

## Return to Order as Return to Realism in Two Italian Elite Literary Magazines of the 1920s and 1930s: *La Ronda* and *Orpheus*.\*

Nous autres civilisations, nous savons maintenant que nous sommes mortelles (Paul Valéry, *NRF*, August 1919)

On 19th May 1945, in an article entitled 'L'Italia rinunzia', Eugenio Montale presented 'un'interpretazione del fascismo come crisi fondamentale, costitutiva e forse inguaribile di un paese che non ha saputo esprimere una sua classe dirigente',<sup>1</sup> thereby suggesting that the rise of Fascism was one of the many manifestations of the lack of public engagement endemically spread amongst leading Italian élites.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, we could further suggest that this notion of Italian intellectuals as 'absent minds'<sup>3</sup> described a particular cultural system - in our case populated by some 'little', élite Modernist journals of the 1920s and '30s and by their contributors and editors - that largely deemed the practice and attitude of sustained

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<sup>1</sup> Eugenio Montale *Auto da fé* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1966), p. 40. Famously, Benedetto Croce had defined Fascism as a parenthesis in the evolution of Italian history, see 'Il Fascismo come parentesi', *Il Fascismo: Antologia di scritti critici*, ed. by Costano Casucci (Bologna, il Mulino, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> Arguably, scholars seem to have reached a consensus on the vexed question of what constituted acceptance and what indifference by aligned and non-aligned intellectuals during the Ventennio. On the élites' lack of direct political engagement as a defining feature of fascist culture and about the ambivalent relationship of the regime with its leading intellectual figures, see for example Gabriele Turi's seminal work *Il fascismo e il consenso degli intellettuali* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1980); on how intellectuals' presence in cultural institutions under the regime helped in fostering pluralism see Ruth Ben-Ghiat's discussion of Jewish intellectuals' in *Fascist Modernities* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), p. 156 and *passim*. For a general overview on intellectuals and the regime which problematises issues of engagement (or lack of it) and calls for a more nuanced understanding of these positions, Mario Isnenghi, *Intellettuali militanti e intellettuali funzionari* (Turin: Einaudi, 1979) and Giovanni Sedita, *Gli intellettuali di Mussolini: la cultura finanziaria del fascismo* (Florence: Le lettere, 2010). Using a great wealth of archival evidence, Sedita in particular details how Fascism financially supported intellectuals. Alternatively, for specific examples of censorship and direct State intervention in the arts see Francesca Billiani, *Modes of Censorship and Translation* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007), pp. 1-25; Giorgio Fabre, *L'elenco. Censura fascista e autori ebrei* (Turin: Zamorani editore, 1998), *passim*; and George Talbot, *Censorship in Fascist Italy, 1922-43* (London: Palgrave, 2007). Talbot in particular analyses the profile of minor intellectual figures and their connections with the regime's secret police, OVRA, pp. 159-95.

<sup>3</sup> Stefan Collini in his work *Absent Minds* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), has argued for the need to discuss historically specific attitudes and positions assumed by intellectuals rather than generic notions of absence or presence. Collini identified the position of lack of engagement, as characteristic of an intellectual who is not in dialogue with any social formation and not as necessarily absent from society. In this respect, as Jon Beasley-Murray has pointed out in his Bourdieusian analysis of intellectuals and social formations: 'Habit's presence, [...] generates its own form of resistance. The first sign of this resistance is inertia: when the social field within which the habitus operates differs from the field that formed it, that friction results as the old habit no longer fits the circumstances. [...] There is always some tension or slippage, however slight, between habitus and field.' *Posthegemony* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 177. A good discussion on affective tensions as forces to generate cultural plurality can be found in Mabel Berenzin, *Making the Fascist Self. The Political Culture of Interwar Italy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 11-69. In reconstructing the rituals involved in the creation of the fascist cultural and intellectual space, Berenzin implicitly rejects the notion of simple indifference and places great emphasis on how the emotional, the affective, irrational drive is not less pivotal than the ideologically rationalised one in the creation of a strong sense of community.

indifference not simply as a form of escapism, as Montale argued, but rather as an effective means of reacting against the regime's myopia.

The inter-war years were not just years of intellectual indifference *per se*. They were also the opposite, as Frank Kermode put it when analysing the intersections between bourgeois writing and political affiliations. In *History and Value* Kermode drew a clear connection between aesthetics and politics in the literature of the 1930s for its 'conscientious conviction that borders and frontiers need to be crossed' with the inevitable "vast historical change, [...] revolution and war [...]" that naturally ensued from such transits. In other words, in the age of totalitarianisms, 'Conscience was reinforced by intellect' inescapably, if not always explicitly, so.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, what Igor Golomstok has written about totalitarianism in Russia not only summed up the principal goal of the 1930s central European totalitarian regimes (Italy included) in their dealings with the intellectual sphere but also marked the differences from the stance of the 'pioneer and revolutionary Fascism' of the early 1920s. Contrary to the attitude of non-intervention, nearly of *laissez-faire*, displayed at its beginnings, in the years of the consolidation of totalitarian power and the imposition of cultural hegemony, the Italian fascist regime in particular was not considering the question of how to silence art and intellectuals for 'The State had no need to ban the avant-garde – it was enough to transfer it to a self-financing footing', with Italian Futurism as a case in point.<sup>5</sup>

In practice, as well shall demonstrate, in the age of totalitarianisms in Italy, this intellectual *indifference* translated into a multi-faceted form of *engaged indifference* that sought aesthetic innovation and intellectual exchange while often avoiding direct political confrontation. In this respect and crucially for the argument to follow, such an attitude could also be found in the extensive publication and dissemination of elite, little, Modernist magazines as *fora* for topical debate. Because of their size and invisibility, the regime could largely ignore such venues, by implicitly labelling them as self-sufficient and peripheral and move them 'to a self-financing footing' with little, Modernist ones as *our* case in point.<sup>6</sup> In this respect, we shall therefore analyse both how two short-lived, little, Modernism journals, *La Ronda* (1919-1923) and *Orpheus* (1932-1934), embraced an ethos of engaged indifference and how they both

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<sup>4</sup> Frank Kermode, *History and Value* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), pp. 22 and 42.

<sup>5</sup> Igor Golomstok, *Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the People's Republic of China* (London: Collins Harvill, 1990), p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> The intellectual and aesthetic retreat in this indistinctly described *turris eburnea* revealed itself under various guises. For instance, in the intelligentsia's exodus, often to Paris; in writers and artists translating and looking to foreign authors for inspiration, seeing them as a more 'authentic' source of creative direction, in self-sustained hermeticist lyrical experimentations; or in general readers showing a distinct interest for foreign over national literature, once again perceived as a more progressive and modern source of entertainment. On examples of anti-fascists abroad, see Pierre Milza, *La presenza italiana in Francia fino all'avvento del fascismo* (Rome: Presidenza del Consiglio dei ministri, Dipartimento per l'informazione e l'editoria, 1984) and Matteo Pretelli *Il fascismo e gli Italiani all'estero* (Bologna: CLUEB, 2010). To this extent, it is worth stressing that until the mid-1930s the regime did not openly boycott the 'foreign', it did so only towards the end of the decade, Billiani, *Modes of Censorship*, op. cit., 15-22, Fabre, 'Fascism, Censorship and Translation', in Billiani, op. cit., pp. 27-59. Having said that, it is not the purpose of this article to discuss moments of explicitly political confrontation with the regime. This is because in these two little, Modernist magazines there is neither textual nor archival evidence to support such political enquiry. Moreover, no prominent fascist officials wrote for the reviews here under scrutiny. The article looks exclusively at discourses relevant to Italian culture and society and not to the regime as a *stricto sensu* political force.

functioned as comparable forces for aesthetic innovation and intellectual debate. To test our hypothesis across the whole Ventennio, for the first time, this article discusses, compares, and juxtaposes two literary magazines distinctly different in geographical location, chronological settings and aesthetic outlooks. We have selected such a heterogeneous pair since *La Ronda*, at the dawn of the dictatorship, and *Orpheus*, during the years of its raising consensus in the civic sphere, provided the élites with a safe home, a home with many rooms and some labyrinthine architectural plans. Thus, we shall argue that, despite their differences, these journals played a major role in allowing the Italian élites to promote change and innovation without directly confronting the fascist regime.<sup>7</sup> Hence this article will explore vis-à-vis the concepts of ‘return to order’ and ‘return to realism’ in aesthetics and politics, while placing these debates within the European network of periodical culture, here chiefly represented by the pivotal and hugely influential *NRF*.<sup>8</sup> Traditionally, in fact, there has been a strong connection between the two: ‘return to order’ in literature meant return to stylistically poised, classic forms in aesthetics and to conservative attitudes in politics; ‘return to realism’ meant a less mediated, modern understanding of the realms of the real in aesthetics and a call for progressive stances in politics.<sup>9</sup>

*Returning* to Kermode’s point, we can now pose the following question: How did these two reviews in particular encourage young Italian intellectuals to occupy a privileged cultural space from which to promote Modernist innovation, and specifically the transition from aestheticism to realism in the arts? Turning back to Montale’s initial statement, we can challenge his view about intellectuals’ absent minds by asking: How did these two élite little magazines enable this ‘classe dirigente’ to transform itself from the liberal intellectual to the new intellectual, who would populate the post-war public sphere?

To date, if the vast majority of critical assessments of *La Ronda* have pertinently placed it within this very same *longue durée* of Italian national literature and culture, they have often discussed it in isolation as the epitome of the intellectuals’ lack of engagement in public life, thereby largely ignoring its contribution as a transnational cultural space for artistic dialogue and transformation. In other words, the

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<sup>7</sup> *La Ronda* and *Orpheus* can also be compared in light of their equally dense, high-brow standings and because of their programmatic and contextual idiosyncrasies: the former introverted, conservative and traditionalist, the latter extroverted, radical and avant-garde. Finally, their differences and similarities reveal probing insights into two opposing sides of Italian culture under the parable of the dictatorship (as a revolutionary movement from 1919 to 1922, and as an imperialist power from 1932 to 1935).

<sup>8</sup> According to Gisèle Sapiro, the *NRF* achieved such prominence in France and amongst European intellectuals through its comparatively staggering printing figures: 5,500 copies per month from 1919, to double by 1928 with 12,000 copies per month, a figure confirmed by Paul Léautaud, who also reported a print-run of 17,000 in 1931, *La guerre des écrivains 1940-1953* (Paris: Fayard, 1999), pp. 127-28. Comparable ‘militant’ magazines’ sales figures, such as that of the 1920s *Time and Tide* (1920-1930) or *The Bermondsey Book* (1923-1930) and for the 1930s *Cambridge Left* (1933-1934) or *Left Review* (1934-1938), would disappear into pale insignificance if compared to those of the engaged *NRF*s of the 1930s in democratic France.

<sup>9</sup> Years later and upon reflection, in a group interview, Riccardo Bachelli elucidated the meaning of the expression ‘return to order’ in relation to *La Ronda*’s experience as such: “Richiamo all’ordine” è stato più volte ripetuto per quel gruppo e per quella rivista. Il pittore Spadini disegnò per le copertine dei suoi fascicoli l’immagine di un tamburino che chiama a raccolta le disperse forze del mondo letterario italiano. 1919: che vuol dire, dunque, contemporaneità con la crisi del socialismo italiano, con l’esperienza gramsciana dell’ “Ordine Nuovo”, con l’esperienza gobettiana che dall’ambito della politica tendeva a trasferirsi a quello della cultura”, ‘Terzo Programma’, interview 14 and 21 May 1969, *I cinquant’anni della Ronda*, ed. by Giuseppe Cassieri, *L’Approdo letterario*, XV (1969), 46, p. 89. This point is reiterated in many studies on *La Ronda*, see for example Guzzetta, op. cit., p. 81; and Pupino, op. cit., pp. 104-05.

review's practice was singled out as either that of quiet acceptance of the fascist totalitarian *status quo* or of seemingly quiet resistance against the limitation imposed by the political scene and the emerging dictatorship; it has never been seen as a progressive force.<sup>10</sup> More recent works have wisely moved on from this position, and have taken the notion of engagement into account in the life of the review. These contributions have, however, neglected to pay attention to the role key played by foreign literature in shaping *La Ronda's* cultural endeavour. Carmine di Biase's study on *La Ronda's* engagement and Antonio Pupino on its modernity, for instance, did not discuss the importance of the transnational field of interaction present therein; rather they stressed respectively the role played by traditional national principles and by moralism as well as by more universal values, such as classicism and humanism, in driving the magazine's choices.<sup>11</sup> *Orpheus* has not yet enjoyed much critical attention, with the sole exception of Ruth Ben-Ghiat's assessment in her important study of fascist culture and modernity. Ben-Ghiat rightly discussed *Orpheus'* engaged and interdisciplinary nature as well as its proximity to fascist youth culture, and in doing so she stressed the unquestionable significance of its transnational affiliations as markers of distinction in the cultural debate of the day.<sup>12</sup>

Our research seeks to fill the existing gaps in the scholarship by rejecting the critical assumption of sustained indifference for *La Ronda*, developing further the initial idea of *Orpheus* as a site of aesthetic innovation, re-assessing aesthetic debates on literature and the arts happening therein, and proposing a transnational platform for the study of little, Modernist magazines in the age of totalitarianisms.

## Engaged Indifference and the Anatomy of the Little Magazine

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<sup>10</sup> Seminal studies on *La Ronda* in its entirety are Enrico Falqui, *Ragguaglio sulla prosa d'arte* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1944), Lanfranco Caretti, 'Significato de *La Ronda*' (1955), in Id. *Antichi e moderni. Studi di letteratura italiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 1976) and Roberto Scrivano, '*La Ronda* e la cultura del XX secolo', in Id. *Riviste, scrittori e critici del Novecento* (Florence: Sansoni, 1965) and Giuseppe Langella, *Le favole della Ronda* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1998). *La Ronda's* elitism and indifference has been fully dealt with; for instance, while Lia Fava Guzzetta did not see ideological continuity between *La Ronda* and Fascism, she still stressed the review's, 'inadeguatezza' in dealing with any kind of historical matter and claimed that it was essentially driven by 'indifference', *Percorsi di scrittura* (Rome: Gei, 1993), pp. 91-117, 95, 98, 101, and 107. Following a parallel critical line of argument, earlier studies had focused on the choices and inclinations of individual contributors, and not so much on the review as a collective enterprise, thereby reaching comparable conclusions about *La Ronda's* political indifference and lack of historical consciousness, see on this point, Giorgio Luti, "'*La Ronda*' romana e il suo «ritorno all'ordine», in ed. by Giovanni Grana, *Letteratura italiana. 900. Gli scrittori e la cultura letteraria nella società italiana* (Milan: Marzorati, 1982), Sergio Briosi, *La Ronda*, in *Dizionario critico della letteratura italiana* (Turin: UTET, 1986), vol. IV, pp. 23-28, Giuseppe Manacorda, *Dalla Ronda al Baretto. Gli intellettuali di fronte al fascismo negli anni '20* (Foggia: Bastogi, 1981).

<sup>11</sup> Carmine di Biase, *La Ronda e l'impegno* (Naples: Liguori, 1971) p. 104 and Angelo P. Pupino, *Ragguagli di modernità* (Rome: Salerno editrice, 2003), p. 120.

<sup>12</sup> Ben-Ghiat, op. cit., p. 103-4 who also stresses the unusually prominent role women had in the running of the review. On Italian Modernism, see some recent contributions which have not dealt with Modernist periodical culture during the regime or indeed with the two journals discussed here: Walter Adamson, *Avant-Garde Florence: From Modernism to Fascism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), Michelangelo Sabatino, *Pride in Modesty. Modernist Architecture and the Vernacular Tradition in Italy* (Toronto: UTP, 2010); Luca Somigli and Mario Moroni, (eds) *Italian Modernism: Italian Culture Between Decadentism and Avant-garde* (Toronto: UTP, 2004); and Luca Somigli, *Legitimizing the Artist: Manifesto Writing and European Modernism, 1885-1915* (Toronto: UTP, 2003).

What is a little, Modernist magazines, then? For the purpose of this article, 'Little magazines are non-commercial enterprises founded by individuals or small groups intent upon publishing experimental works [...]. Defying mainstream tastes and conventions, some little magazines aim to uphold higher artistic and intellectual standards, while others seek to challenge conventional political wisdom and practice', wrote Churchill and McKible in their work on little magazines and Modernism, that assessed how so-defined reviews acted as a 'social forum for writers of different genders, races, and nationalities'.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, as others have debated, 'what 'little' [...] designated above everything else was a limited group of intelligent readers'.<sup>14</sup>

Both *La Ronda* and *Orpheus* had very few readers, were short-lived and discussed high cultural matters: the former was published alongside *Valori Plastici* in Rome, traditionally a more conservative *milieu* than that of the Florentine avant-gardes magazines of the 1910s; the latter was the product of a rapidly establishing cultural hegemony by the Milanese intellectual bourgeoisie, especially on the emerging book market. *La Ronda* appeared from 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1919 to December 1922 – with one last issue in December 1923 and was sold at 3 lire (4 lire for distribution abroad); its chief editor was the writer Vincenzo Cardarelli, known as *pubblicista*, but the magazine's regular editorial staff included up-and-coming writers and critics, such as Emilio Cecchi, as *esquire*, Riccardo Bacchelli, as *possidente*, Antonio Baldini, as *bacelliere in lettere*, Bruno Barilli, as *compositore*, Lorenzo Montano (pseudonym of Danilo Lebrecht), as *industriale*, painters Carlo Carrà and Giorgio De Chirico, Armando Spadini, as *pittore fiorentino*, and Aurelio E. Saffi, as *docente nelle scuole governative*, who was also the segretario di redazione 'editorial secretary'.<sup>15</sup> Contemporary political theorists George Sorel and Vilfredo Pareto also featured amongst *La Ronda's* contributors.<sup>16</sup> Notwithstanding this rather heterogeneous set of contributors, we can still easily single out three main tenets of enquiry which *La Ronda* upheld and made it one of the most distinguished review of its day: Benedetto Croce's aesthetic theory of pure art as the hegemonic theoretical configuration to follow; a very close reading of multiple textual strata as the

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<sup>13</sup> As Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker have remarked in their recent general introduction to *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines, Britain and Ireland, 1880-1955*: 'Our general aim has been to elaborate upon what Michael Levenson described as a 'micro-sociology of modernist innovation, within which small groups of artists were able to sustain their resolve...to create small flourishing communities' (Oxford: OUP, 2010), p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Frederick J. Hoffman, Charles Allen, Crolyn F. Ulrich, *The Little Magazine: A History and a Bibliography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> For a biographical portrayal of these contributors, see 'Terzo programma', op. cit., pp. 89-104; Riccardo Scrivano, *Riviste, scrittori e critici del Novecento* (Florence: Sansoni, 1965), pp. 11-36; Carmine di Biase, *La Ronda e l'impegno* (Naples: Liguori, 1971), pp. 128-29. Like the *NRF*, *La Ronda* appeared regularly every month and was consistent both in its format and typographic layout – (the front cover always had orange and pink tones). Two major double issues, nn.4-5, July-August in 1919 and nn. 11-12, November-December 1921 and several small double issues (nn. 8 and 9, August-September 1920; nn. 10 and 11, October-November 1920; nn. 1 and 2, January-February 1921; nn. 8 and 9, August-September 1921; nn. 3 and 4, March-April 1922; nn. 7 e 8, July-August 1922; 9 and 10, September-October 1922) were published.

<sup>16</sup> Other sporadic contributions came from the young writers and critics Guglielmo Ferrero, Filippo Burzio, Alfredo Gargiulo, Adriano Tilgher, Giuseppe Raimondi, Nino Savarese, Carlo Linati, Alberto Savinio, Eugenio Giovanetti, as well as, most notably, from Giuseppe Ungaretti (*Paesaggio*, 1921), Ardengo Soffici (*Osservazioni intorno alla letteratura russa*, 1922), and Carlo Michelstaedter on Pascoli (*Scritti inediti*, 1922).

principal exegetic methodology to adopt;<sup>17</sup> and approval of Giovanni Giolitti's political leadership in Umbertine Italy. It radically rejected Positivism, early 20<sup>th</sup>-Century avant-gardes, Decadentism in general and Dannunzianesimo in particular. Compared to pre-WWI reviews, such as *La Voce* or *Lacerba*, *La Ronda's* investigative scope was not explicitly experimental, wide-ranging, militant, or even avant-garde and it never aimed at broadening its readership with discussions of social issues. *La Ronda's* contemporary initiatives too were short-lived and remained quite marginal. For instance, although championing an Illuminist ethos which indissolubly connected literature and ethics, even the left-wing *Primo tempo* (1922-1923), founded by Giacomo Debenedetti in Gobetti and Gramsci's red Turin, did not find followers. Equally unsuccessful were Giovanni Papini's traditionalist *La Vraie Italie* with its anachronistic attempt to explore true Italian culture and political tradition, and Marinetti's new journal *Dinamo* (1919), which was seen as little more than a right-wing, pale and slow imitation of heroic Futurism. In this landscape of 'deceased avant-gardes' *La Ronda* stood out when it proposed a formula for productive and sophisticated aesthetic discussions without any social resonance, or better still when it institutionalized pure aesthetic speculation. In doing so, the review simply wanted to find a space for artistic debate and, crucially, to define a generational distance from pre-WWI avant-gardes.

Like its 1920s contemporary from right, left and centre, *La Ronda's* anatomy in itself was quite simple, classical in its composition, comprising of never-too-long feature articles, the famous section 'Incontri e Scontri' where topical matters were discussed,<sup>18</sup> alongside a wide selection of reviews under the headings 'Note e recensioni', and 'Delle riviste', where relevant extracts from or mentions of other reviews were published (amongst the foreign ones we have *The Dial*, *NRF*, *Esprit Nouveau*, *The Manchester Guardian*, *The London Mercury*, *The Egoist*, *La Gerbe*, *Der neue Markur*, *Le Mercure de France*, and many more). The *NRF's* celebrated 'Lettres d'Angleterre' or 'd'Allemagne' also arrived at *La Ronda* as 'Lettere dall'Inghilterra', dalla Francia, dalla Germania, dall'America', bringing the best of world literature to Italy. Mostly in its review section and almost against its own declared exclusive interest in matters of national style though, *La Ronda* manifested a transnational agenda (reaching out to African literature), which promoted foreign literature and championed a dialogic, competitive interaction with other Modernist magazines of the day. In April 1920, reflecting on its first year of activity, *La Ronda* concluded about its European mission: 'E noi dobbiamo oggi considerare *La Ronda* come organo nella sua sfera appropriatissimo a contribuire poderosamente al quel sincero ma consapevole e critico internazionalismo che dovrà saturare lo spirito europeo, prima che la Lega delle Nazioni, suo strumento materiale, possa conseguire piena efficacia pratica'.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Montano remembers that Cardarelli used to ask him to write: 'un pezzetto come quelli del 'Supplemento letterario del Times' for their acerbic criticism and appearance of detachment and indifference towards the matter to be dealt with, 'Terzo programma', op. cit., p. 92. On these points, see also Di Biase, op. cit., pp. 165-207.

<sup>18</sup> See Charles Burdett, *Vincenzo Cardarelli and His Contemporaries* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), pp. 101-04 on the language of this section, as well as on the critique of the avant-gardes, Dada and Futurism; but also R. Bacchelli, 'Notizie oltramontane (La Nouvelle Revue Française), *La Ronda*, II (1920), 377 and E. Cecchi, 'Comunicazione accademica', *ivi*, I (May 1919), 2, 78-83.

<sup>19</sup> *La Ronda*, II (1920), 238.

Paris was the capital city of this 'Republic of Letters' and the *NRF* its flagship.<sup>20</sup> Amongst those reviews, because of the rather explicit, opinionated stances it was progressively voicing, over the 1920s and 1930s the *NRF* stood out and reached across the whole of Europe. Launched in 1909, with André Gide as one of the members of its extremely distinguished editorial committee, the *NRF*'s editorship passed to Jacques Rivière until 1925, and to the *éminence grise* Jean Paulhan until 1935. Serializations of novels and regular feature articles expanded under the editorship of Paulhan and played a more central role in the life of the review. But in the early twenties other regular features, such as the *chroniques* with the *chroniqueurs* (which included Alain, Thibaudet and Benda), the *notules*, a compendium of very short reviews, and the *Revue des revues* - which conformed to the accepted and widely used practice of reprinting and commenting on extracts from significant articles in competing or opposing reviews – equally functioned as marks of distinction for the leading French paper. Thus *NRF* authors appearing elsewhere could be quoted back safely in their *alma mater* in such a way as to establish a proper in-house network as well as an international one. Especially *La Ronda*, but *Orpheus* too, used their dense review sections, frequently rather short ones, in a similar fashion. Essentially, they turned these sections into dynamic dialogic spaces used to debate both informally and freely Italian and foreign literature alongside one another.

Published in Milan from December 1932 to March 1934, *Orpheus* was transatlantic in aspiration and did distinguish itself from other similar, non-mainstream initiatives, such as *Dinamo futurista* (1933), *Futurismo artecrazia* (1932-34), *L'Orto* (1931-39), *Pan* (1933-35), *Pègaso* (1929-33), *Solaria* (1926-34), for its distinctly interdisciplinary scope as well as for an even stronger interest for arts' social dimension within 'fascist mass society'.<sup>21</sup> In a 1934 letter to his friend the painter Pino Ponti, Luciano Anceschi listed similar experiences to *Orpheus*: in Rome those of *Il Saggiatore* (1930-1933) and *Il Cantiere*, in Bologna that of *Il Nettuno*; and in Milan that of *Camminare* (1932-1935 founded by Alberto Mondadori and halted by the regime).<sup>22</sup> We could also add the Florentine-based *L'Universale* (1931-1935) and Rome-based *Occidente* (1932-1935). Like its fellow reviews, *Orpheus* was broad-minded and in close dialogue with the up-and-coming Milanese youth and university culture; as Anceschi wrote in the same letter, it represented 'a case of identification of ourselves with the idea of society'. As Ben-Ghiat clearly summarised, the editors of *Il Saggiatore*, *L'Universale* and *Orpheus* (with the additions of *Il Nettuno* and *Camminare* as mentioned by Anceschi) proved that 'this generation of fascist intellectuals wished less to recast bourgeois Europe than to send it to its grave'.<sup>23</sup> *Orpheus* is therefore typical of an age of mass dictatorship in its hunger for modernity and modernization as well as in its stab at socially embedded

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<sup>20</sup> In her study of Italian literary magazines, Anne-Rachel Hermetet indicated the main difference between Italian and French élite periodical culture. She argued that the Parisian élites, unlike the Italian ones, were seen across Europe as the *pièce de résistance* against totalitarian regimes. This cultural hegemony could be achieved because of the strong, almost tyrannical control and influence the Parisian élites were allowed to exercise over cultural matters through the publication of literary reviews, see, *Les Revues italiennes face à la littérature française contemporaine. Études de réception (1919-1943)* (Paris, Honoré Champion Éiteur, 2003), pp. 24-8.

<sup>21</sup> Ben-Ghiat, op. cit, p. 104.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.comanducci.it/Ponti/AnceschiE.htm> (accessed on 02/09/2012).

<sup>23</sup> Ben-Ghiat, *ivi*, 107.

aesthetic practices fuelled by the desire to redefine 19th century Idealism and Realism. In this respect, it distinguished itself from its more literary aforementioned contemporaries which were, on the whole, less interdisciplinary, less theoretically driven and still concerned with issues of style; in a nutshell, less modern.

It was edited by a group of middle-class young intellectuals and writers, most notably Enzo Paci and Luciano Anceschi. Both born in 1911, they eventually became respectively a leading exponent of Italian existentialism and a noted literary critic in post-war Italy. In the 1930s at Milan Statale University, Paci and Anceschi worked under the supervision of the philosopher Antonio Banfi, who in 1925 signed the Manifesto of the anti-fascist intellectuals. The journal director, Pietro Torchi, was a musician who always encouraged the review to remain progressive in ethos and outlook. It was a medium-sized monthly review which was sold at 2 lire per issue and a total of 13 issues were published. From 1<sup>st</sup> November 1933 the price increased to 3 lire because of a format change, which meant a larger size and more illustrations. *Orpheus* had initially 50 subscribers but was distributed in batches of a hundred of copies in bookstores. It devoted very little space to advertisement, in favour of a Modernist essential simplicity of lines and style, and its front cover was Spartan, featuring only the title. It included a good selection of regular sections, presenting an average of 4 or 5 long articles (on occasion in the form of appunti, 'notes'), and a substantial section of longer 'Recensioni' and shorter reviews, 'Cronache', 'Notiziario' and 'Notizie', often focusing on foreign works either in the original, or in translation (often into French and without the Italian translation) as well as on other Italian and foreign reviews.

Many of the contributors revolved around the Milanese Scuola Superiore di Cultura d'Arte, and were, at the time, university students. Musicians Nando Ballo and Pietro Torchi were the founding chief editors, with French screenwriter Rémy Assayas who had worked with Max Ophüls, Germanist, translator and writer Emilio Castellani, critic Carlo Marchetti, philosopher Enzo Paci, and young controversial artist Pino Ponti as leading contributors.<sup>24</sup> For the most part at the beginning of their careers, these writers and

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<sup>24</sup> A detailed discussion of each contributor lies outside the scope of this article but some indications are useful to appreciate *Orpheus'* anatomy and scope. On screenwriter Assaysa, see Kate Ince, *Five Directors: Auteurism from Assayas to Ozon* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2008). Ponti published in *Orpheus* some rather controversial illustrations, critical of the regime. Through *Orpheus* he also started getting close to Renato Guttuso and later to be involved in *Corrente*. Castellani in post-war Italy made his mark by translating Bertold Brecht, Ernst Toller and Thomas Mann for the Milanese militant publisher Frassinelli and the experimental Rosa e Ballo (1945-1946). The list of contributors to this review has never been compiled before, and there are no existing studies discussing the contributors' individual biographies. The key figures are: art critic Raffaello Giolli (<http://www.treccani.it/biografie>), Riccardo Picozzi (musician and opera teacher), publishers Franco Formiggini and Alberto Mondadori, academic Lorenza Maranini to become a leading French literature specialist, film critic Eva Randi, art dealer Alberto Franco Schwarz of the Schwartz Gallery in Milan, Aldo Valcarengi (son of the co-director of the Ricordi publishing house and organiser in 1931 of the pro Toscanini manifestation), sculptors Luigi Grosso and Giacomo Manzú, architect Isaac Saporta, Clara Valente, Federica Vecchietti, Maria and Clara Albini, Käte Bernhardt, writer Elio Vittorini, artist Riccardo Crippa, and Jewish psychiatrist and academic Antonio Pesenti. The review included, unusually, eight women. For further information, see Ben-Ghiat, op. cit., pp. 102-7. From the second issue onwards, *Orpheus* had a foreign correspondent from Berlin, Grete Aberle, who reported mostly on German Expressionism and collective film, ivi, p. 104. As Ben-Ghiat discovered researching the Anceschi papers, *Orpheus* had some advertisement agreements with the *NRF* and other Italian Modernist journals, ivi, p. 247 note 61.



intellectuals *in fieri* were willing to engage with a wide range of topics and push the boundaries of their knowledge and understanding of culture and society. *Orpheus* gathered together a more varied group of contributors than *La Ronda*, and thanks to its topical agenda, achieved much greater coherence in its editorial selection of topics: the role of women in society, gender and sexuality, Idealist philosophy, corporativism, youth culture, the state of the economy, intermingled with Italian literature, visual arts and cinema, rationalist European architecture, aesthetic debates were recurrent topics for the *orfisti*. In short, its much-cherished dialogue with its readers turned this Milanese little magazine into an experimental site, that like the *NRF*, tried to reach metaphorically outside Italy and, from over there, learn the lesson of realism and engagement.

### Return to Order as Return to Realism

Indeed, these two Italian French-style journals seemed preoccupied with similar issues: namely, the need to reform the aesthetic realm to both find a suitable dimension for the arts within the social field and re-assess the role and position of the intellectual in the public sphere. In her study on fascist patronage of the arts, Marla Stone defined the fascist attitude towards culture as characterised by 'aesthetic pluralism', embodied as it were in a cultural paradox, which 'betrays available shorthands such as "Fascist realism" or "Mussolini modern"'.<sup>25</sup> Stone thus established a connection between realism and modernity and viewed it as a kernel for innovation.<sup>26</sup> But, as we shall see, this very same fascist cultural paradox functioned more as a productive force when it resisted primarily glass-cut boundaries, which juxtaposed innovation and traditionalism: instead these positions have to be interrogated alongside one another, and made to clash and play interchangeable roles. Crisis and transformation, à la Carl Schmitt 'states of exception', are two constantly reiterated notions throughout the lives of these reviews, and they often imply a transition which is at the same time aesthetic and intellectual-cultural.<sup>27</sup> Contrary to the defence of humanism of the traditional élites, this new aesthetic momentum rejected a stark dichotomy between art and life and promoted a more direct engagement between subjectivity and objectivity. It was neither so much the question of realism *per se*, nor even of how to blur the boundaries between élite and popular, but rather of realism as a source for innovation and transformation in order to achieve modern prose

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<sup>25</sup> See Marla Stone, *The Patron State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 5. for a discussion on forms of State patronage on the arts, especially on visual arts.

<sup>26</sup> In literary and artistic circles in 1920s and 1930s Italy, cultural modernity was frequently understood as everything which broke away from the national literary and artistic tradition and provided alternative, innovative, often foreign, models to conceptualize either aesthetic or intellectual choices. In our particular case, the transatlantic Modernist models, repeatedly cited and reviewed across several little Italian magazines of the Ventennio, were the likes of Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, T.H. Huxley, André Gide, Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, W. E. B Du Bois, Paul Valéry, Henry James, T.E. Hulme, John Dos Passos, D.H. Lawrence, alongside Italo Svevo, Luigi Pirandello, Marcel Proust and the *Neue Sachlichkeit* of the Weimar Republic.

<sup>27</sup> Gisèle Sapiro identified three main types of querelles occurring in the inter-war years and by implication during periods of national crisis: 'classicisme et romantisme, moralisme et littérature, occident et orient' are usually the two confronting groups, *op. cit.*, p. 104. For a typology of intellectual positions and affiliations during times of crisis, see Sapiro, *ivi*, pp. 104-8.

writing, that reacted to what earlier generations had understood or perceived as the position of the individual within the real.

If we now look back at the very idea of realism, says Hayden White, we notice that 'to be realist means both to see things clearly, as they really are, and to draw appropriate conclusions from this clear apprehension of reality for the living of a possible life on this basis. As thus envisaged, claims to essential realism were at once epistemological and ethical. The expression, desire to be realistic, then, must reflect a specific conception not so much of what the essence of realism is as of what it means to be unrealistic.'<sup>28</sup> This understanding of realism reinforces the classic dichotomy separating realism, as a form of engagement with reality, from anti-realism as a solipsistic form of escapism, and especially of individual escapism from collective commitment. But in a debate framing the general issue of 1930s realism as a rejection of the dichotomy between 'classics and moderns' and against Ernst Bloch's critique of his understanding of totality as a category to describe reality, Georg Lukács had observed that: 'In the present debate we are concerned with a much simpler question, namely, does the 'closed integration', the 'totality' of the capitalist system, of bourgeois society, with its unity of economics and ideology, really form an objective whole, independent of consciousness?'<sup>29</sup> If subjectivity (bourgeois escapism) and objectivity (realism) cannot be separated into two fields, what would then the consciousness of realism (of the object) consist of in a time of totalitarian regimes? The early twentieth-century turmoil of the avant-gardes and the tragedy of the first war having ceased, did not the desire to be realist, perhaps, mean a return to ordered, poised forms of writing composition with an eye to the classical controlled turbulence of, for example, Giacomo Leopardi's poetry and prose for the *rondisti*?<sup>30</sup> Did not the *orfisti* read Modernist writing in 1933 as a form of revolutionary attachment to the real?<sup>31</sup>

At international level, from the 1910s onwards, the *NRF* too had been promoting a not dissimilar 'moderns versus classicists debate' on how to 'renew, rethink the novel' in the context of the crisis of values impending on the Western civilization. It gave space to articles on Wells, Kipling, Meredith and Stevenson, while at the same time safeguarding the idea of 'modern classicism', consisting in a mix of stylistic accuracy to be deployed to inquiry about topical and concrete subjects. This new aesthetic dimension was hailed as an essential step-change towards gaining a deeper and more lucid understanding of the reality and complexity of contemporary culture with the ambition of preserving it from impending decay. Thus the *NRF* set the scene in Europe with its rejection of the *caos* of the avant-garde

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<sup>28</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1973), p. 46.

<sup>29</sup> Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertold Brecht, Georg Lukács, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 31.

<sup>30</sup> See Burdett, op.cit., pp. 106-7; Di Biase, op. cit., pp. 212-16, Pupino, op. cit., pp. 117, who sums up Cardarelli's aims as outlined in the prologue as follows: 'Capire Leopardi, significa capire la modernità allo stesso tempo'. In his major study on post-Crocean aesthetics *Le poetiche italiane del Novecento* (Milan, Marzoratti, 1962), p. 200 and *passim*, Anceschi described Leopardi and Baudelaire as epitomes of modernity because of the way they have resolved the tension between the classics and the moderns in favour of 'una letteratura ricca di forza lirica, responsabile, critica', p. 201 .

<sup>31</sup> Nando Ballo, 'Pubblico e arte', *Orpheus*, I (Dec. 1932), 1, 1-5.

and the need to pursue a brand of classicism intrinsically expressed by the modern prose Eliot,<sup>32</sup> Pound, Lawrence, Woolf, Mann, Joyce, the friends Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford, the lesser-acclaimed but quite accessible in his brilliant experimental writing founding editor of *The English Review*.

Not too surprisingly, as early as 1919 in Italy, during the 'biennio rosso', years of major social conflict taking place largely in Turin's factories, the famous opening article 'Prologo in tre parti' of the classicist *La Ronda*, suggested to Italian men of letters three directions to follow: 'Classicismo da rivivere come modernità', as a new aesthetic paradigm after the turbulence of the avant-gardes, 'Rifiuto del nazionalismo', which had led to a disastrous war, and 'farsi sentire al crepuscolo della civiltà moderna', as the awareness of occupying a transitory position with a clear sense of crisis and precariousness attached to it.<sup>33</sup> In a nutshell, *La Ronda* wanted to protect the glorious Italian literary and artistic tradition from any form of contamination from bad taste.<sup>34</sup> And its main line of argument as far as national literature was concerned was 'dominance' of stylistic rigour over narrative structure and sustained plot development.<sup>35</sup>

To clearly mark their position in 1921, *the rondisti* published (in separate volumes) Giacomo Leopardi's *Testamento letterario*, an anthology of his writing extrapolated from his diary the *Zibaldone* and edited by Cardarelli himself. The embodiment of the Romantic battle between the 'ancients and the moderns' and the great poets of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, who enjoyed a European-wide reputation, Leopardi became an iconic father figure for the *rondisti*, eager as they were to emulate his classical poetic diction, combined with an enhanced sensitivity for the mundane emotions of the everyday.<sup>36</sup> *La Ronda* largely acted as a guardian angel of style and its *rappel à l'ordre* essentially brought together formal décor and sensibility. In this respect, it is important to remember that at the time Cardarelli was publishing *Viaggi nel tempo*, *Favole della Genesi*, and *Memorie della mia infanzia*, highly autobiographical pieces in lyrical prose, resounding of nostalgia for the past. Cardarelli's *Ronda* championed a national aesthetic paradigm founded on the idea of modern classicism, induced by 'the search of a mode of writing and a formal certainty during times of extreme confusion'.<sup>37</sup>

Having said that, when addressing foreign literature, in the short reviews *à la NRF*, *La Ronda's* attitude changed considerably and a new aesthetic perspective came into being. For example, reviewing the cheap best-seller Guido da Verona's *Sciogli la treccia Maria Maddalena*, published by the middle-brow Florentine Bemporad in 1920, Riccardo Bacchelli, author from 1938 to 1940 of the realist novel *Il*

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<sup>32</sup> For a discussion on T.S. Eliot article 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' published in *La Ronda* in 1919, see Burdett, op. cit., p. 104.

<sup>33</sup> Vincenzo Cardarelli, *La Ronda*, I (Apr. 1919), 1, 1.

<sup>34</sup> In a long article about Gerhart Hauptman (Nobel prize in 1912), *La Ronda*, VI (1922), 9-10, 610-28, Marcello Corra praised the German playwright and novelist's attention to realist details chosen over purely stylistically polished prose.

<sup>35</sup> See for example the famous argument about the novel *Rubè*. Bacchelli accused author Giuseppe Antonio Borgese of having devoted too much attention to plot development and not enough to its much-needed stylistic refinement, *La Ronda*, III (1921), 406-14.

<sup>36</sup> For a discussion of the early days of the inception of the review in relation to its more political predecessor *La Voce*, and on the ideological implications of *La Ronda's* 'return to aesthetic order', see Burdett, op. cit., pp. 95-9 and 113; see instead Pupino, op. cit., p. 110 in relation to Cardarelli's prologue as a way of reclaiming the traditional values of the humanities.

<sup>37</sup> *La Ronda*, II (1920), 142-46 and Burdett, op. cit., p. 103, note 31 for discussion.

*mulino del Po*' (later published in 1957), identified in the lack of good popular literature one of the key problems for Italian modern letters. Bacchelli judged this *prosa* nothing but 'avanzi letterari innocui ad ogni persona appena colta, ma irrespirabili e deleteri alla piccola borghesia novellamente agiata e pervenuta da poco all'alfabeto'.<sup>38</sup> In his contribution, he conscientiously discussed popular culture along the same lines used by Antonio Gramsci, who a few years later will make a point about the need of good, solid national literature for the masses, and about the lack of any letteratura nazionale-popolare, as the most obvious manifestation both of Italy's cultural backwardness.<sup>39</sup> Both classicist Bacchelli and Marxist Gramsci agreed that in Italy there was no good quality middle-brow, or nazionale-popolare, literature, which could be made available to average readers to entertain them, constructively. If autochthonous prose writing did not pay any attention to readers' demands, the gulf between popular and elite literature could only become larger and larger. Furthermore, this would have had the side effect of marginalising Italy's position within the larger transnational cultural circle of modern and advanced economies, all of them having a much more articulated and varied book markets for diversified groups of readers. What Italy did not produce, contrary to other more developed and culturally united countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, was good literature with a moral standing.

Not unpredictably therefore, more gratifying books arrived from the United States, rather than from either Rome or Milan. As early as 1922, a letter from America by C.I. Claflin praised Edgar Lee Master and his poetry collection *Spoon River Anthology* because of its 'autenticità d'ispirazione e dignità e potenza espressiva', voiced with such a persuasive flair, that it could 'almost' compete with Horace's short, satirical *Epodes*.<sup>40</sup> Other letters from the UK on Samuel Butler, from France on Marcel Proust, from Germany on contemporary German literature published in *La Ronda* shared a pretty similar understanding of the social power of either solidly constructed or long elegant prose in supporting one's own narrative tradition. In short, the writers' public task was to enter into dialogue with a receptive readership, something Italian writers and intellectuals had always failed to comprehend.<sup>41</sup> And vice versa.

In 'A proposito di esportazione', a short article on a new Istituto per la propaganda della cultura italiana established by the publisher A.F. Formiggini on 14 March 1921, Lorenzo Montano spelled this out: 'Non esiste una letteratura di qualità in Italia da esportare' and adds that 'quando l'Italia aveva una letteratura ne era pieno il mondo. E non è vero che negli stranieri vi sia un deliberato proposito di ignorarci. [...] Verga trovò all'estero più di un imitatore'.<sup>42</sup> A national tradition can continue to flourish only

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<sup>38</sup> *La Ronda*, II (1920), 146-52.

<sup>39</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, notebook 21, 1934-35, vol. 3, ed. by Valentino Gerratana (Turin: Einaudi, 2007), pp. 2107-09.

<sup>40</sup> *La Ronda*, VI (1922), 528. Fernanda Pivano translated for the first time the *Spoon River Anthology* and published it in 1943, encouraged and supported by the great Americanist Cesare Pavese.

<sup>41</sup> Giuseppe Ungaretti in *Lo Spettatore italiano* similarly criticised Rivière for the lack of human empathy and of real emotional balance between the subject and the object in his works, June 1924. Giuseppe Bottai founded his review in 1924 as another ideal Italy-based embodiment of the *NRF*. Due to financial problems it was closed after a few months and remained largely apolitical.

<sup>42</sup> *La Ronda*, III (1921), 122-23. And interestingly enough, it was the hyper-realist Giovanni Verga, who could combine the experimentalism of his indirect speech with an ordinary subject, such as the lives of Sicilian fishermen, who gained international visibility and prestige for Italy. It is worth noticing that in 1919 with the Neapolitan publisher

if the exchange between its agents, readers, writers, and indeed publishers and foreign competitors functions on a mutual basis. *La Ronda* (and later *Orpheus* too) took into careful account the importance of aesthetic innovation and, when discussing foreign authors, it was never a question of keeping within the boundaries set by 'tradition', but rather of being able to respond to the aesthetic demands, cultural dislocations and intellectual challenges of the day. In the article 'Rassegna di letteratura inglese', Emilio Cecchi made a similar observation about the success in Italy of the high-Modernist Joseph Conrad, soon-to-be a best-seller for many low-budget Italian publishers.<sup>43</sup> Conrad enjoyed fame because he had productively resolved the tension between 'life and literature'. In this way, one of the leading voices of Modernism was not to be described as a solipsistic entity; but rather as a crossroad of subjectivity and objectivity in an attempt to reach out to his readers. In his review of H.G. Wells' *L'anima di un vescovo* translated by the prolific publisher, translator and novelist Gian Dàuli for the popular publisher Sonzogno in 1919, Lorenzo Montano followed a similar vein. For, he commended the accessibility, plain style, as well as lucid portrayal of our 'age' 'che è tutta precisione scientifica e meccanica, vede congiunta la massima confusione e perplessità' of the novel.<sup>44</sup> Wells' scientific, political, and utopian writing pursued both a classicist desire for composed forms and a modern aspiration to achieve mechanical forms of artistic re-production. Such an intersection would give to a work of art in an age of mechanical transformation the required visibility and sharp edge to capture readers' attention. It was almost an aesthetically schizophrenic reception of foreign literature that could be seen emerging from *La Ronda's* pages, if the emphasis was not to be exclusively placed on Modernist isolated subjectivity but on a productive engagement with reality.

In his 1919 review of Carlo Linati's *Sulle Orme di Renzo, pagine di fedeltà lombarda*, the expert on English literature, Emilio Cecchi himself, aligning his views with those of Ferrieri's distinctly transnational and cosmopolitan *Il Convegno*, rejected the idea of a strong, self-contained literary tradition, if too embedded within local and regional concerns; rather he proposed a more international comprehension of prose writing as the way forward towards aesthetic modernization. Cecchi wrote: 'Ciò non diciamo per svalutare in qualche modo il lavoro di Linati [...]. Lo diciamo per dire ch'egli è ancora più vicino a Barrès, a Bourget, e a cinquanta scrittori inglesi, e tutti scrittori assai nobili, che ai nostri e a Manzoni'.<sup>45</sup> The critic saw the emergence of a new phase in Linati's prose style, now much less concerned with purely stylistic matters and more open to experimenting with unconventional plot structures. Even though the result could at times be encapsulated in a less polished form, the desirable outcome was that even a recalcitrant 'esteta può farsi uomo'. Cecchi not only welcomed Linati's affiliations to foreign writers as a progressive move towards modernity, but deemed his detachment from

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Ricciardi, critic Luigi Russo produced a sea-changing study on Giovanni Verga calling for a re-appraisal of his realist narrative experiments as the way forward in the regeneration of Italian literature.

<sup>43</sup> *La Ronda*, II (1920), 58-60. On Conrad's popularity in Italy, see Billiani, *Culture nazionali*, op. cit, pp.125-26.

<sup>44</sup> Montano also noted that despite its many avoidable errors, the translation was nonetheless 'readable', *La Ronda*, II (1920), 71-3.

<sup>45</sup> *La Ronda*, II (1920), 68-70.

Alessandro Manzoni's moralism in historical fiction as a necessary step towards becoming a more complex and European authorial persona.

In this respect, *La Ronda* and *Orpheus* can be seen as two sides of the same coin: expanded subjectivity contained in classical forms by the former, expanded objectivity spread over a multiplicity of collective voices by the latter. In 1932, the year of the celebrations for the Decennale of the fascist 'revolution' and the abolition of artistic groupings in the USSR, *Orpheus* adopted a much more 'militant' position, seeking to transform radically the *prosa d'arte*, lyrical prose, so fiercely championed by *La Ronda*, into collective writing, which was able in itself (and thus enabled the *orfisti*) to react to the demands of a modern, fascist society. In September 1933, almost at the peak of consensus for the Italian fascist regime and at the beginning of Nazi rule, in response to a general consultation with its readers, Paci declared that a new art 'si dovrà costruire e basare sopra tutto su due concetti: il concetto di 'collettivismo' e il concetto di 'realismo storico' as 'trasposizioni sul piano culturale di realtà ormai viventi ed in moto su quello politico e su quello economico'.<sup>46</sup> In November 1933, discussing *Orpheus'* contribution on this occasion to the *Saggiatore's* inquiry on the same topic, the opening article reinforced the point already made a couple of months before, by claiming that the new art they champion is ingrained in the principle that the 'realismo dinamico, [...] determinato dai rapporti con la vita. [...], costituisce il senso della nostra *Aufklärung* collettivista. [...]'. Their task is now that of 'trovare una nuova legge di connessione tra l'individuo e la società, tra il singolo e la collettività'.<sup>47</sup> This 'atteggiamento morale e intellettuale' could not embrace indifference if it were to forge a more profound theoretical and critical awareness of arts' sociability, which had to translate into radically different forms of individual participation to the collective. In other words, without rejecting fascist ideology *per se*, these young intellectuals wanted to 'clarify' and 'explain' further their understanding of the relationship between art and the individual as part of the collective.<sup>48</sup> Since its inception, the review did not hesitate to propose a collective understanding of aesthetics, sustained by a close dialogue between the arts in general – music, visual arts, architecture, film, literature – and society. Specifically, in *Orpheus'* writings on contemporary aesthetics, arts had to be the collective expression of the individual and had to be interpreted as a dynamic and historicised manifestation of the real.<sup>49</sup> Once more, in response to the same *Saggiatore* inquiry in December 1933, *Orpheus* acknowledged that 'se la politica è il fondamento di tutto, il problema

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<sup>46</sup> Enzo Paci, 'In margine ad un'inchiesta', *Orpheus*, II (Sep. 1933), 6-8, 1-4.

<sup>47</sup> 'Appunti per la definizione di un atteggiamento', *Orpheus*, II, (Nov. 1933), p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> Similarly to Russia and Germany, especially in the 1930s, Italy's totalitarian modernity aimed at developing the nation's infrastructures both to consolidate its superstructure and to align economically the country with the other European nation-states. This goal had to be achieved especially through cultural propaganda and the implementation of the corporatist social and economic project (1932-1934). For a general overview, see the very wide-ranging study by Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism. The Sense of Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (London: Palgrave, 2007). The debate on corporatism took place in many different venues, from 1932 onwards, including *Critica fascista* and other aligned reviews such as *L'Italia letteraria* and *Quadrante*, for instance. The overarching discussion centred on the idea of corporatism as the expression of a new, social and collective, fascist art. Artists themselves had to follow the ethos of this new aesthetic of construction orchestrated by the State. The debate on corporatism is vast and well beyond the scope of this article which will only address it in relation to the discussion taking place in *Orpheus*.

<sup>49</sup> Ballo, art. cit. and Pietro Tronchi, *Orpheus*, II (Feb. 1933), 2, 9-12, on State and culture.

corporativo, che esprime l'innovazione rivoluzionaria più concreta della nostra attuale politica, è conseguentemente il problema fondamentale' where the realismo sociale can find its 'espressione concreta in una forma politica in moto, sintesi e strumento della Rivoluzione.'<sup>50</sup>In this respect, as early as February 1933, Paci had almost programmatically written: 'per noi non esiste un concetto d'arte stabilito una volta per tutte, ma diverse forme d'arte che entrano nel gioco della dialettica storica, non solo ma hanno la funzione sociale, politica ed educativa. Questo in sede di socialità dell'arte il significato del nostro realismo storico. [...]; per noi tutti gli aspetti della vita devono giustificarsi entro una logica rigorosa e concreta. [...] Come non crediamo più all'autonomia del fatto estetico dagli altri aspetti della vita: così non crediamo più nell'autonomia del fatto morale'.<sup>51</sup> Thus *Orpheus'* brand of international *realismo storico*, in line with that promoted by similar reviews such as *Il Saggiatore*, was a more general expression of a revolutionary humanism, which could and would bring back artists and citizens to the arts of their Nation and to its social contexts. Moreover, by laying claims to the economic and social appeal of all artistic elements and in line with the aims of 1930s Italian corporative totalitarian art, *Orpheus* not only renounced the liberal idea of art as pure and estranged from practical sense but also as a form of total control of individuals over their consciousness. Differently from the regime's position, however, there was no mention of any control of the State over cultural matters; art was an autonomous field of production ruled independently. The *rappel à l'ordre*, in this instance, transformed itself into a return to the logical acceptance of art as an autonomous form of collective expression, however closely embedded in its social reality of production and circulation.

Luciano Anceschi reviewing *Le case* by Ugo Betti drew a meaningful and elucidating parallel between the Italian playwright and John Dos Passos, he wrote: 'Troviamo assai importante questo libro del Betti, in quanto indice di un tentativo letterario e di una tendenza artistica, che trova la sua giustificazione in un rinnovamento spirituale, che vuol essere profondo e totale'. Just like Dos Passos, Betti too had found 'l'oggetto e la sua vita e il suo svolgimento' and not exclusively their subjectivities.<sup>52</sup> In his review of Ann Vickers by the American naturalist Sinclair Lewis,<sup>53</sup> Anceschi reinforced an analogous point since 'I casi di Anna Vickers ci interessano soprattutto perché iscritti nella critica a un sistema per noi definitivamente sorpassato. Noi viviamo ora con il Fascismo un'esperienza anti-borghese ed anti-liberale'.<sup>54</sup> In short, *Orpheus* proposed a return to 'historical realism', which was not entirely presented in its classical, dichotomist formulation for it very much welcomed, for instance, John Dos Passos's highly Modernist

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<sup>50</sup> 'I giovani e la nuova cultura', a.II, (Dec. 1933), pp. 1-2.

<sup>51</sup> Paci, 'Cenni per un nostro clima', *Orpheus*, II (Feb. 1933), 2, 3-7.

<sup>52</sup> L. A., *Orpheus*, II (May-Jun. 1933), 4-5, 27. Cesare Pavese translated part I and III of Dos Passos anthology *USA* as *Il 42° parallelo* and *Un mucchio di quattrini* respectively.

<sup>53</sup> In 1929, for the first time Cesare Pavese translated American naturalist writer Sinclair Lewis amid great criticism from more traditional members of the literary establishment.

<sup>54</sup> C. M. Cappelli, *Orpheus*, II (May-Jun. 1933), 4-5, 26-7.

subjective practice of the choral novel, understood as expression of the subject's morality within forms of collective artistic production.<sup>55</sup>

What does qualify as proper realist, collective writing with a social appeal? *Orpheus* never failed to display an openly anti-bourgeois, Modernist ethos, which could be referred back to the early days of the dictatorship and that was still strong amongst the fringes of the regime and its official youth culture, championed for example by the university groups, GUF, close to *Orpheus*. Indeed *Orpheus'* contributors made abundant references to the literary, aesthetic debates of the day, with articles unequivocally focusing on the rejection of autobiographism. Anceschi again, in a review of *Oggi, domani, mai* by *rondista*, future neorealist Riccardo Bacchelli ascribed the merits of the novel to its depiction not only of the protagonist's inner musings but also of the historical landscape he fully inhabit. Even when dealing with the intricacies of the inner spheres, Anceschi argued, the intersections between objectivity and subjectivity must be kept constantly in the foreground. Only in collective work like the one under review, pointed out Anceschi, Bacchelli can compellingly criticise the decaying, neurotic middle-classes, and still preserve the lesson of morality and style he had learned from *La Ronda*. Emilio Castellani and Aldo Valcarenghi voiced a related concern in their reviews of *L'armata a cavallo* by Isaac Babel and of *1919* by Dos Passos. And once again, similar were the observations about the German writer and member of the New Objectivity movement Otto Flake's French translation of *Es ist Zeit (La jeunesse déchainée, 1932)*. For the novel moved away from a futile aestheticism to favour 'obiettività lucida', and in so doing presented a new narratological and social collective paradigm for younger generations of writers to imitate. Less than positive was instead the review of the French translation of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. The British author failed to produce a convincing social portrayal of the novel's utopian society, because he was too preoccupied with the characters' dialogue and less so with the collectively connected reality they dwelled in.

Whether or not in a state of flux, of constant evolution and crisis, art can never be extricated from its historical context. By drawing such an unbreakable connection between text and context, *Orpheus* moved away from Benedetto Croce's aesthetic reflection and, just like *La Ronda* did, from Decadentism's lack of moral standing and historical awareness to get closer to European experiences, such as the German New Objectivity, transatlantic Modernism or even rational and functional architecture.<sup>56</sup> It was Enzo Paci who finally brought all these elements together in his long 1933 review of Benedetto Croce's influential *Poesia popolare e poesia d'arte*. In discussing Croce's argument on the productive relationship between folklore tradition and artistic poetry, he unquestionably denied any value to the notion of the 'autonomy of the art work' and declared his unconditional faith in any literary expression, which reflected its historical context. In this important review, as elsewhere in his long, incisive articles on arts and politics, Paci

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<sup>55</sup> 'I giovani e la cultura italiana', *Orpheus*, II (Dec. 1933), 10, 1-6, is a long, positioning article on the inter-connected issues of corporativism, anti-liberalism, the relationship between art and society, and the active role young intellectuals had to assume in shaping political life and the death of traditional middle-classes. In the same issue, see also the note '*Pan e l'Italiano*' on the unavoidable death of the unengaged literary review, *ivi*, 20.

<sup>56</sup> Croce notoriously dismissed Decadentism as a manifestation of morally degenerate art.



anticipated the post-war rejection of Croce and laid the foundations of the soon-to-be hegemonic historicist tradition of critical engagement in the arts.<sup>57</sup>

### From Liberal to Organic Intellectual

In a much more explicit way in *Orpheus* and in a more sibylline one in *La Ronda*, the other main, shared issue which emerged from the analysis of these little magazines was the calling into question of the idea of the role of the intellectual, trapped between the 1920s *défense de l'Occident* and the 1930s totalitarianisms.<sup>58</sup> As Walter Adamson has stated, 'Italy ultimately presented a permissive environment for avant-garde Modernism, at least as compared with Russia and Germany. [...] with a triangle representing three basic positions of avant-garde modernism, conservative traditionalism, and fascist intransigence'.<sup>59</sup>

In such a fluid, yet totalitarian, milieu, if *Orpheus* paved the way for collective, heretical engagement, *La Ronda* only tangentially touched on the need to draw new spaces of public intervention, being more securely at home with the classic, orthodox paradigm of arts' humanism and morality. In a 1950s interview, looking back on *La Ronda's* experience, Bacchelli wrote about their tentative forms of engagement arriving from their European counterparts: 'alcuni collaboratori, come Sorel, Pareto, Chesterton, [...] portavano una nota direi europea e profondamente attuale di critica, e di critica sociale. D'altra parte, a una critica storico-politica ci dedicavamo anche noi'.<sup>60</sup> In November 1933, in *Orpheus* Fabio Marina had stressed that 'la nostra esigenza di rendere popolare la cultura nasce, ....anche dalla considerazione che questo popolarizzarsi della cultura finirà col rimetterla a contatto della vita',<sup>61</sup> thereby questioning the sustainability of the traditional role élites had been playing in shaping artistic reform and putting forward the powerful notion of making art simply more accessible (if not always and explicitly in a directly political fashion).

Not surprisingly, again, Europe needed to teach Italian intellectuals how to escape from the ivory tower and learn the art of engagement, *à la mode de* controversial *guerres* of the *NRF*, again.<sup>62</sup> In one of the first (8-page long) articles to appear in Italy on André Gide, in *La Ronda's* 'Lettere dalla Francia', Jacques Rivière criticised Gide because of his firmly central position within the tradition of the total

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<sup>57</sup> Luciano Anceschi, Emilio Castellani and Aldo Valcarengi, 'Recensioni', *Orpheus*, II (Jan. 1933), 1, 20-5. Carlo Marchetti and N. Z., reviews, *Orpheus*, II (Feb. 1933), 2, 20-3, Paci, *Orpheus*, II (Apr. 1933), 3, 17-9. A few years later, in 1936, the year that marked the decline of the consensus Fascism had been relentlessly building, Luciano Anceschi published his tesi di laurea written at the time of *Orpheus* and entitled *Autonomia ed eteronomia dell'arte* with the Sansoni publishing house, owned by Giovanni Gentile's family. With this volume, Anceschi upheld *Orpheus's* views and introduced Italian readers to new aesthetic perspectives, which more strongly repudiated Croce's idealism and implicitly indicated the need for a more eclectic aesthetic approach to the study of the arts in general. This critical perspective will be fully explored after the end of WWII.

<sup>58</sup> See George Mosse, 'Fascist Aesthetics and Society: Some Considerations', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1, (Jan.1996), p. 247. Keala Jewell made a similar point on the brand of magic realism practiced by Massimo Bontempelli, 'Magic Realism and Real Politics: Massimo Bontempelli's Literary Compromise', *Modernism/Modernity*, 4 (Nov. 2008), vol. 15, 726.

<sup>59</sup> Adamson, op. cit., pp. 230-31.

<sup>60</sup> 'Terzo Programma', op. cit, p. 95.

<sup>61</sup> *Orpheus*, II (Nov. 1933), 12.

<sup>62</sup> Sapiro, op. cit, pp. 150-61 and Martyn Cornick, *The Nouvelle Revue Française Under Jean Paulhan 1925-1940* (Amsterdam-NY, Rodopi, 1995) , pp. 47-68.

intellectual. Gide's problem, says Rivière, introducing him for the first time to the Italian public, consists in his lack of engagement with anything around his persona. This attitude has transformed the French writer into a sort of victim of his own many, too many, interests. At the time of his 1920s literary experimentations with autobiographical writing as well as with controversial topics, Gide seemed only to aspire to float like cork on water, indifferent to the movements of the tides around him. To note that, in 1921 Gide was under attack for the supposed lack of morals in his works and the display of his 'immoral' sexual orientations by French writer Henry Béraud, in the course of a defamatory campaign, which resounded well outside France (in the 'provinces', in Belgium and Switzerland) and ended with Gide's shift towards communism from the early 1930s to 1936. According to Rivière, who had hailed a classical renaissance when appointed editor-in-chief of the *NRF*, Gide's solipsistic intellectual position was *passé*, and his art would benefit more, would become more modern, if it established a closer interaction with all the 'elementi del suo spirito' and the fullness of real life.<sup>63</sup> Even though Rivière recognised that the symbolic richness of Gide's writing still generated genuine interest for its compelling sophistication, the phrase 'noli me tangere' could be fittingly used to describe the French writer and sadly his - less talented - followers.<sup>64</sup> Albeit reflecting internal frictions in the *NRF*, in his comments Rivière identified one of the defining questions of the 1920s: that is, how to re-position the intellectual *in* and *around* the *tour d'ivoire*, without denying the values of humanism and classicism as fundamental to the existence of Western civilization; values which both Gide and Rivière ultimately upheld. Over a decade later, Emilio Castellani admitted, yet again, 'il fallimento di Gide', in view of the French author's lack of social engagement. To Gide, he stated, classicism was not an expression of rational rigour but another mask of elitism, which showed a purely bourgeois, self-referential understanding of literature and society. Despite his conversion to communism, Gide failed because he positioned himself in stark disagreement with a long-standing French tradition of anti-bourgeois, dissenting artists, ranging from Baudelaire to Flaubert and did nothing but continue to profess congratulatory forms of self-indulgent confession.<sup>65</sup>

Gisèle Sapiro has detailed the *NRF*'s internal debate during the 1920s, the Rivière and Gide years, on the relationship between literature and politics and has showed how it evolved from total separation between these two spheres to their full interlocking in the early 1930s. At least since 1927, in fact, the *NRF* had been adopting a much more political stance, which entailed sustaining Martin du Gard's interest in Franco-German relations and Gide's support for the soviet cause. This ideological turning point dated back to the publication of Julien Benda's widely acclaimed (by Gide and Paulhan), yet highly controversial *La Trahison des clercs* in 1927 and continued in the 1930s.<sup>66</sup> French intellectuals gravitating around the *NRF* began to define their cultural and political position in response to Benda's apparently

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<sup>63</sup> Sapiro, *ivi*, p. 121.

<sup>64</sup> *La Ronda*, II (1922), 60-8.

<sup>65</sup> *Orpheus*, II (May-Jun. 1933), 4-5, 6-10.

<sup>66</sup> Notoriously, in the 1930s the *NRF* supported Dreyfus, defended republicanism, and took a fierce anti-German position. Above all this, Paulhan himself was trying to maintain dialogue with all parties concerned, from the academics to the surrealists and communists (Breton and Aragon), and thus from 1933 he started to expand the scope of the review (see note 8).

haughty stance on how and when intellectuals should become politically involved, or even should become part of history. Already in his *La Ronda* review of Benda's earlier works, Emilio Cecchi had similarly declared his aesthetic and intellectual failure and asserted the need to move forward. For looking back at Benda would disclose him as simply 'un dilettante del classicismo, un esteta sperso fra le durezze egiziane del razionalismo puro'. Cecchi continued his assessment of Benda by championing a return to classical composition for him and fellow Henri Bergson and affirmed the need for both of them to take up a bourgeois intellectual position, which had to be validated by a rational understanding of the real, albeit without achieving a totalising synthesis of it. To this effect, Cecchi criticised both Bergson's earlier irrationalism (received in Italy via the Florentine review *Leonardo*) and Benda's extreme logicism, while indirectly questioning any intellectual subject position, which would call for an intervention in the social milieu without a deep, clear understanding of it as a whole. Such exercises were simply futile and dilettantesque.<sup>67</sup>

Whether or not art could float in an autonomous space and still be aesthetically challenging in an age of radical structural, State run and dictated economic transformations became one of the point of topical discussion across Europe in the first half of the 1930s.<sup>68</sup> And *Orpheus* did not miss the opportunity of contributing to this hugely complicated and topical debate. In response to Benda, Anceschi in 'Appunti per la definizione di un atteggiamento', reinforced a similar point by claiming the urgent necessity of moving away from the idea of the intellectual as a solipsistic entity. Rather, in 1930s corporatist and totalitarian Italy the new intellectual had the function of fostering the interaction between art and society with the same purpose of defeating the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century liberal and bourgeois intellectual model. The new intellectual born during the dictatorship, after the fall of the liberal intellectual and before the birth of the organic one, has to solve a double-edged issue, that is 'il problema della nostra funzione morale, in quanto compiamo un'attività pubblica'.<sup>69</sup> In this summative article, Anceschi tackled once more the crucial problems of the morality of art, of its autonomy, and indirectly of the responsibility of the clerics, issues which unquestionably, albeit controversially, unite both *La Ronda* and *Orpheus*. With his contribution, by stating that only realism was the aesthetic dimension where an ethically acceptable subject position of the intellectual-writer and a close engagement with the collective forces of society and history were attainable, Anceschi cogently brings our discussion to a closure. In response to whichever guise this crisis of humanity can appear in, the historical value of art has to be bound to its morality and humanism. The arts and humanities' position within their field of cultural production, in this case of totalitarian regimes, generates symbolic capital when able to formulate a counter-discourse, even if from within. In their search for artistic expression in the age of mass totalitarianism, Italian intellectuals and writers used

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<sup>67</sup> Reviews of 'Benda *Le Bouquet de Glycère (Trois Dialogues)* Chez Emile –Paul Frères, Paris) and Rivière *L'allemand: souvenirs et réflexions d'un prisonnier de guerre (NRF)*', *La Ronda*, II (1920), 69-73. A similar in many ways critique of Benda, accused of excessive indulging in intellectual detachment, appeared in *Il Convegno*, ( 2 Feb. 1928), 82-4.

<sup>68</sup> See on this point, Golomstock, op. cit, pp. 68-80.

<sup>69</sup> *Orpheus*, II (Nov. 1933), 9, 1.

élite literary journals to map their new public and aesthetic identity and define their own space for public intervention. Paraphrasing Giuliana Bruno, we could say that 'looking at the emergence of magazine publishing in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century in terms of cultural space enables us to articulate the link between periodical culture and the culture of Modernity'.<sup>70</sup> If across Europe and to a lesser extent the U.S. élite, little periodicals, such as *The English Review*, *The Criterion*, *The London Mercury*, *The Dial*, *The NRF*, *Cannibale*, *Zenit*, *Nyugat* accommodated the large scale conversations which became Modernism, in the context of the fascist regime's own cultural aim for Italy was that of achieving national modernity. By calling for a return to realism in the age of mass totalitarianisms then, these journals surprisingly shared an ethos common to many of their contemporaries, and even to Fascism itself, grounded as it was in a similar understanding of the close and dependent relationship that interconnected subjectivity and objectivity in collective, realist, Modern and progressive aesthetic practices.

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<sup>70</sup> Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotions* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 17.