconsider the ethical implications of exploiting vulnerability — a tool that all too often has been used negatively in cinematic representations, as **Vito Zagarrio** reminds us in his wide-ranging retrospective analysis, “‘A History of Violence’: violenza, resistenza, tolleranza, sacrificio nel cinema italiano.” We cannot, however, lose sight of the fact that the antidote itself can be “weaponized” and reinserted in the cycle of violence. Cinematic and literary representations of violence can be exchanged and consumed, even when they are created and circulated as critiques of consumerism, as the essay by **Danila Cannamela**, “The Pharmakeia of Blood: Misuse, Abuse, & Reuse in the Young Cannibals’ Narrative of Violence” illustrates.

At the volume’s conclusion, in “Tolleranza, violenza, diritti. In margine a una recente raccolta di studi,” **Enrico Zucchi** reflects on two interconnected notions — individuals’ rights and tolerance — which bear directly on the topic under scrutiny. Undisputedly, every individual possesses fundamental rights, which everyone is allowed to exercise freely while respecting everybody else’s rights. Acceptance of the other’s legitimate exercise of individual rights is the *sine qua non* to avoid conflict in every society, community, and smallest human nucleus. Both a mental habit and a practical virtue, tolerance becomes paramount when the other’s beliefs and practices differ from, or even conflict with, one’s own. But tolerance also signifies the individual’s capacity to bear

pain or hardship by practicing endurance, fortitude, and stamina vis-à-vis life's hardships and everyday dealings with fellow human beings.

##### 5. *Conclusions: Violence, Literature, and the Educator*

Some philosophers are willing to accept their discipline as a philosophy of violence (Strummiello, *Il logos violato*); some historians, like Karen Armstrong, see humankind's history as "fields of blood"; Christianity views every human being as torn and defiled within and thus capable of tearing their fellow humans apart. As far as literature is concerned, we may agree with Armstrong: "From a very early date, prophets and poets helped people to contemplate the tragedy of life and face up to the damage they did to others" (398). But we are all too aware that literature is also born out of violence, has often become a violent discourse, or at the very least it has time and again turned into a manifestation of the inhuman present in every human. If we believe in a future, better life, we hold this belief only through faith or through a very heightened self-esteem, which is oftentimes crushed by harsh reality. Our skepticism toward utopias has grown considerably, and traditional accounts of earthly paradises have all but disappeared.<sup>15</sup> As educators, intellectuals, and scholars, we are compelled to question the extent to which literature — in our case, Italian literature and culture — may have contributed to the universal violence running through humankind's history and seek ways to counteract it. In becoming aware of the pain that violence inflicts on others, we can perhaps become more tolerant of the pain that others cause to us and renew our attention to the pain perpetrated on vulnerable categories: the innocent, children, women, the helpless.<sup>16</sup>

To the extent that writers and scholars are human and are thus rooted in history, they too partake in the inhuman, violent aspect common to all human beings. Dealing with words, seeking to describe worlds external to them or to create with words a reality that exists only in their imagination, writers practice some form of violence in their acts of creation. Thus, as makers of words and makers of worlds with words, as our literature's greatest writers — Dante,

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<sup>15</sup> All forms of writings seeking to describe Edenic or utopic worlds are prompted by the desire to escape the sad, tragic world which we all inhabit. In an extensive article, "The Ends of Utopia," Kumar examines the reasons for the "loss, [...] the decline or death of utopia" (555). The author concludes thus: "The loss of utopia — if only for the time being — must nevertheless be a cause for regret. For over four hundred years it was one of the main vehicles for the expression of the hopes, aspirations, and schemes of humanity. It was a principal way of attempting to tame the future. [...] But even if we cannot resurrect utopia today, we have plenty to reflect on in past visions. The study of past utopias is perhaps the best way to ensure that the form survives, awaiting — who knows? — its time again" (564). On utopia at the time of the Enlightenment, see *Dictionnaire de l'utopie au temps des Lumières*.

<sup>16</sup> On the pain inflicted on the helpless we refer to Cavarero, *Orrorismo, ovvero della violenza sull'inerme*; also, more generally: Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*; on the suffering body: Scarry, *The Body in Pain*.

Petrarch, Boccaccio — remind us, they partake of, or seek to emulate, God's primordial act of creation, which, as we have seen above, may seem to us as not devoid of violence.

Just as violence pertains to the essence of human beings, it is also inherent in human discourse. Poets, artists, writers, and thus also literary critics, are involved in some form of violence in that they seek to achieve, or imitate, a purity which no longer exists, a human identity which has been fractured, a rationality which is always compromised, and a reality, true or imaginary, which is pleasing as often as it is also terrifying. Furthermore, the overwhelming evidence is that authors are more often drawn to subjects that deal, not with peace but war, not with harmony but disharmony, not with weakness but force, while they often approach literary forms with critical tools that emphasize the text's negative and violent aspects rather than its positive and peaceful renderings and manifestations.<sup>17</sup>

The question becomes: How do we teach Italian studies? Insofar as we agree that humankind's history has been painfully marked by violence from its beginning until the present time, we must also accept Italy's responsibility in causing the shedding of blood of its own people and others as well. Then, joining Karen Armstrong, if we wish to teach our students a way to attain "a viable world, we have to take responsibility for the pain of others and listen to narratives that challenge our sense of ourselves" (*Fields of Blood* 400). Armstrong poignant conclusion is that all of us "wrestle — in secular or religious ways — with 'nothingness,' the void at the heart of modern culture" (400). She closes with this sobering but also uplifting consideration:

When we confront the violence of our time, it is natural to harden our hearts to the global pain and deprivation that makes us feel uncomfortable, depressed, and frustrated. Yet we must find ways of contemplating these distressing facts of modern life, or we will lose the best part of our humanity. Somehow we have to find ways of doing what religion — at its best — has done for centuries: build a sense of global community, cultivate a sense of reverence and "equanimity" for all, and take responsibility for the suffering of the world. (401)<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, in acknowledging our role within the critical enterprise, let us reflect on the many violent manifestations in the texts we analyze and the reality we witness; let us develop a kind attitude toward Nature, which nurtures us in a

<sup>17</sup> This form of violence corresponds to the violence of philosophers. Here we are simplifying, adapting, and developing what Strummiello writes in regard to philosophy (*Il logos violato* 386-88) as we apply some of her reflections to literary studies.

<sup>18</sup> Toward the end of a very dense book on Islam (*Islam: passato, presente e futuro*), Küng proposes a hermeneutic, a pedagogy, and a praxis of peace to be pursued by the three monotheistic religions (716-20). He reflects on peace also at the end of his book on Judaism ("Epilogo: nessun nuovo ordine mondiale senza un nuovo ethos mondiale," *Ebraismo* 671-95) as well as in his study of Christianity (*Cristianesimo* 763-79).

truly Franciscan way; and let us embrace a tolerant, accepting, welcoming relationship with the other, a compassionate approach toward all those who suffer, and even a forgiving way of life.

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