



Policing the Secret: Alberto Moravia's "Il conformista"

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Policing the Secret: Alberto Moravia's Il conformista

When the most theoretically radical and purist of the American New Critics, or Contextualists, praised the irreducible irony of the poem, an irony they believed arose from the poem's structural organicism and precluded the critic's reduction of poetic meanings to a propositional moral, they were performing a gesture of fidelity to the acknowledged matrix of their thought in Coleridgean romanticism. The Contextualist eulogy of complexity — with its corresponding ethic of maturity — also declared their rejection of those in their movement who, like John Crowe Ransom, attempted to explain notions of the uniqueness and novelty of context with a Platonizing, mechanistic theory of poetic composition.¹ Put somewhat differently, the radical creationists objected to the blindness of their colleagues of Ransom's persuasion who made the "creative" act essentially the metering of pre-existent, fully formed thought. Let me add that the model of verbal artwork as metered thought essentially transforms it into an easily revealed, propositional secret. But the vice of blindness which the creationists attributed to Ransom's mechanists, I would argue, was not theirs alone. On the contrary, the neo-Coleridgean idealism of the radical creationists made them blind to a thought of difference which their theory of the poetic text with its own version of the secret elaborated. Despite the Contextualists' talk of a struggle between claim and counterclaim in their theory of the poetic text, in the critical methodology they applied, these latter-day "Manicheans" — Krieger's term — also attributed to the text imagery, symbolism, psychology, underlying concepts — and finally characterological psychology — which they treated as univocal, thus implying the concealment of the differential play of the matrices of these elements. That is, silent, unvoiced words were understood to create relationships among each other which constantly changed, while the "visual" and intellectual resources that could be gleaned from that relentless play remained fixed and marmoreal.

What the Contextualists called the play of claim/counterclaim, I believe, is a difference that lies beyond any propositional claim or counterclaim; it is, rather, difference that infects the poetic *as such*. Why? If those claims and counterclaims were simply propositional, each would have had to have been formed by a prior play of claim and counterclaim, in an endless regression toward propositional insignificance. I believe that the verbal artwork arises less from a play of claim and counterclaim than from a more profound — if I may say so — play of difference. My point: the disclosed concept, which the Contextualists understood to be static, is actually not

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so, and could not be so. One effect of Contextualist theory itself, when taken literally, is to make the disclosed concept a mirage thrown up by the relentless play and dissemination of meaning; another: it makes the transparent concept emerge from its opposite, the opacity of organic complexity. This is accordingly not only true of what is understood to be a concept, but it is also true, I would argue, of all the traditional elements that make the concept appear in the realist novel. Thus, in Alberto Moravia's *Il conformista*, the protagonist Marcello's imagined, inferred and longed-for normalcy, far from subsisting as a pure concept in an ideal realm of unchanging thought, is likewise provisory, unstable and differential; normalcy serves the realist novel as an undecidable. Contextualism never posed itself the question of the structure of a non-propositional claim; in its yearning for an intelligible verbal artwork, it was content to run the risk, against its very best intentions, of transforming that artwork into prose.²

Let me take this a step further: the endless self-modification of the organicist artwork suggests that the dramatic character that emerges from such a text is itself constituted, marked and concealed by the traces of all the other figures in the text. Thus, as we shall see in *Il conformista*, the figuration of the protagonist Marcello interpenetrates the figuration of the cat he kills — and vice versa — just as it does that of his victim Quadri, and as it does that of the aging, predatory gay man he encounters in the park in Paris; Marcello is as much Lino as he is Lina and Giulia.³ Likewise the totalizing, hence — paradoxically — singular, versions of normalcy he propounds which interpenetrate other concepts. His unique — and protean — vision of normalcy is a secret that cannot achieve univocal exposure, nor survive intact multiple readings of the novel while remaining an atomic unit of pure, self-identical thought. The secret thus precludes any “total moral awareness” of Marcello or of his motives.⁴ Thus, if we modify somewhat Krieger's reasoning, it would be more correct to say that a cosmic dimension is inscribed upon the appearance of each character, because the literary self is impinged upon in its every moment by every other aspect of the work. Or, perhaps better, that the heterocosm impinges upon every element otherwise considered to be conceptual, fixed, or conventionally prosaic in the world of the artwork. In other words, Marcello's self-examination provides a psychology that does not subsist apart from, nor above, nor prior to the aesthetics that governs the whole, nor is it univocal, coherent, adequate, or definitive. Moravian psychology enjoys no privilege in the interpretation of the changing text. That is, it is not first among the other reductionisms so dear to realist writing. On the contrary, in *Il conformista* psychology is made performative by virtue of its very lack of propositional content, or, perhaps better, it is made aesthetic. The psychology of *Il conformista* is also aesthetic because it participates with its claims in the poetic play of what Contextualists call claim and counterclaim — that is, the matrix of the artwork in difference. Thus, against the traditions of realism, Moravia's novel is an on-going subversion

of matrices as sources of reductive and exhaustive explanations of character, whether those matrices be socio-economic, social, psychological, historical or other.

This differential aesthetic foregrounds itself in Alberto Moravia's *Il conformista*, a masterpiece of modern Italian realism, and permeates the novel's thematics as a play of concealment and disclosure. So it is with Marcello's — the protagonist's — moral awareness. *Il conformista* opens with the announcement and constitution of what we might call a mundane secret: Marcello's carefully hidden awareness of his difference from other boys on account of his uncontrollable cruelty, a cruelty which he experiences as abnormality and attempts to escape most prominently by his essentially therapeutic gesture of espousing fascism.⁵ His awareness of his abnormality begins in a garden, a garden whose walls are formed by railings which both open and close off to him his access to Roberto, the neighbors' boy, a conventionally good boy — a normal boy — who obeys his parents, because he has accepted their morality as his own.⁶ Roberto's unquestioning and unquestioned normalcy is an aspect of his participation in life, a spontaneity unfettered by Marcello's relentlessly judgmental self-scrutiny; however, even the "innocence" of a Roberto will be debunked by the play of the novel, which will show such innocence to be always already corrupted. Young Marcello, on the other hand, sees, but does not see, the cat he will kill; the cat is concealed. Marcello's conscious intent is to kill his playmate Roberto. Concealment in disclosure constitutes his relations with those closest to him: for example, Marcello speaks to, but does not speak to, his indifferent mother who is concealed in the dark of his room (20–21). Her narcissism sets her in a relationship of perpetual distraction from her son, as if to establish a quasi incestuous closeness/distance that endures even into his maturity: the now elderly woman thinks nothing of greeting him almost naked and sharing her intimate secrets: "Ti ho pur detto tante volte di non ricevermi così, mezza nuda" (159), and "Mamma non parlarmi dei tuoi amanti" (160).

Nor is concealment limited to the family: there is concealment in the church where Marcello goes to confess his sins just before the marriage that will present him to society as a normal Catholic, a dual concealment announced in the darkness he encounters as he enters Santa Maria Maggiore (140). Even here, his normalcy consists in concealment by disclosure: he must decide "o fare una confessione completa, secondo le norme della Chiesa, oppure limitarsi ad una confessione parziale, puramente formale, per far piacere a Giulia" (138) — a *confessione parziale*, of course, is not a confession at all in any valid doctrinal sense. This confession, used to deceive, is a means cut off from its proper end — the spiritual transparency that characterizes the theological virtues of faith and charity; indeed, its cynical and opportunistic misuse in the interests of concealment make it a Machiavellian sacrilege. To Marcello confession is merely "uno dei tanti atti convenzionali cui si sobbarcava per ancorarsi definitivamente nella

normalità" (137). A valid confession would require that Marcello confess his mission to Paris to assassinate the anti-Fascist dissenter Quadri, a mission which will occupy his honeymoon. Obviously, none of these acts — even the innocuously therapeutic — could pass as the moral virtue of religion. On the contrary, the examination of conscience, an act of moral self-evaluation, which the believer must perform before confessing and requesting absolution should be the annihilation of such a secret. That is, Marcello considered confession good — that is, useful — to the degree he could turn it to the end of concealment rather than disclosure: "se tale confessione non avesse comportato la rivelazione di due cose che per diversi motivi considerava, appunto, inconfessabili: la tragedia della sua infanzia, e la missione a Parigi" (137); his confession is obviously void of repentance as such.

Marcello's secret thus performs the destabilizing secret which the artwork cannot reveal, yet which constitutes it. The aesthetic experience is accordingly the paradox of an experience of a secret that cannot be revealed, or rather, of a secret that, in the very act of revelation, conceals itself — a secret open to time and change; in short, the aesthetic as the differential is the secrecy of the secret, or the revelation that there is no secret as that word is commonly understood.⁷ Thus, the poetic artwork — in whatever self-critical act it is understood by Contextualists to elaborate in the act of becoming successfully aesthetic (constitutive metaphor, for example) — cannot disclose, or render *coglibile*, either the stable origin of its composition, or its definitive meaning, because any possible constitutive metaphor would be above all, finally, a metaphor for unknowing, a *non-savoir*, wrought from *non-savoir*. Such *non-savoir* is not unfamiliar to Contextualism: since the irony that fashions the text, as the Contextualists would have it, is a play of claim and counterclaim (statements which cannot themselves be reduced to the propositional) there can be no single monolithic — Crocean — inspiration that undergirds the whole. Instead, on account of the play of this difference, an ever-changing *sentimento dominante* would be produced. Or, as the esthetician Leonardo V. Distaso puts it,

Il comprendere è questo stesso movimento: non l'ipostatizzazione di un concetto o lo stabilimento certo di un fondamento; è la penetrazione in ciò in cui già si sta, che lascia scoperto allo sguardo il non-detto essenziale: ciò che sta nel mezzo tra il vedente e il visibile, ciò che vede mentre si vede e ciò che è visto mentre si vede.⁸

Atti convenzionali: the notion of normalcy shares borders with the notions of the natural and spontaneous, but Marcello's normalcy is an aping of conventions rather than a *habitus* of transparent, spontaneous traits and behaviors that are understood to reveal inner being, the *secretum*. Unsurprisingly, religious observance as normalcy in *Il conformista* depends heavily on theater; thus, the Jesuit church possesses a "solennità teatrale" (188). Marcello's behavior is largely theatrical on account of its studied artifice. For example,

on the train to Paris, in his first sexual relationship with his wife, Marcello finds himself playing “la parte di sposo” (193). His wife likewise: in composing herself to confess her long-term molestation, Giulia stops herself “per graduare gli effetti” (199). Indeed, we can see that Marcello’s studied affectation of “normal” behavior is akin to the research the Method actor undertakes in the elaboration of a character. Such an actor experiments with various props, clothing, tics, gesture, mood, and memory, but, unlike Marcello, does so in her quest to present the realism of the singular. Marcello does as much in the interest of concealment and the representation of what he understands to be the collective. Marcello is not self-absorbed as much as he is absorbed by an alienated, instrumentalized and utterly malleable self, a passive deadness which is his own. Nevertheless, because his behavior is *always* repetitive, Moravia suggests that repetition may indeed be prior to the unity of self-identity, personal *haecitas*.

As with his later sacramental confession, the self-exposure the young Marcello attempts by confessing to his mother is a species of concealment, because he had not yet in fact killed the cat he confesses to killing (20). Concealment, of course, characterizes his most atrocious crime: Marcello will be instrumental in the assassination of Quadri and his wife, an act that is unnecessary, gratuitous and unwitnessed by its major perpetrator, Marcello; it is almost ideally secret in that it is permeated by unknowing. Herein lies the irony of his character: Marcello is a victim as a boy, who, as an adult, must victimize others in his compensatory search for a, however defective and abnormal, normalcy. Thus, his personal victimization is perpetuated in his *Servizio Segreto* — his sociopolitical activity of victimization — although neither his molestation, nor his childhood self-doubt can serve either as the exhaustive exemplar, or definitive origin of his perceived abnormality. Marcello transforms his perceived abnormality into his professional activity of political repression, setting the political and psychological in roles of reciprocal exemplarity. A fantasized normality to come marks Marcello’s self-control.

Throughout the novel, that which is set into greatest relief and focus is often evidence of hiddenness; such is the behavior of Marcello’s father: “Ora, quella sera, a tavola, Marcello notò subito che il padre sottolineava con forza, quasi a richiamarvi sopra l’attenzione, azioni abituali e di nessuna importanza” (27). Such attention paid to the act — what philosophers would call ‘destruction,’ to the degree that that act signifies something else — is a species of concealment by emphasis and presentation, however public the particular act may be. Marcello’s youth is an ongoing state of overly intense, revealed concealment; his mother is inattentive to him, does not understand him at all, but is, at the same time, much too close — “Pur non avendo alcuna confidenza con il figlio di cui si occupava pochissimo a causa dei numerosi impegni mondani, ella non aveva mai separato la propria vita da quella di lui” (18) — inserting the distance of distraction within attachment; she is as ungraspable as Dido by

Aeneas in Hades. Here, an almost incestuously uncanny familiarity becomes her concealment from her son. On the other hand, Marcello's father's rage paradoxically discloses Marcello to him: "Tutto ad un tratto, su una lagnanza della madre o della cuoca, il padre ricordava di avere un figlio, urlava, dava in smanie, lo percuoteva" (28). This is family secret policing: in the homelife of Marcello's youth, to emerge from concealment is to risk violence, but to remain concealed is to suffer frustration, abandonment and alienation — a perfect double bind situation. In such a family, safety dictates that the economy of Marcello's character be disclosed as concealed. The veiled in Moravia also consists in false revelations: the scene in which the young Marcello finds himself watching his father (he believes) kill his mother — the two are making love — is such a scene:

Dapprima non vide, in fondo alla camera in penombra, ai due lati del largo letto basso, che le due grandi tende vaporose delle finestre, sollevate da una corrente di vento dentro la stanza, su su verso il soffitto, fin quasi a sfiorare il lume centrale. (32)

What the billowing curtains indicate finally is their own status as revealing/concealing, much as does the scrim in a theater.

As we have seen, disclosure is a form of the hidden in Moravia. Although Marcello's father is certifiably mad, as we shall see, his behavior is, nevertheless, no more the origin of Marcello's sense of abnormality than are the words of the maid: "'E poi,' continuò la cameriera, 'secondo me quell'uomo non è normale'" (34). Some would argue that the ideally normal is a mental state in which any thought or perception can be accepted in its disclosure. Marcello's idea of normalcy is the contrary: to Marcello, false disclosure is essential to the suppression of unpleasant feelings. His father likewise: the exaggerated orderliness of Marcello's father is a school of disclosure as concealment. At dinner, Marcello's father transforms his place setting into a small work of realist art:

Prendeva, per esempio, il bicchiere, beveva un sorso e poi lo rimetteva a posto con un colpo forte sulla tavola; cercava la saliera, ne toglieva un pizzico di sale e poi giù, deponendola, un altro colpo; afferrava il pane, lo spezzava e quindi lo riposava con un terzo colpo. Oppure, come invaso da una subitanea smania di simmetria, si dava a inquadrare, con i soliti colpi, il piatto tra le posate, in modo che coltello, forchetta e cucchiaino si incontrassero ad angolo retto intorno il circolo della scodella. (27)

Normalcy expresses ambivalence: normalcy speaks of both Marcello's acceptance and rejection of his father. Normalcy is a love of regularity and at the same time a conjuring away of madness and surprise. Shortly thereafter we learn that Marcello enjoys the punctuality of school (33), "il rituale delle lezioni" (40). The comfort which Marcello takes from regularity

becomes his participation in the figuration of his father, which Moravia makes a provisional explanatory matrix of Marcello's love of normality: "Ancora una volta era la normalità che l'attraeva . . ." (40). Here normalcy is made to reside in the repetition of routine, but if repetition gives rise to the originary, it must itself be originary. In short, it is the resemblance to his eventually mad father that becomes another proposed — and failed — matrix useful for understanding his yearning for normality. Such a false matrix provides the irony of one of Italy's foremost novelists of realism: that abnormality should arise from an absolutizing yearning for a normalcy-to-come.

The secret is to some degree a gender issue in the novel — protean young Marcello transforms himself into a woman by his manipulatory withdrawal from his pursuer, Lino:

Pur non penetrando il vero motivo delle smanie di Lino, con istintiva civetteria quasi femminile intuiva che il modo più spiccio per entrare in possesso della rivoltella era quello suggeritogli il sabato avanti da Lino stesso: non curarsi di Lino, disprezzarne le offerte, respingerne le suppliche, rendersi, insomma prezioso; finalmente non accettare di salire nella macchina se non quando fosse ben sicuro che la rivoltella era sua. (69)

The narrator comments, "Quasi che, in fondo, non gli fosse dispiaciuto, anzi fosse portato per natura a recitare la parte della donna sdegnosa e civetta" (71). This scene of the young Marcello at the window of the limousine that Lino — his eventual molester — drives suggests a paradigm for the glimpses we receive of Marcello's character: "'Sì,' disse Marcello abbassando gli occhi e giocando con la maniglia dello sportello. Si rendeva conto di fare un viso crucciato, restio, ostile e non capiva più se lo facesse per commedia o sinceramente" (73). *Non capiva più* suggests that young Marcello's behavior is autonomous of his intent, that is, of his will. The car window, accordingly, does not expose, nor does it hide, but rather presents theatrically what Marcello is as what he is not. In addition, the scene at the car window contributes a further irony by making Marcello the trace of his molester Lino, which works a partial ethical leveling by their shared appearance of austerity:

Era vero, Lino gli era antipatico, pensò, ma non si era mai domandato perché. Guardò il viso, quasi ascetico nella sua magrezza severa, e allora comprese perché non aveva simpatia per Lino: perché, come pensò, era un viso doppio, in cui la frode trovava addirittura un'espressione fisica. (73)

Equally leveling is Quadri's later observation of what he presumes in Marcello to be the youthful, idealistic austerity of fascism (299). Far from

an austere devotee, Marcello actually despises everything about fascism. Quadri reposes too much faith in an appearance of spontaneous, unreflective austerity, which may actually be the single-mindedness of the obsessive. Marcello actually cannot tolerate the spontaneous: a spontaneous, premarital intimacy with Giulia, his eventual wife, threatens disorder and abnormality:

Tuttavia non si sentiva inclinato a contraccambiare questi trasporti: voleva che i suoi rapporti con la fidanzata si mantenessero dentro i limiti tradizionali, quasi parendogli che una maggiore intimità avrebbe introdotto di nuovo nella sua vita quel disordine e quell'anormalità che si studiava tutto il tempo di scacciare. (115)

A capacity for the transparency of intimacy is commonly understood to be an important trait of the normal. However, when Giulia describes her passivity in the hands of Fenizio, her molester — “. . . ero come un oggetto tra le sue mani, passiva, inerte, senza volontà . . .” (199) — she becomes the trace of the young Marcello in the hands of Lino. Marcello's flight from molestation lands him in the arms of another victim of molestation.

This play of concealment in disclosure is encapsulated in the aporia of a *Servizio Segreto*: knowledge of the existence of the secret police is crucial to tyranny, for if dissenters do not know that a secret police exists, dissent will flourish, but the prisons will be overcrowded. On the other hand, if the identity of the secret policeman/woman is known, s/he can be avoided, and dissent will likewise flourish. For this reason, the existence and function of a secret police can be no secret — the lesson of this particular secret is, of course, that there is no secret in the form of a content that transcends the play of the letter. In short, its members are not secret because their presumed presence must be intimidating and stifling, even though they themselves should not be identifiable. Their presence accordingly shares a border with that of the sign: they must remain concealed in their disclosure. But this play can be fatal if the government is overthrown: Marcello is endangered by the fall of fascism precisely because he is presumed to belong to the secret police. One could say that the *Servizio Segreto* is the absent presence of Fascist government, the fabricator and theater of its putative omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence. The secretary of the *Servizio Segreto* unwittingly provides a succinct description of the cosmic dimension of the aporia of Marcello's practice of/as secretly policing/policed: “La vostra idea di simulare una conversione politica allo scopo di ispirare fiducia ed entrare nella loro organizzazione e magari farvi affidare un incarico in Italia . . . è buona” (102). The secretary could not have known that Marcello's task of infiltration is far more than a repressive task he unquestioningly undertakes in the service of a government bureau, the *Servizio Segreto*; on the contrary, it is his entire life's project. That

is, his project consists for the most part in the infiltration of a collectivity — in this case, Italian society — under false pretenses, as if it were his entry on stage in the role of the normal man.

Moreover, the *Servizio Segreto* is a sociopolitical correlative of Marcello's inner life — his *secretum* — which is largely an activity of secret policing. More precisely, since, as with so many of his other behaviors, Marcello's work is subordinated to the final end of normalcy, his work in the *Servizio Segreto* is ultimately both theater and therapy — the political put at the service of the personal and private — therapy understood as a means to the imagined happiness of an unscrutinized, spontaneous belonging; that is, a hidden/exposed belonging. Not only his profession of secret agent, but from Catholicism, family life, marriage, down to the smallest behavior — buying a pack of cigarettes, for example — all of these things are subordinated in importance to the therapeutic absolute which is Marcello's achievement of normalcy. But in this lies paradox: Marcello's version of normalcy is a spectral entity deduced from the observation of others and transformed into a hypostasized absolute, the fleshing out of a fetish. With the stealth of a secret policeman, he scrutinizes the collectivity for traits of normalcy in order to use them to assemble himself into a collectively normal individual. Yet, as a further consequence of such construction, Marcello's version of the integration of the self cannot comprise a normal definition of normalcy, because his integration involves the exaltation of normalcy, a private trait, over the public concerns of politics and religion. To those normally deemed normal, such absolutizing of the private would seem odd. Let me underscore a political fact: insofar as normalcy serves Marcello as a moral absolute, his fascism is a psychotherapy set above the political, public and collective. In other words, the privacy of his absolute is tantamount to a repudiation of fascism whose ideology featured the absolute priority of the state to every other concern. As Mussolini put it in his speech of October 28, 1925 at La Scala: “La nostra formula è questa: tutto nello Stato, niente al di fuori dello Stato, nulla contro lo Stato.”⁹

Belonging, taken either as means to, or consequence of, happiness, is a very pallid version of a final end. Such an idiosyncratic cultivation of normalcy is abnormal, and the futility of its achievement effectively transforms Marcello's project into a gesture of prayer for a normalcy *à venir*. Once again, Marcello despises most everything about the fascism that pervades the political collectivity from which he collects the rags of a self: “In realtà, pensò, non c'era quasi nulla nel regime che non gli dispiacesse profondamente; e tuttavia questa era la sua strada e ad essa doveva restare fedele” (99). For all their dependence upon repetition and the theatrical, his single-minded therapeutic ambitions and the moral rigidity that is their consequence will find their literal, staged counterpart in the road from which he will not swerve and on which he will meet his death.

In his on-going performance of *non-savoir*, the narrator stages his failed attempt at explaining the secret of Marcello's lack of understanding of him-

self — his inability to find an irreducible, unified and adequate explanation of his cruelty. In other words, Marcello's inability to find the grounds of his own deviance is paralleled by the narrator's inability to do so; theirs is a parallel unknowing. The narrator confesses his inability to name the secret: "Nel tempo della sua fanciullezza, Marcello era affascinato dagli oggetti come una gazza. Forse perchè, a casa, più per indifferenza che per austerità, i genitori non avevano mai pensato a soddisfare il suo istinto di proprietà; o, forse, perché altri istinti più profondi e ancora oscuri si mascheravano in lui da avidità"; the salient phrase here is *forse perchè*.¹⁰ "Tra tutti gli oggetti, però, quelli che lo attraevano di più, forse perché gli erano proibiti, erano le armi" (8); another failed attempt at explanation, and *forse perchè* once again. "Ben presto si era accorto che il suo gusto per le armi aveva origini più profonde e oscure delle loro infatuazioni militari" (8); the grounds here are *origini più profonde e oscure*. The narrator is at pains to confess his unknowing. He tries another tack:

Forse fu soltanto il caso che lo spinse su questa via, un colpo di giunco che, invece di storpiare un arbusto, colpì sulla schiena una lucertola addormentata su un ramo o forse un principio di noia o di sazietà che gli suggerì di cercare nuova materia sulla quale esercitare la crudeltà ancora inconsapevole. Comunque. . . (10)

One is tempted to respond: *forse fu soltanto il caso*, and, of course, perhaps it was not.

"Come [Marcello] fosse giunto a questo non avrebbe saputo dire o meglio preferiva non ricordarlo, ma ormai tutto era finito . . ." (10); in short, *non avrebbe saputo dire* speaks for the narrator as well. The narrator himself cannot provide an adequate and logically consistent account of the origin of Marcello's sense of his own evil; he can only proffer what he admits are speculations, as if the narrator's default explanation for such feeling were original sin. The narrator cannot even decide among reductionisms that should have priority, as if to say that Marcello's sense of evil dwells in a secrecy beyond any realist narrator's disclosure. Thus, the narrator assures us that we cannot leap beyond the tapestried complexities of Marcello's character to an unconscious in which the explanation of his behavior might be found residing in the pristine splendor of a transcendental signified — social, economic or psychosexual — beyond all difference. And he is right: after all, Marcello's professional identity lies within the tapestry of the secret — a secret police. Secret policing notwithstanding, the Marcello of *Il conformista* is precluded structurally from the knowledge of who he is, if such knowledge is understood to be prelinguistic; that is, prior to interpretation. And such preclusion is the work of the aesthetic.

Marcello's world is governed by accidents, which are the tragic side of *non-savoir*: because of a bureaucratic delay in delivering a message, Quadri

and his wife are murdered, and their murder is revealed as irrelevant to the ends his government originally intended. In short, Quadri's political martyrdom is occasioned by the merest snafu. This is not unique in the novel: the unknown conditions Marcello's lifelong search for normalcy; that is, because of a mistake in the reporting of Lino's death, Marcello lives with the guilt of a murderer and becomes a Fascist assassin, having exaggerated the significance of the briefest violent fantasy to grandiose proportions. He is, not unlike Quadri, the victim of a text — a newspaper's error of reportage. His notion that he is destined to kill arises from the misconstruction of an event that never occurred. The cat dies instead of Roberto. Marcello's father goes mad thinking that Marcello is the son of another man. Marcello has married a woman he thought was normal, but who is not, according to his rigid, exclusivist and absolutizing definition. It is telling that on the train moving toward Paris, his honeymoon and Quadri's unnecessary murder, Marcello experiences something of an epiphany of *non-savoir*:

Provò improvvisamente una sensazione di acuto smarrimento. Perché era in quel treno? E chi era la donna che stava al suo fianco? E dove andava? E chi era lui stesso? E donde veniva? Non soffriva di questo smarrimento, al contrario gli piaceva come un sentimento che gli era familiare e costituiva, forse, il fondo stesso dell'essere suo più intimo. (205)

The achievement of normalcy represents to him the conjuring away of this spectral *non-savoir* even if, at the moment, normalcy shows its smiling Janus face. Normalcy in Moravia is less the play of claim and counter-claim than it is an ironic play of the interpenetration of concepts.

Policing the collectivity: in *Il conformista*, as we have seen, chief among the expressions of concealment/disclosure is normalcy, but Marcello's normalcy is performative: it has no unchanging, underlying content; rather, it is always in play. Marcello is, of course, obsessed with normalcy, hence the title *Il conformista*, but likewise the aporetic irony of the title. That is, Marcello is the paradox of a conformist without a consistent and definitive code of rules, or stable set of behaviors to which he might conform. In short, a normalcy without defined norms suggests what philosophers would call the paradox of a rule without rules. Moravia offers a provisory definition of normalcy early in the novel: "una volontà di adeguazione ad una regola riconosciuta e generale" (38), but the thrust of the novel is toward the repudiation by complication of this very definition. In *Il conformista*, normalcy *always* carries the high price of "complicità varie ma tutte negative" (133) that contaminate the conceptual purity of such normalcy, as if to perform what Marcello himself might call a universal "regola di decadenza" (201). Marcello posits a normalcy possessed by the collectivity — a great Italian *das Man* — but, at the same time, he denies such normalcy to the idiosyncrasy of any single — singular — member of it:

Sempre così gli succedeva: pensava di essere normale, simile a tutti gli altri, quando si raffigurava la folla in astratto, come un grande esercito positivo e accumulato dagli stessi sentimenti, dalle stesse idee, dalle stesse mete, del quale era consolante far parte. Ma appena affioravano fuori da quella folla gli individui, l'illusione della normalità si infrangeva contro la loro diversità, egli non si riconosceva affatto in loro e provava insieme ripugnanza e distacco. (95)

Marcello's version of the collective captures and condemns individuals who are judged not to possess the virtues or enjoy the consolation that he believes should come with membership in the collective. The relationship between the individual and collective is ambiguous: such judgment performs a (quasi Fascistic) violence of uniformity/diversity, for each singularity is posited as first possessing, and then failing to possess, the common and defining trait of normalcy. These words suggest that normalcy subsists in secrecy, because throughout the novel, a "normal" collectivity is set in antidotal contrariety to its origins in deviant and unforeseeable individual idiosyncrasy. Every putatively normal collectivity winds up a disappointment to Marcello. Thus, this endlessly and aesthetically shifting collectivity, one could argue, is of Marcello's own devising, as if he himself elaborated the collectivity from which he is alienated and to which he yearns to belong; as if Marcello searched the collectivity for the very traits he himself had attributed to it, and regularly arranged his own disillusionment. Perhaps more sinister: Marcello poses himself the futile challenge of transforming the despised personal in himself into an aesthetic collective, while still retaining enough of the illusory personal to survive the annihilation of the personal in himself in the collective. Let me elaborate the futility of such a project: throughout the novel, Marcello finds normalcy elusive and oblique: normalcy may be perceived and overheard — policed, in short — but it cannot be directly experienced or grasped. A question then arises from this: would the normal man that Marcello yearns to be be an example of normalcy, or would the new Marcello be the exemplar of normalcy.

This blurring and agglomeration that takes place throughout *Il conformista* elaborates an irony of contagion that compromises the purity of Marcello's concept of normalcy as such: that Marcello should, in each instance, seek to establish normalcy through hypocrisy, tyranny, repression and murder suggests that the essence of Marcello's normalcy is both constituted and compromised by otherness. In *Il conformista*, normalcy presents itself quite literally as difference rejected and reinscribed: possessed by the collective, denied to the individual, then reinscribed in his assimilation of the trait. Indeed, the achievement of normalcy in *Il conformista* requires Marcello's apprenticeship to the very things that fascism found reprehensible. For example, Marcello, whose personal fascism exalts bourgeois morality and stable, traditional gender identities, pimps his

wife to Lina, the lesbian wife of Quadri — who is his intended victim — in an act of infiltration aimed at expediting Quadri's betrayal and assassination. Quadri, himself masked and immoral, is, in his likeness/unlikeness to Marcello, what of the secret Marcello must stifle, a representative of difference Marcello would expunge from the purity of Fascist normalcy.¹¹ Nevertheless, Marcello will fall in love with Lina, who, despite her avowed contempt for Marcello's politics and sexuality, remains, all the same, more like him than different. She too, after all, is one fascinated by the simply, normally and "innocently" heterosexual — in her case, the heterosexuality of Giulia, Marcello's dim and damaged wife ("Marcello la guardò e capì improvvisamente che quel carattere normale che aveva sinora attribuito alla moglie, in realtà non esisteva," 195).

As we have seen, the play of irony and paradox in the novel renders the word "normal" aesthetic and undecidable. Events both unusual and reprehensible so impinge upon normalcy and then so permeate it by repetition as to become the conditions of possibility/impossibility of normalcy. For example, Marcello's support for fascism's attempt to create a healthy, virile, vigorous, and powerful Italy has him first planning assassinations with blundering assassins in foreign whorehouses, and then establishing his credibility with his victim in drag *boîtes*. *Il conformista* thus elaborates a normalcy that at various times shares permeable borders with murder, child molestation, madness, adultery, incest, heroin addiction, fornication, prostitution, extreme cruelty toward animals, sacrilege, and theater. In short, the irreducible otherness in which the search for normalcy involves Marcello is marked by various matricial forms of corruption and exoticism that threaten the basic *italianità* of his expectations. The normal requires, in every instance, an accompanying — that is normal — corruption; so much for its value as a virtue. Nevertheless, even when taken for normal, Marcello is judged either too servile or too fanatical in his work to satisfy his fellow secret policemen, as if the excessive fervency of his desire for an ideal normalcy rendered him abnormal (104). Moravia is a poet of the futility of normalcy: when Marcello makes normalcy his ethical absolute, the very excess of such a desire precludes his achievement of normalcy.

By further implication, this abnormality is not simply the performance of a dialectical play, because each of the terms which should stand in contrariety to normalcy is already present within it — normalcy is shot through with the very difference that it attempts to annihilate. Thus, Marcello's every attempt to assimilate himself to the normal propels him further into the very worlds that normalcy/fascism proscribes as other, but which were always there differentiating it. As a consequence, these elements which contaminate his normalcy announce the coming of the other. That is to say that the normal self-to-come, the self for which he searches and hopes, will be so singular — and other — to Marcello that he can have no power over it, but rather is always already in its power. It would come as a surprise. Moreover, as we have seen elsewhere, the singularity of each

member of the collectively normal disrupts Marcello's notion of normalcy. This contamination underscores the possible/impossibility of an ideal normalcy and the futility of reliance on its certification by Church and state.¹²

If we require a narratorial voice to orient us in our reading of the novel, we could hardly do better than consult Marcello himself, if only because he is a such a consummately failed reader of himself, a master misinterpreter. Insofar as Marcello is a secret to himself, he unleashes hermeneutical longings on a self/non-self that stubbornly refuses his yearning for normalcy. His is a self that refuses his desire to desire appropriately — as he understands the appropriate — stubbornly refuses to yield, transform itself and behave. His abnormality/singularity is a hermeneutical spur: it is a spur to his search for the totalizing secret he believes he knows, because, of course, it is his property, his *proprium/secretum* — and whose effects he would modify by becoming/appearing normal. But the new self, like the old, is never entirely present to him, and, like the self with which he is dissatisfied, persists in its evasion and rebellion. In political terms, the new self is the part of himself he would infiltrate in order to liquidate the old. Marcello is, in effect, unsatisfied with himself and unsatisfied by his failed creation of a new normal, docile self, a response which takes him beyond the bounds of normalcy.

Once again: for Marcello, singularity annihilates normalcy, and, throughout the novel normalcy is constituted by the abnormal and the morally reprehensible. *Il conformista* reveals the structural secrecy of the other, but that other, in this novel, paradoxically inheres in the very self that Marcello would manipulate, but which, for structural reasons, he, as desiring abnormal individual, can never infiltrate, manipulate and inhabit as he wishes. As judged undesirable, his otherness to himself, his abnormality, is a rejected externality, a foreignness, but normalcy as such is itself no less a foreignness. Marcello fails to shuck his old self yet cannot succeed at willing/conjuring/praying himself into a new normal self: this new version of the inside of the inside is something which will never be subsumed under his 'I.' The new self must always remain outside as an other *à venir*, even as it abides in the inside where it is imagined in the satisfaction that it will bring, that is, as an imagining of/by the despised abnormal self. There will be no conversational experience for Marcello, that is, no movement from illusion to reality.

Moravia suggests that the new self may be perpetually hoped for and perhaps affected, but it will never be achieved, if only because a constituting otherness can never be controlled or assumed. Thus, one could apply to the new self that Marcello attempts to elaborate and assume Jacques Derrida's words in *Donner la mort*: "tout autre est tout autre."¹³ That is to say that, on account of the singularity of both the abnormal self that waits and the normal self *à venir*, neither can be responsible for the other, nor can the self-to-come match the expectations of an abnormal judge, any more than the abnormal judge can establish a pristine universal

under which the self-to-come would be neatly and totally subsumed. In other words, the abnormal judge may wish to annihilate and resurrect himself under the larger rubric of the normal and become its example, but, as the novel makes clear, the notion of the normal itself is neither one, nor good, nor monolithic; nor, finally, is it stable. Thus, the impetus of Giulia's passion provides Marcello with ". . . una prova di più che alle persone normali era lecito prendersi la massima libertà con la normalità stessa" (135). Such *massima libertà* is something which neither the repressive state of fascism, nor a repressive, judicial self can tolerate.

Pari passu with the decline and fall of fascism is the emptying of Marcello's desired personal absolute of normalcy to the point of intellectual bankruptcy. Marcello's first terrible realization is that normalcy is neither normative, nor monolithic — "Gli uomini normali non erano buoni, pensò ancora, perché la normalità veniva sempre pagata, consapevolmente o no, a caro prezzo, con complicità varie ma tutte negative, di insensibilità, di stupidità, di viltà quando addirittura non di criminalità" (133) — and above all that it is not *stricto sensu* a moral virtue; being like others falls far short of being good. What's more, one of its conditions of possibility/impossibility is the inevitability of its subversion: "E tutti la perdiamo la nostra innocenza, in un modo o nell'altro . . . è la normalità" (381). 'Normal' in the novel is made to mean, necessarily, losing normality understood as innocence. Normality is a necessary (*tutti*) fall into corruption; this is spoken by Lino, the child molester on account of whom Marcello understands himself to be abnormal. Shorn of any relationship to goodness, sameness can, like Marcello's fascism, represent mere collusion in vice. That a declared moral quality should undergo an inevitable and *necessary* transformation into a vice (*sempre pagata*) implies not only that it is poor material for an ethical absolute, but that its condition of possibility is vice itself. *Complicità varie* here suggests that wherever we have normalcy we necessarily have vice. In short, there is no normalcy as such, no pure normalcy, as Marcello dreams it. Naively to posit a collectivity without individual idiosyncrasy — singularity — is to annihilate not only the normalcy of the collectivity, but the normalcy of him who posits such an agglomeration. Thus, it does not surprise when the momentary happiness he feels, a happiness brought about by an unnecessary murder, is described in the very terms that described normalcy: "Forse perché questa felicità era stata pagata in anticipo a così caro prezzo; forse perché si rendeva conto che non avrebbe mai potuto essere felice, almeno nel modo semplice e affettuoso descritto da Giulia" (336; emphasis mine) and is the annihilation of happiness in the very moment of its acknowledgment.

This normalcy *à venir* is the messianic side of Marcello's inner fascism, but it too must be *pagata* with vice (133): deviant Marcello's yearning for his own annihilation in/by normalcy is the supreme act of repressive secret policing — self-assassination. In short, the desire for normalcy requires an inner homicide, a trace of the political homicide of Quadri. Normalcy

can only be the *summum bonum* of the self-consciously abnormal. That is to say that the coming to presence of the otherness *qua* self is structurally impossible, because *structurally* to come in open secrecy. Even in the innocuous way Marcello sells it to himself — the normal as normative, possessed by, yet possessing and transcending, those who *enjoy* it — it is merely the changing of personnel in a totalitarian system of governance. Normalcy is the messianic coming for which Marcello prays; yet its arrival is of necessity perpetually delayed as would be the coming of a messiah *as such*, a messiah perpetually to come. However, the novel teaches that the coming to presence of normalcy is impossible if not accompanied by its others: the vice and repression with which it must be paid; its arrival must remain perpetually put off because it is paid off by vice. There is accordingly an epitaphic quality in the reason Marcello offers for making love to his wife; the reason becomes a prayer addressed to his future, his death, but at the same time a theatrical role he has assumed: “Sono stato un uomo simile a tutti gli altri uomini . . . ho amato, mi sono congiunto ad una donna e ho generato un altro uomo” (206) — none of these imagined accomplishments finally succeeds in providing him with the *feeling* of normalcy. And their failure is assured even though he is a critic unto himself of his own performance, because, for Marcello, the normal is a quality that the other possesses only *qua* other; in other words, the normal is a perpetual otherness. By its sorties into exoticism, Moravia’s novel suggests that the coming of the other — which will be the new Marcello — may be awaited, but cannot be prepared for, as neither the messiah can be awaited, nor can death, the thief in the night. The Marcello-to-come dwells in opacity and in reluctant secrecy. This yearned-for normalcy is thus also a secret for which there is no revelation. In other words, although the self may wish its annihilation in otherness, it cannot *feel its way to otherness*, if it must also judge its success from the outside as would any other spectator. Thus, we are in the presence of a manifold unknowable other: the normal self must necessarily arrive to Marcello much as did the abnormal self — unexpectedly.

The other is a surprise that defeats all expectation: Marcello is killed with his family as he travels down a narrow road from which he refuses to swerve — a narrow road reminiscent of the hall of the Fascist ministry where he receives his commission to murder — making them an easy target for an unidentified plane that strafes them, making them victims of the *diritta via* of Dante’s ethical ideal: “tuttavia era sua strada e ad essa doveva restare fedele (99).¹⁴ This plane, which he does not foresee arriving, and which will kill him with his family, is another version of the coming of the other, indeed, very literally “the incoming of the other” — in John D. Caputo’s wry and inspired rendering of Jacques Derrida’s term *l’invention de l’autre* — as yet another representation of the arrival of a *toute autre* that cannot be anticipated, like the normal self. Marcello attempted to drive straight down the road, choosing it as a safe way toward a foreseeable

and attainable goal, utterly unaware of both the new political order and of the plane in whose gun sights he was locked. But perhaps it was always this way, because, once again: “la normalità veniva sempre pagata, consapevolmente o no, a caro prezzo” (133). Marcello, the family man, is momentarily and fatally the pursued, which means that he has become a differed and delayed version of the cat, the lizards and Quadri, who was himself killed with his wife while on a trip: in Quadri’s case to Savoia, in Marcello’s to Tagliacozzo. The end of the novel has innocence in the form of a pastoral episode entrap him and cause his death together with that of his family, for what is more normal and innocent than a father taking his family for a ride in the countryside? But this homely vignette becomes quickly dantesque when we learn that Marcello cannot swerve from the straight to save his family and himself. Marcello is killed while returning to an Eden of innocence and simplicity — what he has been searching for all his life, a time presumably before guilt.

Moravia elaborates numerous false allegories beginning with Marcello’s awakening to guilt in a garden: thus, the encounter with Quadri becomes quite overtly Judas’s betrayal of Christ: “Ecco alcuni argomenti a favore di Giuda, pensò scherzosamente” (273). Leaving for a night on the town in Paris with Quadri, Marcello feels “quasi la tentazione di chinarsi e baciare Quadri sulla guancia sinistra, proprio come aveva fatto Giuda . . .” (298). The number thirteen, the number of the original apostles, appears. The phone rings three times, just as the cock crowed three times when Peter denied knowing Christ. We learn that Quadri is a saint to his wife Lina (“Mio marito è una specie di santo,” 265). But suddenly, as they are dining, Quadri’s head is juxtaposed in a mirror with that of Orlando, his eventual assassin (307), as Quadri asks Marcello to deliver letters to his anti-Fascist colleagues in Italy. Quadri, himself a manipulator and Judas, speaks of his anti-Fascist politics as “redenzione” (321). Quadri promises Marcello rebirth in the spirit of St. Paul’s *Letter to the Romans* (6: 4, 11) — “As Christ is risen from the dead by the glory of the Father we also may walk in newness of life . . . So do you also reckon, that you are dead to sin, but alive unto God, in Christ Jesus our Lord”¹⁵ — “lei potrà rinascere ad una nuova vita” (321). But, of course, Quadri, a cowardly opportunist of high moral pretension, is neither saint, nor particularly Christlike. Marcello fears the wrath of God against his family, “la verga divina che colpiva spietatamente la sua famiglia intera” (365). All of these citations, taken by themselves, would seem to suggest a transcendental scheme behind the novel, a perfect, all-reconciling justice that smites the assassin in the end. But the novel works to the repudiation of such a notion just as it must work to the repudiation of an innocence untexted by the ironic play of the whole. Traditional allegory posited a world of pristine untexted truth whose every idea enjoyed ideal purity and separation from every other; this is the world of the all-explaining secret of tradition. But *Il conformista* suggests a world that mirrors no substantive content or idea behind

and above the text which is not itself performative. In this novel, the transcendent reveals itself as always in a play of difference and identity. The transcendent, with antiphrastic irony, is at pains to identify itself as impure.

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Notes

¹I am, of course, using the word “poem” as shorthand for “verbal artwork.” See Murray Krieger, *The New Apologists for Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1963). See also his “Platonism, Manichaeism, and the Resolution of Tension: A Dialogue,” *The Play and the Place of Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1967). Here is Krieger’s eulogy of complexity in “Platonism, Manichaeism”: “After all, we have seen not only that the tensional version of contextualism, in the extreme form that is its only consistent form, seems to forego any aesthetic order externally imposed upon its self-complicating dynamics, but also that this theory in its ironic posing of counterclaim along with every claim, seems to forbid any final thematic resolution, any final moral commitment, in the name of experiential complexity, which readily supplies the skepticism that come of a total moral awareness” (198). In Krieger’s formulation, any resolution together with a reductive moral sense becomes a form of the secret, the hidden. Let us take this a step further to claim that for Krieger literature offers a non-knowledge, but one which stirs hermeneutic passion in readers of literature. Krieger’s secret is not a secret since it is not a propositional nugget; it has no semantic content.

²Some further deconstructive implications of New Critical thought: the secret comes to define the aesthetic, which discloses itself by occulting the differential play of the text’s activity of self-generation. And whatever appears, appears as texted, which is to say that it appears as concealed. Let me add that by “the secret” I mean profound meaning that nevertheless possesses the structure of the sign, the secret *as such*, that is, a secret structurally unknowable, because perpetually concealed and yet perpetually disclosing itself. Indeed, given the relentless play of context which forms the basis of the Contextualist aesthetic, disclosure itself becomes a form of the secret, because one might fairly ask at what point can that which is understood to be perpetually in self-transforming flux be stilled long enough to permit critical purchase? Or, in Heideggerian terms: might not freedom enjoy precedence over being, understood as structure, or order? And put somewhat differently: does not that which resists propositional paraphrase also resist the revelation of a propositional secret, if there is no signified that fully formed pre-exists its artistic expression, that is, transcends its performative content.

³J. Hillis Miller puts it somewhat differently in his *Versions of Pygmalion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1990): “We project names, faces, voices into those inanimate black marks on the page. Nor do we cease at the end of the story to go on thinking of those characters as if they were real people. The reading of stories depends on taking prosopopoeias literally (in however subtle and sophisticated a suspension of disbelief) and is impossible without it” (241). See also his “Derrida and Literature” in Tom Cohen, ed., *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP,

2001) 58–81. I, of course, would take issue with this profoundly mechanistic approach to the text which would reduce the play of the whole to the Platonizing fixity of the rhetorical figure of prosopopoeia.

⁴*Sed contra*: see Anne-Marie Bram, “Authoritarianism in William Faulkner’s *Light in August* and Alberto Moravia’s *Il conformista*,” *Rivista di letteratura moderna e comparata* 26 (1973): 196–220, Diana Culbertson and John A. Valley, “Alberto Moravia’s Melancholy Murderer: The Conformist as Personality Type,” *Literature and Psychology* 25 (1975): 79–85, and Sharon Wood, “Religion, Politics and Sexuality in Moravia’s *Il conformista*,” *Italian Studies* 44 (1989): 86–101. The patient reader will see that I have not set myself the task of dealing solely with the syndromes that constitute Marcello’s secret life, for that has been treated in several of the works cited above with an admirable scientific precision, but rather the task of dealing with a version of the secret that gives rise to the irony of the text: the secret that there is no secret. By this I mean that there is no rock bottom self which is transparent, located beyond Marcello’s acts and their interpretation in a realm beyond all difference.

⁵Norberto Bobbio puts it succinctly in his seminal article from 1961, “Ideologia e dottrina dello stato fascista” (reprinted in *Il novecento: i contemporanei*, ed. Gianni Grana [Milano: Marzorati, 1979]): “Il fascismo aveva la violenza in corpo: la violenza era la sua ideologia” (29–57), and, in support of his thesis, proceeds to cite Mussolini in the *Dottrina del fascismo* (1932): “Il fascismo non fu tenuto a balia da una dottrina elaborata in precedenza a tavolino; nacque da un bisogno di azione, e fu azione; non fu partito ma, nei primi due anni, antipartito e movimento,” and Professor Francesco Ercole: “Le masse non furono guadagnate al fascismo dal suo programma. Non in un programma era il fascismo, ma nell’impeto travolgente della sua concreta e immediata volontà di conquista” (29–57). Bobbio adds with his typical eloquence and succinctness: “I fascisti non sapevano forse che cosa volevano; ma sapevano benissimo quello che non volevano. Non volevano, in una parola, la democrazia, intesa come il laborioso e difficile processo di educazione nella libertà, di governo attraverso il controllo e il consenso, di graduale e sempre contrastata sostituzione della persuasione alla forza” (29–58). On fascism and violence, see also Giovanni Zibordi, “Le componenti sociali del fascismo,” *Critica socialista del fascismo*, repr. in Antonino Répaci and Carlenrico Navone, *Dio e popolo: antologia del Risorgimento e della Resistenza* (Torino: Bottega d’Erasmus, 1961), and Gaetano Salvemini, *Le origini del fascismo in Italia* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1961). (Salvemini, of course, was both witness and victim of Fascist violence, having been forced into exile in the twenties along with Turati, Sturzo, Nitti, and others.) Nothing quite renders the importance of violence to fascism with the force of its own songs; thus “Giovinezza,” fascism’s anthem: “Del pugnale il fiero lampo, / della bomba il gran fragore, / tutti avanti, tutti al campo, / là si vince oppur si muore” (or, as in the initial verses of a variant: “Col pugnale e con la bomba, / nella vita del terrore . . .”). Two parodied verses of the communist anthem “Bandiera rossa” are also telling in this regard: “Avanti popolo / alla riscossa, / ai comunisti / si rompe l’ossa”; “Mano ai revolveri, / botte al locale, / i comunisti / all’ospedale,” and finally, from “Hanno ammazzato Giovanni Berta”: “Hanno ammazzato Giovanni Berta / fascista tra i fascisti, / vendetta sì vendetta / farem sui comunisti,” which concludes, “ti vendicheremo un giorno.” Thousands of other examples could be cited. I should add that it would be ludicrous to argue that violence was foreign to the practice of the fascists’

sworn enemies, the communists. For a precise and useful overview of the question of Fascist violence, visit <http://www.romacivica.net/aniroma/FASCISMO/fascismo2.htm>.

⁶In the fourth chapter, the narrator turns the incident in the garden, recounted in chapter one, into a version of St. Augustine's theft of figs from the *Confessions*. The mature Marcello sees a lizard and remembers massacring them as a boy: "Intanto ricordava di quando, ragazzo, aveva ammazzato le lucertole e poi, per liberarsi dal rimorso, aveva cercato invano una complicità e una solidarietà nel timido Roberto. Allora non gli era riuscito di trovare nessuno che lo alleggerisse del fardello della colpa" (155–56). Thus, Augustine's youthful theft of figs from the garden of a neighbor's house from Book Two of the *Confessions*, trans. John K. Ryan (Garden City: Image Books, 1960). Augustine does not need the figs, indeed, he does not even eat them and what's more his parents have better ones in their orchard. Nevertheless, "late one night . . . a group of very bad youngsters set out to shake down and rob this tree. We took great loads of fruit from it, not for our own eating, but rather to throw it to the pigs; even if we did eat a little of it, we did this to do what pleased us for the reason that it was forbidden" (71). Unlike Marcello, the mature Augustine understands the origin and nature of his evil, as a prideful love of nothingness, fruit of the fall of man: "Behold, now let my heart tell you what it looked for there, that I should be evil without purpose and that there should be no cause for my evil but evil itself. Foul was the evil, and I loved it. I loved to go down to death. I loved my fault, not that for which I did the fault, but I loved by fault itself" (71).

⁷On the secret, see Jacques Derrida, "Passions: 'An Oblique Offering,'" *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995), Peter Fenves, "Out of the Blue: Secrecy, Radical Evil, and the Crypt of Faith," trans. Peggy Kamuf, in *Futures of Jacques Derrida*, ed. Richard Rand (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001) 99–129, and John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997), as well as his *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington: U of Indiana P, 2000).

⁸*Eстетica e differenza in Wittgenstein: studi per un'estetica wittgensteiniana* (Roma: Carocci, 1999) 131. He continues: "Si tratta di richiamare alla mente questa frattura indicibile direi, im-proposizionabile; si tratta di rammemorare le somiglianze e le dissimiglianze, le differenze, che messe insieme *come tali* costituiscono l'unità interna alle cose viste e dette, spiegate ed enunciate, mettendoci tutto davanti alla luce di uno sguardo che non si esprime per mezzo di tesi o spiegazioni . . . ma attraverso la dissoluzione, per oltrepassamento momentaneo, del linguaggio cosale e rappresentativo" (133). See also his brilliant *Lo sguardo dell'essere: con Heidegger e Wittgenstein sulle tracce del guardare-attraverso* (Roma: Carocci, 2002).

⁹Cited in Bobbio, "Ideologia e dottrina dello stato fascista" 29–61.

¹⁰(Milano: Bompiani, 1963) 7.

¹¹The narrator observes of Quadri's face which reveals its concealment: ". . . era, insomma, un viso in cui non c'era nulla di sicuro e di vero, tutto falso, proprio una maschera" (222). Such a face makes Quadri the trace of Lino, whose face "era un viso doppio, in cui la frode trovava addirittura un'espressione fisica" (73). In short, the introduction of Marcello to Quadri is, as with Lino, another *pas de deux* of disclosure/concealment. Moreover, "D'altra parte, la straordinaria dolcezza di Quadri ripugnava a Marcello come un tratto di falsità: gli pareva impossibile che un uomo potesse essere così

dolce senza menzogna e senza secondi fini" (223), as with Lino. Quadri's presumptuously appropriating "caro figliuolo" (223), "figluol mio" (223), "figluol caro" (223), and "bravo figliuolo" (225) make him the absurdist Brunetto Latini to Marcello's absurdist Dante. On account of both his distraction and uninterest in Marcello, Quadri is, moreover, the trace of Marcello's mother: "Ma [Quadri] non aveva ascoltato la risposta di Marcello ed era passato subito ad altro argomento" (223), and "Quadri, nonché interessarsi veramente a lui, non lo vedeva neppure" (224). He is the politicized version of the mother, having "una crudele indifferenza per la vita umana" (227). The figure of Quadri suggests a familiar variety of nobly high-minded and idealistic — if cowardly — opportunism.

¹²The supreme comic version of this obsession with abnormality is, of course, to be found in Italo Svevo's *La coscienza di Zeno* (Milano: Dall'Oglio, 1976): the scene in which Zeno produces a certificate declaring that he is sane. During one of their innumerable arguments, Zeno's father concludes, "Resta però assodato che tu sei un pazzo," whereupon Zeno recalls, "Andai dal dottor Canestrini a farmi esaminare per averne un certificato. La cosa non fu facile perché dovetti sottomettermi perciò a lunghe e minuziose disanime. Ottenutolo, portai trionfalmente quel certificato a mio padre, ma egli non seppe riderne. Con accento accorato e con le lacrime agli occhi esclamò: — Ah! Tu sei veramente pazzo!" (55).

¹³(Paris: Galilée, 1999) 114.

¹⁴I am indebted for this insight to Mr. James A. Chiampi, a student in a course on the modern Italian novel (CL 103) which I offered during fall quarter, 2002 in the Program in Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine.

¹⁵*The Holy Bible Translated from the Latin Vulgate*, trans. The English Colleges at Douay and Rheims (New York: New York Bible House, 1953) 184.