Fascist Modernities
Italy, 1922–1945
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Six months before taking power, Mussolini asked readers of his new review "Gerarchia," "Does fascism aim at restoring the State, or subverting it? Is it order or disorder? . . . Is it possible to be conservatives and subversives at the same time? How does fascism intend to escape this vicious circle of paradoxical contradictions?" With an impossibly heterogeneous coalition of supporters, which included Nationalists, monarchists, national syndicalists, squaddisti, and conservative clericals, Mussolini did not really intend to clarify his movement's ideological identity. The fascist leader had initially marketed himself as a radical populist, using antibourgeois rhetoric and promises of access to land and voting rights to attract women, veterans, workers, and unemployed university graduates. Once he became prime minister in October 1922, though, this stance was all but jettisoned for a realpolitik approach that allowed for compromises with industrialists, the Church, and other major interest groups. Working in tandem with the fascist government, these elites recast political and economic institutions, adopting new strategies of compromise and coercion to maintain old privileges. By 1926, it seemed that conservative interests had been secured. Organized labor had been neutralized and negotiations had begun with Church officials that would lead to the 1929 Lateran Accords Concordat.

Yet it would be wrong to reduce fascism to a movement of bourgeois restoration. The "return to order" planned by Mussolini and his officials was merely the initial step of a comprehensive program of domestic transformation that would allow the country to emerge as an international and colonial power. The fascists' projects for collective change drew upon various liberal-era strains of thinking about Italian development, all of which envisioned the nation as a body whose individual parts had meaning only insofar as they ensured the harmonious functioning of the whole. In the
years preceding World War I, Positivists such as the criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso had utilized an organic model of the nation to justify interventions against those who complicated Italy’s achievement of social harmony. Modernity, in this scheme, became a means of managing societal development by facilitating the detection and segregation of criminals, political rebels, prostitutes, and other “atavistic” elements. The Italian Nationalist movement had also postulated the nation as an organic entity whose productive and reproductive energies were to be regulated and channeled to fulfill state goals. Nationalist thinkers such as Scipio Sighele, Alfredo Rocco, and Enrico Corradini had called for “order and collective discipline at home” to heal the “congenital Italian illness” of excessive individualism that had supposedly hindered Italy’s progress as an imperial force. The demographer Corrado Gini added his own concerns about degeneration to the Nationalist project, arguing that the key to Italy’s future as a modern and international power lay in the qualitative and quantitative amelioration of its population. As with the Positivists, emphasis was placed on the links between internal unity and foreign expansion.

All these ideas about the state’s role in the management of the modernization and nationalization processes found a place under fascism. For Gini and Rocco, who stood among the regime’s leading policy makers, the advent of dictatorship provided the opportunity to pursue a politics of expansionism without obstructions from organized labor and the political opposition. The new fascist rulers also intended to mobilize state resources to discipline social groups whose presence was thought to obstruct the efficient functioning of the national body. The managerial and normalizing aspects of this vision of governance are evident in a speech Rocco made soon after his 1925 appointment as minister of justice: “Fascism, too, believes that it is necessary to guarantee the individual the conditions required for the free development of his faculties... it is clear that a normal development of the individual life is necessary to social development. Necessary, provided that it is normal: an enormous and disordered development of some individuals and groups would be for society what an enormous and disordered development of cells is for an animal organism: a fatal disease.”

What this meant in practical terms became all too clear over the next years. From 1925 to 1929, a series of laws drafted by Rocco and other members of Mussolini’s government transformed Italy into a police state with extensive powers of surveillance and detention. Groups with autonomist tendencies (the Mafia, former squadrists, regionalists) were coerced to coordinate their interests with those of the state; ethnic minorities in border regions such as the Val d’Aosta and the Alto Adige, for example, were labeled as “anti-Italian and antifascist” and forced to adopt new “national” surnames. Other disciplinary measures punished “nonproductive” members of the national collective (single men and women, criminals, dissidents, homosexuals, vagrants) and provided for the confinement (confino) of problematic persons in remote areas. At the same time, the Central Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) was established under Gini’s direction to manage and manipulate the national population pool. For the next seventeen years, mass population transfers to bonifica sites, eugenics research, and other demographic policy initiatives formed the cornerstones of the regime’s policies of national transformation. Concurrently, the government created the OND as a vehicle for the indoctrination of peasants and the working class, who would learn the martial virtues of order and discipline through participation in collective cultural, tourist, and sporting events. Some of these initiatives certainly stemmed from the government’s designs to domesticate the Fascist National Party (PNF). Taken collectively, though, they also point to an attempt to actuate a program of social engineering (bonifica umana) that, Mussolini hoped, would transform “the character, mentality, habits, and customs of the Italian people” and “fascitize the Nation, until Italian and fascist, almost like Italian and Catholic, are one and the same thing.”

Mussolini’s 1927 Ascension Day speech clarified the larger goals that inspired such visions of collective change in Italy, presenting domestic and foreign policy measures as two sides of one totalitarian vision of national regeneration. Fascism’s modernity, in this speech, is linked to its supposed capacity to utilize the tools of science to reclaim and transform Italy and the Italians in ways that would facilitate international expansion. Nationalist programs would not only combat internal decadence by curtailing female emancipation but would close the demographic gap with dominant European nations and allow Italy to emerge as a leader on the continent. The government would undertake “necessary hygienic actions” to cure the “plagues” caused by southern “delinquents” and their “diseased” surroundings. As in Rocco’s speech, politics takes on a therapeutic cast: the state emerges as a rehabilitative institute, with Mussolini as its chief clinician. Tellingly, the fascist leader used a medical metaphor to let Italians know what would happen to those who persisted in “unhealthy” behaviors: “We remove them from circulation as a doctor would an infected person,” the Duce concluded.

The concern with degeneration that pervades this speech also stemmed from Mussolini’s fears of a subversion of racial hierarchies. That same year,
the Duce wrote a preface for the Italian translation of Richard Kraner's Spenglerian tract *Decline of Births: Death of Peoples*, which warned that decreases in European fertility endangered the global racial balance of power. In his preface, Mussolini warned that "the entire white race, the Western race, could be submerged by races of color that multiply with a rhythm unknown to our own." The Ascension Day speech addressed such concerns by offering a blueprint for a revolution in reproductive habits that would preserve white European hegemony. Demographic increase would not only make Italy a leader on the continent but would also solve Italy's land-hunger problem by permitting mass population transfers to Libya (held by Italy since 1911) and to future African colonies. For Mussolini, then, fascist modernity did not merely imply the defeat of degenerative influences within Italy, but also the neutralization of nonwhite races whose continued growth would bring about an era of "senseless disorder and unfathomable despair."  

**Politics and Patronage in Italian Fascist Culture**

Since the squadrist years, the fascists had taken Mussolini's ideal of "surgical violence" to heart as they cut short the lives of those at home and abroad whom they felt would obstruct the process of Italian regeneration. Concluding in 1923 that consensus was "as changeable as the sand formations at the edge of the sea," the Duce relied on force and intimidation rather than popular consent to sustain him as he transformed Italy from a democracy to a dictatorship.  

Yet, fascist officials recognized that brutality and coercion would prove counterproductive with the intellectual class. They lost no time in formulating "a special disciplinary system" for those whom they hoped would generate a fascist culture for domestic and foreign consumption. From the inception of the regime, promises of creative autonomy and state subsidies formed the parameters of a cultural policy that aimed to domesticate and normalize intellectuals while giving them the illusion that they worked within a pluralist system.

Two factors determined this "magnanimous" approach to aesthetic affairs. First was the desire to give fascism an air of respectability at a time of ongoing squadrist violence and illegal imprisonment of opposition leaders. Second was Mussolini's need to keep fascism inclusive enough to accommodate the agendas of his disparate group of supporters. The movement thus emerged in the press as an antidogmatic authoritarianism, and the Duce reiterated his commitment to creative autonomy when pressed to give an opinion on the function of art in his state. The repressive policy measures that accompanied this rhetoric, however, made clear that Mussolini's "tolerance" was the fruit of political pragmatism. In 1923–24, the fascists expanded press censorship and created a government press office, a state radio company (the *Unione Radiografia Italiana*), and a production center for newsreels and documentary films (the *Istituto LUCE*), establishing a foundation for later initiatives of mass indoctrination.

The efficacy of these instruments of propaganda control was tested late in 1924, when the fascists' murder of the popular Socialist politician Giacomo Matteotti provoked intense public hostility to Mussolini and his government. The Duce "resolved" the crisis with a political crackdown that mandated a heightened level of image control. Along with increasing censorship, the regime made its first serious attempts to recruit a corps of public intellectuals. At the inauguration of the National Institute of Fascist Culture (INCF) in March, Gentile asked attendees to sign a "Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals," which would be circulated in the press to prove that fascism was not incompatible with culture and civility. This initiative prompted the philosopher Benedetto Croce and others to produce a counter-manifesto, which appeared in the opposition daily *Il Mondo*. Croce had supported fascism even during the Matteotti crisis, seeing it as a buffer against mass society and leftist collectivism, but now became the regime's most prestigious dissident. The government quickly dismissed the Croce manifesto, but those who had signed it, such as the writer Marino Moretti, found themselves excluded from patronage networks for the years to come. Those who instead stuck by the fascists or chose this moment to declare their allegiance—as did the playwright Luigi Pirandello—increased their chances of official rewards, such as election to the Italian Academy.

The declaration of dictatorship in 1925 also led to the first attempts to create an infrastructure that would support the development of a fascist culture. The esprit de corps that had bound together members of the avant-garde now came under attack as the remnants of a decadent bohemiaism; although café society remained strong during the dictatorship, allegiances and affiliations of a public and statist nature increasingly structured Italian cultural life. No less than other social groups, intellectuals were subjected to *bonifica* policies meant to expurgate "unhealthy" tendencies from Italian culture and create disciplined cadres who would serve the state. Instead of liberal eclecticism and pluralism, which dissipated creative energies, the fascist intellectual should espouse "an effective intolerance[,] which is at the base of every constructive culture." Reclamation, here, aimed to produce a new totalitarian mentality among intellectuals that favored a militaristic "decisiveness and cleanliness in our thoughts and our positions."
Organizations such as the National Confederation of Fascist Syndicates of Professionals and Artists emerged as the primary motors of this political-aesthetic "coordination." In theory, only PNF adherents could join a syndicate, and only those listed in the registers (albi) of that syndicate were eligible for employment. The fascists claimed that the syndical system would stimulate quality cultural production by fostering peer competition for state subsidies. In practice, though, the syndicates were hardly meritocratic. Building on clientelistic traditions among Italian elites that predated fascism, syndical officials commandeered positions of authority in fascist cultural institutions. Influencing job offers, juries, and examination commissions, they shaped power and patronage networks based on party membership, habituating generations of intellectuals to practices and attitudes that would characterize the Italian cultural world long after the fall of the regime.  

The openly coercive character of fascist cultural policy did not stop officials from describing fascism as a "regime of liberty" that respected the autonomy of conscience. Along with the philosopher Gentile, the official Giuseppe Bottai played a crucial role in the formulation of this party line. Bottai had come to fascism via the ardisti futurist and Futurism, and quickly staked out a role within the dictatorship as the premier patron of all that was modern: corporativism, some forms of artistic modernism, youth, and, later, also anti-Semitism—which he understood as a salutary cure of degenerate influences on the national body. In 1923, as a means of attracting "that class which is most reluctant to join the party—the intellectuals," he had created Critica fascista as a forum for "open, serene, and responsible discussion." Naturally, "fascist criticism" did not mean "criticism of fascism"; the achievement of ideological unity, rather than the cultivation of pluralism, remained the official goal. As one writer argued in the review, through the practice of fascist criticism "dissent is manifested, clarified, and eliminated dialectically, leading to a granite-block synthesis that represents the new civilization." Indeed, for Bottai, as for many other rightists in interwar Europe, unregulated individual agency and civil liberties were among the legacies of the French revolution that had led Europe to a situation of social, political, and cultural crisis. Freedom, in this view, came through submission to a collective that regulated individual rights and duties, preventing both anarchy and atomization. Even as they restricted intellectual liberties, then, officials presented themselves as the protectors of individual spirituality and personhood. As Bottai wrote, fascism was the "last defense of Man" against the twin evils of "democratic leveling and communist annihilation."  

While this vision of a highly stratified society undoubtedly assuaged anxieties over the eclipse of transcendence and tradition within modernity, one might wonder how many Italian intellectuals truly believed that fascism constituted a force for freedom. In one sense it is a secondary question. As in other patronage situations, clients who wished to improve their positions were expected to make statements that confirmed their outward acceptance of the worldview of those who exercised power, regardless of their private beliefs. In this light, interventions in the fascist press constituted linguistic performances designed to demonstrate fidelity and a willingness to stay in a game that all the players knew was fixed.  

For their part, Italian officials made it as easy as possible for intellectuals to participate by continually emphasizing fascism's commitment to freedom of conscience and opinion. In a 1928 speech to the directors of sixty daily newspapers, the Duce reiterated his will to maintain "a diversity of artists and temperaments" within the dictatorship, reasoning that overly politicized cultural criticism and cultural production would cause fascism to cut a brutta figura (bad figure) at home and abroad:  

In the fields of art, science, and philosophy, the party card cannot create a situation of privilege or immunity, just as it must be permissible to say that Mussolini, as a violin player, is a very modest dilettante; it must also be permissible to advance objective judgments on art, prose, poetry, and theater without the threat of a veto due to an irregular party card. Here party discipline has no place. Here the revolution does not enter. . . . A fellow may be a volubulous fascist, even of the first hour, but an idiot [deficiente] as a poet. The public must not be put in the position of having to choose between looking like antifascists for boozing, or looking stupid and vile for applauding literary failures, poetic babblings, and housepainters' art. The party card does not give talent to those who don't already possess it.  

Such assurances of creative autonomy gave Italians something to work with. Over the next years, some intellectuals developed discursive strategies that may have minimized what Francesco Flora would later refer to as a collective sense of "habitable guilt." In discussions of cultural affairs, many came to favor an elliptical linguistic style that discouraged open political references and supported the comforting collective myth that the world of ideas ran on a strictly parallel course with that of the dictatorship. While such elusiveness angered party militants who wished for a more overt "fascization" of Italian culture, several factors encouraged its diffusion. First was the influence of Crocean ideas of artistic autonomy, which made many intellectuals pause before the prospect of an openly propagandistic
art. Second was the regime’s goal of increasing its approval ratings abroad, which mandated the use of a “neutral” language at events that attracted high-profile foreigners. Third was the desire to involve as many Italian intellectuals as possible in public cultural initiatives, even those who may have wished to reap the rewards of participation with a minimum of compromise. When the painter Ardengo Soffici urged his peers to produce works “inspired by the reality surrounding us,” was the referent for this reality fascism or simply contemporary society? It was far shrewder not to say.

The regime’s efforts to win over the intellectual class and create a mechanism for the continuous renewal of its authority also hinged on the promise of something much more tangible than creative autonomy: material aid. At the popular level, the dictatorship involved peasants and other Italians in spectacles that proclaimed its ability to orchestrate the population. Among intellectuals, though, gift giving emerged as the most effective medium for the circulation of state power. The profferal and acceptance of countless subsidies, grants, and prizes ceaselessly renewed the ties that bind culture and the regime and occasioned public declarations of support that, even if insincere, legitimated fascism and added to its symbolic authority.

The policies of the Italian Academy, one of the regime’s principal patronage institutions, clarify how the task of creating a national culture became intertwined with the desire to draw intellectuals into clientelistic relationships with the government. Inaugurated in 1929, the Academy’s official goals were to “promote and coordinate Italian intellectual movement in the fields of science, literature and the arts, keep the national character pure in accordance with the genius and traditions of the stock, and favor the expansion and influence of this national spirit outside the confines of the state.” To this end, the Academy financed an unsuccessful campaign for linguistic autarchy and established a State Record Library (Discoteca dello Stato) for the preservation of traditional songs and dialects. The Academicians, who included the Nobel Prize winners Enrico Fermi and Pirandello, were supposed to bring the body prestige, but informers’ reports relate that most nominations aroused contempt among Italians and the resident foreign community. “The Academy is an institution devoid of content and lacking any reason for being,” one Roman spy wrote in 1930, conveying the current café consensus on the subject.

This scornful attitude did not stop thousands of intellectuals from applying for Academy grants to fund their creative and scholarly endeavors. Well-known Italians like the writers Ada Negri and Emilio Cecchi each received the lucrative Mussolini Prize, which was funded by the proprietors of the newspaper Corriere della sera. The painter Mario Mafai and the writers Anna Maria Ortese and Elio Vittorini were among the many members of Italy’s postwar elite who won the much smaller “encouragement prizes” (premi d’incoraggiamento) aimed at younger, relatively unknown intellectuals. Like all ritual gifts, these came with strings attached: good intentions mingled with a desire to co-opt and control. While the Academy did promote culture under the dictatorship, its primary function, as stated in Critica fascista, was to check the “excessive individualism of our intellectuals” and prevent “the formation of literary and artistic hierarchies that might act against the State.”

If the regime’s new institutional framework for culture allowed officials to monitor and “coordinate” the activities of intellectuals, it did little to stimulate the development of a specifically fascist culture. To redress this problem, in 1926–27 Critica fascista asked prominent intellectuals for their opinions on “fascist art,” starting a public debate about the relationship of politics and culture that continued until the fall of the regime. Although all the participants echoed Mino Maccari’s contention that fascist art would have to be “intimately and unmistakably Italian,” no consensus could be reached on what that might mean. For the conservative critic Cipriano Efisio Oppo, Italianità (Italianness) stood for order, discipline, and the classical heritage, while the Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti interpreted it as a penchant for the spontaneous and the original. The most politic associated Italy with beatific equilibrium in all things: the country was at once spiritual and temporal, classical and Romantic, traditional and modern. It was a place whose culture, Soffici asserted, “unites the experience of the past with the promise of the future.”

Although these intellectuals proved reluctant to enunciate positive guidelines for fascist art, they did not hesitate to declare what that art must not be. Soffici denounced artists whose works showed “anti-Italian, liberal, Judaic, Masonic, and democratic” tendencies, and Bottai launched a not-so-veiled attack on modernism, labeling “psychoanalytic, fragmentary, synec- pated” works as “rebellions against the great Italian artistic tradition.” The official Alessandro Pavolini, who would later help to deport Jews to Nazi death camps during the period of the Republic of Salò, contributed a vitriolic, if coded, attack on Jews and other “cosmopolitan elements.” He decried “recluses in ivory towers who speak to each other in their latest jargon, above the fray and beyond national borders[,] . . . critics who speak a mys- terious tongue, editors of unreadable journals, frauds and pervers, lazy intellectuals and idiotic wheelers and dealers, merchants who buy for five and resell for a thousand after the death of the ‘misunderstood artist.’” The practices inaugurated in the course of Bottai’s initiative
would be followed by much of the fascist intellectual community until the fall of the regime. Although it remained bad form to mandate the style or content of the new national culture, the public naming of negative and undesirable traits was encouraged as a way of steering Italians away from certain tastes. Fascist anti-Semitism, which received no political or legal expression until the late thirties, found its earliest and most congenial home in the cultural press, where "Judaic" soon came to stand for the foreign and the pathological. The stated desire to cleanse Italian culture of Jews and others who acted as agents of decadent foreign modernities would find official support after 1936 in the campaigns for cultural autarchy and cultural reclamation.27

As Bottai's survey came to a close, two factions of intellectuals vied for the right to stand as the leading expression of fascist art. Both Strapaese (Supervillage) and Novecento (Twentieth Century) claimed to be the supreme interpreters of italianità but held contrasting conceptions of the meaning of Italian modernity and national identity. Yet both movements expressed a desire to fashion an Italian mass culture that would meet the challenges posed by Americanization. Led by the artist Mino Maccari, a former squadrist, Strapaese took shape in the midst of the Matteotti crisis as a lobby for intellectuals who opposed the abandonment of fascism's revolutionary politics. These same autonomist tendencies doomed it to an early death as a political project, and Maccari decided to shift the group's field of struggle to the plane of aesthetics: "We have well understood that today not everyone is allowed to engage in politics. For fascism, politics is the art of the government, not the party. . . . thus Strapaese [the group's journal] . . . has closed its squadrist period and has chosen a new existence centered on the cultivation of art."28 Over the next fifteen years, under the guise of cultural politics, Maccari and his colleagues protested the transformations being produced in Italy by the convergence of consumer capitalism and the centralizing tendencies of the fascist state. Against a threatening culture of "fads, foreign ideas, and modernist civilization," the intellectuals of Strapaese proposed a model of community based on ethnic identity. Here, the local stood as a synecdoche for the national, and the village as a repository of national tradition. Of course, local identities had long served to filter the experience of national belonging in Europe; the slipperiness between the two allegiances is expressed in the double meaning of the words Heimat, paese, and pays, which can refer to both a national and a provincial homeland. In Italy, though, where regionalist sentiments had continued to form an integral, if contested, component of national identities, the Strapaese movement offered a way to build a national culture on autochthonous models. The paese became a formative agent for what Maccari called "a modernity of our own, an Italian modernity," one that would preserve local actions and allegiances within the modern mass state (fig. 1).29

The intellectuals of the Novecento movement took a different route to the construction of a national culture. As an architectural and artistic trend, Novecentismo took shape as an attempt to create a modern aesthetic with visible roots in Italy's rich cultural past.30 Literary Novecentismo's patriotic profile was less evident at first. Its journal, '900, was published entirely in French for the first two years, it featured works by André Malraux and D. H. Lawrence, and its editorial board included James Joyce, Georg Kaiser, and Ilya Ehrenburg. The review met with hostility from the editors of the
Strapase-allied review L'Italiano, who accused Bontempelli of diffusing a modernist culture designed for and by "Jews and peddlers." Yet '900's cosmopolitan ethos was founded on impeccable imperialist principles, as the statements of its editors Massimo Bontempelli and Curzio Malaparte make clear. Bontempelli believed that Italians could dominate Europe and compete with America for cultural hegemony only if they became "rapidly and conscientiously acquainted with all of the developments that the rest of Europe has achieved on its own." Like the Futurists, who launched their hypernationalistic movement in the pages of a French newspaper, the editors of '900 chose to publish in French after making a pragmatic assessment of the realities of the international cultural marketplace. As the former diplomat Malaparte maintained, it was the most "tactful and tasteful" way to publicize the values of fascism abroad.31

Imperial pretensions also shaped the aesthetics of literary Novecentism, which aimed to develop a corpus of national texts with a transnational and transhistorical significance. Liberal-era solipsism and materialism would give way to a collectivist and mythopoetic sensibility that would "infuse daily things with a sense of mystery," transforming local and quotidian realities and truths into universal ones. This "magic realism," as Bontempelli called it, placed writers in the role of bards of the fascist national community and invested them with the task of "inventing myths and fables that then distance themselves from the writer to the point of losing all contact with his pen. In this way they become the common patrimony of men and almost things of nature." The will to transmute chronicle into epic and history into nature has often accompanied the fashioning of national cultures. In fascist Italy, it underwrote an intertwined agenda of domestic consolidation and imperial expansion.32

As the thirties began, the existence of new cultural movements and organizations did not prevent Italians from complaining that, in cultural affairs, fascism remained a révolution manquée. The editor Gherardo Casini lamented that the dictatorship enjoyed only a "superficial consensus" among intellectuals: although everything had a fascist label on it, nothing was "really and substantially" fascist.33 Younger intellectuals emerged as the most vociferous critics of a fascist culture that seemed merely to perpetuate liberal-era aesthetics, authorities, and ideas. The twenty-seven-year-old journalist Berto Risci identified two of the factors that most hindered the development of a uniquely Italian and fascist modernity. First, he charged, many older intellectuals fetishized the past, remaining too dazzled by Italy's artistic heritage to conceive of a true break with tradition. Second, a national inferiority complex, inherited from the liberal period, led many Italians to associate modernity with the achievements of more dominant nations. Taken together, these attitudes ensured that, ten years after the March on Rome, Italian modernity still consisted largely of "following the trends of German, French, or American modernity, ten years later: doing what is done abroad, but a bit later, a bit less, and (to use our much-loved adverb) moderately... so [we end up with] the contemporaneous triumph of the museum and America: and what gets screwed is the famous Italian modernity."34 In the early thirties, Risci's complaints were echoed by many intellectuals his age who wished to create a culture that would reflect the regime's "revolutionary" achievements in the political and social spheres. They also found an attentive audience in regime officials, who hoped to market fascism abroad as an antidote to the European crisis and realize culture's potential as an instrument of diplomacy. The convergence of these factors produced a new round of debates and policies designed to clarify the components and boundaries of fascist models of modernity.

TASTE WARS I: GENERATIONAL POLITICS
AND FASCIST AESTHETICS

In a 1933 novella, the twenty-six-year-old writer Vitaliano Brancati articulated the dilemma of the first generation to come of age under Italian fascism: "We are swimming over with vital energies. They've fired us up from all sides... But what are we supposed to do with these energies?... We conserve them, putting them aside in silence... Just what is it we're doing here? What do they want from us?" Celebrated in the press as fascism's next political and cultural elite, young intellectuals such as Brancati began their careers under a cloud of frustration. Born between 1905 and 1915, too late to have participated in World War I or the March on Rome, they felt out of place in a society that valorized martial virtues and conquest fantasies. Excluded from the collective memory of fascism's past, they claimed a central place for themselves in the fashioning of fascism's future. Yet, as the young art critic Nino Bertocchi charged, the government and the intellectual establishment cast them in a quite different role, as "those who look on[,]... those who, for good or ill, merely obey."35

Such complaints unsettled officials who considered one of fascism's central tasks to be the creation of a future political and intellectual elite. Yet as we will see in chapter 4, the fascists themselves had created the conditions for the production of separatist discourses. Generational thinking had always been integral to Mussolini's movement, and the construct of "youth"
performed for the fascists in the same way that class and race had for the Bolsheviks and National Socialists—as a mobilizing and integrating national myth. Bottai and his Critica fascista group, in particular, had long argued that fascism’s survival depended on its ability to have younger Italians identify their interests with those of the state. Starting in the late twenties, under Bottai’s guidance, the regime began a public campaign to favor youth for positions and patronage over Italians of the war and prewar generation.36

If the strategy of “making way for youth” (far largo ai giovani) did not lead to any significant changes in administrative personnel, it did restructure the field of fascist cultural debate. Starting in 1930, the government authorized the publication of a slew of independent youth reviews that denounced the continued hegemony of liberal-era arts and letters and advanced sincere, if often incoherent, programs for cultural modernization in Italy. The editors and contributors to publications such as Saggiatore, Orpheus, and L’Universale were an overwhelmingly male and middle-class group who lived in central and northern Italian cities. While their journals normally lasted only a few years and had a rather limited readership, they held interest as laboratories for the formulation of ideas about politics and aesthetics that would have influence in Italy long after the fall of the dictatorship. Romano Bilenchi, Mario Pannunzio, Indro Montanelli, and many others who would occupy prominent positions in postwar culture got their first experiences as journalists and public intellectuals in these reviews, which were read with interest and sometimes suspicion by government officials. Although each group worked in isolation at first, and each had its own particular attitudes and agenda, their shared goal of getting rid of the “old men and ideas that continue to reign undisturbed on the political and cultural stage” drew them into an alliance that, as one youth wrote, aimed to bring about “the birth of a new Weltanschauung” in Italy.37

Several causes united this generation and would influence its activities in the coming years. First and foremost was the embrace of cultural politics as a solution to and compensation for limitations on political activities. Culture became a surrogate sphere of operation and the primary means of expressing enthusiasm and animosities that otherwise could not be voiced. Lambasting their elders for their “lack of commitment,” writers in Milan, Bologna, Florence, and Rome advanced a vision of culture as “an arm, a means of action, an instrument on the same plane as other instruments in life,” and claimed for their own purposes the regime’s theme of intellectual mobilization. Voicing sentiments held by many his age, twenty-two-year-old Orpheus editor Luciano Anceschi characterized his cohort’s mission in 1933 as “the search for a new interpretation of the world rooted in the concrete needs of the masses. He who still wastes time dreaming of artificial literary paradises, who tries to evade the concrete with enchanting ‘invitations au voyage’ and reduces the world to his own experience, does not live in our climate, which requires the adoption of a nongeneric position with regard to all problems of life.”38

Second was the creation of a modern code of values that would allow Italians to rise to the challenges posed by mass society. As the university student Domenico Carella contended in his journal, Saggiatore, only by operating an “internal revolution” could individuals adapt to modernity’s new political forms, social practices, and mentalities. For Carella and his peers, the arbitration of taste contained a moral as well as aesthetic mandate: it implied a series of choices in how to organize society. Thus they criticized the continued hold of liberal-era philosophies and aesthetics in Mussolini’s Italy as a primary obstacle to the realization of fascism’s ethical revolution. “If culture remains completely disininterested in all that is ‘new’ in contemporary life,” Carella wondered, “who will be able to form a conscience for modern man?”39 Over the next decade, the definition of the styles and values of fascist modernity would constitute one of this generation’s primary political projects.

The collective desire for engagement created support in the early 1930s for an aesthetic that, as one put it, would be “more direct and immediate in its effects.” Associating decorativism with democratic decadence and self-indulgence, young intellectuals such as Leo Longanesi argued for a “post-crisis aesthetic” that would be “poor, without much ‘artistic appeal,’ bare, crude, and very direct.” This new style would hold little appeal for “those who prefer theatrics, paper-mâché constructions and rhetorical garlands,” another warned, but would “represent man as an active force who engages with his society.” What was needed, as summed up by the philosophy student Giorgio Granata, was a “a work of integral reclamation” (un'opera di bonifica integrale) in this realm as well.40 This taste for the concrete was advanced by Rationalist architects who touted their streamlined designs as the embodiment of fascism’s constructive and anti-ideological ethos. Concurrently, young film critics championed a “cinematography of real life,” and their peers in music and literature called for “antieretical” compositional and writing styles. The moral connotations ascribed to this barebones aesthetic disposition were conveyed by the twenty-eight-year-old historian Delio Cantimori, who informed older Italians that “what counts for us is to be sincere and serious, to refuse to mystify our surroundings with beautiful words, to look at reality as it is, without fictions or hypocrisy,
without resorting to such cowardly cover-ups as blue skies, pink clouds, thrones, dominations, and little cherubs: beautiful but false. Reality means man, his life, his association with other men; with them, and for them, we live. Nothing else matters.”

This culture of “concreteness” and commitment was by no means restricted to Italy, however, nor to those on the right. In both communist and capitalist Europe, realism became a keyword of interwar cultural discourse, as intellectuals and artists experimented with narrative techniques and modes of analysis that would allow a more direct relationship between the observation and representation of mass society. In Weimar Germany, the new ethos found expression under the rubric of the amorphous Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) movement, which sought to represent reality without the distorting filters of individual emotion. A documentarist aesthetic took hold in film, painting, photography, and literature, and Logical Positivists joined Bauhaus architects in a campaign for a culture born, in Walter Gropius’s words, of “sober calculation and the precise analysis of practical experience.” The Neue Sachlichkeit’s credo of impersonality found few followers in France, but intellectuals there also sought to replace the culture of “pretense and plaster” that supposedly characterized the Third Republic. Young philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre gravitated to phenomenology and psychology, and aesthetic agendas took on an ethical significance. As Emmanuel Mounier explained in his journal, Esprit, “honest” art inspired by surrounding reality rather than subjective sentiment could help to resolve the crisis of values by offering “a complete vision of man.”

Then, as always, realism was a slippery term that invoked a variety of representational modes and ideological positions. Although social realism, socialist realism, magic realism, Neue Sachlichkeit, and neorealism all flourished between the wars and used similar lexicons, they had radically different political implications. Moreover, those who embraced the cult of objectivity were hardly objective. More often than not, the discourse of neutrality masked a desire to naturalize a politically derived worldview. In a sense, realism became a handy vessel that served parties and individuals in purveying their agendas as they competed for control of the social and ideological spaces opened up by the crisis of bourgeois democracy.

In Italy, in fact, the new outlook became closely associated with fascism, which had been advertised as an anti-ideological ideology even before the March on Rome. Depicting communism as a prisoner of rigid planning schemes, blackshirt propagandists pronounced fascism to be a dynamic, pragmatic, and quintessentially modern movement whose policies were dictated by the needs of the present. Fascism signified “clarity, simplicity of method, linearity of application, rectitude, and honesty,” one supporter wrote in a typical paean to totalitarian “transparency.” Thus, if in France and Weimar Germany the call for antihistorical aesthetics and philosophies often formed part of an oppositional political agenda, Italian intellectuals often identified their interests with those of the government. As the editors of Saggiatore argued, this convergence of attitudes put Italians in a privileged position with respect to other countries, since diffused aspirations could be transformed into concrete policies: “Decadence of democracies, intolerance of all old ideologies, the creation of new ethics, calls for new realisms... are by now common terms in the vocabulary of young intellectuals in all countries. But it is Italy’s task to take these symptoms and themes and form from them a new culture.”

TASTE WARS II: ANXIETIES OF INFLUENCE

If fascism provided a political point of reference for this culture as it developed over the early thirties, foreign institutions and ideas also proved inspirational to those who wished to modernize Italy’s aesthetic identity. Temperament, rather than age, often determined the position one took on the question of foreign influence, and no strict generational divide can be drawn between those who built on the paradigms for national culture set up by the Strapaese and Novecento groups. Nonetheless, cultural debates took on a generational ring in the early thirties, as younger Italians who sought stylistic suggestions abroad came into conflict with members of the fascist cultural establishment who feared that uncontrolled foreign influence might bring about the loss of national cultural traditions. To win them over, some younger intellectuals argued that borrowing from other cultures was itself a hallowed practice in Italian history. Refuting criticism from older architects that his movement’s buildings were anti-Italian, the Rationalist architect Carlo Enrico Rava contended that “Italy has always absorbed, assimilated, and recreated what it has received from other races, making it something entirely ours.” Their intent was not to imitate other nations, Rava argued, but to learn from them as a means of creating superior cultural products that would expand Italian influence abroad.

Although some fascist cultural authorities never accepted this line of reasoning, several factors pushed Mussolini and many officials to promote a form of cultural internationalism in the early thirties. First, Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia emerged as rivals in the race to establish an antidemocratic new order. Faced with regimes that, like fascism, offered supra-
nationalist solutions to the crisis of the nation-state, Mussolini sought to cultivate a more international image. He acted as senior statesman during the negotiation of the 1933 Four Power Pact and patronized "universal fascist" currents that sought to realize his movement's transnational potential. Second, Italy was in the midst of a tourist crisis brought on by the revaluation of the lira and the depression, and Mussolini needed to improve fascism's standing abroad to lure foreigners back into the country.49

These concerns created support for a politics of cultural "openness" with two intertwined goals: to expose Italian intellectuals to the latest foreign trends, allowing them to fashion a modern culture that could be exported to other countries, and to attract foreign intellectuals into Italy in the hope of converting them to the fascist cause. To this end, cultural bureaucrats such as Bottai and Luigi Chiarini mobilized state resources to manage processes of exchange and appropriation that had gone on informally in the liberal period. Writing in 1932 in his Ministry of Education–linked review Educação fascista, Chiarini proposed a three-point strategy for the development and marketing of a new national culture. First, Italians must become informed about the latest trends abroad, since "knowing other peoples also means knowing what they think of us[,] … how they reject or accept fascism." Second, "discussions and clarifications" were necessary before deciding on which innovations might be "absorbed" and "assimilated" into Italian traditions. This state-of-the-art national culture would then facilitate "the penetration and diffusion abroad of the doctrine and ideals of fascism."50

The new policy orientation gave rise to a variety of mechanisms that facilitated the examination and selective appropriation of foreign cultures. Educação fascista inaugurated a column entitled "Ideas beyond the Borders" to expose Italians to "the most diverse and extreme tendencies" of foreign avant-garde culture. Literary reviews such as Circoli, which translated foreign authors, received government subsidies, and official institutions such as the School for Corporate Sciences sponsored book series that examined how other peoples sought to "resolve questions that preoccupy us as well." As one author asserted in an INCF-sponsored study on the international treatment of ethnic minorities, "Fascism gives just weight to the experiences of other nations. … their experiments are precious to us as sources of information and comparison."51 Daily newspapers devoted more space to foreign trends and reportage from abroad, while L'Architettura, the journal of the architects' syndicate, announced that it would give more space to foreign design trends. "It is necessary to have a thorough knowledge of what others are doing in order to surpass them," one editor wrote in explaining the change to the journal's conservative readership.52

Bringing a managerial mentality to bear upon the old national ideal of aggiornamento, the regime also invested in international congresses and study centers that would attract high-profile foreign intellectuals into fascist Italy. The Institute for International Film Education hosted Rudolph Arnheim, who wrote Film als Kunst (Film as Art) during his tenure in Rome, and big-budget conferences sponsored by the Italian Academy and other official entities brought Le Corbusier, Stefan Zweig, Alban Berg, Werner Sombart, Nadia Boelanger, and dozens of other luminaries onto Italian soil. While these encounters surely stimulated Italians, they were also designed to convince foreign elites that fascism cared about culture. As the composer and government functionary Mario Labroca reminded his peers in Critica fascista, "We do propaganda work not only when we export our ideas abroad, but also when we invite foreigners here so they can come into contact with our lifestyle and our way of thinking."53

As it turned out, conferences were only one component of a comprehensive politics of exhibition(ism) that, as the critic Ugo Ojetti termed it, placed fascist Italy "on display" in order to cultivate tourism, foreign currency holdings, and the cult of bella figura.54 Exhibitions had long been used by governments to communicate particular visions of social organization and substantiate their power to their citizens and to other states. Under Mussolini, exhibitions took on a central importance as agents of indoctrination and mass mobilization. Yet foreigners, as much as Italians, were the target audience of the festivals and other public offerings (including the infamous punctual trains) that proclaimed the end of Italy's historic inefficiency and cultural backwardness. The regime soon imposed a sort of Gleichschaltung on these spectacles, scheduling them in clusters to maximize their touristic and propagandistic potential. Following complaints from the prefect of Venice that foreigners "of class" were increasingly abandoning the city, an International Music Festival was added to the Venice Biennale art exhibition in 1930.55 The success of this initiative, which premiered works by Ernst Bloch, Darius Milhaud, and Paul Hindemith, who also performed as a violinist, led administrators to add film to the program as well. The first Biennale Film Show opened in 1932 in time to coincide with the Grape Festivals (Feste dell'Uva) held in September throughout Italy, and with the opening of the blockbuster Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution in Rome.56 In 1933, the coordination of such events became even more complete, with the Triennale architectural and design ex-
hibition serving as linchpin of a season of spectacle that included the Milan Trade Fair and international music and architectural congresses. In the midst of these events, the novelist Corrado Alvaro noted in his diary that fascism seemed less a nationalistic movement than "an attempt to Europeanize Italy[,] . . . to conform to other countries[,] . . . to open a window on Europe, but in a provincial way. It is the manifestation of the inferiority complex of the Italian middle class." 58

This politics of display and appropriation proved successful for the regime in several ways. First, as Alvaro correctly perceived, it helped to assuage ingrained anxieties about modern Italy's marginal status as a cultural power. The plethora of exhibitions also enabled the fascists to consolidate patronage relations, since writers, architects, scenographers, and artists of every type could compete for high-profile commissions. These "ensnaring enticements," as Flora later termed them, proved especially effective in drawing younger intellectuals into the regime's reward system. Giuseppe Pagano, Mario Mafai, Franco Albini, and Carlo Emilio Gadda were among the emerging talents who provided texts and images for government-generated displays. 59

Fascism's new internationalist orientation did not please everyone. The intellectuals of Strapaese protested that "it is simply ridiculous to bring false foreign novelties among us—even with the intention of absorbing them and using them for our own goals." Even those who were involved in the implementation of these policies specified that the regime's openness to foreign trends did not entail any relaxation of censorship or cultural controls. Commenting on the cosmopolitan program he had approved for the 1930 International Music Festival in Venice, the composer and fascist deputy Adriano Lualdi warned that government officials had no intention of becoming "accomplices in the importation of certain artistic poisons and drugs that have wreaked havoc beyond the Alps." 60

The critic Ugo Ojetti, who organized the 1933 music congress, reacted with particular alarm to this internationalist orientation. An Academician and president of the High Council for Antiquities and Fine Arts, the conservative Ojetti had long advocated Italy's autonomy in cultural affairs. In 1929, he had argued arrogantly that Italians did not need to look to other countries for inspiration because their culture represented an ideal synthesis of the world's civilizations. In 1932, even as he issued invitations to foreign music celebrities, he accused Bottai of modernizing at the expense of Italy's national identity and aesthetic patrimony. "For you it is important that Italy is not 'out of date,' for me it is important that Italy remain Italian," Ojetti declared polemically in his journal Pegaso. Bottai responded by reprinting Ojetti's attack in Critica fascista and appending a rebuttal so that he could have the last word. "Knowing something does not necessarily mean accepting it," Bottai reminded his critic. "It can also signify rejecting it, reacting to it, and gathering force for our own critique of it." Learning how nations like Germany, Russia, and America "face and resolve the contradictions of modern civilization" was essential if Italy intended to play a hegemonic role in a rapidly changing world. 61 Whether or not Ojetti agreed with this reasoning, by the end of 1933 he seemed to have acquiesced. The initial editorial of his new journal, Pan, promised to "keep readers informed of new developments, including those beyond the Alps and overseas, which will be measured against our own character and civilization." 62

IN SEARCH OF MODERNITY: ITALIANS ABROAD, 1929–34

In the early thirties, as the regime intensified its efforts to define a specifically Italian and fascist model of modernity, critiques of foreign cultures on Italian soil were complemented by the firsthand perspectives provided by intellectuals who traveled abroad. Anxieties over the social and economic crisis and the desire to increase exports created a ready market in Italy for information on foreign models of modernity. Reportage from New York, Berlin, and Moscow appeared regularly in La Stampa, Il Lavoro, Il Popolo d'Italia, and other newspapers.

Those who produced travel literature under the dictatorship differed widely in their motives, outlooks, and occupations. Novelists, former diplomats, engineers, psychologists, and architects joined journalists in turning their impressions of life abroad into print. Some authors swathed themselves in the mantle of journalistic objectivity, claiming that they had crossed the Alps "with the sole desire of looking and observing." Others, like the engineer Gaetano Cicco, whose 1933 account of his experiences in setting up a Fiat ball-bearings plant in Moscow went through six printings in five months, felt that reportages should "propose [solutions], ... not as a way of playing diplomat, but to aid the One who makes the decisions." 63

Indeed, while the works of this genre teem with facts about life abroad, they also convey the dominant political and ideological discourses of fascist Italy. More often than not, their comparisons between foreigners and Italians reaffirm the superiority of national tastes and social mores. Taken collectively, they helped to articulate visions of a mass society that would differ from American and Soviet models of modernity.

Italians had many fellow travelers as they pursued their purposeful
peregrinations after World War I. As Mary Nolan and other scholars have shown, the interest in rationalization and new models of industrial production led managers, academics, and labor leaders from Western Europe to America and Russia in the twenties and early thirties, while technicians and specialists from Britain and other countries helped to run the hydroelectric plants and factories of Stalin's Five-Year Plan. Italy attracted its share of foreign visitors who were curious about corporatism and fascist social planning schemes. European governments faced similar problems in the twenties and thirties, and looked beyond their borders to learn how allies and enemies implemented the public works programs, social welfare measures, and managed economies that composed the landscape of the new state-interventionist capitalism.64

As a model of mass society and modernity, Soviet Russia caused the most curiosity in Italians. In the years 1928–35, more than fifty books appeared on the place that one writer called "the grandest laboratory of social experience in existence."65 As the Italian government knew, the communist dictatorship exerted a special fascination in a country whose own leftist political culture had been persecuted out of existence. Disgruntled former socialists and idealistic young fascists were allowed to show their admiration for the Bolshevik state by depicting it as fascism's "enemy twin"—another mass regime with a flair for propaganda and mass mobilization. But wariness increased with the onset of the depression, when debates began all over Western Europe about which revolution—the red or the black—would guide the world in the future. As one blackshirt worried, "The decline of nineteenth-century civilization has left only two roads to follow: ours and theirs. And we can be sure that in time these two roads will meet. But will we end up on their path, or on ours? The serious person must ask himself: will it be Rome or Moscow?" The degree to which officials still worried about communism's attraction for Italians also came through clearly in Chiarini's journal, Educazione fascista, which reminded those who might be setting off for Russia to avoid ideological "confusions" by looking at Moscow "with the eyes of Rome."66

Whether out of conformism or self-censorship, most Italians did exactly that on their trips East. As a place where collectivism appeared to be proceeding "without any brakes or restraints," the Stalinist state played on ingrained fears about modernity's leveling effects. To many Italians, communism stood as an example of modernity's potential to forge a civilization that, by privileging uniformity and quantity over creativity and quality, would turn human beings into "automatic puppets." While other foreign visitors to Russia came to similar conclusions, in the Italian context such critiques of communism helped to create a consensus for the fascists' goal of actuating a mass society that preserved the spiritual realm.67

While economists and industrial planners focused on the mechanics of the Five-Year Plan, many writers and journalists concentrated on the social, psychological, and cultural effects provoked by Russia's "idolatry of the machine." Alvaro, who toured the country on assignment for La Stampa, evoked the image of a country selling its cultural patrimony to pay for machines, while Ugo Barzini denounced the sacrifice of humanism at the altar of a "religion of technology."68 The transformation of churches into restaurants, workers' circles, and party headquarters provoked equal horror in Italian travelers. A visit to the antireligious museum in Leningrad only strengthened the Catholic faith of the young novelist Enrico Emanuelli, who confessed that he "now believed more than ever."69

For many Italians, the reaction against religion in Russia constituted but one aspect of communism's abandonment of all things spiritual and natural—the family, the home, maternal and conjugal love, and private property. Collective kitchens and shared living spaces discomfited Italians who associated the hearth (focolare) and the dinner table with a private, familial space. Male travelers saw the "masculinized" Soviet woman as a symbol of this social disintegration and found communism's gender relations disorienting. "One suspects that a matriarchy is in the offing," wrote a disconsolate Alvaro from Moscow in 1934.70 Some Italians stressed Mother Russia's racial as well as sexual otherness, emphasizing the country's Asiatic and Jewish nature. The literary scholar Ettore Lo Gatto and the art critic Pier Maria Bardi presented the Soviet state as a place where Jews occupied positions of enormous economic and political authority.71 For visitors from fascist Italy, then, Russia represented a world that confirmed modernity's potential to undermine "natural" social and sexual hierarchies. Even Ciocca, who looked with sympathy upon many aspects of Soviet life, lambasted Russia for "renouncing thousand-year-old norms and habits and trying to destroy all vestiges of the past, confusing good and evil, tempting fate and the very dictates of nature." Moscow, he concluded, was to be studied, understood, and negated.72

For many other intellectuals, though, capitalist America, not communist Russia, formed the biggest threat to the survival of Italian institutions and ways of life. As Maccari warned his peers in Il Selvaggio, Americans relied not on political propaganda but on the insidious lures of mass culture to convince other nations to follow their path: "Today's enemy is unarmcd. . . . He enters into your house via newspapers, photographs, and books that diffuse his mentality. Look around you, Italians: and you'll see Americanism
all around you... we call a poor fool who sings a Communist song a subversive, and we smile, exalt, and honor those who are introducing among us things that will destroy our spiritual health.” Macchi's alarmist tone reflected the enormous popular appeal America had in fascist Italy as a symbol of glamour and freedom from tradition. Known above all for its cinema, America functioned in the interwar period as a giant screen upon which Italians projected their fears and fantasies about consumerism, sexual emancipation, and other developments associated with mass society. The ambivalence that most Italian intellectuals showed toward America is captured in Barzini's 1931 remark that the country was both "the most stupendous and powerful phenomenon of modernity in the world" and "a place where all the deviations of the spirit bear fruit." Other Europeans felt similarly divided. Many French intellectuals saw America's faults—disrespect for (French) traditions, small-scale economies, and individual eccentricities—as the source of its strength as a financial power, and few refused to see the films of Charlot, no matter what they said publicly about American cinematic imperialism. In both Italy and France, the thirties saw the formation of attitudes toward America that would continue, often under different political guises, long after 1945.

Still, America occupied a special place in the Italian imagination. Emigrations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had brought millions from the old world to the new, and letters and contact with those who made reverse migrations gave many Italians some familiarity, however mediated, with American culture. This sense of connectedness was encouraged by the fascist government, which labeled emigrants as "Italians abroad" and established free summer camps for emigrants' children to nurture their sense of Italian identity. Moreover, Mussolini adopted a friendly stance toward America in his first decade of rule, partly to guarantee Italy's receipt of monies from the J. P. Morgan loan and encourage exports. In this period, with the help of his eager admirer William Randolph Hearst, Mussolini wrote many articles for the American press that highlighted the putative similarities between the two countries—both were young, both were forging new ground, and both, at least in Hearst's papers, were anti-communist.

While pro-American attitudes found public expression until the outbreak of World War II, the Wall Street crash created a ready audience for anti-American messages as well. In the years of the depression, a flood of books and articles appeared whose depictions of the country ranged from ambivalent to hostile. Far from being the land of the free, America increas-

ingly appeared as a "dictatorship" of capital that enslaved its citizens to a materialistic lifestyle. Returning from the States, the critic Margherita Sarfatti reported that Americans had created a "modern, efficient, and rational hell" where the "roar of riches in the making" had replaced church bells and birdsong. Many accounts placed the blame on unregulated consumer capitalism, which standardized bodies and souls in its push to forge national markets. The journalist Valentino Piccoli likened the American socialization process to a Fordist assembly line: "The standard mentality is like an enormous octopus whose tentacles extend over all of life, imprisoning the mind and the spirit, forcing ideas and attitudes to conform to one type, in the same way that the great mechanized factories produce the different pieces of an auto according to a uniform model." Paradoxically, the most modern people on earth also seemed to be the most primitive. Adriana Dotterelli and other Italian visitors took the popularity of jazz, spy novels, comic books, and mass-produced trinkets as proof of Americans' infatuation and lack of taste. As the writer Emilio Cecchi reported after he returned from a year-long lectureship at the University of California at Berkeley in 1935, in matters of culture America was truly a blank slate. Describing a student's inability to pick out the Madonna figure in a Renaissance painting, Cecchi recalled, "I was ecstatic. I really was in the desert." As for French intellectuals, the notion of taste among Italians implied some internalization of cultural norms that, in turn, were indicative of shared moral and social discourses. The failure to provide for the education of the senses signified that, after 350 years, America had remained "prenatal" and primitive.

The New World served as a repository for Italians' fears over the shifting of racial hierarchies as well. Cecchi characterized the San Francisco Bay Area's black communities as "disturbing and swarming breeding grounds of that savagery to which America is still profoundly tied," and the painter Renato Paesano looked askance at the "animalistic" aspects of Hispanic culture. Even religious practices appeared to be showcases of regressive behavior. From New York, the writer Mario Soldati recorded the activities of black-influenced "carnal and colorful cults," and Paesano reported on the self-mutilation and crucifixion supposedly practiced by deviant Hispanic Catholic sects. "The American conscience is a ferment of barbaric and panicked energies," Cecchi concluded.

The "shockingly amoral" nature of American life also struck Italian observers who investigated gender relations and the family. Like their counterparts from France and Weimar Germany, Italians castigated American
women whose lifestyles confirmed the outcome of modern trends that had begun to manifest themselves at home: female emancipation, the supposed neglect of maternal duties, the eclipse of traditional patterns of seduction and courtship. American wives dominated their husbands, they claimed, and their focus on careers meant that, as in Stalinist Russia, the hearth and the home-cooked meal were things of the past. As one reporter observed, American homes consisted of "cold radiators, iron, cement, glass, and aluminum. All without history, beauty, or dreams. One has instead levers, buttons, floodlights, and base bulbs. Everything is standardized."  

Taken collectively, such texts created support for models of modernity that might maintain patriarchal traditions and strong family identities. By underscoring the tyranny of democratic models of modernity and social life, they also aided Italian intellectuals in sidestepping the issue of fascism's own violence and inhumanity. The case of the writer Soldati and his book America primo amore (America First Love, 1933) holds interest in this regard. In 1929, at the age of twenty-three, Soldati came to America to do graduate work in art history at Columbia University. A friend of Carlo Levi and student of Lionello Venturi, the Turin native was no fan of the regime, and he viewed his sojourn abroad as a step toward a possible emigration. After just two years, though, he returned voluntarily to live under the Italian dictatorship, and made peace with fascism in the interests of career ambitions and family obligations. He published several literary reportages drawn from his American experiences in the daily and periodical press, and in 1935 reprinted most of them in America primo amore, earning a reputation as a preeminent Italian commentator on America that persisted well into the postwar period.

Despite his book's title, Soldati depicts America as a violent and pathological place that stands as a warning against unchecked modernization. Unregulated consumer capitalism had created a new type of standardized mass-subject devoid of all taste and humanity. Emitting strange metallic odors, "like certain high-voltage electric machines," Americans were heartless automatons who thought nothing of throwing their relatives out on the street and who pursued their own interests at whatever cost. The random violence that plagued America was further evidence of American barbarism for Soldati. New World criminals did not fit Lombrosian stereotypes of degeneracy; assassins were "blond and handsome, with sweet eyes and serene expressions," driven to the criminal life by "inner emptiness" rather than defective genes. Every American was thus a potential killer (including Soldati's knife-brandishing Midwestern girlfriend), and crime formed part of the fabric of everyday life. "Violent and moral passions, kidnappings, evasions, lynchings, murders, and suicides[,] . . . there are more crimes in one day in America than in a whole year in Italy," Soldati wrote in a 1933 article that typified the unwillingness of many Italian intellectuals living under fascism to come to terms with their own government's state-sponsored brutality.

Discourses of gender and race also perform in America primo amore to underscore America's status as an emblem of deviant modernity. Like the mass culture and mass politics with which it was so closely associated, America was often likened to a woman for its primitivity, vulgarity, and capacity to seduce. As the writer Alberto Moravia reflected on the way home from his own sojourn in America, there "one is continually tempted, violated by things to eat things to buy things to enjoy, and all these things can be had for the asking. . . . it is a bit like the temptation of the bazaar, and of the brothel." In Soldati's book, America's "cosmopolitan and suffocating embrace" is embodied in the figure of a woman "as black as coal," whom he meets in a Harlem nightclub. He experiences the club's jazz music and dancing bodies with a "sense of strange freshness, almost of perversion," and wonders if his "fantastically sensual" dancing partner might be a prostitute. His adventure ends when he flees to the "sweet company" of his all-male Columbia dormitory, his "love of exoticism" temporarily sated.

At a broader level, Soldati's entire American stay is characterized as an unwholesome period of absorption into a very "un-Italian" sphere of decadence and femininity. In a preface that would be removed from most postwar editions of America primo amore, the writer foregrounds his desire for America as pathological:

Many men, for a period in their lives, that is, during their first love, believe that it is possible to exist totally outside of oneself and dedicate oneself exclusively to another person. In the same manner, during my American stay, I believed it was possible to evade: to change one's country, one's religion, one's memories and one's conscience. And for more than a year I lived with the morbid conviction that I had succeeded. The first love and the first journey are sicknesses that resemble one another.  

His decision to return to Mussolini's Italy thus appears to be a therapeutic act, an event that marks his return to his origins as a man and as an Italian. In the year following the publication of this book, Soldati demonstrated his commitment to completing his rehabilitation by scripting the colonial
film il grande appello (A Call to Arms, Mario Camerini, 1936), which, tellingly, recounts the transformation of a cynical Italian emigrant into a duty-bound patriot who sacrifices his life in the Ethiopian War.

America was not the only country that Italians routinely described in gendered terms. Fickle, faddish, and feminized in its compulsory disarmament, Weimar Germany came across in Italian writings as another example of modernity's potential to erode identities. With its Russian-inspired architecture and American-influenced films and factories, Germany offered the frightening example of how a nation could lose its sense of collective purpose and make the imitation of foreign trends into a way of life. During a six-month stay in Berlin, the writer Alvaro identified two elements of Weimar culture that facilitated this denationalization: the modernist scorn for the autochthonous and the traditional, and the influence of a cosmopolitan "Hebraism." "Italy, Russia, or America? Which of these new countries should we take as a model?" wrote another Italian critic, scornfully summing up the country's current disorientation. 89 Nowhere more than in the Weimar Republic did male travelers feel the weight of those shifts in gender relations that, in contemporary cultural discourse, often stood as the most visible sign of the crisis of "civilization." Italians reported that the triumph of female habits and logic in Germany had turned the country into a shrine to feminine consumer and erotic desire. Even in the bedroom, the New Woman had disrupted old patterns of life: by privileging performance over preliminaries, she had made sex into an "anonymous and indifferent act," depriving males of the "control and devotion" that made intimacy possible. 90

An autobiographical story by Alvaro based on his stay in Berlin in 1929-30 shows the extent to which changing sexual dynamics stood for modernity's threat to the established social order. Like the famous movie The Blue Angel (Josef von Sternberg, 1930) that preceded it, "Solitude" recounts a saga of female domination. An Italian visitor to Berlin becomes involved with Elfrida, whose shaved neck, managerial position, and sächliche manner mark her as the quintessential New Woman. When he visits her workplace, he feels like "an exotic fruit placed there as an ornament" and muses that he'd like to "give her a small humiliation." Yet he is the one who wakes up feeling ashamed and degraded after a night spent together. 91 A dinner party Elfrida takes him to clarifies the political referent of this world turned upside down, as we learn that all the guests are leftists, including a doctor who performs in drag at the end of the evening. Elfrida finally drives Alvaro's character to a hotel and abandons him there after a bout of lovemaking. As the story ends, he learns that her aim was to become pregnant and then raise the child on her own. In the Weimar Republic, Alvaro warns, men have become instruments of female ambitions and desires.

Russia, America, Germany: three dystopias whose fates Italians hoped to avoid. In the travel writings of this period, Russia, America, and Weimar Germany emerge as laboratories of a dangerous modernity that exploited the body, suffocated the spirit, and ultimately led to degeneration. Reportage on these countries functioned as a sort of border patrol, identifying which elements of contemporary existence would have no place in Italian modernity. It also gave intellectuals an opportunity to improve their political standing by affirming the superior freedoms that distinguished Italy under Mussolini. The journalist Giuseppe Lombrassa surely spoke both to his peers and to his patrons when he asserted that "we fascists have earned a great privilege: that of finally being able to look foreigners in the face without rancor or envy and tell the truth as it appears to us, without the need to exaggerate the bad or conceal the good for propagandistic reasons." 92 Among Italians who returned voluntarily to live under the dictatorship, the need to emphasize fascism's respect for personhood and humanity proved especially compelling. Alvaro argued after his return from Berlin that the only liberty that mattered was "the interior liberty of the individual." Paresce proclaimed that American liberty consisted mainly of the right to make money and "the right to kill oneself and, naturally, to be killed," and Soldati assured his compatriots upon his return from New York that Italy was "more civil, more solid, [and] more humane." 93 Such statements worked together with fascist officials' continual assurances of artistic autonomy, allowing intellectuals to deny or disavow the regime's everyday repression and remain in Italy to realize their own cultural ambitions and those of the government. The next chapters will examine how two generations of intellectuals articulated their visions of Italian and fascist modernity in the realms of literature and film.
2 Narrating the Nation

In a 1928 article entitled "Invitation to the Novel," the Italian literary critic Giovanni Titta Rosa remarked,

It is commonly said that there is no modern Italian life, and the little that exists does not offer material for the writer. The truth is the opposite. Modern Italian life exists, and is rich with passions, with content. The war and postwar—for those who have known how to understand them—offer the most varied and vast panorama of passions imaginable. I dare say that even the Napoleonic era did not produce such an outburst of expression.

Rather than remaining "in an ivory tower" in the face of such dramatic material, the critic concluded, Italian writers must "feel contemporary life in the most intimate and committed way."  

Titta Rosa's invitation was one of many launched by the literary establishment as part of a campaign to enlist the support of writers in the creation of a distinctly Italian and fascist model of modernity. As writers were organized into syndicates that would "discipline" their professional lives, they were also encouraged to generate works that, by disseminating the moral and spiritual values of Mussolini's revolution, would contribute to the cause of collective transformation. Titta Rosa's allusive language hardly conceals his attempt to inflate the representation of Italian modernity with the representation of the fascist era: in the years of the dictatorship, in fact, earlier calls for the modernization and nationalization of Italian literature became intertwined with the campaign to create a corpus of fascist works. Certainly, not all Italian writers and critics accepted the regime's claim to represent the nation, and few advocated an overtly political literature. Yet most did share the dictatorship's desire to foster the production of modern, identifiably national novels and stories that could be exported abroad. Aided by a literary etiquette that favored the use of inferential language in cultural debates, the vast majority of writers and critics participated in fascism's public literary culture, allowing officials to vaunt a formal consensus for their efforts to conscript the institution of literature for the battle of national regeneration.

For several reasons, the effort to inspire a literature reflective of a distinctly fascist modernity proved less than successful. The strength of Crogan injunctions against the politicization of art, and the desire to maintain the collective illusion of creative liberty under fascism, tempered impulses to realize an openly fascist literature. Many literary figures, even those of convinced fascist faith, considered it bad form to write overtly political works. This viewpoint was summed up in 1936 by the writer Arrigo Benedetti, who told the contributors to his new review, Letteratura, that "no one is talking about making political declarations. We may rarely write the word Fascism, even if I believe we cannot be uncertain in front of this term."  

The influence of foreign literary models also worked against the production of a cohesive body of blackshirt works, as did market conditions that favored foreign translations and escapist tales of the type the regime had vowed to eschew.

All the same, Mussolini's regime had far-reaching effects on the conceptualization, production, and critical reception of literary works in Italy. Although many authors managed to publish without joining the PNF, the state made full use of its powers to silence unacceptable voices and control the content and circulation of literary texts. Books and stories were routinely confiscated, altered by the censors, or condemned to oblivion through press directives that commanded critics to ignore them. In some cases, the censor's changes were extensive, complicating the issue of authorship. Other books were abandoned at the idea stage by their authors, who followed their instincts on what subjects to avoid. "I had a censor in myself," declared Alvaro a year after Mussolini's removal from office.

The Italian dictatorship's policies toward writers and critics consisted of a mix of disciplinary measures and patronage. With subsidies and prizes came the controls exercised by the syndical system that, however, disciplined the individual rather than his or her work. Until 1933, book censorship fell to the prefectures, whose employees often had limited literary expertise. To save costs and protect themselves from capricious decisions, authors and publishers made recourse to informal procedures of preventive censorship, such as showing authorities synopses of book projects or asking advice on ideas. As in the post-World War II state socialist regimes of Hungary and East Germany, censorship functioned less through heavyhanded repression than through collaboration with authors who negotiated
with authorities over a questionable tone or turn of phrase. A separate system of censorship existed for the daily and periodical press, which hosted literary debates, criticism, and installments of some of the best-known novels of this period. Every publication had to designate a prefect-approved individual who assumed legal responsibility, and directors of periodicals had to join the journalists' syndicate. Mussolini's Press Office distributed press directives and photographs, scrutinized publications, notified journalists of transgressions, and granted subsidies to newspapers, periodicals, and individuals.

Critics constituted the final class of authorities who shaped the institution of literature under the dictatorship. In many political contexts, critics can position themselves as agents of canon formation for high culture and as tastemakers who seek to mediate the public's contact with Art. The first link in the chain of reception, they participate actively in the postproduction of a text by helping to determine its public destiny and readership. Under a dictatorship, where the acts of interpretation and contextualization take on heightened importance, the critic's role is magnified. By editing out ambiguities, or by playing on the polyvalence of language, Italian critics could make texts perform as documents of an emerging fascist literature. Naturally, they could also exploit this same polyvalence to bring out the propositional message of a work for their readers. Press policies ensured that many newspaper critics were staunch fascists, however, who often worked directly with the government. In different ways, the texts that make up the literary history of these years bear the marks of a regime that arrogated the right to decide who could speak, what they could say, when and where they could say it, and to whom.

TOWARD A NEW ITALIAN LITERATURE

In the late twentieth century, before the regime had consolidated its disciplinary and patronage mechanisms, Italian writers and critics were not shy about denouncing the sorry state of their national literature. They charged that the continuing influence of liberal-era genres such as the lyrical prose fragment had left Italians incapable of producing what the young author Alberto Moravia called "a true and above all convincing representation of life." For various reasons, many of them championed the novel as a means of reviving Italian letters. For some, the passage from the literary fragment to the novel would mirror Italy's own transition from a regional to a national consciousness during World War I. As the literary historian Salvatore Rosati and others envisioned it, the focus on personal experience would be replaced with an emphasis on what was "universally national" in the Italian consciousness, allowing the novel to communicate the new identities that accompanied the advent of Italy's "first truly national life." Others argued that the novel's sweeping scope made it the literary form best suited to depict the complexities of mass society. The twenty-two-year-old critic and journalist Mario Pannunzio argued that only the novel could express the drama of the individual's destiny at a time of moral crisis and radical social transformations. He urged Italian writers to correct decades of reductivist Positivist depictions by narrating modern man "as a complete and whole figure who struggles with his fellow creatures, with nature, hunger, and death. The necessity of the novel today is a necessity for a return to the epic, in the etymological sense of the word; for a return to telling the stories of a perpetually suffering humanity that is endlessly changing. It is a story that is all the more evocative and poetic for being real, true, and topographical." Other partisans of the novel had political as well as literary interests in mind. While not every intellectual who championed the novel in these years can be termed a convinced supporter of fascism, many considered it the best literary vehicle for the dissemination of the regime's ideals in and outside of Italy. Specifically, the novel's potential to offer a more integrated portrait of the individual appealed to those who wished to utilize literature to inculcate fascist values. The novelist, in this view, would disseminate a "new ethical attitude" by choosing to focus on contemporary moral dilemmas. In this way, Granata wrote in Critica fascista, writers would fulfill a social function by "giving life to works that can provide clarification for each person." This "ethical" novel would also show its transparency through the use of realist codes of representation, which found favor among a broad spectrum of literary intellectuals. Several factors account for this preference for realist aesthetics. The experience of World War I was a catalyst for some older intellectuals: as in other countries, it produced a predilection for prose styles that would reflect the harsh and essential quality of combat experience. Another factor was the influence of fascism. The merger between art and life that Mussolini had always advocated would find its clearest expression, some claimed, in aesthetics that "go directly to the essentials, destroying the literary means that were so dear to the decadent period that preceded ours." Others, mindful of the didactic function the regime envisioned for culture, considered its communicative potential. After all, as the writer Massimo Botticelli contended in 1933, the task of the new avant-garde was not to perfect "a rare language destined for the ears of a few initiates," but to learn how to deliver a message to twenty thousand people in an orig-
nal and entertaining way. Finally, realism appealed to critics for its potential to perform as political speech while keeping up the appearance of artistic autonomy. Arnaldo Bocelli could thus couch his calls for a “new realism” in language that alluded to political as well as aesthetic necessities. Realism would satisfy “a fundamental need of our time and spirit: to leave behind old forms and formulas, to broaden our horizons, to look around us with eyes that are free from preconceived ideas, to observe the life being lived around us, to understand it, keep pace with it, and interpret it from within.” The formal consensus for realism among literary intellectuals did not denote the existence of a unified school of realist thought or practice. Whereas in Soviet Russia several years after literary debates ended in 1934 with the establishment of socialist realism as state policy, in Italy a variety of realist tendencies received official support and patronage throughout the fascist period. In literature, as in art and film, the government’s main goal was to muzzle realism’s critical bite, since officials knew that asking Italians to record reality in their works could easily prove counterproductive. Bontempielli’s “magic realism” provided one possible model, but its stress on mythmaking and evasion gave it little appeal for younger intellectuals who adhered to the thirties ethos of engagement. For the same reason, many writers rejected Bottai’s vision of the artist who “presents and embodies all the particulars of reality in order to reconcile its contradictions,” although this consolatory aesthetic inspired Italians in various fields who embraced an illustrative and propagandist model of fascist art.

What held the most promise as a uniquely Italian and fascist literary aesthetic was the notion of a “spiritual” realism that would “transfigure” reality rather than merely register it. As presented by Bocelli, Titta Rosa, and other critics, “spiritual realism” would avoid the pitfalls of materialistic aesthetics—such as Naturalism and the Neue Sachlichkeit—that “lost sight of the individual.” Ideas of impersonality and absolute objectivity, they charged, made the writer into a “mere reporter of events” and stripped him or her of the chance to use literature to actively shape new values. At the level of the text, this spiritual ethos would be expressed through the inclusion of psychologically complex characters whose actions were motivated by ethical concerns. This formula satisfied a variety of literary constituencies, as it preserved, at least in theory, Crocean notions of the autonomy of art. Yet by assigning the writer a transformative role and urging him or her to manipulate reality in the service of a moral vision, it also conformed to the fascist request for works that would foster changes in collective behavior.

CRITICS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF LITERARY IDENTITY

As in other realms of fascist culture, the definition of national literary aesthetics proceeded through a series of encounters with foreign texts. While the Italian market had always proved receptive to foreign works at both the popular and elite level, fascist goals of developing a modern and exportable literature increased support for an “open door” policy. Isolationist attitudes would further harm an already provincial literary culture, critics argued; to find audiences throughout Europe, modern trends should be “assimilated, rather than refused; surpassed, rather than ignored.” As in other fields of cultural endeavor, younger intellectuals proved particularly open to influences from abroad. In a 1929 article, the twenty-one-year-old writer Elio Vittorini complained that neither Futurism, D’Annunzianism, Naturalism, nor prosa d’arte inspired his age-group. He concluded that Italy’s new literary spirit would have to develop through a process of “exchanges and correspondences” with Europe. For this generation, translating foreign authors proved to be a mechanism of cultural influence as well as a source of income. In the thirties and early forties, writers like Vittorini, Umberto Barbaro, Cesare Pavese, Moravia, and Enrico Emanuelli translated new Soviet, American, French, and German authors for the Italian market as they were writing their own works.

In the early thirties, both commercial and political goals thus produced a climate of support for publications with a cosmopolitan character. Dailies like the Corriere padano and periodicals such as Espero and Italia letteraria purveyed prose by, and discussions of, a wide range of American and European writers. In Rome, the journal Occidente, which billed itself as a “synthesis of the literary activity of the world,” offered the works of authors such as Katherine Mansfield, Hans Fallada, Ramon Perez de Ayala, and Ernest Hemingway and advised Italians on new work coming out of Europe and North and South America. Book publishers’ lists proved no less eclectic. Editorial houses such as Mondadori, Bompiani, and Corbaccio peddled translations of a wide range of American and European novels. Corbaccio’s series “Writers from All over the World,” which featured Leon Feuchtwanger, Alfred Neumann, Thornton Wilder, and John Dos Passos, mushroomed from twenty-six to sixty titles between 1933 and 1934.

Soviet literature, like the rest of Soviet society, commanded much attention among intellectual circles and the educated public in the years of the depression. The market supported a specialized publishing house, Slavia, while periodicals such as L’Italiano and Il Convegno dedicated issues to
Viet literature. 24 Reviews of Russian literature often served Italian intellectuals to send messages to their peers on subjects—such as realism and the relationship between politics and art—that were hotly debated under Mussolini as well as under Stalin. Thus the critic Giuseppe Raimondi lauded Konstantin Fedin, Lydia Seyfullina, and other writers “who in the midst of a war and a Revolution kept their eyes open to be able to record all that they observed,” and Barbaro suggested Seyfullina’s lyrical prose as a model for Italian writers who wished to overcome the constraints of Naturalism. 25 Yet Italians also called attention to the loss of intellectual autonomy under communism. Lo Gatto, a University of Padua professor who headed the Institute for Eastern Europe, ended his chronicle of the first years of Stalinist rule with an account of the “artistic castrations” faced by Soviet writers. Stalin’s literary policies were certainly more draconian than Mussolini’s: they mandated manual labor for writers and the use of state-approved themes and styles. Such comparisons might also have placated Italian consciences, though, by furthering the notion that fascism was a regime that protected art and the liberty of thought. Thus Lo Gatto and others noted that Russian critics such as Vyacheslav Polonski had lost their jobs for opposing state literary policies, “forgetting” that the press had been purged, if in minor measure, at home as well. 26

American literature drew even more interest from writers and critics under the dictatorship. As Pavese would later recall, Italians saw similarities between their own literary goals and the attempts of authors like Sinclair Lewis to create “a modern taste, a modern style, a modern world” in the years following World War I. 27 But the “documentary” realisms supposedly favored by Americans met with little favor from more traditional critics, who charged that they evinced a mechanistic mindset that was out of step with the Italian national character. 28 In an “open letter” from Ojetti to Dos Passos that appeared in Pegaso, Ojetti expressed admiration for Manhattan Transfer and 1919, but criticized the American writer’s “ruthlessly” objective narrative voice, which floated “like a perfect movie camera” from scene to scene. Ojetti concluded that Dos Passos’s prose was “the opposite of what we Italians have written in the past, what we are writing now, and, I dare say, what we will write in the future.” 29 Other reviewers, especially younger ones, did not agree. Dos Passos’s continuous shifts in style and setting, they argued, allowed him to capture modernity’s tempos and mentalities. Orpheus editors Luciano Anceschi and Remo Cantoni, who were studying phenomenology with Antonio Banfi in Milan, cited the American’s writings as an example of how the abandonment of literary formulas and theories resulted in more authentic representations of reality.

Commenting on Manhattan Transfer, Anceschi noted that “social life itself becomes the protagonist of the novel. . . . He [Dos Passos] judges nothing, but merely accepts life and lets things speak for themselves: any judgment must necessarily come from the reflections of the reader.” 30

This praise for American literature did not, in most cases, imply sympathy for American democracy. For Pavese, who was ostracized for his antifascism from the start of his career, the study of American literature represented an opening to a world of greater civil and creative liberties. But the majority of Italian intellectuals did not associate freedom with American democracy in the early thirties. Even Moravia, who confessed to feeling “isolated and sad” in fascist Italy, returned from a two-month trip to America convinced that freedom “costs too much” there, given the unemployment and public poverty. As he informed Giuseppe Prezzolini, who had hosted him at Columbia’s Casa Italiana, “liberty is culture” and America had very little of that (fig. 2). 31

Weimar German literature provided a final reference point for Italians who sought to develop a national literary aesthetic. As an experiment in realist poetics, the Neue Sachlichkeit held much interest for writers and critics, and all of the major authors of the movement were translated and reviewed in the fascist press. Italians admired the Germans’ readiness to break with past artistic canons and acknowledged the different kind of beauty produced by this aesthetic of concreteness. The novelist and German scholar Bonaventura Tecchi conceded that, in the hands of Alexander Döblin or Hermann Kesten, “the most brutal reality, the bare fact of chronicle[,] . . . can generate the most wondrous and modern poetic evocations.” 32 The critic Enrico Rocca also praised works such as Ernst Glasers’ Jahrgang 1902 for their “actuality,” and hoped aloud that Italians would be inspired by them to write novels about “the dramatic and inviting events” that culminated in the March on Rome. 33

These same commentators, though, also lost no occasion to emphasize the deficiencies of the Neue Sachlichkeit, which Titta Rosa characterized as a “pseudo-literature” of “crude content.” 34 Discussing Döblin’s novel Berlin Alexanderplatz, for example, Rocca lauded the German’s inclusion of newspaper cuttings and other artifacts of “real life” but warned that the book’s “coldly brutal” realism could only find success among a people who, like the Germans, were “antisentimental and frigid.” 35 Still others objected to the cultural assumptions that undergirded many currents of the Neue Sachlichkeit. Alvaro noted during his stay in Berlin that the movement reflected a mentality that privileged the material, the quotidian, and the contingent. However remarkable its “poetic possibilities,” he asserted, the
away from trends and aesthetics that, they claimed, had no place under Mussolini’s dictatorship.

**The Realist Novel and the Search for Moral Change**

Not all Italian authors accepted these critical messages, at least not at the outset of their careers. In the midst of these discussions over foreign realisms, a group of novels appeared that pointed up the contradictions that beset the regime’s projects for a national literature and a fascist style of modernity. Written by intellectuals in their twenties, these novels sparked much debate for their frank depictions of bourgeois moral corruption. While some critics saluted them as revolutionary contributions to the creation of new collective values, others decried their focus on illicit sex and financial scandal. In fact, the young protagonists of these works hardly fit the description of the regime’s “new men,” and the cosmopolitan demi-mondes they frequent had been targeted by fascist zealots for rehabilitation. I will discuss three of these novels, Moravia’s *Gli indifferenti* (The Indifferent Ones, 1929), Barbara’s Lucio fade (Cold Light, 1931), and Emanuelli’s *Radiografia di una notte* (X-Ray of a Night, 1932). While the first of these works remains one of the most famous twentieth-century Italian novels, the latter two have remained in the dustbin of literary history since World War II. Despite the different political stances of their authors—only Emanuelli was a convinced fascist—they are similar in tone and theme. Taken together, they raise questions about the role of biography, ideology, and language in the production and reception of fascist texts and shed light on a literary movement of the dictatorship that has yet to receive much critical attention.37

The denunciation of middle-class morality that pervades *Gli indifferenti* has led critics to classify it as an antifascist work and, more recently, as an expression of existentialist tendencies. Both these interpretations overlook the book’s affinities with the causes of the fascist avant-garde, with which Moravia was associated in his earliest days as a writer.38 In many ways, Moravia was an anomaly within the fascist literary world. First, an allowance provided by his wealthy architect father meant that, unlike most Italian intellectuals, he was under no duress to publish his work or accept the subsidies proffered by state patronage institutions. Second, family ties placed him in direct contact with both fascist and antifascist circles, although, by his own admission, he embraced neither creed with much conviction. His maternal uncle Augusto De Marsanich was a senator and a
prominent fascist official, while his cousins Carlo and Nello Rosselli belonged to the Giustizia e Libertà opposition group. Thus even when he became a regular guest of Sarfatti, Ciano, and other dignitaries, he was intermittently tailed by the fascist political police. 39

In light of these affiliations, it is interesting that Moravia chose to become involved in 1928 with the militant youth journals I Lupi and Interplanetario, the latter of which he helped to edit. Viewing fascism as a profound break with the past, these two reviews embraced experimental theater and other manifestations of the avant-garde as the foundations of a corresponding "cultural revolution" in Italy. To mark their distance from the literary styles of the war generation, they called for an "antiliterature" that would reflect fascism's concrete, fact-oriented mentality. 40 Gli indifferenti took shape in I Lupi and Interplanetario as a series of stories that display Moravia's sympathy for such views and provide clues as to the ideological climate within which the novel was developed and received. 41 A parable he contributed to the former journal constitutes the thematic nucleus of Gli indifferenti, as it mocks those who cannot decide whether or not to act in life. In his story "Villa Mercedes," which appeared in Interplanetario, a courtesan is killed and left in the attic of her belle epoque house as a not-so-subtle message about the obsolescence of liberal moral and aesthetic codes. 42

A similar concern for ethical change pervades Gli indifferenti. Set in Rome in the mid-1920s, the narrative focuses on the society woman Mariagrazia and her children, Carla and Michele, who are both in their early twenties. Presented as an unsympathetic if pathetic figure, Mariagrazia passes her time with her best friend, Lisa, a lascivious divorcée, and her lover, Leo, a lecherous and violent man who plans to swindle the family out of their home. Carla communicates her disgust with the "oppressive, miserable and petty" climate in which she lives, while Michele distances himself by becoming an "indifferent" voyeur for whom "gestures, words, feelings, all were just a vain game of pretense." 43

Making sexual conquest a metaphor for predatory behavior of other kinds, Moravia structures his novel around the parallel seductions of Carla and Michele by Leo and Lisa. Carla's sad future at Leo's side is presented as a foregone conclusion. With the first touch of Leo's hands on her skirt, she thinks, "There was just no way out of it, everything was fixed and governed by a wretched inevitability." For Michele, however, Lisa's unwanted attentions bring on a crisis. He ponders the ethical consequences of his indifference to the corruption around him, and nurtures a dream of living in a "paradise of concreteness and truth" where "every gesture, feeling, and word would have an immediate and direct connection [aderenza] with the reality that inspired them." 44 When Michele's halfhearted attempt to shoot Leo fails, he puts himself through a mock trial for his "sin of indifference" and concludes that he is guilty. "I have done nothing[,] . . . nothing but think . . . that is my error," he reflects as the book ends. 45 Michele's condemnation of his own apathy sent a message that was not out of keeping with the current intellectual and political climate, as it raised the possibility of his transformation from amoral spectator to active agent of ethical change.

Published by Alpes, an editorial house owned by Mussolini's brother, Arnaldo, Gli indifferenti was an immediate succès de scandale. Catholics and conservatives objected to its frank language and depiction of youthful apathy, and a reviewer in the Corriere padano denounced it for spreading a "psychotic Freudianism" that had no place in fascist Italy. 46 Many critics lauded the book for its penetrating exposé of the bankruptcy of existing values, however, arguing that it condemned indifference rather than encouraged it. As Tecchi commented, while many works of the Neue Sachlichkeit betrayed "a certain cynicism and moral apathy[,] . . . the rarity of Gli indifferenti, in my opinion, is that Moravia has presented moral indifference as a problem, described it, and in a certain sense, judged it." While Moravia later claimed that his book had vanished into oblivion after being labeled a subversive work, Gli indifferenti quickly achieved canonical status as an example of the new Italian novel. 47 The work also enjoyed commercial acclaim. By April 1930 it had gone through four printings, and a deluxe edition had been prepared for collectors. Bompiani bought the rights and issued a second edition in 1934.

Motivated by similar moral concerns and, perhaps, a wish to share some of Moravia's success, other young writers published their own critiques of indifference in the early thirties. Eraldo De Micheli and Elio Talarico, both convinced fascists, authored similar tales of the costs of apathy that ended with their protagonists' renunciation of decadent tastes and behaviors. 48 The twenty-nine-year-old Barbaro brought out Luce fredda, which was immediately placed alongside Moravia's as an example of the new realist school of writing. An autodidact of great talent about whom little has been written, the Sicilian-born Barbaro was a critic, editor, translator, novelist, filmmaker, screenwriter, and playwright. A specialist in Russian culture, he translated a variety of Russian and Soviet authors, as well as the works of Vsevolod Pudovkin and Sergei Eisenstein. 49 After 1935, he taught film theory and practice at the state-run Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (CSC) and emerged as a leading communist film critic after World War II.
His vast knowledge and diverse activities rank him as one of the most important mediators of European modernism in interwar Italy. Both during and after fascism, Barbaro remained an uncomfortable figure for many, however, since his ideas and works play on the lability of the boundaries between rightist and leftist revolutionary discourse. Barbaro’s political and aesthetic roots lay in that segment of the Italian avant-garde that, in the early twenties, brought Futurists into an aesthetic alliance with leftist artists who could not find a place in the culturally conservative Italian Communist Party. This heterodox formation honed Barbaro’s skills at exploiting the polyvalent qualities of revolutionary rhetoric. This mastery of language, together with the protection he enjoyed from his friend Chiarini, allowed him to carve out a varied career within the institutions of the regime.

Luce fredda is the product of an intricate web of cultural and political influences. Alternating between a satirical tone reminiscent of Mikhail Bulgakov (whose novel Fatal Eggs he was translating at that time) and Neue Sachlichkeit reportage, Barbaro employs an arsenal of experimental narrative techniques to tell a story that converges in many points with that of Moravia. His polyphonic narrative begins in May 1922 and continues into the late twenties. It darts in and out of the lives of characters who are introduced through interior monologues that jump, sometimes in mid-sentence, from the thoughts of one protagonist to those of another. This multiperspectivist approach, which recalls that of Döblin and Dos Passos, allows Barbaro to present a damning collective portrait of the Roman bourgeoisie. Sergio, the novel’s apathetic young protagonist, hates the hypocrisy he sees everywhere in society, but lacks the resolve to change anything. As he reflects, “Is it possible to create a moral code for oneself that would be independent of and superior to the recognized and consecrated one? ... Perhaps not; but certainly anyone who doesn’t try is a contemptible person, no?”

Such open-ended discourse conveys more than Sergio’s perpetual state of indecision. It lends Barbaro’s text an ironic, almost mocking tone that separates it from other contemporary realist works. Unlike Moravia’s Michele, Sergio experiences no moment of moral clarity that might allow him to act as a guide for others in the future. Instead, he comes to see the wisdom of indifference, understood as a refusal to enter into a society governed by an authoritarian logic of binary oppositions. As he states, “There is no such thing as good and evil, beauty and ugliness, white and black as mutually exclusive things; all opposing things are absurdly intertwined and interlinked, all lying on the same plane of indifference, and life is all of a color[70,... a fading white that is not yet black.” Toward the end of the novel, Sergio resolves to discard his pernicious “intellectualism” and “regain a sense of reality and the concrete.” He then promptly falls asleep, allowing Barbaro to end his narrative in a dreamworld that vindicates those “evasions from the real” that Sergio had originally condemned. At the close of the narrative, Barbaro’s protagonist remains in his seedy Roman boardinghouse, in a liminal and unredeemed mental and physical space. The disjunction between Sergio’s thoughts and his behavior at the novel’s end stands as a rebuke of fascist projects to mobilize youth and create a “new man” in whom, as one militant put it, “the virtues of thought and action would be harmonized.”

Despite Barbaro’s apparent refusal to support the regime’s projects of collective reclamation, fascist critics interpreted Luce fredda much as they had Gli indifferenti: as a protest against bourgeois corruption and the self-absorbed attitudes of the Italian intellectual class. Bocelli depicted Barbaro as a messenger of moral activism and devoted a long article to him and the emerging school of “spiritual realism.” Although Barbaro and other new writers had captured modernity’s “fragmented and discontinuous” mindset, they had steered clear of the Positivist tendencies that marred the Neue Sachlichkeit. Bocelli saw “behind all the pitiless analysis, an aspiration to harmony and synthesis; behind the ostentatious coldness and cynicism, a sincere need for faith and authentic human warmth; behind the orgy of the particular, a search for the universal. ... man is being reborn in the writer today.” For other critics, though, the appearance of Barbaro’s work on the heels of Gli indifferenti raised fears that the new Italian novel was taking a terribly wrong turn. The “magical realist” Bontempelli objected to these authors’ materialistic focus on “corporal necessities,” while Giovanni Battista Angioletti decreed that the analytical tone and abulic protagonists of works like Luce fredda were elements that “we cannot embrace.”

Trepidation over the style and content of these new novels only increased with the publication of Emanuelli’s openly experimental Radiografia di una notte, which chronicled six hours in the lives of a wealthy Milanese family. Like his friend Soldati, the twenty-three-year-old Emanuelli moved easily between reportage and literature. In the early thirties he journeyed to Spain, Libya, and Russia on assignment for newspapers such as La Stampa and La Gazzetta del Popolo. Emanuelli viewed the advent of mass society in Italy with ambivalence. His novel showcases modernity’s social and psychological costs as much as its material enticements. Indeed, unlike Moravia and Barbaro, Emanuelli blames commercial culture as much as bourgeois convention for the erosion of meaning in contemporary life.
Like the Americans and Weimar Germans depicted by travelers such as Soldati, Emanuelli's modern subjects lack all sense of personal taste and volition; they are caught in the flow of commodities that characterizes contemporary Milan. Their stream-of-consciousness monologues contain recitations of advertising slogans, and they blindly consume the products offered them—women's magazines, radio programs, and other products whose ads Emanuelli inserts into the narrative. Subjecting every character in the book to a pitiless “X-ray” light, the author develops images of a superficial nouveau riche society in which spirituality is considered a sign of weakness rather than a source of strength. Reflecting on her life of “horrible, degrading half-truths,” Stefano’s mother, Lucia, notes that “it would be too humiliating to ask for comfort and help from prayer, from faith.”

As in many *Neue Sachlichkeit* novels, generational conflict takes center stage. Stefano’s father, who neglects his family for evening “business meetings” with his mistress, takes the brunt of the work’s critical blow. The book’s dénouement comes when Stefano confronts his father, who symbolizes the pervasive moral corruption that obstructs all ethical and social change. In the course of their quarrel, his father pulls out a gun, and accidentally ends up dead. “Someone must die here,” Stefano’s friend Giacomo muses at the end of the book as he tries to justify the tragedy. “Only then will everything change.” At the close of Moravia’s novel, Michele can only condemn himself for his inaction, while Barbaro’s phlegmatic Sergio cannot bring himself to do even that. By the end of Emanuelli’s story, at least in one family, the stage is set for a purifying moral “revolution” that might underpin social change.

Like other realist works, this one met with mixed reviews. Younger critics like Vittorini praised the book’s spirit of “moral resentment” and termed it “one of the most remarkable works of our time.” The book also gained Emanuelli an “encouragement prize” from the Italian Academy, although an internal Academy report that year noted that reservations had been expressed over the practice of rewarding youth such as Emanuelli who were “too acerbic.” Other critics accused him of imitating Moravia’s and Barbaro’s skeptical determinism and of borrowing the worst of contemporary modernism. As one charged, the novel was nothing but a “chaotic photomontage” of Dos Passos, Freud, Joyce, the Surrealists, and the “crude phono-veristic” tone of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*.

The issue of foreign influence proved to be the most sensitive for Italian commentators who had awaited this generation’s contributions to the new national novel. Indeed, reviews of realist novels often became occasions for impromptu referendums on the applicability of modernist styles and techniques to the Italian fascist context. Even before Emanuelli’s work appeared, fascist functionaries had joined critics in accusing realist writers of propagating foreign “decadence.” In 1931, claiming that the new novelists had “confused modernity and novelty,” Arnaldo Mussolini had warned students at the School of Fascist Mysticism away from books that propagated “sad foreign literary movements that aim at the degeneration of the dignity of man.” The next year, Chiarini blasted young Italians who imitated “precious, deformed, and cerebral” foreign movements that obliterated “not only our national character, but the personality of the artist himself.” By 1933, after several more realist texts had appeared, the journalist Carlo Villani proclaimed it a “national duty” to “save our youth from the tedious analytic examination of foreign fetishes. It is not just a question of literature[,] . . . the continued physical and moral integrity of our people depends on it.”

Moravia proved the most vocal in refuting charges of foreign influence. He justified his generation’s recourse to “foreign experiences” as a means of representing an Italy “that is changed, ambitious, Europeanized, bourgeois, and pulsing with new needs whose commonality with those of other nations does not make them any less Italian.” Other critics of Moravia’s generation seconded his opinion. In Saggiatore, Panunzio reminded the detractors of the new novel that his generation’s goal remained that of creating a literary culture which, “while reaching out to Europe, remains Italian, giving us works that reflect our turmoil, our hopes, in a word, our way of understanding and adapting to modern life.” Minister Bottai backed up Moravia and his peers. Asserting in *Critica fascista* that Italianness as a matter of spirit as well as of style, he proclaimed Gli indifferenti to be entirely consonant with “the ethical climate of fascism.” Restating the arguments of the young Rationalist architect Rava, he concluded that the “transfiguration” and adaptation of foreign trends had long been recognized as a national trait.

**FASCIST LITERATURE AND THE FICTION OF THE UNPOLITICAL**

Political as well as cultural designs lay behind Bottai’s support for realist novelists. The early thirties witnessed the development of patronage strategies designed to control and neutralize young intellectuals. Academy awards, invitations to write for publications such as *Il Bargello* and *Critica fascista*, and public encouragement of “nonconformist” creative endeavors drew writers into cliental relationships with fascist authorities. Like Emanuelli, Moravia commenced a parallel career as a journalist for *La
Stampa and La Gazzetta del Popolo, which allowed him the luxury of frequent foreign travel. At the same time, he became a fixture at the salons of fascism’s social and political elite and served on the jury of the San Remo literary prize. With the help of his patron, Chiarini, Barbaro began to write for the wider audiences of Educazione fascista and Roma, was hired by the Cines movie studio as a documentarist and screenwriter, and in 1935 became coeditor of Italia letteraria and a teacher at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografa. Over the long term, the price of this access to power would be the slow erosion of experimental impulses. As we will see, Barbaro and Emanuelli left behind their avant-garde ethos as they became more immersed in the structures of the regime.

The utility that these new networks had for both patrons and clients came through clearly in a 1932 debate about the relationship of literature and politics under fascism. Functionaries who wished to speed up the development of a fascist literature supported the realists and their supporters in their campaign for novels of actuality, offering them space in Critica fascista, Il Lavoro fascista, and other publications. They also delivered their own seemingly allied messages about the writer’s duty to “immerse himself in life” and produce works that, as Chiarini wrote, reflected “the grand problems of our time.” While this generic request may have seemed innocent, its meaning in the context of fascist cultural policies proved easy to decipher. Thus the writer and critic Angioletti, speaking for the anti-realists, boldly decided to call the functionaries’ bluff:

Immerse ourselves in life. Very good. But we are already in life up to our necks, and one must not demand that we immerse our heads as well. . . . Does participating in the political life of a Country mean placing art at the service of politics? Inviting the writer to illustrate certain principles? . . . If art must respond to certain presuppositions[,] . . . then writers have the right to be told openly. And then what will be discussed is the essence of art, its moral function and its limits in front of the collective interest; such a discussion could create a deep and unbreachable division among artists.

Angioletti’s blunt statement infringed Italian literary etiquette but proved effective. Chiarini immediately retreated, replying that “no one wishes to make artists the executors of [Soviet-style] ‘social commands’ or propagandists: no one wants to impose limits to art or establish controls or censorship: I was simply speaking of the relationship between art and life.” Casini, who would soon become fascism’s chief literary censor, also denied any censorial intentions. The call for a “literature of the present,” he claimed, was less a request for “an art that calls itself fascist[,] . . . a State art enslaved to political ends,” than a reminder that all writers had the responsibility to participate actively in the making of a modern society, which in Italy meant furthering the fascist revolution. A few months later, speaking to the Italian Society for Authors and Editors, Mussolini delivered his own carefully worded message on the matter. While he disavowed any intention to establish a state literature, he chided his audience for not drawing more inspiration from two “capital events” such as the war and the revolution. Henceforth, writers must redouble their efforts to “immerse themselves in life” and become “interpreters of their own time,” which, he specified, “is that of the fascist revolution.”

The discussions about the relationship of literature and politics also provided writers like Barbaro and Moravia with opportunities to publicly reinterpret their works to make them better conform to the current political climate. For intellectuals who were regarded with some suspicion, such “self-criticism” had a precise performative value: they constituted political acts that could better one’s position or at least keep persecutors at bay. “My aesthetic, in essence, concerns the relationship of art and life,” Barbaro wrote in one of several articles that explained his literary philosophy in terms that conformed semantically both to contemporary communist and fascist cultural policy. “All of my work . . . denounces individualism and the inexorable destruction to which it leads; this is certainly a topical problem.” Luce fredda, he intimated, should be seen as a demonstration of his “ethical commitment” as an artist, since its goal was to “cause the reader to acknowledge the problems of daily life . . . in order to give him an overwhelming urge to put an end to them, to transform himself and the world.” Such was Barbaro’s skill at the art of double entendre that, after his death in 1955, his friend and patron Chiarini could contend that “his writings contain not a line or a word that could be cause for shame or repentance.”

The same, perhaps, could not be said for Moravia, who had come in for the most criticism and proved an easy target for charges of anti-Italianness and antifascism due to his ties to the Rossellis and his Jewish heritage. Of course, Moravia had connections that worked for him as well: in 1932, Bottai had pointed out Gli indifferenti’s convergence with fascist concerns for moral renewal, and had reminded Italians that “the true fascist intellectual is known by his works and not by his party card or position.” In 1933, though, at the height of the polemics regarding literature’s role in the fascist state, Moravia chose to repudiate his successful novel on the third page of the extremist (and anti-Semitic) paper Il Tevere. Comparing himself to “Saturn [who] eats his own children,” the Roman writer claimed