Limited Developments, Limits of the “Real”: The Italian Novel of Formation and Uses of Literary Realism during Fascism, 1929–1938

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of Italian Studies
University of Toronto

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Abstract

This thesis examines a cluster of six Italian realist novels of formation, all initially released between 1929 and 1938 and written by young intellectuals who came of age during the fascist period—Alberto Moravia’s *Gli indifferenti*, Umberto Barbaro’s *Luce fredda*, Carlo Bernari’s *Tre operai*, Elio Vittorini’s *Il garofano rosso*, Fausta Cialente’s *Natalia*, and Alba de Céspedes’ *Nessuno torna indietro*. In each case, the author’s ideological intentions influenced not only his or her decision to employ realism and the general form of the *romanzo di formazione* but also the shape of the protagonist’s path toward maturation and the characteristics of the realism with which this process is narrated. Despite significant variances between them, the primary works included in the corpus show major commonalities that make it possible to begin to define a typology of the Italian realist novel of formation of the period roughly spanning the 1930s. Aesthetically, they involve prose that is mostly realist but incorporates non-realist traits, the result of the authors’ experimentation with techniques derived from the contemporary avant-garde. In terms of thematic content, the male writers depict male developments made difficult by a combination of repressive environmental forces outside of the protagonists’ control and problematic personality traits, especially significant given the emphasis placed on virile youth by the regime. The female authors approach the task differently, portraying women who are remarkably transgressive, considering traditional gender roles in Italy and fascist propaganda concerning women, but who nonetheless mature more successfully than their male counterparts do. The manner in which the writers use the realist *Bildungsroman* as a means of intellectual and
ideological engagement makes these novels important to the history of both the novel of formation and literary realism.
Acknowledgments

While writing this dissertation, I received aid from many organizations and individuals. Thank you to the Canadian Federal Government's Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council, the Province of Ontario's Ontario Graduate Scholarship Program, and the University of Toronto, among others, who facilitated my work by investing financially in it. I am deeply indebted to my supervisor, Dr. Luca Somigli, for his invaluable assistance and confidence in me and in my research. He is responsible for the fact that I am just as passionate about my subfield of Italian Studies as I finish this degree as I was when I began it. I also greatly appreciate the feedback of my other committee members, Dr. Domenico Pietropaolo and Dr. Alberto Zambenedetti, and the contributions of Dr. Rocco Capozzi at earlier stages of my program.

My parents, Michael Gaudet and Patricia O'Brien, instilled a love of learning in me when I was a child, nurturing my curiosity and allowing my stubbornness. These gifts contributed to my decision to pursue a PhD and to my ability to complete it, and their encouragement has been sustaining. I have furthermore been immensely grateful for the support of my parents-in-law, Brian and Julie Hiatt, throughout this process. I am so happy to call them family. I would be amiss not to mention my brothers, Christopher and Liam Gaudet, with whom I share much of my early scholarly history and who are, and will always be, two of my favourite people, and my uncle, Douglas Gaudet, who has been a source of inspiration, whether or not he has known it. Thank you to friends near and far who directly facilitated the production of this dissertation through work sessions and, at times, much-needed distraction, particularly Daniel Fryer, Michael Kunz, Dr. Nicholas Matte, Dr. Kayleigh Somers, and Dr. Sarah Rolfe Prodan, to name but a few of a large number. Writing a thesis can be an isolating endeavour, and having supportive companions has made all the difference.

Most importantly, my husband, Andrew Hiatt, has been integral to my ability to complete this dissertation. A constant, reassuring, understanding, and loving presence, he frequently reminded me that I could, and would, achieve my goal despite the unexpected, and ill-timed, challenges that I faced along the way. Andrew: I could not ask for a better person with whom to share my own, life-long, process of formation. This truly belongs to us both.
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Chapter 1

Realism, Fascism, and the Bildungsroman: Developing a Typology of the Italian Romanzo di Formazione of the 1930s

Over the past twenty years, there has been a renewed interest in how state and culture intersected in Mussolini’s Italy. For example, volumes such as Ruth Ben-Ghiat’s Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945, Emilio Gentile’s Il culto del littorio. La sacralizzazione della politica nell’Italia fascista, Guido Bonsaver’s Censorship and Literature in Fascist Italy, and Marla Stone’s The Patron State: Culture and Politics in Fascist Italy encourage what Bonsaver terms “a redefinition of the actual relationship between the regime and the Italian intelligentsia” (Censorship and Literature 6); at the same time, such works problematize issues like censorship and the oppression of intellectual thought. Although these scholars offer valuable contributions to our comprehension of the literature produced in the fascist totalitarian state, they do not adequately treat realist novels written during the interwar period.

In this thesis, I use the notion of the realist Bildungsroman, or novel of formation, as a lens through which to examine the development of a realist aesthetic in 1930s Italy. My work aims to fill gaps in current scholarship regarding two research areas: Italian realism of the 1930s, which forms a neglected part of the continuity between verismo of the nineteenth century and post–Second World War neorealism, and the Italian novel of formation, which is addressed in volumes such as Maria Carla Papini, Daniele Fioretti, and Teresa Spignoli’s 2007 collection Il romanzo di formazione nell’Ottocento e nel Novecento but rarely, and never thoroughly, in the context of the fascist period. By identifying chief characteristics of Bildungsromane written in this timeframe by Italians who had come of age during the rise of fascism, I show that the novels have striking—and sometimes surprising—similarities both in terms of the kinds of developments depicted and in terms of the aesthetic used to depict them.

I limit my corpus to early works by young authors: Alberto Moravia’s Gli indifferenti (1929), Umberto Barbaro’s Luce fredda (1931), Carlo Bernari’s Tre operai (1934), Elio Vittorini’s Il garofano rosso (published in serial form from 1933 to 1936 and in volume in 1948), Fausta Cialente’s Natalia (1930), and Alba de Céspedes’ Nessuno torna indietro (1938). Taking a cultural-historical approach, I link their utilization of the genre of the Bildungsroman to an evolution in Italian literary realism that took place in the late 1920s and in the 1930s. In doing so, I consider the impact of the complicated political and cultural landscape of an Italy in which the
fascist regime sought to control every aspect of the lives of Italians, including their production of and exposure to literature and art. This backdrop is key to understanding the thematic and the aesthetic codes of the works, all initially published between 1929 and 1938, or roughly the 1930s, at the core of my study.

While attempting to determine how this variety of realism, and the choice to use realism rather than other literary styles, was affected by the exigencies and influences of the historical state of affairs, I operate with the basic assumption that ideology and aesthetics in these works are closely intertwined. The connection between politics and culture in the fascist state is clear. Ben-Ghiat argues that fascism “appealed to many Italian intellectuals as a new model of modernity that would resolve both the contemporary European crisis and the long-standing problems of the national past” (Fascist Modernities 2). This was, for a sizeable number belonging to this group, an era of negotiation, compliance, or consensus. Mussolini was in fact indebted to Futurism and other avant-gardes of the first decades of the twentieth century that helped facilitate his rise to and consolidation of power; as Gentile states and then expands on in The Struggle for Modernity: Nationalism, Futurism, and Fascism, “it is difficult to deny the participation of the avant-garde in the formation of fascist political culture” (41). Indeed, futurists did not challenge “the fundamental motifs of the totalitarian State: the primacy of mythical thought, the vitalist realism, the mystical exaltation of national community, the heroic and warlike pedagogy, the imperial ambitions, or the myth of the Italian nation as the vanguard of a new society” (Gentile, The Struggle 65). However, despite holding much appeal, especially for supporters of fascism, futurism did little to address actual social issues plaguing the Italian population. With various artistic and ideological goals and to different extents, the authors whose novels I examine reacted to contemporary trends incapable of bringing about productive change by adopting the realist Bildungsroman as an alternative form of political and intellectual engagement.2

1 Gentile quotes Mussolini, who was explicit about futurism’s influence on him, stating, “ora, io formalmente dichiaro che, senza futurismo, non vi sarebbe stata rivoluzione fascista” (qtd. in Gentile, The Struggle 66).

2 In “L’opera prima come Bildungsroman: canone e anticanone della scrittura come formazione,” contained in Papini et al., Linda Altomonte identifies another group of authors who used this form for their first novel—Giuseppe Culicchia, Isabella Santacroce, Enrico Brizzi, and Niccolò Ammaniti—and discusses the significance of their decision to do so, arguing that “il romanzo diventa un necessario messaggio in bottiglia, oltre che autentica morte e rinascita di chi lo scrive” (272). There are some
Because youth was a critical issue in fascist Italy, the specific form that the authors’ realist novels take—one focused on the development of a young person—is as significant as the realist aesthetic used in narration. The Bildungsroman, in Michael Beddow’s formulation, entails the “expression and recommendation of a particular understanding of the nature of humanity through the more or less overtly fictitious narrative of the central character’s development” (5). The protagonist of a Bildungsroman is by necessity young, thus belonging to one of the social groups that the fascist state most wished to bring under control. Tracy H. Koon describes how “by the late 1930s the regime had become a ubiquitous and virtually unavoidable influence on the lives of Italian young people both inside and outside the classroom” (172). Using the slogan “largo ai giovani,” Italian fascists made an enormous effort to extoll the power, virtue, and physical vitality of youth while securing the support of the next generation through the educational system and by establishing institutions ranging from the Opera Nazionale Balilla to the Gioventù Universitaria Fascista that were meant to organize as many Italian young people as possible, from small children to university students. All this was further motivated by, in Michael A. Ledeen’s words, “the conviction that the times marked the turning point between two distinct and greatly different periods of world history, and that it was for the young generation to bridge the gulf” (151). This belief makes clear the relevance of an essential piece of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the Bildungsroman—that the protagonist of a work of this kind “is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other” (“The Bildungsroman” 23)—to a study of examples written during this era.

Although the political indoctrination of youth under Mussolini was ultimately largely a failure, since “many of the young born and raised in the ‘new Fascist climate’ realized that the regime had given them nothing to believe in, no one to obey, and nothing for which to fight” (Koon 252), fascist attempts to socialize Italian youth were not without effect. The novelists whose texts I analyze were to varying degrees exposed to this propaganda directed at and about the young.

Similarities between this cluster of works and the one at the centre of my study, most obviously the protagonists’ lack of successful formation and the idea of an authorial formation that takes place through the text. The works in question, however, reflect the very different cultural and historical climate, around the turn of the twenty-first century, in which they were written and in which they are set.
As I explore throughout this thesis, issues surrounding the unique problems associated with youth infiltrate their novels, all of which feature a young protagonist (or protagonists, in the case of *Nessuno torna indietro*) engaged in a kind of struggle with his or her contemporary society and all of which were written by young authors in the middle of their own political, personal, and intellectual development. Due in part to this correspondence between young protagonist and young author, the concept of the double *Bildung* is a recurrent and important aspect of these works.

Several broad questions guide my analysis. Perhaps most crucially, why did a range of writers with different backgrounds and political intentions produce realist *romanzi di formazione*? What is the purpose of the aesthetic strategies employed by the authors, and are there patterns in how they are used? How did the political and cultural situation affect the shape that the novels would take? What similarities unite the protagonists of these *Bildungsromane* despite variances in the characters’—and the authors’—socioeconomic circumstances and ideological leanings, and what is the significance of these correspondences? Finally, what are some defining attributes of female realist novels of formation written during this period, and how do they vary from their male counterparts? The investigation of these issues figures prominently in my examination of individual novels.

In this chapter, I outline the theoretical framework with which I will later develop and elaborate my primary hypothesis: that these works display definite stylistic and thematic commonalities from which it is possible to begin to construct the general parameters of a category of the realist Italian novel of formation of the 1930s. In terms of style, I argue that notwithstanding varying degrees of experimentalism injected into the realist aesthetic utilized, as a group these *Bildungsromane* represent a shift toward neorealism. In terms of the formations depicted, which are often in the end failed, lacking, or marked by disillusionment or even apparent regression, I

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3 For other detailed analyses of relevant issues surrounding the idea of youth in fascist Italy, see Grandi and Cavallera.

4 Although the general notion that there are parallels between an author and his or her *Bildungsroman* is found in several other scholars’ works, I first encountered the Italian equivalent of the term “double *Bildung*” in Domenica Perrone’s “La doppia *Bildung* del Garofano rosso,” where the author analyzes *Il garofano rosso*. 
contend that it is possible to identify an archetypal male protagonist: one that has evolved beyond the *inetti* of Pirandello and Svevo,\(^5\) thus showing that action is possible, but one that is nonetheless unable to bring about any concrete change to his condition, thereby emphasizing the frustrations of maturing in the environment created by the regime. This version of young adulthood stands, of course, in stark opposition with fascist propaganda’s image of the virile male youth. Furthermore, I propose that the protagonists in the female *Bildungsromane* that I analyze contrast with their male equivalents in interesting, and extremely significant, ways that reflect the distinct role of women under fascism.

In the following section, I discuss ideas of realism and the *Bildungsroman* as presented in theoretical works by György Lukács, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Erich Auerbach. Next, I describe Franco Moretti’s study of the *Bildungsroman*, addressing his contention that the beginning of the First World War marked the end of the genre and explaining why his (and Gregory Castle’s, in his work on the modernist *Bildungsroman*) conception of the confines of the genre should be expanded in order to include examples originating in other literatures, movements, and time periods. Finally, I provide a cursory examination of the specific context in which these novels were written. I focus in particular on aspects of the cultural situation directly pertaining to Italian realism.

1 Realism and the Nineteenth-Century and Early-Twentieth-Century *Bildungsroman*: Theoretical and Historical Definitions

Because terminology regarding the *Bildungsroman* leaves significant room for individual interpretation, the label has consistently been a source of semantic confusion and disagreement. Even if much contemporary criticism advocates a more relaxed idea of the genre, what constitutes a *Bildungsroman* continues to be a source of debate. While a Germanist tradition

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\(^5\) Although both Pirandello and Svevo’s *inetti* and the protagonists of the novels included in my corpus have difficulty finding a place in society, for Pirandello’s Mattia and Svevo’s Zeno (to take two examples of Italian modernist *inetti*), this is first and foremost due to their internal struggles, which can be linked to the novels’ modernism, particularly the subjective narration. For Sergio in *Luce fredda*, Teodoro in *Tre operai*, Alessio in *Il garofano rosso*, Natalia in *Natalia*, and the protagonists in *Nessuno torna indietro*, on the other hand, external obstacles play a larger role: this can be connected to the texts’ style, which is primarily realist. *Gli indifferenti* presents an intermediate case.
claims that the genre is typical only of humanist convictions of late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century Germany, denying a broadening of the term, another faction calls for a more general definition. In this second group is Moretti, who deemphasizes the German aspect and calls the Bildungsroman “the ‘symbolic form’ of modernity” (5) but still assigns it strict chronological limits. Trying to establish a definition of literary realism presents similar difficulties, a point that Marshall Brown makes clear in his assertion that “the constant renewal of the hunt for realism reflects frustration, perhaps, but also a feeling that the jungle harbors a valuable beast, elusive yet worth capturing” (224). According to Brown, “the seeming endlessness of the debate argues for the complexity of the term, not for its meaninglessness” (224). Fredric Jameson also recognizes the long-term nature of the problem of realism, referring to the realism debate of the 1930s as an event “whose navigation and renegotiation is still unavoidable for us today” (“Reflections” 133).

As previously noted, scholarly work on the realism produced during the interwar period in Italy is relatively scarce. Besides Papini, Fioretti, and Spignoli’s aforementioned Il romanzo di formazione nell’Ottocento e nel Novecento, which, though a valuable contribution, does not offer a systematic survey of the Italian Bildungsroman, analyses of the Italian novel of formation are also few. With the occasional exception of Ugo Foscolo’s Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis, Italian works are typically excluded from general analyses of the Bildungsroman. A case in point is Moretti’s foundational text on the genre, which discusses the German, French, and English traditions without acknowledging examples from the Italian context. Bakhtin’s essay on the Bildungsroman similarly ignores Italian novels. Providing the theoretical context for the present study, then, also entails justifying the use of the conceptual schema of the Bildungsroman as a framework with which to analyze realist works written within particular spatial-temporal coordinates not often considered in the history of the novel of development or in the history of literary realism.

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6 Moretti does, however, make two brief mentions of Renzo of I promessi sposi; see The Way of the World 3 and 268.
The scope of what follows is intentionally limited. Since the main purpose of the discussion is not to reconstruct the critical history of the *Bildungsroman*, which has been treated elsewhere, nor is it to summarize theories of literary realism, I have decided not to include a thorough analysis of the history and theory of either. Instead, I delineate the primary theories with which I will analyze primary works in subsequent chapters and justify why I will use them while referring in brief to some other especially germane aspects of the debates on the *Bildungsroman* and on realism.

### 1.1 Lukács, Bakhtin, and Auerbach

The main theoreticians that inform this section offer theories of realism that are distinctive yet complementary. All approach literary criticism from different manifestations of a historicist position that is useful for the attempt to establish a connection between corresponding variations in the political commitment of the authors studied, the degree to which their novels can be labeled *Bildungsromane*, and the realism employed in their works. Even when their analysis of literary realism refers specifically to other European literatures, Lukács, Bakhtin, and Auerbach’s theoretical formulations are influenced by a European climate marked by widespread unrest and are generally relevant to the Italian situation.

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7 The term is acknowledged to have entered the literary language through Wilhelm Dilthey in 1870 and in 1906 (Boes 231). For more detailed analyses of the history of the *Bildungsroman*, see, for example, Moretti, Boes, and Castle. Also useful is Fritz Martini’s “Bildungsroman—Term and Theory” in the volume *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman* edited by James N. Hardin.

8 These theorists form a small subset of the many critics who have contributed, or continue to contribute, to the debate on realism and/or the *Bildungsroman*. Others—notably Sartre, Barthes, Benjamin, Brecht, and Adorno—also engaged with the relationship between political-ideological purpose and formal qualities of realism, examining the possibility of representing reality in aesthetically and politically forward-looking ways. See especially Adorno et al., Sartre, and Barthes. Similarly important is the interpretation of realism set forth by Russian formalists, such as in Roman Jakobson’s essay “On Realism in Art,” which remains, as Sandy Petrey argues, “one of the most forceful and pointed statements of the formalist position” (17). Jakobson holds that revolutionary realism develops cyclically in reaction to other art forms and other kinds of literature: “The words of yesterday’s narrative grow stale; now the item is described by features that were yesterday held to be the least descriptive, the least worth representing, features which were scarcely noticed” (40–41). Some of Jakobson’s other arguments are also germane—for example, Re indicates that Jakobson’s belief in the “relative meaning of realism,” a view held also by Barthes, according to whom “the concrete meaning of realism is a wholly relative one” (Re, *Calvino* 10), is applicable to the situation in Italy in the 1940s and 1950s; I suggest that it furthermore pertains to the situation in Italy in the 1920s and 1930s, when the political value of realism was already a topic of debate.
Since their differing ideologies and personal experiences shape their conceptions of realism, there are of course variances in how Lukács, Bakhtin and Auerbach interpret the reality that they consider to be the dominant referent of the realist novel. What is most crucial for the present study is that each of the three theoreticians offers important aesthetic and critical formulations of realism that can accompany an investigation not just of the aesthetic characteristics of the prose but also of the texts’ practical message. Importantly, they all privilege the genre of the novel. Their theories are thus appropriate for an assessment of the thematic and linguistic strategies used in the composition of *Bildungsromane* by Italian literary realists with varying worldviews.

Although the Marxism of Lukács is of course not totally analogous with the dominant political reality in Italy as experienced by the authors at the core of this work, it nevertheless gives rise to many of his considerations as to the significance of specific social context that can easily be applied to other sets of cultural, political, and institutional factors.¹ Lukács is one of a large number of critics who worked within a Marxist framework for literary theory and saw literature, broadly speaking, as a tool of socio-political transformation reflecting the social context from which individual works originate. This background undeniably coloured Lukács’ explanations of literary realism and of the *Bildungsroman*, which can, in one interpretation, be seen as a Marxist allegory for human society in which “the individual represents the rise or emergence of a class and is thus understood as a marker for broader changes in society” (Maynard 287). An obvious instance of explicitly Marxist content in Lukács’ work is his lengthy discussion of the positive potential of socialist realism as a literary mode in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*. Other examples are, however, plentiful.

Lukács’ oeuvre is vast and diverse, and the impact of his writings in the Western world has varied drastically according to the topic at hand and the time and situation of composition. His arguably most lasting texts, including those referenced in this study, are in some way connected

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¹ Lukács did not initially work from a Marxist perspective. For a brief account of how his early politics and subsequent conversion to Marxism after the publication of *The Theory of the Novel* was influenced by his theories of literature and informed his later work, see Thompson 4–7. Terry Eagleton provides a succinct and useful definition of Marxist criticism, stating that it “is not merely a ‘sociology of literature’, concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class. Its aim is to explain the literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and meanings. But it also means grasping those forms, styles and meanings as the products of a particular history” (3, emphasis in the original).
to what Fredric Jameson describes as Lukács’ “lifelong meditation on narrative, on its basic structures, its relationship to the reality it expresses, and its epistemological value when compared with other, more abstract and philosophical modes of understanding” (*Marxism* 163). Within this group of theoretical works, I restrict my observations to those most pertinent to realism as present in the *Bildungsroman*.

In Lukács’ view, literary realism is the best means by which to foster historical self-awareness in literature, an important and potentially political objective that, if properly executed, will result in a text that allows the reader to infer general qualities about a society from the depiction of individual characters. The vehicle for literary realism should be the novel. When combined, this aesthetic (realism) and medium (novel) create works that involve the meaningful intersection of specific lives with historical circumstance, thereby manifesting and commenting upon the socio-historical place of literary production. As might be expected, then, the necessary precondition of effective realism is an aesthetic comprehension of the historical and social reality in question. “Realism in the Balance,” first published in 1938, is the author’s defence of literary realism against what he perceived as inferior modernist schools of writing. *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* again returns to the topic of literary realism and its superiority over modernism. Taken together with his earlier theoretical work *The Theory of the Novel*, these texts offer an expansive picture of Lukács’ conception of the realist novel and the ideological and cultural role it should play in society, ideas that unsurprisingly shifted and changed considerably from *The Theory of the Novel*’s 1920 publication to the appearance of *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* in the late 1950s but still maintain some essential content that forms a running thread throughout.

The concept of realism set forth in “Realism in the Balance” is especially material in evaluating the relationship and interaction between modernism and realism and, in the case of some authors,

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10 Lukács saw the epic as being the ideal form in a historical sense since it allowed for the total convergence of individual lives and social reality. However, in modern times, the epic is not a viable genre because of how substantially reality has changed. The novel, which has the capacity to embody/be typical of the broader historical movements of the time, is the new epic of the modern world, which presents an entirely new way of being. As Lukács writes in *The Theory of the Novel*, “the novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God. The novel hero’s psychology is demonic; the objectivity of the novel is the mature man’s knowledge that meaning can never quite penetrate reality, but that, without meaning, reality would disintegrate into the nothingness of inessentiality” (88).
the transition from one to the other. Lukács’ articulation of his ideal kind of realism is encapsulated in the following excerpt:

Great realism … does not portray an immediately obvious aspect of reality but one which is permanent and objectively more significant, namely man in the whole range of his relations to the real world, above all those which outlast mere fashion. Over and above that, it captures tendencies of development that only exist incipiently and so have not yet had the opportunity to unfold their entire human and social potential. To discern and give shape to such underground trends is the great historical mission of the true literary avant-garde…. After what has been said already, I hope that no further argument is required to prove that only the major realists are capable of forming a genuine avant-garde. (“Realism” 48)

As is made evident here and elaborated throughout the essay, literary realism is, for Lukács, the superior aesthetic; as Esther Leslie states, it is “the sole literary mode capable of representing the true image of society, because it strives to represent it in its totality and demonstrates the importance of conscious human rationality in determining history” (126). Unlike expressionism and other forms of modernism, which portray subjective experience in its immediacy, thereby failing to effect change, realism can address the issues of an objective, existing reality. Lukács proposes it not just as an alternative to modernism, but as the actual avant-garde.

In fact, the stated intent of “Realism in the Balance,” written in reaction to Ernst Bloch’s defence of expressionism, is to reveal the shortcomings that Lukács perceived in modernist schools of writing. In his bid to do so, he attempts to formulate an aesthetic better able to unmask problematic qualities of reality while carrying out what he saw as the necessary social mission of literature. A crucial point in this regard is that Lukács’ championing of realism is linked to his belief that it is more accessible to the masses and thus has a greater potential to be disseminated to a larger group of readers, who would presumably recognize and be affected by the political message of the realist novel in question. On the other hand, “the broad mass of the people can learn nothing from avant-garde literature” (57). Indeed:

Precisely because the latter is devoid of reality and life, it foists on to its readers a narrow and subjectivist attitude to life (analogous to a sectarian view in political terms)…. The taxing struggle to understand the art of the ‘avant-garde’ … yields
such subjectivist distortions and travesties that ordinary people who try to translate these atmospheric echoes of reality back into the language of their own experience, find the task quite beyond them. (57)

Also fundamental to the essay is the idea that capitalist society is an objective totality of social relations. This essentially Marxist tenet is, according to Lukács, detrimentally ignored by those who reject realism as an alternative to modernist movements.

Three central arguments in “Realism in the Balance” are particularly important for the investigation of the literary realism produced in fascist Italy. First, the dialectical opposition between appearance and essence: Lukács holds that good realists are cognizant of the relationship between appearance (characters’ consciousness, which is subjective) and essence (the reality independent of the characters, which is objective). The successful construction of this distinction is imperative if a realist work is to reveal how a subjective experience is provoked by the underlying social, cultural, and political reality. In order for a text to be most effective, “what matters is that the slice of life shaped and depicted by the artist and re-experienced by the reader should reveal the relations between appearance and essence without the need for any external commentary” (33–34). Second, the concept of totality: to Lukács, representing totality is a key component of representing reality since totality is the essence of the real; “if a writer strives to represent reality as it truly is, i.e. if he is an authentic realist, then the question of totality plays a decisive role” (33). In contrast with modernism, expressionism, and other movements, which “reflected merely moments of a fragmented totality,” Lukács believes in “the capacity of realist art to portray the totality of society” (Thompson 6–7). A critical part of the totality of any literary work is the social context. Third, abstraction: despite Lukács’ emphasis on objectivity, that is, on essence, realist authors may in the right situation write in an ambiguous, or abstract, manner, which is sometimes necessary if one is “to penetrate the laws governing objective reality and to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society” (Lukács, “Realism” 38). While this strategy may seem to detract from the mimetic quality of realist works, for Lukács it does not render such texts unrealistic. Taking

11 His acceptance of abstraction can be linked to his larger objections to naturalist fiction, which for him is starkly different from realism. See his 1936 essay “Narrate or Describe?,” in which he criticizes literary naturalism at great length.
abstraction into account is vital when examining novels that were produced in the context of the fascist state, a situation that caused some authors to attempt to avoid censorship by writing with a certain degree of ambiguity.

Since they involve the representation of the relationship between the individual and his or her world, and with that the integration of individual and collective history, all three of these aspects of Lukács’ model are also pertinent to the study of the Bildungsroman. Indeed, the idea of a personal journey that interacts with and is affected by a social reality is built into the structure of the Bildungsroman and is characteristic of Lukács’ historical materialist worldview. Lukács first addressed the positive traits of this narrative mode during the pre-Marxist phase of his development. Writing about the novel of education in The Theory of the Novel, he describes it as dealing with the “reconciliation of the problematic individual, guided by his lived experience of the ideal, with concrete social reality” (132). Lukács takes as his example Wilhelm Meister, which in his conception “steers a middle course between abstract idealism, which concentrates on pure action, and Romanticism, which interiorises action and reduces it to contemplation” (135). In a typical Bildungsroman, the ability of a character to embody general principles of his society makes universal the difficult journey that he must undertake. The depiction of this kind of relationship between individual and society is in line with both the Hegelian and the Marxist attributes of Lukács’ initial and later theories of literature. It also coincides with his preoccupation with the very concept of the Bildungsroman. As Michael J. Thompson indicates, “Lukács saw this process of development as a central value, one he sought to protect and exalt in his work, seeing it as a definitive struggle of modern man to realize his full potential as a fully integrated personality” (3).

The Meaning of Contemporary Realism reiterates many of the ideas found in Lukács’ previous works and discussed above. Here Lukács again emphasizes the importance of context, stating that “the literature of realism, aiming at a truthful reflection of reality, must demonstrate both the

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12 As Re articulates, “the idea that history is a coherent totality and that the development of history follows a necessary narrative pattern is … directly derived from the tradition of German idealism and neo-idealism. Lukács’s model of history as the organic unfolding of a unified action through time is Hegelian; the agents, vicissitudes, contents, goals, and nature of the principles of probability and necessity that give the action its specific shape are for Lukács derived, on the other hand, from Marx’s great metanarrative of history as the history of class conflicts” (Calvino 21).
concrete and abstract potentialities of human beings in extreme situations . . .” (23). He moreover reaffirms that the potential and the indispensability of realism are unmatched: “Indeed, there is a fundamental truth at stake here: realism is not one style among others, it is the basis of literature; all styles (even those seemingly most opposed to realism) originate in it or are significantly related to it” (48).

The volume, first published in German in 1957 and then in English in 1962, contains a considerable development in Lukács’ theory of realism when compared with “Realism in the Balance”: namely, he goes to great lengths to flesh out the distinction between critical, or bourgeois, realism and socialist realism. Critical realism for Lukács involves a critical reflection on the historical situation. However, unlike socialist realism, which is able “both to portray the totality of a society in its immediacy and to reveal its pattern of development” (Lukács, The Meaning 99), critical realism lacks the power to bring about a significant transformation of society. In Gordon Graham’s assessment, it is “marked by its understanding of present ills, but limited by its failure to understand the whole historical process in which these occur and especially its future direction” (199).

Interestingly, though Lukács believes that “socialist perspective, correctly understood and applied, should enable the writer to depict life more comprehensively than any preceding perspective, not excluding that of critical realism” (The Meaning 98), he identifies problems inherent in socialist realism and finds qualities to admire in critical realism. The bourgeois outlook, Lukács acknowledges, is also legitimate for the representation of contemporary problems, in which case “the class struggle will be described from the bourgeois point of view, its effects on society being demonstrated only indirectly, by revealing the psychological and moral consequences” (The Meaning 99). As Lucia Re affirms:

Lukács concedes that while the socialist perspective theoretically enables the writer to give a more comprehensive and profound account of man as a social being, in practice socialist realism has generated no true art comparable to what Lukács sees as the achievement of non-socialist “critical realism.” The possibility of a reconciliation of the two appears … as Lukács’s own utopian desire. (Calvino 22)
For Lukács, critical and socialist realism would ideally blend into one via a process by which “the negative perspective of critical realism will gradually be transformed into a positive, socialist perspective” (The Meaning 114). In the absence of such a development, aspects of critical realism make it a valid, if perhaps not ideal, method with which to interpret the human condition as a dialectic between humans-as-individuals and humans-as-social-beings.

One last relevant aspect of Lukács’ theory of literary realism is the idea of the typical character. According to him, “a character is typical … when his innermost being is determined by objective forces at work in society” (The Meaning 122). Martin Coyle’s summary of this concept demonstrates its importance:

Following Engels, Lukács sees the ‘typical’ character as key. Typical characters concentrate within themselves the salient aspects of a historical moment. They are unlikely to be average members of society, for in average people different historical tendencies blunt one another. Typical characters instead reveal the deep structures of history, and they reveal them as structures in motion. They serve as vectors, indicating the direction of an ongoing, exceedingly complex yet ultimately coherent process. More than that, through what Goethe called ‘necessary anachronism’, typical characters act as tacit interpreters, mediating between past and present: in their thoughts, words and actions what is implicit in the cultural motivation of the past becomes sufficiently explicit to be comprehensible in our own present. (533)

Given the link between the typical character and the socio-cultural context, and the typical character’s role as mediator between the reader and the novel’s ideology, the extent to which the protagonist(s) of the works analyzed in this dissertation can be considered “typical” is a worthwhile consideration.

Like Lukács, Bakhtin wrote on a remarkable variety of topics, including several models of the self (archetonic, carnivalized, and dialogic), the chronotope, and the Bildungsroman. He differs from Lukács, however, in that the specific political quality of his œuvre is not immediately clear: though not as surely identified with Marxism, he was nonetheless very aware of and influenced by Marxist theories and doctrine. Notwithstanding any ambiguities or confusions in his political stance, a unifying element in Bakhtin’s works is a perception of the history of
human social life that seems in line with much of Marxist thought, a theme which, Ken Hirschkop argues, for Bakhtin “exists as a constant process of cultural creation, unpredictable yet with a logic—and a dignity—of its own” (25). In Hirschkop’s words:

> Every change in the substance of linguistic experience must … be accounted a change in the condition of moral and social life, and every new version of dialogue must be measured by its distance from a redeemed state. From this point of view the rise of novelistic style is simultaneously an ethical and a linguistic event. (25)

Bakhtin very much emphasized that the historical context is important to both language and form and can have ethical motivations and/or consequences. Many core Bakhtinian concepts, including dialogism and heteroglossia, similarly suggest that meaning is generated in relation to environment. In contrast with the structuralist account of the history of language, Bakhtin felt that “linguistic change is not systemic, but messy, produced by the unforeseeable events of everyday activity. Moreover, it is not the result of purely abstract forces (systemic imbalances), but of real people’s actions in response to their daily lives” (Morson and Emerson 144). The notion of the chronotope that Bakhtin develops in “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” and claims “defines genre and generic distinctions” (“Forms” 85) especially stresses the primacy of time and space.

Significantly, Bakhtin held fast to his opinion that contextual analysis must be done in a specific way. In “Response to a Question from the Novy Mir Editorial Staff,” Bakhtin disparages Marxist theorists who crudely relate literary works to “socioeconomic factors, as it were, behind culture’s back” (2) and insists that literature should instead be seen as part of a linear progression that is simultaneously influenced by the literary and philosophical currents that came before it and by “the powerful deep currents of culture (especially the lower, popular one), which actually determine the creativity of writers” (3). Interaction between author, text, and reality are therefore of the utmost consequence.

In line with his other theories, Bakhtin’s essay on the Bildungsroman asserts the dominance of contextual factors in the production of literature. He begins “The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism” by creating a typology of novels that fall into the loose category of Bildungsroman. The general groupings, which Bakhtin breaks down further into
subcategories, are the travel novel, the novel of ordeal, the biographical novel, and the novel of emergence. The novel of emergence has five subgroupings: a cyclical-idyllic chronotope that does not appear alone, but is found in other works; a cyclical emergence characteristic of the eighteenth-century novel of education that “typically depicts the world and life as experience, as a school, through which every person must pass and derive one and the same result”; the “biographical (and autobiographical) type” such as David Copperfield, in which the protagonist’s image is shaped and changed by his or her own actions; the didactic-pedagogical novel; and lastly, the novel of historical emergence, in which “man’s individual emergence is inseparably linked to historical emergence” (22–23, emphasis in the original).

The kind of novel that Bakhtin considers to have the most bearing is without question the novel of historical emergence, which stresses questions of time and place and is closely associated with literary realism. In fact, Bakhtin declares that “aspects of this historical emergence of man can be found in almost all important realist novels” (“The Bildungsroman” 24). Recognizing the “profoundly chronotopic nature” of Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister, the focus of his inquiry in this essay, he believes that as a genre the Bildungsroman constitutes “a significant assimilation of real historical time” with the novel (23–24). For Bakhtin, changes in the perception of time and space that took place during the Enlightenment made possible Goethe’s conception of the simultaneous emergence of the world and of the humans inhabiting it. Fiction should be socially and historically specific to this new reality. As he states:

Human emergence … is no longer man’s own private affair. He emerges along with the world and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. He is no longer within an epoch, but on the border of two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other. This transition is accomplished in him and through him. He is forced to become a new, unprecedented type of human being. What is happening here is precisely the emergence of a new man. The organizing force held by the future is therefore extremely great here—and this is not, of course, the private biographical future, but the historical future. (23, emphasis in the original)

Bakhtin’s novel of emergence thus involves both historical emergence and the emergence of the protagonist, who plays a special role in reflecting and bringing about change in the society that he represents. Though his study does not extend beyond the nineteenth-century Bildungsroman,
Bakhtin’s primary points—especially that the historical context is necessarily entwined with the protagonist’s development—are germane to the evaluation of realist novels set in other historical situations.

While Auerbach did not directly analyze the Bildungsroman, his seminal theories of realism are also compatible with the idea of a historically grounded realist novel of formation. In Mimesis, his extended examination of representative realist works from the history of Western literature, he takes a sociological and philological approach. Throughout the text, he emphasizes the effect of social forces and historical context on the production of realist works, which are characterized by, in his definition, “the serious treatment of everyday reality, the rise of more extensive and socially inferior human groups to the position of subject matter for problematic-existential representation, on the one hand; on the other, the embedding of random persons and events in the general course of contemporary history, the fluid historical background” (Mimesis 491). Auerbach firmly links the development of the realist aesthetic to the process of historical development, asserting in a later article, “Philology and Weltliteratur,” that “whatever we are, we became in history, and only in history can we remain the way we are and develop therefrom” (6).

Auerbach’s conception of realism is grounded in his suggestion, evidenced in aspects of his close reading of individual texts in Mimesis and explicitly articulated by him in both Mimesis and in “Philology and Weltliteratur,” that realist literature entails a mixing of styles. As he states, “the conceptual pair ‘stylistic differentiation/stylistic mixing’ is one of the themes of my book and always has the same significance throughout the twenty chapters, from Genesis all the way to Virginia Woolf” (Mimesis 563). Auerbach argues that the dissolution of the traditional separation of styles helped make realism possible. A direct consequence is a sort of levelling with which “the ‘elevated’ style is no longer reserved for upper social strata but can be used as the style to treat ‘lowly’ characters and subject matter” (Earnshaw 211). In Auerbach’s view,

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13 Robert Doran clarifies that Auerbach’s definition of stylistic mixing should be considered in a specific way when it comes to realism: “Auerbach explicitly excludes any interpretation of the mixture of style that would enclose realism within the middle or intermediate style. He is aiming toward a concept of high realism, in which realistic genres such as the novel, traditionally disparaged as formally defective, are revalued for their profound grasp of the human condition” (354, emphasis in the original).
both the social content and the linguistic form of realist works show this “stylistic mixing” based on Hegel’s model of the “‘classical’ mixture of the everyday with the sublime” (Miles 373).

Besides Auerbach’s ideas regarding the presence of multiple styles within a realist text, Frank R. Ankersmit identifies other “normative conceptions of realism” that are located within Auerbach’s major work, including: “the notion of figura, … the emphasized sublimity of realism, … and … reality’s best presenting itself in experience” (73). A specific subset of the category of “the emphasized sublimity of realism” raises important questions about the potential use of realist novels to achieve social and/or political ends. The “creatural” dimension of realist texts, a kind of sublimity, consists of the representation of certain realities of human life, for example physical and mental illness, which though generally considered unpleasant are an avoidable aspect of human existence. These unwelcome inevitabilities know no social boundaries and are depicted in all major kinds of realism. As Ankersmit puts it, “however much we try to stylize or beautify our lives, the sublimity of these nightmarish aspects will never cease to announce itself” (66). Ankersmit’s final assertion about the role of the “creatural” as conceived by Auerbach is key:

In the eyes of their middle-class readers, the normal and simple ways life was lived by the novels’ brutal protagonists assumed the form of the sublime “creatural.” In this sense, the realist novel has contributed enormously, perhaps more than any other cultural product, to the psychologization of twentieth-century man and to his readiness to embrace a democratic political order based on the assumption that all people are equal. The same dark psychological forces operate in all of us, whether we are descendants of illustrious, centuries-old lineages or

14 After stating “I think that one can discover a definition of realism behind Auerbach’s analyses, and that we can even put our finger on the specific theorist lying behind this definition: Hegel” (373, emphasis in the original), Miles devotes less than a page to explaining this connection, which is, however, discussed in slightly more detail in Ankersmit 62–63.

15 In the article “Literary History and the Sublime in Erich Auerbach’s Mimesis,” Robert Doran provides a detailed examination of Auerbach’s conception of the sublime, arguing that “though the term ‘sublime/sublimity’ (Erhabene in German, sublimitas in Latin) and its synonyms, ‘high,’ ‘lofty,’ and ‘elevated,’ can be found throughout Mimesis and are at the core of [Auerbach’s] concept of the mixture of styles, Auerbach is never mentioned in critical discussions of the sublime; nor is the sublime much of a topic in Auerbach studies” (355).
the progeny of simple, working-class families. Historically, the nineteenth-century realist novel has been a leading moral educator of mankind in the West, and for this it deserves praise. (66)

In other words, the “creatural” helps give the realist novel ideological weight by making the reader identify the universality of human suffering. It thereby grants the text a role in revealing or shaping morals.

The above passage also suggests that Auerbach saw the political dimension of realism as lying in its alliance with processes of democratization, an idea that would seem to endow the realist aesthetic with tremendous political potential. Given his own political and historical positioning, it is hardly surprising that Auerbach would have had political and humanistic intentions with his work; indeed, throughout, “there is seen to be an attempt to make Western literature a bastion of civilisation against National Socialism” (Earnshaw 212). Though his politics of course diverge from Lukács’ and Bakhtin’s, each of the three theorists incorporates a political dimension into his respective theoretical formulation of realism. This political aspect is connected to the fact that they also, to different degrees, share a fundamental belief in a profound, material tie between realism and reality.

1.2 Franco Moretti’s *The Way of the World* and Gregory Castle’s *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*: Delimitations of the Genre as a Twentieth-Century Category

Scholars frequently call into question earlier critical configurations of the *Bildungsroman* such as those set forth by Lukács and Bakhtin, proposing renewed or restricted uses of the term. For example, Susan Rubin Suleiman’s understanding of the *Bildungsroman* expands on and departs from Lukács’ attempt to determine the formative path of the hero of the *Bildungsroman*. As she states, in Lukács’ definition of the novel, “there is a contradiction between the implicit affirmation that the *Bildungsroman* is the archetype of the novel, and the explicit assertion that

16 For studies addressing such issues and published in recent decades, see, for example, those by Todd Kontje (*Private Lives in the Public Sphere: The German Bildungsroman as Metafiction* and *The German Bildungsroman: History of a National Genre*) and by Michael Minden (*The German Bildungsroman: Incest and Inheritance*), all of which discuss the German tradition.
this type of novel has been fully realized by only a single work [Wilhelm Meister]” (66–67). Jeffrey L. Sammons argues that as a label, “Bildungsroman” is “indiscriminately applied to a vast and amorphous type discoverable … in the whole world history of the novel from its most ancient beginnings” (36), his phrasing evincing his disapproval of the widespread employment of the term for coming-of-age narratives.

Another trend encourages a more liberal definition. Recent studies on the female Bildungsroman, the post-colonial Bildungsroman, and the African-American, or Black, Bildungsroman speak to the generic resiliency of the Bildungsroman, which is often appropriated to narrate formations that are not necessarily of a young white male. The impact of structuralism, which “encouraged comparatively minded scholars to approach the genre no longer merely as an inductive and taxonomic construct, but to look rather at large-scale symmetries across European traditions,” together with Fredric Jameson’s The Political Unconscious, which “introduced a dialectical and historical dimension to genre criticism that did much to break up ossified structures” (Boes 234) also allowed for a more flexible conceptualization of the Bildungsroman.

The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture is inarguably one of the most influential histories of the genre to emerge in recent years. Moretti traces the evolution of the Bildungsroman from its origins with Wilhelm Meister to its death, which he dates to the First World War. Analyses of the emergence of modernity and resulting problems of socialization are a central component of his study. For Moretti, the Bildungsroman is the “‘symbolic form’ of modernity” (5) and an almost entirely Western, male, bourgeois mode. Like modern life, youth is unstable and transient. The “intrinsically contradictory” form (6, emphasis in the original) is thus characterized by “‘youthful’ attributes of mobility and inner restlessness”; as Moretti explains, “youth is, so to speak, modernity’s ‘essence’, the sign of a world that seeks its meaning in the future rather than in the past” (5, emphasis in the original). When attempting to depict the growth of capitalist society, the Bildungsroman provided an ideal means since it helped to “manage the

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17 Studies of non-traditional types of Bildungsroman are many. Notable analyses of the Black Bildungsroman include Geta LeSeur’s Ten Is the Age of Darkness: The Black Bildungsroman and Mark Stein’s Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation. Books specifically on the female Bildungsroman will be further examined in Chapter Five but include Susan Fraiman’s Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development and Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland’s edited volume The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development.
effects of modernization by representing it within a safe figurative scheme” (Esty 143). Because *The Way of the World* has shaped how scholars approach the *Bildungsroman*, outlining some of Moretti’s basic arguments is useful. Perhaps most important is addressing his contention that the First World War marked the end of the genre, a suggestion that, if true, would disallow the possibility that *Bildungsromane* could be produced in fascist Italy.

In a usual *Bildungsroman*, the story of a young individual’s development, or *Bildung*, is intrinsically linked to the historical setting in which the action takes place. Since nineteenth-century Europe “held fast to the notion that the biography of a young individual was the most meaningful viewpoint for the understanding and evaluation of history” (227, emphasis in the original), it was in this social and cultural situation that the genre flourished. Moretti classifies novels of formation according to narrative plot, utilizing Lotman’s categories to identify two principal traditions, one based on classification and one on transformation. Some *Bildungsromane* fall into the category of “classification principle”; these works build toward the protagonist’s stable self-formation and successful initiation into his or her society, privileging a concrete ending to the narrative. Other *Bildungsromane* are instead subject to the “transformation principle”; in these novels, the process of formation is what is important, not the end result (Moretti 7–8). Common to both are general characteristics of the hero of the *Bildungsroman* and his (or her) role in the narrative. This young protagonist often occupies the boundary between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy and evolves in several distinct social environments, both private and public.

Moretti’s divides his study into four main chapters. The first, “The Comfort of Civilization,” deals with the “classical” *Bildungsroman* (here he examines two: *Wilhelm Meister* and *Pride and Prejudice*), which to him succeeds in fusing the ideal of self-determination with the difficulties of socialization. In this sort of novel of formation, social integration and individual formation proceed simultaneously and eventually make the protagonist whole, or actualized. The process also brings the narrative to a kind of totality. As Moretti writes, “unlike the usual nineteenth-century novel, in the classical *Bildungsroman* the ending and the aim of narration coincide. The story ends as soon as an intentional design has been realized: a design which involves the protagonist and determines the overall meaning of events” (55). Though politics do not figure strongly, there is a connection between novel and historical context to the extent that “the classical *Bildungsroman* narrates ‘how the French Revolution could have been avoided’” (64). In
both *Wilhelm Meister* and *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, marriage unites aristocracy and bourgeoisie. As a result of their union, the respective protagonists renounce freedom but gain happiness in their union with their bride or bridegroom, thereby validating the “existing order” (68) and suggesting that a similar revolution would not happen in Wilhelm’s world or in that of Elizabeth.

The second chapter, “Waterloo Story,” treats what Moretti terms the realistic *Bildungsroman*, which stands in stark contrast with the classical variety. Stendhal and Pushkin (whose novels are Moretti’s primary exemplars) create characters who in their interiority are contradictory, opportunistic, and often unlikeable. Politics enter firmly into these works, which feature “the coexistence of fictional biography and political history” (77). The nature of modern life encourages the protagonists to lead double lives and inevitably brings the novels to an unhappy ending. This is in part due to “the Waterloo paradox,” in essence “the short circuit between politics and culture” (126), to which there is only one solution:

> The Waterloo paradox is … solved in the only possible way: not by disentangling it, but by fixing it in a double course of existence. The unhappy ending lets the reader continue believing in the professed principles of legitimacy, since no ‘higher’ values have been offered in their stead: they can be ‘kept alive’—simultaneously, they can be ‘kept from becoming alive’, because the story’s unchangeable ‘reality’ shows that they cannot be realized, as the threat of destiny hangs over them. (127, emphasis in the original)

In the realistic *Bildungsroman*, the negative influence of the political and social context is clear: the protagonists are prevented from reaching their goals because they are repressed by forces that are outside of their control.

The chapter on Balzac and Flaubert describes another major development in the European *Bildungsroman*. Moretti argues that within a new kind of narration, “Balzac’s great innovation lies in shifting the origin of plot from an *individual volition* to a *superindividual mechanism*: the mechanism of *competition*, which with the unification of the national markets, in the first half of the nineteenth century, ceases to be an exception to become the *norm* of social relations” (147, emphasis in the original). Balzac shows that it is an illusion that individual growth and social progress can exist side by side. In modern capitalist society, having goods, or having the ability
to produce or acquire goods, is more important than simply being. The open-ended narrative of the *Comédie humaine* disallows a tidy ending such as was possible in, for example, *Wilhelm Meister*. With youth and money now the most coveted commodities, maturity, no longer the desired and celebrated endpoint of a passage from youth, is marked by a sense of loss.

Though he discusses *Bildungsromane* from several eras and from several European cultures, Moretti’s definition is in actuality a relatively narrow one. Significantly, and of most consequence for this dissertation, he poses strict temporal limits on the existence of the *Bildungsroman*, describing how the disintegration of the form began with Flaubert, whose Frédéric Moreau by the close of *Sentimental Education* plainly lacks the will and ability to fight with reality, and then quickly gained momentum. At the end of “The Conspiracy of the Innocents,” the last chapter of *The Way of the World* and chiefly an analysis of the British *Bildungsroman*, Moretti presents his opinion that the *Bildungsroman* could not effectively exist after the nineteenth century, contending that “the ‘central’ symbolic form of [the new historical phase] could no longer be the *Bildungsroman* which, in all its diverse manifestations, had always held fast to the notion that *the biography of a young individual was the most meaningful viewpoint for the understanding and the evaluation of history*” (227, emphasis in the original).

As he states:

This may well have been the highest artistic convention ever produced by modern Western society—it was certainly the most typical. But no convention outlives the fall of its foundations. And when the new psychology started to dismantle the unified image of the individual; when the social sciences turned to ‘synchrony’ and ‘classification’, thereby shattering the synthetic perception of history; when youth betrayed itself in its narcissistic desire to last forever; when in ideology after ideology the individual figured simply as a part of the whole—then the century of the *Bildungsroman* was truly at an end. (227–228)

In an appendix that expands on the crisis, Moretti claims that the genre’s demise coincided with the First World War. Having participated in the horrors of trench warfare, young men could not experience the passage to maturity as had the youth of previous generations. Phrased differently, “if history can make cultural forms necessary, it can make them impossible as well, and this is what the war did to the *Bildungsroman*” (Moretti 229).
As Boes articulates, “Moretti puts a new face on the old argument that the broadly diachronic and evolutionary Bildungsroman gives way to a more fragmentary and synchronic … form of narrative during the early twentieth century” (238). For Moretti, this does not mean the emergence of a new type of Bildungsroman but, instead, its total disappearance. The inflexibility of his view is problematic. While it may be true that changes in socio-cultural context made the kind of Bildungsroman based on the formal categories of transformation and classification impossible, Moretti does not allow for the possibility that the Bildungsroman could continue to evolve in order to reflect a new phase in Western civilization. Additionally, the omission in his study of whole language groups renders uncertain whether the “end” of the genre applies only to the national literatures on which he focuses here or whether what transpired in other countries, Italy included, might have deviated from this fateful trajectory.

Writing about the construction of the idea of youth in literature and in other facets of society and culture, John Neubauer sees the situation in quite a different light. With the First World War, the novel of formation did not fade away but rather self-adapted to suit the socio-cultural realities of the time:

To pinpoint a closure for literary adolescence is as difficult as to set a terminal date for adolescence itself: both extend themselves indefinitely and reemerge later. The great watershed of World War I did not diminish the literary concern with adolescence; instead, it refocused the theme by incorporating the war experience, as in the case of Hesse’s Demian, Cocteau’s Thomas l’imposteur, and Radiguet’s Le Diable au corps. (81)

In fact, many critics—notably Tobias Boes and Gregory Castle—recognize Moretti’s contribution to the study of the Bildungsroman while also raising issues with it. Castle argues that Moretti’s basic theory, which “tether[s] the genre too closely to a German origin or nineteenth-century field of relevance” (5), can and should be expanded to account for other kinds of Bildungsromane. In the introduction to Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman, Castle

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18 Paul Sheehan’s view of the Bildungsroman and its relationship to modernism is closer to Moretti’s. For Sheehan, “the clearest link between the humanist tradition and the novel is the Bildungsroman” (2). He sees modernism as bringing the death of the Bildungsroman: in his words, “the genre of the
explicitly states how his attitude contrasts with that of Moretti: “Moretti’s position … sees in the English Bildungsroman, at the dawning of the twentieth century, the exhaustion of the form. I take the opposite view, that it is precisely the breakdown of traditional forms of identity and of normative, harmonious socialization that gives the Bildungsroman a new sense of purpose” (5).

In Castle’s opinion, that modernist examples of the Bildungsroman often involve a failed Bildung can in fact be interpreted as “a critical success when viewed from the standpoint of genre”; it is his belief that “the narration of failure provides an important lesson, one that we see in other forms across many different manifestations of modernism in the arts: the failure of form leads to its rehabilitation under new conditions of engagement” (252).

Adorno’s theory of negative dialectics is fundamental for Castle. He holds that in the novels that he examines, “the desire for autonomous self-formation … rescues a classical ideal of Bildung” while also exposing it “to what Adorno calls an ‘immanent critique,’ one that allows for more sensitive negotiations of complex problems concerning identity, nationality, education, the role of the artist, and social as well as personal relationships” (3). Resisting “the institutionalization of self-cultivation (Bildung),” authors writing Bildungsromane during the early twentieth century, the site of “emergent late modernity,” used the genre of the Bildungsroman to problematize issues of humanity and identity (1).

Castle establishes the groundwork for his study in its introduction and first chapter, where he provides a history of the Bildungsroman as a theoretical construct and philosophical concept. As he claims, “the critique of Bildung is part of a general modernist project of recuperation and revision of the Enlightenment concept of aesthetico-spiritual Bildung” (1) that “responds to a specifically English tradition of humanism, individualism, and liberalism” (31). In the second, third, and fourth chapters, he uses British and Irish modernist Bildungsromane to illustrate and elaborate these ideas.

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*Bildungsroman … is essential to an emplotment of the transactions between the human (humanism, humanitas) and the novel. Its antagonist is the experimental, formally diverse modernist novel, with its fraught negotiations between anthropos and narrative* (5–6).
Castle’s work is premised on the assumption that the form has changed and will continue to change in order to accommodate the exigencies of the socio-cultural situation at hand. As the previous quote referring to “recuperation” and “revision” suggests, part of this process of negotiation is a return to earlier forms. In a very positive evaluation of Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman, John Paul Riquelme explains how Castle “claims counterintuitively that the failure of modernist narrative to fulfill the expectations for a harmonious integration of the self constitutes a robust resistance to nineteenth-century tendencies” that “involves rejecting bourgeois delusions and turning back to the aspirations of an earlier moment in the genre’s history” (360–361). That Castle’s amendment to Moretti’s work requires a kind of “turning back” in its looking forward is important since it confirms that the development of the Bildungsroman is not a unidirectional, forward-moving progression but is rather representative of a more complicated and dynamic process.

If the modernist Bildungsroman is a reaction to earlier manifestations, and if its “failure to conform to the strict generic demands of the Bildungsroman form” signals “the beginnings of trends that will define the entire twentieth century” (Castle 1), it is plausible that the production of realist Bildungsromane in fascist Italy is another stage in this process of generic reevaluation. The choice of the young authors in my corpus to use a realist rather than a modernist mode to depict the formation of young Italians in fascist Italy is significant, especially since the apparent attempt to engage more directly with social issues at hand could be considered a rejection of modernism in favor of a more transparent kind of narrative. The realist Bildungsroman in this sense simultaneously reaches back to earlier forms of the Bildungsroman and forward beyond the modernist Bildungsroman, much as neorealism looks back to verismo while also trying to formulate an aesthetic better able than modernist or avant-garde narration to grapple with contemporary social problems.

2 The Italian Context: Italian Realism during the “Anni del Consenso” (1929–1936)

I return now to the specifically Italian context. The complex state of Italian literary realism in the 1930s, or more narrowly during what Renzo De Felice terms “gli anni del consenso,” is best represented as a panorama rather than as one coherent movement. Though comparisons with
German *Neue Sachlichkeit*, from which the term “neorealism” originated,\(^{19}\) and with Russian Socialist Realism can be drawn, there are clear differences between the three, above all in the role, official or otherwise, that they played within the culture in question.\(^{20}\) They furthermore diverge in the diversity of the kinds of realism produced: while the German and Russian situations were marked by fairly uniform ideas of what realism ought to be, in Italy there was a profusion of trends that were to greater or lesser degrees “realistic,” from Massimo Bontempelli's magical realism to the realism advocated by the regionalist *Strapaese* movement in the 1920s to the realism of anti-fascists such as Ignazio Silone. Most relevant to the current discussion are varieties of Italian realism that are aesthetically more closely related to more conventional literary realism and make an attempt, whether or not genuine or successful, to play a role in depicting and/or shaping society.\(^{21}\)

In this section I discuss three broad tendencies within the realism of 1930s Italy that have varying political undertones: first, I address distinctly fascist realism as articulated in an official government publication; next, I describe the realism of the so-called “*fascisti di sinistra*” (especially as debated in literary journals like *L’Universale* and *Il Bargello*); and finally, I briefly examine realism by authors from southern Italy whose works are often analyzed as standing in opposition, however ambiguous, to the regime. In the second two cases, realism developed in reaction to and protest against both the political situation and the state of Italian literature, which was still dominated by the avant-garde, including the enduring influence of *La Voce* and the conception of literature as an elevated, aristocratic form as propagated by the classicism of *La

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\(^{19}\) Re indicates that “while the *Neue Sachlichkeit* did not directly influence Italian neorealism, there is a clear thematic and stylistic affinity between the two, for both attempt to focus directly and objectively on the socioeconomic reality of a specific moment in modern history”; she also affirms “the derivation of the term ‘neorealism’ from the German *Neue Sachlichkeit*,” a fact that “is punctually noted in most discussions of neorealism” (Calvino 16).

\(^{20}\) For studies of Socialist literary realism, see Dobrenko. Fewer studies have focused specifically on literature associated with *Neue Sachlichkeit*. See, however, the chapter “*Neue Sachlichkeit* Literature” in Plumb (127–139).

\(^{21}\) Though I do not deal directly with magical realism or the *Strapaese* movement here, for *Strapaese* see Troisio; for a general summary of magical realism, see Parkinson Zamora and Faris; and for an analysis of Bontempelli and his magical realism, see, among others, Piscopo (*Massimo Bontempelli*).
factors that helped obstruct the acceptance of the realist novel as a way with which to engage with contemporary issues. Romano Luperini makes a clear distinction between the “nuovo realismo” of this period and later neorealism, arguing that while the latter was characterized by its overt political content, the former was born “da esigenze preventemente letterarie” and consisted of several branches between which there were not necessarily many points of contact—for example, the realism of the fascists “di sinistra” Vittorini, Bilenchì, and Pratolini, the “realismo meridionale” of Bernari, the realism inspired by America of Pavese, and the realism, “ben diverso,” of Moravia. Luperini does, however, identify a line of continuity that “è fortissima nell’idealizzazione del ruolo dell’intellettuale, che ora aspira sì a un nuovo mandato sociale di parte proletaria e magari a una nuova committenza (identificata nei partiti di sinistra) ma senza porre in discussione la propria funzione ideologica né il generico umanesimo populistico degli anni trenta” (Il Novecento 669). Without differentiating between “nuovo realismo” and “neorealismo,” Arnaldo Bocelli asserts that neorealism began well before the Second World War:

Il neorealismo è una tendenza letteraria cominciata ad affermarsi in Italia intorno al 1930, col sorgere di una nuova narrativa che, all’autobiografismo critico-lirico dei “frammentisti” e dei “saggisti” della Voce e della Ronda, e ai modi evocativi, al paesismo elegiaco della letteratura allora dominante, intendeva contrapporre la rappresentazione strenuamente analitica, cruda, drammatica di una condizione umana travagliata, fra volontà e velleità, dall’angoscia dei sensi, delle convenzioni della vita borghese, dalla vacuità e noia dell’esistenza. Le polemiche che negli anni successivi al 1930 si dibatteranno intorno a formalismo e

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22 In “Modernism and Fascism: The Politics of Culture in Italy, 1903–1922,” Walter L. Adamson discusses La Voce and La Ronda in some depth. Contrasting the two journals, he states that while La Voce’s fascism and modernism were evident, “La Ronda had a predominantly antifascist but slightly ambiguous political profile. Its classicism was clearly a repudiation of modernism … and seemed to be a repudiation of fascism. Yet some of its important contributors—like Vilfredo Pareto and Soffici—were either fascists or fellow travelers” (389). See also Giuliano Manacorda’s Storia della letteratura italiana contemporanea 1900–1940, especially 89–176 and 201–215.

23 Bocelli, in fact, used the term neorealismo as early as 1930: as Millicent Joy Marcus states, “neorealism began its career as a literary designation, coined by Arnaldo Bocelli in 1930 to describe the style that arose in reaction to the autobiographical lyricism and elegiac introversion of contemporary Italian letters” (18).
contenutismo, sono strettamente congiunte con l’affermarsi di cotesta tendenza.
(qtd. in Bo 23)

Francesco Jovine’s declaration in a 1934 article entitled “Aspetti del neo-realismo” that “in antitesi con una letteratura vuota di contenuto, ridotta a vane esercitazioni stilistiche, si tenta di contrapporne un’altra che tragga dalla realtà presente le sue ragioni di vita” (189) also suggests that there was a continuation between this version of realism in the 1930s and the ethical-moral imperatives of post-war neorealism.24

Indeed, even if these earlier forms of realism were not as explicitly or uniformly politically and socially engaged as their later counterpart would be, it can be argued that as a movement advocating the use of realism as a political tool, neorealism had immediate literary and political roots reaching back to the 1930s. As in the broader European debate, the idea of literary realism assumed important dimensions in fascist Italy as it acquired definite political significance in literary journals and even in fascist propaganda. Italians who had come of age during or immediately before fascism figured prominently as producers (and consumers) of literature featuring a mode of discourse that would, at least in theory, be more mimetic and thus better able to objectively depict socioeconomic realities.

The extent to which realism was put forth as an ideal aesthetic by official fascist publications was minimal: the fascist regime famously avoided pronouncing one kind of art or literature to be most fascist, opting instead to negotiate questions of intellectual consent through support of a wide range of artistic and literary styles.25 Nonetheless, realism was utilized with political ends by various groups, including the fascist party itself. A publication of the Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF) entitled La cultura fascista, part of the series Testi per i corsi di preparazione politica and distributed by the Libreria dello stato (Anno XIV E. F.), implies that by 1936, at


25 “Mussolini e il fascismo si limitarono a promuovere una restaurazione culturale, ma non proposero mai, ad esempio, un’estetica o una poetica di Stato” (Luperini, Il Novecento 343).
least for the purposes of fascist literature of this kind, realism had come to be of not negligible consequence:

Ora la tendenza fondamentale della letteratura d’oggi, la sua aspirazione intima, anche se non sempre ben consapevole di sé, dei suoi modi e dei suoi fini, è il realismo: un particolare realismo. Un realismo che vuoi essere negazione d’ogni forma di simbolismo e d’ogni deformazione o coercizione intellettuale del sentimento; che vuol essere coscienza unitaria di vita di fronte al frantumio delle sensazioni e alla ridda delle immagini vagabonde; che vuoi essere restaurazione, di contro all’esasperato soggettivismo o egozentismo, d’un senso concreto della collettività, della società, per cui l’artista riconosce e celebra nella propria umanità l’umanità di tutti; che vuol essere sintesi di romanticismo e di classicismo. Realismo, pertanto, che non contrasta con i principi di quello spiritualismo che è la conquista del pensiero contemporaneo…. Realismo—a volerlo definire con una sola parola—“spiritualista”. (9–10)

Critical is the subsequent paragraph of the same document, which makes the propagandistic nature of the author’s analysis of the literary landscape of his contemporary Italy unequivocal:

Ma un realismo siffatto—ed ecco quel nesso profondo tra letteratura e politica, che dicevamo—è strettamente affine, anzi è tutt’una cosa con il realismo onde è animata la concezione fascista della vita e dello Stato: anche se nella letteratura propriamente detta esso, per mancanza di personalità altissime di artisti, non abbia sinora avuto quella integrale e armonica espressione, che ha invece trovato in politica grazie al genio di MUSSOLINI. (10)

The publication, intended to serve as part of the education of youth who would become the next leaders of fascism, cites no realist authors or examples of realist literature produced in the fascist state. The belief (or appearance) that realism represented the ideological concerns of the fascist regime was evidently more imperative here than whether, or how, it actually did.

26 Though the publication is without an officially named author, Ben-Ghiat, in “Neorealism in Italy, 1930–50,” claims, “parts of this text are identical with Bocelli’s ‘Aspetti della letteratura d’oggi. Realismo,’ Corriere padano, 26 April 1934, and this has enabled me to identify him as the author” (157).
The failure to concretely define and illustrate the shape that fascist realist literature should take is characteristic of the regime’s inconsistent approach to endorsing the aesthetic, which gave rise to essential ambiguities. In what is one of the most thorough analyses of realism in fascist Italy, Ben-Ghiat argues that “realism evolved in the early 1930s as part of an endeavor by Italian intellectuals to create a culture that would reflect the notion of fascism as a revolutionary ‘third way’ after liberalism and Marxism” (“Fascism” 631). Her description of how realism was encouraged as a means by which to grapple with social issues and promulgate “new antibourgeois values and codes of behavior” (“Fascism” 631) is vital, especially if, as she states, “throughout the thirties, the ideological construct of the third way would serve as a conveniently vague emblem of fascist identity that allowed a wide variety of political discourses to be expressed within the framework of the regime” (“Fascism” 632).

Still, some intellectuals, many of whom were young, chose to adopt a more definite stance. Directly connecting the fascist “policy of largo ai giovani” to the wish for internal renewal that led, in some cases, to the campaigning for realist literature as an alternative to the avant-garde, Koon holds that the government’s relatively laissez-faire approach to controlling the intellectual output of young Italians “helps to explain the complex evolution of movements of dissent within fascism during the 1930s” (198). Youth had a significant role in an initiative for cultural change arising in the early years of the decade that played out largely in literary journals, a phenomenon documented and analyzed by scholars such as Giorgio Luti in Cronache letterarie tra le due guerre 1920/1940.27 As Danilo Breschi and Gisella Longo state:

Il problema degli intellettuali si poneva con urgenza in relazione al tema delle giovani generazioni, che non avevano partecipato alla prima ondata del fascismo e che ora vivevano una sorta di rifiuto dell’idealismo, del formalismo, e dell’intelletualismo. In questa posizione si esprimeva il movimento “realista”, sorto proprio all’inizio degli anni Trenta, nel tentativo di combattere ciò che era inattuale e mediocre…. (116)

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27 See also, for example, Mangoni, Seroni, and the anthology edited by Folin and Quaranta.
This action often took place within the confines of institutions and/or publications with explicit connections to the fascist party: for example, in “le riviste dei GUF, con le leve più giovani prodotte dal fascismo in crisi che si riallacciano ad una validità provinciale e ad una necessaria sostanza europea per esprimere i limiti che la cultura fascista ufficiale presenta loro” (Luti 190).

Attempts to codify realism as a literary mode to be employed by fascist writers were one manifestation of the general discontent expressed by young Italians in such magazines and remained by and large unofficial, frequently involving fascisti di sinistra who denounced aspects of the fascist regime. It warrants immediate clarification that this term typically functions as a broad category rather than a narrow definition, thereby allowing for the inclusion of Italians of differing political beliefs. According to Giuseppe Iannaccone, the label is of a vague nature and has sometimes been used for specific ends:

Sarà forse perché, così facendo, si toglieva un po’ di imbarazzo ai tanti protagonisti di una vicenda politica, culturale ed ideologica, ritenuta tutt’altro che edificante, sarà forse perché così era facile dare a vecchie accondiscendenze un carattere di originalità, di ereticità, di trasgressione rispetto alla quotidiana e concreta prassi politica del fascismo, ma certo è che sistemare in una cornice ideologica separata il contributo della “generazione fascista”, liquidandolo con la semplificazione terminologica di “fascismo di sinistra”, ha fatto comodo un po’ a tutti. (205)

Iannaccone suggests that the “definizione generica e schematizzante” has historically served a larger purpose, first and foremost for those who turned to the anti-fascist cause during the Resistance and required “una condizione di distacco, di opposizione, di non con-divisione rispetto alle realizzazioni politico-economiche ‘di destra’ del regime …” (206). Similarly, Ben-Ghiat’s analysis of the problem of memory in relation to the realism of the 1930s deals with authors who later denied or downplayed their membership to this group and/or the extent to which they believed in fascist principles. In this thesis, I use the designation for individuals

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28 Besides Iannaccone’s Il fascismo “sintetico”. Letteratura e ideologia negli anni Trenta and Ben-Ghiat’s “Fascism, Writing, and Memory” (and also her Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1940), studies with a significant focus on fascisti di sinistra include Ivan Buttignon’s Compagno duce. Fatti,
who during the early 1930s self-identified as fascist but stood in opposition to some aspects of fascist policies.

Several of these intellectuals worked in forums such as *Il Bargello* (founded in 1929) and *L’Universale* (founded in 1931). The “Manifesto realista” written by Berto Ricci (1905–1941) and published on 10 January 1933 by the left-wing fascist journal *L’Universale*, associated with the *Gruppi Universitari Fascisti* (GUF), is an illustrative example of how realism was undergoing a tremendous transition. Director of *L’Universale* but also a contributor to and organizer of other cultural initiatives as well as a professor of mathematics, a poet, and a writer, Ricci was a key figure among the fascisti di sinistra. In his book-length study of the young intellectual, Paolo Buchignani describes how, in a radical change operating in the opposite direction than did political “conversions” of many other writers from the late 1920s until the Second World War, “antifascista intransigente fino al 1925, Ricci si rivela mussoliniano e strapaesano già nel 1927, l’anno del servizio militare a Gaeta” (33). He remained firmly anti-bourgeois and a strong advocate of revolutionary fascism, dying on the front on 2 February 1941. Signed also by Giorgio Bertolini, Romano Bilenchi, Diano Brocchi, Gioacchino Contri, Alfio Del Guercio, Alberto Luchini, Roberto Pavese, Icilio Petrone, Ottone Rosai, Edgardo Sulis, and Mario Tinti, Ricci’s “Manifesto realista” is representative of his particular political and

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*personaggi, idee e contraddizioni del fascismo di sinistra*, Luca Leonello Rimbotti’s *Il fascismo di sinistra. Da piazza San Sepolcro al congresso di Verona*, and Ruggero Zangrandi’s *Il lungo viaggio attraverso il fascismo. Contributo alla storia di una generazione*. A relatively recent contribution that looks also at the continued influence of the leftist fascist movement right into the 1970s is Giuseppe Parlato’s *La sinistra fascista. Storia di un progetto mancato.*

29 I discuss only *L’Universale, Il Bargello,* and Solaria. However, realism was a topic of debate in other literary and cultural reviews in Italy in the 1930s. *Il Cantiere, Oggi, Orpheus,* and *Il Saggiatore,* among others, also took up the question. See, for example, Magnani.

30 Zangrandi suggests that Ricci was finally disillusioned by fascism, claiming that his death was a political and physical “consapevole suicidio” motivated, in part, by Ricci’s realization that the fascist revolution would never be actuated (455). Buchignani, on the other hand, argues that Zangrandi’s view is coloured by his own turn to anti-fascism and is not founded in actual evidence: “Era la rivoluzione, appunto, che l’inquieto intellettuale fiorentino cercava nella guerra, non la morte. Quella lo colse quando lui meno se l’attendeva e certamente non la cercava, come dimostrano anche le lettere … che egli scrisse dall’Africa ai familiari e agli amici: si tratta di documenti che ci consegnano un uomo dal morale alto, un uomo proiettato nel future e non sull’orlo del suicidio” (321).
cultural worldview. The document calls on Italian intellectuals to contribute to the fascist revolution from within in protest of the direction in which the party was continuing to evolve. The “realista” of the manifesto’s title does not refer explicitly to realist literature but is a general attitude urging the creation of a new fascist culture that would be “real” in the sense that it would be concrete, in contrast with the abstract nature of Gentile’s idealism. The publication’s importance for literary realism is nonetheless clear: as Luperini states, “andava ben al di là dell’ambito filosofico antidealistico e antigentiliano a cui pure era immediatamente diretto, finendo per suggerire un’opzione precisa anche in campo letterario” (L’autocoscienza 55).

An examination of the manifesto confirms that it is firmly anti-capitalist, anti-bourgeois, and anti-Church. The first section summarizes some of the signees’ chief concerns:

> Alcuni Italiani sazi di sentir parole, e desiderosi d’un ritorno italiano alle idee, ritengono utile esporre il loro pensiero su cose di qualche interesse presente e futuro. Questo manifesto non è perciò che una franca espressione d’opinioni fortemente sentite, delle quali alcune coincidono con principi ormai stabiliti in Italia e in via d’affermarsi anche fuori, altre sono controverse: né le prime si danno qui come novità, né le seconde come suggerimenti a nessuno. Più cercatori di verità che recitatori di catechismi, e accomunati da questa ricerca e dal disprezzo della facile sapienza che si sbriga de’ massimi problemi con frasi usate, i firmatari trovandosi d’accordo su alcuni punti essenziali ne danno notizia a chi come loro si pone oggi domande rigorose e si sforza di trovarvi risposta.

> E in primo luogo affermano che secondo ogni apparenza l’odierna crisi spirituale e pratica di molti popoli è crisi di civiltà, e sta ad indicare la decadenza della civiltà occidentale nei suoi aspetti di nazionalismo e di capitalismo, nonché in quello più antico e solenne di cristianesimo. (121–122)

Though criticism of certain aspects of fascist policy is present throughout the document, which advocates revival and renewal in the realms of politics and culture, the manifesto resonates with

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31 See Tarquini, “The Anti-Gentilians” 637–662 for other manifestations of anti-Gentilian sentiment during the ventennio.
the fascist call for a revolution that would incite radical change in the organization of society. Rather than negating fascism as a movement, it objects primarily to fascism as manifested in the regime.

Like *L’Universale*, *Il Bargello* on occasion argued for a reevaluation of the manner in which fascism was moving and for a reorientation toward earlier principles. The weekly magazine, distributed by the Fascist Federation of Florence, was founded in 1929 by twenty-six-year-old Alessandro Pavolini, at the time Florence’s Secretary of the Fascist Party. As Peter Hainsworth explains, *Il Bargello* brought together Italians of a variety of political positions: “In the course of its history, a remarkable number of important intellectuals and writers who were active in Florence in the 1930s contributed to it, ranging from leftish revolutionaries, such as Elio Vittorini, to out-and-out reactionaries, such as Giovanni Papini, and apparently a-political or purer letterati, such as Carlo Bo and Mario Luzi” (696). The content of the magazine was not strictly intellectual, instead incorporating a “mixture of party news, ideological discussion, propaganda, sport, and moderately modernist high culture” (Hainsworth 699). Important for the current project is *Il Bargello*’s literary page, which, according to Luti, “si apre misteriosamente alla collaborazione dei letterati ‘puri’ o quasi, trovando i suoi cronisti e i suoi recensori tra gli ‘ebrei’ e gli ‘antifascisti’ di ‘Solaria’” (192). Some individuals responsible for this part of the magazine were members of the fascist literary left who urged a continuing dialogue among fascist intellectuals and were, or would be, influential producers of realism, most notably Elio Vittorini, Romano Bilenchi, and Vasco Pratolini. Analysis of this periodical as it pertains to individual authors will be incorporated into subsequent chapters of this thesis.

Both *L’Universale* and *Il Bargello*, then, had explicit ties with the fascist regime. *Solaria*, on the other hand, founded in 1926 by Alberto Carocci, was not affiliated with a fascist organization and thus for official purposes maintained a separation between culture and politics. In reality, however, the monthly journal, which produced ninety issues between January 1926 and May 1934, had some affinities with the cultural and political agendas of other publications. Using *Il Bargello* as his point of comparison, Hainsworth writes that *Il Bargello* and *Solaria* “emerged from much the same cultural matrix. Their basic assumptions overlapped and … they shared two

32 For general analyses of *Il Bargello*, see Luti, especially 190–199, and Hainsworth.
regular contributors” (696). Like the fascist magazines, Solaria was an integral part of the formation of many young intellectuals, some of whom would later reveal themselves fervent anti-fascists even if, in several cases, they actively participated in official venues of fascist culture during the early years of the 1930s.

One of these young men was Vittorini, who in his Diario in pubblico retrospectively insisted that in the literary circles of that time, being a solariano meant being anti-fascist, Europeanist, universalist, and antitraditionalist (192–193). Of course, the reality was not this simple. Luti points to Solaria’s complicated relationship with fascism, stating, “‘Solaria’ non coincide col fascismo, ma inevitabilmente vi si adegua e, accettando una situazione, trova la chiave necessaria alla convivenza, nell’illusione di conservare intatta l’autentica superiorità dell’intelligenza borghese, l’eredità lasciata dall’attivismo barettiano e dall’attendismo rondiano” (96). Given that the dates that Solaria was published correspond with Mussolini’s rise to and consolidation of power, it is unsurprising that overt political opposition was largely absent from its pages; still, the involvement of individuals with ties to the fascist party suggests that the magazine was not as unequivocally anti-fascist as Vittorini later made it out to be.

Solaria is particularly notable for its desire for contact with foreign literatures and argument that Italian literature should seize its place in the international arena. Especially important in this regard is Leo Ferrero’s 1928 article “Perché l’Italia abbia una letteratura europea,” which recognizes the moral dimension of the connection between politics and literature. Here Ferrero encourages the production and dissemination of Italian prose with strong moral and social underpinnings:

33 The individuals named by Hainsworth are Elio Vittorini and Raffaele Franchi. Vittorini is perhaps the most obvious and important example of an intellectual who contributed to both a journal affiliated with the PNF and to Solaria. His involvement in Solaria (beginning in 1929) and in Il Bargello (in the early 1930s) will be discussed in later analysis of Il garofano rosso.

34 This article is reprinted in full in Manacorda, Letteratura e cultura 125–128.

35 “Gli scrittori italiani non sono più europei, perché non hanno la chiave della vita, non solo europea, ma universale, che è il sentimento morale. Interessarsi al mondo vuol dire, soprattutto, patirne; ma tutte le letterature, e più ancora le romanzesche, sono il frutto di questa sofferenza morale. Possiamo dire, perciò, che le più vaste animatrici della letteratura siano già le passioni politiche, ma più largamente ancora le passioni morali; perché lo studio del proprio paese è ispirato e guidato dal desiderio della giustizia” (qtd. in Manacorda, Letteratura e cultura 126).
Uno scrittore che giudica del mondo senza avere il sentimento morale è come un pittore che giudichi dei colori senza avere gli occhi…. Nessun romanzo può diventare europeo se non è ispirato da un sentimento morale: perché su questo sentimento, prima di tutto, si accordano e riconoscono gli uomini di una stessa civiltà. Possiamo già dire, d’altra parte, che nessun romanziere saprà dipingere gli uomini, in modo da appassionare tutti gli europei, se non lo anima la più universale delle sofferenze. (qtd. in Manacorda, Letteratura e cultura 128)

With its emphasis on the “romanzo” and “romanziere,” the above passage is also indicative of another critical aspect of Solaria’s agenda: that in an overturning of literary hierarchies of the time, the magazine concerned itself primarily with narrative rather than with poetry. The European novelists held up as examples to be emulated—Balzac, Dostoevsky, and Manzoni, among others—reveal the realism at the core of this attention to prose.

Indeed, as Luperini makes evident, the program of Solaria closely coincided with the development of a new kind of realism, its primary aims being to reinvent the time and duration of narration “senza ricadere nelle secche del romanzo verista o psicologico-decadente,” to discover in Italy and to continue a modern tradition of the novel “capace di porsi all’altezza della problematica europea ma senza indulgere a soluzioni d’avanguardia,” and to structure a novel that is “nuovo e tuttavia classico” (Il Novecento 467). Later issues brought focus also to American literature, much of it realistic.36 Though realism was not the only aesthetic endorsed by Solaria, which saw the merits of many movements, including surrealism, the journal’s importance in helping to relaunch the novel as part of an attempted renewal of literature is

36 American literature and culture, especially as mediated by Pavese and Vittorini, were to have a notable effect on Italian culture in general and on realism in particular; according to James D. Wilkinson, “it was in Italy that American fiction found its earliest appeal and greatest resonance among European intellectuals. To Moravia’s generation, it offered a possible source of a new ‘sincerity’ and ‘faith’” (203). As he goes on to state, American literature became “a means to criticize the regime without risking arrest…. For the younger generation of Italian writers, such translations and reviews provided one of the few sure means of support during the 1930s” (204–205). For another study of americanisti in the interwar years, see Antonelli.
undeniable, as is its role in the early years of the careers of authors such as Vittorini, Alvaro, and Pavese who used realism in many of their works.\(^{37}\)

The last category of realist novels to be briefly addressed in this section consists of works written in and/or depicting the south of Italy. As did Giovanni Verga in the nineteenth century, some southern authors in the 1930s used versions of realism to comment on critical issues. In many of the resulting novels, the realities narrated are affected by profound ethical and social problems. Ugo Dotti emphasizes the realist quality of much southern literature of the time, furthermore suggesting that it was subsequently fundamental in nurturing neorealismo: in his opinion, “in genere, si può riscontrare in tutta questa letteratura una tendenza al realismo, tanto che si è potuto interpretare la breve stagione del neorealismo seguita agli anni della guerra, della Resistenza e del dopoguerra come una sorta di maturazione di questa prima esperienza” (700–701). Southern realism of this period is, then, perhaps the most direct descendent of verismo and precursor to neorealismo, both of which engaged with social issues and involved a disproportionate number of writers from the south of Italy.\(^{38}\)

Of the works that form part of this general kind of literary output, the first novel of Carlo Bernari (born in Naples in 1909) is included in this study. Other southern Italian authors, however, were also essential to the advancement of realism. For example, Corrado Alvaro (born in San Luca in Calabria in 1895) observed and narrated the individual and collective reality of a southern town in Gente in Aspromonte (1930). Francesco Jovine (born in Guardialfiera in the Campobasso area

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\(^{37}\) For an account of Solaria and its role in the return to narrative, see Luperini, Il Novecento 456–487 (the section entitled “‘Solaria’ e il rilancio della narrativa: romanzo di consumo, ‘aura poetica’, ‘nuovo realismo’ e favola surreale”).

\(^{38}\) Ugo Dotti accounts for this disparity between northern and southern involvement as follows: “Gli anni Trenta del nostro secolo sono gli anni, come tutti sanno, del pieno fascismo e da parte degli scrittori si hanno, accanto a consensi al regime, inevitabili e ben più importanti dissensi. Soprattutto nell’ambito dei narratori d’origine meridionale, di fronte al divario crescente tra nord industrializzato e sud sempre più abbandonato a se stesso, la protesta degli intellettuali si fece notevolmente vivace, anche se abbastanza spesso la cultura dell’impegno cedette il posto a quella dell’angoscia, della sofferenza esistenziale, e, persino, dello stesso scetticismo” (700). Luperini suggests that southern authors had a different perspective than did northern authors and thus used realism in a different way. In his assessment, “essi possono guardare al mondo meridionale e a quello industriale del Settentrione partendo da un unico punto di vista che gli consente di spiegare tanto la realtà della ‘campagna’ e del sottosviluppo quanto quella della ‘città’ e della nascente industrializzazione” (Il Novecento 552).
in 1902) produced *Un uomo provvisorio* (1934), which can be considered a novel of formation. Although Ignazio Silone (born in Abruzzi in 1900) “began writing his first novel *Fontamara* in a Davos sanatorium” in 1929 and finished it in 1930 while still in Swiss exile (Holmes 2), the novel focuses on concerns representative of the Italian south. Moreover, the fictionalized account of peasants repressed by a large, government-backed landowner and unable to escape misery even when they flee to the city contains transparent anti-fascist themes.

3  **Realist Bildungsromane of the 1930s: Brief Introduction to Individual Works**

Despite great variances in their political persuasions, intellectual views, and former experiences, each author whose work I examine chose to engage with the genre of the *romanzo di formazione* for his or her first, or, in the case of de Céspedes, second novel. Taken together, the resulting *Bildungsromane* offer a cross section of the varying ways in which young Italians grappled with the representation of reality via the narration of a young person’s formation, whether stalled, failed, or otherwise.

Although it is my contention that these novels form a subset of Italian realist prose of the interwar period that is important in both a historical and a literary sense, the primary works evaluated in this dissertation do not offer a comprehensive picture of the state of realism in interwar Italy. Each displays different characteristics of the aesthetic, and they can be associated with different realist approaches to literature. All, however, are foregrounded by the cultural situation outlined in the previous section and should be interpreted with the understanding that they form part of a larger political and cultural context.

Chapter Two analyzes Alberto Moravia’s *Gli indifferenti* (1929). Chronologically the first of the novels that I include in my study, *Gli indifferenti* has several attributes that recur in the majority of the later works: for example, primarily realist prose with some experimental properties; a highly critical view of the bourgeoisie; the portrayal of a generational gap (most significantly, in this case, between the scheming, self-assured Leo Merumeci and the passive and paralyzed Michele Ardengo); the concept of double Bildung; and political dissent, even if heavily veiled, that is communicated through a process of development that is hindered by the society in which the protagonist, or protagonists, lives. Throughout the chapter, I argue that *Gli indifferenti* was instrumental in Moravia’s personal formation, providing him with a vehicle with which he could
transition away from his early experimental prose while conveying an ideological message through Michele’s periodic efforts to mature. Since Michele is at an extreme in terms of his state of malaise, it is possible to interpret the conclusion of the portion of his development presented in Gli indifferenti as a point of departure for those of Sergio, Teodoro, et al., who manage to progress further than Michele does.

In Chapter Three, I examine Umberto Barbaro’s Luce fredda (1931) and Carlo Bernari’s Tre operai (1934). Both authors inject elements of the avant-garde into their realist aesthetic, resulting in marked—and likely necessary—thematic ambiguities, and both novels are representative of a move toward realism as a tool of social commitment. The idea of the double Bildung is furthermore germane: while writing these novels, Barbaro and Bernari were in the middle of a period of personal, political, and intellectual transformation.

There are notable divergences between the works. Luce fredda’s Sergio belongs to the bourgeoisie, which repulses him, and lives in an environment characterized by apathy that profoundly affects him and his acquaintances. He frequently gets caught up in moralizing, philosophizing, and rumination that stunt his growth. Nonetheless, Sergio takes much more significant steps toward maturation than Michele of Gli indifferenti does. As a member of the working class, Teodoro, the protagonist of Tre operai, is confronted by different challenges. He too, however, has intellectual tendencies, even if he is an operaio, and he too is frustrated by the difficulties that he faces as he tries to overcome his malaise and carry out his political education. He is of the lowest social standing of all the protagonists in the novels analyzed in this thesis, and his process of formation comes to the end that is, arguably, the most devastating. Interestingly, he is to a certain extent aware that his ultimate destitution is not wholly of his own doing but is rather precipitated by the political situation, most notably by his compatriots’ failure to take action.39

39 Some parts of this section of Chapter Three, in modified form, are from my article “The Failure of Family: Anti-Fascism in Tre operai,” which appeared in Carlo Bernari tra realismo e sperimentalismo, a special issue of Rivista di Studi Italiani (26.2 [2008]: 129–142), edited by Rocco Capozzi and Enrico Bernard.
Chapter Four is an analysis of Elio Vittorini’s *Il garofano rosso*, a *Bildungsroman* that follows the political, sexual, and intellectual development of Alessio Mainardi, who lives in a boarding house and attends school in southern Italy. He is the only of the protagonists I evaluate who is directly involved in the fascist cause, which he embraces wholeheartedly. *Il garofano rosso* was released in serial form beginning in 1933 and was released in volume only in 1948. Using realism that is in many ways traditional, Vittorini portrays a young man who is eventually disillusioned of the notion that fascism is the key to a better life but never outright rejects it. The work’s lengthy gestation coincided with a period during which the author’s political views were beginning to change, which may help account for the protagonist’s evolving experience of fascism. I contend that despite Vittorini’s later attempts to distance himself from the work and to refashion his intentions in writing it, *Il garofano rosso* was a considerable part of his own political and intellectual development and reflects the left-wing fascist views that he held at the time.

In Chapter Five, I discuss Fausta Cialente’s *Natalia* (1930) and Alba de Céspedes’ *Nessuno torna indietro* (1938). These female *romanzi di formazione*, fascinating in their own right, offer an interesting point of comparison for the male *Bildungsromane* analyzed in other chapters of this thesis. Though they are in many respects dissimilar, they also share important common traits. Cialente and de Céspedes show that because expectations were different for women than they were for men, different kinds of rebellion were necessary. Their protagonists’ relative success is subversive for the opposite reason than the male protagonists’ failure is: as women, they are meant to accept their role in the home as submissive wives and mothers, and that they find some happiness despite their refusal to bend to gender norms reflects the authors’ message of protest. The males, on the other hand, do what is expected of them yet are still defeated by repressive forces more powerful than they are. Indeed, the female protagonists develop more fully, on average, than the protagonists portrayed by Moravia, Barbaro, Bernari, and Vittorini are able to.

*Natalia* follows the coming of age of the title character. Over the course of the novel, she assumes and rejects various identities as she attempts to mature without denying her desires, most of which are antithetical to social standards. Her complex development sees her frequently overstepping the boundaries of what was considered acceptable female behaviour. Cialente uses a modified form of magical realism to narrate Natalia’s formation. The “magical” qualities of her
aesthetic are more pronounced in sections of the work that are particularly transgressive—for example, in those depicting the title character’s same-sex romantic encounters—and lend it a certain degree of ambiguity that may have helped it bypass fascist censors.  

*Nessuno torna indietro* is a collective novel of formation that depicts the entwined formations of young women from a range of social and economic backgrounds who live in the Grimaldi, a convent-run boarding house in Rome. That the women have left their respective homes to come to the capital to study is in itself indication that de Céspedes wished to show that womanhood was not exclusively synonymous with wife– and motherhood. In terms of the acceptability of their behaviour, there is a continuum among the diverse group of students: many make choices that are in direct variance with the ideals entrenched in Italian society whereas others have goals that are more conventional. The women who strive to marry cannot easily attain the traditional life they want but rather face major roadblocks that speak to the precarious and sometimes contradictory position of women in the Italy of the 1930s; interestingly, the outcome for the females whose goals are less in line with those propagated by the regime is generally more favourable. In order to capture the choral nature of the novel, which has multiple protagonists, de Céspedes employs a complex narrative framework in which she uses a prose that tends to be largely conventionally realist.  

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40 This section of Chapter Five is modified from my article “Fausta Cialente’s *Natalia*: Representing Transgressive Female Formation During Fascism,” which first appeared in the journal *Carte Italiane* (9.2 [2013]: 77–88).

41 Portions of this section of Chapter Five are modified from my book chapter “Desiring Dissent: The Function(s) of Desire in *Nessuno torna indietro,*” which was published in the edited volume *The Fire Within: Desire in Modern and Contemporary Italian Literature* (ed. Elena Borelli, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014, 80–95).
Chapter 2
Developing a Form through a *Formazione Mancata*: Alberto Moravia’s *Gli indifferenti*

Set in 1920s Italy, Alberto Moravia’s *Gli indifferenti* (1929) describes a bourgeois family in decline: siblings Carla and Michele; their mother, Mariagrazia; her lover (and seducer of Carla), Leo; and her friend (and seducer of Michele), Lisa. It is in this repressive environment and with morally questionable role models that the young male protagonist, Michele, must struggle to mature despite the stifling constraints imposed on him by his social condition. Though he recognizes the need for transformation, he is capable only of relatively minor rebellious gestures and ultimately fails to bring about concrete change.

In this chapter, I contend that *Gli indifferenti*, the earliest work that I analyze in this thesis, can be considered a *romanzo di formazione* that displays many characteristics that are recurrent, in various configurations and to greater or lesser extents, in other novels of development included in my corpus. Within the text, the idea of formation is relevant in several regards. On a more technical level of the narration, the use of prose that while primarily realist, typical of Moravia’s later works, still displays some techniques of the avant-garde, which Moravia also employed in his early short stories, makes the novel representative of the development of a new realist aesthetic. Thematically, *Gli indifferenti* captures Michele’s attempt to transition to adulthood, an effort that is to all appearances unsuccessful. That he remains more or less a static character does not disallow his position as the protagonist of a novel that falls into the category of the *Bildungsroman* but is rather a criticism of the society in which he is situated. Both of these kinds of formation point to a third, extra-textual type of development: that of Moravia himself. Indeed, vital to the analysis that follows is the idea that the novel attests to and is profoundly influenced by its place in Moravia’s intellectual, personal, and political formation.

Although these three components—a mixing of realist and experimental qualities; a protagonist whose development is stifled by a combination of internal and situational factors; and the relevance of the concept of a double *Bildung*, that of author and protagonist—can be found to varying degrees in all of the works examined in subsequent chapters of this dissertation, it should be noted that there are some differences between *Gli indifferenti* and these other narratives that could be deemed considerable. For example, while Michele anticipates the protagonists that...
come after him, he is arguably closest, as will become clear, to the *inetto* in the broad tradition of Svevo and Pirandello (among other authors who used this figure to symbolize issues that they saw as being emblematic of their time). Furthermore, the period depicted in the novel is only a few days, even if they are significant ones. This snapshot of Michele’s ineptitude nevertheless gives the reader an adequate, and revealing, picture of Michele’s claustrophobic existence and the mostly stalled formation that results from it, and where he falls on the developmental trajectory as compared to the protagonists of later Italian novels of development is affirmation that Moravia was instrumental in laying a foundation from which this genre began to take shape.

Whether or not they completely agree with its classification as such, and generally without expanding beyond a few brief remarks, various critics have made the connection between *Gli indifferenti* and the *romanzo di formazione*. Rocco Carbone, for instance, believes that fundamental aspects of *Gli indifferenti* allow it to be classified as a novel of education. For Carbone, the most obvious of these features is the “forte presenza di un giovane protagonista, la cui esperienza esistenziale costituisce l’elemento portante della vicenda narrata” (22). Tibor Wlassics’ opinion on the matter is similarly unequivocal: as he writes, “come ogni opera successiva di Moravia … *Gli indifferenti* sono un *Bildungsroman*, storia di una ‘educazione sentimentale’. Il tema è quello del ‘crescere’ e del ‘diventare’, sotto lo stimolo di una crisi inaspettata” (303).

Valentina Mascaretti’s *La speranza violenta. Alberto Moravia e il romanzo di formazione* is the only monograph that specifically treats Moravia’s production of *Bildungsromane*. However, while Mascaretti identifies Moravia as the author of a “vero e proprio ‘filone’ di romanzi di formazione” (18, emphasis in the original), she excludes *Gli indifferenti* from this group. In the chapter devoted to analysis of Moravia’s first novel, Mascaretti focuses on its position as a precursor to his later works, averring that because its central theme is indifference rather than adolescence or development, it cannot be called a true novel of formation. Mascaretti asserts that due to the effects of indifference, Michele’s *Bildung* is a failed one: at the end of the book, “il
Disagreeing with Mascaretti’s argument that this is evidence that *Gli indifferenti* is not a *romanzo di formazione*, I hold that it being “un romanzo di denuncia di una condizione esistenziale negativa” (Mascaretti 96) is not irreconcilable with its classification as a *Bildungsroman*. Rather, the context in which the novel was written informed and affected Michele’s *Bildung* in terms of plot and thematic content and in terms of the aesthetic codes employed in the narrative. When analyzed in this light, the very lacunae that lead Mascaretti to conclude that *Gli indifferenti* is not a novel of formation instead lend the representation of Michele’s formation a larger ideological and social significance.

Indeed, if we consider both that characteristics of *Gli indifferenti* that for Mascaretti render its position within the genre impossible—most notable among them indifference, a label that she feels “impedirebbe una reale formazione” (96)—are a reflection of and comment on the political, social, and cultural context of the fascist years and that the *Bildungsroman*, according to Bakhtin and Moretti, involves “l’assurgere dell’eroe al flusso della storia o l’abbassarsi di quest’ultima alla dimensione dell’eroe)” (Mascaretti 107), then the trajectory of Michele’s

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1 Mascaretti subsequently states that “il *romanzo di formazione* ‘mancato’, quale *Gli indifferenti* è, morirà infatti in altre storie, che germoglieranno dalle sue inerti ceneri … è solo un’opera *inaugurale*, ossia la matrice da cui l’autore trarrà l’inchiestro sufficiente a realizzare il filone di romanzi di formazione che percorre trasversalmente la sua sterminata produzione e che rappresenta una significativa eccezione alla seguente conclusione di Moretti: ‘In questo quadro culturale, lo scenario politico postbellico non poteva certo incoraggiare una rinascita del romanzo di formazione: che dei movimenti collettivi possano contribuire a ‘costituire’ l’identità individuale, e non solo, ad annullarla, è una possibilità che la narrativa occidentale non ha mai esplorato’” (148, emphasis in the original). According to Mascaretti, then, Moravia’s other young protagonists would benefit from this early work by experiencing psychological growth going beyond that of Michele and his sister, Carla.

2 Interestingly, Mascaretti bases her contention that Moravia’s next novels contradict Moretti’s view that the genre of the *Bildungsroman* necessarily dies in the early twentieth century on her opinion that thanks to Moravia, “il *romanzo di formazione* non è morto dunque, e nemmeno sopravvive, ma vive nel modo migliore pur adeguandosi alla realtà del nuovo secolo” (148, emphasis in the original). If she categorizes these later works as *romanzi di formazione*, why could *Gli indifferenti* not be an earlier, more extreme adaptation?

3 Mascaretti goes on to argue that “se infatti la formazione è movimento, fisico e spirituale, l’‘indifferenza’ rende irrimediabilmente statici” and then that “*Gli indifferenti* non è un romanzo di formazione ma un romanzo di denuncia di una condizione esistenziale negativa” (96).
development is significant in two regards. First, it is appropriate to the form; second, the fact that it is a formazione mancata is key to the ideological message of the novel, which, whether fascist or anti-fascist, a question that I will examine further, most certainly censures the bourgeoisie.

My examination of aesthetic factors is also informed by this chapter’s overall focus on manifestations of the concept of formation. While the extent to which Gli indifferenti can be called an example of literary realism has been a topic of much critical debate, there is nonetheless a more or less general consensus that it contains clear realist elements. Salvatore Battaglia, for instance, summarizes some potential implications of the realism of Moravia’s first novel in relation to the overall development of literary realism in Italy, asserting that “in un’epoca di crisi sociale e di fremiti rivoluzionari,” the call to realism was in itself a sign of protest and denunciation (126); Battaglia suggests that Moravia inaugurated a new way of using the realist aesthetic in condemnation of societal and cultural woes since it was with Gli indifferenti that the realism present in Italian culture became, in Battaglia’s view, “la rappresentazione di modi di vita e di società in disfacimento, in cui gli uomini appaiono impegnati soltanto esteriormente, ma sostanzialmente increduli e scettici” (127). Also important, however, are experimental features of Moravia’s prose that echo those found in his early short stories. The use of these techniques disavows the “mito della ‘prova unica’” named by Pasquale Voza (Moravia 9) and confirms that Gli indifferenti was the product of a time of great intellectual growth and preparation for the author. As I will further discuss, the resulting realist style is suitable for Moravia’s depiction of a society in moral crisis and has much in common with theories of literary realism outlined in Chapter One of this dissertation.

1 Contextual Factors

Before evaluating specific aesthetic and thematic qualities of the novel, I contextualize my study of it by describing some situational factors influencing the text, namely Moravia’s political views at the time of Gli indifferenti’s composition, aspects of his early life that are particularly germane to an evaluation of his first novel, and the intellectual conditions in which he wrote Gli indifferenti. Here I analyze a selection of Moravia’s first writings, all of which were produced either shortly before or at the same time as the novel and all of which have significant connections to it. In addition to their importance in providing a backdrop for subsequent analysis, these considerations begin to show how the work reflects its place in Moravia’s formation.
1.1 The Problem of Politics

A detailed analysis of Moravia’s fascism/anti-fascism is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, since his relationship with and attitude toward the regime cannot be wholly separated from the interpretation of Gli indifferenti, I preface my appraisal of the novel as a romanzo di formazione with a summary of some issues related to Moravia’s possible political intentions. My aim is not to reach a final verdict but is rather to examine, in brief, how his desire for sociopolitical engagement may have affected the text.

While in Gli indifferenti Moravia undeniably denounces the social situation through his unflattering portrait of bourgeois life, the degree to which his protest can be solidly linked to politics is uncertain. In the same way that criticism of the immoral nature of the bourgeoisie as portrayed by Moravia does not automatically render the novel anti-fascist, “the book’s affinities with the causes of the fascist avant-garde, with which Moravia was associated in his earliest days as a writer” (Ben-Ghiat, Fascist Modernities 55), do not necessarily make it pro-regime. In fact, no matter what his later politics, and despite his involvement in fascist literary magazines such as I Lupi and L’Interplanetario at the time of the novel’s composition, Moravia’s political position remained unclear. In a volume published in 1990, many years after the fact, Moravia acknowledged the contrariety of his stance, maintaining, “avevo sempre provato antipatia per il

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4 George Talbot takes issue with Ben-Ghiat’s assertion that Gli indifferenti represents fascist values, contending that “it is difficult to sustain an argument according to which Gli indifferenti would ever contribute to the inculcation of ‘deep belief’ in Fascism among its readers” (129). He believes that the novel’s “contribution to a new ethical attitude’ is probably of no more than as a caustic portrayal of the behaviours of the decadent, rich, liberal Roman society. That much it certainly has in common with the avant garde critique of decadent liberal Italy, but that is not quite the same thing as standard-bearing for the new Fascist Italy, to use Mussolini’s terms” (129). This anti-bourgeois sentiment could also be interpreted as being anti-fascist.

5 Moravia’s characterization of the individuals involved in L’Interplanetario and I Lupi in an interview in 1981 is revealing of his ambivalent attitude toward fascism. Recounting the circumstances surrounding his early short stories, he states, “i racconti furono pubblicati da una rivista da ragazzi, avevo ventun anni, non mi ricordo neanche se fosse fascista, si lo sarà anche stata. Allora tutto era fascista. Chi voleva fare qualcosa doveva passare attraverso il regime oppure andare all’estero. Il fascismo di sinistra era una cosa all’acqua di rose: di sinistra perché prendeva le parti di un supposto popolo? Ma alla fine tutti i salmi finivano in gloria. Del resto il fascismo era un movimento di massa, no?” (qtd. in Voza, “Nel ventisette” 208).
fascismo e al tempo stesso, in maniera contraddittoria … sentivo che gli antifascisti erano perdenti” (Moravia and Elkann 23).

This personal ambiguity is reflected in *Gli indifferenti*. Moravia later professed that he did not intend the novel to be at all political, but the veracity of his claims, especially given the distance between when he made them and when he wrote his first novel, is impossible to determine. Natasha V. Chang indicates that “Moravia’s comments about the novel in his *Autobiografia breve* … detach this text from its socio-historical context” (211), corroborating her argument with Moravia’s words:

*Gli indifferenti*, nella mia intenzione non voleva essere che un romanzo, ossia un’opera letteraria scritta secondo determinati criteri puramente letterari. Ma la critica e il pubblico ci videro una violenta polemica sociale che c’era senza dubbio ma che io non avevo avuto intenzione di metterci. Io non mi ero mai occupato di politica e i miei interessi erano soltanto letterari. (qtd. in Chang, “Moravia’s Indifferent Bodies” 211)\(^6\)

Moravia’s insistence on his political indifference in the novel implies that the reader’s interpretation of the story is what leads to the detection of the “violent polemica sociale” cited above. Nevertheless, even given Umberto Eco’s reminder that narrative fiction “cannot say everything about [the] world [of the text]” but rather “hints at it and then asks the reader to fill in a whole series of gaps” (3), it seems implausible that Moravia was completely unaware of the admittedly ambiguous social message of the work, particularly because of the political and social climate of the time.

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\(^6\) This was by no means Moravia’s only statement regarding his ideological intentions. Similar to this proclamation is his assertion in an interview that first appeared in the *Paris Review* in 1954 that *Gli indifferenti* “was not a reaction against anything. It was a novel”; later in the same interview, he said, “my own criticism, whatever there is, is unintentional, occurring entirely by chance. In my view, the function of a writer is not to criticize anyway; only to create living characters. Just that” (“Alberto Moravia” 192). In another instance, Moravia declared, “hanno detto poi che era un romanzo di critica della società borghese. Può darsi, ma io non ne ero consapevole. Avevo ambizioni puramente letterarie. E per il resto mi servivo del materiale che avevo sottomano” (*Vita* 22).
Indeed, deciphering Moravia’s political views during the fascist years is problematic. Concrete conclusions cannot be drawn from considerations external to the text, such as Moravia’s family ties as outlined below, the intellectual groups in which he operated, or his decision to publish *Gli indifferenti* with Alpes, a publishing company owned by Mussolini’s brother, nor can they be ascertained from considerations internal to the text, such as the purportedly anti-bourgeois message of the novel or its aesthetic qualities, which Ben-Ghiat claims give the work, as previously cited, “affinities with the causes of the fascist avant-garde” (*Fascist Modernities* 55)—although many scholars do not share her opinion. The regime’s mixed reactions to *Gli indifferenti* further confuse the situation, as does, as already referenced, the fact that Moravia himself declared “di non aver esplicitamente cercato di analizzare il fascismo ne Gli Indifferenti, ma di aver voluto solo presentare la storia di una famiglia” (Katz 39), an affirmation that points to an alternative possibility: that in *Gli indifferenti*, which takes place almost entirely in interior spaces, removed from outside political concerns, Moravia adopted an apolitical stance, a decision that would be, of course, in a sense political. The author’s problematic depiction of the moral crisis facing youth in *Gli indifferenti*, a portrayal pointing to the failure of fascist attempts to mobilize the young, is also evidence against it being a fascist novel and should thus be taken into consideration when attempting to evaluate the politics of the work. Such contextual concerns will be developed in later sections of this chapter.

1.2 Alberto Moravia: Biographical Considerations

Two aspects of Moravia’s early experiences are particularly relevant to an examination of *Gli indifferenti* since they both contributed to his (ostensible) political ambiguity at the time of its composition and inspired some of its aesthetic and thematic attributes. First, his familial connections fell on two ends of the political spectrum—his uncle Augusto De Marsanich was a

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7 As Talbot states, Moravia’s choice of publisher “did not in itself constitute an endorsement by the regime” (129).

8 The perspective from which Giuliana Sanguinetti Katz analyzes Moravia’s politics is at the other extreme: “Moravia presenta il fascismo da un punto di vista marxista, come forma del governo della borghesia corrotta che sfrutta il proletariato” (39).

9 For a brief analysis of the government’s reception of *Gli indifferenti*, see Bonsaver, *Censorship and Literature* 154.
fascist official while his cousins Carlo and Nello Rosselli were active members of the anti-fascist group Giustizia e Libertà. As a result, the young intellectual was exposed to conflicting models of political involvement within his own extended family. At least during his teenage years, which corresponded with the years in which he was writing Gli indifferenti, Moravia seems to have reacted to this contradiction with detachment from and disinterest in his family’s politics. In his Vita, he makes little mention of De Marsanich (the exception has no direct bearing on politics but is an interesting testament to contemporary attitudes toward literature: “Mio zio De Marsanich, deputato fascista, amava D’Annunzio. Una volta lo incontrai e mi disse: ‘Voi giovani avete torto a trattar male D’Annunzio! È un grande poeta.’ Gli risposi che aveva ragione” [39]). Moravia’s relationship with the Rosselli brothers at the time was by his own admission distant; asked during an interview if he was fond of them, he replied, “no, li conoscevo appena” (Vita 23).

Second, illness kept him relatively isolated from the evolving fascist state for stretches of his adolescence. Moravia recognized in later writings that the osseous tuberculosis with which he first fell ill at the age of nine was of great consequence to his personal formation. In one such recollection, he writes:

Questa malattia è stato il fatto più importante della mia vita. Il secondo fatto più importante fu il fascismo. Attribuisco molta importanza alla malattia e al fascismo perché a causa della malattia e del fascismo io ebbi a subire e feci cose che altrimenti non avrei mai subito né fatto. Ciò che forma il nostro carattere sono le cose che siamo costretti a fare, non quelle che facciamo di nostra volontà. (“Autobiografia in breve” 10)

Though in this passage he groups together his health crisis and the restrictions imposed by the regime, much of the most significant contact with and interest in fascism to which Moravia

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10 Giustizia e Libertà was founded in France following Carlo and Nello Rosselli’s escape from Italy. Following years of anti-fascist activities, the Rosselli brothers were murdered in 1937 on Mussolini’s orders. For a detailed study focusing on Carlo Rosselli, see Pugliese.
alludes in this passage came after the publication of *Gli indifferenti*. In contrast, the influence of his illness on his education was profound. Besides shielding him from events external to the sanatorium in Cortina d’Ampezzo in which he spent March 1924 to October 1925, when he was sixteen and seventeen years old, the immobility resulting from his convalescence allowed him time to gain familiarity with various literary greats, most of them foreign. As Moravia attests, “non ero politicizzato allora. Pensavo alla letteratura e basta” (*Vita* 34).

The same experience made him acutely aware of social problems experienced by the socio-economic class to which he belonged. Moravia remembers that:

> Il senso di *cupio dissolvi* era diffuso a ogni livello in maniera allarmante. Era una cosa di cui soffrivo anch’io acutamente, condannato com’ero all’immobilità. E bastava che mi guardassi attorno, nello stesso sanatorio, per scoprire che l’idea di morte, e il disfacimento, pure se sembrerà strano che tutto questo potesse avvertirlo un ragazzo, erano intorno a me. Era in atto una decomposizione sociale dalla quale affiorava un violentissimo erotismo. (qtd. in Siciliano 32)

The social decay that Moravia diagnoses both in the sanatorium, populated with fellow members of his class, and in his own family finds resonance in *Gli indifferenti*. It seems, in fact, that Moravia’s social standing affected the novel’s gestation and eventual shape in several concrete ways. For example, his position of economic advantage lent him privileges since “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” (Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities* 55). In addition, Moravia’s origins in the

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11 Moravia makes specific reference to his political attitude as a teenager in *Vita di Moravia*. In response to a question about his knowledge of fascism during this period, the same in which Giacomo Matteotti was murdered, he replies, “nel ’24 vennero a trovarmi al sanatorio i miei cugini Carlo e Nello Rosselli. Avevo sedici anni e non mi occupavo di politica…. Carlo, che dei due era quello che aveva una vera attività politica, mi disse che in autunno contavano di mandare Mussolini in Corte d’Assise…. Pensai che era un ingenuo, ma non sapevo affatto perché lo pensassi. Era un’impressione, ecco tutto” (23).

12 Moravia confirmed that his contact with European literature was coloured by his illness: “Leggendo, assorbii la cultura europea, la vissi da malato, con la violenza di uno che a letto non vorrebbe stare, ma vorrebbe fisicamente indentificarsi con quel che legge…. Era come se io capissi attraverso la mia malattia tutta l’impossibilità di fondo, l’impossibilità alla vita che la cultura europea esprimeva” (qtd. in Siciliano 32).
bourgeoisie, the only social group of which the author had a profound knowledge, certainly had repercussions for his mode of writing.

Moravia provided a concrete answer to the question of autobiography in relation to his oeuvre in general and to *Gli indifferenti* in particular:

My novels are usually based on a particular experience of my life, an experience which I try of course to filter, to analyze in depth. A writer’s work is always “autobiographical,” obviously, for one can talk only of what one has known or experienced. Michele, the protagonist of *The Time of Indifference*, is clearly a projection of myself. The persona of this lonesome and unhappy boy already existed in my mind when I was eleven years old, which is to say that the novel grew out of many years of incubation. (qtd. in Rebay 7)

He elsewhere commented on the link between his upbringing and the bourgeois setting of the novel: “Essendo nato e facendo parte di una società borghese ed essendo allora borghese io stesso (almeno per quanto riguardava il modo di vivere) *Gli indifferenti* furono tutt’al più un mezzo per rendermi consapevole di questa mia condizione” (*L’uomo* 66). The idea that the novel transformed Moravia’s self-identity in that it was by writing *Gli indifferenti* that he became aware of his own condition, saw for the first time the deficiencies of the manner in which he was raised, and even learned to write (“ho imparato a scrivere con *Gli indifferenti*. Con questo voglio dire che con *Gli indifferenti* per la prima volta le cose sono diventate per me parole e viceversa” [*Vita* 31]) reinforces the association between the author and the world that he creates in the text. It also points again to the analogy of the novel as a site of growth and development for Moravia. Although, as previously mentioned, he later resisted the suggestion that the work was a purposeful attack on the bourgeoisie, it is not unreasonable to draw the conclusion that in *Gli indifferenti*, Moravia is both judge and victim of the bourgeois condition that he represents. As will become clear from a close reading of the text, manifestations of this general attitude

13 Moravia’s acknowledgement that his inspiration for *Gli indifferenti* came partially from “l’esperienza generica della vita di famiglia che non sapevo di detestare fino a quel punto” (*Vita* 22) confirms that his new vision of bourgeois family life was not a positive one.
toward the social class of which he was a member are found throughout the novel and are a critical element of the kind of *Bildungsroman* crafted by the young author.

### 1.3 Moravia’s Cultural Involvement Prior to *Gli indifferenti*

Some of the circumstantial factors outlined above, such as the literature by foreign authors to which Moravia was exposed during his convalescence, undoubtedly contributed to the divergences from Italian literary trends evidenced in the prose of his first novel and to the individuality for which Romano Luperini labels Moravia’s realist style as being “ben diverso” from other emerging realisms (*Il Novecento* 669). Indeed, even his contemporaries noted “la novità dirompente del capolavoro rispetto alla letteratura del tempo” (Casini 190). In contradiction with critical interpretations emphasizing Moravia’s isolation and innovation, however, Moravia was not detached from the cultural situation in which *Gli indifferenti* was finished and released.

In Chapter One, I discuss some pertinent aspects of the general cultural climate of the interwar years and of the state of realism in the period leading up to and corresponding with the novels analyzed in this thesis.\(^{14}\) Several scholars, notably Valentina Mascaretti, Geno Pampaloni, Umberto Carpi, and Pasquale Voza, have analyzed this environment in direct reference to *Gli indifferenti*. In describing the historical and cultural moment in which the novel was written, Mascaretti and Pampaloni assert that narrative was not as developed in Italy as it was in other parts of Europe.\(^{15}\) Pampaloni goes so far as to claim that Moravia’s long illness was “un’astuzia della provvidenza (letteraria!)” in that it led to his formation taking place with classics of modernity, outside of “quell’Italia stagnante”; in fact, “a quella sua infelice adolescenza, trascorsa in cliniche e sanatori, Moravia deve gran parte della sua aristocrazia culturale che gli è connaturale” (XL).

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\(^{14}\) See the section “The Italian Context: Italian Realism during the ‘Anni del Consenso’ (1929–1936).”

\(^{15}\) According to Mascaretti, “proprio negli anni Venti, veniva producendo a poco a poco capolavori rivoluzionari” (89). In Italy, on the other hand, “dopo la stagione verista, e accanto alle esperienze della *Voce* e della *Ronda* che avevano decretato la ‘crisi del romanzo’, gli unici significativi narratori erano stati Pirandello, Svevo e Tozzi” (89). In Pampaloni’s opinion, “gli anni in cui il liceale mancato Alberto Pincherle scopri in sé la vocazione letteraria e cominciò a scrivere (attorno alla metà degli Anni venti) erano, in Italia, anni di depressione, anche culturalmente parlando (XL).
Carpi sees the situation differently. Recognizing the complexities of the Italian cultural and literary world in which Moravia worked in the years coinciding with his writing *Gli indifferenti*, Carpi portrays an atmosphere marked by, among other movements, experimentalism, rationalist architecture, *immaginismo*, and Freudism in which “convenivano fascisti e antifascisti (o non fascisti), accomunati da una forte, per quanto in sé ambigua, carica antiborghese e da una strenua attenzione verso l’Europa degli ‘ismi’ avanguardistici”; as he states, “nell’Italia di quegli anni non tutta la cultura fascista era ‘selvaggia’ e ‘strapaesana’, né tutta quella antifascista filoeuropea alla maniera moderata di ‘Solaria’” (“‘Gli indifferenti’” 696–697). In another article, Carpi expands on his view that the circumstances of *Gli indifferenti*’s composition were more complicated than they have often been considered. While accepting that the coordinates normally used to evaluate Moravia’s debut novel—“come stato personale, la segregazione in sanatorio; come condizione storico-politica, la prigione della dittatura fascista” (“L’esordio” 79)—are valid, he insists that these factors are too generic and thus insufficient and that they furthermore neglect a critical truth: that “*Gli indifferenti* sono molto meno di quanto si creda una *bouteille à la mer* lanciata da un oppresso isolamento, e molto più il frutto d’una stagione di intensi contatti ed esperienze intellettuali, non esauribili con lo scontato quanto vago accenno ai rapporti ‘novecentisti’ con Bontempelli” (“L’esordio” 79). Beginning with these first contacts, Moravia’s intellectual life would be “intrecciata con quella dei gruppi romani sia culturalmente che politicamente più vivaci ed eterodossi” (“L’esordio” 79).

Carpi’s interpretation is borne out by tangible information about these years. Moravia’s involvement in the Italian literary scene steadily increased beginning shortly after he left the sanatorium at Cortina d’Ampezzo in 1925, at the age of seventeen. In 1926 he met Corrado Alvaro, who in turn introduced him to Massimo Bontempelli. Moravia published his first short story, “Cortigiana stanca,” in Bontempelli’s *900* in 1927, an accomplishment indicating that by then, his involvement in cultural activities was significant.

When compared to his later aesthetic preferences, the experimental nature of the intellectual circles with which Moravia associated in the late 1920s suggests that this was a period of flux for him. The content of his earliest writings supports this conjecture, as does their very being. Voza accounts for Moravia’s failure to address the existence of these pieces until decades after their initial publication or to include them in his later collections of essays and short stories, decisions which helped keep them in a sort of oblivion, by speculating that they conflicted with the
aforementioned “mito della ‘prova unica,’” which was important to the idea of Moravia’s literary precocity and a major component of the effort to resist verifying “l’esistenza di un terreno di formazione di quell’‘opera prima’” (Moravia 9). This “terreno di formazione” was, in actuality, and in contrast with the long-standing critical vision of *Gli indifferenti* as Moravia’s initial foray into literature, decidedly rich and therefore warrants further analysis. His first article dates to 1927, two years before the release of *Gli indifferenti*, and was accompanied by nine *novelle* printed in various literary magazines—all of which had connections of varying degrees to fascism—in 1927, 1928, and 1929. All of this activity, which was contemporaneous to his writing *Gli indifferenti*, attests to the relationships that he was building with other intellectuals and to the developing state of his aesthetic and literary attitudes and approaches since many of his earliest works are infused with experimental techniques characteristic of avant-garde movements with which Moravia had contact at the time. Significantly, much of his experimentation would be attenuated, though not wholly eliminated, in *Gli indifferenti*.

Moravia published the following nine short narrative works in the period preceding and immediately after the release of *Gli indifferenti*: “Lassitude de courtisane” (Spring 1927), “Delitto al circolo di tennis” (September 1928), “Il ladro curioso” (21 January 1929), and “Apparizione” (21 May 1929) in *900*; “Dialogo tra Amleto e il Principe di Danimarca” (29 February 1928) in *I Lupi*; and “Cinque sogni” (15 February 1928), “Assunzione in cielo di Maria Luisa” (15 March 1928), “Albergo di terz’ordine” (1 April 1928), and “Villa Mercedes” (1 June 1928) in *L’Interplanetario*.16 While the *novelle* are significant in aggregate, I discuss only those most directly related to *Gli indifferenti*: “Cortigiana stanca” (originally published as “Lassitude de courtisane,” the French translation by Emmanuel Audisio), “Cinque sogni,” “Dialogo tra Amleto e il Principe di Danimarca,” and “Villa Mercedes.”

First, however, I consider the implications of the article “C’è una crisi del romanzo?,” incidentally the only text that Moravia signed using the surname Pincherle.17 Umberto Fracchia

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16 “Dialogo tra Amleto e il Principe di Danimarca,” “Cinque sogni,” and “Villa Mercedes” are reprinted after Carpi’s “‘Gli indifferenti’ rimossi” in *Belfagor* 36.6 (1981): 700–709. Citations in this chapter refer to these reprints.

17 Moravia’s article is reprinted (for the first time since its initial release) following Voza’s “Nel ventisette sconosciuto” in *Belfagor* 37.2 (1982): 210–212. Citations in this chapter refer to this reprint.
founded *La Fiera Letteraria* in Milan in 1925 with the goal of creating “un giornale che fosse letto dal maggior numero di persone e sia pure senza rinunciare al culto delle cose belle e buone” in “una incondizionata adesione e solidarietà con il tempo” (qtd. in Manca LXVIII). Moravia’s “C’è una crisi del romanzo?” appeared in the journal on 9 October 1927. The crux of his argument was that the novel was suffering from a state of disequilibrium between thought (i.e., the narrator’s representation of the state of the characters’ psychology and conscience) and action. In what was part of “il problema della realtà” plaguing narrative, thought had come to dominate action, a development with negative effects (211). Moravia described the process as follows:

> Allora è venuta la gran fiera psicologica: tutti i baracconi erano aperti: in uno si vedevano i pensieri colpevoli che passeggiano indisturbati per i lobi del cervello umano; in un altro c’era una grande oscurità appena illuminata da qualche rosso bagliore, vi si udivano strane voci e orribili favelle, ed era la nostra subcoscienza; in un terzo la famigerata associazione delle idee teneva le sue riunioni; in un quarto la fantasia ballava; in un quinto la memoria… e sulla porta chi batteva la grancassa? La letteratura, naturalmente, e ispirava molta compassione vederla così mal ridotta, lacera, e miserabile, così… cerebrale. (211)

Despite his obvious disapproval of the situation, Moravia did not advocate a return to “narrazione pura e semplice dei fatti, senza alcun commento psicologico” (211). Instead, he held that the psychological element should not exceed “il testo cioè l’azione” (211). Equilibrium should be re-established in two primary ways. First, the centrality of the character must be reaffirmed since:

> A lungo andare questa prevalenza dell’elemento cerebrale è uno squilibrio che impedisce l’opera d’arte; la realtà non è mai stata così male descritta e interpretata come ora che se ne discute tanto, mai come ora sono mancate le figure colossali, proverbiali, più vive degli autori, che incarnano dei tipi immortali di umanità …

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18 This quote is from “Esistere nel tempo,” which appeared in the first issue of *La Fiera Letteraria* on 13 December 1925.
[e] in compenso c’è una gran nebbia, una grande oscurità: evidentemente quella della subcoscienza! (211, emphasis in the original)

Second, the novel must be given back “le sue funzioni che non sono filosofiche o didattiche o religiose o sperimentali, ma solamente di testimonianza” (212).¹⁹

Moravia’s collaboration with La Fiera Letteraria was limited to one article. His involvement with 900, on the other hand, was more extensive. Founded in 1926 by Massimo Bontempelli and Curzio Malaparte, the magazine was the mouthpiece of Bontempelli’s Novecentismo and magical realism. Calling for a break from traditional modes of narration, it favoured instead the avant-garde and more experimental trends. As suggested by its subtitle, “Cahiers d’Italie et d’Europe,” and by its initial use of French as the language of publication, the journal advocated international dialogue and an understanding of European literary currents.²⁰ 900 moreover had important ties to the fascist regime, not least of which through Bontempelli, who was at the time a member of the Accademia d’Italia and secretary of the fascist writers’ union. Besides his written contributions, Moravia served on the journal’s editorial board.

There are two distinct links between 900 and Gli indifferenti. According to Moravia, while working on 900, he had participated in a competition for which he finished writing Gli indifferenti. As he claims in his “Autobiografia in breve,” “i novecentisti si erano impegnati con Bontempelli a scrivere ciascuno un romanzo. Ma il solo che scrisse il romanzo fui io” (11).

¹⁹ In “Nel ventisette sconosciuto,” the sole detailed analysis of Moravia’s first article published to date, Voza provides a meaningful interpretation of this important piece of the author’s early intellectual history, suggesting that via “C’è una crisi del romanzo?,” “è possibile cogliere l’affiorare di alcune costanti essenziali della poetica moraviana, anche se nella loro forma più ‘tecnica’ e insieme più perentoriamente rivelatrice di quello che potremmo definire l’originario e costitutivo ‘anti-decadentismo’ dello scrittore romano” (208, emphasis in the original). In Voza’s reading, Moravia’s ideal lies somewhere between the naturalistic and the overly psychological novel. In the same literary environment that Moravia problematizes, “si trattava di elaborare dall’interno ... una nuova misura narrativa, capace di consentire una rappresentazione vera, e soprattutto convincente della vita” (“Nel ventisette” 210, emphasis in the original). If we extrapolate from Voza’s observations, Moravia’s formulation of the “nuova misura narrativa” (“Nel ventisette” 210) put to work in Gli indifferenti could be considered part of the larger creation of a new kind of realism that had its beginnings in the interwar period in Italy.

²⁰ Bontempelli, Novecentismo, and the journal 900 are the subject of many critical works: see, for example, Biscicchia, Mascia Galateria, Luti (especially 146–152), Piscopo (Massimo Bontempelli), and Saccone.
Additionally, the novelle “Cortigiana stanca” and “Delitto al circolo di tennis,” both published in 900, exhibit narrative techniques and themes found also in the novel.

Aleramo P. Lanapoppi identifies the affinities between “Cortigiana stanca” and Gli indifferenti:

La prima pagina di Cortigiana stanca, scritta quando l’autore era appena ventenne, getta con sicurezza assolutamente sorprendente le fondamenta di tutta l’opera posteriore: le caratteristiche esterne e interne dei personaggi, la situazione psicologica, l’ambiente fisico, il modo di narrare sono quelli che diventeranno familiari fino all’ossessione ai lettori di Moravia. (32)

Although the novella differs significantly from Gli indifferenti, they are similar in several respects, some of which are listed by Lanapoppi. These include the dialectic between thought and action, the use of enclosed spaces, contrasts between light and dark, and a young protagonist who ultimately fails to act. The central dilemma in “Cortigiana stanca” stems from the youth’s inability to resolve a problem posed by his financial situation and by his moral stupor, both of which preclude him from continuing to maintain his older lover, Maria Teresa. They attempt separately to find solutions to their difficulties, but due to the young man’s tendency to get lost in rumination and his resulting inability to take responsibility for her, Maria Teresa, the more vulnerable of the two, is in the end abandoned.

Moravia’s pieces in I Lupi and L’Interplanetario are revealing of the extent to which he was part of a variety of young literary groups in Rome during the years in which he was writing Gli indifferenti. These two publications, closely associated with 900, were open to Europeanism and new kinds of prose,21 and both quindicinali, or biweekly magazines, were short-lived.

21 In Cronache letterarie tra le due guerre 1920/1940, Luti mentions I Lupi and L’Interplanetario only once, noting them for their relationship to 900: “La posizione bontempelliana sarà ripresa, sia pure in termini meno ‘mitici’, da altre riviste che possono anch’esse essere situate nel movimento di ‘Stracittà’: ‘I Lupi’, ‘L’Interplanetario’, ‘Duemila’, ‘Lo Spirito nuovo’” (152). Few critics discuss L’Interplanetario or I Lupi in detail. Umberto Carpi provides perhaps the most thorough treatments in “L’esordio ‘avanguardistico’ di Moravia” and in Bolscevico immaginista. In the former, referring to L’Interplanetario, he indicates that the journal is of extraordinary interest and “non liquidabile come foglio minore del ‘novecentismo’” (“L’esordio” 80). He points also to the “assoluta eccellenza delle collaborazioni: Moravia a parte, vi troviamo Sinisgalli, Alvaro, Bragaglia Anton Giulio e Alberto, futuristi come Benedetto e lo stesso Marinetti, gli ‘immaginisti’, Bontempelli con una schiera di scrittori e intellettuali di spicco … ecc” (“L’esordio” 80). In the monograph Moravia, Pasquale Voza also addresses
L’Interplanetario was founded by Luigi Diemoz and Libero de Libero in 1928, publishing its first issue on 1 February and its seventh, and last, on 1 June of the same year. I Lupi (subtitled “quindicinale del Novecentismo fascista”) was founded by G. G. Napolitano and Aldo Bizzarri and was published in three issues from 20 January 1928 to 29 February 1928. A notice appearing in the last issue of L’Interplanetario on 1 June 1928 confirms that Moravia’s participation in this cultural scene was tied to Gli indifferenti:

Alberto Moravia, giovanissimo scrittore, collaboratore di 900 e nostro redattore, pubblicherà nei primi mesi del prossimo anno un fortissimo romanzo per i tipi di una casa editrice milanese. Ancora però non ne ha fissato il titolo che sarà: Cinque persone e due giorni, oppure Gli Ardengo, Lisa e Merumeci. Noi gli consigliamo il primo. (qtd. in Carpi, “Gli indifferenti” 697)

Moravia is here acknowledged as a contributing and respected member of this and other literary magazines, even though Gli indifferenti would, of course, take neither of the titles individuated in the passage above.

“Cinque sogni,” the first of Moravia’s novelle to be published in L’Interplanetario, has the most obvious connection to Gli indifferenti.22 The story narrates the dreams of five individuals who crave escape but find no reprieve in sleep: “Tutti cinque si erano affidati fiduciosamente al sonno con la sicurezza di riposare e per quelle ore di dimenticare la realtà; ma la vita non si spezzava; dei sogni appassionati e turbanti opprimevano le loro anime indifese” (702). Featuring characters with the same names and characteristics as those of the novel (as evidenced, for instance, by references to “la gelosia della madre” and “l’indifferenza di Michele” [703]), “Cinque sogni”

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22 As earlier stated, “Cinque sogni” is reprinted after Carpi’s “Gli indifferenti’ rimossi.” Citations in this chapter refer to the text, on pages 702–705, following Carpi’s article.
was in fact intended to be part of the final draft of *Gli indifferenti*. The characters’ dreams, which often degenerate into nightmares, are suggestive of several movements of the avant-garde with which Moravia was likely acquainted, among them surrealism, expressionism, and *immaginismo*. Echoes of Freudian concepts are throughout. Carpi hypothesizes that Moravia removed this section from the novel because “avrebbe svelato subito, in chiave onirica, assolutamente tutto” (“‘Gli indifferenti’” 699, emphasis in the original); when rereading *Gli indifferenti* after “Cinque sogni,” “par quasi che il comportamento e le azioni dei protagonisti siano la trasposizione di quella loro verità onirica in termini di finzione realistica” (“‘Gli indifferenti’” 699, emphasis added). Seen this way, the story is a testament to Moravia’s experience with the avant-garde while his decision to exclude it from *Gli indifferenti* points to his progressively more realistic aesthetic.

Chronologically, the next of Moravia’s publications is “Dialogo tra Amleto e il Principe di Danimarca,” which appeared in *I Lupi*. Although its representation of the excesses of the bourgeoisie are considerable—for example, the Prince declares that he is “un uomo come tutti gli altri” then produces a list of ridiculous proportions that includes a selection of the many pleasures that he enjoys, such as women, cars, airplanes, swimming, polo, travel, and dancing (700)—the “Dialogo” is most significant for its development of the theme of indifference. The Prince’s excessive rumination makes him aware of his overwhelming ambivalence: “Si può agire in un modo qualsiasi, soltanto se si è agitati da un sentimento, tutto questo mi lascia completamente indifferente” (701). As becomes increasingly evident as the story progresses and the lineaments, implications, and mechanisms of indifference continue to be developed, indisputable parallels exist between Moravia’s protagonist in this piece and Michele of *Gli*...
indifferenti. This relationship is upheld in the final lines, where in words that could have just as easily come from the mouth of Michele Ardengo, the Prince exclaims: “O vita! o eternità! la questione non è di essere o non essere ma un’altra, non è possibile che ce ne sia una sola, un’altra! un’altra! bisogna trovarne un’altra” (702).  

If the greatest relevance of “Dialogo tra Amleto e il Principe di Danimarca” to Gli indifferenti is the central role assumed by the thematics of indifference, the importance of “Villa Mercedes,” published in the last issue of L’Interplanetario, lies in its portrayal of a villa in a Roman neighbourhood, a prolonged and generally uncomplimentary description that “esplicitava il significato profondo della villa e ne definiva extra romanzo il ruolo nel mondo degli Indifferenti” (Carpi, “L’esordio” 87). The first paragraph clarifies that the area in which the villa is situated is inhabited by the rich. It also provides initial evidence that Moravia holds in low regard both the new kind of architecture used in the houses’ design and the decadence of their residents:

È un quartiere nuovo, sorto in soli venticinque anni, in una specie di valle, sull’orlo estremo della città; la ricchezza degli abitanti, l’abbondanza dei terreni hanno permesso agli architetti, pur seguendo i piani regolatori già esistenti, di sbizzarrirsi in costosi esperimenti di stili puramente moderni; non case banali e civili o palazzi di pietra e di ferro, non negozi o portoni; questo quartiere di ricchi professionisti, di donne di lusso, di fabbricanti di automobili, di banchieri falliti, di aristocratici e di ebrei convertiti, contiene esclusivamente ville private e fornite di ogni più moderna comodità…. (705)

Moravia quickly changes gears, now comparing the neighbourhood to a zoo: “L’ingresso è libero, nessun cartello addita la via percorsa per arrivare alla patriarcale oscenità delle scimmie o al subdolo letargo dei serpenti, quel particolare odore felino è assente, ma non ingannatevi: è proprio di un Giardino Zoologico di nuovo genere che si tratta” (705). He continues this

26 Though I do not analyze Moravia’s use of Hamlet in detail, themes reminiscent of Hamlet are in fact found throughout Gli indifferenti, especially in the relationship between Michele and Leo.

27 As indicated previously, “Villa Mercedes” is republished following Carpi’s “Gli indifferenti’ rimossi.” I refer to the text, on pages 705–709, following Carpi’s article.
extended metaphor for another full paragraph, equating the villas to cages and the Romans living therein to *belve*.

The Villa Mercedes is presented in minute detail. Its particulars evoke the setting of *Gli indifferenti*, and dark, insalubrious, empty areas abound. Although the explicit comparison of the anteroom to a stage bespeaks Moravia’s professed wish to write a novel with theatrical qualities, a desire stemming from his conviction that “l’apice dell’arte fosse la tragedia” (Moravia, *L’uomo* 63), more pertinent to the current study is that his characterizations suggest that the structure was purposely built in an illogical way. As Carpi indicates, the irrational layout of the villa confirms the congruency of the story with the agenda of *L’Interplanetario*, which he calls “il giornale più precoce e generoso nel dare spazio all’apologia dell’architettura razionalista intesa come specifico linguaggio antiborghese” (“Gli indifferenti” 700). In Carpi’s view, “la villa degli ‘indifferenti’” is the exact opposite of the rationalist model; “è la forma architettonica (le finte facciate e superfici ecc.) d’un’irreversibile crisi strutturale (la vecchia molla rotta che non serve più)” (“Gli indifferenti” 700).

The anti-bourgeois flavour of the *novella* goes beyond deprecatory depictions of physical spaces. Moravia also denounces the degeneracy of the bourgeoisie via the villa’s residents. Indeed, the only palpable human action occurs when a man nonchalantly hides the dead body of a courtesan in a trunk, a scene that to Ben-Ghiat represents “a not-so-subtle message about the obsolescence of liberal moral and aesthetic codes” (*Fascist Modernities* 56). The character’s shocking indifference in calmly carrying out the final steps of this crime forms part of the story’s socio-cultural critique, which is reaffirmed and strengthened in the last lines:

> …ed ora eccoci… eccoci all’aria aperta; gli uccelli cantano, le foglie stormiscono, i grandi alberi verdi rendono al passar del vento un calmo mormorio oceanico. Ma il quartiere, le ville segrete dalle false architetture ci circondano. Ci accorgiamo che abbiamo saputo soltanto vedere. Trovare l’idea che come una molla insospettata fa scattare l’uomo dalla scatola delle sue abitudini, oppure rassegnarsi

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28 “Si arriva nell’anticamera che come un palco di teatro domina tra due false colonne l’abisso della scala” (707).
The picture is almost wholly negative: in a world of false conventions and futile actions void of real meaning, humans are trapped in narrow roles from which there is no chance for escape. This reality in large part corresponds to that portrayed in *Gli indifferenti*.

## 2 Uses of Realism

That Moravia’s article and short stories were published contemporaneously with the writing of *Gli indifferenti* confirms that the novel was not his literary debut but was instead part of a more complex and fecund phase of his intellectual development that included an appreciable amount of collaboration with journals embracing experimentalism. This activity certainly coloured select aesthetic aspects of this work. Accordingly, many of the vast number of critical readings of *Gli indifferenti*’s aesthetics identify echoes of the avant-garde and/or see the novel as foreshadowing later non-realist trends. For example, scholars have explored the role of the dream, the significance of light and dark, and the idea that the work is an instance of existentialism or expressionism. Some emphasize that it is reminiscent of decadentism; others go so far as to call it anti-realist.  

Umberto Carpi brings it back to *immaginismo*. Nonetheless, the work is, I suggest, primarily realist. Somewhat ironically, the return to realism is one of the qualities that most makes *Gli indifferenti* stylistically speaking innovative: at a time in which the novel was in crisis, marked by phenomena such as the *prosa d’arte* and *frammentismo* as well as other manifestations of the avant-garde and the influence of literary magazines like *La Voce* and *La Ronda*, Moravia’s refashioned version of realist prose, even if it is one that incorporates elements of various other literary trends, was in itself a departure from predominant intellectual currents of the day. As Elena Candela puts it, “col suo primo romanzo … , che si può dire di *rottura*, l’autore aveva avuto il merito di riallacciarsi, con una salda e

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29 Tonino Tornitore summarizes many such analyses in his valuable article and bibliography “‘Gli indifferenti’ e la critica: prolegomeni ad una futura indagine.” See especially 78–81.

30 See *Bolscevico immaginista* 142–143.
tradizionale struttura del genere romanzo, alla tradizione realistica ottocentesca (Manzoni e Dostoevskij)” (48, emphasis added). In doing so, he anticipated realist trends to come.

Acknowledging that an exhaustive summary of the body of critical work on Moravia and realism and that more than a superficial analysis of his aesthetic choices are beyond the scope of this chapter, in the following I briefly explore the idea that *Gli indifferenti* represents a definite movement toward an idiosyncratic realism that oscillates “dalla rappresentazione oggettiva della società borghese in dissoluzione all’analisi critica dello stato di alienazione dell’individuo in tale contesto” (Mascia Galateri a, *Come leggere* 59). This variety of realism utilizes descriptions and dialogue suitable for Moravia’s depiction of the bourgeoisie, whose hypocrisy and duplicitousness, among other problems, has a greater impact on the reader because of the stylistic choices made by the writer.

It moreover resonates with the theories outlined in Chapter One of this dissertation. Lukács’ view that realist novels allow the reader to draw conclusions about the world external to the text through the author’s depiction of individuals is in this respect especially important, as is his argument, set forth in “Realism in the Balance,” regarding the dialectic between appearance and essence: Michele’s subjective experience and his objective reality are—in line with Lukács’ ideal—offered by Moravia with little external commentary. As I discuss later in this section, Lukács’ theory of critical realism is likewise relevant. Auerbach’s conception of realism can also be productively applied to an analysis of *Gli indifferenti*, particularly his proposal that realist literature involves a mixing of styles; certainly, this novel exhibits a variety of stylistic features, including the extensive use of the aforementioned imagery related to light and dark, additionally found, as previously stated, in a selection of Moravia’s stories from the same period, and of the leitmotifs of rain and of the mask.

Interpretations of the stylistic characteristics of *Gli indifferenti* abound. Among critics who consider realism its dominant aesthetic, some call it the endpoint of a prior tradition and/or the

31 Auerbach and Bakhtin have comparable beliefs. See Chapter One.
precursor to another. Perhaps the most cited evaluation of this kind is Arnaldo Bocelli’s individuation of *Gli indifferenti* as one of the first cases of Italian neorealism, but many others hold similar, though of course not identical, opinions. While he avoided making definitive statements, Moravia, for his part, seemed to confirm, or at least not deny, that attributes of his aesthetic were intentionally realist. In a published interview with Nello Ajello, for instance, Moravia agreed that he was a realist but also called himself “un decadente” (*Intervista* 25–26). In his book-length study of Italian realism of the twentieth century, Walter Mauro describes Moravia’s self-reflection on his use of realism in his first novel, arguing that Moravia saw it as, in Mauro’s words:

Il momento conoscitivo attraverso il quale lo scrittore romano pervenne alla letteratura realistica, intesa in una dimensione estensiva che coinvolge ancora altri

32 Elena Candela offers a concise view of Moravia’s position in the development of neorealism. See 45–55.

33 “Sta il fatto che il neorealismo, come corrente letteraria, cominciò ad affermarsi da noi intorno al 1930…. Le polemiche che negli anni successivi al ’30 si dibatterono intorno a formalismo e contenutismo, sono strettamente congiunte con l’affermarsi di questa tendenza, che riconobbe uno dei suoi primi esemplari negli *Indifferenti* di Moravia (1929)” (Bocelli 366–367).

34 For example, Spagnoletti felt that *Gli indifferenti* was “una ripresa del realismo in Italia” after the death of Tozzi (602). Pampaloni uses the term “realismo dell’utopia” for Moravia’s aesthetic, stating, “ha giocato insieme sui due tavoli della ‘attualità’ laica e della antica e eterna ricorrenza del peccato e del male nella vita degli uomini” (LXI). Originally writing in 1929, soon after the publication of *Gli indifferenti*, Sergio Solmi suggested that critics almost unanimously identified “una consumata abilità narrativa, assieme ad una capacità quasi sconcertante di osservazione realistica” conducted in “un’atmosfera gelida e sorda” in which “i motivi morali vengono scomposti nella loro elementare determinazione psicologica da uno sguardo che sa non arretrare di fronte alle realtà più torbide e miserabili, compiacendosi di operarvi una sorta di lucida e spietata anatomia” (85). For Limentani, “il realismo di Moravia sarebbe … , in definitiva, un’anticipazione dell’esistenzialismo o, se si vuole, una specie di pre-esistenzialismo” (Di Monte 473).

35 Gianluca Lauta’s recommendation that Moravia’s self-evaluations “vanno accolte con grande prudenza (è, del resto, una raccomandazione che si può fare per molti altri scrittori, ma che vale in modo particolare per Moravia)” (*La scrittura* 12) should, however, be borne in mind when considering Moravia’s observations about his own prose since there is at times disparity among his own critical writings and interviews.

36 This recognition came in a reflection on critics’ view of him: “A volte i critici di sinistra si indispettivano con me. O meglio, nutrivano nei miei riguardi una specie di amore-odio. Sentivano che in fondo ero un realista, e questo per loro era importante. Ma sentivano anche che sono un decadente: il che è vero. Mi rimproveravano una cosa giusta” (*Intervista* 25–26).
e più difformi elementi da aggiungersi a tutti quelli già innestati al nodo delle problematiche veriste nel periodo di passaggio tra la fine del primo conflitto mondiale e l’avvento del fascismo. (51)

When asked, “who do you consider to have influenced you? For example when you wrote Gli indifferenti?” and then “do you feel, for instance, that your realism stems from the French?” in a 1954 interview, Moravia provided a specific answer that named several authors without challenging the realist label: “No, No, I wouldn’t say so. If there is such a derivation, I’m not at all conscious of it. I consider my literary antecedents to be Manzoni, Dostoevski, Joyce. Of the French, I like, primarily, the eighteenth century, Voltaire, Diderot; then, Stendhal, Balzac, Maupassant” (“Alberto Moravia” 197).

The interviewers’ speculation about the origins of Moravia’s realism in this Paris Review piece reflects a recurrent theme in examinations of the aesthetics of Gli indifferenti: comparisons to naturalism and verismo. Importantly, however, scholars interpreting Moravia’s first novel in this manner typically accept that it is by no means a straightforward return to the prose utilized by the realists who came before him. Sergio Solmi calls attention to its relationship with earlier manifestations of the realist aesthetic when he observes that the style of Gli indifferenti cannot be considered a simple mimicking of naturalist modes but is rather “un esempio assai notevole di quella ‘non partecipazione’ di un autore alla vita delle sue creature, che i naturalisti dell’ultimo ottocento non avrebbero saputo realizzare che in piccola parte” (85). In his view, Moravia surpasses the naturalists in his ability to achieve the quality of “non partecipazione” (85). Adelaide Sozzi Casanova also individuates specific aspects of Gli indifferenti that unite it with naturalism, including the “impegno di obiettività e distacco del narratore dalla materia trattata,” a

37 In her analysis of realist elements of the prose in Gli indifferenti, Marinella Mascia Galateria explicitly deals with qualities of the novel that could be deemed naturalist: see especially Come leggere 54–56. Moravia did not agree with analyses aligning him with naturalism. In Maraini, he states the following: “Ho sempre rifiutato il naturalismo. La mia era una scrittura espressionista semmai, con una tensione esistenziale” (110).

38 Solmi goes on to write that although many characteristics of the novel, especially “il tono staccato e crudamente realistico,” are meant to offer the traditional tranche de vie of naturalism, “non ci appaiono del tutto giustificate le asserzioni di quei critici che hanno voluto riconoscervi unicamente un freddo e abilissimo esperimento in corpore vili” (86).
historically defined social context, \textsuperscript{39} and “una scrittura aderente alle cose … e un linguaggio che si adegua ai personaggi introdotti ad agire: un italiano medio, casuale, poveri di riferimenti culturali, spesso intriso di luoghi comuni che riflettono il modo di parlare, cioè di pensare, della società borghese” while recognizing attributes of the novel that point to Italian and European decadentism, especially in the young peoples’ psychology (15–16). Gianluca Lauta takes a different perspective, arguing that similarities between \textit{Gli indifferenti} and \textit{verismo} are limited to some generic correspondences in style and structure; in his judgment, theoretical conditions and linguistic-structural features of \textit{verismo}, most significantly “l’adesione esplicita dell’autore e quella certa fiducia ottimistica nel valore scientifico dell’arte,” are lacking in Moravia’s work (\textit{La scrittura} 20–21).

Due to the nature of the novel’s social message, examining the realist dimensions of \textit{Gli indifferenti} using Lukács’ idea of critical realism is appropriate.\textsuperscript{40} Indeed, if one of the primary manifestations of the work’s realism involves the depiction of “una condizione di vita innegabilmente vera nella società contemporanea” (Amici 89), then it is opportune to evaluate it through the conceptual lens of Lukács’ theory, whose contention that in critical realist narratives “the class struggle will be described from the bourgeois point of view, its effects on society being demonstrated only indirectly, by revealing the psychological and moral consequences” (\textit{The Meaning} 99) describes the focus on uncomfortable social realities of the bourgeoisie in Moravia’s first novel quite accurately. Gordon Graham’s avowal, cited in Chapter One, that critical realism “is marked by its understanding of present ills, but limited by its failure to understand the whole historical process in which these occur and especially its future direction” (199) also calls to mind Moravia’s cold portrayal of representatives of a society that is, writes Gualtiero Amici, apparently quiet and satisfied in the comforts of a well-being that is in effect “stravolta nella propria coscienza morale, eticamente cieca e socialmente isolata nel proprio egoismo, ermeticamente chiusa e refrattaria ad ogni possibilità di riscatto, perché incapace di riconoscersi e giudicarsi” (89).

\textsuperscript{39} Casanova’s observation that the novel “si svolge … nel tempo” (15) accords with Bakhtin’s theory of the \textit{Bildungsroman}, as outlined in Chapter One.

\textsuperscript{40} Although their theoretical formulations of realism differ from those of Lukács, Auerbach and Bakhtin share his fundamental belief in a profound tie between realism and reality. See Chapter One.
This and other specific qualities of Moravia’s realism directly contribute to the novel’s ideological impact. For instance, his prose, which makes heavy use of description, often seems closer to that of journalism than to that of literature, adding weight to his depiction of the bourgeoisie under fascism. Additionally, Moravia rarely makes recourse to ornamental language or rhetorical devices, instead painting a cynical picture of the Ardengo family, Leo, and Lisa without shying away from scathing details of their deficiencies and immoralities. Large sections of dialogue—both internal and not—are employed in this effort to reveal the extent to which the characters live in a morally equivocal universe. The verb “pensare” often accompanies the internal dialogue, stressing important contrasts between the spoken and unspoken, and the frequent use of the past conditional with modal verbs emphasizes the distance between what the characters, particularly Michele, would like to, or should, do and the actions that they succeed at forcing themselves to carry out, and thus their indecision and ineffectiveness.

Poggioli’s hypothesis that cynicism and morality are for Moravia closely linked is germane here since bound up in his analysis of Gli indifferenti is the assertion that realism increases the efficacy of Moravia’s representation of social issues. For Poggioli, Moravia’s realism “is ironic and lucid, and produces always the impression that reality is stranger than fiction. His characterizations and plots aim at showing what one could call the ‘pre-established disharmony’ of this world, the absurdity of life and the foolishness of man” (322). Realism, then, intensifies the novel’s force by making the reader question pre-existing notions of what “reality” actually entails and has the consequence, whether or not this was Moravia’s intention, of problematizing the image of Italian society set forth by fascist propaganda.

41 The presentation of the imagined trial in Chapter XV is a good example. Other illustrations are the descriptions of Carla’s bedroom in Chapter IV (35–36) and of Lisa’s in Chapter V (39–42), where Moravia details the characters’ surroundings in order to reveal deeper truths about them.

42 For instance, in an episode involving Carla, it is reported that “avrebbe voluto gridare; abbassò le due mani e se le torse, là, contro il ventre, così forte che i polsi le si indolenzirono” (8). The contrast between her desired and her actual course of action is marked. Later, listening to Leo and his mother interact regarding the question of the villa, Michele’s reaction is the following: “‘Il ragionamento non fa una grinza’ osservò Michele; avrebbe voluto appassionarsi a questa loro questione vitale, protestare: ‘Vediamo’ pensava ‘si tratta della nostra esistenza… potremmo da un momento all’altro non aver di che vivere materialmente’; ma per quanti sforzi facesse questa rovina gli restava estranea; era come vedere qualcheduno affogare, guardare e non muovere un dito” (21). In this example, which shows the protagonist’s ineffectuality, we see the past conditional of the modal verb “volere” shortly followed by the verb “pensare.”
In this sense, it is likely best to propose that *Gli indifferenti* reveals “un atteggiamento verso l’osservazione di cose, di fatti e di situazioni che potremmo chiamare neorealismo spontaneo, non certo programmatico” (Candela 50–51) and, furthermore, that it is a document of Moravia’s intellectual formation pointing back to the concept of the double *Bildung*. Taking into account the more obviously neorealist qualities of some of his later works, and also his own recollections about his transition toward a more explicitly anti-fascist attitude,\(^\text{43}\) supplies evidence that *Gli indifferenti* corresponds, aesthetically speaking, to the early stage of Moravia’s career during which it was produced—a stage in which he utilized a prose that is primarily, but not completely or traditionally, realist, perhaps because he sensed that this particular style was the most effective tool with which to portray the morally lacking world in which the protagonist, Michele, attempts to come of age.

### 3 *Gli indifferenti* as *Bildungsroman*

Michele’s frustrated, and frustrating, process of maturation consists of several main elements. His intellectual and sexual formations highlight the extent to which indifference hinders his ability to behave in a manner that would allow him to fulfill his goals, and although Michele, who remains mostly in spaces disconnected from people outside of his immediate social circle, experiences no political formation, conflicts with members of the older generation—especially with Leo—provide a kind of proxy for this feature of other novels of formation. These three aspects of Michele’s development are particularly important in anticipating the protagonists of *Bildungsromane* that I analyze in subsequent chapters of this dissertation.

Moreover, they show how while Michele’s *formazione mancata* is a result of factors that are both internal and external to him, the internal ones take clear precedence, and to a larger degree than for Sergio in *Luce fredda*, Teodoro in *Tre operai*, Alessio in *Il garofano rosso*, Natalia in *Natalia*, and the women in the boarding house in *Nessuno torna indietro*. For this reason, he is more an *inetto* than are the protagonists in the novels of formation that come later. As Michele recognizes, his environment plays a significant role in blocking his *Bildung*, and though with varying degrees of energy, he attempts to remedy this in various ways, including by drawing on

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\(^{43}\) See, for example, Moravia, *Intervista* 98.
memories involving outsiders, such as a fight he earlier witnessed, as inspiration, knowing that “real” life exists beyond his family unit and that in order to access it, he will need to mimic the behaviour of more authentic people rather than reproduce the dysfunctional patterns that have been set forth to him as models. However, his successive failures show that an equal, if not greater, obstacle to his coming of age is Michele himself: while seeking sincerity in the face of the falsity that surrounds him, he cannot harmonize thought and action and is instead in constant self-dialogue, exhibiting impressive awareness about the problems with his state and yet ultimately succeeding at doing little to remedy them.

3.1 The Indifferent Intellectual

Michele’s development does not proceed in a clear, linear fashion but is rather circular, the result of a vicious cycle of over-analysis, reasoning, and excessive rumination that impedes his ability to mature more than superficially. His mental processes cause him to be uncomfortably aware of the injustices of the world that he inhabits to such an extent that he regrets “di non essere un imbecille, insomma, di essere in grado di sospettare l’esistenza di un mondo degli altri, animato da sentimenti e fatti veri, reali” (del Buono 26). Even if one of his very first statements in the novel is “tutto questo mi è indifferente”—the narrator then reports that Michele “si sforzava di parer freddo e vibrante benché non si sentisse che indifferente” (10)—Michele at least initially wishes to bring about change. In fact, true indifference might permit him to content himself with the status quo and would thus be of preference to his actual state. He is characterized by this internal conflict, which is caused by the knowledge that he should but cannot take steps to behave genuinely and escape his reality.

Michele’s desperate need for sincerity, accentuated by the frequent appearance of the noun “sincerità” and the related adjective, distinguishes him from Leo, Lisa, and Mariagrzia, whose indifference is communicated through their reluctance to view themselves critically and through their embracing of the corrupt spirit of the bourgeoisie, which is demonstrated by their willingness to deceive each other to various degrees in order to obtain what they want. It also distinguishes him from Carla, who, though with serious reservations, many regarding her own

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44 See Gli indifferenti 29.
desire for a kind of sincerity that she understands that wedding Leo will not afford her, eventually succumbs to largely self-imposed pressure to take this opportunity. Michele tries to remain detached from and indifferent to his companions’ melodrama but is powerless to fully extract himself from it. While he is bitterly mindful of the need to act, reason becomes a paralyzing force of inaction making his every movement foolish and clumsy. He is thus an ideal example of how, as Rocco Capozzi states, Moravia “has repeatedly and consistently portrayed his intellectuals almost as parodies of Hamlet—that is, as characters who contemplate, continuously, their problems and their predicaments, to the point of becoming paralyzed by their own (excessive) self-consciousness” (“Voyeurism” 39).

Defining Moravia’s idea of intellectualism is essential to the current discussion. In Intervista sullo scrittore scomodo, Moravia comments on his conception of the intellectual, who is, to him, “un amministratore del pensiero, e anche un dispensatore di pensieri. Ciò che una volta si chiamava philosophe. Nell’ancien régime, il philosophe era qualcuno che distillava le sue teorie in privato. Con la rivoluzione francese è venuto fuori l’intellettuale che analizza e magari organizza la realtà” (69). He clarifies that “la massa si aspetta dall’intellettuale ciò che una volta si aspettava dal prete: una verità, una direttiva, una consolazione” (72). The role of the intellectual established in Gli indifferenti endures in Moravia’s later narratives.45 In Luca Gervasutti’s words, “la posizione dell’intellettuale più o meno è sempre la stessa. È la società che cambia. L’intellettuale è un testimone della verità, perciò non cambia secondo i tempi. Se noi leggiamo Diderot, oppure leggiamo Marx, scopriamo che l’immagine dell’intellettuale è sempre la stessa” (23). This characterization of the intellectual or, to use Moravia’s favoured term, philosophe, applies to protagonists who, beginning with Michele in Gli indifferenti, are in futile pursuit of sincerity to counteract problematic truths against which they try to rebel. Seeking purpose and direction becomes a full-time occupation that detracts from the rest of their

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45 Moravia recognized that the intellectual is very prominent in his body of work, writing in his “Breve autobiografia letteraria” that “ad una visione panoramica, appare subito che i miei romanzi e racconti potrebbero essere divisi in due grandi categorie: quelli in cui il protagonista è un popolano e quelli in cui è invece un intellettuale” (XIX).
development. Aptly, these young men can, according to Tommaso Soldini, be read as “intellettual[i] in formazione” (81).

Michele’s lack of concreteness in revolting against the moral void that he identifies in the bourgeois world that is his home is not due to his lack of trying but is a consequence of his mental condition, which, in line with Gervasutti’s observation about the influence of the society in which the intellectual lives (23), is in turn conditioned by his surroundings. Since Michele’s psychological processes do not manifest themselves in physical actions that would suffice to illustrate the complex attempted maturation that he undergoes, Moravia makes extensive use of narrative devices, most commonly the internal monologue, that bring to light the mental anguish underlying the protagonist’s inertia. Written in free indirect discourse, Michele’s soliloquies confirm that he must live in a world in which he is expected both to ignore the immorality that encircles him and to behave in a manner that he finds unacceptable. Besides exemplifying the convoluted reasoning that is his downfall, the lengthy passages of self-reflection underline Michele’s intense alienation and isolation. Ironically, some of his most tangible gestures are those that he has carried out only in his elaborate daydreams.

Two of Michele’s monologues take on decidedly important dimensions. En route to Lisa’s house, a visit that to him represents “l’ultima prova della sua sincerità” (217), Michele establishes that the decision whether or not to become her lover will have bigger repercussions. For Michele, the narrator reports, “le ipotesi erano due: o egli riusciva nei suoi scopi di sincerità, o si adattava a vivere come tutti gli altri” (217). He spends little time analyzing the first possibility, instead musing at great length about the consequences, many of which he convinces

46 In fact, Soldini creates two categories for the protagonists of Moravia’s first ten novels: “l’intellettuale in formazione” and “l’intellettuale che fa del suo ruolo una professione” (81). Michele belongs to the first group.

47 For a detailed analysis of the formal and ideological characteristics of the monologues found in Gli Indifferenti, see Mascia Galateria, Come leggere, especially 62–64.

48 The other primary characters also have internal monologues, though Michele’s are the longest and most frequent. All are written in free indirect discourse. Mascia Galateria indicates that the variations in length and frequency of the internal monologues of each character are indicative of the personality of the character in question: for example, “quelli di Leo sono rarissimi e assai brevi, tesi semplicemente ad evidenziare la rapidità balenante delle sue decisioni” (Come leggere 63). For further analysis of internal monologues in Gli indifferenti, see especially Casanova 23–24.
himself would be positive, of the second. The most complex and interesting document of Michele’s “malattia della volontà” (Casanova 11), however, is the long interior monologue that accompanies him as he indulges in a prolonged, elaborate imagining of the aftermath that would follow his killing Leo. In Casanova’s opinion, “la volontà di azione, che egli ha cercato fittiziamente di suscitare e alimentare in sé, si consuma nel suo lungo e minuzioso fantasticare. Giunto alla porta di Leo, ogni energia e passione sono scomparse” (11).49 As has become his pattern, one that is repeated in various situations and with other characters, Michele is overwhelmed by his thoughts, and so his intentions come to naught.

### 3.2 Generational Contrasts and Conflicts

Michele’s inner voice is, then, a critical site of potential formation. Another are his interactions within the microcosm of the Italian bourgeoisie in which he lives and from which he would like to escape, with certain elements of this environment being especially key to the development of his character and of central themes of the novel as a whole. The older generation, which influences Michele by providing him with (imperfect) standards of behaviour that guide his own, is one example. Indeed, in Gli indifferenti, the tense relationships between young people and their superiors are portrayed in a manner that emphasizes essential generational differences while also showing the complicated nature of Michele and Carla’s links with their elders.50 Michele and Carla periodically, depending on the context and character in question, feel some compassion for or even respect toward Mariagrazia, Lisa, and Leo; more often, however, they view them antagonistically or with pity or disgust, partially because of how they behave and partially because of what they represent.

Significantly, the older adults are more integrated into society than the younger adults are. Leo is a successful member of the bourgeoisie, and Mariagrazia is seemingly in denial as to the very real possibility that due to impending economic ruin, she will lose the social status that she so

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49 This monologue and its effects are further discussed in analysis of Michele’s contact with Merumeci.

50 The distance between the generations lessens as the novel progresses and the young people, especially Carla, begin to perpetuate the patterns of behaviour that are part of the world into which Carla will marry if she follows through with her promise to wed Leo and Michele will become enrooted if he goes against his instincts to sleep with Lisa.
values. Lisa is similarly, and also unattractively, entrenched in matters related to social class. In contrast, Michele and Carla see through the falsity of their mother, Leo, and Lisa, but their desire for a different, better reality—“una nuova vita,” a phrase that they yearningly repeat throughout the novel—is not enough to allow them to obtain an alternative that is completely acceptable to them. Carla, even if it is not without hesitations and emotional trauma, therefore resolves to take advantage of the benefits that fully entering this society would give her and begins to transition into it. Michele, on the other hand, is less able to act definitively than his sister is.  

Since Michele’s formation takes place primarily in locations cut off from the world exterior to that of his social milieu, there are few opportunities for him to develop politically. In *Gli indifferenti*, cross-generational animosity thus assumes an additional role: marked as it is by conflict associated with representations of the bourgeoisie, the aspect of the novel that is the most ideological, his contact with Leo Merumeci, his elder, can be interpreted as substituting Michele’s political formation. Indeed, Merumeci is evocative of the anti-bourgeois controversy that “apparteneva al fascismo delle origini e che ora ritrovava espressa … nel romanzo moraviano” (Manacorda, “Alberto Moravia” 779–780). Appropriately, Leo claims to be employed by the government—“‘sono impiegato al Ministero di Grazia e Giustizia’ rispose Leo con umiltà” (76)—and has violent instincts and fantasies that help render him an even more effective foe.  

In trying to mature via Leo, Michele goes so far as to use a firearm to attempt to eliminate him.

This is but one aspect of Michele’s relationship with Leo, whom Jane E. Cottrell describes as a “forceful non-intellectual male” (37). Their bond is developed more thoroughly than are Michele’s relationships with other familial figures and is particularly significant in that it brings to the forefront competing ideas of *Bildung*. Leo, the triumphant bourgeois, has reached something resembling the ideal end-point of a traditional *Bildungsroman*, in which being

51 This wish for a new life is something that is in actuality shared by Mariagrazia and by Lisa, but their longing is less intense and more superficial, based, especially in the case of Mariagrazia, mostly on economic concerns and on the very specific aspiration to project or nurture a certain image while Michele and Carla’s is based more on a desire for sincerity.

52 For instance, when Mariagrazia threatens to sell the villa at auction, it is reported that “il suo più naturale istinto sarebbe stato quello di saltare addosso alla donna, riempierla di schiaffi, magari anche strozzarla” (138). Luckily, Leo knows how to control himself.
accepted into society is one of the hero’s primary goals. Merumeci frequently abuses his power to take advantage of Mariagrazia and Carla and is the entity against which Michele would most like to rebel but for whom he simultaneously experiences “odio cosciente e ammirazione inconscia” (Mascaretti 105). Perhaps unsurprisingly, he is the main extrinsic barrier to Michele’s formation. Their exchanges show Leo attempting to make Michele conform to the norms of his social class, standards of social behaviour that Michele finds troublesome. Ultimately, Michele is unable to thwart his foil, who almost constantly tests his sincerity and ability to take action.  

With a defined and lucid vision of reality, Leo freely invades Michele’s physical and emotional territory in order to achieve his sexual and financial ends, at the same time condescendingly pretending, at least at times, to respect Michele’s role as head male of the family:

> Alla porta si fermarono: “Prego” disse Leo; e la madre uscì; restarono l’uno in faccia all’altro, l’uomo e il ragazzo, e si guardarono: “Avanti avanti” insistette Leo complimentosissimo posandogli una mano sulla spalla; “cediamo il posto al padrone di casa…” E con gesto paterno, con un sorriso tanto amichevole da parere canzonatorio spinse dolcemente il ragazzo. (12)

Despite these sarcastic words, it is readily apparent that Leo’s installation in the Ardengo household makes him the true padrone di casa. He has had an affair with Mariagrazia in hopes of appropriating the family’s home and now pursues Carla. The family’s financial dependence on him, together with his constant presence in the Villa Ardengo, makes Leo a perverted kind of father figure—a role that is recognized by various characters, including by Leo, who is not bothered by the incestuous tinge to his relationship with Carla.  

The patronizing tone adopted by Leo when he converses with Michele is evidence of his antagonistic position. Like a puppet master, he capitalizes on Michele’s vanity in an attempt to

53 Examples of this within the text are numerous, including, at an extreme, when Leo reveals to Michele that he and Carla are having an affair (235–237).

54 In fact, Leo almost flaunts it: the note that accompanies the flowers and bag that he sends for her birthday reads, “a Carla, alla mia quasi figlia, coi più affettuosi auguri, Leo” (53); when she later complains to him about the wording, he admits that he enjoys imagining that she is his daughter, and when she exclaims that what he says “è contro natura,” he rebuts with, “sì, ma poiché tu non sei mia figlia il pensiero non conta” (57).
heighten it. In doing so, he reinforces the ideals of the bourgeois class of which among the characters in the novel, Leo is the best representative. The following passage is demonstrative of their dynamic:

[…] “Eh eh, che bel vestito che hai… chi te lo ha fatto?…”

Era un vestito di stoffa turchina di buon taglio ma molto usato, che Leo doveva avergli veduto addosso almeno cento volte; ma colpito da questo diretto attacco alla sua vanità, Michele dimenticò in un solo istante tutti i suoi propositi di odio e di freddezza. (10–11)

Leo pounces on Michele’s gratified reaction to this flattery: “E bravo il nostro Michele’ disse battendogli la mano sul braccio; ‘sempre inappuntabile, non fa che divertirsi e non ha pensieri di nessuna sorta.’ Allora dal tono di queste parole e dal sorriso che le accompagnava, Michele capi troppo tardi di essere stato astutamente lusingato e in definitiva canzonato” (11). Later, the narrator again points to the dysfunctional nature of Leo and Michele’s relationship and to Michele’s overwhelming apathy, as well, by describing Michele’s response to Leo’s ironic glances: “Un uomo forte, un uomo normale se ne sarebbe offeso e avrebbe protestato; lui invece no… lui con un certo avvilente senso di superiorità e di compassionevole disprezzo restava indifferente… ma volle per la seconda volta andar contro la propria sincerità: ‘Protestare,’ pensò ‘ingiuriarlo daccapo’” (26). Michele is discouraged by his predispositions, recognizing that he should take control of the situation but finding himself overtaken by apathy.

Michele’s ineptitude is likewise elucidated in other clashes with Leo, altercations that demonstrate “la ripetizione, … qui esasperata, dell’atto mancato che aveva contrassegnato tutte le comparse in scena di Michele” (Strappini, Le cose 12). According to Joan Ross and Donald Freed, “Michele yearns to expose the villainous Leo, but over and over again he gives way to feelings of complete indifference” (39). It is in part due to this detachment that Michele’s endeavour to berate Leo with a “mascalzone” (23) is entirely ineffective. Leo’s belittling response, “se tu fossi un uomo saprei come risponderti… ma sei un ragazzo senza responsabilità… per questo la migliore cosa che puoi fare è andare a letto e dormirci sopra” (24), is characteristic of the attitude that is so frustrating for Michele and that thus fuels the recurrent confrontations between the sole male characters. Another dispute occurs when in Chapter VI Michele feels affronted by Leo but proves unable to act quickly enough to retaliate. His ventured
slap is therefore in vain. Similarly, the ashtray that he throws at Leo in Chapter VIII naturally falls short of its target, instead hitting Mariagrazia, who is not unhappy at the thought that Leo will recognize that she has sacrificed for him, taking the improvised weapon in his stead (141). Again, Michele is inevitably the weaker party. Following this episode, Michele looks out the window and reflects on what has just transpired:

“Tutto qui diviene comico, falso; non c’è sincerità… io non ero fatto per questa vita.” L’uomo che egli doveva odiare, Leo, non si faceva abbastanza odiare; la donna che doveva amare, Lisa, era falsa, mascherava con dei sentimentalismi intollerabili delle voglie troppo semplici ed era impossibile amarla: ebbe l’impressione di volgere le spalle non al salotto, ma ad un abisso vuoto e oscuro:

“Non è questa la mia vita” pensò con convinzione; “ma allora?” (142)

Michele displays exceptional understanding about his condition, but his ability to recognize that he exists in a world for which he is unsuited is to his detriment due to the problematic qualities of his environment and to the fact that he is apparently unable to use his self-awareness to his advantage. Though he hates Leo, this hatred is not strong enough to result in behaviour with real consequences, and so indifference wins out.55

The culminating event in Michele’s bid to eliminate his nemesis is the attempted homicide in Chapter XV. The lengthy internal dialogue in the form of an imagined trial, which unfolds while Michele makes his way through the rainy street to Leo’s residence, reveals that even now, aware that the stakes are high, he must convince himself to act. Upset that Lisa does not believe that he will kill Leo, Michele is determined to prove himself capable. Instead of finally behaving earnestly, however, Michele becomes so lost in imagining the consequences of his actions while making the necessary arrangements that he fails to carry out the most fundamental preparation. Cristina Benussi describes the significance of this episode: “L’unica dimensione in cui il riscatto potrebbe realizzarsi, per far vincere il sentimento della vendetta o dell’amore, sembra essere la fantasticheria: … [Michele immagina] di uccidere Leo, ma di venir giudicato con formula

55 The phrasing “non si faceva abbastanza odiare” in the passage above pins some of the blame on Leo, who should, apparently, make himself hated more in order to spur Michele to action.
dubitativa, perché avrebbe finalmente agito con sinceritá” (9). As Benussi observes, Michele can succeed only in his imagination since he is unable to reconcile his imagined rebellion against Leo with the effort needed to achieve this ambition. His plan to liberate his family (notably Carla, who, as he now knows, is in a relationship with the man) from Merumeci fails precisely because it remains a fantasy: the revolver is not loaded, so Leo does not die. Michele recognizes that the responsibility for the botched murder is fully his own, lamenting, “un po’ di fede… e avrei ucciso Leo… ma ora sarei limpido come una goccia d’acqua” (284). All the same, self-knowledge does not lead to further action. Leo, model bourgeois, wins almost by default.

3.3 Sexual Formation

In addition to their contact within the Ardengo family, Leo and Michele are connected through Lisa, Leo’s former mistress and Mariagrazia’s friend. The links between Michele, Lisa, and Leo are important but nebulous: Michele is ineffectual when faced with Lisa’s propositions and Leo’s provocations; Lisa was once Leo’s lover; and Leo decides to attempt to renew his affair with Lisa, thereby infuriating Michele. After Lisa refuses to rekindle her ties with Leo when he approaches her in Chapter VII, Leo directly tries to influence how Michele understands the concept of romantic love. As usual, Leo adopts a pompous, condescending tone when speaking to the younger man:

“O allora… perché non sei restato?”

“Ma… perché non la amo.”

Questa risposta fece sorridere Leo: “Ma, vediamo” incominciò, “credi tu forse che si debba andare con una donna soltanto quando la si ama?”

“Io credo questo” rispose Michele senza voltarsi, in tono serio.

“O allora…” mormorò Leo un po’ sconcertato; “ma io per esempio” soggiunse tranquillamente, “troppe donne ho avuto che non ho mai amato… la stessa Lisa l’ho presa senza amarla… e ciò nonostante non ho mai avuto a pentirmene…: mi son divertito quanto chicchessia.” (95–96)
In this conversation detailing Leo’s view of sex, the contrast between Leo’s expressed convictions and Michele’s disgusted responses is obvious, and when it becomes evident that he has been both betrayed and insulted by Leo, Michele is initially angry and indignant. Ultimately, however, he reverts to impassiveness. In this confusing mix of events, his variance from the other characters is consistently evidenced by his reactions to Lisa’s courting and to Leo’s advice, which to him form part of the larger “indegna commedia” (51) in which he does not want to take part but to which he finds himself drawn. His resistance to conform to the social and moral norms that guide the other characters’ sexuality is a further impediment to his development. Of course, because of his innate characteristics as an *inetto*, it is unclear what he would accomplish if he were willing to embrace Lisa’s invitations.

The idea of sexual discovery, or “prove a carattere sessuale” (Mascaretti 112), has a special place in Moravia’s novels of formation, and *Gli indifferenti* is no exception, even if Michele is seemingly stalled somewhere between boy– and manhood, occupying a position on the developmental spectrum that does not coincide with the fascist image of male virility. Although his memory of “una donna pubblica fermata per strada e portata in una camera di albergo” (223) insinuates that he has already lost his virginity, thus eliminating the possibility that this is a sexual initiation in the literal sense, his sexual trials in the work take on symbolic dimensions due both to the object of desire (or, in this case, the object of mostly disdain and confusion) and to his reactions to her, which are central in exposing dysfunctional aspects of the mental processes that hinder his development. Indeed, “all’interno delle dinamiche evolutive di Michele la donna è poco più che un pretesto” (Mascaretti 113).

The much-older Lisa, desperate to feel young and validated, idealizes how Michele will bring her “il sole, il cielo azzurro, la franchezza, l’entusiasmo,” how he will respect her as a goddess and put his head on her knees: it is reported that “non vedeva l’ora di bere a questa fontana di giovinezza, di tornare a quest’amore nuovo, balbettante, pudico che da vent’anni aveva

56 “Fuori continuava a piovere: ‘ladro, ladro,’ si ripeteva Michele senza sdegno, con una specie di falsa esaltazione; ‘ha tentato anche di rubarmi Lisa… e poi chi è il ladro?’; ma pochi minuti dopo con proprio stupore dovette accorgersi di non essere affatto adirato; tranquillissimo invece; nessuna azione di Leo, per quanto malvagia, riusciva a scuotere la sua indifferenza; dopo un falso scoppio di odio, egli finiva sempre per ritrovarsi come ora, con la testa vuota, un poco inebetito, leggerissimo” (108).
dimenticato” (41). Emphasizing her desire to cling to her now-distant youth, her bedroom’s décor is a fading, almost comical relic of her past, and she sometimes behaves childishly.⁵⁷ She offers herself freely and repeatedly to Michele and goes so far as to lure him to her apartment with a false offer to help find him employment.⁵⁸ In line with his proclivities, Michele responds mostly passively when given the chance to experience this kind of romance. Unable to take a firm stance one way or the other—use Lisa to his advantage, as Leo urges him to, or abandon her and seek a relationship that better corresponds with his ideals, as he would like to—he allows himself to avoid taking action that would have lasting consequences for as long as possible.

Beginning with Lisa’s early seductive gestures, Michele’s indifference is made explicit: “Lisa non gli piaceva, proprio no, e tutto questo gli era indifferentemente” (44). As the novel progresses and his understanding of her motives grows, his reactions to her ploys to win him over are increasingly characterized by a mix of amusement and disgust, both at her and at himself.⁵⁹ While recognizing that he is playing into the hypocrisy, loose morals, and social conformity that he so loathes, Michele is at the same time bothered by the fact that he cannot seize this opportunity to “abbandonarsi al sentimento” (116). Remembering a couple, obviously in love, that had earlier caught his attention, he bemoans his situation: “Perché Lisa non è quella donna?” pensava; ‘perché io non sono quell’uomo?’” (116). However, an eventual kiss with Lisa at least temporarily confirms for Michele that he is unable to engage in a relationship based on moral debasement like those that he witnesses in his day-to-day life seem to be and like one with Lisa would surely end up.⁶⁰

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⁵⁷ This is also a characteristic of some other potential lovers of protagonists of other male Bildungsromane examined later in this thesis. An especially good comparison is Zobeida, the prostitute to whom Alessio, the protagonist of Il garofano rosso, the subject of Chapter Four, loses his virginity.

⁵⁸ Her willingness to do so, and Michele’s willingness to accept her help, is revealing of the power dynamics of their relationship and of the fact that Michele is still at a stage of his development at which such an offer—from a lover, no less—is necessary and alluring.

⁵⁹ For example, “Michele guardò quella faccia mal sicura e gli venne una gran voglia di ridere: ‘Mia povera Lisa’ avrebbe voluto rispondere; ‘cosa debo fare per convincerti che non ti amo?’” (112).

⁶⁰ Most of his interactions with and thoughts about Lisa underscore Michele’s apathy and acute indecision and the inauthenticity and duplicity of the other characters, but there are exceptions. Though their relationship remains marked mainly by Lisa’s failed attempts and Michele’s passivity, Michele is periodically honest with her about his emotional state: for instance, responding to Lisa’s “voce familiare e
Lisa is akin to Leo in that, like him, she represents the licentious sexual customs of her social class. By committing to a relationship with her, Michele would thus further embed himself in the bourgeoisie. Leo suggests that Michele’s official adult entrance into the world of his elders would be eased by the economic advantages afforded by a relationship with Lisa, naming these in the conversation previously cited where the older man warns Michele that this is a rare chance that should not be passed up. In his words, which clearly do not take into account Lisa’s emotions: “Lisa non è davvero da buttarsi via […]. [D]ove la trovi oggi una amante che ti riceva in casa? Questo, per te che non puoi pagarti la camera o l’appartamentino, è una grande comodità […]. Lisa non ti costerà un soldo, dico un soldo… ecco io non so cosa si possa desiderare di più…” (96). His advice adds another layer to Michele’s inability to move from reason to decision and highlights the moral divide separating the two men.

Yet, Michele and Lisa’s potential relationship fails to take form not because Michele worries about exploiting her but primarily because Michele cannot actuate it. Bored by Lisa’s vanity and desperation, he analyzes and rationalizes, unable to decide how to act. In fact, the most tangible result of his interactions with Lisa is that they make him painfully aware of the mental processes that handicap him. They also bring attention to what he lacks:

La sua solitudine, le conversazioni con Lisa gli avevano messo in corpo un gran bisogno di compagnia e di amore, una speranza estrema di trovare tra tutta la gente del mondo una donna da poter amare sinceramente, senza ironie e senza rassegnazione: “Una donna vera” pensò; “una donna pura, né falsa, né stupida, né corrotta… trovarla… questo si che rimetterebbe a posto ogni cosa.” (134)

As was inevitable, the illusion breaks and a sound from Mariagrazia “lo ricondusse alla realtà” (134). Michele later ruminates in more depth about the indifference that has led him to kiss Lisa’s hand despite not loving her, realizing that he is starting to follow the path expected of a falsa” when she asks “cos’hai,” he says that he is thinking “quale debole sforzo basterebbe per essere sinceri, e come invece si faccia di tutto per andare nella direzione opposta” (48). Her reactions, which indicate that she is unable to truly process his need for frankness, are evidence that Lisa belongs in the emotionally empty community portrayed by Moravia.
young man in his position. This depresses him. He yearns for a reality in which it would be possible “appassionarsi, agire, soffrire, vincere quella debolezza, quella pietà, quella falsità, quel senso del ridicolo” since it is necessary “essere tragici e sinceri” (190) but, as before, soon comes back to earth: “Egli avrebbe voluto vivere in quell’età tragica e sincera, avrebbe voluto provare quei grandi odi travolgenti, innalzarsi a quei sentimenti illimitati… ma restava nel suo tempo e nella sua vita, per terra” (191). This statement suggests that situational factors are at least in part responsible for Michele’s tremendous indifference.

Despite how problematic the scenario is, Lisa symbolizes a possible exit from the solitude that Michele detests and therefore a possible path toward the new life that he and Carla separately seek. At times, his recognition of this leads to romanticization. For example, at a certain point it is noted, in relation to Michele’s endeavours with Lisa, that “se la prova riusciva, tutto sarebbe mutato: egli avrebbe ritrovato la sua realtà concreta come un artista ritrova l’ispirazione dei tempi più felici; una nuova vita sarebbe cominciata, la vera, la sola possibile” (217). By the final chapter, however, nothing concrete has come of her pathetic seductions. Just as he has failed to mature by standing up to Leo, Michele has failed to experience a sincere sentimental or romantic connection, whether with Lisa or with a more suitable candidate, and it seems unlikely that he will find it within himself to venture beyond the confines of what is familiar to him in search of love that might, as an added benefit, allow him to gain a wider perspective on life outside of the tiny, oppressive realm of the bourgeoisie in which he was raised.

In an exchange with Carla, Michele demonstrates that he understands that he has behaved in the same manner with both Merumeci and Lisa:

Parve a Michele di trovare in queste parole la sua definitiva condanna: “Non ho fatto nulla” si ripeté con stupore, ché gli pareva di essere invecchiato, di aver molto vissuto in quel solo giorno: “è vero… non ho fatto nulla… nient’altro che pensare…” Un fremito di paura lo scosse: “Non ho amato Lisa… non ho ucciso Leo… non ho che pensato… ecco il mio errore.” (279–280)
Michele’s impotence is both sexual, in that he remains indifferent to Lisa, and economic, in that Leo retains financial control of the Ardengo family.\(^{61}\) As in most facets of his life, his fundamental mistake is that due to his mental state, he does nothing rather than risk an unfavourable outcome.

Although there is no real resolution to Michele’s basic problems—as Marinella Mascia Galateria states, “senza che nulla accada, Michele rientra nel mondo sonnolento, corrotto e corruttore da cui non era mai uscito” (Come leggere 48)—the end of the novel sees a subtle shift in his attitude. However, this movement is a further sinking into indifference. Instead of continuing to resist Carla’s marriage to Leo as was his initial, horrified reaction, Michele begins to accept its inevitability, even noting its potential advantages. His self-justification is typical:

[...] La tentazione era forte… Denaro, conoscenze, donne, forse viaggi, forse opulenze, ad ogni modo una vita sicura, diritta chiara, piena di soddisfazioni, di lavoro, di feste, di parole cordiali… tutto questo glielo avrebbe dato il matrimonio di Carla… non avrebbe venduto sua sorella, non credeva a queste grandi e terribili parole, non credeva all’onore e al dovere… si sentiva indifferente, come sempre, speculativo e indifferente. (269)

Following this revealing moment of deliberation, Michele’s few remaining attempts to stop Carla from marrying Merumeci are relatively half-hearted. Similarly, the last pages of the novel see him still disgusted by himself and his companions but now more resigned to their farce. Nonetheless, although his offer to dine with Lisa might be symbolic of his new attitude,\(^{62}\) it almost immediately leads to a new crisis of conscience:

Si sentiva soffocare; guardò Lisa, pareva contenta: “Come vivi?” avrebbe voluto gridarle: “sinceramente? con fede? dimmi come riesci a vivere.” I suoi pensieri

\(^{61}\) Interestingly, Michele at one point considers using his sexual power over Lisa as a bargaining chip with Leo, fantasizing about demanding, “‘tu mi dai i denari… ed io in cambio convinco Lisa…”’ (218). Furthermore, both Lisa and Leo offer to help find him employment, thus further underlining his impotence in that it is readily apparent to all that he is unable to forge his own path toward financial independence.

\(^{62}\) See Gli indifferenti 284.
erano confusi, contradditori: “E ancora” pensavo con un brusco, disperato ritorno alla realtà, “forse questo dipende soltanto dai miei nervi scossi… forse non è che una questione di denaro o di tempo o di circostanze.” Ma quanto più si sforzava di ridurre, di semplificare il suo problema, tanto più questo gli appariva difficile, spaventoso. (284)

Even if here and elsewhere he tries to convince himself that he is capable of living as Lisa and Leo do, his view of the immorality and depravity of the other characters has evidently not changed. Painfully cognizant of his insincerity, impotence, and self-contradictions, he sees going on as being almost inconceivable: “Avrebbe voluto piangere; la foresta della vita lo circondava da tutte le parti, intricata, cieca; nessun lume splendeva nella lontananza: ‘impossibile’” (284). Still an inetto, he is also still developmentally stifled by his environment, and these two impediments to his formation, distilled in the few days depicted in Gli indifferenti, continue to negatively affect him.

4 Final Observations and Conclusions

Michele’s development does not closely resemble that of the conventional protagonist of the Bildungsroman: in contrast with Wilhelm Meister, Frédéric Moreau, et al., Michele undergoes no true metamorphosis and little personal growth. Rather, his Bildung is frustrated by both internal and external barriers, and, indeed, by the manner in which these internal factors, most notably his indifference, influence how he reacts to the external ones, especially to the other characters. Yet, his resignation to a life of anguish, lethargy and indolence marks a kind of formation, and one that, it could be argued, befits the society in which he cannot mature in a manner true to his principles of sincerity. Gli indifferenti might capture only a brief time in his development, but it is a critical period that encapsulates the essence of it and represents the existential crisis that plagues him, contributing to his status as an inetto whose inability to live sincerely and passionately is debilitating.

Mascaretti contends that although there are some similarities between Michele and the protagonists of uncontested novels of formation such as Wilhelm Meister, what differentiates Michele’s case is that “la componente dell’esperienza” is completely lacking (144). If we consider Bakhtin’s idea that the protagonist of a Bildungsroman should live as one with his or her historical time, and if we see Michele as representing the crisis of his generation, then
perhaps his “failed” experiences are the only kind possible for him. Because of the societal group in which he was born and raised, and because of major changes brought on by, among other events, the First World War and the rise of fascism, his search for a “paradiso di concretezza e di verità” (Moravia, Gli indifferenti 223) is doomed from the outset.\(^{63}\) If he could miraculously summon the energy necessary to shed the indifference that often cripples him, he would still face tremendous challenges to his process of development since the values of his social class starkly contrast with his ideals but are entrenched in the environment of his maturation.

Oreste del Buono’s summary of the historical situation in which the novel takes place, a post–World War I city marked by “la distruzione totale della scala tradizionale dei valori, distruzione che aveva comportato l’interruzione del rapporto convenzionale tra l’uomo e la realtà” (21), together with his later statement regarding Michele, who cannot establish “un autentico rapporto con la realtà” (26), speaks to this firm association between the shape of Michele’s Bildung and the social and intellectual realities of interwar Italy. Important to analyzing Gli indifferenti as a novel of formation is appreciating its embodiment of and position in this changing cultural and social climate. In terms of aesthetics, Moravia’s prose has experimental qualities while also foreshadowing certain aspects of neorealism. Thematically, too, Gli indifferenti represents a shift in progress: though it may not exemplify the genre of the Bildungsroman as it is traditionally defined, it is a starting point not only for Moravia’s later male protagonists in novels such as Agostino that are more obviously romanzi di formazione but also for novels such as Carlo Bernari’s Tre operai, whose Teodoro displays many of the same characteristics as Michele but experiences life more fully (before his eventual and inevitable defeat, a commonality in most novels examined in this thesis). When Gli indifferenti is viewed in this way, Michele is an ideal Bildungsheld in that while he might be “ad un passo dal divenire un personaggio in formazione” (Mascaretti 108), he is typical of the setting and historical situation.

Another critical point is that Michele’s formation, though unfinished, can be considered open. It is true that he has not changed in a significant way or reacted productively to the hypocrisy and stasis in which he is immersed during the short span of the novel, but it is also true that there is

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\(^{63}\) Tellingly, Michele identifies this “paradiso” in an encounter with a prostitute, who, he assumes, lives something more real than what he experiences by virtue of his bourgeois lifestyle. See 223–224.
still a trace of ambiguity as to whether or not he will finally take action. Mascaretti sees the end of *Gli indifferenti* as showing “l’estremo congedo di Michele dall’idea stessa della formazione” as he “viene crudelmente abbandonato dal narratore, il quale declina qualunque responsabilità organizzatrice” (143–144). In a different reading, Moravia does not fully abandon Michele at the end of the final chapter. Instead, he implies that meaningful change is possible if we resist the temptation to abandon ourselves to the flow of history. Though Michele’s final lines may reveal him as pessimistic and desperate than ever, if not more so, it is possible to interpret this as a positive development, as a sign of genuine emotion that may push him to finally break free of the ties that bind him to an older generation that is blind to encroaching social and political dangers and so perpetuates outdated traditions ill suited for the demands of a modernizing world. This explanation assumes greater significance if we link it to another—that the indifference of Michele and his sister can be seen as representing the indifference of a generation of young people who, like the generation before them, did nothing, or very little, while the fascist regime consolidated power. If this is the case, then it is possible that this open ending leaves room for much-needed change.

I conclude this chapter by reiterating my contention that beyond *Gli indifferenti*’s general role in the development of a new realist trend in Italy, the kind of novel of formation formulated by Moravia laid the groundwork for later *Bildungsromane* of 1930s Italy, establishing some key characteristics that would recur in subsequent works. There are undeniable variations and divergences—in most cases, for example, there is more emphasis on the exterior world and on political issues, and the protagonist, less an *inetto*, is able to achieve more concrete undertakings. Even so, as does *Gli indifferenti*, all depict youth struggling to mature due to a variety of factors, many of which are outside of their control and some of which require more action than they are equipped to perform.

In my analysis of other young writers’ novels of formation, I operate with the hypothesis that their authors, like Moravia, were explicitly or implicitly influenced by both the political and the cultural situation to create narratives deviating from established norms. In some cases, the young

64 Ben-Ghiat’s interpretation of this aspect of the novel is, in this sense, similar to mine; she writes that the ending leaves “the possibility of [Michele’s] future transformation from amoral spectator of society to active agent of ethical change” (“Fascism” 643).
intellectuals in question clearly protested the status quo. Although Moravia’s message is undeniably more vague, he nevertheless established a precedent for Bildungsromane that did not toe the line in terms of politics, genre, or aesthetics but rather engaged with new kinds of realism to reveal unsavoury aspects of the Italy in which Moravia and others were coming of age, in this manner commenting on the difficulties facing youth under fascism using the realist novel of formation as an tool of ideological engagement—and of personal growth.
Chapter 3
Ambiguous Anti-Fascism: Umberto Barbaro’s *Luce fredda* and Carlo Bernari’s *Tre operai*

Although Umberto Barbaro’s *Luce fredda* (1931) and Carlo Bernari’s *Tre operai* (1934) differ in some major ways—for example, *Luce fredda* features a protagonist who is a member of the bourgeoisie while *Tre operai* features a protagonist who is a worker—these *Bildungsromane* have in common that they are usually considered to be anti-fascist and that they follow what Gregory Castle calls “the rudiments of the form—a biographical narrative, problems of socialization, the influence of mentors and ‘instrumental’ women, [and] the problem of vocation” (4). In both, a young man who contradicts the image of virile male youth propagandized by the fascist regime is engaged in a process of personal development that is profoundly affected by the environment in which he finds himself. Both works were furthermore the first for their respective author and show him playing with a combination of realism and experimentalism. They thus document an early stage of Barbaro and Bernari’s intellectual careers, which, like the formations of their protagonists, were coloured by their political and cultural experiences. Due to these correspondences, the idea of the double *Bildung*—that of the protagonist and that of the writer—can be productively applied to these novels of development, in which the relationship between aesthetic choice (realism, techniques of the avant-garde) and authorial position (ideology, historical circumstances) is significant.

Indeed, the issue of style is central to an analysis of *Luce fredda* and *Tre operai*. Taken together, they illustrate a possible approach to realist literature produced in a time during which a renewal of the realist aesthetic was in a nascent phase and during which the fascist government had consolidated control. In Valentina Mascaretti’s terms, “il realismo di cui sovente si avvale il romanzo di formazione va … considerato non solo in senso categoriale e metastorico, ma anche in senso storico” (83). Barbaro and Bernari’s decision to use a chiefly realist aesthetic for their novels of formation is certainly important in this sense: in their reaction to their contemporary situation, they contributed to the history of literary realism, anticipating and setting a certain pattern for the neorealism of the post-war period.

Maintaining a realist base keeps emphasis on the connection between the reality internal and external to the text. For these authors, however, the influence of other cultural trends was key to
the search for a new kind of realism. In order to more effectively engage with reality, Barbaro and Bernari each employed techniques of the avant-garde as part of their attempt to expand the traditional definition of realism. Whether or not it was their intention, avant-garde aspects of the texts, informed by the writers’ early exposure to and participation in avant-garde cinematographic, artistic, and literary movements, also serve a practical function by adding a degree of ambiguity to the novels, thereby allowing the inclusion of a greater amount of socio-political content.

In fact, no matter how explicitly Barbaro and Bernari articulated their political views elsewhere, here their intended message remains somewhat vague. As Rocco Capozzi indicates, in the case of *Tre operai*, this ambiguity is purposeful: “Sin dal primo capitolo diventa palese come l’autore si avvalga di strategie cinematografiche e pittoriche non solo per rompere con i registri naturalistici del realismo e del verismo ma anche per velare le sue denunce contro il regime fascista” (“Metafisica” 105). A similar observation could be made for *Luce fredda*. In both novels, the use of experimental narrative techniques in the development of a new realism results in a blurring of the lines between the objective and the subjective examination of reality that further enhances the ambiguous character of the ideological message. The works’ differing reception by literary critics and fascist censors reflects the different extents of Barbaro and Bernari’s experimentalism and political engagement. This is in turn reflective of the individual ways in which the authors attempted to negotiate a balance between the use of realism for political ends and the limits of what could be published and disseminated under the fascist regime.

When considering many contextual factors, among them the version of male youth idealized in fascist Italy, the use of the general form of the *Bildungsroman* for *Luce fredda* and *Tre operai* becomes particularly meaningful. In his essay on the genre, already introduced in the first chapter of this dissertation, Mikhail Bakhtin suggests that the protagonist of the *Bildungsroman* develops in a manner that is closely tied to the author’s representation of the evolving historical

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1 In this vein, fascist acceptance of modernist movements and failure to sanction an official style add an important dimension to the textual use of the avant-garde. With some avant-garde art and literature permitted and even encouraged by eclectic state patronage, using experimental narrative techniques could have been an ideal method with which to veil a political message unfavourable to Mussolini.
setting. In his words: “Man’s emergence is accomplished in real historical time, with all of its necessity, its fullness, its future, and its profoundly chronotopic nature” (“The Bildungsroman” 23). Investigating social and historical themes in *Luce fredda* and in *Tre operai*, both written during the fascist era in Italy, helps to elucidate how Barbaro and Bernari chose to utilize experimental realism to depict the social and political realities of their historical time, as the realities actually were or as they envisioned them to be, via a young man’s frustrated formation. Due to the authors’ ideological views, this type of realist *Bildungsroman* offers a portrait of what is in the end a *formazione mancata* since the protagonists, while not to the same extreme as Michele in *Gli indifferenti*, are unable to reach an ideal conclusion to their development. In a form that integrates individual and collective history, their struggles against the oppression that they face are fundamental to the portrayal of social and political injustices, and that these individuals are less inept than the protagonist of Moravia’s first novel is makes their plight seem all the more unmerited.

In the following sections, I first separately analyze *Luce fredda* and *Tre operai* as realist novels of formation. I then compare Sergio and Teodoro, the protagonists, discussing how each relates to the authors’ socio-political message and to the novels’ classification as *Bildungsromane*. As I argue, although Sergio and Teodoro reveal themselves, to varying degrees, more active in their respective process of development when juxtaposed with Michele, they nonetheless prove unable to achieve their aim of successfully establishing themselves in the adult world. Finally, I identify similarities between the realism of Barbaro and Bernari in these novels in order to demonstrate a connection between the authors’ political commitment and their distinctive use of the novel of formation. Throughout, I develop my contention that *Luce fredda* and *Tre operai* represent an innovative approach to the realist *Bildungsroman* that is complexly entwined with the authors’ cultural and political desires and constraints.

1 Experimenting with the Novel: Umberto Barbaro’s *Luce fredda*

Umberto Barbaro, born in 1902 in Acireale, in Catania, is best remembered for his theoretical and practical work on socialist realism and neorealism in the post–World War Two years. Already in his 1931 novel *Luce fredda*, however, he engages with a new sense of reality and realism that is connected to his ideological standing and belief in the necessity of cultural
change. Dissatisfied with the primarily experimental narrative style that characterizes the kind of prose that he wrote and for which he advocated during his involvement with the *immaginismo* movement, Barbaro searches for an aesthetic to depict reality in a more socially and morally committed manner. *Luce fredda* is, then, part of his progression toward a style firmly grounded in realism.²

The notion of formation, and thus of the *Bildungsroman*, is present in distinct but interrelated properties of the text. On a technical level of the narration, Barbaro experiments with methods learned through his experience with the avant-garde. The result is the development of an idiosyncratic, realistic conception of art that though still coloured by techniques of the avant-garde is also characteristic of his later theoretical and ideological dispositions. In the narrative itself, the young protagonist, Sergio, embarks on a search for a new home in Rome. He at first attempts to forge a place for himself in society, but Sergio’s intellectualism and psychological malaise prevent his immediate success. His quest, symbolic of his wish for productive change, is greatly impeded by obstacles imposed by the historical situation. While presenting the protagonist’s formation, Barbaro undertakes a mode of self-investigation that documents his own intellectual crisis and subsequent passage to a new phase of artistic development.

Barbaro’s first significant intellectual experiences centred on *La bilancia* (1923), a journal that he directed and that was noteworthy in encouraging and publishing avant-garde and experimental pieces, and on the *immaginismo* movement. In discussing aspects of the post-war Italian avant-garde, Alessandra Briganti identifies a “tendenza, nettamente minoritaria e progressivamente del tutto emarginata,” which “rimane collegata alla tradizionale identificazione tra avanguardia artistica e avanguardia politica” (3). She situates Barbaro within this group:

… nell’ambito di questa tendenza viene a coagularsi un gruppo di artisti e di intellettuali che svolgerà un’azione di notevole importanza nella cultura, non solo romana, degli anni Venti e Trenta: Umberto Barbaro, in primo luogo, e Vinicio Paladini, presenti nel 1923, accanto a Paolo Flores, nell’ambito di due iniziative

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² In the chapter “Crisi dell’avanguardismo immaginista e nuove sperimentazioni in *Luce fredda*” of her monograph, Di Giovanna discusses relevant issues, though not from the perspective of the novel of formation. See 113–137.
As Briganti suggests, Barbaro insisted on the connection between the artistic and the political avant-garde. This ideal was held by the Movimento immaginista, the theories and history of which are reconstructed by Umberto Carpi in Bolscevico immaginista. Immaginismo can be interpreted as a serious, but ultimately failed, attempt to create a socially and politically informed Italian movement parallel to surrealism and with affinities to metaphysical trends and the Novecento group. The short-lived journal La ruota dentata, of which only one issue was published, in 1927, by the publishing house of the same name, was its only real organ. Barbaro was an important contributor to this initiative.

The examples of La bilancia and immaginismo indicate the general character and diversity of Barbaro’s intellectual activity during this era. His involvement would continue to expand, change, and grow but always maintained a firm footing in political engagement. Gian Piero Brunetta summarizes the course of Barbaro’s cultural formation as follows:

Aveva attraversato senza problemi vari “ismi”—futurismo, espressionismo, costruttivismo—prima di fondare, a sua volta, l’immaginismo e approdare infine, agli inizi degli anni Trenta, all’idea di neorealismo, movimento culturale modello in cui gli sembrava di poter fondere la tradizione nazionale con l’esperienza delle avanguardie europee. (“Poesia del film” 24)

Also in the years immediately surrounding Luce fredda’s publication, Barbaro collaborated with Bragaglia in the Teatro Sperimentale degli Indipendenti; shortly thereafter, he was instrumental in the foundation of the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome.

In line with the vast majority of his work, Barbaro’s increasing use of realism was intimately connected to his political beliefs, especially to his call for writers and artists to engage with their

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3 In the same text, Carpi also discusses Barbaro’s political views. No other critical works consulted analyze Barbaro’s politics in the 1920s–1930s more than superficially.
contemporary reality. This link between ideology and aesthetics extends to *Luce fredda*: as Lea Durante indicates, the “centralità della politica” in the novel is clear (“Avanguardia” 117). However, when considering only the context in which it was written, and not post-war commentary, extricating the intended political message is not a straightforward task. Since Barbaro is most typically associated with Italian Marxism, the obvious assumption is that *Luce fredda* should be read as representative of this ideological framework, a hypothesis strengthened by Carpi’s affirmation that by the mid-1920s, “Barbaro era già nell’orbita del Partito Comunista” (*Bolscevico* 25). Furthermore, Barbaro’s idea of realism stemmed from the Soviet authors through which he first approached and analyzed realist literature, and his later cinematographic work is very evidently tinged with this political association.

Though a careful examination of both the central themes of the novel and Barbaro’s behaviour during this period does not disaffirm his Marxist and anti-fascist position, it does reveal a certain vagueness in its articulation. Indeed, no matter what Barbaro’s professed political stance, *Luce fredda* can be interpreted in at least two manners that are almost antithetical, as his call for collectivism and denunciation of the bourgeoisie are compatible with both Marxist and fascist thought, and his willingness to work within structures created by the fascist regime indicates that he was not so militant in his views as to reject some governmental support. Mino Argentieri briefly addresses this contradiction, in this instance speaking to Barbaro’s cinematic work. Built into his analysis is the supposition that Barbaro remained unwavering in his commitment to Marxism:

4 A representative example of Barbaro’s attitude is found in a 1935 article, now contained in *Neorealismo e realismo*, where he states, “ora per un complesso di circostanze, alle quali naturalmente non è il caso di fare il processo, gran parte dell’intelligenza italiana si è applicata troppo spesso, nei tempi moderni, e si applica tuttora oggi (che ha in più la spinta della tradizione) ad una produzione avulsa da ogni problematica attuale. Troppo spesso in Italia dunque l’intelligenza, compiacendosi di sé stessa, si esercita (e si affina magari anche) in giochi senza scopo e in ricerche che son fine a sé stesse, individualistiche, aristocratiche, antistoriche” (182–183).

5 See Barbaro’s discussion of Soviet realism in *Neorealismo e realismo*, especially 99–118 (“Letteratura russa a volo d’uccello”), where he advocates cultural exchanges and draws analogies between Soviet realism and the German realism of Döblin while suggesting that Italy should, in addition, develop a realist mode that would allow for maximum participation of Italian intellectuals in political and cultural debates; also important is the treatment of Soviet realism on 158–163.
C’è da chiedersi come mai il suo atteggiamento fu tollerato dal regime, esente per di più com’era da prudenza e precauzioni. Nel rispondere al quesito ci sorge il sospetto che … in fondo quel richiamo a un’arte a tesi, a un realismo sociale, cui Barbaro attribuiva molta importanza e che perorava, sulla scorta della grande scuola sovietica, fornisca suggestioni ai paladini del cinema rivoluzionario fascista. (qtd. in Brunetta, Umberto Barbaro 14, emphasis in the original)

Argentieri implies that Barbaro did not adjust the self-representation of his political orientation while working under fascism in this capacity. Seen another way, it is conceivable that Barbaro’s composition of Luce fredda evinces his understanding that a certain degree of collaboration was necessary to succeed in this environment, a perspective conforming with his assertion, reiterated in his critical writings, that all human behaviour is conditioned by history. This credence would, naturally, also apply to his personal situation. When analyzed from this perspective, one could conclude that Barbaro, influenced by the historical context, did not act in complete accordance with the program of political commitment in art that he advocated elsewhere but rather altered his strategy in order to avoid outright censorship of Luce fredda.

In contrast with the presiding view that the novel contains Marxist and anti-fascist themes, Ruth Ben-Ghiat argues that the ambiguous and allusive prose of Luce fredda is fully intentional and connected to Barbaro’s collaboration with fascist institutions. As she states in a concurrent analysis of Luce fredda, Alberto Moravia’s Gli indifferenti, and Eurialo De Michelis’ Adamo, “though only De Michelis identified himself openly as a ‘fascist writer,’ all of these men were frequent contributors to the most militant journals of the fascist ‘revolution’ and actively participated in the debates over the lineaments of the realist aesthetic” (“Fascism” 640). Ben-Ghiat’s observation raises questions of consequence to the interpretation of the novel and of the nature of Barbaro’s self-fashioning as a politically engaged intellectual. It would be wrong, however, to automatically determine that such participation equalled conscious complicity. If Barbaro, as Ben-Ghiat indicates, wrote for fascist literary magazines, it is undoubtedly possible

6 Barbaro’s conviction that art is shaped by the historical context is repeated in several essays in Neorealismo e realismo and recalls the views of other theoreticians, including Bakhtin and Lukács.

7 In the relatively small body of scholarship on Barbaro, Ben-Ghiat is the only scholar, to date, to explicitly contend that the ambiguity of Luce fredda is significant to the political message.
that he was an opportunist, but it is equally possible that he did not see an alternative way to communicate his ideological views.

Still, although, as Durante suggests, it seems that Barbaro does read reality with his “positivo atteggiamento del ‘fare,’ ma col bisogno di tarare strumenti nuovi e più robusti” (“Avanguardia” 119), in Luce fredda there is little to indicate whether his objective in using a realist aesthetic as a tool of social and moral commitment is to prescribe a future ruled by the ideals of communism or by the ideals of fascism. This is, of course, a critical uncertainty, and one that in discourse about realism is not confined to Barbaro. I nonetheless operate with the anti-fascist interpretation supported by the majority of post-war criticism discussing the work.

1.1 Fragments of Reality: Presence of the Avant-Garde

The composition of Luce fredda took place in what was for Barbaro not just a transitional period of political formation leading up to the unambiguous declaration of his communist viewpoints after the Second World War but also during what in the introduction to Neorealismo e realismo Brunetta calls the “fase di formazione letteraria nella quale Barbaro ricerca e definisce il suo ‘orizzonte culturale’ e gli strumenti più adatti per affrontarlo … che va dalla seconda metà degli anni venti fino agli inizi degli anni trenta” (12–13). In this intermediate step in the direction of realism, Barbaro frequently employs techniques of the avant-garde. He also critiques the avant-garde, sometimes using modes of narration characteristic of the very object of his criticism. Although as supported by his later critical writings Barbaro eventually decided that realist novels could best serve as a reaction “against traditional bourgeois narrative structured around a hero and a happy ending” (Ben-Ghia, “Fascism” 651), his definition of realism was most certainly influenced by contextual factors. As the site of his experimentation with a combination of avant-garde and realist techniques, Luce fredda is a vehicle for Barbaro’s maturation as author and intellectual.

The presence of the avant-garde is discernable throughout the narrative. Here I focus on a quality that is relevant to a discussion of the novel as a romanzo di formazione for both Barbaro and Sergio: the use of techniques that can be grouped in the general category of fragmentation. Maria Di Giovanna identifies that fragmentation, like photomontage, accords with the tenets of immaginismo, suggesting that it is therefore in line with Barbaro’s initial cultural involvement:
Barbaro’s early view on fragmentation was, however, to change.\textsuperscript{8} Durante observes that after his break with \textit{immaginismo}, a primary aspect of Barbaro’s need to confer political meaning to the artistic act was the notion that writers should “frequentare la narrativa quando storicamente essa rappresentò una ‘battaglia’ contro le poetiche del frammento, e quando si configurò come la forma più propria del ‘realismo’ in arte” (“Umberto” 89). In \textit{Luce fredda}, fragmentation understood in a broad sense, a component of Barbaro’s conception and experience of the avant-garde, serves a critical role in allowing the author to express frustration with both the literary culture of the avant-garde and the individualism of bourgeois society. The use of fragmentation also lends the text qualities characteristic of film and in this sense anticipates his theoretical work on the cinema.

The most conspicuous kind of fragmentation in \textit{Luce fredda} is found in the novel’s overall structure. The narrative focus jumps from character to character while alternating between dialogue, monologue, and internal monologue. Inserted between these segments, which resemble cinematographic scenes, are letters and diary pages that further distance the characters from one another. Besides disallowing any real feeling of continuity, the episodic nature of the text impedes extensive character development. The protagonist and his acquaintances are uniformly flawed. Unable to form meaningful relationships, they fail to create a united front against the issues that plague them. The brief glimpses of each are just enough to reveal his or her ineptitude, a feature that can be read as part of the central theme of the absolute need for collectivity. More than their superficial interactions, what holds these people together is their inability to live productively in the modern world. Without exception, they are members of the

\textsuperscript{8} “Nuovi occhi per Dostoevskij” includes Barbaro’s discussion of fragmentism, which, writing now in the mid-1930s, he depicts negatively. See \textit{Neorealismo e realismo} 122–127.
bourgeoisie, painted here in strong shades of immorality and corruption. For the more intellectual among them, reflection and introspection come at the expense of collective action that might give direction to their aimless lives.\footnote{Some characters, most notably Maria and Tilde, do occasionally recognize the superiority of collectivity—for example, Maria describes watching operai with great awe, an experience that impels her to seek out independence in Rome, and Tilde eventually burns her diary, realizing that true life is not in reflection but is in the actuation of a social role (Durante, “Umberto” 131–132). However, neither Maria nor Tilde ultimately moves past her individualistic mode of being.}

The disjointed essence of the narrative suggests that Barbaro’s priority is to depict behaviours and situations emblematic of problematic qualities of his present reality rather than to construct a traditional story. Firmly linked with the fragmented structure is the narrative voice. The diverse roles of the narrator in the text produce ambiguity and emphasize the characters’ passivity. This ambiguity is sometimes heightened by changes in tense. An example is the following:

\begin{quote}
Altre volte Leone s’era messo la fede nel taschino del gilet ed era corso spensieratamente dietro a gonne disposte a lasciarsi frugare, spiegazzare e sollevare, docilmente complici di piaceri veri anche se più volgari… Ma qui, non si sa perché, tutto era su di un piano elevato e spirituale. E questo è certamente il vero valore di Fernanda. (58)
\end{quote}

Because of the switch from the past perfect to the present indicative in this passage, it is unclear whether this is an intrusion into Leone’s conscience, the observation of an omniscient narrator, or both. When this sort of narrative confusion occurs, it in essence disenfranchises the character affected. All denizens of the world of Luce fredda live in a suspended state in which the passing of time brings no change, and whether they have full power over their thoughts, let alone their actions, is uncertain.

Since fragmentation contributes to the effectiveness of the social commentary implicit in the novel, it is in fact appropriate for the representation of this particular reality. Barbaro’s comment in the article “La mia fede,” which originally appeared in 1933 in Il Giornale d’Italia, is telling of his ultimate narrative goal:
Abbandonata definitivamente ogni forma di individualismo, ho perduto ogni indulgenza e ogni acquiescenza, in vista di equilibri più alti e irraggiungibili da seguire. Questo modo di intendere la vita e l’arte riecheggia credo con sufficiente ampiezza nel romanzo *Luce fredda*; e tutto quello che ho scritto non è che, in definitiva, un vario aspetto dello stesso problema: una denuncia dell’individualismo e delle tristi disfatte a cui esso sbocca fatalmente. (qtd. in *Neorealismo e realismo* 140)

Barbaro’s employment of fragmentation, a technique of the Italian avant-garde,\(^\text{10}\) is connected to this depiction of the negative effects of individualism and therefore to perceived problems with his contemporary society. His new realism, on the other hand, in its nascent stage in this novel, looks to the future, prescribing for it both a new aesthetic and a new moral code. Wrapped up in the fragmented narrative structure, then, is a critique of modernism, of individualism, and of the bourgeoisie. In his bid for a return to the real, to the concrete, Barbaro comments on the avant-garde’s inability to change reality.

Dream sequences and free association, indicative of Barbaro’s knowledge of psychoanalysis,\(^\text{11}\) are further evidence that Barbaro rejects the traditional model of nineteenth-century realism. Importantly, however, experimental techniques in *Luce fredda* do not negate Barbaro’s realist intention but are instead tools that allow him to expose the limitations of modernism and explore possibilities for an evolved realist aesthetic. Rather than spurning the avant-garde completely, he includes in *Luce fredda*, as Lucia Strappini affirms, “un’accezione molto particolare di realismo che esplicitamente richiama modi innovativi e antimimetici di rappresentazione e di comunicazione, su una linea che è certo molto più vicina alla neoavanguardia che al continuismo

\(^{10}\) For a discussion of the *frammentismo* of *La Voce*, see Prezzolini 144–147. In the article “Modernism and Fascism,” Walter L. Adamson identifies the role of fragmentation: “The Florentine avant-garde was modernist because experimental—stylistically as well as in content. It pioneered an elliptical, aphoristic, and fragmentary style, very different from the overblown and ornate forms that, despite D’Annunzio’s professed Nietzcheanism, had continued to typify D’Annunzian prose…. Distortion, exaggeration, and telegraphic effects that paralleled modernist development elsewhere especially characterized the successors to *Leonardo—La Voce* (1908–1914) and its more futurist offshoot, *Lacerba* (1913–1915)” (375).

\(^{11}\) For an especially good example of both a dream sequence and free association, see *Luce fredda* 219–225.
letterario e culturale” (“Letteratura” 454). Though techniques of the avant-garde could not fully satisfy Barbaro’s need for a socially engaged literature, they could still form an element of a greater narrative mode better equipped to effect change in modern society. The result in Luce fredda reflects the novel’s intermediate position in the elaboration of Barbaro’s personal aesthetic: while foreshadowing his later work on neorealism, it contains notable traces of his prior experimental experiences.

1.2 Sergio’s Development: Bourgeois Intellectual in the Fascist Era

There is a clear parallel between the authorial formation that takes place through the text and the protagonist’s attempted maturation. Like Barbaro’s gradually evolving conception of the avant-garde and realism, Sergio’s development progresses slowly and remains incomplete. His personal campaign for change operates on two levels: he begins by searching for new accommodation, a physical undertaking, and concurrently seeks a more fulfilling life, a more abstract challenge. Despite his dispassion and detachment, he eventually realizes, or seems to realize, that he must find a more genuine way of being.

In accordance with Castle’s general criteria, Sergio’s problems of vocation and socialization dominate his education; his romantic endeavours are also transformative. All three aspects of his development are coloured by the mental anguish, the protagonist’s handicap, that is a constant presence in the novel. While disgusted by the class to which he belongs and by his own inaction, Sergio cannot break free of his intellectual paralysis. Others recognize this lassitude. For example, Maria’s father refers to Sergio when he criticizes his daughter’s friends in Rome and names “le raffinatezze dei tuoi amici romani che mettono la loro dignità nel non far niente” (150).

This trait points to similarities between the protagonist of Luce fredda and that of Gli indifferenti, and it is indeed possible throughout the novel to individuate affinities between Sergio and Michele—both, after all, are intellectuals, both become stuck in a self-destructive cycle of rumination and inaction, and both are members of the bourgeoisie. However, unlike Michele, Sergio is able to rouse himself from his apathy enough to physically leave his home and set forth on a journey of self-discovery, thereby taking more tangible steps toward his formation. If he loses his way, it is at least in part due to factors that are outside of his control. His is by no means
a perfect ending: as *Luce fredda* comes to a close, Sergio remains a resident of the *pensione*. Nevertheless, though he has been in many respects unsuccessful in achieving his goals, the extent to which he has matured, especially at the end of the novel, insinuates that there is a good possibility that he has undergone a transformation that will be lasting and that there is potential for further change.

Significantly, the avant-garde stylistically and thematically tinges the representation of Sergio’s path in the direction of manhood. The physical space in which he moves is critical to the development of his character. Since his surroundings are frequently the subject of his excessive philosophizing, his interactions with and attitude regarding his environment say much about his initial crisis and incremental maturation. His discussion of architecture is in this sense especially revealing. Positioned in the initial pages of the novel, this episode immediately defines Sergio as an intellectual living in a culture in which the avant-garde plays a leading role. Acknowledging the effect of ambience, Sergio determines that his new house should have all of the characteristics of a modern dwelling. His ideal corresponds almost exactly with that of rationalist architecture. The houses that he passes as he traverses Rome are far from suitable, their disorganized, distasteful, dirty appearance not projecting forward toward the “futuro più sano, più pulito” that he so desperately desires; as he indignantly breaks out, “e’ proprio vero che l’architettura è un’arte sociale!… Ma vallo un po’ a dire a questi ciarlatani di architetti!” (9).

Sergio infers that his inability to find accommodation that meets his particular requirements is a reflection of his own failings. However strong his initial opinion about the indispensability of modernist surroundings, he is overtaken by his habit of choosing the road of least effort and so settles on a shabby room in a ramshackle boarding house, even when he is advised not to take it.

Obstacles related to Sergio’s socialization and those related to his vocation are intrinsically linked. While constantly elaborating theories of love and morality, he lacks the ambition, or,

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12 See Durante, “Avanguardia” 120–121 for a brief analysis of the debate on rationalism in Italy in the 1920s–1930s and its manifestation in *Luce fredda*. Di Giovanna also addresses the protagonist’s attitude toward the physical space in which he lives: see especially 113–115.

13 “Ma Sergio in quel momento sognava la nuova architettura sospirandone la mancanza come d’una sua disgrazia personale, e quasi sommando nell’impossibilità di trovare un alloggio di suo gusto tutte le insoddisfazioni della sua vita riflessiva e triste…. (9).
perhaps, the ability, to translate his doctrine into action. His friends are often the target of his moralizing, but they too, in various ways, are plagued by indifference. Due partially to its other inhabitants, Sergio’s new home does not improve the possibility that he will be able to interact more purposefully. In a moment of clarity, he understands that he has made a mistake by deciding to stay at the boarding house: “Improvvisamente, con una chiarezza che gli dava un senso di disgusto enorme, Sergio pensò alle innumerevoli noie che gli sarebbero derivate dall’esser venuto ad abitare in una casa di squilibrati” (98). Sergio is a participant, willing or not, in this society of “squilibriati.” He is, however, somewhat set apart from his bourgeois companions. Unlike most of his acquaintances, he cannot fully resign himself to this idle, meaningless life.

Both Clelia and Maria, the most prominent female characters, are of tremendous consequence in effectuating change in the protagonist. These women are furthermore frequently connected to episodes concerning Sergio that directly incorporate techniques, concepts, and/or critique of the avant-garde. Clelia exerts such a strange hold over him that his feeling in her presence is enough to convince him to stay at the pensione. As she draws him in, in the process changing his experience of the boarding house, their relationship takes on almost surrealist dimensions. Her unusual qualities are not described in wholly positive terms. In fact, for Sergio, “la stranezza dei modi di questa ragazza è indiscutibilmente tale da togliere la calma: le sue telepatie, i suoi presentimenti, le sue ipersensibilità sono comunicative ed inquietanti”; regardless, it is because of Sergio’s strange telepathy with Clelia that the house, which was at first for him odious, becomes instead “piacevole e insostituibile” (134). That Clelia is an important agent of Sergio’s change is confirmed on the following page, where the narrator states, “alla stupidità piatta e diffusa del mondo piccolo borghese e insopportabile nel quale Sergio ha sempre vissuto oggi Clelia ha sostituito una stupidità effettiva” (135–136). Though this substitution is in some ways negative, it contributes to Sergio’s resolve to find an alternative to his moral paralysis.

Sergio’s friendship with Maria is also instrumental in his gradual development of a personal ideology suitable for the modern world. He is frequently conflicted in his interactions with her, due in part to his uncertainty about what they share. Maria is his female counterpart, and she too, while to a lesser extent, ruminates about her social position. Her discomfort originates in her perception of her family’s hypocrisy, particularly her mother’s affair and her father’s exploitation of the workers in his employ. When Maria moves to Rome in order to assert her
independence from her parents and be closer to Sergio, her interactions with him become increasingly focused on ideological concerns. Walking through the city, she and Sergio discuss matters of social relevance. Critically for Sergio, Maria is to later act in contradiction with her stated values.

The night drinking in honour of Maria’s arrival in Rome is a turning point for the protagonist. Di Giovanna notes Barbaro’s apparent disdain for the kind of avant-garde represented in this scene, where “modi e tecniche dell’avanguardia vengono sfruttati dai personaggi, più che a fini artistici, in realtà solo per un giuoco disimpegnato e sciocco” (117). Sergio observes the noisy confusion that envelops him without engaging in the exchanges about jazz or the antics of the ridiculous figure “Mam’zelle Flon-Flon.” It is at this gathering that Sergio is afforded an opportunity to act when he intervenes to free Maria after she is seized by one of his acquaintances, the caposquadra. Importantly, this incident is one of the first in which Sergio takes spontaneous action in aid of another being. The experience inspires him to further reflect on the need to achieve a more socially and morally engaged lifestyle. Annoyed at himself for having introduced Maria to his friends, he also realizes that there is something inherently wrong with the people with whom he chooses to associate: as he laments, “che una ragazza simpatica come Maria dovesse far colpo in quel mondo di zitelloni borghesi e semi-intellettuali era facile prevederlo: ma che la prendessero d’assalto a quel modo!…” (189).

Whether because of his or because of the women’s shortcomings, Sergio’s relationships with both Clelia and Maria come to naught. Maria is seduced by the caposquadra, an episode whose significance is described by Di Giovanna (123), and Clelia’s psychiatric illness becomes progressively worse, culminating in an episode in which she “è stata presa da un accesso di

\[14\] Di Giovanna analyzes a scene from Chapter XIII as being a similar manifestation of the avant-garde. Here, she states, in a “casa alquanto equivoca … alcuni frequentatori sono portatori di una cultura avanguardistica, che però in quella confusione, tra giuochi lascivi, alcool, rissa, dialoghi banali e ‘bassi’, risulta svilita, degradata, connotata negativamente, così come tutti quegli squallidi individui” (116).

\[15\] As Carpi indicates, jazz has a place in Paladini’s idea of the avant-garde: “in Giallo, per citare un caso, Paladini ribadirà la sua legittima presenza nella fenomenologia significativa del gusto contemporaneo, elenca[to], insieme al fatidico Luna Park e alla passione del meccanico, fra i ‘prodotti tipici dell’inquieta e sognante anima moderna’” (Bolscevico 128). Jazz is also part of the ambience of the scene in Chapter XIII described in the previous note in the quote beginning “casa alquanto equivoca.”
pazzia; in seguito a non si sa bene quale discussione col padre gli si è improvvisamente slanciata contro brandendo un coltello di cucina … [e] Clelia è stata trasportata in una casa di salute” (215).

These romantic failures do not prevent Sergio’s further metamorphosis. Instead, the suicide of Clelia’s seventeen-year-old brother builds the momentum toward change initiated earlier. Finally, there have been real, concrete, moral consequences for the behaviour of Sergio’s companions. Comprehending this has a profound effect on Sergio. He sees Ruggero’s death as punishment for his social circle’s moral indifference and is determined not to continue as before the tragedy: “Ed ecco,—pensa Sergio—io mi getterò nell’azione; costi quello che costi, anche se illogica, anche se incomprensibile, vedremo chi arriverà prima, se io o la realtà…” (224).

It is apposite that this last chapter contains Sergio’s final dream sequence and examples of free association that speak to Barbaro’s knowledge of Freud and psychoanalysis. Even now that Sergio has identified the ineffective nature of his own ways and is cognizant that change is possible only if he takes action to make it so, Barbaro continues to employ techniques of the avant-garde. His selective use of the aesthetic affirms that Barbaro wished to surpass what he perceived as its inertia and failure to engage with social and moral issues. In developing a new kind of realism to go beyond the avant-garde, he adopts, here, elements of a movement that he elsewhere censures. In his authorial maturation, Barbaro has taken major strides toward his goal of a variety of realism suitable for his particular ideological aims but has not quite reached the endpoint of his development. His experimental realism in Luce fredda, very much the product of the uncertain political and cultural landscape of the day, is nevertheless a critical juncture in his formation as author and theoretician of neorealism.

2 From Experimentalism to Experimental Realism: Carlo Bernari’s Tre operai

Carlo Bernari’s 1934 novel Tre operai is a clear testimony to the futile struggle of the lower classes in Italy in the years leading to Mussolini’s consolidation of power. Like Luce fredda, the

work can be analyzed as a Bildungsroman for both author and protagonist. It is through his narration of Teodoro’s development that Bernari engages with experimental narrative techniques that form an important component of the critical realism that he uses in the work.

Bernari’s early cultural and intellectual exposures were certainly operative in shaping his approach to writing. Born in Naples in 1909 and expelled from school as a young adolescent, he was for the most part self-educated, though he was an active participant in intellectual circles that counted Benedetto Croce among their ranks. Three personal experiences, all of which occurred in his early twenties, are key to understanding the major role of the avant-garde in his intellectual development. All of these demonstrate Bernari’s contact with and knowledge of various branches of avant-garde artistic, cinematographic, and literary movements.

Manifestoes with which Bernari was familiar and/or that he co-authored in the late 1920s speak to this awareness of cultural trends and willingness to accept new means of intellectual expression. In 1927, he encountered the artistic movement circumvisionismo, whose adherents included Carlo Cocchia, Paolo Ricci, Antonio D’Ambrosio, and Guglielmo Peirce. The Manifesto dei Pittori Circumvisionisti dates to 1928. While acknowledging the influence of other European movements, especially cubism and futurism, which “hanno il merito inestimabile di aver divincolato per sempre la pittura dai ceppi pesantissimi dell’accademia” (qtd. in Piscopo, Questioni 409), the manifesto also delineates “una nuova visione futurista” (Capozzi, “Metafisica” 102); as its authors state, “ci differenziamo dai nostri predecessori in quanto non intendiamo assolutamente di limitare o di offrire un solo mezzo di espressione delle cose viste nella loro integrità” (qtd. in Piscopo, Questioni 409–410). Maria Laura Macchini emphasizes the importance of the circumvisionisti in the cultural landscape of Naples and in shaping Bernari’s involvement in this ambience: “Attraverso il Circumvisionismo—e quindi il secondo futurismo—attraverso la mediazione di Peirce, Bernari entra in contatto con l’ambiente artistico e intellettuale della post-avanguardia” (119).

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17 Primary material pertaining to circumvisionismo and udaismo, including the Manifesto dei pittori circumvisionisti, signed by Cocchia, D’Ambrosio, and Peirce, and the Manifesto di fondazione dell’U.D.A. (Unione Distruttivisti Attivisti), signed by Bernari, Peirce, and Ricci, are in Piscopo, Questioni 407–420. These documents confirm that both movements placed high value on cultural renewal and the role of youth in actuating cultural change.
The Manifesto di fondazione dell’U.D.A. (Unione Distruttivisti Attivisti), composed by Bernari, Peirce, and Ricci in 1929 after Bernari’s return from Rome to Naples, documents another step in the maturation of his intellectual and political conscience and suggests a Marxist worldview and an early interest in avant-garde modes of representation. In Bernari’s recollections in the “Nota 1965,” an explanatory essay first included in the 1965 “definitive” edition of Tre operai:

Sulle orme di Platone e di Hegel compivamo anche noi, con l’Udaismo, la nostra piccola rivoluzione, anche adottando in termini marxistici l’hegeliano de profundis: “il pensiero e la riflessione hanno sopravanzato l’arte bella”. A sostituire l’arte declinante noi chiamavamo la tecnologia e le scienze; uniche attività dello spirito capaci di restituire un’immagine probante del reale, grazie a un’epistemologia che raccordasse i valori costituiti e depositati dalle varie scienze esatte. Anticipavamo di un trentennio la discordia fra cultura umanistico-letteraria e cultura tecnico-scientifica, a tutto vantaggio della seconda che ci apriva il cuore a un’ingenua speranza marxistica; speranza che doveva trascinarsi sino ai nostri giorni, nell’inconciliabile conflitto fra le due culture. (“Nota” 170–171)

The movement, a youthful variation of Bernari’s approach to literature, is significant to the development of his later work in that, in line with his characterization of Udaismo as “la nostra piccola rivoluzione” (“Nota” 170), it demonstrates his intentional break from Croce, futurism, and other groups and influences. Furthermore, the unapologetically anti-bourgeois, pro-engagement stance of the udaisti points to a crucial ideological element. As Capozzi emphasizes, already at this early stage of Bernari’s development, we see “l’insistenza del Bernari sull’impegno dell’intellettuale chiamato ad assumere la sua responsabilità davanti alla storia” (Carlo Bernari 15).

Bernari’s interest in the avant-garde and experimentalism was profoundly shaped by his visit to Paris in the summer of 1930, when he came in contact with new cultural forces of many varieties and was able to interact with major writers and artists of the French avant-garde. Such intellectuals introduced him to techniques of surrealism and expressionism in art, literature, and film. Bernari reports in the “Nota 1965” how during this time in France, he was exposed to “Buñuel del Chien andalou, il breve film surrealist del 1928 che feci in tempo a vedere a Parigi insieme ad altri esperimenti d’avanguardia, come il sovietico Tre in un sottosuolo, L’étoile de
mer di Man Ray, *La Marche des machines* di Deslaw” (164). Bernari affirms that also important was “quel clima etico-politico che l’antifascismo in esilio restituiva all’Italia dalle rive della Senna, filtrando attraverso le maglie delle spie del regime e dei suoi sicari all’estero” (167). His participation in the crisis of surrealism underway in Paris moreover supplied him with a new model of the relationship between cultural production and politics. Reflecting in the “Nota” on a trip to the headquarters of the surrealist magazine *Bifour*, Bernari describes André Breton, who “metteva la rivista del surrealismo al servizio della rivoluzione, per esserne ricompensato con l’espulsione dal Partito Comunista dopo il rifiuto di compilare un rapporto sulla situazione dei gasisti in Italia” (168). Bernari states that with this experience, he was persuaded “di dover invidiare quella libertà che consentiva a [Breton] di respingere una richiesta, essa stessa affermazione di libertà.” This ultimately contributed to Bernari’s return to Italy “sdegnoso d’ogni gesto letterario che non servisse a liberare … dalla soggezione al fascismo” and thus to his eagerness to devote himself to the bid to use literature for political ends (168–169), although, of course, one must accept the author’s post-war declarations of anti-fascism only with caution.

*Tre operai* was then already midway through its gestation. In various outlets, Bernari attributed the reworking of the novel that took place at this stage to his own renewal of conscience. The lengthy process of writing and revising *Tre operai* also signals another kind of formation—that of the novel itself, which underwent multiple and considerable alterations before its initial publication and further, though more minor, adjustments to editions published in 1951 and 1965. These changes are closely connected to the intended socio-political significance of the work.  

Bernari recalls some of the factors that helped determine how *Tre operai* would act as a vessel for his political engagement:

> Da reprobo della borghesia io faticai ad accordare le mie sofferenze con i dolori dei miei compagni di lavoro; dovetti perciò anch’io trovare la mia guida per potermi calare nelle pene di ognuno, nella paura che ciascuno dei miei compagni

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18 The complicated editorial history of *Tre operai* is traced by Giuseppe Amoroso in the chapter “Per i ‘Tre operai’ di Carlo Bernari” of the volume *Sull’elaborazione di romanzi contemporanei* and by Eugenio Ragni in his introduction to *Gli stracci*, an early manifestation of *Tre operai*. The manuscript of *Gli stracci* was discovered after Bernari’s death and published in 1994. As Ragni states, “si tratta di una narrazione completa e complessa, ‘altra’, certo, rispetto a quella di *Tre operai*, ma forse più intrigante proprio per questa difforme somiglianza” (Introduction 22).
As he suggests, depicting the struggles of the working class would make his abstract political message more tangible. In a decision that reinforced the novel’s realism, he opted to “rivivere l’intero progetto; disporlo a un altro linguaggio, non importa se più o meno rozzo, purché assomigliesse in tutte le sue pieghe ai tre operai (ecce che nasceva anche il titolo) e alle loro desolanti avventure” (“Nota” 169). He additionally adopted an approach that was in fact consequential to his attempt, successful or not, to impart a political message while avoiding censorship: establishing Tre operai’s temporal point of departure as immediately before the First World War, and thus before Mussolini’s political conversion and rise to power, facilitated the justification of the work’s potentially socialist, and therefore seditious, ideas.

The critical nature of the work was confirmed by Bernari, who stated that he felt that it was imperative to “sentire istintivamente che il passato che evocava voleva essere un implacabile atto d’accusa al presente, trasfigurato in passato come ambiente, vicenda, passioni” (“Nota” 166). Despite his clear scorn for the contemporary social and political institutions responsible for the repression of the Italian people, the past setting does mute the militant dimensions of his political message. Still, as articulated by him in interviews and writings produced after the fall of fascism, Bernari’s insistence on the anti-fascism implicit in the novel is unequivocal. According to him, his intent was to portray reality as he saw it, refusing to render the novel inaccessible to fascist officials by resorting to a sophisticated language like that of the ermetici. That he was successful in writing a realist text with an ideological purpose is endorsed by Salvatore Battaglia’s judgment that the work is the result of “un esperimento parallelo ai Malavoglia del Verga, sostituendo ai pescatori di Acitrezza il mondo dei braccianti meridionali, dei manovali giornalieri che aspiravano a diventare operai qualificati a sentirsi partecipi e insieme comparse della nuova civiltà italiana” (qtd. in Mauro 105).

The political ambiguity is nonetheless an important aspect of the novel discernible not only in the past setting but also in the criticism of failed socialism that runs throughout and that provides
an alternative interpretation of its ideological intentions. Francesca Bernardini describes how some fascist critics, considering Tre operai amenable to fascist ideas, sought to “ricondurne gli elementi divergenti dalla politica culturale e dalla letteratura fascista all’interno della poetica del realismo ‘organico’ e di un’arte di contenuti, populistica e subalterna agli obbiettivi della propaganda” (xxxv). Curiously, in 1935 Bernari received a monetary prize from the Accademia d’Italia, presumably to encourage him to produce more works like this one (Ben-Ghiat, “Fascism” 658).

Other qualities of Tre operai similarly allowed this initial analysis. An example that contributes to its political ambiguity while also illustrating Bernari’s narrative experimentation is the textual influence of Mario Sironi, a proclaimed fascist who, according to Emily Braun, “embodies the best, and the worst, of compromised culture under Fascism, but … was undeniably the emblematic figure of the period and the only artist to devise an original style consistent with modernist principles” (16). The presence of techniques related to Sironi is recognized by critics and acknowledged by Bernari in the “Nota 1965”:

Conoscevo di Sironi i manifesti celebrativi del fascismo e le tavole con cui egli veniva illustrando, sulla rivista diretta da Mussolini, articoli e racconti…. I muri screpolati di Sironi, le sue tragiche rocce, quei tenebrosi calanchi, che respingono ogni fisica identificazione col reale e si dispiegano come specchi a riflettere il furore degli uomini, la loro stanchezza di vivere, le loro paure, erano anch’esse visioni congruenti al cinema di quel periodo…. Era il clima, la cultura del tempo, che si estrinseca nei quadri, non meno che nei libri e nei film. Credevamo di esserne fuori, di giudicarla; mentre vi eravamo immersi fino al collo, con tutti gli entusiasmi e gli sgomenti che quella cultura ci ispirava. (164–165)

Though the influence of Sironi is quite possibly, and most likely, limited to the technical level of the text, it nevertheless augments the element of ambiguity that contributed to the novel’s early positive reception. Of course, this acceptance was short-lived: due to the evident leftist themes,

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19 For example, Guido Piovene; see Bernardini xxxi.
*Tre operai* was soon subjected to an unofficial fascist ban when Mussolini read it and declared, “altro che socialista, qui c’è il comunismo!” (qtd. in Bonsaver, *Censorship and Literature* 113).

### 2.1 Experimenting with Reality: Uses of the Avant-Garde in a Realist *Bildungsroman*

Bernari’s exposure to the avant-garde can be detected in several of the modernist techniques found in the work, innovations that primarily serve to enhance his brand of realist narration, which, as Capozzi indicates, is very close to Lukács’ conception of critical realism (*Carlo Bernari* 17). Bernari’s aesthetic formation in *Tre operai* consists above all in finding a textual balance suitable for the expression of his political and social objectives. Doing so entailed “un processo di simbiosi durante l’atto creativo in cui fantasia e realtà interagiscono l’una sull’altra—una nozione a cui egli è rimasto fedele in tutta la sua opera” (Capozzi, “Il realismo spettrale” 51). Responding to Carlo Bo in *Inchiesta sul neorealismo*, Bernari claimed that he did not write *Tre operai* with the desire of formulating an entirely new aesthetic: “Perché avevo scelto quella direzione, così ‘diversa’, tu dici, e in ‘contrastò’ col lavoro degli altri? Confesso che non me ne resi conto allora. Mi pareva di lavorare in armonia con gli altri” (34). However, *Tre operai* is the first segment of a developmental process by which over the span of decades, Bernari moved progressively more and more from realist narrative with some experimentation to a model of writing in which symbol, experimentation, and metaphor are more prominent than they are in his first novel.

Bernari’s realism in *Tre operai* is undeniably far removed from nineteenth-century naturalism and *verismo*. The many avant-garde features of the text include surrealist elements, the expressionist use of light and dark, the presence of cinematographic techniques, and the influence of *Neue Sachlichkeit* and are all aided by the manner in which Bernari “pass[a] continuamente dal tessuto pittorico al tessuto narrativo con gran disinvoltura” (Capozzi, “Metafisica” 108). Here I first describe some general qualities of Bernari’s aesthetic in this novel.

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20 Guido Bonsaver discusses this censorship: “The first wave of sales and reviews of *Tre operai* were positive and Zavattini was planning to submit the book for various literary rewards. However, on 6 April 1934 he wrote an alarmed letter informing the author that he had just heard that Mussolini’s press office had ordered the press not to mention Bernari’s novel. This ruined any prospect of new editions and literary awards” (*Censorship and Literature* 113).
and then discuss how experimentation is employed in connection with descriptions of the protagonist’s surroundings. This strategy, illustrative of Bernari’s fusing of realism and the avant-garde, attests to the novel’s place in his developmental trajectory.

A central element of Tre operai’s socio-political message is embedded in the linguistic characteristics of Bernari’s new critical realism. Unadorned prose is an integral part of Bernari’s anti-literary stance, and the frequent adoption of dialectal expressions is already an act of protest against fascist language policies. The realist features of Bernari’s writing have been analyzed by several critics, including Giuseppe Sansone, who asserts that Bernari’s “conclamato e palese ‘realismo’” is actuated “prima di tutto mediante una sintassi breve e scarsamente elaborata, tanto da dare preferenza alla coordinazione a danno della costruzione subordinata, per cui il fraseggio asciutto ed essenziale si prospetta come cumulo di periodi ridotti alla primaria necessità espositiva, ovviamente ignara di ogni orpello” (27). The “scarce” prose used to present a reality based on one existing outside of literature makes relevant, immediate, and accessible to a contemporary audience the theme of the tense relationship between individual (and intellectual) and society—a relationship inherently skewed in favour of the latter. The choice to write mainly in the historical present tense, “con rari arretramenti al passato o all’imperfetto” (Bernari, “Nota” 166), was also motivated by a desire to effectively communicate an ideological message about the present, which for Bernari was bleak; his stated goal in using this tense was to evoke the past so that “quasi si narrasse da sé, con tutti i suoi terrosi trapassi verbali affidati all’umore dei fatti, al suo condensarsi in macchie dense, ora d’ombra ora di luce, più che alla logica narrativa” (“Nota” 166).

While the realist base is there, Bernari’s lexical, syntactical, and structural choices undoubtedly often cross the border into the experimental. Romano Luperini explains how Bernari’s originality, which extends to the structure of the novel, is influenced by the avant-garde:

Anche la struttura narrativa è originale: solo apparentemente si tratta di un romanzo neoverista, in realtà la scrittura è di tipo sperimentale: la terza persona molto spesso si soggettivizza, e la narrazione oggettiva lascia il posto al monologo interiore (d’altronde Bernari è molto attento alla lezione di Döblin, Dos Passos, Kafka). (Il Novecento 561)
Though I argue that *Tre operai* is realist notwithstanding this experimentation, Luperini’s observations about the manifestation of some specific kinds of experimentalism in the novel are useful. Free indirect discourse, shifts from past to present tense, abrupt changes from third– to first-person narration, and unpredictable intrusions of the narrator all contribute to a fragmented style, as in *Luce fredda*, that here confuses the objective with the subjective. These techniques also privilege the existential nature of the work, emphasizing the hopelessness of the characters’ situation.

Textual examples are many. “Si sente felice per le cose nuove che indosserà domenica; se mi sarà possibile comprerò anche una cravatta” (6) demonstrates a shift from third– to first-person narration. Other such instances include “per sbucciarla deve cercarsi un coltello in fondo ad un cassetto che puzza di pepe e di formaggio, questi cassetti li mettereai al balcone per un mese” (13) and, later in the novel, “cerca del lavoro e col lavoro una vita decente: e mi presento un giorno vestito bene, e dico: Questo non è più il tempo… A chi dirlo? Non ha più nessuno a cui dirlo” (151). A lengthier passage presents other experimental techniques:

I nostri due bravi operai arrivano intanto in città, e si recano ai Sindacati; Marco vuol presentare Teodoro come “uno che ci sa fare”. In questo momento occorrono elementi capaci, dirà; ma egli pensa egoisticamente che Teodoro può essergli di grande aiuto nella Ferriera. I due debbono aspettare parecchio tempo, prima d’essere ricevuti dal vice segretario, che in questi giorni ha molto da fare. È appena finito uno sciopero, e già se ne profila un altro! Vi sono stati disordini in periferia e nel nord sono accaduti fatti piuttosto gravi da mobilitare polizia ed esercito. (130)

Notable here is the free indirect intrusion (“È appena finito uno sciopero, e già se ne profila un altro!”). The utilization of the present tense is also significant in that it contrasts with traditional narration in the simple past and further amplifies the immediacy of the social message.

Other parts of the novel point to other uses of avant-garde techniques. Throughout the text, modernist components are closely linked with descriptions of the physical landscape. The manner in which the setting is depicted was influenced by Bernari’s biography and by this stage of his development. Naples was the city of his birth and a subject to which he frequently returned in his writing, even if he lived for the majority of his life in other locations. Appropriately given
the political situation during which the novel was written, the Naples of *Tre operai* is not a picturesque retreat. Instead, constant rain and ever-present pollution transform the city into a grey backdrop that is intimately connected to psychological and physical malaise. Weather affects the workers in a very practical way since it frequently impedes their search for employment: “ Quando un operaio va in cerca di lavoro, piove sempre” (10). Together with filth and pollution, it also makes a psychological impact by contorting the characters’ relationship with the city itself, ultimately contributing to the pessimistic worldview characteristic of the novel as a whole. Such distortions are especially prominent in narration involving Teodoro.

In fact, depictions of Teodoro and his surroundings are the most common site of metaphysical and surrealist elements in the narration. As recognized by Bernardini, feelings of disorientation and resignation are often communicated through images that recall metaphysical painting:

Teodoro vive e agisce per intermittenze, ora immerso nella contingenza, ora in una dimensione onirica ed estraniata, in un tempo sospeso; l’ansia e l’incapacità dei personaggi di trovare un senso nell’esistenza e una prospettiva di futuro si rivelano attraverso immagini mutuate dalla pittura metafisica e dalla poesia montaliana. (xxxii, emphasis added)

Indeed, the “strategie espressionistiche e di arte metafisica che investono luce, colori e ombre di una carica emozionale” described by Capozzi (“Metafisica” 113) are important in the emotionally charged portrayals of the objects and landscapes with which Teodoro interacts.

The representation of Teodoro’s environs operates on several levels. One of these is his psychological condition, which influences how he sees the world. For example, the narrator, describing Teodoro in the final stages of the failed factory occupation, when he is aware that Anna is dead and that his “revolution” was in vain, states, “lui piange, come un bambino che abbia perduto qualcosa. La gru nera è una grande forca. Nel fondo del cantiere, la locomotiva e i carrelli, uno dietro l’altro, sono tanti plotoni di soldati” (145). This characterization shows Teodoro regressing as he is brought to tears and transforms objects familiar to him into symbols of his lost battle. Similarly, the physical setting is deformed by Teodoro’s sense of defeat before he leaves his family home; as he looks out the window, unsure where he should go, his view is a skewed one:
Al di là della finestra vi è un muro bianco dipinto di fresco a calce che al poco lume sembra alluminio. Teodoro lo percorre con lo sguardo e s’accorge che attraverso i vetri ondulati, spostando leggermente il capo a destra e a sinistra, si può farlo muovere a piacere, fonderlo e allungarlo, come se il muro fosse di pasta malleabile. (15)

Just as he is set to depart, it begins to rain again, complicating his exit and affecting his mental state: “Ricomincia a piovere: era stata una giornata di umido, di quelle che danno il senso precario della vita, perché si hanno i pantaloni bagnati e le scarpe, coperte di fango e segatura, sembrano deformi: Dove vado? … Teodoro è preso dal panico: che tempaccio, dite un po’” (15–16). Other environmental factors, especially weather phenomena, the sea, and the factory, are also prominent in Bernari’s dreary portrait of Naples. The eternal gloom points to the futility of Teodoro’s struggles.

Here and elsewhere, the weather acts as Teodoro and his fellow workers’ adversary. Rain in the novel does not materialize at random, nor does it appear only in realistic or expressionistic instances in the narrative. Instead, it also assumes a symbolic function as it corresponds to and anticipates Teodoro’s failures, sometimes emphasizing the jail-like quality of the factory. Although it had rained in the days before his initial employment and is apt to do so when he is forced to be outside, on Teodoro’s first day of work, while he is trapped indoors, the sky is miraculously clear: “Sul ritmo cadenzato dello stantuffo della vecchia macchina a vapore si ode il battito degli zoccoli tra rigagnoli di sapone sporco e di acqua tinta che acquista colore via via che si avvicina allo spiraglio di una porta chiusa, dove si scontra con una lama di sole: fuori sarà bel tempo” (4).

This insistence on similar properties is likewise found in the final chapter of the novel, which furthermore recalls the fragmentation discussed in relation to Barbaro. Teodoro is by now in the end-stages of his descent. In what is essentially a loose interior monologue suggestive of surrealism, elements of several of Teodoro’s major failures are juxtaposed and blended:

Intanto è saltato sulla carcassa del vecchio vapore e discende la scaletta di un osteriggio. Ambienti bianchi, come ospedali di sera. L’ultimo ambiente è lontano, buio. Tutto vuoto, le pareti sono spoglie, dai due lati si riflettono a terra le tonde luci che la luna manda attraverso gli oblò squarciati. Dal di dentro lo sciacquio è
come un tonfo. Teodoro si raschia la gola per farsi compagnia, accenna una canzone con la sua voce rauca, la sua voce vecchia, consumata. Il carcere consuma, consuma anche il ricordo delle compagnie nella memoria. “Su compagni, su fratelli”, “Ti ricordo, ti rivedo Ninà, una piovosa sera...” E che altro? Bandiere rosse avvolgono il corpo di Maria, come lingue di fiamme le anime del purgatorio. (151)

Even here, where Teodoro’s recollections are consumed by memories of prison and hardship, descriptions of his physical surroundings figure prominently. Empty spaces and bare walls illuminated only by the light of the moon symbolize his unfulfilled goals and growing awareness of being alone in the world.

2.2 A Failed Revolutionary: Teodoro’s Social, Sentimental/Sexual, and Political Development

Even if it involves obvious divergences from the traditional model, the narrative of Teodoro’s development is coherent with the general structural concept of the Bildungsroman.21 Dissatisfied with the social class that he has inherited from his parents, he embarks on a multifaceted path toward what he hopes will be greater independence and fulfilment. Tre operai follows his detachment from the family unit, his exacting interactions with society, his failed attempts to initiate and sustain a romantic relationship, and his political education. Although Teodoro, an intellettuale-operaio, is just one of several primary characters, the work is dominated by his ongoing maturation. The image of him crying “come un bambino che abbia perso qualcosa” (145) is revealing: not only does it reflect his failure to mature, but its placement in the passage earlier quoted, full of industrial imagery, juxtaposes his deeply emotional, childlike reaction with the cold repression of factory life. However, that Teodoro’s formation is ultimately incomplete, “mancata”—the final pages see him reduced to a pitiable, vulnerable condition—does not render

21 In “Tre operai di Carlo Bernari: un romanzo di de-formazione,” Silvia Acocella argues that Bernari “si serve della struttura del Bildungsroman solo per svuotarla dal suo interno” (349). I disagree with the categorical nature of her statement, holding that Bernari, like other authors that I include in my corpus, uses the Bildungsroman in a modified manner in accordance with his narrative and ideological goals but that his alterations do not constitute an “emptying” of the structure but rather a readjustment of it.
the novel any less characteristic of this genre. Teodoro’s failure instead forms a key part of Bernari’s political and social protest.

Teodoro’s battle with internal and external forces is largely due to his social standing. In a reversal of Sergio’s disdain for the upper class in Luce fredda, Teodoro yearns to move up in the social hierarchy of the pre- and immediately post–World War One Naples that he inhabits. Unlike most protagonists of the Bildungsroman, Teodoro is not a member of the bourgeoisie. He is nonetheless an intellectual at odds with his state.22 Capozzi comments on the significance of the unusual melding of intellectual and worker found in Teodoro: “Notiamo che è soprattutto in questo tipo di personaggio problematico che l’autore riesce a rappresentare il perenne contrasto tra individuo e società, tra dimensione privata e dimensione sociale; tema questo che è al centro di tutta la narrativa bernariana” (Carlo Bernari 26–27). As intellettuale-operaio, Teodoro occupies a middle ground between the proletarian hero of Soviet socialist realism and the bourgeois protagonist in existential crisis of Luce fredda. His intellectual efforts initially motivate him and are therefore positive. Yet, given the near impossibility of transcending lineal class structure in his contemporary Naples, it is ultimately of little consequence that Teodoro is better educated than his fellow workers are because his innate position as operaio renders him defeated even before his quest for self-betterment has begun. Instead of assisting him in any meaningful way, his family, the origin of his inferior social rank, is one of the major barriers to his success. His father makes this explicit, the message being that “da una famiglia di operai non può venir fuori che un operaio” (14). With this, he discourages his son from endeavouring to rise

22 Bernari in fact first conceived Teodoro as a piccolo borghese. In an interview with Toscani, Bernari describes his realization that he must radically change his novel by changing Teodoro’s social class: “Presi coscienza, cioè conobbi, quel mondo nel senso razionale del termine, solo dopo averlo descritto. Dopo aver composto il libro mi resi conto che una parte dei suoi personaggi erano i sacrificati, erano i ‘vinti’, erano quelli che veramente meritavano una storia, e proprio perché meritavano una storia, io volli dedicarla a loro, non a titolo di riscatto o di rivendicazione o di predicazione o di esortazione, ma in termini di riflessione, di ripensamento dei proprii errori” (qtd. in Ragni, Invito 58). As Bernari explains in his “Nota,” it was after this moment of clarity that he reformulated Tre operai, a shift with larger implications: “Perché il protagonista Teodoro, da piccolo-borghese declasato che esce ciondoloni dalle pagine del protoromanzo, diventa nella successiva stesura decisamente operaio? Frutto di suggestioni letterarie? Può darsi. Ma l’operazione riduttiva investì tutti i personaggi, non solamente lui, con un calo globale di rilievo, da un’oggettività naturalistica piccolo-borghese ad una soggettività aspra, risentita, quasi da prima persona” (161).
above his class and confirms critical generational differences. While Teodoro is eager for change, his parents have resigned themselves to their fate.

Episodes concerning Teodoro’s sentimental education recur throughout the novel. Interestingly, they typically include three characters. René Girard writes that “the triangle is a model of a sort, or rather a whole family of models” that “always allude[s] to the mystery, transparent yet opaque, of human relations” (2–3). This intersubjective structure is pertinent to an examination of the protagonist’s relationships with others and becomes particularly useful when such analysis focuses on his interactions with women. Though Teodoro takes an active role in forming his trios, he remains unsuccessful with the opposite sex, and his experiences certainly fit Girard’s description of “transparent yet opaque” (2).

In the “Nota 1965,” Bernari comments on the greater meaning of the double triad, the most morally polemical of the living arrangements that arise: “La doppia triade, la prima formata da due donne conviventi con un uomo, la seconda da due uomini conviventi con una donna, [vuole] significare qualcosa di più, che fa alone al segno primitivo con cui le figure furono realisticamente incise” (172–173). Bernari’s first triad is an especially good example of an unconventional grouping. Here, Teodoro’s simultaneous pursuit of two women presents him with obvious difficulties. The second case is also problematic since living with Marco and Anna is for Teodoro the cause of some confusion about his emotional and practical roles in the household.

Both monetary and sentimental factors lead to the initial trio. Anna is convinced that by inviting Teodoro to live with her and her sister, she will secure his love and affection, but Teodoro is attracted to the strong and wilful Maria, who exploits her beauty in order to attract men of a higher social class. A triangle composed of two women supporting an able-bodied man is undeniably atypical. Teodoro’s erotic fantasies for Maria, who is seldom at the apartment but is nevertheless the frequent subject of his thoughts, make an already objectionable situation all the more so. Teodoro tries to justify his feelings, speaking “dell’amore libero, che al giorno d’oggi non bisogna essere gelosi; che cos’è questa gelosia? una formula convenzionale che serve a nascondere l’egoismo!” (26). Unsurprisingly, his reasoning does not convince the women of the merits of free love.
Despite their cautious optimism, it is soon apparent that neither Anna nor Teodoro is satisfied by the tenuous circumstances. Anna can sense that she will eventually be abandoned, and Teodoro, blind to the enormous sacrifices that Anna has made for him, becomes increasingly agitated. At first he claims that this is temporary, but since he is unable to find a job, he must continue to live with the sisters longer than he had anticipated. Teodoro, Anna, and Maria finally separate when Teodoro attempts to escape further humiliation and self-loathing by leaving with Marco. Though necessitated by Teodoro’s economic privations and Anna’s need for affection, the collaborative venture brings them no clear advantage. Teodoro is not employed, and Anna, unable to learn from her mistakes, is left in a worse state than before. His father’s insistence, quoted earlier, that “da una famiglia di operai non può venir fuori che un operaio” (14) has driven Teodoro from the paternal home, but the unorthodox alternative with Anna and Maria has proven disheartening in a way that he could not have predicted. While the experiment is by and large unsuccessful, it is nevertheless transformative. Bernari identifies that besides reaffirming “una libertà che allora non solo per una città come Napoli, ma per l’intero Paese, poteva sembrare inconcepibile, una libertà anche nel rapporto sessuale,” their arrangement is significant for a more utilitarian reason: “Le due sorelle che soggiacciono a Teodoro danno a Teodoro la possibilità veramente di scavalcare se stesso da semplice operaio e diventare un intellettuale, un politico” (qtd. in Benassi 43). Teodoro’s stay with the women thus assumes an importance in the development of ideological themes.

His sentimental failure is not limited to this one instance. Another triad with romantically problematic implications for Teodoro is formed when Marco, Anna, and Teodoro band together, tired of struggling as individuals against contrary forces that continue to subjugate them. His later interactions with Elisa, whom he meets in Taranto, also point to the ambivalence and confusion that characterize Teodoro’s attitude toward women. All of these aborted bids at forming meaningful relationships are revealing of Teodoro’s stalled sentimental and social maturation. In combination with his division from his parents, Teodoro’s questionable choices, especially his involvement in the quasi ménage à trois, contribute to the fact that his final defeat in the novel is human and emotional as well as political.

As demonstrated by the ideological changes that he undergoes while coinhabiting with Anna and Maria, Teodoro’s political education is intrinsically linked not just to the socio-political core of the novel but also to other aspects of his development. Its progression is fivefold. First, Teodoro
feels a vague sense of unfulfillment when he begins work at the factory and recognizes the social injustice of his position. He then enters a phase marked by naïve enthusiasm and extensive study. Next he moves to Taranto, where he becomes immersed in political action. He then goes to war, which helps him to develop a class consciousness and subsequently inspires him to take an organizational role in political activism when he returns. Finally, he is disillusioned by the failure of the factory occupation and by Anna’s death.

The changes that come with this development are part of what sets Teodoro apart from Anna and Marco, who remain more or less stagnated. His goal is not solely personal but is rather “una ‘felicità’ generale, per tutti, per Anna, per Maria, per Marco, per il padre, anche per il padre, che non sa di essere infelice” (15). Though he evolves, the realities of his environment continue to frustrate his efforts. His political ambitions are therefore ill fated. If the social reality depicted in this novel is not far from the historical situation as perceived by Bernari in the years in which he composed *Tre operai*, then Mussolini’s government, which rose to power between the period in which the novel is set and the date of the work’s publication, had neglected to address the primary issues that in the novel plague Teodoro’s generation and social class. This staticity of context is important to the political message communicated through Teodoro.

The initial stage of Teodoro’s political education takes place in the first chapters of the novel. When exposed to factory life, Teodoro is displeased but still hopeful. His observations make clear the hierarchies of the factory that render him powerless:

> Il martedì, appena al secondo giorno, Teodoro è già stanco del lavoro. Vede per la prima volta i suoi principali, tornati appena da un lungo viaggio; e i suoi principali non si scomodano neppure a guardarlo troppo: un’occhiata furba, e via, insieme col padre. Che diranno di me? Forse si metteranno d’accordo sulla paga; e Teodoro, mentre aspira gli effluvi di vapori che si sollevano da una vasca, pensa al paio di scarpe nuove che potrà comperarsi dopo due settimane di lavoro. (4–5)

When he finally receives his pay, he is quickly disabused of the notion that he will have disposable income: “Una vera delusione quei pochi soldi che gli hanno dato! Che scarpe! forse non riuscirà neppure a fare una gita con la ragazza, domani” (6). Unmotivated to perform, he soon loses his job. Teodoro now fully realizes that he cannot be happy if he remains stifled by his father’s insistence that he resign himself to a lifetime of work as an *operaio*. However, he is
as of yet unable to articulate exactly what the alternative for which he yearns might entail. As is stated, “io vorrei essere libero, pensa Teodoro, vorrei essere libero, si ripete, senza capire il senso della frase” (9).

The next phase of his development comes when Teodoro leaves the family home and begins living with Anna and Maria. Still unemployed, he occupies himself with a diversion that is also formative: “In quel periodo leggeva un po’ di tutto e la mente vagava dietro fantasmi rivoluzionari. Romantiche, bandiere rosse al vento, la presa della Bastiglia, Moreau con quella maledetta faccia da bambino, il massacro dei comunardi nelle catacombe di Parigi” (27). At a midpoint between complete inaction and total commitment to political activity, he engages in abstract contemplation on the nature of revolution, and also on his own social identity: “Un borghese che non lavora è sempre un borghese, ma un operaio disoccupato non è più un operaio. E che cos’è?” (28). Although he reportedly chooses books “un po’ a caso,” his reading material is undeniably politically themed, consisting, in part, of “Il manuale del socialista dell’avvocato Messina; una serie di dispense del Socialismo e socialisti italiani dell’Angiolini; [e] Capitale e salario di Mara [sic] pubblicato dalla ‘Lotta di Classe’ del 1895, in cui spiccava un articolo di Oddino Morgari” (29).

Teodoro soon leaves Anna and Maria in order to travel to Taranto with Marco, confident that he will find meaningful employment in this unfamiliar location. His inability to do so, together with his perceived abandonment by Marco, gives rise to a third stage of his political development: “Di punto in bianco, senza averne la minima idea, Teodoro è diventato un rivoluzionario” (60). This new occupation gives him much-needed purpose, and he embraces his role enthusiastically. In a moment of self-awareness, he identifies his current position in his political maturation:

E poi, non vi è una coincidenza, una strana coincidenza fra ciò che egli sta per fare, e quelle che erano le vaghe aspirazioni della sua prima giovinezza; quando, impiegato nella lavanderia, con Marco si occupava di sindacato e di organizzazione operaia? Ma allora discuteva soltanto di questi problemi, ora

23 In her chapter in Papini et al., Acocella examines the significance of Flaubert’s Sentimental Education in Tre operai, referenced in the “Moreau con quella maledetta faccia da bambino” in this passage; as Acocella states, “questo richiamo … si ripeterà con tutta la costanza e la coerenza di un leitmotiv” (346).
agisce, ora *realizza*. Ha un programma netto; e tuttavia non riesce ad afferrarlo d’un colpo, panoramicamente: anzi, quando tenta vederlo nella sua totalità si spaura perché ne scorge solo una parte, e tutto il resto è sfuocato, avvolto nell’ombra. (60, emphasis in the original)

In order to move past this uncertainty, he vows to continue his studies and to relocate to Reggio, the site of his first concrete political action. Distributing sheets of propaganda, he is thrilled by his power to effectuate change, though his personal ideology remains somewhat ambiguous: “Abbasso la guerra, viva la guerra! Ed è lui che ha fatto dire quelle parole! È lui che le ha *inventate*” (61, emphasis in the original). His euphoria is short-lived. Caught by two agents, he is brought to the *Commissario* and sent to the front as punishment for his insubordinate actions.

The war proves key to his political formation. Discharged and now in Crotone: “Teodoro agisce con ben altro tatto: è diventato più prudente, più sicuro di sé: la guerra gli ha rafforzato la sua coscienza di classe; e durante la guerra stessa egli ha avuto agio di capire certi fenomeni che prima gli sembravano problemi complessi” (65–66). Teodoro must still struggle to refine his ideas of revolution and despairs at the indifference and ignorance of the workers that he seeks to organize. He encounters further barriers when he clashes with reformists and kills a man during a scuffle, a grave error that will contribute to his final undoing, but is nonetheless determined to act according to his new political conscience and so helps Marco, with whom he has reconciled, organize a factory occupation. He is by now incapable of abandoning his new ambitions because “lui non può fermarsi dove e quando vuole: c’è una forza in lui che lo trascina; lo trascina, e lo innalza, su una cima, a un passo dal precipizio” (121).

This determination is not enough to guarantee his victory. The final stage of his political development involves his total resignation after the terminated occupation, Anna’s death, and his imprisonment. It is critical that Teodoro’s ultimate non-success is not solely due to his own shortcomings but is instead inevitable given the historical situation. Bernari accounts for Teodoro and Marco’s political deficiencies by reaffirming the fundamental anti-fascism of the novel, stating, “a quel punto li il fascismo è già alle porte, ha quasi vinto, l’occupazione delle fabbriche è fallita e i due superstiti sono ormai dei rottami” (qtd. in Benassi 43). Eugenio Ragni identifies other factors at play that are also outside of Teodoro’s control, suggesting that “se non fosse alla fine schiacciato da avvenimenti eccezionali (ma non trascendenti, non fatali: umani),”
Teodoro “sarebbe in sostanza un vincitore, uno appunto degli eroi cari a tanta letteratura, di quelli che attraverso una serie di prove giungono a una consapevolezza e a una maturità che non possedevano” (Invito 61–62). He undeniably struggles through periods of indifference, but he also takes tangible action to actualize his dream of a free, happy life.

The shape of Teodoro’s Bildungsroman is profoundly affected by a basic aspect of Bernari’s brand of realism, specifically his willingness to use it to present the harsh realities of the world. As Tre operai proceeds, the protagonist’s disappointments mount in a progression of defeats in which, as Bernari states, we can “inseguire pedagogicamente la scia degli errori commessi nel suo combattere il mondo più forte di lui” (“Nota” 166–167). His decline is facilitated by his fellow workers’ inability to effectively respond to his call for action. As articulated through Teodoro’s development, the novel’s criticism is, broadly speaking, twofold. While a condemnation of fascism’s repressive institutions and failure to bring about meaningful change, it also comments on the situation of mass indifference that allowed Mussolini’s rise to power.

3 Sergio, Teodoro, and the Realist Bildungsroman of the Fascist Period

As indicated in Chapter One, the Bildungsroman, for Michael Beddow, entails “the expression and recommendation of a particular understanding of the nature of humanity through the more or less overtly fictitious narrative of the central character’s development” (5). It logically follows from this assertion that a character’s social reality may be understood in a specific way in accordance with his or her development in the text. Hence, when Luce fredda and Tre operai are analyzed as Bildungsromane, Sergio and Teodoro assume a critical importance as the intended harbingers of a socio-political message, their personal formations revealing essential information about the state of the society in which they attempt to grow and, in turn, about the authors’ ideological stance in the works. While Sergio and Teodoro develop in different manners and play different roles in their respective narratives, the two nevertheless have several affinities that are closely tied to the idea of the romanzo di formazione as conceptualized by Barbaro and Bernari.

The protagonists’ approach to the opposite sex is a good point of comparison since both become enmeshed in triangular relationships that are somewhat ambiguously defined. Like his political engagement, Teodoro’s triads are more explicit than Sergio’s are. In each case, however, the young man’s interactions with women have polemical dimensions. Rather than showing one
male and one female in a traditional courtship and/or marriage, in these configurations there is
the subversion of social norms. Interestingly, the other two members of the primary trios are
females that sharply contrast with one another. Teodoro is involved with Anna, a weakened and
resigned operaia, but is attracted to her sister Maria, who has taken concrete, but morally
questionable, steps to move beyond her social standing. Sergio’s enervated woman is Clelia, who
is representative of the stagnancy of society, and his Maria, like the Maria of Tre operai, is
cognizant of the possibility for social change. The protagonists’ simultaneous attraction to these
two ends of the spectrum is significant. They are tempted to remain inert in their social reality,
an option found in Anna and Clelia, but are also drawn to women who are more self-assured in
their choices.

Perhaps the clearest distinction between the protagonists is found in their political development.
Though neither triumphs in the manner of the hero of socialist realism, their battle against
society is nonetheless an indispensable component of each novel. Teodoro’s is categorically
central. Sergio’s is implicit. This difference is in part due to their social class: as an operaio,
Teodoro must struggle for change at a more basic level, whereas Sergio’s membership in the
bourgeoisie affords him enough comfort and stability that he is not forced to act. Still, it is
evident that both of them, firmly anchored in the authors’ contemporary society, are deliberately
designed to be a component of the political message. Bernari’s decision to situate Tre operai in
the near past afforded him the possibility to paint Teodoro in politically less equivocal terms;
Barbaro’s contempt, on the other hand, is buried deeper in the text.

While there is an undeniable link between Sergio and Teodoro and the Pirandellian/Svevian
model of the inetto,24 their ineptitudes are only partially responsible for their failure. Despite the
frequently demonstrated incompetence of the characters, how they are presented in these
primarily realist texts makes obvious the dominance of the repressive environment. Sergio and
Teodoro recognize the need for transformation but employ diverse approaches to bringing about
this change. Teodoro is the more proactive, taking material steps to create a new life for himself.

24 Di Giovanna, in fact, explicitly identifies in Sergio “i consueti tratti dell’inetto primonovecentesco. Il
personaggio di Sergio in effetti riproduce (come d’altronde anche altri personaggi di Luce fredda)
un’affermata tipologia della narrativa italiana e europea” (118). I would argue that aspects of his
ineptitude set him apart from earlier versions of the inetto.
More tentative, Sergio is capable only of rebellious gestures that are comparatively minor. That despite this apparent opposition their adopted strategies both prove futile is an important element of this variety of *Bildungsroman*.

The general model of the novel of formation is also relevant to aesthetic strategies in the works. The convergence of engagement, experimentation, and ideas of reality in *Luce fredda* as compared to in *Tre operai* can be effectively examined with reference to Lukács and to Auerbach, whose theories were introduced in Chapter One. Like Bakhtin, the two approached realism from a historicist position that is appropriate for an analysis of the degree to which individual experience in the *Bildungsroman* can be extrapolated to portray a coming of age typical of the historical setting. Lukács’ concept of realism focuses on ideas of political engagement, while Auerbach’s theory of mimesis is less overtly ideological but still acknowledges the necessary connection between realism and history. Together, they provide a useful perspective from which to review the political-ideological purpose of the realism utilized by Barbaro and Bernari and the aesthetic qualities that result from/are used in their attempt at engagement.

Ben-Ghiat discusses realism as envisioned by fascist “writers, critics, and cultural functionaries” in relation to the notion that “the new Italian novelists were free to transfigure reality and produce works that would chronicle the present and yet bear the imprint of an individual creative and ethical sensibility” (“Fascism” 631). It is telling that both *Luce fredda* and *Tre operai*—which, I argue, are ambiguous in their anti-fascism but are clearly not fascist—involve innovative transfigurations of reality. Though realist, the primary aesthetic in *Luce fredda* and in *Tre operai* does not equal simple documentation. Indeed, Barbaro and Bernari’s realism is not reproductive but productive, entailing a search for new ways of representing truths about their time.

For Bernari, there is a definite connection between ideology and literary realism: as he states, “la scelta dello scrittore realista è già una scelta ideologizzante” (*Non gettate* 85). Even if Barbaro is not transparent about the intended target of his anti-bourgeois, anti-individualistic message in

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25 Ben-Ghiat, however, interprets them as being fascist.
Luce fredda, the presence of some ideological elements in the novel is conspicuous. It is curious, then, that working against engagement of this kind is the use of textual strategies, including techniques of the avant-garde and structural, lexical, and syntactic choices, that veil the socio-political message of the novels. That the two authors employed such experimentation within a realist text is revealing of the cultural climate that helped determine how they would engage with what they recognized as problems with their contemporary society. No matter what the ambiguity, the political-ideological aspect of the works reflects Lukács’ belief that “realism is a political category as well as an aesthetic one, as the realist text—whatever the ideological commitments of its author—is by definition a progressive one” (Taunton 1).

Both authors furthermore insisted on an aesthetic that did not consist only of objective description. Bernari was explicit about this fact:

Il problema del realismo non può risolversi applicando la più ovvia formula dialettica, ora col privilegiare la realtà (l’oggetto) ora col privilegiare l’artista (cioè il soggetto), a seconda che si propenda per un materialismo cieco o uno spiritualismo non meno allucinante. A questo punto dovrebbe essere chiaro per tutti che quando si parla di realismo non si vuole pretendere di asservire l’arte al più piatto oggettivismo o naturalismo, ma s’intende agire all’interno di un fenomeno per coglierne … tutti i momenti di crisi. Operando una scelta nella realtà l’artista compie un atto critico; ma tale scelta è già il risultato di un rapporto istituito, o meglio in fieri fra l’artista—nel nostro caso lo scrittore—e la realtà. (Capozzi, “Intervista” 167, emphasis in the original)

The intentional coexistence of objective and subjective narration in the novels corresponds with Lukács’ idea, articulated in “Realism in the Balance,” that good realists are able to create a contrast between the subjective nature of their characters, in his term appearance, and the objective reality, or essence, in which they move. “The crux of the matter,” Lukács affirms, “is to understand the correct dialectical unity of appearance and essence” (“Realism” 33), an opposition that allows the reader to come to better comprehend the social and economic conditions that produce the characters’ experiences (as discussed in more detail in Chapter One). In accordance with this interpretation of the relationship between objectivism and subjectivism in realist works, Bernari’s depiction of workers and Barbaro’s portrayal of the bourgeoisie, born
from specific worldviews, involve interesting alternations between appearance and essence, between subjective and objective descriptions.

Though not mimetic in the strictly traditional sense, these works are also consonant with Auerbach’s conception of mimesis, in whose historical relativistic perspective there is a deep relationship between literature and society. Individual actions take place “in a total reality, political, social, and economic” that “is concrete and constantly evolving” (*Mimesis* 463). Importantly, as the various texts examined in *Mimesis* suggest, there is no one kind of realism; on the contrary, a prerequisite for realism is a mixture of styles. Frank R. Ankersmit notes that this aspect of Auerbach’s theory is influenced by the theorist’s own political experiences:

As a victim of Hitler’s regime, acutely sensitive to the latent totalitarianism that was reflected in, or came to be associated with, the texts he studied, Auerbach often pointed out the extent to which the separation of the styles lends itself to an elitist conception of society…. As defined by Auerbach, realism is the literary style of democracy, and free movement within a hierarchy of styles is the literary analogue of freedom in a society that respects democratic equality. (63)

In this definition, the presence of multiple styles in Barbaro and Bernari’s realist novels—seen also in *Gli indifferenti*—does not discredit their realism. Instead, their willingness to experiment with different aesthetic techniques might be interpreted as a sign of dissent against the totalitarian government.

It is striking that experimentalism in the novels examined in this chapter is frequently employed in the narration of Sergio and Teodoro’s relationship with their surroundings since these techniques make evident the circumstantial forces that repress the protagonists. However, in the situation created by Italian fascism, where there was room for some intellectual innovation and “no designated stylistically uniform art” (Stone 13), it is difficult to argue that stylistic variation in itself equaled a sort of opposition or nonconformity. There nonetheless remains a notable political dimension negotiated in the works by way of thematic and aesthetic strategies.

In fact, the presence of anti-fascist themes is linked to essential qualities of the *Bildungsroman*. Teodoro’s political education is a clear example. Imperative in *Luce fredda*, too, is the representation of youth, the most basic element of the novel of formation. The inability of
Teodoro and of Sergio to properly develop in their respective societal positions—in one case the working class, in the other the bourgeoisie—stands in stark contrast with the fascist vision of the young, virile, and strong male. That neither Teodoro’s nor Sergio’s central conflict is resolved is in itself indication of fascism’s failure to reverse conditions that led to the disillusionment felt by the era of Italian youth who grew up through World War One. Despite fascist policies and propaganda aimed at reigning in young intellectuals, their apathy toward fascism persisted as a critical problem. The protagonists of these novels speak to generational suspicions and (in)actions of this type.

4 Some Concluding Remarks

In *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, Lukács declares that “realism is not one style among others, it is the basis of literature; all styles (even those seemingly most opposed to realism) originate in it or are significantly related to it” (48). When judging the realism of Barbaro and Bernari, it is crucial to acknowledge that it is the basis, not the sum, of their style in these novels and that they moved beyond traditional mimesis because doing so allowed them to engage with text and society. Claudia Salaris’ observation that *Luce fredda* responds “all’esigenza di creare un romanzo di tipo nuovo, moderno, sperimentale, che non solo rifiuti la prosa d’arte o la ‘bella pagina’, ma cerchi di spingersi al di là del naturalismo e della comunicazione linguistica legata alla denotazione …” (238) is apt. This attempt to create a new kind of novel could similarly describe Bernari’s efforts in *Tre operai*.

The repressive historical setting depicted in these works also acts on the authors. Indeed, whether due to self-censorship or external pressure, their socio-political intent in the novels remains somewhat implicit. This tactic proved more successful for Barbaro, who made heavier use of ambiguous themes, avoided explicitly political content, and subsequently escaped having his novel banned. *Tre operai*, which blunts the ideological subject matter primarily by positioning the story before the fascist era, enjoyed fleeting success but quickly faced fascist censure.

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26 For a detailed analysis of fascism’s politics of youth, see Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities* 93–122. See also Chapter One.
The notion of the double *Bildungsroman* is again germane. In what are their first novels, Bernari and Barbaro each assumed the task of using realism to narrate a young man’s development. In doing so, both authors confronted contemporary social and political issues and the challenge of developing their own intellectual identities while at the same time developing a new aesthetic. A comparison of *Luce fredda* and *Tre operai* makes evident major variances in the use of experimental techniques and in how the political theme is defined. But these divergences are outweighed by the commonalities that unite the works: realist prose influenced by the avant-garde; socio-political engagement; a protagonist attempting to mature and better himself in a society that overpowers him; and an author in an intermediary stage between an early dedication to experimentalism and a later approach firmly grounded in realism. The position of these novels in the oeuvre of the author in question speaks to their notably different, but equally significant, role in Barbaro and Bernari’s personal development. While Barbaro wrote very few works of prose after *Luce fredda*, instead going on to focus mainly on the theory of socialist realism in art and the theory of neorealist cinema, Bernari continued to experiment with realism, remaining for the most part somewhere, as in the title of Capozzi’s volume, “tra fantasia e realtà.”
Chapter 4
Developing through Fascism: Elio Vittorini and Il garofano rosso

Elio Vittorini’s Il garofano rosso was first published in serial form in Solaria from 1933 to 1936 and later released as a volume in 1948. In this chapter, I argue that the work is distinct from the other Italian romanzi di formazione examined in this thesis in several respects. Written by the most politically engaged author, it is, unsurprisingly, the most explicitly ideological of this group of novels. Aesthetically, it is among the most conventionally realist, although it is unquestionably tinged with experimental qualities. It furthermore fits closely within the parameters of the traditional Bildungsroman as defined by literary critics and theorists and presents the male protagonist with what is conceivably the most positive, if still ambiguous, outcome.

Il garofano rosso’s affinities to theoretical conceptions of the novel of formation are indeed significant. As I discuss, the path toward maturation of Alessio Mainardi, the protagonist, sees him overcome a series of obstacles, some internal, some external, before he eventually gains a better awareness of his surroundings and priorities that allows him to move forward in a more genuine manner. Consonant with Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the Bildungsroman,¹ the novel very clearly represents a time of societal and cultural transition. Most notably, Alessio’s initial enthusiasm for the fascist cause and subsequent questioning of the movement for which he had wholeheartedly fought shows the confusion and conflict that came with the shift from early fascism to its later iteration. His process of development thus profoundly and explicitly reflects the political environment in which it takes place, a situation not found in works such as Gli indifferenti, Luce fredda, and Natalia, whose ideological message comes from attitudes and individual actions that are for the most part removed from the novels’ immediate historical circumstances. Tre operai is connected to a specific historical context but is distanced from the fascist era. Nessuno torna indietro is set during the fascist dictatorship, but references to political concerns are extremely limited.

¹ Bakhtin’s theory, as elaborated primarily in “The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel),” is outlined in Chapter One of this thesis and is discussed briefly in connection with Il garofano rosso in Section Four of this chapter.
Also relevant to an exploration of the kinds of formation present in *Il garofano rosso* is the idea of multiple developments—primarily those of Alessio and the author. The complicated genesis of the novel parallels Vittorini’s complicated intellectual and personal formation, and both primary themes of the work and aspects of Alessio’s coming of age can be linked to features of the author’s biography and views that he contemporaneously expressed elsewhere. As demonstrated by decisions such as that to publish in the fascist journal *Il Bargello*, an issue to which I will later return, Vittorini was in fact supportive of fascism at the time of the novel’s composition, even if he would try to disassociate himself and this early work from the politics of his youth. That he did so is evidence that the novel represents a transitional segment of his development that he was eager to leave behind. Aesthetic properties of the text similarly suggest that it occupies an intermediate stage of Vittorini’s frequently changing approach to narrative.

The motivations behind and the consequences of the author’s thematic and stylistic choices constitute an important component of my investigation, which aims to give preliminary answers to several questions via a reading of *Il garofano rosso* as a novel of formation. First, what is the influence of Vittorini’s political stance, and how do his politics manifest in the work? Next, is it possible to individuate a link between plot and aesthetics in *Il garofano rosso*? Finally, what are the most decisive elements of Alessio’s *Bildung*, and how do they correspond to theoretical formulations of the novel of development? These points of inquiry guide my analysis of the *romanzo di formazione* as envisioned by a young writer who, like his protagonist, was in the middle of what would prove to be a considerable transformation that entailed, among other factors, challenging his own worldview.

## 1 Elio Vittorini: Brief Biographical Considerations

Untangling the details of Elio Vittorini’s childhood and intellectual formation is a complex and problematic task both because the author was reluctant to provide information about these early years and because there remain marked contradictions within the large body of criticism about him and his oeuvre. What follows is a synthesis of pertinent biographical details about which there seems to be some degree of consensus.

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2 Regarding Vittorini’s unwillingness to provide more than minimal specifics about his childhood and “formazione irregolare,” Sergio Pautasso writes that Vittorini alluded to this period “con accenti così
Born in Syracuse in 1908 to a railway worker and his wife, Vittorini moved frequently as a boy. In 1924, he left technical school prior to graduating and made his way north to work as an employee of a construction company “come contabile ed assistente ai lavori” (Briosi, Vittorini 3). His primarily self-directed education and growing political awareness, together with his friendships with prominent intellectuals like Curzio Malaparte, led to the publication of political and literary articles in periodicals such as La conquista dello Stato, Il Mattino, Il Lavoro fascista, La Fiera Letteraria, and La Stampa between 1926 and 1929, a prolific period—and one that, based on the materials contained in Diario in pubblico, he later chose to underplay—in which his ties to the ideas of fascism were particularly strong. In 1927, he married Rosa Quasimodo, the sister of Salvatore Quasimodo, and eleven months later, their first child was born.

Vittorini’s collaboration with Solaria was a significant milestone for him. Starting in 1929, his contributions began to appear in the journal regularly. His involvement deepened after he moved to Florence in December 1929 and took a job as Solaria’s secretary. Around the same time, he was hired as a copyeditor at La Nazione, subsequently working with the fascist-controlled periodical Il Bargello. In addition to these paid opportunities, his intellectual horizons rapidly expanded in these years through personal study and growing connections with literary circles, including groups meeting at the Florentine café Le Giubbe Rosse. In this way, he established

copertamente letterari e romantici, nonostante la loro autenticità, che diventa difficile discernere gli elementi obiettivi dalla suggestione esercitata dal mito di uno di quei rari uomini destinati alla letteratura da una irresistibile vocazione” (Elio Vittorini 15). Pautasso’s statement, though phrased rather romantically itself, points to issues inherent in reconstructing Vittorini’s first writings and in discerning his original political intentions.


4 Vittorini made contact with Malaparte at the age of seventeen. At the time, Malaparte was editor of La conquista dello Stato, which, as Guido Bonsaver writes, “had become a safe haven for revolutionary fascists—also called ‘left-wing fascists’—who insisted on the need for Mussolini to radically change Italian society through the dismantling of middle-class privileges and the creation of a socialist-oriented corporate state” (Elio Vittorini 9).

5 Ernesto Livorni outlines the role of Le Giubbe Rosse in early-twentieth-century Florentine society in his article “The Giubbe Rosse Café in Florence. A Literary and Political Alcove from Futurism to Anti-Fascist Resistance.” Among the periods of the café’s culture that Livorni describes is the prominence and
relationships with important figures like Eugenio Montale while continuing to successfully submit articles and narrative works to other publications.

Vittorini was soon spending increasing intervals in Milan, accepting a job there with Bompiani in 1938, at which point he had almost finished writing Conversazione in Sicilia. Interested in translation and American prose, he prepared an anthology entitled Americana. His activities during the Second World War followed his well-documented anti-fascist turn that began in earnest with the advent of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 and continued to amplify. He had started to participate in concretely anti-fascist undertakings by the fall of 1942, writing and disseminating anti-fascist propaganda, and was arrested on 26 July 1943 and imprisoned until 21 August of that year. In 1944, he wrote Uomini e no “while in hiding from the nazi police who had identified him as one of the leaders of the Milanese communist partisans” (Bonsaver, Elio Vittorini 104). The narrative was published the following year by Bompiani.

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6 See Bonsaver, “Fascist Censorship” for an account of the difficult publication history of Americana, which was heavily censored before its release and finally banned in 1943.

7 See, for example, Briosi, Invito 22–23. It is important to acknowledge that Vittorini’s views did not suddenly and totally change at the onset of Italy’s participation in the Spanish Civil War. Bonsaver cites as evidence of this the in-depth work of Giovanni Falaschi, whose view it is that “although it is still unclear whether Vittorini resigned from the fascist party or whether he was expelled from it, what is certain is that in the summer of 1936 Vittorini finally realized the incompatibility between his anti-bourgeois, revolutionary idea of fascism and the reality before him” (Elio Vittorini 33). It should be noted that this was a relatively new development; Bonsaver shows that “by the time of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, in the autumn of 1935, Vittorini was still openly supporting the fascist regime, albeit from a critical viewpoint” (Elio Vittorini 31). Ettore Catalano similarly asserts that Vittorini’s fascism would fall into crisis “con la guerra di Spagna, e non già con l’aggressione all’Etiopia” (La forma 140).

8 In “Fascist Censorship,” Bonsaver calls attention to the fact that in late 1942, Vittorini still had supporters within the regime and that there is evidence that “it is only after the collapse of the regime that Vittorini’s political activities drastically interfered with his literary career” (182). For example, despite Vittorini’s anti-fascism at that time, which is cited by many critics, “in October 1942 Vittorini was … officially invited as Italian representative to a Nazi-organized conference on literature in Weimar” (Bonsaver, “Fascist Censorship” 181).
As the war drew to an end, Vittorini briefly directed *L’Unità* before founding *Il Politecnico*, a cultural journal with significant political implications that operated from September 1945 until December 1947. Despite issues in his personal life such as the annulment of his marriage in 1950 and the death of his son in 1955, the late 1940s and the 1950s proved professionally productive for him. Although he published relatively extensively—his works from these years include *Il Sempione strizza l’occhio al Frejus* (1947), *Le donne di Messina* (1949), and *Diario in pubblico* (1957)—his editorial and journalistic activities in the post-war period were arguably of equal, if not greater, significance. For example, he revived his earlier collaboration with *La Stampa* and in 1951 began work with Einaudi on *I Gettoni*, a series of narratives. In line with Vittorini’s tendency “to express his political and social ideas in the public arena” (Bonsaver, *Elio Vittorini* 234) and the forward-looking attitude toward literature that characterized his activity after the Second World War, he commenced editing the quarterly *Il Menabò* with Italo Calvino in 1959. Vittorini died in 1966 of stomach cancer, with which he was first diagnosed in 1963.

2 Early Writings and Political Associations

In this section, I briefly describe the most germane of Vittorini’s early writings, delineating key aspects of his ideological leanings as expounded in published articles and considering how his beliefs may have impacted his literary maturation. Given the plethora of Vittorini’s initial contributions and the intricacy of the argument, I conduct only a cursory examination, the goal of which is to provide context for my analysis of *Il garofano rosso*. Incorporated into my discussion are some observations regarding scholars’ handling of the author’s involvement in fascist circles. Like him, they have often minimized and/or justified his actions.

Even in an article as relatively early and brief as “Scarico di coscienza,” published in *L’Italia letteraria* on 13 October 1929, we see Moravia grappling with potentially polemical ideas that suggest that he perceived the intellectual situation in Italy to be disheartening and wished to draw attention to what made it so. The title with which a passage from “Scarico di coscienza” was republished by Moravia in his *Diario in pubblico* in 1957—“Maestri cercando”—is revealing of

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9 For a study about the importance of *Il Menabò* in the literary landscape of Italy at that time, see Bonsaver, “*Il Menabò*, Calvino and the ‘Avanguardie’” (which, despite the title, includes significant analysis of Vittorini’s involvement) and Ferretti 285–296.
a key theme: the need to search for appropriate cultural figures on whom to draw for inspiration and in turn bring about change. In this piece, Vittorini expresses his discontent with Italian culture, which, he felt, should be more open to European literatures and to new intellectual approaches in general. Taken with his praising of Italo Svevo, who, he states, “ci ha giovato meglio che venti anni di pessima letteratura” (“Scarico” 1), this piece shows Vittorini’s desire at this point in his career to accomplish an innovative attitude toward literature involving a combination of factors, including elements from other European literatures, classicism, and modernism. For example, while making clear his disdain for many producers of literature, both current and of the past, Moravia acknowledges the positive influence of La Ronda.10

Though Pautasso contends that “Scarico di coscienza” “praticamente costituisce il suo ingresso ufficiale nel contesto della letteratura italiana” (Elio Vittorini 19), “Scarico” followed a formative period in which Vittorini had already displayed unequivocal sympathies for Malapartian fascism, a time of seemingly passionate political engagement that was “segna[t]o da un impegno narrativo piuttosto assiduo e non privo di risultati interessanti, anche se provvisori” (De Nicola 6). Rather than an outsider’s observations of an environment that he had yet to enter, “Scarico di coscienza” was evidently meant, then, as an expression of collective frustration and concern on behalf of members of his intellectual generation, a group to which he already felt he belonged (as also indicated by his liberal use of the first-person plural in the article, such as when he declares, “Proust è il nostro maestro più genuino, più spontaneo, più caro, di cui non sapremmo privarci senza abandonare i nostri medesimi pensieri, senza sacrificare il nostro mestiere” [1]). Vittorini became a member of the fascist party in April 1926 at the age of seventeen, a decision bespeaking a stance that would hold steady for several years to come as “his political views remained faithful to the fervent support for revolutionary fascism shown in his debut article” (Bonsaver, Elio Vittorini 10), which was a 1926 piece entitled “L’ordine nostro” that appeared in La conquista dello Stato and expressed opinions consistent with those of

10 That Vittorini acknowledges Italian culture’s “impagabile” debt to the journal (“Scarico” 1) is, perhaps, less surprising when one notes the influence of La Ronda on some of his earliest works, particularly Il brigantino del papa, to which I will return.
provincial fascism.\textsuperscript{11} This and other writings see a young man unmistakably aligned with the sentiments of Malaparte, the Selvaggio, and the Strapaese movement, particularly in his exploration of the theme, “allora sollecitato dal regime,” of the definition of the “italiano nuovo” formed by fascism (De Nicola 14).

Indeed, in “L’ordine nostro,” formulated as a letter to the editor of La conquista dello Stato, and in the subsequent essay “Il sermone dell’ordinarietà,” which consists of three parts called prolegomeni published between 1927 and 1928, Vittorini articulates his vision of anti-bourgeois fascism, contrasting the “ordinarietà” of the majority of Italians with the “straordinarietà” of the bourgeoisie and foreigners (Panicali, Il primo Vittorini 6). This group of writings is furthermore significant in that the revealing parallels between the “Sermone” and Vittorini’s first published story, “Ritratto di Re Gianpiero,” show the intertwining of the author’s political views and literary output.\textsuperscript{12}

The “Ritratto” is, in fact, the “traduzione in termini letterari dell’ideologia politica dello scrittore tra il 1926-1927” (De Matteis 17), a portrait of the model presented by Vittorini in the “Sermone” that unmistakably Malapartian. Published on 12 June 1927 in La Fiera Letteraria, it is germane to a study of Il garofano rosso in several respects, not least of which in that it demonstrates the degree to which even in his early stories, the author used his fictional works as a vehicle for his ideological perspectives. The failure of the protagonist of the story, the king Gianpiero, “un uomo tagliato all’antico” (Vittorini, “Ritratto” 2), is not due to his (lack of) efforts but can instead be attributed primarily to his inability to adapt to new realities and thus please his subjects, who seek someone extraordinary. “Ordinary” in the mould presented in the “Sermone,” he becomes a negative symbol to his subordinates and is not accepted by them. As a result of their rejection, of his sense of having been born in the wrong era, “si sentiva per sempre chiuso nelle pareti dei Codici e delle leggi, custodito e suggellato, fatto simbolico e figurazione,

\textsuperscript{11} “L’ordine nostro” consists of three parts: “L’italiano,” “Quando è che si fece l’Italia?,” and “La restaurazione del costume.” The many critical explorations of this piece include Panicali’s Elio Vittorini 13–15 and Il primo Vittorini 3–10. “L’ordine nostro” was published in La conquista dello Stato on 15 December 1926.

\textsuperscript{12} The relationship between the article and the short story is examined in depth by Panicali in Il primo Vittorini 15–30 and also in Elio Vittorini 17–20.
e disperato di essere troppo re e poco signore, sfogava in fantastici gesti del suo scettro di vecchio oro giallo” (Vittorini, “Ritratto” 2). That the ordinary-extraordinary dichotomy is at the root of the people’s denial of Re Gianpiero as an authority figure worthy of trust and respect is made explicit: “Così che di lui maravigliava ognuno come di un uomo straordinario e fuor di natura, dove invece egli era il più ordinario per la sua regale ordinarietà; ed il popolo lo teneva in fama di stregone e perciò lontano dalla fiducia, non avendolo mai accostato, nè avuto famigliare” (Vittorini, “Ritratto” 2).

While the influence of Vittorini’s mentor (Malaparte), of the Selvaggio group, and of Strapaese on the views conveyed in “L’ordine,” the “Sermone,” and, to a certain point, on the prose utilized by Vittorini in the “Ritratto” is marked, one can also find direct stylistic links between the “Ritratto” and the classicism of La Ronda. The enigmatic nature of Vittorini’s early attempts suggests that he was very much in an uncertain and experimental phase, although he skilfully melded the various threads of his approach in order to communicate his viewpoints in as effective a manner as possible. As Panicali asserts with respect to characteristics reminiscent of the contemporary ideas of Malaparte and those evocative of La Ronda, these “vie” did not proceed in parallel: rather, “s’intrecciano e si scambiano, in modo da mediare i due linguaggi (da nobilitarli o, viceversa, da renderli più popolari)” in homage “all’ideologia che vuole un ordine politico e un’architettura letteraria consoni all’unità italiana da costruire: non rigida, bensì viva delle sue molteplici differenze regionali; tradizionale e insieme moderna; classica, ma di un classicismo ironico e turbato” (Elio Vittorini 17–18). The young author thus continued to affirm his allegiance to Malaparte, to whose ideology he was still plainly and firmly attracted, while also beginning to establish a style of his own—one that would evolve away from the almost militant anti-bourgeois fascism of the “Sermone” and the prose of the “Ritratto.”

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13 It should be remembered that even in terms of the themes that they endorsed, Il Selvaggio and Strapaese are not totally separate from the group of La Ronda; as Giuseppe De Matteis states, “il concetto di ‘italianità’… dalle chiare connotazioni nazionali tra il gruppo dei rondisti, si verrà colorando di sfumature regionali e il Vittorini si inserirà proprio in questa tendenza di continuità ideologica che legherà la Ronda al movimento di Strapaese” (17). Vittorini would identify the connection between La Ronda and Solaria in “Scarico di coscienza,” which “established his name as a militant young intellectual” (Bonsaver, Elio Vittorini 21). See De Matteis, especially 20–21, for a description of Vittorini as advocate for a renewal of concepts of La Ronda during his time at Solaria.
The mixing of elements suggestive of *La Ronda* and of the *Selvaggio* evinces the general heterogeneity of Vittorini’s writing in these years. Other works more definitively lean in one direction or the other. As in the “Ritratto di Re Gianpiero,” the short story “Il commendatore,” published in *L’Italiano* in October 1928, and the brief novel *Il brigantino del papa*,\(^{14}\) in which Vittorini tried to develop characters and themes established in the aforementioned stories, are quite clearly related to the *Selvaggio* thematically since they again take up the issue of the creation of a prototype for the new Italian. Stylistically, however, “Il commendatore” and *Il brigantino* differ from the “Ritratto,” which privileges “la ricerca formale, raggianta ricorrendo a tutti gli inganni della logica, dell’ironia, del sentimento” (Panicali, *Il primo Vittorini* 16). In contrast, the language in these slightly later publications is “esagitata e robusta, fantasiosa e popolaresca” and more closely recalls the fashions of *L’Italiano* and *Il Selvaggio* (De Matteis 17–18). Reflecting the nascent stage in Vittorini’s complex intellectual formation during which they came to fruition, they are not of uniformly high quality. This might in some measure account for Vittorini’s failure to acknowledge the vast majority of his youthful production in the personal history that he built in *Diario in pubblico*. The omission was likely also motivated by the “changing perception both of himself as an individual artist and of the nature and function of his art” (Burns 992) that caused him to later reshape certain parts of his intellectual past.

Other writings from this period are dominated by other literary influences. While the strong views expressed in articles and illustrated by “Ritratto di Re Gianpiero” and *Il brigantino del papa* showcase Vittorini’s political and literary engagement with Selvaggian themes and connected aesthetics with, in the case of the “Ritratto,” limited influence from the *Ronda*, some of his literary experiments in the years preceding *Il garofano rosso* more directly make use of Rondian techniques. For example, he produced several short stories in the late 1920s that “fall, to different extents, into the category of literary tableaux in the best *prosa d’arte* tradition” (Bonsaver, *Elio Vittorini* 17). Such works include the highly descriptive narratives “Saluto a

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\(^{14}\) *Il brigantino* was received negatively by both Malaparte and Falqui and was thus abandoned and left unpublished, with the exception of a short fragment, until the manuscript was rediscovered decades later and edited by Sergio Pautasso. His introduction to the 1985 Rizzoli volume provides a good summary of the editorial history of the novel. Pautasso makes evident that the work is by no means a masterpiece: as he states, his intention in releasing it is to render a fuller understanding of Vittorini’s developmental trajectory, not to suggest that it represents the revealing of “un capolavoro segreto e nascosto” (Introduction XVIII). See also Bonsaver, *Elio Vittorini* 14–15.
Bologna,” “San Martino,” “Inverno al mare,” “Sogno di caccia,” and “Approdo in secca,” which appeared in publications such as Il Mattino, Il Resto del Carlino, and Il Lavoro fascista between 1928 and 1929.

The diversity of his output in the 1920s foreshadows the multifariousness, prolificacy, and, in some cases, contradictions of the author’s endeavours during his first major stay in Florence, which began in earnest in 1930 following his relocation there. I discussed this period in the previous section; therefore, I will simply reiterate how while making an effort to advance his involvement with Solaria, an activity that he emphasized in later recollections, Vittorini also wrote for periodicals including the fascist Il Bargello and carried out other editorial work, most prominently at La Nazione. He moreover contributed to volumes like Scrittori nuovi and, remarkably, to an approbatory biography entitled Vita di Pizzo-di-ferro detto Italo Balbo for which Vittorini was, as has been recently discovered, probably the ghostwriter.

Of these projects, it could be argued that those pertaining to Solaria shaped Vittorini’s intellectual development the most. Though many of his initial pieces in Solaria were reviews, often of foreign authors, he composed short stories as well, notably three that would form part of the collection Piccola borghesia, which was published in 1931 in Florence. Furthermore, it was during his time at Solaria that his friendship with Malaparte definitively ended and that “si

15 These years of Vittorini’s formation have been investigated by many critics. See, among others, Panicali, Il primo Vittorini 53–99 and Bonsaver, Elio Vittorini 21–34.

16 I briefly describe Solaria and its place in the cultural climate of the interwar period in Chapter One of this thesis.

17 Basing his belief both on philological considerations and on statements from witnesses, Lorenzo Greco asserts that Vittorini was likely the author of the biography; as he writes, “le testimonianze dei contemporanei trovan importanti e decisive conferme sul piano filologico: risulta quindi del tutto attendibile l’attribuzione a Vittorini della Vita di Pizzo-di-ferro detto Italo Balbo” (Censura e scrittura 42).

18 The stories of Piccola borghesia are furthermore significant in that they show the degree to which Vittorini was experimenting with different narrative styles. Another interesting work from this period is Viaggio in Sardegna, an account of his travels on the island written for a contest staged by L’Italia letteraria in 1932. Portions of it appeared in L’Italia letteraria in 1932 and others in Il Bargello and Solaria in 1933. It was released in its entirety by Parenti in 1936.
assiste a una vera svolta nello stile narrativo: in quello stile che Vittorini aveva temprato alle cadenze della retorica roncida” (Panicali, Elio Vittorini 51).

Given the extent of Vittorini’s relationship with the journal, the issue of Solaria’s somewhat ambiguous political orientation is an important one. Critic Giorgio Luti argues that the attested apoliticism of Solaria cannot be equated with anti-fascism, suggesting that by not taking a position, Solaria rendered itself complicit; as he writes in a passage already cited in Chapter One, the periodical “non coincide col fascismo, ma inevitabilmente vi si adeguare, accettando una situazione, trova la chiave necessaria alla convivenza” (96). This interpretation problematizes Vittorini and other intellectuals’ retrospective characterization of Solaria as an unequivocally anti-fascist publication (Vittorini’s claim that being a member of the Solaria group meant being anti-fascist is a case in point; see Diario in pubblico 174).

On the other hand, the political stance of Il Bargello, officially associated with the Fascist Federation of Florence, is incontrovertible. Guido Bonsaver’s description of Vittorini’s work with the journal, which took place in tandem with his collaboration with Solaria, is revealing of the extent to which Vittorini was willing to openly express pro-fascist views; as Bonsaver describes it, Vittorini’s continued sympathy for fascist notions was typified by “his hatred for whatever constituted bourgeois culture, with the added belief that a revolutionary form of fascism would sweep away its parasitical remnants” (Elio Vittorini 29). Indeed, Vittorini’s articles in Il Bargello make plain that his outward, though fault-finding, support for the regime endured. The reality of his pre–Spanish Civil War convictions is in direct variance with his post-war insinuations, particularly in the 1948 preface to Il garofano rosso, and again discloses the complexity of his intellectual and political formation.

3 Preliminary Considerations regarding Vittorini’s First Novel

Il garofano rosso, set in the mid-1920s, around the time of the murder of Giacomo Matteotti, depicts a portion of the adolescence of Alessio Mainardi, a high school student in Sicily. The

19 Bonsaver, however, references an interview conducted in 1953 but only recently published in which “Vittorini gave what is perhaps his most sincere account of his political stance during the fascist regime” (Elio Vittorini 31). See Bonsaver, Elio Vittorini 32 for an excerpt.
novel can be divided into three parts, each representing a phase of his development: the first focuses on his friendship with Tarquinio, a young revolutionary, and his love for Giovanna, a schoolgirl; the second on Alessio’s return home; and the third on his devastating but transformative sexual experience with Zobeida, a prostitute. Various narrative currents connect these segments and develop the overarching plot, which in itself consists of several threads, including Alessio’s exposure to and embracing of the ideas of left-wing anti-bourgeois fascism and the consequences thereof; his sexual coming of age; his education; and his eventual disillusionment with elements of the adult world that he at first so desperately wished to join. The story is told from the perspective of Alessio, but secondary characters assume critical roles in establishing and expanding key themes.

It is imperative to acknowledge the complicated genesis of the novel. As Ettore Catalano maintains, “il Garofano rosso si presenta subito come la prova vittoriniana più complessa ed accidentata per quanto riguarda la sua storia esterna, la vicenda delle varie stesure e delle revisioni e degli interventi d’autore” (La forma 140). An initial consideration is the format of the work as it was first published since the gap between the first instalment, which appeared in the February–March 1933 issue of Solaria, and the final instalment, which was dated 1934 but did not appear until March 1936, is quite large.20 This is especially significant given that Vittorini did not finish the novel before publication began: in fact, his exchanges with Alberto Carocci give “the overall impression … that he was writing Il garofano rosso without a well thought-out general plan” (Bonsaver, Elio Vittorini 51). This assertion is borne out by unexplained shifts in focus and style between the instalments published in Solaria, adjustments that at least in part reflect the concomitant evolution of Vittorini’s political and intellectual views.21

The changes that Vittorini made to the manuscript before attempting to have it accepted for release in volume form in the late years of the 1930s—an unreached goal despite his best efforts to appease fascist censors—show that he did not abandon Il garofano rosso after the publication of the final instalment in Solaria. Rather, in contradiction with his characterization of the novel’s

20 The later instalments faced difficulty from fascist censors. Bonsaver’s work on the subject is important in elucidating how the censorship of Il garofano rosso is not indicative of the Vittorini’s nascent anti-fascism; see Bonsaver, “Fascist Censorship” 172–174.

21 See Bonsaver, Elio Vittorini 51–57.
development in the preface to the 1948 Mondadori edition, he most likely edited it for the first time in the latter half of the 1930s. These first modifications were substantial, leading to “la rigida separazione tra la stesura del Garofano in rivista e quella in volume” (Rodondi 14).

While this is a matter of debate, the second reworking of the text might have entailed additional, although not as extensive, revisions.

In his recent study of Il garofano rosso, which includes a comprehensive apparatus of variants, Gianluca Lauta argues that “la redazione definitiva è l’esito di un severo lavoro di autocensura” (Il primo Garofano rosso 13), identifying an important reality—that “Vittorini scrisse il romanzo sotto il regime, da fascista, e lo pubblicò definitivamente a regime caduto, da comunista” (Il primo Garofano rosso 11). While recognizing the significance of the adaptations, and while considering the variations so thoroughly individuated by Lauta and others, I nonetheless quote from the final version rather than that of Solaria. I justify this choice based on factors besides the obvious issue of the inaccessibility of the Solaria edition, which has never been republished and

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22 The passage of the preface beginning “ma era dall’autunno del ’35 che non avrei potuto riconoscere più come ‘mia’, e insomma come ‘vera’, nessuna delle ragioni per le quali avevo scritto il Garofano rosso” (193) implies that he abandoned revisions to the work in the autumn of 1935. However, as Francesca Fiorillo asseverates, using Vittorini’s account to aid a philological investigation of the genesis of Il garofano rosso should be done with reservation since the author’s rendering of his intellectual process in this document is “scarsamente attendibile” (Fiorillo 68).

23 There is a significant degree of disagreement among critics as to when these initial revisions took place. For example, Catalano affirms that “una revisione accurata” was probably conducted in 1935 (La forma 140) while Bonsaver believes that Vittorini revised the novel in 1937 and in the early months of 1938, at the same time as he was writing Conversazione in Sicilia (Elio Vittorini 53).

24 Critics have examined the differences between the editions in detail; see especially Greco, Censura e scrittura 104–132, Panicali, “Lingua e ideologia” 232–234, Rodondi 86–147, and all of Fiorillo. Lauta provides an extensive list of studies of the variants (Il primo Garofano rosso 7).

25 The situation is complicated because there is no known manuscript of the first version of Il garofano rosso in volume form (Rodondi 15). Bonsaver indicates that there is general consensus among critics that Vittorini’s assertion in the preface to Il garofano rosso that he did not further amend the text in 1948 is likely truthful, pointing to Rodondi’s analysis as an authoritative source (Elio Vittorini 53). Greco also concludes that this is probably the case, though he bases his opinion on the absence of evidence to the contrary (Censura e scrittura 105). Fiorillo, on the other hand, does not really say which of the possibilities (which for her are corrections in 1935, 1948, or else gradual ones) she thinks is most probable, stating only that “nessuna testimonianza dello scrittore ci aiuta in questo senso in modo meno vago di quanto risulta da ciò che ha dichiarato nel corso di alcune interviste” (70). Lauta believes that a second series of corrections, “solo ipotizzata,” took place in 1948 (Il primo Garofano rosso 13).
can be read, as Lauta confirms, “soltanto in una delle non moltissime biblioteche che possiedono, completa, la collezione della rivista” (Il primo Garofano rosso 11). Despite Vittorini’s many alterations and attenuations, the Mondadori version retains the core of the original and is probably very close to the text of the later 1930s, which is within the period examined in this thesis and at which time Vittorini was still in the midst of his personal development. The changes are certainly major but by no means render it a different novel; although Vittorini was by 1948 aligned with the communist party and sought to defend and reshape his intentions in writing the original, the work as it was finally published depicts the chaos and excitement experienced by young men during the early stages of fascism. Even Lauta, who devotes himself to determining differences between the Solaria and the Mondadori editions of Il garofano rosso, allows that “in genere, i temi ideologici sono trattati nello stesso modo nelle due versioni” (Il primo Garofano rosso 17).

I preface my direct analysis of Il garofano rosso as a Bildungsroman with a return to the topic of the manifestation of Vittorini’s politics in the work, which I introduced in relation to the author’s contemporaneous literary and journalistic production. Particularly germane is Panicali’s reference to “il romanzo dell’ambiguità” (Elio Vittorini 114), an idea that encapsulates both Vittorini’s reluctance to fully explain his motives and critics’ varying interpretations, some of which definitively call Il garofano rosso anti-fascist and some of which definitively call it fascist. I hold that even if Vittorini subsequently recalibrated the political dimension of the novel and was critical of aspects of the fascist party as it had evolved by the 1930s, evidence such as his relatively positive portrayal of anti-bourgeois fascism, the nature of the changes that he made for the later edition, and the views that he expressed through other venues corroborate the hypothesis that Il garofano rosso cannot be declared as being anti-fascist. Whether or not it can

26 He goes on to write that “nella seconda si cerca di attenuare alcuni elementi scomodi o imbarazzanti” (17).

27 Vittorini recognized the political dimension of the novel. However, his explanation/justification in the 1948 preface seems to imply that he meant for the work to serve as a kind of warning rather than as a glorification of fascismo della prima ora and does not acknowledge his participation in it, as indicated by his use of the third person plural; as he states, “Il principale valore documentario del libro è tuttavia nel contributo che può dare a una storia dell’Italia sotto il fascismo e ad una caratterizzazione dell’attrattiva che un movimento fascista in generale, attraverso malintesi spontanei o procurati, può esercitare sui giovani. C’è in loro, verso il mondo costituito, una diffidenza che li accomuna e un atteggiamento di
be classified as explicitly fascist is more equivocal, but just as his eventual rejection of fascism and embracing of communism, as well as a later series of ideological crises, are incontestable facts and form an important element of Vittorini’s contribution to Italian literature and politics, so is his enthusiastic, though arguably naïve, adherence to left-wing fascism up to the beginning of the Spanish Civil War.

4 Aesthetic Considerations

The issue of the aesthetics of *Il garofano rosso* is made complicated by the novel’s lengthy gestation, by contemporaneous changes in Vittorini’s style, and by his shifting political motives. Although many differences between the Solaria and the Mondadori texts deemphasize the realist aspects of the work, and even if it is tinged with other styles such as lyricism, *Il garofano rosso* can be analyzed as an example of literary realism in several regards. First and foremost, it is, as Vittorini and various scholars propose, a document that captures a historical moment in terms of both the events chronicled and the language used in narration—in Lauta’s formulation, a realism that is often “puramente descrittivo” (*Il primo Garofano rosso* 11). Due, in part, to these attributes, it exhibits characteristics of Lukács, Bakhtin, and Auerbach’s theories of realism, which stress the inseverable connection between realism and the reality that it portrays and, in the case of Auerbach, the concept of mimesis. There are furthermore traces of psychological realism, which is also discernible in some of Vittorini’s early works.

While I take these features into account, the significance of and motivations behind stylistic changes that occur from the beginning to the end of the narrative (for instance, a movement toward prophetic language that would later be a distinguishing feature of *Conversazione in Sicilia* [Panicali, “Lingua e ideologia” 234]) along with aesthetic modifications to the text from

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28 As outlined in Chapter One.

29 There were, of course, intermediate and rather significant steps between *Il garofano rosso* and *Conversazione in Sicilia*. In *La metafora e l’iperbole*, Catalano discusses *Giochi di ragazzi*, which was
the Solaria to the Mondadori version of Il garofano rosso should also be considered. These alterations bespeak not only concessions that were necessary for reasons of censorship but also, and perhaps more importantly, a profound development in how Vittorini thought about the novel as a category: in fact, “tra la stesura del primo Garofano e la revisione, Vittorini aveva in effetti cambiato idea su che cosa si dovesse intendere con romanzo ‘nuovo’” (Lauta, Il primo Garofano rosso 47). In formulating this “new” novel, Vittorini attenuated the realism of Il garofano rosso in the same way he did the work’s political and sexual dimensions. His actions, and the novel’s resulting qualities, indicate that the idea of double Bildung can be connected to a stylistic analysis of Il garofano rosso in that it helped shape, and was in turn shaped by, the somewhat lengthy—and highly significant—stage of the author’s intellectual formation in which it was written.30

However, the extent to which Vittorini was able to revise the text in accordance with his change in attitude is debatable. In his lengthy exposition in the 1948 preface to Il garofano rosso, he rejects many aspects of this particular novel—and, to a certain extent, of the novel in general—while also defending his acquiescence in allowing Mondadori to publish Il garofano rosso well over a decade after he had apparently abandoned it. His wish to make clear that it was not reflective of his subsequent production or political views is evidence that despite incentives to do so, he could not wholly eliminate the work’s realist elements or its political and sensual content since they are at the core of the novel and since plot and aesthetics in Il garofano rosso are not easily divided.31

写的1935年和其中“costituisce l’ironico rovesciamento dell’ipotesi di riscatto-condanna del Garofano rosso ed in ogni caso un anello importante della catena narrativa che condurrà a Conversazione” (81–82). In the same work, he calls Erica e i suoi fratelli “erede di tutte le contraddizioni della forma narrativa vittoriniana, dagli esordi strapaesani fino alla missione disperante del Garofano rosso ed il suo ironico rovesciamento” (90).

30 Domenica Perrone also sees Il garofano rosso as representing “una doppia Bildung, quella degli adolescenti della finzione romanzesca e quella dello scrittore” (370).

31 Vittorini devotes a significant amount of the preface to expanding on his aversion to the traditional novel. He prefers the melodrama, which is, he writes, “in grado di risolvere poeticamente tutti i suoi problemi di raffigurazione scenica di un’azione realistica” while “il romanzo non è ancora in grado di
Critics such as Andreini, Catalano, Corti, Lauta, Panicali, and Rodondi have examined in detail the linguistic variations between *Il garofano rosso* as it appeared in serial form and as it was eventually released by Mondadori. Lauta’s is the most recent of these analyses and includes a more or less comprehensive overview of the alterations, but other studies are also valuable. Panicali, for one, suggests that irreconcilable stylistic ambiguities, which “danno luogo a due diversi linguaggi” (*Elio Vittorini* 114), were eliminated only with the corrections for the Mondadori volume, although she does not state that the language dispensed with was the more “realist” of the two. Rodondi indicates that the identification of the transformed quality of Vittorini’s prose is a commonality in a number of scholarly inquiries, writing that many of them “sottolineano come costante, nel passaggio da S [Solaria] a M [Mondadori], l’eliminazione (o l’attenuazione) del livello marcatamente ‘realistico’, che nel testo solariano si appoggiava per lo più a moduli stilistici di stampo becero-selvaggio” (35).

I will not repeat the work of these scholars, who provide systematic descriptions of important divergences between the versions of *Il garofano rosso*. Agreeing that Vittorini reshaped it for several reasons, including his maturing intellectual and political identity and the need to render the novel more acceptable to the fascist censors that he would need to appease in order to have it published, I instead highlight only the most relevant modifications. In doing so, I provide my own interpretation of them and of their ultimate effect on the realism present in the work. Though they are certainly significant, I contend that the specific differences that it is possible to individuate are at least in part indicative of a general change in Vittorini’s approach to narrative rather than being solely due to an explicit (and total) eradication of the “livello marcatamente ‘realistico’” named by Rodondi (35). This was, after all, a period of experimentation for the author that closely followed his “rejection of *selvaggesque* styles and themes” and development of closer ties to the styles of the *Ronda* and, more notably, of *Solaria* (*Bonsaver, Elio Vittorini* 35).
Inarguably, neither iteration of *Il garofano rosso* can be labeled as being entirely realist, a fact upon which Vittorini insisted and that he even underscored. Writing about the 1948 volume, he argues that purely realist language:

> Non riesce ad essere *musica* e ad afferrare la realtà come insieme anche di parti e di elementi in via di formazione…. Si è, in un secolo, impregnato talmente della realtà che ha continuato a voler conoscere, da esserne ormai saturo e non poter rappresentare una realtà diversa da quella di cui è impregnato, o non riducibile a quella di cui è impregnato. È come se ormai fosse un linguaggio ideografico. Non risponde più, vale a dire, al compito proprio di un linguaggio poetico: il quale è di conoscere e di lavorare per conoscere quanto, della verità, non si arriva a conoscere col linguaggio dei concetti. (Preface 195, emphasis in the original)

In other words, realism is not effective unless it is combined with lyricism, which better allows for a full appreciation of reality as it exists and as it comes into being. These qualities were not absent in the *Solaria* instalments of *Il garofano rosso* but were unquestionably intensified in the edition that appeared in 1948. Indeed, Catalano maintains that when comparing the *Solaria* to the Mondadori version, it is immediately apparent that the “linguaggio urtante” of the *Solaria* instalments is “improvvisamente liricizzato” and that the erotic-realistic tension in *Solaria* “è venuta meno” (*La metafora* 68), calling this a “pudico processo di intensificazione ‘lirica’ (volto a cancellare le zone linguistico-realistiche ed a sostituirle con delicate *nuances* psicologiche)” (*La metafora* 69). The influx of lyrical characteristics, then, had a conspicuous impact on the kind of realism utilized by Vittorini in the book as it was in the end published by Mondadori.

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32 In an article that was published in *Il Bargello* in 1933 and is now reprinted in *Diario in pubblico*, Vittorini directly compared *realisti* and *lirici*, distinguishing the two groups like this: “Quelli che, leggendoli, mi fanno pensare ‘ecco, è proprio vero’, e che cioè mi danno la conferma di ‘come’ so che in genere sia nella vita. E quelli che mi fanno pensare ‘perdio, non avevo mai supposto che potesse essere così’, e che cioè mi rivelano un nuovo, particolare ‘come’ sia nella vita” (*Diario in pubblico* 58). I suggest that his approach in *Il garofano rosso* at least partially reflects a reconciliation of these two notions. De Nicola provides a summary of other of Vittorini’s contemporary theories about realism and lyricism; see 52–53.

33 This is just one aspect of the changes to the text identified by Catalano: he also, for example, notes the elimination of many of the erotic-realistic *tòpoi* (*La metafora* 69).
Vittorini also probed other aspects of realist prose. For instance, in an essay now published in *Le due tensioni. Appunti per una ideologia della letteratura*, he insults the “schifosissimo” Verga, whose mode of writing, to Vittorini, “non corrisponde a un processo storico—ma a una velleità di processo storico” (77). He also directly criticizes naturalism, writing that in that movement, “l’oggettività (che pur è teorizzata con tanto fasto—anche per la questione di *come far parlare i personaggi*) … non esiste in alcun modo” (*Le due* 77, emphasis in the original). This view, which he expressed following the *Solaria* version of the text, might have contributed to the nature of his modifications to the Mondadori edition.\(^{34}\)

He furthermore acknowledged that *Il garofano rosso* is an example of psychological realism, though he was clearly displeased about this quality as it materialized both in the content and in the mode of writing employed in the work, which he sought to justify as a product of his youth and inexperience.\(^{35}\) Again writing in 1948, he reflected on the aesthetics of the novel and his impulse to separate himself from it, a wish seemingly rooted more in his dislike for style than for plot:

> Quello che io ero diventato non trovava nel libro alcun appiglio per manifestarsi. Tutto del libro mi riusciva d’ostacolo a correggerlo nel senso di “quello che ero diventato”; e più della sua vicenda, dei suoi personaggi, delle idee e degli affetti osservati nei suoi personaggi, mi erano d’ostacolo il modo cui avevo creduto di dover attenermi nel rappresentare la sua vicenda, il realismo psicologico di cui mi ero servito per descriverne i personaggi, l’angolo visuale da cui mi ero sforzato di osservare idee ed affetti nei personaggi, insomma il suo linguaggio. (Preface 194)

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\(^{34}\) Lauta takes as fact that this was a determining factor, stating that “quando Vittorini rivide il romanzo, ormai impostato, cercò per quanto possibile di attenuare le insegne più tipiche di quel genere narrativo” (*Il primo* Garofano rosso 47). Since there is, so far as I can ascertain, no direct evidence that this is the case, it is perhaps inadvisable to make an inference as to contemporary authorial intent based on a critical writing that makes no reference to the novel, particularly given Vittorini’s unreliable account in the preface to *Il garofano rosso*.

\(^{35}\) His assertion that “questo era un linguaggio che sembrava obbligatorio per imparare a scrivere romanzi” (Preface 194) evinces his insistence that *Il garofano rosso* was little more than an instrument in his intellectual formation.
Vittorini’s observation suggests that ridding the work of this kind of language, which he directly attributes to psychological realism, would entail rewriting the novel almost entirely. Instead of doing so, he chose to relegate it to a past, naïve phase of his development. As a result, the psychological realist dimension does not disappear. Using the first person, Il garofano rosso is narrated from the viewpoint of Alessio, whose psychological reality and perspective are central to how the narrative develops.

Still, the work falls somewhere between the two varieties of realism outlined by Bernard J. Paris, who explains that “novels in which psychological realism predominates tend to present society from the point of view of the individual; novels of social realism often take a sociological rather than a psychological view of character” (8). Core themes of Il garofano rosso are political and sexual in nature, and in the majority of the narrative, particularly in the Solaria edition, “Vittorini si era spinto a esprimere una realtà sociale, si era servito della terminologia ‘realistica’” (Panicali, “Lingua e ideologia” 234). No matter if this aspect of the work is downplayed from one edition to the other, in neither does Vittorini shy away from explicit and realistic descriptions of political and sexual, potentially controversial, features of Alessio’s development. Many such elements of the protagonist’s formation will be examined at length in the next section of this chapter.

Other important traits of the realism utilized in Il garofano rosso are the speech patterns and vocabulary of the young people, especially as found in the letters that are exchanged between Alessio and Tarquinio while Alessio is at home with his parents. Various instances of this language of youth are suppressed in the Mondadori edition, even if significant traces of it remain. Panicali argues that Alessio and Tarquinio’s correspondence is the site “in cui lo stile si fa mimetico del parlato, tutta una zona lessicale iconoclastica della generazione del regime, che fa da pendant linguistico al fondo ideologico del romanzo” (“Lingua e ideologia” 232);

36 Raffaela Rodondi confirms that “entro un’ottica comparativa,” the many variants that define the passage from Il garofano rosso as it was printed in Solaria to as it was published by Mondadori “non intaccano, nella sostanza, la struttura dell’opera né sono tali da modificarne radicalmente, sul piano linguistico-formale, la fisionomia complessiva” (143).

37 In Panicali’s view, there is a distancing from realism in the later sections of the novel (correlating with Vittorini’s dynamic approach to writing and politics); see “Lingua e ideologia,” in particular 234–235.
Francesca Fiorillo also stresses the importance of the letters (75–76). In addition to this communication, which records written, informal language, further linguistic characteristics of the young people’s dialogue similarly tie it to the environment in which they live. Lauta, in fact, contends that *Il garofano rosso* is a kind of direct linguistic testimony to the “linguaggi giovanili della prima metà del Novecento” (*Il primo* Garofano rosso 19). This language manifests throughout the novel and in several ways. One example is the low register, most distinctively of the *Solaria* segments, which contributes to the documentary value of work. Another is the use of colloquialisms that, together with related attributes, “ricorrono a un linguaggio disinibito che riflette un atteggiamento nuovo dei giovani”; these are “esempi reali di parlato giovanile degli anni venti e trenta, promiscui sul piano diacronico, diatopico e probabilmente anche su quello diastratico” (Lauta, *Il primo* Garofano rosso 23). Moreover, the use of profanities and the indicative in place of the subjunctive evinces Vittorini’s attempt to mimic real speech. A few examples of obscenities/impolite phrases in *Il garofano rosso* are Alessio’s exclamation of “Dio che balle!” (103) and another character’s “mandatelo fuori questo coglione” (110). Among many examples of the substitution of the indicative for the subjunctive are the following, all in the Mondadori edition: “Credo che è meglio spiegarci chiaro una volta” (105), “mi pare che ce l’avete con me” (121), and “credo che hai detto molte cose giuste” (176).

The linguistic variations are also significant in that they parallel, and are indeed linked to, the ideological ones. Vittorini’s double intention is unmistakable—as Lauta asserts, the author “corrèse il Garofano con preoccupazioni di ordine ideologico e stilistico” (*Il primo* Garofano rosso 55)—and many of the changes affect both levels at once since the attenuation of realist qualities often occurs in sections in which Vittorini felt he must suppress thematic elements, whether of a political and of a sexual nature, that would offend fascist censors and thus impede his ability to have the novel published. Shifts in style in later parts of *Il garofano rosso*, such as the aforementioned prophetic language of the *ragazzino senza nome*, also entail an evolution toward a less realist approach. However, clear realist characteristics persist in the Mondadori version, lessened as they might be. Their presence and Vittorini’s perfunctory acknowledgement

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38 Lauta takes this one step further, calling it the only case of such language. See *Il primo* Garofano rosso 19–29 for his analysis, which he divides into several parts: “Il gergo innovante e l’onomastica giovanile,” “Mimesi o invenzione?,” “Retorica del ‘nuovo’ parlato,” and “Processo di razionalizzazione del parlato.”
of them place the novel in a particular period both for Italy and for the author, and his efforts to dilute their role in the work reflect and are associated with his simultaneous dealing with thematic concerns.

5  **Il garofano rosso as Bildungsroman**

Several major theories of the novel of formation are applicable to *Il garofano rosso*. In line with Mikhail Bakhtin’s proposition, the protagonist comes of age in a time of enormous cultural and historical transition. One of most relevant pieces of Franco Moretti’s explanation of the *Bildungsroman*, which similarly indicates that the protagonist’s development is intrinsically connected to the historical setting, is his insistence that it is a genre that is characterized by “‘youthful’ attributes of mobility and inner restlessness” and “that seeks its meaning in the future rather than in the past” (5, emphasis in the original). Historical context is crucial to the formation of Alessio, a young man who moves to the city and strives to balance his responsibilities, his instinctual desires, and his evolving convictions in order to make a place for himself among his peers and prove that he is a man. In narrating the story of his development, Alessio almost immediately affirms that this is a critical point in his path from child–to adulthood, first proclaiming, “avevo sedici anni, quasi diciassette; mi piaceva ormai fare il ‘grande’ e stare coi grandi veri” (3–4) and subsequently identifying the moment in which, as he articulates, “cominciai a non essere più bambino” (5). These declarations signal that the protagonist is aware he is in a transitional state—he is no longer a boy but cannot yet call himself a “grande.” The novel centres on the strategies with which Alessio attempts to move past this stage and the difficulties that he faces in doing so.

5.1  **Multiple Formations**

*Il garofano rosso* portrays not only Alessio’s development but also that of other characters. Taken together, the multiple formations emphasize the passion, confusion, and precariousness of the historical situation as experienced by this specific group of young people. Though Alessio and his process of maturation are the focus of the narrative, his companions’ developments are tied to his. Besides contributing to the contextualization of the novel, their behaviour impacts Alessio and frequently provides an impetus—whether positive or negative—for his actions. The differences between them are also significant, particularly those relating to age since “da questo nucleo problematico … prend[e] sviluppo tutta la vicenda dell’amore frustrato di Alessio”
(Greco, *Dubbiosi disiri* 80). There are numerous examples of the influence of these secondary characters, many of whom do not remain static but rather grow alongside the protagonist.  39

As proposed earlier, the novel can be analyzed as reflecting features of the author’s formation. While taking great pains to separate it from the rest of his oeuvre, and while denying the autobiographical elements of the text, Vittorini acknowledged that it was important to his intellectual growth, stating, for instance, that “si fa qualcosa anche a scrivere *Garofano*; si studia; s’impara; si addiziona, sottrae, moltiplica e divide; si tirano righe; si pesa; si bilancia; e infine ci si trova che qualcosa si è messo dentro per la prossima volta” (Preface 205). But the author’s retrospective insistence that Alessio is not a projection of his younger self—among his justifications is that the novel belongs, in his words, “alla società alla quale io appartengo; alla generazione alla quale io appartengo” and, as such, “è come se fosse stato scritto impersonalmente, da tutti coloro che hanno avuto o conosciuto o comunque sfiorato la mia stessa esperienza” (Preface 207)—does not account for the parallels between his life and Alessio’s.  40

Many of these correspondences are identified in Raffaele Crovi’s critical biography of the author, which shows that some aspects of the novel are more or less transposed from Vittorini’s experiences. The evidence presented by Crovi directly contradicts Vittorini’s claim that Alessio is not even a partial self-representation: besides affirming that certain characters were inspired by Vittorini’s family members and friends, Crovi also points to Vittorini’s participation in a school strike that led to a lengthy suspension, going so far as to aver that “l’epoca degli avvenimenti è spostata di due anni, nei mesi del delitto Matteotti del 1924” (33). Though maintaining that Alessio is an exact literary facsimile of Vittorini is probably an overextension, Crovi’s establishment of such links suggests that Vittorini’s revisionist version of the situation is

39 As previously stated, Perrone also analyzes *Il garofano* as a novel of multiple formations, writing that “nella tormentata stesura del romanzo vittoriniano portata avanti tra il ’32 e il ’34, si gioca … la partita di una doppia *Bildung*, quella degli adolescenti della finzione romanzesca e quella dello scrittore” (370). Though I agree with the core of her argument, I hesitate to unconditionally accept her statement that Vittorini’s was a “percorso di maturazione esemplare, attraverso cui viene pure a delinearsi la storia di una generazione cresciuta negli anni del Fascismo, desiderosa di inserirsi nella dialettica politica-società e di collegarsi con la modernità cercando di dare un nuovo senso al mestiere intellettuale” (368).

40 For an analysis of Vittorini’s disassociation of himself from *Il garofano rosso*, see Burns 993–998. As indicated in the previous note, Perrone identifies in the novel “una doppia *Bildung*,” including that of the author (370).
part of the general project with which he sought to “imbrogliare le carte autobiografiche” (Pautasso, Introduction X).

Given the distinct parts that constitute Alessio’s development, it too could be considered a salient example of multiple formations. However, these components, sexual, political, and educational, are intimately connected. The following sections examine the protagonist’s sexual coming of age, experience of fascism, and attitude toward and involvement in school, analyzing them each in turn in order to consider how they contribute both individually and in combination to his process of maturation.

5.2 The Flower, the Schoolgirl, and the Prostitute: Sexual Formation in *Il garofano rosso*

Alessio’s overall *Bildung* hinges on his sexual formation, which propels and motivates other major aspects of his development. It takes place through contrasting females: Giovanna, a student a few years his senior, and Zobeida, a prostitute who facilitates what Domenica Perrone terms Alessio’s “seconda nascita” (374). His interactions with them bookend the portion of his formation that is depicted in the novel. A glance from Giovanna is a small act that sparks in Alessio what is likely his first sexual passion, and an affair with Zobeida is presented as a rite of passage in which he sheds elements of his immature self, even if he has not reached the end of his development. Both cases underscore his youth and inexperience, to which Giovanna refers using a proxy and about which Zobeida teases him, but his infatuations are also the sites of important growth. Indeed, the consequences of his exposure to and feelings about these women spur him to assert his manhood, often via violence and political action.

Though their relationship is limited to a few brief encounters that include one in which she gives him the symbolic carnation and another where they exchange a brief kiss, Giovanna guides the first part of Alessio’s formation. Alessio is convinced that “il bacio di Giovanna sarebbe continuato” (7), but this is not to be. He is soon approached by Giovanna’s friend, the *levatrice*, who tells him that Giovanna is upset about the previous day’s events and wants to forget them. She and Alessio cannot be together for a simple yet highly significant reason: because Giovanna
is a woman, and Alessio is, according to the levatrice, still “un ragazzo” (11). Her next words to him are a disparaging but sententious exhortation: “Sappia essere uomo questa volta tanto da dimenticare il poco che c’è stato” (11). Alessio’s thoughts very quickly turn to his desire to purchase a weapon that might facilitate his becoming a man. His instinctual sense that violence will aid his maturation, the topic of subsequent analysis in this chapter, anticipates his embracing of political ideas and is the result of the awakening—of a new feeling of being alive and vital—that loving Giovanna has triggered in him. Despite her rejection, he continues to feel some loyalty to her.

Alessio’s chance meeting with the levatrice near the end of the novel verifies that he is no longer a boy. In stark contrast to her earlier snide remark as to his immaturity, she now exclaims, “accidenti, è diventato grande e grosso” (172). As the levatrice reports, Giovanna has also grown up: “Sapesse che bellezza è diventata! E come si veste bene! Che figura! Tutti si voltano quando passa!” (173). She furthermore comments that Giovanna has removed herself from the group of schoolgirls to which she formerly belonged. Responding to Alessio, who asked why Giovanna did not attend the funeral, she says: “Doveva venire [...]. Ma non si trova più tanto bene con noi scolare… Prima ha detto sì, poi invece ha mandato i fiori ed è rimasta a casa. Con noi dice che si sente troppo grande… Buffo, no? Ma potrebbe essere già una signora… Del resto non mancherà molto che lo sarà, m’immagino” (173). The distance between Giovanna and Alessio, who continues to traverse a different, less advanced, stage of youth, has evidently widened. However, it is only with the final revelation that she has lost her virginity to Tarquinio that Alessio reaches what is to all appearances a true turning point.

Alessio’s idealized bond with Giovanna as it first manifests represents an incipient moment in his passage to adulthood. If he is to advance further, he must consummate his longing to be with a woman, an opportunity that his unreciprocated yearning for Giovanna does not afford. Alessio learns about Zobeida from Tarquinio, who describes her in terms that approach the fantastical.

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41 Greco suggests that a chief impediment to Alessio is that he and Giovanna are in different developmental stages (Dubbiosi disiri 80). He furthermore states that Giovanna’s disobedience, as demonstrated by her actions later in the novel, also makes her significant on another level since she can be considered “come la protagonista d’un rovesciamento importante, relativo alle norme matrimoniali e alle proibizioni d’amore” (Dubbiosi disiri 86).
She is so magnificent that “non si può fare a meno di volerla” (24), and her exoticism is accentuated by her name, “da mille e una notte quasi” (25). Zobeida is, in essence, the antithesis of Giovanna. Whereas Giovanna is unattainable, Zobeida can be purchased; Alessio’s relationship with Giovanna is very fleetingly physical, transitioning into an association that comes only through references from other characters, while his connection with Zobeida temporarily metamorphoses in the other direction; his wish to have Giovanna is unrealized while his interactions with Zobeida are erotic and intense. Nonetheless, the women play interconnected and ultimately inseparable roles in Alessio’s formation, and his emotions regarding them are in constant flux. This oscillation is illustrated by Vittorini’s juxtaposition of references to Giovanna with references to Zobeida: for example, an episode in which Alessio fantasizes about Giovanna is immediately followed by a flashback to when the new group of prostitutes arrived at Madame Ludovica’s (30–31). It is also demonstrated by Alessio’s occasional superimposition of qualities of Giovanna with those of Zobeida. For instance, while speaking to his sister about his love interest, he confuses Giovanna with Zobeida and then pretends they are a single person (65–66).

Alessio’s relationship with Zobeida, who, according to Ruth Ben-Ghiat, “stands for an illicit and unpressed realm of life that, in Vittorini’s eyes, had fallen victim to the dictatorship’s moralizing imperatives” (Fascist Modernities 117), progresses in a manner that puts emphasis on his growing self-assurance. His time with her is part of the process by which he makes “lo sforzo decisivo per tagliare i ponti con l’infanzia” (Greco, Dubbiosi disiri 82). Alessio first visits the brothel with Tarquinio and Manuele and sleeps with a blonde who “s’era presentata per viennese” (53), an intermediate and empowering step. After discovering that Giovanna “si è quasi fidanzata” (53) and that he has failed six subjects, he vows to return to Madame Ludovica’s, where he will, as he states, “prendermi la viennese e voglio anche sentire che tipo di… è questa Zobeida!” (54).

He is at first passive and hesitant when he follows through on his pledge to be with Zobeida. She guesses that he is inexperienced and young, asking if it is “la prima volta” and calling him “uno strano ragazzo” (113). He wants to wait a little before beginning but cannot help but take her

42 Fiorillo describes the significance of this episode: see 78–79.
immediately, “appena si fu distesa…. Così fu presto finito, senza che fosse stato diverso di sempre” (113–114). Though his boyish attributes are in this way reinforced, he shows his emerging manhood when they make love again during the same visit. 43 He is cognizant that this sexual act is functioning as a kind of initiation, a meaningful juncture for him and for Zobeida, and tries to make sense of it: “Pensavo: è questo l’intenso? E sarebbe cresciuto ancora? Sarebbe stato di più? Sarebbe stato tutto l’intenso? Volevo che fosse tutto… E intanto diventavo un altro essere e mi pareva di apprendere che anche lei diventava un altro essere. Era nel suo diventarlo, l’intenso?” (114–115, emphasis in the original). He has satisfied Zobeida, who has not been sexually pleased in years and is impressed by his performance. Still, part of her attraction to him is due to his youth, or maybe to his immaturity: as she says, “mi sei piaciuto. Fai tanto odore di ragazzo che mi piaci…” (115).

The note on which this episode ends is negative. It moreover makes clear that Alessio’s development is not strictly linear. Zobeida’s belittling demeanour resurfaces as she comments on Alessio’s tie, telling him that he should purchase a new one. She then rummages through his pockets and finds the carnation. Alessio’s thoughts drift back to Giovanna, about whose appearance he cannot remember a great deal except that “aveva negli occhi una splendida luce griglia, questo solo” (118). As he departs, he regrets having left the garofano, his only remaining physical link with Giovanna, behind. This symbolic transfer of the flower from one woman to the other foreshadows Alessio’s impending transformation.

Other prostitutes embarrass him while he waits for Zobeida the next day. He is bothered by how young they are, perhaps because they remind him of Giovanna: “Erano ragazze quasi come scolare, pure mi davano vagamente voglia di piangere” (128). When Zobeida appears, he is overwhelmed by her presence. 44 At the same time, she makes him painfully aware that he is not a man:

43 That this is an important stage of his development is further accentuated by a brief role reversal that takes place as the older Zobeida becomes “una bambina” (114).

44 “E a me parve che sarei stato chissà come felice di poter vivere sempre, avendola mia, vicino a lei” (129).
Mi venne il sospetto che non si ricordasse della sera prima. Ma non riuscivo a non esser timido vicino a lei. Mi faceva sentire così ragazzo, quella donna, e ragazzo come con gli altri non ero mai stato fino allora, senza petulanza, senza audacia, ragazzo sempre sul punto di arrossire. E soffrivo del mio sospetto, della mia timidezza, del mio trovarmi li pieno di desiderio d’adorarla e di bisogno di piangere, e della musica da ballo che era cominciata a giungere di sotto. (129)

Though she admonishes him for having returned against her wishes, Zobeida also invites him to come to bed with her. Alessio’s reaction—he reports that he is “accanito e rabbioso come per sfogar[si] della [su]a timidezza” (130)—suggests that a change is underway. This encounter is wholly unfulfilling for him. He does not understand why Zobeida does not respond to him the way she had previously, and in his anger, which he directs at Zobeida but that originates as much in his sense that he has failed and that his inability to pleasure her is a sign of regression as it does in his feeling that she does not love him, he daydreams about a possible reconciliation with Giovanna: “La scuola sarebbe cominciata—con la grigia luce dei suoi occhi sui banchi. Anche questo sarebbe stato gridare di bene; sarebbe stato ‘intenso’” (131). Tellingly, he imbues Giovanna, who, he has convinced himself, now loves him, with traits of Zobeida, stating, “la pensai là dentro che diventava più grande. L’avrei ritrovata adulta come Zobeida” (131). This confusion as to whom he wants most is heightened by an ensuing passage in which he tells himself that he loves her but realizes that “non sapev[a] per chi lo dices[e]” (139).

Alessio’s next experience with Zobeida is arguably the most significant moment in his Bildung, presented as a rite of passage that helps him to leave his childhood behind. The episode, which takes place over several days, begins inauspiciously. Conflict arises when Zobeida, upset that Alessio has called her “la Madonna a cavallo” (140), becomes impassive. However, she does not successfully maintain this front. On the contrary, she asks him to stay, making “un cenno della testa più che mai da bambina” (141). Despite her lapses into girlish behaviour, Alessio recognizes that Zobeida is “grande e donna” (141) and that she lives in a different realm than he does. Due to his idolization of her, to Alessio she is not only “la Madonna a cavallo” but also a “regina” and a “dea” (140–141). There is an irreconcilable gap between them that Alessio perceives but tries both to dismiss and to evaluate: “Cos’era possibile avere con lei? pensavo. Solo di scendere ai suoi piedi? Solo adorarla, adorarla, e saperla dea? Era solo la donna più bella del mondo? Eppure aveva pianto. Ma di che aveva pianto?” (142).
There are multiple references to Alessio’s passing boyhood in this sequence. He senses that Zobeida still treats him as a child—she displays, for instance, “una timidezza come da mamma verso di me bambino” (142)—and wants her to be sure that he is no longer a boy. He therefore begins to refer to his youth in the past tense. Zobeida’s wish to protect Alessio from her is indicative of her suspicion that he is fragile and thus unable to handle the realities of the adult world, which has evidently been unkind to her. Yet Alessio seems convinced that their bond is unbreakable; even after she tells him that she is “una donna di malaffare,” Alessio replies with “si… Ma sei mia” (145), and when Zobeida must leave quickly, instead of departing Alessio opts to disobey her orders and remain in her room. Like a child, he marvels at her things and that he is alone here. Zobeida now gives his life meaning: indeed, “era vuoto il mondo tranne in grembo a lei” (146).

Alessio waits for Zobeida’s return, hoping that he will be able to spend the entire night with her. His earlier delusions are recalled in his hope that he “rester[à] per sempre con lei” (147). He eventually notices someone sitting near the window: “Era stata li tutto il tempo? Mi aveva visto?” (148). This vision renders him paralyzed. Imagining what he might say, he offers himself to her fully. This is, he insists, his reality; nothing else is authentic, and he is no longer a child. Alessio’s words and Zobeida’s response are nonetheless delivered in an unreality created by Alessio’s fever or by his dreamlike state. Zobeida’s (hypothetical) reaction is to encourage him to remain a boy, declaring, “ma è orribile, è orribile…. Tu non sai com’è orribile! Corri via, tu devi restare un ragazzo. Corri via, mentre sei ancora in tempo” (149). She then disappears.

Upon returning, she does not chastise him as he expected she might but instead asks why he stayed. He responds by crying “contro la sua faccia, tranquillo nel [suo] pianto come un bambino che si ritrova fuori da un incubo” (153). As in several more instances in the same episode, Alessio’s youthful traits are again made clear: “Era viva nelle mie mani, ed io un curioso fanciullo felice di sentirla viva nelle mie mani. Ridevo di curiosità, senza che nulla mi consumasse. E ridevo felice di restare intatto ogni volta che lei si ritirava” (153). What soon follows represents Alessio’s rebirth, a fact of which he is conscious. Suddenly astonished by his surroundings, he feels “come nato appena” (154) and sits with his head in Zobeida’s lap while

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45 Using phrases such as “quand’ero ragazzo” (142).
she tells him about her childhood, which she transforms into a fairy tale that further mythologizes her.

By the time Alessio’s fever breaks, it is apparent that there has been a conspicuous shift in his thinking, even if he is “schiavo d’un bisogno di tenerezza come un bambino” (161). His thoughts demonstrate a new self-awareness regarding the impossibility of what he desires:

Ora più che mai desideravo ch’ella avesse gli occhi grigi, e fosse davvero anche Giovanna, perché nulla esistesse fuori di lei. Nel mondo c’era adesso una cosa che qualcuno poteva prendere. Io non volevo lasciarla imposseduta. E invocavo che quella grigia bontà si alzasse su dal mondo, e venisse a distendersi negli occhi della mia donna bionda. (162)

Alessio’s confusion—his fantasy that the two women could somehow become one—reveals that he has not fully relegated Giovanna to the past. It is furthermore evidence that he in some way understands the enmeshed effect that Giovanna and Zobeida have had on his development. Their contributions have been, as is accentuated by Alessio’s purposeful melding of them, complementary.

In the end, Alessio can have neither Zobeida nor Giovanna. Zobeida may regret that they must disunite, but she is realistic in her evaluation that this has always been a time-limited relationship. Though Alessio claims that “non [gli] importava di difendere la [sua] vecchia vita di ragazzo che aveva voluto bene a Giovanna e che era stato amico di Tarquinio” (146), his use of the past tense distancing him from his personal history, he is nevertheless reminded of Giovanna even during his last moments with Zobeida. The final pages of Il garofano rosso might imply that he will now surrender his persistent fixation on Giovanna, but there is no true resolution.

The last episode involving Tarquinio exemplifies both the incomplete nature and the complexity of Alessio’s sexual development. After Alessio tells him that while he is certain Giovanna is lost, he is still “pieno di speranza” (183), Tarquinio responds by showing Alessio a stained handkerchief. Alessio immediately understands what this gesture represents. The closing passage of the novel, which comes from Tarquinio, further emphasizes how fraught with confusion Alessio’s sexual coming of age has been, many of Alessio’s difficulties having been produced by
Tarquinio himself: “Non deve dispiacerti se sono così con Giovanna. Dopotutto tu l’avevi solo baciata. Non hai avuto quell’altra, tu? Forse non è vero che non ti importi nulla di quell’altra” (184). How Alessio reacts to these words is not reported. While he has unquestionably matured as a result of his tumultuous encounters with and attitude toward Giovanna and Zobeida, how he will move forward is, as with the male protagonists of other novels examined in this dissertation, left somewhat ambiguous. However, he diverges from Michele, Sergio, and Teodoro in the more active role that he plays in his sexual formation and in the greater depth of emotion with which it is carried out.

5.3 Political Formation

In the preface to the 1948 Mondadori edition of Il garofano rosso, Vittorini writes that the principal documentary value of the work lies in its contribution to an understanding of the history of Italy under fascism since it shows the attraction that “un movimento fascista in generale, attraverso malintesi spontanei o procurati, può esercitare sui giovani” (209). Alessio’s development is undoubtedly influenced by the appeal of fascism for young people. His political ordeals assume a central importance in the narrative, disclosing critical aspects of his character and shaping his overall formation. Indeed, the interplay between the various facets of Alessio’s Bildung is emphasized by how he turns to political action, rhetoric, and/or violence when he wishes to prove to others and to himself that he is becoming older and more mature. He is particularly likely to behave this way when he experiences a romantic failing and must overcome the resulting insecurity, but actions of this kind are also linked to his desire to feel like he belongs to the group of young fascists with whom he associates throughout the novel. Fascism thus comes to represent a means with which to attempt to grow up, to rebel, and, finally, to build an identity distinct from the one of his childhood.

In the following, I describe some general characteristics of Alessio’s political formation, including the chief motivations for and the changing nature of his political involvement and the conception of fascism to which Alessio and his companions adhere. I then analyze the role of the group, focusing primarily on Tarquinio, who is at the core of a great deal of the males’ collective action. Next I expand on the connection between Alessio’s amorous conquests and his penchant for violent and aggressive fantasies, which occasionally play out but often remain in his imagination. I later discuss how Alessio’s political development is affected by his aspiration to
detach from his family’s small town in general and from his father in particular. Through, I show that in *Il garofano rosso*, political action is equated with violence, and violence, much like sexual intercourse, is presented as a rite of passage. The *garofano* becomes a symbol of this merging of politics, aggression, and sex.

Weapons also hold symbolic value. The roots of Alessio’s fascination with firearms reach back to his boyhood exposure to them. In the first section of the narrative, Alessio recalls his early experiences with rifles, stating, “crescevo così, ed ero in grembiule, aspettando un giorno in cui avrei potuto staccare quel fucile dal muro e sparare fuori dalla finestra su qualcuno” (11). This is a memory about which Vittorini writes in the preface:

> Si parla dal ricordo d’infanzia che viene, nelle prime pagine, attribuito al ragazzo protagonista. È ricordo d’un desiderio, conosciuto nella primissima infanzia, di *uccidere* qualcuno. L’esistenza successiva del protagonista e l’educazione ricevuta non lo hanno eliminato, o lo hanno semplicemente represso. A sedici anni egli è ancora posseduto da una vaga impressione che, per affermare se stesso, “entrare nella vita degli adulti”, essere riconosciuto uomo, occorra “forse” uccidere qualcuno o, comunque, versare sangue. (209, emphasis in the original)

This observation implies that Alessio’s obsession with guns and with the idea of killing another human being stems from his upbringing and continues to colour his viewpoint.

The narrator’s depictions of the concrete political involvement of his adolescence begin early in the work. The first allusion to this political engagement is made when the protagonist passes a *regia-guardia* and identifies him from student demonstrations in 1922, during which Alessio “gli ___

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46 It is important to note that there are significant differences in where the political emphasis in the novel lies in the *Solaria* instalments as compared to the 1948 version that was eventually published by Mondadori: for example, the *ragazzino*’s praising of fascist politics of corporatism was later toned down (Bonsaver, *Elio Vittorini* 55). For the purposes of the present analysis, suffice it to say that despite these changes, the appeal of fascism as a way forward, as a means with which Alessio tries to find a place in the adult world, remains in both an underlying element of the protagonist’s development, one that stimulates him and from which he gradually drifts away but that is nonetheless instrumental in his slow movement toward adult life.

47 As Greco writes, the flower is “un segno portatore di valenze storico-politiche, al tempo stesso è il simbolo del successo amoroso di Alessio con la misteriosa Zobeida” (*Dubbiosi disiri* 79).
avev[a] tirato un pomodoro alla faccia” (9). Other references to specific events dominate the first third of the novel, often appearing in Alessio’s diary entries. Two major examples among several are found on pages 38–40, where he details an occasion in which he joined fascists in demonstrations, and on page 41 and on pages 44–52, where he describes his role in an uprising at school carried out in protest of the professors’ commemoration of Matteotti and his subsequent help in the planning and execution of a total strike.

Alessio is at least in part driven by his wish to take on a subversive, and thus manly, persona. The manner in which he initially attempts to do so speaks to his enduring immaturity. Indeed, he harbours juvenile fantasies, in one case mentally transforming a demonstration into an imaginative pirate scene: while among the throngs of people, “[s]i credev[a] il Pirata delle Filippine alla Riscossa, altro che scolaro; e che ci fosse stata una [loro] flotta schierata nei mari attorno in linea di fuoco” (41). His naïve behaviour resurfaces elsewhere. For instance, he brings a gun to a student protest, not understanding the potentially negative consequences of being caught in possession of a firearm (48–49). This misstep is part of the blind enthusiasm that is behind a good portion of his actions, especially in the first phases of his political formation. Emblematic of this eagerness is a passage in which Alessio responds with excitement to a gathering of fascists, recounting, “scappo a mettermi in camicia nera, mi cerco un bastone e scendo…. In piazza Duomo mi trovo tra fascisti, non li conosco, ma non importa, giro con loro” (38). Though he does not know these people, he nevertheless energetically participates, his childish need to fit in obvious.

The fascism to which Alessio and his companions belong is unequivocally revolutionary and anti-bourgeois. Tarquinio articulates this interpretation of the political movement and its foes:

Tutta questa gazzarra, in cui comunisti, massoni e liberali si ritrovano unanimi sotto un vessillo da Esercito della Salvezza rivelà la mentalità piccolo-borghese e nient’affatto rivoluzionaria dei vecchi partiti italiani. E per il fascismo è un bene, ve lo dico io. Il fascismo, che credevate reazionario, ne uscirà rivoluzionario davvero e antiborghese… (20)

Alessio’s reaction evinces the nature of fascism as it has been construed by Tarquinio, whom he idolizes; as Alessio states, “mi veniva in mente con queste sue parole che erano anche mie, come lo avevo visto a volte inveire contro taluni dissidenti figli di bottegai, nell’aula della sezione. Ah
il fascino della parola ‘antiborghese’! E che voglia di fucilate!” (20). Tarquinio later further refines his definition, insisting that “fascismo deve essere qualcosa di più e di meglio di un comunismo e qualcosa di meno del liberalismo” (29). By the end of the novel, however, it is evident that the fascism for which the young men have fought is in the process of change. The discourse of the *ragazzino senza nome*, which Panicali sees as praising corporatist policies (*Il primo Vittorini* 143–149), is one illustration of a shift away from a movement built primarily on violence. A beacon of current political thought so far as this subset of youth is concerned, Tarquinio sends a telling message by claiming in the last pages of the book that he will settle down and leave the convictions of his youth behind. Nonetheless, even if the particulars of how the young people approach fascism do eventually evolve, the core of their belief system—one tied to the virility of youth—remains more or less the same for the bulk of the narrative.

The young men with whom Alessio fraternizes are essential to his formation, serving as the community in which it proceeds. They gather in locations such as the café in which the novel opens and the boarding house in which many of the students live, places of collectivity and transition. Alessio’s exposure to males of his approximate age provides him with models for behaviour that both aid and hinder his process of formation. Moreover, the contrasting figures show a range of possible reactions to fascism within the same general demographic, thus giving depth to the kind of fascist that Vittorini portrays.

Indeed, the influence of the group is particularly crucial in elaborating the political dimension of the novel. Alessio is drawn to political action by his strong desire for group membership and aspiration to become one of the *grandi*. The other men facilitate his involvement in fascist activities and allow him to take part in something that causes him to feel immense pride. His growing feeling of acceptance translates into concrete participation in political efforts, including strikes and protests carried out alongside these young comrades. As suggested by the following affirmation, which uses the collective “we,” his political identity is bound to them: “Ma adesso che abbiamo ammazzato e che tutti i borghesi e i professori ci sono contro, sono troppo fiero d’essere un fascista, troppo fiero, e voglio restarlo” (31). The distance between Alessio and the older boys gradually closes as he matures and becomes more politically aware.

Certain members of this assemblage of boys and men are particularly conspicuous. Most influential is, of course, Tarquinio. His and Alessio’s friendship was forged on political
participation and meditation on political and other issues: the two met in 1922 in a “bottega di un fabbro-tipografo” (13), where they prepared a student paper together, and they continued to socialize in the *bottega*, or, as they begin to call it, “la cava,” even after they stopped producing the periodical. Alessio acknowledges how profoundly Tarquinio has shaped his worldview, relating that “tutte le cose ch’egli sapeva diventavano tra noi comuni. I suoi libri diventavano i miei libri, le sue idee diventavano le mie idee, la sua logica diventava la mia logica” (14). His friend is furthermore instrumental in helping Alessio become part of the political world in which Tarquinio is already embedded. As Alessio remembers in his diary, the others did not allow him to join them in the March on Rome. Waiting in the *bottega* for their return, his disappointment led him to believe that it might have been better to “diventare comunista e tutta la vita battere col martello sopra l’incudine” (27). When Tarquinio arrived, he came to Alessio’s defence and took steps to make him more confident in his ability to become a good fascist (27–31). Tarquinio’s later change, which likely takes place because he is ready to become an adult—in fact, Alessio states that “Tarquinio non era più un ragazzo” (104, emphasis in the original)—entails a rather abrupt shift: “‘Secondo te, allora’ dissi io ‘le rivoluzioni e le guerre non sarebbero che giochi…’ ‘Sicuro: per colui che le fa’ disse Tarquinio. ‘E tutti i cosiddetti grandi uomini non sono che ragazzi’” (104). His suggestion that revolution and war are nothing but games for children affects Alessio, who eventually realizes that he must disengage. Despite differences between them, however, and though Tarquinio is frequently condescending, sabotaging, and manipulative, he is vital to Alessio’s process of maturation.

Other individual young men play less dominant, but also important, roles. The *ragazzo senza nome*, who expresses views that, according to Bonsaver, hold “the kernel of the novel’s political message” (*Elio Vittorini* 54), is one example. Rana is another. The animosity at the core of Rana’s interactions with Alessio is not explicitly due to clashing political perspectives, but it incites hostility and reactions tied to Alessio’s political formation and changing emotional condition. For instance, Alessio’s victory when he easily wins a physical fight against Rana is bittersweet since Alessio alternately feels guilty about injuring him, as evidenced by a crying spell, and laments having not hurt him more (36–38).

In his position as Alessio’s rival in love, Rana is critical in showing the entwining of Alessio’s sexual and political development. The initial brawl between him and Alessio is spurred by Giovanna giving the carnation to Alessio instead of to Rana. Rana continually tries to obtain the
flower, going so far as to form a pseudo-political party appropriately called *Il garofano rosso*,
the purpose of which is to retrieve it. The connection between love and violence in Alessio’s
formation is made clear both in cases such as this one, which involves an intermediary, and
directly through the results of Alessio’s romantic experiences, especially the violent thoughts
that come instinctually to Alessio when he feels rejection of any kind.

Much as he tends to romanticize violence, the protagonist fantasizes about the romantic success
that violence might bring him. This is first apparent in episodes concerning Giovanna. For a
fleeting moment, Alessio wishes that he had murdered Rana so that he could ask for Giovanna’s
pardon, believing that this would reveal to her how powerful he is. The prospect gives him
personal satisfaction, again showing a close link between violence and romantic pursuits: “Allora
mi sento felice. Mi sento il freddo della rivoltella battermi sulla coscia. Mi viene voglia di
camminare e camminare così tutta la notte, e di avere duelli misteriosi, e di passare per la via di
Giovanna” (39). During the occupation of the school, he is inspired to write on the wall “Diana e
Alessio Si vogliono Bene Bene” (51, emphasis in the original) in an ode to his first true love.

The relationship between love and aggression is also evident in incidents featuring Zobeida.
While hiding in her chambers, he thinks about the revolver that he had earlier buried and about
the fact that he had almost killed Rana. He moreover assumes that telling Zobeida that he, like
her, is a thief would bring them closer together (149). Still concealed, he hears other men
entering Zobeida’s room and, aware of her hidden gun, wonders, “perché non li uccide tutti?”
(150). His anxiety hints that he conceives of aggression as an acceptable solution and that it has
not occurred to him that he could execute this task himself. There is, in this sense, an interesting
parallel with *Gli indifferenti*. Like Moravia’s Michele, who cannot bring himself to pull the
trigger and destroy his nemesis, Alessio too is paralyzed. Unable to act, he is temporarily
rendered inept.

Interactions during Alessio’s trip home to the site of his childhood intimate that his enthusiasm
for the fascist cause is due in part to seeing it as a way in which to sever ties with his ancestral
roots. This visit takes place after he has failed his exams for the first time and provides a window

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48 The name of this group is an obvious reinforcement of the symbolism of the carnation.
to Alessio’s boyhood via several of his enlightening reminiscences. By reexamining his past, he is able to confirm that he wants to leave it behind. That this section of the novel is of particular significance to Alessio’s political development is accentuated by conversations with and about his father. After Alessio learns that his father was, in his youth, a socialist, his father explains to him what socialism stood for: “Il socialismo è un’idea e uno può avere avuto delle idee. Anzi è un’idea generosa e uno della mia condizione può aver voluto essere una volta generoso. Ma poi nella vita s’impone la necessità di salvarsi ognuno per conto suo” (75). While this statement implies that he is no longer a socialist, at least not in an official sense, it also indicates that he still values the ideas that socialism represents, even if they are unrealistic. Alessio reacts to this information in an extraordinarily negative manner: “E fui per tutto il resto di quelle vacanze discolo, cattivo, disobbediente come non mai. L’anno appresso avevo conosciuto Tarquinio, e mi ero messo nei fascisti per antipatia verso quel socialismo dal quale discendeva mio padre col suo odioso modo di ragionare” (76). His unambiguous disgust toward his father and determination to reject his views strengthen his resolve to remain a fascist. They additionally show a generational gap that reinforces the portrayal of fascism as a movement that in its initial stages was perceived as belonging to the young. When an old man verifies in conversation that Alessio’s father used to be a socialist, Alessio again feels the need to proclaim that he, on the other hand, is a fascist (79). The old man’s response—“forse i tempi cambiano” (80)—is telling. Times are, indeed, changing, and it would be difficult for Alessio to forge the political identity that he has chosen for himself if he were to remain with his parents. Essential to Alessio’s ability to grow up, then, is achieving political emancipation from his father, and the virile, active, and revolutionary qualities of fascism as practiced by his social network in the city render the situation there immensely attractive to him. Though he is often portrayed as a follower who is motivated by factors such as the excitement of the political current and peer pressure, there are, it seems, also deeper and more personal reasons behind his actions.
5.4 The Role of Education

Education, an idea wrapped up in Bildung as it is conventionally defined, has an important function in Alessio’s formation and close ties with other aspects of his development. He is in the city to study, a path that he and his parents presumably assume will lead to a better life. His relationship with formal instruction is, however, complicated, first because of his antagonistic exchanges with his professors; second because school, the site of strikes, becomes a place of political education; and third because as he discovers women, his priorities fluctuate. Even his decision to study in order to pass his exams is inspired not by a wish to use education as an opportunity for personal growth or professional advancement but rather by his longing to be with Giovanna. Vittorini’s characterization of Alessio’s experience with schooling appears to privilege practical lessons over those learned in the classroom, attaching a sense of futility to traditional education.

How Alessio thinks about school does not remain static, and every academic decision he makes and action he carries out, and every consequence thereof, is associated with his romantic and/or political endeavours. For example, he is suspended because of his reaction to his kiss with Giovanna, a development that renders him, as he acknowledges, irrational: “La felicità della cosa avvenuta mi metteva dentro una voglia di sfida senza ragione” (7). His regret concerning his suspension is due more to the fact that Giovanna is there and he cannot see her than it is to a sense of remorse or desire to learn. This ambivalence toward the liceo when faced with alternatives emerges again and again as the novel progresses. Alessio later affirms, for instance, that he does not care if he is expelled because he is seventeen years old, wants to become a pilot, and hopes that war will break out, especially if Giovanna will no longer be in school (43–44).

49 Greco addresses in detail the role of school in Alessio’s initiation to adult life. See Dubbiosi disiri 87–95.

50 It is significant that Tarquinio, Alessio’s role model, does not take school seriously, evidently having decided that involvement in other activities is more essential than formal education.

51 It is possible to draw a parallel here between the protagonist’s experience and that of the author since Vittorini’s education was largely self-guided.
The political activities that occur within the walls of the liceo are perhaps the most unequivocal evidence that Alessio is conflicted when it comes to education. School serves primarily as a place of opposition in which the “conflitto centrale fra cultura scolastica e libresca, e cultura della vita” plays out (Greco, Dubbiosi disiri 89, emphasis in the original). Concrete experiences take obvious precedence over scholastic ventures. In fact, such actions overtake educational opportunity, the student strikes and occupations radically disrupting lessons and showcasing the general ambience of indiscipline and defiance. Many scenes set within the school depict these demonstrations whereas very few depict the kind of learning that is meant to happen there.

Alessio’s aforementioned return home is also significant in regards to his education. His parents’ anger about his failure to pass his exams indicates that they expect him to take full advantage of the opportunity that they are affording him. Alessio, for his part, is ill at ease with the people who work the land, both feeling a sense of inferiority and realizing that he has options that they do not (74–75). As he tries to make sense of the world and his place in it, he observes that the operai might be “simpatici” due to their lack of study (77). His direct encounter with a worker again shows the contrast between the realm of Alessio’s childhood and his new life, descriptions of his academic work stressing the differences between the protagonist and the other man (79–80). Although while here Alessio has devoted himself to preparations for his exams, when he returns to the city his efforts prove to have been in vain. He fails to attend the oral component since he is with Zobeida engaged in what is arguably of more direct consequence to his formation. Formal education is once more shown to be secondary to life experiences, the “cultura della vita” individuated by Greco (Dubbiosi disiri 89, emphasis in the original).

Midway through the narrative, Tarquinio lumps together workers, students, and soldiers, who are all, in his opinion, full of “un senso di ragazzo” (102). This observation, particularly as it pertains to students, resonates with the situation as characterized by Vittorini. For the most part, education is shown as impeding instead of facilitating growing up, even if Alessio occasionally senses that there is some value in it. There are, however, slight shifts at various points in the novel. During Alessio’s second meeting with the levatrice, for instance, she hints that there had been the possibility that Alessio might have been in school with Giovanna had he managed to be promoted. The implication that Alessio is disappointed that he has been held back is due, though, to a missed romantic opportunity, not an educational one. Tarquinio, who has also failed his exams, proposes that they study together (182), but the growing divide between him and Alessio
suggests that they will not do so. What is certain is that while school has in some way been a catalyst to his formation, Alessio’s development up to now has taken place primarily through other means.

6 Final Observations

When analyzing *Il garofano rosso*, the issues of political and of intellectual intent take on unavoidable and fundamental importance. Considerations such as Vittorini’s relationship with the fascist regime, the censorship of the novel, and the author’s later revisionism are thus critical to a thorough understanding of the intricacies of the work. But the question of politics in *Il garofano rosso* is a complex one, especially given the unreliability of Vittorini’s assertions in the preface to the 1948 Mondadori edition and elsewhere. Catalano underlines that the author is not entirely credible when it comes to claims about his own work, stating that some of Vittorini’s most crucial affirmations regarding political matters in *Il garofano rosso* “non paiono, in questo caso, del tutto convincenti: anzi, il proposito di anticipare al 1933–34 … una rottura rispetto al modo di essere del fascismo non solo è discutibile ma è perfino contraddetto dalla realtà del contributo politico di Vittorini sul ‘Bargello’ negli anni che vanno fino al dopoguerra etiopico” (*La metafora* 55). While it is true that the novel was censored, initially with the last instalment of the *Solaria* serialization, this was due to “the presence of some bawdy passages in which the protagonist falls in love with a beautiful prostitute” and not to “political elements linked to the censor’s action” (Bonsaver, “Fascist Censorship” 173).52

As far as the contention that *Il garofano rosso* is a realist *Bildungsroman* is concerned, some simple facts take precedence: above all, that the protagonist’s multifaceted process of formation is very soundly tied to the historical context, which attests to the correspondences between *Il garofano rosso* and the theories of realism and of the *Bildungsroman* outlined in Chapter One of this dissertation. It is possible, for example, to identify a connection between Alessio and the hero of the novel of historical emergence, one of the main subtypes in Bakhtin’s work on the

52 Jane Dunnett suggests that the first version of the volume in novel form, which Vittorini unsuccessfully tried to have published in the later 1930s, was rejected by fascist censors for the same reason (103). Several critics offer full accounts of the censorship of the novel; see especially Bonsaver, “Fascist Censorship on Literature and the Case of Elio Vittorini” (172–174) and *Censorship and Literature in Fascist Italy* (140–146).
"Bildungsroman": indeed, Alessio can be interpreted as finding himself “on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other” (Bakhtin, “The Bildungsroman” 23), and as the society in which he is attempting to mature undergoes changes—changes that include, but are not, of course, limited to transformations in the political actions of his peers—he must adjust the expectations he has of the world and of himself. Furthermore, *Il garofano rosso* is at times very closely aligned with the traditional novel of formation in terms of how the protagonist’s development is structured. Alessio’s sexual formation helps drive forward his overall journey of *Bildung*, his political formation allows him to engage with and become part of the society to which he belongs, and his education reveals a particular view of the priorities of young men at the time. These primary threads often overlap with and intersect each other.

The traits that most render *Il garofano rosso* a *Bildungsroman* of the Italy of the 1930s become less dominant as the novel progresses and the spotlight shifts from political issues. Related to the movement away from political concerns are alterations to the prose that downplay the novel’s realist characteristics. The work’s realism nonetheless remains and augments Vittorini’s political and social message. Moreover, certain characteristics of the novel, which is at least in part autobiographical, reflect Vittorini’s changing political perspective and intellectual focus as they evolved from the first to the last instalment of the *Solaria* version and, arguably to a lesser degree, as they manifested in alterations to the work as it was being prepared for publication in volume. Such links between author and text indicate that, as is similarly the case with the other novels analyzed in this dissertation, the concept of the double *Bildung*—the development of both protagonist and author—can be productively applied to *Il garofano rosso*.

In combination, the representation of a young man’s navigation of revolutionary fascism and the style used to portray it offer a telling glimpse of an important period of history that was, in some respects, particularly challenging for young people. The overt realist dealing with political and social issues separates *Il garofano rosso* from the veiled anti-fascism of many of the other works in the corpus of this thesis, and while Alessio is ultimately disillusioned of the notion that he will grow up in the manner that he initially sought to, his fate is, in fact, positive when compared to the fates of the protagonists of male *Bildungsromane* such as *Gli indifferenti*, *Tre operai*, and *Luce fredda*. As the novel comes to a close, Alessio is at a somewhat ambiguous point in terms of his political allegiances and in terms of his general attitude. However, though the protagonist’s prospects have become increasingly less certain as the novel has progressed, he nonetheless
continues to mature and has a better idea of how his future will unfold at the end of the narrative than he did at the beginning. Maturity is accompanied by a sense of loss, but also by a degree of optimism.
Chapter 5
The Female *Bildungsroman* in Fascist Italy: Fausta Cialente’s *Natalia* and Alba de Céspedes’ *Nessuno torna indietro*

This chapter examines Fausta Cialente’s *Natalia* (1930) and Alba de Céspedes’ *Nessuno torna indietro* (1938), both written by and about young Italian women. While acknowledging the differences between them, I argue that these works can be analyzed as novels of formation that reflect not only the set of sociocultural coordinates in which each was produced but also the authors’ desire to negotiate constraining forces in order to subvert fascist myths of womanhood. The realism and discursive strategies utilized by Cialente and by de Céspedes to portray female developments that seldom fully conform to what might be expected given societal norms of the era strengthen the ideological weight of the narratives.

Due to the inequality between the sexes built into fascist ideology and to traditional assumptions about the genre of the *Bildungsroman*, an investigation of female romanzi di formazione produced during the *ventennio* requires some different considerations, specifically those related to gender and politics, than an investigation of the male version does. My analysis of the female novel of development thus incorporates the following major points of inquiry. First, which aspects of the social, cultural, and political position of women in fascist Italy are problematized in and by these novels? Second, can existing theoretical formulations of the female *Bildungsroman* be applied to Italian examples produced during this period? Third, what are the chief dissimilarities between male and female novels of formation written by young authors under fascism? Finally, is it possible to draw a distinction between the realism employed by these women novelists and that used by their male contemporaries? My readings of *Natalia* and of *Nessuno torna indietro* are informed by these questions.

Although Cialente and de Céspedes would later take active roles as anti-fascists, there is an interesting, but perhaps understandable, lack of historical perspective in the books. In the case of *Nessuno torna indietro*, which is set primarily in fascist Rome, fascism’s effects on the day-to-day life of Italian women are rarely mentioned explicitly, and *Natalia* takes place not during the regime but rather in the years surrounding and including the First World War. The message of protest nonetheless remains, playing out, as I will show, through various textual strategies, most of which see the authors using an idiosyncratic brand of realism to depict women who make
untraditional choices. Like the young men in other Bildungsromane examined in this thesis, the young females in Natalia and in Nessuno torna indietro must struggle to mature and forge lives for themselves while facing a stifling, repressive society that is hostile by design. The women grapple with additional difficulties arising from social roles that have been predetermined for them because of their gender. Undeterred by these constraints, they develop in ways that are frequently surprising and often involve a kind of rebellion or, at a lesser level, rebellious intent.

1 Women in Fascist Italy

Fascist gender policies changed significantly in the few years separating the writing of Natalia from the writing of Nessuno torna indietro. Natalia, published in 1930, was finished in 1927, when the demographic campaign had just begun; by 1938, when de Céspedes published Nessuno torna indietro, which portrays the period from 1934 to 1936 (Nerenberg, Prison Terms 80), repression of women’s rights was much more acute. While my analysis of each novel will expand on relevant issues regarding the gender norms and attitudes that Cialente and de Céspedes represent and subvert, here I cursorily outline some historical considerations relating to women in Italy from 1922 to the mid-1930s that are pertinent to both works: the demographic campaign; education of women through both formal education and female organizations; and standards for the “modern” woman. My aim is not to provide a comprehensive history of women in fascist Italy or a summary of the vast body of work on this topic. Rather, I touch on some especially germane aspects of the subject in order to help contextualize the rest of this chapter.

The regime’s complex and contradictory attitude toward women is well documented. While insisting that women should embrace their traditional duties as wives and mothers, the fascist government sought to modernize many facets of society, including female roles. Paradoxically, women were to be both bearers of children and contributing, engaged fascists; they should stay at home with their offspring yet also carry out welfare activities for the good of the nation. Depending on class, geographical location, and other factors, they might furthermore enter the

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workforce, though women’s job prospects were severely limited and typically paid very low wages. Indeed, any new possibilities for women created by the bid to revolutionize the fascist state did not result in female emancipation or liberation. On the contrary: as Bruno P. F. Wanrooij affirms, by “turning maternity into a civic duty, Fascism put more responsibility on the shoulders of women, without granting them any new rights” (188). The influence of the Catholic Church and of Italian and foreign media further complicated the reigning models of ideal female behaviour and appearance.\(^2\)

The first twenty years of the twentieth century in Italy were marked by increased female mobilization. Piero Meldini identifies the significance of both “la complessa e variegata predicazione femminista del primo decennio del secolo” and of women’s tremendous contribution to the war effort, which brought profound changes to their sociocultural position as they entered the workforce in record numbers in order to replace male workers (20). This progress was not eliminated at the war’s end despite the “fierce gender struggle” that arose when men returned from battle (Graziosi, “Gender Struggle” 28). In reality, women in post–World War I Italy made several political gains, even if the right to vote was not among them,\(^3\) and the dawn of the fascist state did not bring about an abrupt end to this slow march forward.

Although fascist policies regarding women would, predictably, prove regressive, the full extent of fascist hostility toward them was not immediately apparent.\(^4\) Perry Willson describes how some feminists were “present in the early period of the Fascist movement,” indicating that “for many of them, the catalyst for involvement was quite clearly the First World War” (“Italy” 13–14). The number of female fascists in the party’s initial years was low, but the women who chose to become politically active in this manner did so within the bounds of early fascism in relatively autonomous political women’s groups whose members, Alessandra Tarquini states, emphasized “la volontà di essere considerate soggetti politici a tutti gli effetti” at the 1924 congress of the

\(^2\) Chiavola Birnbaum offers a succinct analysis of Catholic doctrine, fascism, and women. See 34–37.

\(^3\) In the chapter “The Legacy of Liberalism” of How Fascism Ruled Women, De Grazia details the position of women in Liberal Italy and the rise and fall of Italian feminism in the buildup to and consolidation of fascism. See 18–40.

\(^4\) Graziosi describes the chameleonic nature of Mussolini’s position on women’s suffrage. See “Gender Struggle” 38–39.
Milanese Fasci femminili (Storia 168). Italian women were temporarily rewarded for their persistence in working toward female suffrage in 1925, when Mussolini’s government granted certain groups of women the right to vote in administrative elections. This recognition, however, had little lasting consequence since the very elections in which they would now be allowed to participate were eliminated the following year (De Grazia 37). Worth noting as another avenue of political involvement for women is the transmutation of the largely bourgeois feminist movement of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century into a new kind of feminism that advocated devotion to the family, love for tradition, and respect for “la stirpe” (De Giorgio 512). Victoria De Grazia construes this “Latin Feminism” as giving voice to a group of women who “no longer … championed equal rights in a strict sense” but “had by no means renounced improving the situation of women in Italian society” (236) because they worked within the framework and restraints imposed by the fascist government.

The relatively liberal treatment of women quickly changed as the fascist party consolidated its power and established its authoritarian nature in the years following the 1924 Matteotti Crisis. Any hope of male-female equality vanished as the growing focus on masculinity and virility amplified already-strong gender discrimination and stereotyping and relegated women to supporting positions, usually in the family home. Mussolini’s Ascension Day speech of 1927 made unequivocal his intention to increase the Italian population through a demographic campaign in which women were expected, of course, to play a critical role. Exhorting Italians to fulfill their duty to the Italian nation, Mussolini aimed to increase the country’s population from forty million to sixty million in the space of twenty-five years in what was, as Carl Ipsen states, “both a new call to action and a statement of official populationist attitudes developed during the previous four-plus years” (90). The Ascension Day address was, in fact, foreshadowed by previous pronatalist actions such as the institution of the Opera nazionale maternità e infanzia

5 For information about the early female fascists, see especially De Giorgio, De Grazia, and Willson.
6 See De Grazia 236–238 and 249–250.
7 The Ascension Day speech, which covered much more than only questions of demographic politics, has been analyzed in depth by many scholars. See, for example, Meldini 11–19.
(ONMI) in 1925, a Royal Legislative Decree of a tax on single men between the ages of twenty-five and sixty-five in 1926, and a Consolidated Act banning the distribution of contraceptive devices and expert advice later that year. Mussolini articulated the same stance again in a 1928 article entitled “Il numero come forza” and remained true to his demographic ambitions for the rest of his regime’s existence.

Italian women ultimately ignored this appeal for them to use their reproductive organs in aid of the state. The birthrate dropped during the fascist years, and, illustrating the failure of fascist propaganda to inspire the next generation of Italian wives and mothers, a 1937 survey of schoolgirls in Rome showed that the majority of them did not want or plan to be housewives, less than ten percent were attracted by domestic work, and twenty-seven percent declared that they were repulsed by it (Mancini 68). The situations in Natalia and in Nessuno torna indietro likewise rebuke the importance that the fascist government placed on childrearing and on population growth. As I later explain, most females in these works are apparently disinterested in motherhood, setting goals for themselves that do not include children. Their desire, sometimes extreme, to preserve their independence is not a wholly accurate reflection of contemporary attitudes. It is, however, almost certainly closer to them than were the images of prolific mothers disseminated in fascist propaganda, at least so far as the social classes depicted in the novels are concerned.

General fascist feelings toward women were also manifest in policies designed to discourage girls and young women from obtaining more than basic schooling. Giovanni Gentile’s 1923 reform of the educational system, based on a thoroughly anti-feminist philosophy, discriminated against girls and young women, excluding them, for example, from attending licei classici and licei scientifici while creating the inferior liceo femminile that restricted their choice of studies,

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8 For a summary of the functions and operation of the ONMI and the topic of maternal welfare, see Graziosi, La donna 88–90 and Willson, Women 68–71.

9 “Il numero come forza” is reprinted in full in a volume edited by Susmel and Susmel. See Mussolini 209–216.

10 De Grazia notes that the decline in birth rates was uneven, with middle class and urban women more likely to reject fascist injunctions to reproduce. However, as she shows in a table on page 46, birth rates saw a marked decline in all regions, including southern Italy. See 45–52.
offering “a smattering of humanities, including Latin, as well as arts and crafts suited to signorine” (De Grazia 153). Fascist youth groups for girls like the *Piccole italiane* and the *Giovani italiane* supplemented traditional classroom education by organizing young Italian females in order to further inculcate fascist ideology. They also gave girls the chance to socialize outside the home, creating new fascist spaces in which females could gain skills and experiences away from the influence of their parents—an interesting situation given the weight of traditional family life in fascist doctrine.

Remarkably, despite the regime’s attempt to limit educational opportunities available to women, the number of females attending secondary school and university grew for much of the *ventennio*.\(^{11}\) The very premise of *Nessuno torna indietro*—young women living in a religious boarding house in Rome while attending university—bespeaks the female presence in higher education. However, such students faced appreciable obstacles. One was monetary: beginning in 1928, women were required to pay double tuition in schools and in universities, a change that came the year after fascist syndicates reduced female salaries to half that of corresponding male salaries with a decree on 20 January 1927 (Macciocchi 62). Moreover, attending institutions of higher education was no guarantee of a satisfying career. The limitations placed on women who wished to become teachers, traditionally a female profession, were emblematic of the changing state of female education and vocation.\(^{12}\) Already in December 1926, women were declared ineligible for Latin, Greek, history, and philosophy positions in *licei classici* and *licei scientifici* and for history and Italian positions in technical schools. Teaching posts open to women would become fewer and fewer in subsequent years. These restrictions in the field of education were part of a larger trend making employment of most varieties, often necessary not just for self-fulfillment but for economic reasons, too, difficult to obtain for middle-class urban females.\(^{13}\)

\(^{11}\) See Willson, *Women* 70–71 for statistics. Note that alternative educational “opportunities” that were meant to “define and institutionalize the recoded notion of ‘feminine’” were made available to women. For example, with the support of the fascist state, female groups opened schools meant to prepare women for “appropriate” jobs as social workers and nurses (Graziosi, “Gender Struggle” 34).

\(^{12}\) See De Grazia 149–157.

\(^{13}\) For a summary of issues relating to female employment in fascist Italy, see Willson, *Women* 71–76. Rural women had readier access to work in the agricultural sector. Silvia Salvatici’s *Contadine dell’Italia fascista* offers a good history of peasant women in fascist Italy.
Also rife with contradiction were competing models of the modern woman. Most obvious in the fascist state were the exalted mother figure and its condemned opposite. In R. J. B. Bosworth’s words, “Fascist newspapers often excoriated the vices of the modern donna crisi (twitchy woman), thin, neurotic and very likely sterile, as distinct from the virtues of the traditional donna madre (woman and mother), stocky, large-hipped, big-bosomed and, above all, fertile” (267–268). But the standards set forth by fascist propaganda did not typically coincide with the ideals projected by much contemporary media, especially that inspired by foreign sources, which “went about producing far more influential images of female beauty” (De Grazia 213). Nor was it consistent with the archetypes produced by the mass mobilization of women that took place largely in the late 1930s, when millions of females joined organizations that provided them with new occasions to demonstrate their physical abilities, to socialize, and to engage politically. In other words, conflicting physical standards existed even within those imposed by fascist institutions. It is difficult, after all, to reconcile the notion of the robust keeper of the focolare with the picture of the fit female servant of the state that emerged as modernization and militarization required new forms of female participation. Besides fascist models of the Italian woman, there were American-inspired versions of beauty, which were rampant in commercial culture and put emphasis on physical appearance. Perhaps the most important consequence of

14 A recent source on the donna crisi is Natasha V. Chang’s excellent The Crisis-Woman: Body Politics and the Modern Woman in Fascist Italy.

15 De Grazia discusses issues regarding fascist body politics, arguing that in fascist Italy, factors other than the health and fitness of the nation played into definitions of canons of female beauty: for example, new focus on female participation in sports and the need to contend with “the ever-wider and more intense circulation of images of beautiful women through the movies, photography, and advertising” had a major role in shaping the regime’s approach to depicting female bodies because it “sought to manipulate this new awareness of female physicality in order to check the emancipatory impulses that stimulated and fed off of it, as well as to aggrandize itself by making female beauty, strength, and stylishness attributes of its exercise of national power” (211).

16 The Fasci femminili were in existence beginning in the early years of the regime, founded by Elisa Mayer Rizzoli in 1921. However, membership numbers remained relatively low until the late 1930s. Graziosi describes the genesis of the organization in La donna e la storia 80–87. Nunzia Messina provides a useful discussion of the characteristics and growth of various fascist organizations for females from their origins to their role in World War II in Le donne del fascismo 93–175. De Grazia gives a chart showing membership numbers from 1925–1942; see page 3.
this focus on the female body in fascist Italy is the one identified by De Grazia, who describes how “overweening public attention to female physicality gave an especially narcissistic turn to these great changes in aesthetic conventions” (214). Using as evidence a quote from the journalist Maria Coppola, who came of age during the ventennio, De Grazia sees this narcissism as a positive product of the contemporary obsession with women’s bodies, arguing that “to determine one’s own individuality in the face of state-proclaimed aesthetic standards represented no small act of self-confidence” (218). I would contend that literary representations of females who are preoccupied with their bodies, particularly in Nessuno torna indietro, demonstrate the emancipatory power of self-reflection and manipulation of physical appearance in the lives of women with little available to them.

2 Theories of the Female Bildungsroman

Considering the nature of how females were repressed in fascist Italy, it is clear that the trajectories and results of formation for girls and young women should differ from those of their relatively privileged (but also subjugated) male counterparts. In fact, the inferior position of women, by no means a situation unique to the Italy of the 1920s and 1930s, is the starting point of several works on the female Bildungsroman. Even if most—though certainly not all—of these theoretical explorations of women’s novels of formation deal primarily with Anglophone literatures, some of their observations about characteristics distinguishing female from male formations are nonetheless useful as a starting point for an examination of Italian narratives of female development produced during fascism.

They do not, of course, provide a perfect model. Indeed, although they correspond in part to hypotheses and suggestions about how to categorize and think about other kinds of female Bildungsromane, the Italian examples discussed in this chapter often deviate from the patterns identified in literature from other periods and cultures. Therefore, my analysis of Natalia and of Nessuno torna indietro, while drawing on the critics that I discuss in this section, will also individuate key traits of these works that are not necessarily identified in the following formulations.

Scholarship on the female novel of development, particularly scholarship by feminist critics, gained momentum in the late 1970s and in the 1980s. Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland’s The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development (1983), which addresses
barriers to establishing the parameters with which to analyze females’ Bildung, is one of the most influential of this group of volumes. Recognizing the gender bias inherent in traditional accounts of an individual’s relationship with society, the editors hold that there has been a general failure to account for female experiences. Since even the most liberal characterizations of Bildung “presuppose a range of social options available only to men” (7), it is, in their judgment, necessary to adjust such definitions in order to accommodate gendered differences in the influence of social context. Some potential features of the female Bildungsroman that they identify include, but are not limited to, a focus on “inner concentration” or “inner life,” imperative because of social conditions affecting female development (8–9); the presence of either an “apprenticeship,” which portrays “a continuous development from childhood to maturity” but “adapts the linear structure of the male Bildungsroman” (11) or an “awakening,” which may occur after formal development from girl– to womanhood is already complete (11–12); a “disjunction between a surface plot … and a submerged plot” (12); and, due to the centrality of community in a female’s development, the possibility of collective protagonists and/or a shared journey toward the achievement of Bildung (12).¹⁷ Despite the many ways in which the “presuppositions and generic features of the traditional Bildungsroman” are not applicable, female novels of formation have in common some basic conventions of the classic version, namely: “belief in a coherent self … ; faith in the possibility of development … ; insistence on a time span in which development occurs … ; and emphasis on social context (even as an adversary)” (14). Though this framework by no means precisely accounts for female Bildungsromane of interwar Italy, some of the characteristics that it includes, such as the concepts of awakening and of multiple formations, can be found in Natalia and in Nessuno torna indietro.

In her book Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development, Susan Fraiman is similarly interested in exploring the link between gender and genre, setting as one of her goals the task of “rais[ing] questions about … generic formulations and the understanding of development on which they rely” (ix). In the chapter “Is There a Female Bildungsroman?,”

¹⁷ As the editors state, “women characters, more psychologically embedded in relationships, sometimes share the formative voyage with friends, sisters, or mothers, who assume equal status as protagonists” (12).
Fraiman, who like Abel et al. stresses the importance of context and names some traits of female novels of development that stem from women’s social position, including “a blurring or decentering of the ‘major’ narrative by alternative stories of female destiny” (10), comes to a position—although an uncertain answer to the question posed in the title of her chapter—that the form of a female Bildung is vastly different from the one communicated by Dilthey in 1870 and in 1906 (3). She is sceptical about the existence of a paradigmatic female Bildungsroman yet engages in depth with shifting notions of the genre, with the ideological assumptions of labels like “novel of formation,” and with the critical debate about how these terms pertain to female literature.

Unlike the editors of The Voyage In, Fraiman makes little real attempt to articulate how the process of girls becoming women is depicted in literature but rather emphasizes the difficulties in trying to reduce a complicated and often misread group of texts to a singular definition. She does not, however, completely reject a reformulation and broadening of the genre. Lorna Ellis’ Appearing to Diminish: Female Development and the British Bildungsroman takes another approach, arguing that the chasm that separates female from male novels of development is not as wide as most critics would have it. Ellis shows that for both men and women, “maturation comes at the expense of adventure and some personal autonomy” (19). She nevertheless acknowledges fundamental dissimilarities between male and female formation, agreeing, in essence, with Sarah E. Maier’s contention that “the female bildungsroman does exist; perhaps it is not the antithesis, but rather a radical extension of the traditional bildungsroman first located in Goëthe’s text” (320).

With few exceptions, the works analyzed in The Voyage In, Unbecoming Women, and Appearing to Diminish are English novels (or, in the case of Unbecoming Women, also conduct manuals), many from the Georgian or Victorian period. Other critics expand the temporal and national fields of analysis, frequently approaching their studies from contrasting perspectives and drawing contrasting conclusions about the limits of the term and its usefulness. In The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century, Esther Kleinbord Labovitz asserts that female novels of formation were not possible in the eighteenth century or in the nineteenth century. Rather, in the “pluralistic and fragmented” society of the 1900s (8), female Bildungsromane, until then inconceivable due to social factors, actually replaced the male version, which was by that point made impossible. The premise of Il romanzo del divenire. Un
Bildungsroman delle donne?, edited by Paola Bono and Laura Fortini, is that most female novels of formation do not portray Bildung, which they describe as a “processo lineare e concluso” (11), so much as they display a process of becoming. Individual essays in this collection address a wide range of novels and female novelists representing a variety of nationalities and time periods, from Italy in the early years of the twentieth century to Palestine in the early 2000s. In the first chapter, Adriana Chemello appropriates Bakhtin’s novel of emergence and states that this model best corresponds to “un processo pedagogico di educazione declinabile sul paradigma del femminile e capace di rappresentare il ‘mettersi al mondo’ di una donna attraverso l’esperienza e la scuola della vita, evolvendo progressivamente dall’ingenuità degli anni giovanili alla consapevolezza di sé della maturità” (17). Natalia and Nessuno torna indietro are more or less consonant with this progression, but one of the chief modifications that Chemello makes to Bakhtin’s theory—her assertion that the female process of maturation is “un viaggio introspettivo” (21) that takes place primarily in enclosed spaces—is not particularly germane since, unexpectedly given contemporary norms, almost all of the women depicted by Cialente and by de Céspedes maintain a significant freedom of movement.

Carol Lazzaro-Weis also breaks away from English literature, using genre theory and feminist criticism to read Italian novels of the 1980s.18 As follows from the title of her 1990 article “The Female Bildungsroman: Calling It into Question,” Lazzaro-Weis casts doubt on the existence of a cohesive model of female development. She takes as concrete examples two narratives of (attempted) female formation, Fabrizia Ramondino’s Althénopis and Ginevra Bompiani’s Mondanità, contending that these works’ “denial of the possibility of representation highlights one of the basic contradictions in the form, that is its idealization of limitless possibility and its restricting goal of maturity” and thus “exploits it for a feminist purpose” (33). Her final remarks return to the article’s central query:

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18 Besides Bono and Fortini, and Lazzaro-Weis, other scholars have also analyzed twentieth-century Italian novels as female Bildungsromane, though few include any discussion of female works from the fascist period. One exception is Papini, Fioretti, and Spignoli’s Il romanzo di formazione nell’Ottocento e nel Novecento, which contains an essay by Luisa Ricaldone on Anna Banti’s 1937 novel Itinerario di Paolina.
Is there such a thing as a female Bildungsroman? Probably not, which is why it has been necessary over the years for many women writers and critics to invent one. And they will most likely continue to do so since the questions surrounding the relationship between experience, subjectivity, and social structures are far from being resolved. (34)

Lazzaro-Weis thereby affirms that though the traditional, male-centric version of Bildung is not applicable to women due to cultural and psychological variations in how the sexes mature, female quests for self-development form a category, as necessarily loose and ever-evolving as it may be, unto its own right. The chapter “The Female Bildungsroman” in her full-length work From Margins to Mainstream: Feminism and Fictional Modes in Italian Women’s Writing, 1968–1990, published six years after the abovementioned article, sees a subtle shift in Lazzaro-Weis’ approach. While explaining and investigating some of “the problems inherent in using the Bildungsroman as a useful critical tool for writers and critics” (96), Lazzaro-Weis no longer questions whether there is such a thing as the female Bildungsroman but instead interprets the enigmatic nature of the term as applied to novels about both genders, citing other critics’ arguments in support of and in opposition to certain formulations of the novel of development. Her conclusion—of great interest to the present study—is that while there are obvious variances, there are also marked affinities between male and female Bildungsromane.

3 Virile Men, Servile Women? Some Preliminary Notes on Gender (and Genre) Differences between Male and Female Novels of Formation in Fascist Italy

Embedded in one of Lazzaro-Weis’ observations about the female Bildungsroman is a view that is of particular importance to my own conceptualization of why the idea of formazione can be a productive means with which to analyze Italian “female” novels such as Natalia and Nessuno torna indietro. Discussing Susan Wells’ understanding of the Bildungsroman as elaborated in The Dialectics of Representation, Lazzaro-Weis writes that:

The relevancy of the Bildungsroman to current feminist critical debates and writing lies precisely in the fact that the form has always exposed the tensions, contradictions, and difficulties involved in linking the representation of subjectivity to the criticism of social and political structures, even if the form
itself is based in an unresolved dialectic between its intent to represent experience and its negative critique of social and political structures. (From Margins 98)

The task of criticizing social and political situations via personal narratives is undoubtedly rife with challenges, but, as have other authors across continents and centuries, Cialente and de Céspedes recognized the potential of the general form of the romanzo di formazione to reveal truths about the repressive effects of society on female development.

The “unresolved dialectic” of the genre that is especially troublesome for the “feminist critical debates and writing” cited above mirrors a similar issue that arises when analyzing almost all such literature produced in fascist Italy, where attempted social control and difficulties related to censorship were pressing and exigent considerations. Such concerns were particularly acute, however, for this generation of women, situated, as they were, after the decline of early feminism and during a period in which oppression of women was more or less standard practice. Female authors depicting women thus came up against an undertaking that was even more problematic than was that of their male contemporaries, but this does not make the Bildungsroman, understood, of course, in broader terms than have traditionally been allowed, any more or less viable for the narration of female experience than it was for male experience in the Italy of the ventennio.

This last point—that the novel of formation is suitable as a means with which to analyze both male and female processes of development—does not imply that there are not vast differences between the representation of male and female Bildung. As referenced, some of these divergences between the transition from girlhood to womanhood as opposed to from boyhood to manhood in English contexts are addressed in theoretical texts like The Voyage In and Unbecoming Women. Although Lazzaro-Weis discusses discrepancies between male and female narratives in Italian novels, her focus of the 1980s renders her conclusions less pertinent to the examination of novels produced during the fascist period, which gave rise to a special set of conditions affecting the kind of literary responses provoked.

Given these geographical and temporal variances, I draw on the above theories when appropriate while also offering my own hypotheses to account for this specific context and for my observations about these two novels of formation. Most importantly, I examine Natalia and Nessuno torna indietro with the assertion that, somewhat paradoxically, the majority of the
female developments depicted are comparatively more auspicious—though ultimately arrested and ambiguous—as compared to the generally failed, but also generally more complete, developments experienced by many of the male protagonists of novels of formation written in the same timeframe. While the men retain, to varying degrees, elements of the *inetto*, the women tend to adeptly navigate available resources in a situation that is made unfavourable to them by virtue of their gender and are rewarded, even if in minor ways, for their willingness to behave in opposition to norms. Much of Cialente and de Céspedes’ protest therefore comes from the fact that one or more protagonist eventually manages to achieve positive societal recognition of some kind regardless of the barriers to maturation that she faces and despite her nonconformity, whereas in the male novels of formation, the ideological message is delivered via the protagonist’s failure to succeed even when attempting to do the right thing.

In fact, with the notable exception of Michele, who reaches a negative impasse, these young men genuinely strive to proceed through steps that should guide them to maturity. Most try to leave the family home, acquire meaningful employment, and engage politically; they also have sexual experiences with women. Their goals are at least vaguely consonant with the fascist model of virility, but they are nonetheless thwarted by the very society and institutions that prescribe such standards. Starting again with *Gli indifferenti*, the females seem to attain a better result. Although the sexual deeds with Leo to which Carla acquiesces could be analyzed as tainting her path forward, Carla’s potential development, or, in any case, the glimpse of it contained in the novel, shows a young woman who makes calculated decisions in order to take advantage of the general ambience of malaise in which she finds herself. She does not manage to achieve her ideal formation, but she nonetheless comes closer than her brother can. Just as the developments of the male protagonists in novels following *Gli indifferenti* go well beyond Michele’s paralyzed ventures to free himself of Leo Merumeci, the formations of the main female characters in *Natalia* and in *Nessuno torna indietro* progress further than Carla’s does.

As I explore more in subsequent analysis, the development of Cialente’s protagonist involves several significant complications. First is the matter of self-fashioning,\(^\text{19}\), which Natalia attempts

\[^{19}\text{This term was introduced by Stephen Greenblatt in his 1980 volume } Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare; I use it in a more general sense in order to describe the process with which the protagonist in this work constructs her identity.\]
to use as a tool with which to mature from a girl to a woman but that becomes a form of deception with complex consequences. In my close reading of *Natalia*, I argue that the manner in which the protagonist alters and manipulates her identity is a strategy that she employs as she tries to grow up and that points to Cialente’s protest against fascist conceptions of women and motherhood, a form of resistance that manifests in a careful negotiation of traditional female identities. Also part of the questioning of female roles are the protagonist’s lesbian experimentation and her abandonment of her marriage. Interestingly, however, Natalia opts to return to her husband and live a more archetypical female life. Despite her earlier rebellion, she is welcomed back and is seemingly content with this outcome.

Few of the women in *Nessuno torna indietro*, published eight years after *Natalia*, find this kind of unconditional acceptance. Still, at the close of their stories of development, some of these young females have achieved, or are on their way to achieving, their objectives. On the whole, the defiant, arguably anti-fascist nature of their formations lies in the fact that their goals for the most part do not coincide with what fascist institutions and propaganda would wish for them, yet they meet at worst ambiguous, at best favourable, ends. Indeed, except for Milly, who dies early in the book, none of the women end up in a situation as devastating as that of *Tre operai*’s Teodoro or that of *Luce fredda*’s Sergio. Although the men’s desires are in at least a sense consonant with the fascist vision of masculinity, they face obstacles that they are by and large unable to overcome. The women are not subject to this fate, even if some of their ambitions—for example, to be independent or to be an intellectual—are irreconcilable with the fascist paradigm of the prolific mother.

With the intention of accounting for some of the divergences between men’s and women’s outcomes, I theorize additional variations between the male and the female *romanzo di formazione* in later analysis. Doing so necessitates being cognizant of both the divergent social, cultural, historical, and political circumstances facing men and women and class differences between all protagonists. The novels’ structure is also relevant: while the male works, with exceptions, focus to a greater extent on a single protagonist and have mostly linear storylines, the female novels are more multi-vocal and episodic. I link the prominence of these characteristics to the challenges of depicting women’s coming of age, which, as critics have suggested, often
involves participation in a female community, interplay between private and public life, in which the former is clearly dominant, and reduced physical and social mobility. Cialente and de Céspedes are selective about which of these traditional impediments to female development to incorporate into their models of female Bildung. They also make fascinating choices as to what hinders and what helps female formation. The result is women who, if not fully “formed,” are at the very least in states that, in-between and suspended, are undeniably preferable to the defeat that their male counterparts in other works must endure. In the end, then, these novels are subversive not because they show the impossibility for young people to succeed in fascist Italy but, given the gender and goals of the young Italians in question, for exactly the opposite reason.

My separate evaluations of Natalia and of Nessuno torna indietro consist of three parts. In each, I begin with a brief description of pertinent biographical details about the author. Next, I analyze the novel’s realism, individuating distinctive features of Cialente and de Céspedes’ aesthetic choices. Finally, I discuss general thematic characteristics of the text and its presentation of female development. I focus in particular on the issues of agency and the subversion of gender roles, connecting them to the question of anti-fascism.

4 Natalia

4.1 Cialente in Egypt

Biographical considerations pertaining to Fausta Cialente’s upbringing and young adulthood shed light on both the autobiographical elements of Natalia and the question of Cialente’s political intent. Like those of the protagonist, Cialente’s childhood and adolescence were marked by constant movement. Born in Cagliari in 1898 to a father from Abruzzi and a mother from Trieste, Cialente spent her early years in various Italian towns and cities, including Osoppo,

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20 See, for example, Abel et al. 7–12.

21 This section is a modified version of my article Gaudet, Kathleen, “Fausta Cialente’s Natalia: Representing Transgressive Female Formation During Fascism,” Carte Italiane 9.2 (2013): 77–88.

22 Renata Asquer’s Fausta Cialente. La triplice anima is essentially a brief biography and as such details Cialente’s childhood. Cialente’s Le quattro ragazze Wieselberger, which Parati describes as constituting an “autobiographical act” (74), is another good source of information regarding her (and her mother’s) biography.
Jesi, Milan, Rome, Padua, Florence, and Genoa. After marrying Enrico Terni in 1921, she relocated to Egypt, where she would remain until 1947. This migratory lifestyle evidently had appreciable ramifications for Cialente’s sense of geographical identity. In an interview conducted by Sandra Petrignani in the 1990s, Cialente declared, “non ho mai sentito … di essere italiana, un po’ per le mie origini, un po’ per la vita che ho fatto” (Petrignani 85). The fact that she did not have an “identità nazionale o culturale definita” (Nepi 6) would influence her literary production.

The implications of her immigration to Egypt give Cialente’s own process of development affinities to the idea of awakening described by Abel et al.\textsuperscript{23} in that her move to Alexandria brought with it rather sudden and profound changes to her worldview, opening her cultural, intellectual, and political horizons beyond what had been possible for her in Italy. In the same interview cited above, Cialente related how upon gaining access to her husband’s vast collection of books, she immediately began expanding her understanding of literature. As she recalled, “in Egitto disponevo della ricca biblioteca di mio marito, che in casa dei miei genitori non avevo mai avuto a causa del vagabondaggio di mio padre. Passai i primi anni a leggere. Non facevo altro” (Petrignani 87). This period was also intellectually enlightening for her in other respects since she was actively involved in social circles made up of expatriates and was exposed to a great deal of classical music thanks to her husband’s position as vice-president of a local society for music. This was, in Marianna Nepi’s words, a time “di grande fervore intellettuale” for Cialente, to whom Egypt seemed “vivace, ricco e stimolante se paragonato a quell’Italia provinciale che si è lasciata alle spalle” (6). It was there that Cialente wrote her first novel, Natalia, which she started in 1925, completed in 1927, and had published in 1930 in Italy by Sapentia. This was followed by short stories that were later printed in two collections, Pamela o la bella estate (1935) and Interno con figure (1976), and by a novel, Cortile a Cleopatra (1936). Like Cortile a Cleopatra, two subsequent novels, Ballata levantina (1961) and Il vento sulla sabbia (1972), would take place in Egypt.

Cialente’s stay in Egypt had another consequence. As she explained, the most fortunate aspect of living “così a lungo in quello straordinario paese” was that she was granted “la possibilità di trascorrervi tutto il vergognoso periodo fascista” (Petrignani 86). In the opinion of Renata

\textsuperscript{23} See earlier section of this chapter for a summary of this theory of the female Bildungsroman.
Asquer, Cialente’s aversion to Mussolini’s political program was established even before she left Italy in 1921: her reaction to a gathering in Piazza San Sepolcro witnessed during a March 1919 trip to visit family in Milan is, for Asquer, evidence that “da subito si sentirà aliena allo stile e all’ideologia mussoliniani” (51). This claim is interesting, but since it is left unsubstantiated, it is not particularly useful in attesting to Cialente’s political leanings. Her political orientation beginning with the Second World War was, however, unequivocally anti-fascist. In October 1940, English officials asked her to move to Cairo in order to broadcast a daily anti-fascist program on Radio Cairo (Nepi 10); in October 1943, Cialente and Anna Caprera founded Fronte Unito, a weekly anti-fascist publication for Italian prisoners of war (Nepi 11).

Given not only Cialente’s physical distance from Italy for the entirety of the fascist period but also that until Un inverno freddissimo, published in 1966, all of her novels with the exception of Natalia were set outside of Italy, it is somewhat difficult to evaluate how, and indeed if, the anti-fascism that led her to become so involved in anti-fascist propaganda is reflected in her earlier narratives. Nonetheless, in the case of her debut work, it is apparent that the crux of Cialente’s dissent lies in her open challenge to presiding gender norms. The regime’s refusal to allow a second printing of the prize-winning novel unless Cialente modified certain passages, including one suggestive of a lesbian relationship between the protagonist and another female character and one critical of the Italian forces’ performance in Caporetto, is evidence of its politically contentious nature, and Cialente’s defiant reaction—to forego a reprint rather than make the required adjustments—insinuates that she valued and was aware of the book’s controversial posture.24 Because of her reluctance to bend to the demands of the fascist censors, Natalia would not be republished until 1982, when a new, revised edition was issued by Mondadori.25 My analysis refers to the original, unmodified 1930 version.

4.2 Aesthetic and Related Considerations

Natalia begins in a villa in the Italian countryside, where Natalia and her family, which frequently moves because of her father’s military career, arrive. She soon meets Silvia, the object

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24 See Nepi 19.

25 Most published critical works on Natalia coincide with and refer to this second edition.
of her youthful affections. Other important characters include Malaspina, a soldier who initially falls prey to Natalia’s manipulations and is later her husband; Ivan, a boy with whom Natalia socializes during her girlhood; Jacopo, her brother; and Valdemaro, a male acquaintance and poet and intellectual who facilitates Malaspina and Natalia’s reunification. The protagonist’s unconventional process of self-discovery dominates the narrative.

In terms of its style, *Natalia* is very much a transitional text that occupies a unique place in Cialente’s oeuvre, differing from her early production of short prose with more markedly “magical” characteristics and from her later, more obviously realist, novels. Even if it both thematically and aesthetically resists conventional notions of narrative and is therefore difficult to categorize, certain of its characteristics give it affinities to magical realism, a quality shared most notably with Cialente’s short story “Marianna,” also published in 1930.²⁶ Several critics have made this connection. Carlo Bo, for example, states in his brief introduction to the second edition of *Natalia* that, faithful to Massimo Bontempelli’s lesson, “la Cialente ha adottato la formula del realismo magico ma senza portare alle conseguenze estreme l’interrogazione astratta e sterilizzata del suo maestro.”²⁷ Agreeing that the influence of magical realism is conspicuous, in this section I expand on Bo’s observation, showing that while magical realism is an important component of the novel’s aesthetics, it is attenuated and altered when compared to Bontempelli’s original conception of the literary style. I propose that Cialente’s personal brand of realism, one in which oneiric qualities, particularly the nebulous relationship between reality and dreams, are of great importance, complements the thematic content of the narrative and is thus an appropriate means with which to narrate Natalia’s idiosyncratic development.

Bontempelli outlined his theory of magical realism in several articles printed in the literary journal *900* starting in 1926, developing and explaining his conception of it in depth beginning with the assertion that “il dominio dell’uomo sulla natura è la magia” (10).²⁸ Two aspects of

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²⁶ In *La Fiera Letteraria*.

²⁷ Bo’s short analysis of *Natalia* appears in the dust jacket of the 1982 version, which includes no other introduction.

²⁸ The four preambles expounding the principle characteristics of *Novecentismo* were originally published, in French, in September 1926, December 1926, March 1927, and June 1927. Italian
these programmatic writings are especially central: his admiration for three fifteenth-century artists, Masaccio, Andrea Mantegna, and Piero della Francesca, whom he sees as combining magical with realistic elements in a manner that resonates with his own goals; and his criticism of more contemporary movements such as impressionism and futurism, whose representation of reality he does not respect (Bontempelli 21–25). Although a detailed analysis of Bontempelli’s theories is beyond the scope of my work, a 1930 statement in which he sums up a chief characteristic of magical realism is relevant to analysis of Natalia since his assertion—that “la vera norma dell’arte narrativa è questa: raccontare il sogno come se fosse realtà, e la realtà come se fosse un sogno” (161)—reflects properties of Cialente’s novel.

In fact, the entanglement of different realities is a recurrent feature of the text and affects and involves most major characters. Malaspina, for instance, sees Natalia in the sky before their first meeting (73). Natalia’s dreams are sometimes monopolized by Malaspina, who unsettles her moments of repose: “Dormendo sognava cose straordinarie e avventure impossibili e in mezzo a tante visioni ritornava sempre quella di Malaspina, bianco in faccia, che si apriva il petto e le mostrava come ci avesse dentro un bel fuoco acceso: lei gli diceva che poteva spegnerlo, da solo” (80). Natalia’s relationship with Silvia, on the other hand, is an enchantment that lasts both day and night. The same phrase is used twice to describe how she changes in Silvia’s presence. While she is still a young adolescent but is already captivated with Silvia, it is reported that “Natalia era scesa nell’incanto” (12). More than one hundred and thirty pages after Natalia and Silvia’s first encounter, Natalia is again said to have descended “nell’incanto” (145). As the word choice suggests, episodes with Silvia occur in a place removed from reality, where everything revolves around the here and now.\footnote{Valdemaro, for his part, most consistently straddles the line between reality and dreams. As Malpezzi Price summarizes his daydreaming, “his visions translations of the “Giustificazione,” “Fondamenti,” “Consigli,” and “Analogie” are contained in the 1938 collection \textit{L’avventura novecentista}. I quote here from the 1974 Valecchi republication.}

\footnote{In a passage that illustrates how Natalia has difficulty seeing beyond the present moment, it is reported that “il mattino andava a spiarla mentre dormiva anche se aveva passato la notte con lei. Non poteva immaginare la sua grazia alterata dalla vecchiaia o dalla morte e le nasceva dai ricordi della notte la tenerezza del giorno” (146).}
present a parade of painters obsessed with dead women, pianists with haunted pianos, and saxophonists playing while perched in trees” (110).

Other aspects of the text also point to its affinities with magical realism. Nepi sees “l’influenza bontempelliana” in Natalia as residing “nell’atmosfera alle volte in bilico tra una visione lucida e realistica delle cose e una immaginata e distorta, negli oggetti che sembrano animarsi e partecipare della realtà dei protagonisti, nel gioco di avvicinamento e distanziamento messo in atto tra fantasia e realtà” (27). As a result of descriptions scattered throughout the novel giving everyday objects and situations symbolic weight, the protagonist’s reality becomes irreversibly fused with a magical dimension that is not so far from what the reader thinks possible as to be deemed totally absurd but that varies enough from widely held ideas of normality as to make uncertain some assumptions about human existence, about interpersonal relationships and relationships between people and things. An illustrative example is the following depiction of Silvia in which the assignment of natural attributes, most notably those of a tree, “qualcosa di radicato per sempre in un luogo, che per secoli si nutre della stessa terra e della stessa acqua” (Nepi 25), becomes a complex metaphor:

I piedi stretti e lunghi nella scarpetta di tenero camoscio bigio avevano qualche cosa di arboreo, erano la fresca radice di tutto il suo corpo in fioritura. La caviglia rotonda modellava una calza leggera come la muffa, ma là dove cominciava la purezza di una linea curva cadevano fitte le pieghe della vesta…. Un ciuffetto d’erba cresciuto a l’ombra del sedile si affacciava di sotto l’orlo e innalzava, salvo, un fiorello bianco. Essere quel fiore sotto la campana misteriosa e aperta di quella gonna. Un ginocchio posato su l’altro segnava la linea di un frutto nascosto, rotondo, e di là partiva il raggio delle pieghe cadenti. (12–13)

Besides showing the interweaving of the human world and nature, this passage, which appears very early in the book, makes evident Natalia’s desire for Silvia, thus presaging their later bond.30 It also stresses the females’ contrasting personalities: Silvia is grounded while Natalia is flighty, romantic, and seldom comfortable with her situation for more than a short time.

30 In fact, the description of Silvia as “un frutto,” now “molle, sul tappeto” (111), appears again during the first erotic scene.
The hypothesis that there is a connection between *Natalia* and Bontempelli’s magical realism might seem strengthened by the fact that the jury that awarded the Premio dei Dieci, the literary prize won by the first edition of the work, was presided over by Bontempelli himself, but whether or not Cialente’s deliberate goal in incorporating magical elements was to create a magical realist text is unclear. In any case, the magical characteristics serve important functions and are fundamental to the novel’s aesthetics. A final consideration relating to and stemming from its affinities to magical realism is one that crosses over from plot to aesthetics: the notion, developed by Cialente throughout the narrative, that our idea of reality is spurious or, at the very least, that reality is more complex and unpredictable than we normally assume it to be. Indeed, both Natalia’s predilection for lying, a trait that will be examined as I analyze elements of the protagonist’s process of development, and the consistent vacillation between the characters’ conscious existence and a parallel world cast doubt on the veracity of the story, the memoir of an unreliable young woman who lives an exceptionally unconventional life. As I later discuss, the issue of characters’ self-misrepresentation is also present in *Nessuno torna indietro*, which more openly and extensively criticizes presiding gender norms, while the fantastical dimension that occasionally emerges in *Natalia* is not found in de Céspedes’ novel.

### 4.3 Manipulation of *Bildung* and Subversion of Gender Roles

*Natalia* is composed of five parts, each focusing on a different stage of the title character’s formation. As the novel progresses, she gradually matures from a twelve-year-old child aptly described by her mother as “molto viziata” (8) to a young woman who, after several misadventures and revelatory experiences, appears to content herself with wedlock. It is on the complicated path leading from the rather conventional beginning to the equally conventional end of Natalia’s development that emerges a series of episodes showing a nonconformist female who must make a number of exacting decisions regarding the life that she is building for herself.

Natalia’s attempts at self-formation and the repercussions thereof form a running thread throughout. Reconciling her “natura sensuale e … trasgressiva” (Adda 5) with both external pressure and internal, though intermittent, volition to conform leads her to evade uncomfortable realities by compulsively and habitually manipulating her self-image in order to mollify others and overcome the tremendous self-doubt and loneliness that result from her awareness of her alterity and fear “di avere un cuore sterile, incapace di dare un’emozione … né di riceverla”
(Cialente, Natalia 203). Her character is developed primarily through the frequently deceptive actions with which she constructs various identities, assuming and then rejecting several before finally capitulating to that of wife. Her agency in this process is important: though the social and cultural context certainly affects the options that are open to her, she seldom yields control. It is, in fact, with Natalia’s many self-adaptations and the power demonstrated by her manipulation of others that the extent to which her conduct is subversive, even when she is trying to create an accepted role for herself, is revealed.

Over the course of her formation, Natalia cycles through at least eight distinct versions of herself. The first is that of her girlhood. The second is the one that she fashions via her correspondence with Malaspina. Next she evolves into Silvia’s lover, perhaps the most genuine of her identities. Another is the femme fatale (Nepi 23) that she describes in a lengthy letter to Jacopo in which she lies about her first meeting with Malaspina. Faced with the challenge of gaining Jacopo’s forgiveness after he discovers that she has deceived him, Natalia subsequently tries to reinvent herself as a charitable, altruistic woman. When this proves a fruitless effort, she half-heartedly marries Malaspina, thus becoming a wife and potential mother. Now embittered and disenchanted, Natalia deserts her husband and family and, as she reports to an acquaintance, Valdemaro, creates a new fictitious identity as an independent singleton, finding a place in a boarding house for women and a position as an office worker. Her final role—again as wife—varies from her first attempt at domesticity since she has apparently ceded some of her characteristic intransigency and meekly reenters marriage a more complacent female. Given Natalia’s complex psychology and the precedent of mutability that has been set by her previous instability, it seems unlikely that this variation of her character will endure.

The most transgressive of Natalia’s identities, that of Silvia’s partner, warrants first mention because it colours many of her later decisions. This is not only the role that comes most naturally to her but also the one that gives her the most pleasure and satisfaction. Margherita Adda observes that during her return to the countryside, Natalia lives in “una dimensione di verità, in cui è sincera, appassionata, non ha bisogno di fingere di fronte a se stessa e di fronte a Silvia” (5). This situation, in which Natalia is able to affirm the legitimacy of her otherness and embrace her desires, cannot be anything but transient. While they can justify their actions in this separate space, removed from the judgmental eyes of society, neither woman is willing or able to give herself fully to a lifestyle so incompatible with prevailing mores.
Their romantic liaison, which I will address in more detail, comes to a relatively hasty close, but its consequences reverberate through much of the work. Natalia’s lasting feelings for and about Silvia are the impetus for endeavours to generate and project a more stereotypical female identity and continue to shape her actions well after she has come to believe that the key to external success, if not to inner happiness, is the acceptance of a conventional role. Most significant is the influence of their shared history on Natalia’s attitude toward her pregnancy, which she considers an opportunity to absolve herself of past transgressions. When the baby is stillborn, she suspects that her body has been permanently compromised by her weakness and concludes that the only way that she might escape her guilt and definitively liberate herself from the burden of her sins is by disappearing.

In all of Natalia and Silvia’s interactions, Natalia is the more dominant partner. Although her affection for Silvia is reciprocated, Natalia approaches her selfishly. Her physical attraction to the young woman is undeniable: when she sets eyes on Silvia for the first time in several years, Natalia “la vedeva così bella che ne aveva il cuore ferito” (92). Nevertheless, her wish to touch Silvia is in part incited by her wish to both effect change in Silvia and test the limits of her own power. This control is not unique to her same-sex experiences. In fact, a consistent aspect of Natalia’s sexual and intellectual formation is the manner in which she subordinates men. Indeed, over the course of her development, Natalia leaves several victims in her wake as she uses relationships as tools for self-growth with little regard for the feelings of others. Paradoxically, the root cause of this behaviour is her innate need to be wanted.

Natalia’s egoism is first evident in the first part of the novel, which begins with her arrival at a country villa that will be her family’s new home. Besides serving as the venue for her initial contact with Silvia, it is here that she meets Ivan, who is the son of a rabbi and clearly enamoured with Natalia. Their rendezvous, during which they read together in their attic hideaway, are important to Natalia’s education and socialization, especially since she does not attend school. For Ivan, their meetings are corrupting. Having grown up with a conservative father, he has had little exposure to the idea of sexuality, so the contents of the old love letters that he and Natalia discover and the feelings aroused in him by his proximity to her are alarming. Natalia remains indifferent and cold. The conclusion to this episode emphasizes how she has upended and forever altered Ivan and Silvia’s quiet lives: while she is seemingly not very
bothered by her family’s relocation, they vow to help each other cope with the sense of abandonment elicited by her departure.

Malaspina, with whom Natalia conducts an epistolary relationship during the war, is perhaps the most obvious sufferer of Natalia’s manipulation. She takes advantage of him even before they first see each other. Assuming that their communication will be limited to writing letters, Natalia uses their correspondence as a game whose objective is to see how quickly he will fall in love with the false persona that she has created. She is successful: “Il figlioccio s’era innamorato, presto, delle infinite bugie ch’ella gli mandava ogni settimana su carta velina” (42). Her immense command over him is accentuated by the fact that he does not really want to love her—in actuality, “ella gli faceva paura” (45)—but is powerless to her allure. Flattered by his love, Natalia wishes to remain the centre of attention so unashamedly exploits his infatuation. During their first meeting, which takes place at a time and location of her choosing, she totally, and rather cruelly, rejects him. When they marry, it is because she has determined that this is the best option for her. Most illuminative of Natalia’s influence, Malaspina welcomes her back after she has abandoned him, even though she has caused him tremendous emotional suffering that has contributed to his becoming an alcoholic. The contrasts between them stress the unpredictability of Natalia’s character: for instance, Malaspina is consistently tender while she is sometimes sweet but often volatile and temperamental.

Other men serve other purposes. Valdemaro is a means with which Natalia moves forward in her formation since, as Paola Malpezzi Price states, he “helps Natalia find her way back to reality from the world of imagination” (110).\textsuperscript{31} By now considered lost by her family, Natalia inexplicably appears in Valdemaro’s apartment and relates her story to him, beginning with her relationship with Silvia and ending with a description of the false identity that she has assumed since disappearing. Natalia’s confession has a cathartic, transformative effect on her; Valdemaro, on the other hand, gains nothing by alleviating her need to bare the truth. A romantic who, as did

\textsuperscript{31} Malpezzi Price’s analysis focuses on Natalia as a precursor to later female protagonists who are more obviously intellectuals. Though I agree with her argument that Natalia is in some senses an inchoate intellectual foreshadowing women in Cialente’s later novels—her friendship with Ivan, prolific letter-writing, and overactive imagination are evidence of this part of her personality—I do not see this as being her defining characteristic or the one that is most relevant to an analysis of the subversion of gender roles in Natalia. See Malpezzi Price 110–111 for her interpretation.
Malaspina, forms a fast attachment to Natalia, Valdemaro is in love with her, but she has decided that she has erred by leaving Malaspina. When Natalia and Malaspina reconcile, Valdemaro, hurt and confused, struggles to accept that “Natalia era andata con suo marito ed era giusto” (342).

Jacopo differs from Ivan, Malaspina, and Valdemaro in that he is the only character to truly challenge Natalia’s authority. Her wish to please him is instrumental in shaping her development. Natalia is envious of Jacopo’s time alone with Silvia and eager to make amends when he refuses to speak with her because he is angered and ashamed by Malaspina’s revelation that Natalia has been untruthful. His refusal to forgive her inspires a series of attempts to remake herself in an image more admissible to her brother, but he stubbornly ignores the long days that she spends practicing “l’umiltà e la dolcezza” (176). Jacopo’s disapproval, together with the discovery that Silvia is engaged to a cousin “che è arrivato dalla Svezia” (207), impels Natalia to acquiesce to Malaspina in a last-resort effort to appease Jacopo and regain some control. When she subsequently leaves Malaspina, Jacopo is once more infuriated. Natalia’s desire to pacify her brother is also a contributing, though not the only, factor in her ultimate reacceptance of marriage. She realizes that the forgiveness of her family will have to come through Malaspina, and by submitting to a role that more readily conforms to societal expectations, she helps restore the Fandels’ inter-familial dynamics.

4.4 Sexual Maturation and Motherhood

Natalia’s displays of dominance are certainly at odds with the fascist ideal of the submissive female. Her sexual coming of age is similarly atypical: the first sexual acts in which she engages are with another woman, and her comparatively dispassionate union with Malaspina results in a devastating stillbirth. Cialente reinforces Natalia’s sexual otherness by insisting on her and Silvia’s emotional and physical bonds, describing their mutual attraction and sexual experiences in an amount of detail that is lacking in the portrayal of Natalia’s heterosexual relationship. Her final epiphany—that she has loved Malaspina all along—seems almost an afterthought, an orthodox ending to a markedly unorthodox story.

The opening section of the novel contains many sensual descriptions that foreshadow Natalia and Silvia’s later affair, which takes root in these early interactions beginning when they take each other’s hand and set foot on the “strada incantevole” (16) that leads to their eventual sexual experimentation. Well before their friendship has fully metamorphosed, Natalia recognizes that
her feelings for Silvia have already had major ramifications. In one of several crises of identity that prompt her sexual maturation, or at least help advance it, Natalia posits that because of a “risveglio” that took place during her adolescence, she is not pure “secondo la morale e la religione” (52). She does not explicitly state what has caused her awakening. However, the nature of her contemplation suggests that it was Silvia who changed her perspective on love, a hypothesis supported by the fact that their first encounters took place primarily in the gardens surrounding the country villa, reflected here in her reference to “i giardini della malizia” (52) and rumination on original sin. She is obsessed with the idea that she must conceal a part of herself from Malaspina, who if told that she has never felt “la benda fredda della purità” (53) would assume that she has had a lover when she is in reality still a virgin. Unsettled by the fear of being criticized, she concludes that it is too late to “rimontare la corrente” (53) that carries those who remain untainted.

The outcome of her agonizing over these feelings is a self-fulfilling prophecy that is actualized as Natalia rejects Malaspina during their first meeting and then approaches Silvia. She is portrayed as stumbling into the initial sexual act, surprised by her own capacity to seduce: “E non seppe mai come fu che baciandola poté lentamente rovesciarla sul tappeto. La vergine era matura: come un frutto, era caduta, molle, sul tappeto. Natalia, che non aveva voluto proprio questo, fece di lei quello che aveva confusamente sognato di fare” (110–111). The next morning Silvia avoids Natalia, who quickly angers and considers liberating herself from Silvia by returning to Malaspina. The women nonetheless unite physically several more times before Natalia goes back to the city.

Although their separation is necessary since Natalia must visit her sick mother, it is not wholly unwelcome. Natalia is by this point conflicted, but not because she is particularly concerned that her romantic involvement is socially unacceptable. Rather, she has begun to bore of day-to-day life with Silvia. Their intrinsic dissimilarities, which had fed Natalia’s adolescent fascination with Silvia, therefore become starker and more problematic:

Ancora una giornata inutile. Silvia porta in sè le ventiquattro ore e quelle notturre, prossime, sono le più dolorose. Averla guardata tutto il giorno è stata una sofferenza. Ma non è niente: bisognerà toccarla, fra poco, e baciarla. Natalia
non si sente preparata a un rito che è quasi sempre lo stesso e la guarda (sorride ogni tanto alla madre e al viscido segretario) con gli occhi bruciati. (154)

Significantly, the sexual acts are not what bother Natalia: the monotony of their routine, which has come to represent obligation instead of excitement, is.

Further facets of Natalia’s character emerge through her treatment of Silvia and attitude toward their relationship. Her palpable desire for validation, which makes any sign of rejection very hard to bear, is one example. She is possessive of Silvia, even after it has become evident that she has no real interest in staying with her indefinitely, and reacts swiftly and insolently to imagined indiscretions. Closely linked are the sense of entitlement that is a factor in her frequent and consuming jealousy and the preference for passion over reason that causes her to behave impulsively. After she has left the countryside but before her marriage to Malaspina, she laments that “era stata ragionevole troppo a lungo” (180) and fantasizes about rekindling her connection with Silvia. As is often the case, she is motivated primarily by her wish for conquest and by her compulsion to confirm that she is wanted and needed.

Natalia’s marriage to Malaspina is coloured by her awareness that she has compromised the part of her personality that eschews practicality. She is not fully comfortable with the role that she is about to assume; when she first applies the word “fidanzata” to herself, she feels that she wears it “come il vestito di un’altra persona” (204). Due to the shock of the engagement, she faints and suffers a blow to the head. Her injury is symbolic since it demarcates the end of her former existence and the beginning of one in which her fantastical romanticism has been transformed into a more pragmatic worldview. This period with Malaspina is indeed a stage of uncharacteristic realism for Natalia, who quickly adapts to the rhythms of her new life.

Natalia’s pregnancy is one of the first-mentioned consequences of her and Malaspina’s romantic and physical connection. While her same-sex relationship with Silvia was seemingly the result of instinctual actions, childbearing, a more usual state for women of the time, is for Natalia a destabilizing and disagreeable condition. When she discovers by accident that she is pregnant, her reaction makes clear that motherhood is not something to which she has ever aspired, perhaps because she does not want to turn into, as is narrated, “una delle donne feconde, sparse nel mondo. Che travaglio” (233). Although this has the potential to be “l’evento decisivo per un recupero della normalità” (Nepi 24), a process that was initiated by her marriage to Malaspina, it
ends in a tragedy that creates the impression that something about Natalia’s disposition makes her ill suited for maternity.

Her initial emotions regarding her situation are as extreme as they are mercurial. In what is perhaps reflective of her previous sexual experiences and her relative naivety about male-female intercourse, she had not considered the possibility that she might become pregnant with Malaspina’s child and is thus shocked and upset. In short order, however, she realizes that this is a second chance; with a “germoglio nei fianchi, possibilità di un avvenire che non fosse maligno,” she might summon the energy necessary to “voltarsi a diritto e guardare i giorni a venire” (233). The pregnancy represents an opportunity for Natalia to definitively move past her earlier sexual “misdeeds” and prove herself a “real” woman, but starting with her first obsessive musings, it appears unlikely that it will have such a positive result. She lacks confidence in her ability to successfully carry the baby to term and is terrified that she will make a critical error that might harm it: after all, “le sembrava tanto piccolo e informe che temeva, solamente a pensarci, di romperlo in due” (234). The fetus, too, becomes a judging presence that Natalia imagines watching her every action, its most fragile part being “certamente gli occhi. Per guardarlà” (234). Overwhelmed by the responsibility that she faces, she understands that even if the child has been sent for her salvation, she will have to save it from herself. She is haunted by “il ricordo di un istinto perverso che l’aveva uncinata e scossa durante un tempo breve ma vissuto in profondità” (235) and is afraid that her sins, which have indelibly stained her, will also tarnish the child. Despite these preoccupations, the impending birth becomes a source of great excitement and anticipation. Yet the negative effects of the pregnancy are never fully at bay. The process of weight gain is described as one of gradual physical deformation, and the disfiguration that accompanies the gestation and that foreshadows the stillbirth is mentioned on several occasions.

The setting in which Natalia gives birth—a peaceful home in the countryside, surrounded by plant and animal life—underscores her variance from the sanctioned female role from which she has diverged since childhood. Natalia is not even afforded the opportunity to grieve in a natural way: the stillbirth is kept a secret from her by her family members, who tell her that the baby is healthy and “bello” (250). She remains in limbo, unsure what is happening to her child, for days before she concludes that he has passed away. Natalia’s instinctual sense that pregnancy is a kind
of affliction is confirmed by this sad outcome. Although she is desperate for absolution, she is unable to fulfill what would have been considered to be one of her fundamental female duties.

At this critical juncture in the novel, Natalia is disillusioned of the notion, entertained since her marriage to Malaspina, that she could be a good wife and mother. Devastated by bereavement and its emotional repercussions, she tries to come to terms with her failure to produce a healthy child but cannot transcend her intense grief or free herself of nagging questions as to what has become of the baby. In this way, Natalia loses not only her son but also the identity that she has been attempting to adopt. Her efforts to resist her inclinations in order to conform to societal norms and her mother and brother’s wishes have been in vain. Feeling trapped and seeing no other way out, she runs away from Malaspina and her family, who give up trying to find her once “la premeditazione divenne certa” (273).

Natalia eventually decides to reenter society in an act of reconciliation, but her fate is by no means unequivocally favourable. Rather, there is the definite sense that by choosing marriage, she has sacrificed the freedom and happiness that she had experienced while rebelling. Though still the same person, the protagonist of the finale, which Malpezzi Price rightly calls “ambiguously ‘happy’” (110), is almost incomparable to the fiercely independent and obstinate female of earlier in the novel. The abrupt conclusion is thus another disruption, this time to the untraditional Bildung that has been constructed throughout the work.

5 Nessuno torna indietro

5.1 De Céspedes in Rome

In contrast with Cialente’s intellectual development, which took place mostly in Egypt, de Céspedes’ was based in Italy. Born there in 1911 to an Italian mother and a Cuban father who was a diplomat and the son of the first president of the Cuban Republic, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes y del Castillo, de Céspedes spent her childhood primarily in Rome. This city was instrumental in her intellectual formation and features prominently in many of her novels, the

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vast majority of which she wrote in Italian. Although the culture and language of her mother are dominant in her literary production, her Cuban father was, according to de Céspedes, most influential in encouraging her to pursue a career as a writer. In a 1990 interview with Piera Carroli, she relates how he praised her early literary efforts. Affirming that she started writing poetry while still a little girl, de Céspedes states: “La prima volta che ho scritto una poesia la mia governante l’ha presa e l’ha portata da mio padre, io credevo che mi strillassero e invece papà ha detto:—Alba lo farai sempre—” (Esperienza 133). As she tells it, his support was a constant until his death shortly after the publication of Nessuno torna indietro; in fact, while on his deathbed, he told her, “tu sei una grande scrittrice e non ti devi sposare, devi soltanto scrivere” (Esperienza 133). By this point de Céspedes had already not only married but also divorced Giuseppe Antamoro, whom she wedded at the age of fifteen and with whom she had a son in 1928, when she was seventeen years old.

Since she was taught by a private teacher during her childhood and adolescence, de Céspedes’ first formal education outside the home came only after her divorce in 1931, at which point she entered the Istituto Ravasco. De Céspedes’ time at the Ravasco was to have direct bearing on Nessuno torna indietro, being, as Laura Di Nicola writes, an “esperienza trasfigurata letterariamente nel romanzo” (111). Within a few years, she had moved into a studio with her son. January 1934 marked her literary debut, the story “Il dubbio” published in Il Giornale d’Italia. De Céspedes’ work subsequently began to appear in various Italian periodicals and in monographs. 1935 saw the release of L’anima degli altri, a collection of short stories with the publisher Maglione, and Io, suo padre, a brief novel, with the publishing house Carabba. The following year, Carabba distributed a book of de Céspedes’ poetry entitled L’anima degli altri and in 1937 an anthology of her short stories entitled Concerto.

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33 Io, suo padre, with the subtitle “romanzo sportivo,” was, according to the title page of Concerto, “prescelto a rappresentare la letteratura italiana alla XI Olimpiade in Berlino” (qtd. in Gallucci, “Alba de Céspedes’s Io, suo padre” 59) and presents a curious case that contrasts thematically and stylistically with de Céspedes’ other works. Gallucci offers one of, if not the most, thorough analyses of this brief novel, which was seldom acknowledged by the author herself and has been largely ignored by scholars. Interestingly, despite calling Io, suo padre “a glorious Fascist sports parable” (“Alba de Céspedes’s Io, suo padre” 62), Gallucci seems to suggest that its existence is not evidence that de Céspedes had any connections with fascism, instead insisting that de Céspedes was “publically anti-Fascist” at the time (“Alba de Céspedes’s Io, suo padre” 63). This discordance is peculiar. See Gallucci, “Alba de Céspedes’s Io, suo padre: Father, Son, and Fascism” for an exploration of the novel and of the film based on it.
Next was *Nessuno torna indietro*, which was released in 1938 by Mondadori and was an almost immediate triumph (Pickering-Iazzi, “The Sexual Politics” 85). According to Marina Zancan, de Céspedes’ first full-length novel was an intellectual turning point for the author in that by writing it, she began to move beyond the “sperimentazione ampia” evidenced by her earlier short stories and poetry and chose the novel as her preferred narrative form:

In questo senso la stesura di *Nessuno torna indietro* porta a esito maturo la ricerca di questa prima stagione letteraria, in cui la giovane de Césedes realizza le sue prime scelte: la centralità innanzitutto della narrativa e, in essa, del genere romanzesco, pur nella pratica parallela di altre tipologie di scritture (la giornalistica, nei primi anni, e quella poetica; più tardi la scrittura per il teatro e quella per il cinema, la televisione, la radio; la scrittura diaristica, conservata dalle carte d’archivio, che accompagna e spesso commenta le scritture destinate al pubblico). (Introduction, *Alba de Céspedes* 13)

*Nessuno torna indietro* indeed constituted a pivotal moment for de Céspedes, both because its immense popularity increased her fame and influence and because many of its qualities diverge from much of her previous production but are typical of her other novels. Most obvious is its more or less realistic portrayal of a female story, also characteristic of, for example, *Dalla parte di lei* (1949), *Quaderno proibito* (1952), *Prima e dopo* (1955), *Il rimorso* (1963), and *La bambolona* (1967), all of which engage with themes involving the social position of women.

The question of de Céspedes’ political motivations and involvement is relevant to an analysis of her literary output. Though they became more and more substantial as the 1930s progressed and she took on increasingly distinct anti-fascist roles, the extent and nature of de Céspedes’ early political engagement are somewhat nebulous. Her active participation in the Resistance in the 1940s, especially through her program on Radio Bari, is, on the other hand, well documented. In the interview with Carroli, de Céspedes described how she chose to broadcast under the pseudonym Clorinda, Tancredi’s “donna vestita da uomo,” and had “un ottimo ascolto, il massimo, forse perché una donna è più umana qualche volta” (qtd. in Carroli, *Esperienza* 142).  

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34 In “Resistance and Remorse: Alba de Céspedes’ s Withdrawal from the Public Sphere,” Ellen Nerenberg offers a discussion of de Céspedes’ involvement in the Radio Bari program, which, following
She acknowledged that her anti-fascism had been much more subdued until then; as she said, “ero stata sempre antifascista però non avevo fatto nulla” (qtd. in Carroli, Esperienza 141).

Yet de Céspedes’ problems with the government started years before. Having been the subject of close monitoring due to her anti-fascist associations, she was arrested for making anti-fascist comments on 12 February 1935, having participated in unacceptable telephone calls that were intercepted the day before (Bonsaver, Censorship and Literature 253). According to Bonsaver, de Céspedes “denied any wrong doing … and was eventually given a police warning and released on 17 February” (Censorship and Literature 253). That her political stance was clear enough to warrant surveillance of this kind supports the hypothesis that themes in this novel were purposefully adversarial, even if her protest of fascism is undeniably implicit. Furthermore, while she was by her own admission not particularly vocal in her political views during this period, de Céspedes was punished for the subversiveness perceived in her text, though not to the degree suggested by her assertion that, in her words, “ho avuto molti guai nel periodo fascista. Tutto di me fu proibito” (qtd. in Petrignani 40). In actuality, Nessuno torna indietro would not be censored until several years after it was initially published, as evidenced by a letter dated 27 January 1941 and sent from the Ministero della Cultura Popolare to Mondadori “ordering him to stop any reprints of Nessuno torna indietro … includ[ing] any negotiations regarding contracts for translations of the novel” (Bonsaver, Censorship and Literature 255). Circulation of the book


35 There is a lack of consensus regarding de Céspedes’ incarceration. Since he bases his analysis on police records and other archival documents that he cites, Bonsaver’s argument is difficult to refute. However, other scholars present other information as fact. For example, in a chapter in A History of Women’s Writing in Italy, edited by Letizia Panizza and Sharon Wood, Re states that de Céspedes was in jail “for six days in 1936” (“Futurism” 202). While the records found by Bonsaver indicate that she was held from 12–17 February 1935, de Céspedes remembers being under arrest for “pochi giorni, una quindicina” (Carroli, Esperienza 141), her “about fifteen days” representing a significantly longer period.
nonetheless continued, and by this time it had already achieved a tremendous amount of success both within and outside of Italy and was in the process of being made into a film.\textsuperscript{36}

5.2 Narrative Practices and Uses of Realism

I move now to the question of de Céspedes’ poetics in \textit{Nessuno torna indietro}, which I contend is written in an idiosyncratic realist style that is characterized by relatively straightforward prose within a complex narrative framework. After situating \textit{Nessuno torna indietro} by briefly considering its place in de Céspedes’ oeuvre and possible historical and contemporary literary influences, I describe some of the narrative strategies that she employs in chronicling the lives of the boarders, concentrating on a selection of the realist qualities of the text with which she represents female subjectivity and suggesting that despite various experimental characteristics of the novel, its realism is in some regards traditional. Guiding my analysis of realist elements of the text is my proposal that many of the author’s innovations are closely linked to her treatment of themes relating to the intricacies and difficulties of the lives of women. In order to avoid a reiteration of Pickering-Iazzi’s persuasive and useful explication of the role of the sexual politics of space in de Céspedes’ aesthetic,\textsuperscript{37} which recognizes the manner in which “certain narrative features intersect with other generic conventions” and contends that \textit{Nessuno torna indietro} shows characteristics in line with those “interwar notions proposed for a new realism that, as in the post-war period, encompass a fluid variety of elements resisting codification” (\textit{Politics of the Visible} 165), I individuate other aspects of the novel that are especially effective in compellingly narrating the story in question and that, I believe, are also components of the variety of realism seen in the work.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{36} Jacqueline Reich analyzes what she calls the “problem-plagued” (133) film adaptation of \textit{Nessuno torna indietro} in significant depth: see her book chapter “Fear of Filming: Alba de Céspedes and the 1943 Film Adaptation of \textit{Nessuno torna indietro}.”

\textsuperscript{37} See Pickering-Iazzi, \textit{Politics of the Visible}, particularly where she first introduces and expands on her hypothesis that “the author fashions a literary language that, while evocative, fabricates objects, habits, values, and ideas marking the characters’ quotidian space” (165–166). She also points to other scholars’ analyses, which identify in \textit{Nessuno torna indietro} genres and trends including the female psychological novel, the gothic, and the romance.

\textsuperscript{38} For a discussion of cultural influences on de Céspedes, see Fortini 159–163. Note that de Céspedes’ friendships with other female authors developed primarily during and after the Second World War, well after the composition of \textit{Nessuno torna indietro} was complete.
De Céspedes’ initial literary production, consisting of prose, poetry, and journalistic writings, gave her a solid and multifaceted literary foundation. It furthermore functioned as a site of intellectual growth that helped determine the style of her later works, constituting what Fortini terms a “percorso complesso” that took place “nel segno di un consapevole sperimentalismo volto a ricercare temi e stili che rispondessero pienamente alla propria tensione alla scrittura” (138) and that led to the adoption of the novel as her preferred form.\textsuperscript{39} Just as valuable in elucidating de Céspedes’ early intellectual process and its direct contribution to Nessuno torna indietro are the unpublished diaries in which she recorded initial drafts and occasional poetry and prose. Using it to corroborate the importance of these notebooks, Zancan points to a “frammento autonarrativo che dispone esplicitamente la scrittura diaristica all’origine del proprio immaginario poetico” of the author (Introduction, Romanzi XV).\textsuperscript{40} Besides showcasing general characteristics of her development, de Céspedes’ diaries hold “Pensionato per signorine,” identified by Zancan as the “prima bozza” of Nessuno torna indietro and dated January 1932 (Introduction, Romanzi XVI). The novel was therefore underway, though it remained in a germinal state, six years before it was finished and released. This lengthy incubation period undoubtedly brought with it changes in style and substance, but that de Céspedes was already engaged with such content at this stage in her literary formation suggests that the thematic core of her work—one that could be reduced to the potential (and need) for female empowerment—reaches back to her first attempts at writing prose while simultaneously reflecting, as Zancan states, “il punto cui è arrivata nella sua esperienza l’autrice” (Introduction, Romanzi XVIII).

In the same way as both the continuity and disconnection between de Céspedes’ early work and Nessuno torna indietro must be acknowledged, so should the relationship and differences

\textsuperscript{39} Fortini furthermore argues that the progression from Io, suo padre to the poems of Prigione to the short stories contained in Concerto shows an increasing orientation toward themes regarding women (138–139). She also contends that these earlier works foreshadow elements of de Céspedes’ 1938 novel. For example, she sees the story “Il cielo è azzurro,” set in a convent and about three young women, as constituting the “vero nucleo generatore” of Nessuno torna indietro (139).

\textsuperscript{40} Zancan elaborates on the relevance of de Céspedes’ diaries to the rest of her oeuvre, writing that they conserve “oltre ai riflessi interiori delle sue esperienze (anch’essi, dunque, narrazione della vita filtrata da immaginario e coscienza), testi rimasti inediti … , riflessioni metanarrative e i primi nuclei di opere poi edite” (Introduction, Romanzi XVI). See XV–XVI.
between the novel and historical and contemporary literary trends. Due to social and cultural factors, de Céspedes, like her female contemporaries, was to a certain extent obligated to develop separately from her peers:

Si tratta di una generazione—nata e cresciuta in un periodo di grande chiusura sociale, politica e culturale—che sembra aver cancellato il percorso delle generazioni precedenti ed essere ripartita, nella ricerca di sé e del proprio mondo espressivo, su di un terreno sicuramente difficile, ma apparentemente immaginato neutrale, in cui ognuna di loro, separatamente, ha dovuto costruire, in un clima di grande isolamento (dagli uomini, dalle altre donne) la propria presenza intellettuale e il proprio mestiere di scrittoRE. (Zancan, “La donna” 826–827)

This brand of segregation aside, however, her intellectual formation did not proceed in total isolation: indeed, it is possible to locate similarities linking *Nessuno torna indietro* to female Italian authors of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, even if these correspondences are primarily thematic, not structural or linguistic (Fortini 161). Moreover, literary allusions scattered throughout the text reflect the author’s familiarity with cultural and intellectual figures and movements.

Significantly, critics have identified characteristics of the novel’s aesthetics that are in line with traditional conceptions of realist writing, particularly the use of standard Italian and a “limpid prose style … praised by no less a critic than Eugenio Montale” (Nerenberg, “Alba de Céspedes” 105). Alberto Asor Rosa, for his part, detects “la … lucidità e obiettività narrativa, … lo stile lucido e preciso, privo di fronzoli, lontanissimo dalle seduzioni della ‘prosa d’arte’, dominante nei due decenni precedenti” (359). Scholars have also referred to the work’s purported linguistic simplicity as compared to many literary trends of the time. According to Fortini, for instance, the

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41 In Politics of the Visible, Pickering-Iazzi examines these general issues and considerations in some depth, though she does not more than superficially relate them to *Nessuno torna indietro*. See 124–147.

42 Many of these references come through Augusta, the female intellectual. For example, she references Deledda, a fellow Sardinian (160), then complains about a literary journal that publishes “certe ignobili cose futuriste con tanti onori quanti ne avrebbe la Commedia” (161).
work is presented “in una veste linguistica apparentemente dimessa”; as she writes, “Nessuno torna indietro è un’opera scritta in un italiano che verrebbe da definire medio” (163).

Other stylistic features of the text are more inventive. Though Fortini goes on to specify that de Céspedes draws from a “corpo linguistico apparentemente normalizzato, quasi ai limiti della quotidianità,” she also avers that de Céspedes’ work represents “lo scardinamento implosivo della narrazione in forma di romanzo” (164). Her observation about its marked deviations from the conventional form is germane since many of de Céspedes’ departures from the literary norm are related to structure. The choral nature of the novel is one example. Another is its basic format, which consists of four parts, other internal divisions signalled only by white space. The uniformity of the barriers that the women face is emphasized by de Céspedes’ decision not to utilize chapters. In their absence, the characters’ highly disparate stories of development flow into each other and become one despite their inherent differences.

Though this configuration, together with scenes in which the women interact in communal spaces at the convent, is critical in establishing the theme of female solidarity, focalization for the majority of the novel jumps from one female to another. While preserving third-person narration to express the women’s individual thoughts, de Céspedes makes use of various literary devices in order to develop each character’s narrative voice and backstory. By means of flashbacks that result in frequent temporal and spatial digressions (Fortini 163), the subjective and omniscient narrator provides a window into the women’s lives prior to their coming to the Grimaldi. Rather than relying on dialogue to reveal critical information about their intentions, de Céspedes employs internal monologues that, using indirect discourse and, occasionally, indirect free discourse, reveal the protagonists’ inner desires. These monologues, found throughout the work, are the source of some of the novel’s most powerful and revelatory moments. A case in point is Xenia’s exploration of female identity and sexuality, in which she asks herself, “ma è pura davvero la donna che va a prendersi un amante? O è impura anche se è intatta?” (198).

43 As stated earlier in this chapter, this chorality is also relevant to the classification of Nessuno torna indietro as a female Bildungsroman since it is consonant with the idea of multiple protagonists as described in Abel, Hirsch, and Langland’s The Voyage In.
I propose, then, that a basic feature of the realism in *Nessuno torna indietro* consists of the melding of more or less unadorned prose with a distinct structural framework that is used to relate entwined but separate means of female maturation, a combination that is apposite to the author’s goal of crafting an impactful narrative exposing social and cultural obstacles to young women’s processes of formation. I conclude by returning to Pickering-Iazzi’s theory of “female realism” as she explains it in the chapter “Continental Drift” of Politics of the Visible. Perhaps the only extensive investigation whose primary focus is interwar realist literature produced by Italian women, this study begins to account for how a group of female authors “inscribe[d] signs of a politics of writing aimed at putting into literary discourse a fuller, more veracious range of women’s intellectual and affective desires, experiences, and disillusionments” (Pickering-Iazzi, Politics of the Visible 142). Referring to Paola Drigo’s *Maria Zef* and to de Céspedes’ *Nessuno torna indietro*, Pickering-Iazzi writes that the “discursive effects” employed by the authors allow the emergence of “an oppositional space subverting the very patriarchal structures of power that realism is generally assumed to reinscribe,” especially by means of the portrayal of “forms of female self-fashioning among characters belonging to different socioeconomic classes and locations,” which “contend with the epic myths of woman, rural life, community, and nation—key elements of Fascist politics in everyday life and culture” (131). Teasing out the aesthetic from the thematic properties becomes a difficult task since form and content complement each other in the attempt to build a narrative that persuasively tells a story, in this case one with a message that is by and large incompatible with fascist rhetoric, that the reader might consider true.

### 5.3 Female Community and Multiple Female Formations under Fascism

In this section, I preface my examination of specific aspects of the protagonists’ developments by outlining some general considerations relating to my argument that *Nessuno torna indietro*, which follows eight female characters as they finish their education and transition into adulthood, is a female novel of formation(s) narrating the diverse comings of age of multiple

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44 Although Nerenberg sees Emanuela as the protagonist of the work (*Prison Terms* 200), for the purposes of my analysis I consider all eight of the young women as being sufficiently important to plot development to be called protagonists.
women. It should first be acknowledged that when compared to many Bildungsromane, the temporal focus of the work is relatively narrow. However, the approximately two-year span represents a critical point in what Marina Zancan terms the protagonists’ “esperienza collettiva di formazione” (Introduction, Alba de Céspedes 13). Asor Rosa also explicitly calls Nessuno torna indietro a female novel of formation, or, better, “autoformazione,” and maintains that despite the heterogeneity of their outcomes, “ognuno dei protagonisti esprime un certo quoziente di libertà, un’affermazione di volontà e di desiderio fortemente individualizzata” (359). Restricting the phase narrated permits de Céspedes to concentrate on the significance of this particular moment in the women’s development, while flashbacks provide further information about the characters’ youth.

The location in which much of the novel takes place—a religious boarding house in Rome—is an important aspect of this kind of Bildungsroman. The Grimaldi is a removed space where the protagonists can assert their independence and functions as a sort of catalyst for their processes of formation. Nearly all of the eight primary characters make the convent-run residence a temporary home in which they further their education and explore possibilities for their futures with the knowledge that it will not be a permanent dwelling. This is not to say that their stay here will culminate in absolute emancipation: as Sandra Carletti states in her explanation of the recurrent boarding-house-as-bridge symbol, “the point of departure is a condition of emotional and economic dependence from the family, and the arrival is the realization of one’s aspirations in a society where spaces for women are still supervised and their contacts with the world mediated by men” (“‘La sponda’” 174). This backdrop furthermore allows de Céspedes to highlight how a cross section of women from different backgrounds navigates in differing ways.

45 Laura Fortini references the significance of the city of Rome itself. Discussing how “Roma è la città della cultura con cui le ragazze del ‘Grimaldi’ si confrontano e da cui traggono conferme e disconferme,” she states, “è la città del transito, a cui si guarda come luogo di formazione e di sperimentazione anche dolorosa, ma da cui si parte per non rimanere fermi in un circolo chiuso senza possibilità di emancipazione, se non di libertà: città difficile ma vitale, Nessuno torna indietro la fotografa nell’istante lungo di sospensione prima dell’esplosione delle contraddizioni della storia, prima dello scoppiare della guerra ormai imminente” (151–152).

46 Carletti’s “‘La sponda dell’attesa’: Journeys and Rites of Passages in Nessuno torna indietro” addresses the bridge metaphor in depth, suggesting that it is an important part of de Céspedes’ portrayal of “a multi-faceted and restless female microcosm during a period in Italian history that was overbearingly masculine” (173). See especially 174–182.
the challenges and restraints presented by conflicting societal expectations and personal goals. The boarders are united not only in that they face these formative years in the same physical location but also in that most of them rebuke to varying degrees what Ruth Ben-Ghiat calls “the overdetermined nature of gender and social roles under fascism” (*Fascist Modernities* 189). As a result of these socially inscribed ideas, they cannot hope to deviate from what is expected of them if they are passive participants in the establishment of their adult lives. Many instead opt for the antithesis, taking agency by capitalizing on opportunities for transgression.

Indeed, though the Pensione Grimaldi is designed to suppress the young women’s desire to stray from the path laid out for them, its effect is in general the opposite. The convent is described in discordant terms. Carole C. Gallucci indicates that “from the very beginning of the novel, the author represents the Grimaldi using the imagery of a jail” but also that the students see it as symbolizing a bridge leading from child–to adulthood (“Alba De Céspedes’s *There’s No Turning Back*” 202). Victoria De Grazia emphasizes the oppressive nature of the boarding house, stating that “women’s freedom to go out could be compared to the freedom reigning at the Pensione Grimaldi, a halfway house with fixed hours, closely watched group routines, and the structures of newly internalized conventions” (233). Notwithstanding these restrictions, however, the protagonists are permitted more freedom here than they had before arriving. Now distanced from patriarchal influence, they begin to question the gender roles decreed by fascist doctrine and encouraged by their families. Within “a city within a city—a women’s city in Rome” (Pickering-Iazzi, “The Sexual Politics” 90), the women form a network for socialization and support, frequently gathering after lights-out under the pretence of study to converse and, on one occasion, to hold a séance, a violation of the rules of the church that provides evidence of their defiance and collaboration.

Also due to the setting, the protagonists are managed by the nuns who run the Grimaldi and control the students, enforcing the rules with gusto and insisting that the residents behave according to a narrowly conceived ideal for young women. Yet the relationship between the religious order and the students can be analyzed in a light more sympathetic to the sisters. Although Ellen Nerenberg likens them to “those female Fascists who saw in Fascism relief to women’s predicament within Italian society” (*Prison Terms* 92), they too are imprisoned by the walls of the establishment. With their vows of chastity and obedience, the nuns have forsworn a more conventional form of female development. They are not uniformly satisfied with the
consequences of dedicating their lives to the Church, incidentally one of the few widely accepted alternatives to marriage available to Italian women, nor do all of them happily accept the systemic inequities and constraints inherent to convent life. In fact, the very actions that infuriate the boarders are indicative of individual nuns’ discontent with the status quo. Vinca recognizes this early in the novel when she claims that Suor Lorenza denies her the privilege of making a telephone call “per rabbia … perché lei sta chiusa qui dentro” (10–11). Evidently, the sister’s choice to renege her independence and freedom of movement has led to frustration in addition to any spiritual fulfilment.

A last point regarding the framework of the novel is that de Céspedes develops the characters via both their individual actions and their interactions with one other. Notably, the solidarity that develops among the group’s members does not bar dissidence. The inventive narrative structure, which weaves together flashbacks, stories from the protagonists’ lives, and scenes of communal living, underscores the variances of opinion represented by the females. Instead of glorifying their fellowship and struggle, de Céspedes portrays elements of their existence that detract from an idealized vision of a women’s community. This is an essential feature of the novel’s socio-political message since the protagonists’ differentiated ideas and heated discussions expose the inadequacies of the inflexible model propagandized by the regime. The message is clear: encouraged archetypes of female self-sacrifice leave no room for the kind of development afforded young men. The young women nevertheless find ways to circumvent restrictions, forging lives for themselves that are striking in the extent to which they vary both from each other and, with few exceptions, from the fascist ideal.

5.4 Sexual Maturation, Female Intellectuals, and Self-Fashioning

The complexity of plot resulting from the presence of multiple formations makes a thorough analysis of each character’s process of development and identity building difficult. I therefore focus on those features of female maturation that are particularly effective in revealing how contemporary conventions regarding the behaviour of women were overly constrictive. Key to my analysis are the following components of de Céspedes’ representation of female Bildung in the novel: the depiction of women who violate gender norms; a (limited) form of collectivity; the focus on sexual maturation; the portrayal of female intellectuals; and the idea of self-fashioning, which figures prominently in the formation of some of the women but is lacking in the formation
of others. As I show, de Céspedes engages with the genre in an idiosyncratic manner and to significant effect.

Proceeding with the presupposition that the representation of gendered Bildung in Nessuno torna indietro is profoundly affected by the social institutions and practices that the novel in turn problematizes, I also consider the impact of the socio-political situation. This context is vital since the degree to which the characters have acted in accordance with or in opposition to expectations for women seems to help determine how they are perceived and treated by others, in turn influencing the course of their development. Carroli reminds us that fascism emphasized the Mary-Eve dichotomy “tra la donna che accetta il ruolo tradizionalmente impostole dall’etica maschile e la donna che lo rifiuta e perciò è ostracizzata dalla società” (Esperienza 48). Indeed, many of the protagonists of Nessuno torna indietro are ostracized due to their refusal to submissively accept the role that they are expected to play. However, there are appreciable variations to this general rule.

It is perhaps unsurprising, given the morals concerning female sexuality in fascist Italy, that sexual and romantic longing are important elements of de Céspedes’ presentation of the women’s efforts to come of age. For the majority of the protagonists, the breaching of the tenets of fascist rhetoric involves their experience with or attitude toward men; for one of them, maturation is impeded by her apparent lesbianism and rejection of traditional male-female relationships.47 In my analysis, which seeks to highlight both how the characters’ formations converge and how they diverge, I first touch on the women whose ambitions are more or less conventional. I then move to an examination of females who openly grapple with life decisions resulting from their wish to transgress gender norms established by authority figures and society. Included in this second group are Augusta, the writer, and Silvia, the academic, whose intellectualism the author uses to “critique normative codifications of male-female relations and female desire” (Gallucci, “Alba De Céspedes’s There’s No Turning Back” 207).

47 The students recognize that they feel and conceptualize love in a variety of ways: “Poi Milly disse—Ognuna di noi ha una diversa maniera di pensare all’amore. —Qualcuna anche—fece Augusta—non vi pensa affatto. —Non è vero—ribatté Vinca.—Soltanto c’è chi lo confessa e chi no” (121–122).
It warrants mention that for all of the young women living in the boarding house, not just those who clash with codes structuring female conduct, the realization of their goals is in some way disrupted. This is true even for those who aspire to marriage and motherhood. Anna is a case in point. Unlike the protagonists who “feel their way blindly, groping for opportunities beyond those Fascism afforded women” (Nerenberg, *Prison Terms* 83), Anna’s vision of her future is firm and cogent. Although her ideals closely coincide with the fascist ones, her parents, contrary to sanctioned discourse and fascist exemplars, encourage Anna to finish her education, relinquish her ancestral roots, and adopt an identity that she does not want to assume. Their disavowal of a traditional rural existence can be seen as a comment on the inevitability of change and is at odds with much fascist propaganda. As a result of their need for Anna to be modern and independent, she must rebel in order to fulfil her objectives. She thus defies her parents so that she can remain in Puglia, marry Mario Aponte, and presumably have children, thereby bringing to a close what is arguably the most stereotypical of the female developments presented in the novel. Valentina and Vinca are also young women for whom the endeavour to conform does not guarantee an easy path to maturity. Valentina, for example, affirms that her primary mission is to find a husband, declaring, “non sono nata per lavorare; mi piacerebbe sposarmi, sposarmi in città” (230). Because of socioeconomic and familial factors, however, she has no choice but to work, her position complicated by her uncles’ unwillingness to help support her mother. Valentina’s reaction to news that she receives from other residents of the Grimaldi while she is at home for the summer in Puglia evinces her discontent and jealousy about the life that she cannot have; as is reported, Valentina “era sconvolta da quelle lettere delle amiche che parlavano sempre d’amore. Di notte mormorava ‘Andrea, Luis’ per gustare il suono di quei nomi come esse lo gustavano” (236). Since young love, let alone matrimony, is beyond her reach, Valentina’s eagerness to marry leads only to erotic fantasies involving an Indian prince, which are elaborated in detail and that, to Gallucci, make plain “the way De Céspedes situates woman as the subject of her own desire, the creator of a prince who satisfies her different desires” (“Alba De Céspedes’s There’s No Turning Back” 214). In a situation demonstrative of the author’s message about the profound social barriers facing women, Valentina is one of a pair of the main characters to dwell at the Grimaldi at the novel’s end and the only of the two who had sought a different course. Her process of development thus proceeds no further, though not for lack of trying.
The Spanish resident, Vinca, likewise craves a committed relationship faithful to the prescribed model. She is deeply in love with her compatriot Luis, who returns to Spain to fight in the civil war. Before leaving, he reassures her that they will be reunited—“Tornerò, sai? O tu verrai laggiù, tutti torneremo al paese. Non ti ricordi i discorsi che facevamo dell’Andalusía? Tu m’aspetti, io ritorno” (191)—but while gone becomes engaged to another woman. Hopelessly enamoured of him even after he has betrayed her trust, Vinca is left alone and dejected. She is akin to Anna and Valentina in that all three are held back by dominant male characters who impose obstacles—Anna by her father, whose insistence that she become self-sufficient is ironic given that she is the woman who most craves a traditional lifestyle; Valentina by her uncles; and Vinca by Luis. Only Anna, who behaves in a calculated manner in order to do so, is able to push forward and actualize her goal of marriage.

The events preceding Milly’s death, which marks the end of her incomplete formation, appear designed to evoke sympathy from the reader. She has come to the boarding house because her single father had misinterpreted the nature of her meetings with a blind musician and sent her from Milan to Rome. True to her meek, passive, and forgiving disposition, the sickly Milly does not hold her father’s actions against him. She is happy to have her days free to play the harmonium and write in Braille to the man with whom she shares a platonic bond, her interactions with him providing her with great pleasure. As she reports to Emanuela upon reading a letter that she receives from him:

Le parole, attraverso le dita, entrano nei pori, si fonfondo col sangue, il nostro essere le assimila come l’aria. Ti accorgi forse tu di respirare? Eppure la vita entra in te. E lo stesso m’accade per le parole di lui.—Le mani di Milly sembravano medianiche.—Dice che suonerà anche lui quell’oratorio, alla messa di Natale. Bisogna che io guarisca, capisci, Emanuela? per scendere; se no sarebbe un tradimento. (74)

Bolstered by the organist’s words, which give her a sense of purpose, she disregards her father’s disapproval and continues the epistolary communication that buoy her spirits.48

48 That the letters serve as a kind of critical sustenance is reinforced by a later passage in which Milly declares to Emanuela, “e poi io sto in vita per quelle lettere, sai?” (128).
The extent to which Milly is penalized for her perceived transgression is revealed when she is on her deathbed. The nuns in charge of the Grimaldi wish to contact her family, but Milly is aware that she must choose between her relationship with the blind man and her relationship with her father, even when she is critically ill, and insists that she would rather die in Rome than return to Milan: “Ieri la suora ha detto che vuole scrivere a papà. Se scrive mi verrà a prendere subito; e se torno con lui a Milano muoio davvero” (128). Her father arrives in Rome only after she has already passed away. Though reportedly “gentile, compitissimo” (135), he is absent at the end of his daughter’s life because of his mistaken belief that she has violated norms that are for him sacred. Milly’s death curtails her Bildung but does not lessen her contribution to the overall development of the novel: rather, her unjust fate is both illustrative of the women’s challenges and instrumental in their collective and individual formations, serving as an unsettling reminder of the precariousness of their circumstances.

De Céspedes’ depiction of female intellectuals is also critical to the representation of the difficult condition of women within Italian society since it portrays their deviation from the standard and offers divergent examples of the potential consequences of pursuing a customarily male occupation. While Augusta’s and Silvia’s choices are at variance with each other, an atypical sexual development due to abstention from sexual experiences is for both a necessary result of their decision to embrace their intellectualism rather than renounce their scholarly ambitions in order to conform to widespread visions of womanhood. Augusta is still living among the nuns when the narrative comes to a close, her formation either over, a possibility given her relatively advanced age (she is “la più anziana delle ragazze,” and “non si capiva come ancora fosse tra le studentesse del ‘Grimaldi’. Dimostrava oltre trent’anni” [11]), or in an indefinite state of

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49 Given the situation, his behaviour is baffling: “Neppure si rammaricava di non essersi trovato li la sera prima, di aver rivisto la figliola quando già pareva una statua di marmo. Imponeva soggezione, e si capiva che Milly preferisse viverne lontana; ma era gentile, compitissimo, a tutte le ragazze aveva stretto la mano dicendo: ‘grazie, grazie’ come se gli avessero fatto le congratulazioni” (135).

50 A detailed analysis of the complex issue of female intellectualism as present in Nessuno torna indietro is beyond the scope of this section. Carroli, however, provides a thorough interpretation of the role of Augusta and that of Silvia (though she focuses on the former): see Esperienza 47–62. Carletti also analyzes Augusta and Silvia’s intellectualism in significant detail, suggesting that they are displaced from both the female and the male world. See “Internalizing the Gaze” 119–126. Another source is Gallucci, “Alba De Céspedes’s There’s No Turning Back” 207–211.
suspension resulting from her lifestyle and expression of opinions regarding the oppression of females, both possible only in the privacy of her room in the boarding house. Silvia, whose process of maturation starting from childhood has been shaped by her failure to comply with established models of femininity,\textsuperscript{51} recognizes that professional and amorous success are mutually exclusive and, after some deliberation, chooses the former, thus initiating a development that is truer to her nature and aspirations.

Augusta occupies an extreme in her views of marriage and motherhood. Her rejection of traditional male-female relationships is total. An aspiring author, she is the resident closest to the inner circle of nuns and the most vocal opponent of resigning oneself to life as a meek and obedient wife. Wanting to apprise the younger women of her opinionated feminist viewpoints, she encourages them to gather in her bedroom, “la sola stanza dove si sentiva che qualcuno viveva veramente” (29), and predicates the merits of a male-free existence. Her long tenure at the Grimaldi suggests that she values life among women, but she is also realistic with her companions about the impermanence of their arrangement. Marriage, the inevitable fate of many among them, is a dividing force that renders impossible the kind of friendship that can develop in an all-female space. In what is perhaps her guiding maxim, she proposes a solution: “Che deve fare la donna per liberarsi dalla tirannia dell’uomo? Bisogna che si sostituisca a lui. Una vita autonoma, affrancata anche dalla servitù dei sensi: piena indipendenza dello spirito e della carne” (327).

Two aspects of Augusta’s character explicitly subvert “cultural constructions of the bourgeois family, romantic love, and femininity” (Gallucci, “Alba De Céspedes’s There’s No Turning Back” 215). First, she is cognizant of the unfeasibility of being both a writer and a woman emulating the fascist paragon and has firmly decided that the former is preferable, even if her literary output remains unknown and unpublished. Her appearance and mannerisms change in accordance with the “masculine” activity in which she engages. As a repercussion of the hours

\textsuperscript{51} Silvia’s dissimilarity from her sisters is revealed by the narrator in the following passage: “Quando Silvia era bambina amava giocare e correre con i maschietti della sua età, mentre le sorelle intrecciavano ghirlande, ricamavano, ascoltavano le favole accanto al camino…. A tredici anni chiese alla madre d’improvviso: —Ditemi, mamma, sono proprio brutta, vero? —Chi ti dice questo? —Lo hanno detto certe ragazze che giocano con le sorelle. Ridevano, anche le sorelle ridevano e insistevano: ‘Non l’avete vista con i calzoni del nostro fratello? È un maschio anche lei’” (184).
that she spends working on “un romanzo contro gli uomini … un libro rivoluzionario” (259), for instance, she loses weight and takes on “gesti e costumanze maschili” (261). Second, Augusta “challenges the heterosexual contract, and provides configurations of lesbian desire” (Gallucci, “Alba De Céspedes’s There’s No Turning Back” 209). In a general sense, Augusta’s “unambiguous feelings about marriage and men” allow, in Nerenberg’s formulation, the identification of “a lesbian position” (“Donna proprio” 271).

There are furthermore several allusions to her sexual orientation, including a revealing exchange with Vinca and Silvia in which Augusta implies that she appreciates the potential for sexual attraction between two adult women (122–123).

Like Augusta, Silvia has scholarly career objectives. Problematizing her otherwise clear path are the feelings, rooted in some measure in her admiration of his academic accomplishments, that she develops for her supervisor. This distraction from her work is troublesome; as Pickering-Iazzi indicates, “the scenes between Silvia and Professor Belluzzi propose both a form of female romantic desire arising from shared intellectual labors of love and its impossibility” (“The Sexual Politics” 96). Indeed, intellectual and lover are incompatible identities since “Silvia’s ‘sacrificed femininity’ and her renunciation of love are the price that she has to pay for her ‘incursion into man’s dominion’” (Carletti, “Internalizing the Gaze” 124). Observing Belluzzi’s relationship with his wife, Dora, who epitomizes stereotypical femininity, makes Silvia further aware of her priorities. She therefore symbolically departs for Littoria to take up a teaching job that Belluzzi has found for her. Her dedication to her intellectual goals is, it seems, the principal stimulus and guide for her development.

Though her femininity, unlike Augusta and Silvia’s, is never in doubt, Xenia also transparently breaks from the conventional role of women, taking concrete and cogent steps to liberate herself from pervasive models of female self-sacrifice. After failing her exams, she steals Emanuela’s emerald and travels to Milan, where she finds employment in a glove shop and supports herself until a mutual friend introduces her to a young businessman. Her pursuit of him is initially motivated by her implacable need to be the object of his affection. Even if there is a conspicuous

52 Both Gallucci and Nerenberg perform analyses of Augusta’s lesbianism. Nerenberg’s is the more detailed of the two. See Nerenberg, “Donna proprio” and Gallucci, “Alba De Céspedes’s There’s No Turning Back.”
degree of ambivalence in her response of “no, ma… mi piace, ecco” (192) when she is asked if
she is in love, she nonetheless proceeds with the relationship, which will constitute an important
phase of her formation.

Despite this underlying hesitance, Xenia exhibits a notable degree of self-awareness and agency.
Alone in front of the mirror, she wonders what her impulses reveal about her, asking herself, in a
highly significant passage previously cited, “ma è pura davvero la donna che va a prendersi un
amante? O è impura anche se è intatta?” (198). She considers the alternative—retreating to her
elderly parents—and comes to a resolute verdict:

Libertà. Bella cosa la libertà. Tutto il resto è un’ubbia dei tempi andati; cercava di
convincersi che, di quest’epoca, la famiglia, il matrimonio, ormai non avessero
più grande importanza; tentava di riderne perfino. Forse la verità è che tutti si
mascherano d’ipocrisia, pochi hanno il coraggio di confessare quello che pensano,
di passare sopra le tradizioni. Mi va un amante, sí, me lo piglio. (198–199)

Xenia’s first sexual act with the man signals an unequivocal shift. Deciding to give in fully to her
desires, she takes advantage of her physical beauty, which, as Carroli indicates, corresponds with
“l’ideale fascista della femminilità diffuso attraverso stampa e cinema dal Ministero della
Cultura” (Esperienza 50), to become a kept woman. Her primary goal was once the relationship
itself. Now, her chief incentive is not the chance that he might become her husband but the
lifestyle that his money, and her choice to engage in premarital intercourse, makes possible.
Dismissing the propagated archetype of male-female relations, she embraces her new sense of
freedom and power in order to advance her development by using her sexuality as an instrument
for change. Her readiness to behave in this manner endures throughout her subsequent
experiences.

Emanuela’s process of maturation is particularly complex. She purposefully fashions a new
identity for herself at the Grimaldi, concealing from the other students that her young daughter,
the product of a love affair with an aviator killed during a training flight, lives in a nearby
convent-run boarding school. Her backstory affirms the difficulties inherent in female Bildung. The unexpected pregnancy put Emanuela in an impossible bind entailing two uncomfortable options: abort the foetus or give birth to a child who, as a symbol of her weakness in giving into desires of the flesh, would be an enduring source of stigma. She decided on the latter, and the baby was taken from her.

De Céspedes’ depiction of maternity, which she puts forth, as indicated by her portrayal of some of the women, as “a learned behavior, not the natural fulfillment of female biological and psychological needs” (Gallucci, “Alba De Céspedes’s There’s No Turning Back” 206), reinforces her message of protest. Motherhood does not come naturally to Emanuela, who hated the idea of carrying “una creatura viva che accaparrava il suo sangue, la sua vita, che cresceva in lei a suo dispetto, che era padrona della sua esistenza già prima di nascere” (115) and now struggles to build a maternal identity. Rather than constituting an obligatory milestone of female development, the birth of Stefania marks the creation of a burden that hinders Emanuela’s ability to move smoothly into full-fledged adulthood.

In fact, Stefania’s existence, and Emanuela’s realization that she must acknowledge it, factor heavily into the failure of Emanuela’s attempt to marry. Recognizing that there is no place for her daughter in her relationship with Andrea, a chauvinistic university student with traditional conceptions of marriage and male-female relations, Emanuela keeps her a secret from him. As the deceit becomes increasingly difficult, she begins to emotionally and physically detach from

53 Note the analogous living situation of mother and daughter, which points to their relative closeness in age (and, one could argue, maturity).

54 Carletti describes the complexity of Emanuela’s bid to appease her parents and lessen the disgrace on the family. As she writes, “more than any other character, Emanuela embodies the conflicts deriving from the attempt to adjust one’s image to the model offered by society. Having sinned, Emanuela is asked to cover her deviation from the norm by lying, so that the gaze of society might find her conforming to its reassuring standards. Emanuela finds herself playing two incompatible roles: ‘la ragazza che abitava in un pensionato per studentesse, la madre che bussava al collegio della figlia’ (76)” (“Internalizing the Gaze” 114).

55 There is a distinct parallel here with the protagonist’s pregnancy in Natalia.
Stefania, her hunger for a new life with Andrea temporarily more impelling than any lingering sense of parental responsibility that she might feel.\(^{56}\)

Emanuela ultimately discloses her past to Andrea, thus shattering the idealized image that he had built of her. His response is severe and hypocritical. Indeed, he cannot accept that Emanuela has experienced another man and is bothered by her claim that she did not love Stefano. The idea that she had sexual intercourse solely to indulge bodily urges is at the core of his displeasure:

“L’Emanuela che conoscevo io, quella che m’ero fatta, insomma, se fosse andata a dormire con qualcuno almeno l’avrebbe fatto per amore. Invece no, neppure l’amavi, hai detto, l’hai fatto così, eh? per sapere cos’era. Dovevo accorgermi fin da principio che sei di quel genere di donne che detesto” (423–424). He follows his condemnation of Emanuela’s immorality with an admission of his own:

Stanotte mi sono domandato se io ero stato sempre franco con te, se mai t’avevo mentito: ma fin dal primo momento sono stato sincero, non ho neppure cercato di apparire migliore per conquistarti, t’ho mostrato d’essere nervoso, duro, alcune volte. L’unica cosa che t’ho nascosto è di aver avuto qualche volta una donna, una donna mai vista prima, così, come prendere un’aspirina quando hai mal di testa. (425)

His words betray a socially entrenched double standard. Andrea’s transitory sexual encounters are justified by his being a man “di oggi” with sexual needs to be satisfied, while Emanuela’s previous relationship with one man is inadmissible because she is a woman. Emanuela and Andrea have committed similar sins by hiding their sexual past; what sets them apart, in Andrea’s mind, is “his duplicitous belief that he is entitled to what she is not” (Ferme 53).

Although Emanuela loses the emotional stability afforded by a committed partnership, Andrea’s rejection of her nonetheless has positive repercussions. Forced to take responsibility for her and her daughter’s future, she withdraws Stefania from school and departs with her on a cruise around the world. In doing so, she evades “a nightmarish existence as a housewife” (Gallucci, 56).

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\(^{56}\) She in fact considers how things would change for the better if Stefania were to die: “‘Se morisse, niente più discorso con Andrea’. Avrebbe seguito il funerale sola con l’ombra di quel padre ignoto, quel padre ignoto che fabbricava aeroplani. Sola, un lungo velo nero in faccia” (289).
“Alba De Céspedes’s *There’s No Turning Back*” 207), a fate not suited to her temperament or ambitions. Stefania is thus transformed from an encumbrance into Emanuela’s liberator:

“Pensava che invece avrebbe potuto invecchiare nella vita borghese di Andrea, del padre, della madre, negozianti borghesi, felici, appagati solo perché avevano la corona reale sulla porta…. Se non avesse avuto la bambina a quest’ora sarebbe la moglie di Andrea, provava un brivido per la schiena, adesso, a quest’idea” (451–452). Physically and metaphorically setting sail from Italy with her daughter, Emanuela quite literally removes herself from oppressive influences, at least as much as is practicable.

Even if the narrative of Emanuela’s formative years shows a young woman whose development is profoundly shaped (and hindered) by normative notions of female sexuality, it also shows a woman who ultimately takes charge of her own future. The majority of her companions in Rome face similar situations and make similar choices: though repressed by virtue of their gender, they look further than what they first perceived to be “their respective sentimental and social destinies” (De Giorgio 8) when they discover that acquiescing to narrow gender roles will not allow them to conduct meaningful, productive lives. Rebelling often requires significant sacrifice and effort and is not, as I have demonstrated, a guarantee of a satisfying and complete formation, but the results of the protagonists’ choices suggest that something approaching one might be attainable—and this, in itself, is remarkable.

6 Italian Female Novels of Formation in Comparison: Multiple Developments, Multiple Roles, Multiple Subversions

A brief comparison of *Natalia* and *Nessuno torna indietro* reveals many similarities but also, as might be expected, many differences between them. Both depict multiple formations: in *Natalia* figuratively via the protagonist’s multiple identities, assumed largely through processes in which she maintains a significant degree of agency, and in *Nessuno torna indietro* in a literal sense via the many young women in the boarding house. Thematically, *Natalia* shows that the traditional female roles in Italy at the time, and the ones propagated by the fascist regime, were not necessarily satisfying for women or even possible for them to adopt. The extent to which the protagonist diverges from standard models of femininity is repeatedly emphasized as she lies and manipulates, resists marrying as is expected of her, and enters a same-sex partnership that is
exceptionally subversive given contemporary mores, even if the sexual element is short-lived and (thinly) veiled. On one of the rare occasions that she does conform, she fails to become a mother as would be her expected duty. *Nessuno torna indietro*, for its part, presents a diverse range of female formations. Some of the women find their attempts to mature either initially or permanently hindered, despite having chosen relatively routine paths toward adulthood. Some make decisions that were significantly less conventional for women of the period, deciding, for example, to become intellectuals. Some opt for lives that are more subversive still, such as those whose sexual relationships do not correspond to typical male-dominant configurations. Whether or not the protagonists of her novel face adversity, and whether or not they are, in the end, able to reach the goals that they set for themselves, by portraying such a varied group of females, de Céspedes stressed that the options available to female Italian youth approaching womanhood were not as limited as the media and authority figures would have them believe. Given the political and social climate, this was a powerful message.

Another consideration is the works’ aesthetic qualities. Though both Cialente and de Céspedes modify the realism that they utilize, Cialente employs a distinctive kind of magic realism while de Céspedes employs more traditional realism within a complex narrative structure. In each case, the author’s stylistic choices are tied to her thematic ones: Cialente’s prose, although still realist, obscures, to a certain extent, the transgressive elements of the protagonist’s actions, and the chorality of de Céspedes’ work necessitates the structure in question, which stresses the idea of female community. In both, using a realist aesthetic was key to the authors’ attempt to communicate a political message, even if they did so somewhat obliquely.

As stated earlier, regardless of their undeniable struggle to mature, the protagonists of these female novels of development find themselves, for the most part, in a better place at the end of their narratives than do the protagonists of the male novels of development analyzed in other chapters. I hold that the women’s relative success contributes to the authors’ ideological message in a similar way that the men’s failure does. As females, they should refrain from straying from the rigid course set out for them. That they not only decline to do so but also, in some cases, achieve minor victories as they pursue alternatives could thus be deemed a challenge to the oppressive fascist vision for female behaviour.
Conclusion
Formations in Progress: Realism, the Novel of Development, and the Difficulties of Coming of Age in Fascist Italy

My analysis in previous chapters has demonstrated that by considering certain aspects of *Gli indifferenti*, *Luce fredda*, *Tre operai*, *Il garofano rosso*, *Natalia*, and *Nessuno torna indietro*, which constitute a cluster of Italian realist *romanzi di formazione* written between 1929 and 1938 by young people who intellectually matured during the fascist era in Italy, it is possible to begin to define a typology of the Italian realist *Bildungsroman* of the period roughly spanning the 1930s. The authors of these works came from a variety of backgrounds and had differing political orientations when they composed these novels, yet their goals in portraying the formations of youth were similar: generally speaking, they wished to comment on the difficulties faced by young men and women as they struggled to mature in a society that stifled them. In the cases of the works by Moravia, Barbaro, Bernari, and Vittorini, the writers disavowed notions of the virility and power of young Italian males, while in the novels by Cialente and de Céspedes, they challenged the traditional gender roles of young Italian females as propagandized by the fascist regime. In a reflection of the diversity of their viewpoints and intellectual histories, the authors’ stylistic approach to narrating these processes of development—which represent protagonists who, though from a range of social and political circumstances, embark on paths toward maturation that are without exception problematic—was not uniform. However, a solid realist base characterizes each of their aesthetic.

Before highlighting the primary stylistic and thematic traits of the texts included in my corpus, it is first worth reintroducing a theme that has been recurrent throughout this thesis: the idea that most of these novels can be seen as representing multiple *Bildungs*—that of the protagonist, or, in *Nessuno torna indietro*, protagonists, and that of the author. To be sure, they served as a vehicle for immense personal and intellectual growth for writers who were in a critical phase of their career, and in some instances, it is also possible to individuate autobiographical parallels between character and author. I would tentatively propose that these multiple formations could be expanded to encompass others if we include the development of the generation to which the authors belonged and the cultural developments that were taking place in Italy, particularly those to which Moravia, Barbaro, Bernari, Vittorini, Cialente, and de Céspedes directly contributed.
In terms of the aesthetic employed, these texts have a number of highly significant traits in common and represent the formation of a new kind of realism, even if its parameters cannot be perfectly defined since it did not develop via a concrete movement or in a wholly systematic way. Though they exhibit a spectrum of stylistic qualities, all of the novels that I have examined use realism as the primary means with which to narrate the story of development in question. That they do so suggests a shared desire to grapple with contemporary issues via the realist portrayal of a young person’s—or young people’s—attempts to come of age, and that the authors chose realism rather than other aesthetics is indication that they understood its potential for more direct engagement than alternatives could afford.

Indeed, it is critical to consider both the features of the literary realism in these works and the authors’ motivations for employing realism instead of a different narrative mode. That the realist aesthetic in these Bildungsromane has a strong ideological component makes it consonant with the theories of literary realism and the Bildungsroman outlined in Chapter One, which can be used, at least to a certain extent, to analyze the style present in *Gli indifferenti, Luce fredda, Tre operai, Il garofano rosso, Natalia,* and *Nessuno torna indietro.* Lukács, Bakhtin, and Auerbach stress the necessary connection between the world interior and exterior to the novel and the relationship between the protagonist and his or her environment, important given the centrality of the historical context in motivating these authors’ choices. It is essential, of course, to acknowledge the varying grades of mimesis in the realism that the writers employed and their tendency to combine realism and experimentalism, which is consistent with Auerbach’s concept, as articulated in *Mimesis,* his seminal study of realism in the Western canon, that good realism can involve the mixing of styles. In fact, all of these works include some experimental qualities together with the realist ones. In each case, the combination of realism and other traits can be attributed to the place of the novel in the author’s own developmental trajectory as well as to other considerations, such as the need to imbue the text with some measure of ambiguity. The type of realism that originates in these Bildungsromane thus simultaneously reflects the situation in which it was developed and the aims of the individuals who were responsible for it.

\[240\] See pages 17–18 of this dissertation.
It is furthermore possible to identify a probable link between the extent to which the message that the author wished to communicate was subversive—that is, discordant with fascist ideas—and the manifestation of realism in that it seems that the most subversive of the novels employ the realist styles that are the least traditional. A notable example is Cialente’s *Natalia* and its magical realism, whose magical characteristics help veil the most transgressive aspects of the text. Relatedly, the most conventionally realist work, Vittorini’s *Il garofano rosso*, is also the one that presents the coming of age that could be seen as the least thematically problematic because of the fascist sympathies of its protagonist. This connection, however, necessitates further investigation but is beyond the scope of this thesis.

In brief, the main qualities related to the novels’ aesthetics—that they involve a combination of experimental and realistic characteristics, with the experimental ones serving a distinct purpose, and that the use of realism reflects the authors’ ideological aims—unite these six texts, which display them to varying degrees. The historical context in which they were written influenced their aesthetic properties in that concerns stemming from the fascist government’s treatment of Italian citizens were for many, if not all, of the authors a factor in their decision to employ realism. The writers’ discontent with the cultural state of affairs in their contemporary Italy also contributed to the formation of a new aesthetic, a variety of realism whose characteristics both signal a clear disconnection from nineteenth-century realist modes and anticipate aspects of post–World War II neorealism, which emerged after the fascist regime had already ended and could thus afford to be more openly politically engaged.

Based on commonalities between the novels, including *Il garofano rosso*, which can be called an example of left-wing fascism, it could be argued that the male authors use the depiction of the hardships faced by young Italians in their process of coming of age as their primary form of protest against the political and/or social status quo, forgoing definitive political critiques. In *Gli indifferenti* and *Luce fredda*, for example, political issues are not explicitly addressed. In *Tre operai*, which is set before the fascist period (this itself being an important strategy), and in *Il garofano rosso*, political matters are secondary in the protagonist’s process of formation. Portraying young men who unmistakably engage in anti-fascist activities would surely lead to censorship; in order to circumvent this while still expressing a dissenting view, the authors instead present youth who struggle to build meaningful lives for themselves due to problems stemming from a) environmental factors and b) personality traits that align them with the
Pirandellian/Svevian archetype of the *inetto*, albeit a new, evolved version of it that is nonetheless still starkly at odds with the model of the strong young man set forth by the fascist regime. Indeed, in all of the works included in my corpus, direct criticism of political issues is avoided, and in the novels by male writers, such condemnation comes obliquely via the description of Michele, Sergio, Teodoro, and Alessio’s rocky passage to adulthood—a passage that, significantly, is not complete at novel’s end.

As noted, the interpretation of the *inetto* that appears in these realist novels of the 1930s is distinct from the one of the decades previous. Its variances can in part be attributed to differences in aesthetic choices. While exceptions abound, *l’inetto* is often associated with modernist texts, with *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (Pirandello, 1904) and *La coscienza di Zeno* (Svevo, 1923) being arguably the two best Italian examples. In the last case especially, the protagonist’s story—taking a form that Jacqueline Reich calls “a modern parody of the *Bildungsroman*, the novel of formation and assimilation” (*Beyond the Latin Lover* 7)—is told from an undeniably subjective point of view. The narration is in the first person, and the narrator-*inetto* is unreliable.

Although certainly not a full return to traditional realism, *Gli indifferenti* marks a shift in that direction, a third-person narrator and other characteristics demonstrating affiliations with a realist style. While Michele is also an *inetto* of a sort, his ineptitude has a different quality and effect than that of the modernist *inetti* did. Zeno’s *Bildung* is failed, but he is happy despite it, or maybe even as a result of it. Michele is not able to embrace defeat in the same way that Zeno is, and there is thus no resolution to the woes that leave him in an in-between state. Yet this is, to be sure, a transitional text. The young men whose formations dominate the coming-of-age narratives that come later in the fascist years—Teodoro, Sergio, and Alessio—are similarly characterized by how much trouble they have bringing themselves to act, which contributes to the fact that self-actualization eludes them; at the same time, they are less apathetic than Michele is. In a reflection of the thematic and aesthetic changes that can be seen in the works as the 1930s progressed, the trait of ineptitude is least burdensome for Alessio, the latest and most politically engaged of the male characters included in my study. The version of the *inetto* of the 1930s that I
have individuated in these novels requires further examination to clarify its significance and links to earlier standards, especially the modernist one.\(^{241}\)

My analysis of the male *Bildungsromane*, then, has revealed that it is possible to identify several thematic commonalities that connect them, despite divergences in the writers’ politics and backgrounds: most importantly, that they portray a coming of age that is made difficult by a combination of repressive environmental forces and the protagonist’s trouble rousing himself to action. These external and internal factors influence each other and are both subversive given the context of the fascist state but less subversive than directly criticizing fascist institutions would have been. Other thematic constants that run through these novels of formation include the presence of an intellectual development of some kind and the presence of a sexual formation, however repressed and/or challenging it may be. The idea of political development is also recurrent but manifests more obviously in some cases than in others and is not the main site of the novels’ anti-fascism. In all, the protagonist’s formation is further complicated by his ineptitude, an inherent character trait that is present, though to various degrees, in each of the male novels of formation included in my corpus and that affects how he engages with his surroundings.

It should be noted that similarities that unite the works do not discount the very significant differences that separate them from one another. Some of the most interesting of these are between the male and female *Bildungsromane*. As earlier stated, the male formations remain for the most part unfinished at the end of the novels. Though the young men leave the family home and try to move forward in their development (with the exception of *Gli indifferenti*’s Michele, who nonetheless eventually makes an attempt to rouse himself from his state of malaise), their efforts go largely unrewarded: *Luce fredda*’s Sergio is overwhelmed by his bourgeois companions; *Tre operai*’s Teodoro is betrayed by his fellow workers, who fail to take action; and *Il garofano rosso*’s Alessio is disillusioned of the notion that adherence to the fascist cause will

\(^{241}\) Future research might also explore a connection that I will only observe, here, and leave for later work: that these protagonists, who are often also intellectuals, could be seen as a comment on the failure of the authors’ peers to take action for positive change. It is significant, then, that most of the protagonists’ processes of development can be interpreted as “open,” not fully failed, since this implies that there is still room for advancement.
facilitate his becoming a man. Even when temporarily empowering, the protagonist’s disappointing sexual relationship, or relationships, colours his formation and contributes to the overall sense that a negative outcome is likely. The female developments depicted by Cialente and by de Céspedes, on the other hand, are as a whole more complete, though somewhat ambiguously so and not to the extent as the classic examples of formation presented in theoretical works such as Moretti’s *The Way of the World*. Like the men, the women struggle to come of age, but for them, this is to be expected since their behaviour is highly unconventional in the context of the society in which they live. Regardless, they manage to push past barriers and find some amount of contentment.

Indeed, akin to the male protagonists, the female characters offered by Cialente and by de Céspedes face repressive social forces. They do not, however, exhibit the same characteristics that would give them affinities to the *inette*. On the contrary, they take remarkable agency in their process of formation and act remarkably transgressively, showing that, against what fascist images of femininity would suggest, smoothly transitioning from girlhood to prolific motherhood was not necessarily a viable option, emotionally or practically, for all Italian females. Natalia and the women at the Grimaldi instead make other choices for themselves, if only temporarily, and are not as harshly punished for their infringements of sanctioned behaviour for women as one might predict that they would be: rather, staying true to their desires results in an outcome of the portion of their development depicted in the novels that is more favourable, on balance, than is the outcome experienced by the young men who strive to act in accordance with the paradigm of powerful male youth encouraged at the time. While the relative failure of the male youths is subversive given this ideal for young males in fascist Italy, the relative success of the female youths is surprising given the role of women as wives and mothers, which the vast majority of the protagonists in *Natalia* and *Nessuno torna indietro* neglect to carry out.

In terms of their thematic content, the two female novels of formation of the period examined in Chapter Five are united by interesting, and not always expected, qualities. The clear transgression of gender norms is the most obvious of the nonconformist traits that the works share, manifesting via young women who tend to reject, though in some cases not permanently, a future as mother and wife, who display alternative sexual preferences, and/or who are intellectuals. The concepts of self-fashioning and of female mobility and independence also factor into both texts, if to different extents. As a result, an underlying message of *Natalia* and of
Nessuno torna indietro is that successful development comes through seizing control of one’s process of formation. Although there is some uncertainty as to the women’s outcomes, it cannot be denied that they are on average more positive than what the men face.

The main characteristics of a prototypical realist romanzo di formazione of 1930s Italy, then, start to emerge through the analysis of this group of works. Aesthetically, they involve primarily realist prose that strategically incorporates some non-realist traits, the result of the authors’ experimentation with techniques derived from their experience with the avant-garde. In some instances, this approach provided a balance between a kind of realism that would best convey subversive themes and techniques that would veil these ideas enough to allow the novels to be published and disseminated. Thematically, the works with male protagonists show men who are repressed due to factors external and internal to them. None fully integrate into society or otherwise reach an optimal endpoint to their process of formation, hindered as they are by the oppressive environment and by character traits that demonstrate their correspondences to the inetto. The novels of development with female protagonists portray young women who live unconventionally but manage to obtain some degree of success regardless of their flouting of gender norms. While the male and female texts differ in how they do so, in all of the Bildungsromane analyzed in this thesis, a version of realism is utilized to narrate a coming of age that deviates in highly significant ways from societal expectations, and in all, the author—young himself or herself—was to all appearances at least in part ideologically motivated to reveal serious problems facing Italian youth via the genre of the novel of formation, which would allow him or her to suggest that coming of age under the regime posed tremendous challenges for young people.

Although these novels of formation provide a reasonable cross section of the kind of Bildungsroman produced in the 1930s, written as they are by individuals from various backgrounds with diverse approaches, it is impossible to draw definitive conclusions about all Italian novels of development from this period based on a sample limited to six examples. Future research should thus broaden the corpus to see if other romanzi di formazione composed in Italian during the same time span display similar traits. As earlier stated, it should also expand on the archetype of the inetto developed in these novels and its connection to earlier models. Additional possible avenues for further analysis of the realist Bildungsroman of 1930s Italy includes a more detailed exploration of the link between modernism and the realism employed
by the authors and a more thorough investigation of the relationship between these novels—the first for most of the authors—and the writers’ later works, which might help illustrate how the specific circumstances, the fascist-run state, influenced the texts.

Even if there is a need for more examination of the genre as a whole, this thesis has established that Moravia, Barbaro, Bernari, Vittorini, Cialente, and de Céspedes used the realist *Bildungsroman* both as a form of protest and as a means of personal and intellectual maturation—again pointing to the idea of double *Bildung*, especially important because of the writers’ age at the time of composition. Appropriately given the authors’ goals, none of the protagonists experience a perfect development, but in most cases, the ending of his or her difficult formation is at the very least left open. Change is, it seems, possible, but only if concrete action is taken to actualize it.
Works Cited


