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Modernists? Culture, Society, and the Florentine Avant-Garde

Darius Barik

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements of the degree of Master of Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities.

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Abstract

The Florentine avant-garde emerged in the first decade of the twentieth century. Young, radical intellectuals coalesced around the journal *La Voce*. Through its vehement opposition to the liberal ruling elite of Giovanni Giolitti, *La Voce* established itself as the major organ of avant-garde cultural, social, and political expression in Italy. The Italian nation was argued to be in a state of crisis, which was at once spiritual, social, political, and cultural. In response, the journal's contributors formulated a rhetoric of cultural renewal; demanded the formation of a young, masculine elite; expressed an avant-garde view of the artist; and called for a Nietzschean transmutation of values.

It has been argued that the dominant cultural discourse of this period was modernism. In order to express an understanding of the Florentine avant-garde, this thesis constructs a dialogue between the movement and the dominant discourse. Being a task of cultural analysis, the thesis first seeks to define the term 'culture'. The sociological notion which is expressed informs the subsequent understanding of modernism: rather than a set of aesthetic practices, it is shown to be better understood as a mind-set or a 'network of cultural responses' to a particular socio-political context.

The analysis of the avant-garde builds on this cross-disciplinary approach. The thesis first places the journal in the wider socio-political context. The thesis then examines the cultural politics of the movement through the close-analysis of *Un uomo finito*, the autobiographical work of Giovanni Papini, one of the major protagonists of the movement. Through these analytical practices, it is argued that, in their radical world-view, creative-destructive aesthetics, and future-oriented politics, which was dominated by calls for cultural and political renewal, the Florentine avant-garde can be said to have been a permutation of the modernist 'sensitivity', which developed in the highly specific context of early twentieth-century Italy.

Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the Regulations of the University of Bristol. The work is original, except where indicated by special reference in the text, and no part of the dissertation has been submitted for any other academic award. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

Signed: Darius Barik

Date: 03/10/2015

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Introduction

Much scholarship has asserted that modernism was the dominant cultural discourse of early twentieth-century Europe.¹ The cultural production of the period was innovative, extravagant, shocking, powerful, and political: across the arts, realist and objective representation were rejected; traditional forms and methods of narrative ordering were challenged; the inner turmoil of individuals gained precedence over external action; the figurative gave way to the abstract; the material was imbued with the spiritual. The desire to revolt against cultural norms, to seek alternative modes of representation and self-expression, was pervasive. This, it has been argued, was ‘modernism’: a discourse of paradox and dualities, a state of mind more than a manifesto of aesthetic rules, a compound that confounds attempts at precise definition: the dominant *spirit* of the period.²

At the turn of the twentieth century, Italy was a parliamentary democracy. Its politics were dominated by a liberal elite at the head of which was the statesman Giovanni Giolitti. The period between 1901 and 1914 was one of economic growth, advancements in infrastructure, and political enfranchisement.³ In spite of this, opposition to the ruling elite was great. Opposition groups highlighted economic differences between the northern and southern regions of the country, a failure of the nation to assert itself at an international level, and a degenerate national culture. The unification project of the *Risorgimento* was deemed, at best, incomplete; at worst, it was considered a failure.⁴

In Florence, an avant-garde grouping emerged, whose opposition to the contemporary context was vehement and sustained. Above all, the group demanded the cultural and spiritual renewal of the Italian nation. These ideas were disseminated predominantly through journals and periodicals. The major organs of expression, the journals constituted sites for the discussion of political, social, and aesthetic concerns; they were spaces in

¹ See especially, *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (London: Penguin Books, 1991); Peter Gay, *Modernism: The Lure to Heresy. From Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond* (London: Random House, 2007); Matei Calinescu, *Faces of Modernity*; Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2008); Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

² Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, ‘Preface’, *Modernism* ed. by Bradbury and McFarlane, p.11.

³ Martin Clark, *Modern Italy: 1971 to the Present* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp.164-169.

⁴ Charles Burdett, *Vincenzo Cardarelli and his Contemporaries: Fascist Politics and Literary Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 10-15.

which public discourse was formed and intellectuals shaped and expressed their public identities. Set up in 1908 by Giuseppe Prezzolini and Giovanni Papini, *La Voce* was the most illustrious and influential. The range of contributors it attracted was vast and its reputation was international. In Florence the journal had a remarkable impact, creating a space of intellectual ferment and ideological exchange.⁵ Through its influence on the early thinking of Benito Mussolini, its wider political impact was lasting. In the literary realm, individuals surrounding the journal, such as Scipio Slataper, Giovanni Boine, and Giovanni Papini, developed a radical and experimental form of aesthetics which, this thesis will endeavour to show, was arguably a permutation of the modernist ‘spirit’ that was driving cultural innovation across Europe.⁶

Giovanni Papini, in particular, had a prominent role in shaping the cultural politics of the journal, Florence, and Italy. Born in Florence in 1881, his upbringing was modest. While his formal schooling was limited, an auto-didactic thirst for knowledge drove his cultural, political, and social education; he was to become the most-celebrated and most-read writer of his generation.⁷ His journalistic writing is defined by an ethics of action, which was shaped by aggressive, misogynistic, and exclamatory rhetoric. With regard to his literary work, one can emphasize an ethics of renewal, a focus on the interior world of the human psyche, and a radical view of the intellectual’s role in society. In their political ideology and social attitudes, Papini and his contemporaries were wholly men of their time. The body of literature left by the *vociani* - both literary and journalistic in nature- becomes a valuable social document of great heuristic value. To subject it to examination will allow an insight into a period of dramatic cultural, political, and social ferment.

That both modernism and the Florentine avant-garde were cultural phenomena is clear: the preoccupations with form and compositional methods, whether of texts, music, or art, attests to this. However, the activities of the Florentine avant-garde clearly went beyond the cultural sphere: it was, in large part, a reaction against the contemporary political context of modernizing liberal Italy. Likewise, the innovation of modernists, such as Woolf, Mann,

⁵ Walter L. Adamson, *Avant-Garde Florence* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp.251-53.

⁶ See especially, Adamson, *Avant-Garde Florence*; Emilio Gentile, *The Struggle for Modernity: Nationalism, Futurism and Fascism* (Westport, CT: Praeger Press, 2003).

⁷ Adamson, ‘Giovanni Papini: Nietzsche, Secular Religion, and Catholic Fascism’, *Politics Religion & Ideology*, 14 (1) (2013), 1-2.

Stravinsky, or Braque, was not pursued with aesthetic aims alone: new methods were sought in order to better represent an objective world in a state of flux, a context in which human life had been profoundly altered.⁸

Even on a superficial level, then, culture cannot be separated from society. This being so, how ought one to understand and talk about culture? If 'modernism' is a problematic, semantically complex, and mobile term, 'culture' loses little by comparison. It is, says the critic Raymond Williams, 'one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.'⁹ Certainly, it goes beyond what we understand to be 'cultural products': art, literature, poetry, theatre. Indeed, for the cultural anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, culture is an 'acted document', formed of 'webs of significance';¹⁰ for others, such as Peter Berger, the cultural universe is a coercive, humanly-constructed facticity, subjective and objective in nature, on which human beings depend both spiritually and biologically.¹¹

Such ideas will underlie this thesis, which will consist of two chapters. Notions of culture and the link between society and cultural phenomena will be the focus of the first chapter. Two surveys will be conducted: the first will address 'culture' and will examine how it ought to be understood. With reference to the notion of culture that is expressed, the second survey will consider how modernism has been discussed and defined. In both instances, a cross-disciplinary approach will be adopted.

The dialectic constructed between these phenomena will inform the second chapter of the thesis. The Florentine avant-garde will be brought into this dialogue. In the first instance, the socio-political context of early twentieth-century Italy will be examined; in the second, the politics and aesthetics of the group will be outlined; finally, these will be exemplified through the close analysis of Giovanni Papini's autobiographical work *Un uomo finito*. To undertake this analysis in view of the dialogue between culture and modernism will enable a consideration of the interaction between culture, society, and the Florentine avant-garde

⁸ Bradbury and McFarlane, 'The Name and Nature of Modernism', in *Modernism*, pp.19-22.

⁹ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.87.

¹⁰ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973).

¹¹ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1967), pp.3-28.

in early twentieth-century Italy. By doing so, new understandings will be possible, which go beyond the cultural and extend into the political and social realms.

Chapter I Modernism and Culture: In Dialogue

(i.) Culture

Culture and Society

Central to the study of the Florentine avant-garde is how one understands and defines ‘culture’. The premise of this thesis is not simply that a dialogue may be opened between modernism and culture and, subsequently, the Florentine movement. Rather, it is argued that it is wholly necessary to enable this dialogue if one seeks to account for these cultural phenomena. This assertion is made both explicitly and implicitly in the study of modernism undertaken by the critic Tim Armstrong. To appraise modernism, he argues, is to undertake what is inherently a cultural practice. Yet it is one that is profoundly linked to the wider context of human existence- to the social, economic, and political spheres.¹² In his study, Armstrong attempts to account for literary modernism and its characteristics from a socio-cultural perspective. The task he sets himself is:

to engage with culture defined [as] an interconnected field of activity in which hierarchy, and even causality is problematic; in which agreed boundaries are replaced by permeability and relatedness – in which economic thought is readily seen as influenced by ideas about the body; or literature might seem akin to science; or politics might become aesthetics.¹³

Armstrong’s evocation of a world defined by permeability and relativity is striking. Indeed, it informs any attempt to understand modernism: the view of the human world that he posits is one in which the social, political, cultural, and even economic spheres defy compartmentalization. Such an approach permits the critic to move beyond the arts and literature as sources for an understanding of the human world: the critic can instead examine a broader range of topics, from anthropology to linguistics, philosophy to medical science. As such, any cultural activity, whether in the form of creative endeavour or cultural criticism becomes a human and social activity in its own right: it cannot be limited to an

¹² Timothy Armstrong, 2005, *Modernism: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity Press) p.xi.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.ix.

approach which seeks to examine products of culture as independent objects. Instead, any attempt to understand a cultural phenomenon must attempt to gain possession of the different schemas of knowledge, communication, understanding, and observations of which the human world consists. Only then can one start to understand the cultural phenomena that have, together, been termed 'literary modernism'.

Armstrong's assertion that an appraisal of modernism is essentially a cultural practice certainly rings true. However, while his approach builds upon a strong academic tradition, it neglects to 'unpack' fully the key term: 'culture'. The initial chapter of this thesis will therefore seek in the first instance to gain an understanding of how notions of culture have been expressed, developed, and applied. In part, the necessity of doing so stems from the relationship between modernity, culture, and modernism. Armstrong himself notes that any account of literary modernism must take the category of modernity as its point of departure: the two are bound in a relationship that is more homologous than antagonistic. Their objective independence is a fallacy- only when placed in juxtaposition can they be understood.

Anthony Giddens: Characteristics of Modernity

Across his writing, Anthony Giddens has explored the socio-economic characteristics of modernity and how these permutations have impacted on social and personal life. Elements of his work help to understand the relationship between culture and modern society. Modernity, Giddens argues, is fundamentally a problem defined by questions of reorganisation, reflexivity, and disembedding mechanisms in the social sphere. As such, it is sociological in nature. By extension it is a coercive force: modernity irreparably alters the human experience on both a collective and personal level. The self, for instance, is essentially a project of self-identity, through which one nurtures and seeks to maintain a coherent biographical narrative. Meanwhile, on a broader social level, modern institutions create 'settings of action'. Within these, collective experience is ordered and roles in social

life are assigned, thereby facilitating further the construction of the individual self.¹⁴ From this perspective, subject to diverse social forces, the individual exists in a perpetual state of revision. Furthermore, human understanding of the social world is altered, too: our understanding is shaped by the institutions that direct human action in the world. In light of this, the products of human expression are constantly re-conceptualized and re-organised; different strands of representation emerge as the cultural products of men and women are transformed by the dynamic forces of the social world that act upon the individual and to which he or she subsequently reacts.

The ‘Cultural Apparatus’

In light of such a view of the interaction between the social, political, economic, and cultural spheres, to seek to develop a notion of modernism without first seeking to re-appraise and re-define ‘culture’, appears somewhat neglectful. Vital, too, is the product of an engagement of this kind. The result of the discussion of ‘culture’ will produce a conceptual framework, enabling a more effective discussion of the modern movement, its characteristics, its exponents, and its products. Robert Wuthnow and his co-authors, in the conclusion to their study of the cultural analyses of Peter Berger, Mary Douglas, Michel Foucault, and Jürgen Habermas, reinforce the usefulness of such a framework. The diverse approaches developed by individual theorists each offer a unique ‘conceptual apparatus’; these are, in turn, adopted, adapted, and employed by the cultural analyst. No single approach is necessarily the most appropriate for the task being undertaken: each arguably highlights different aspects of ‘cultural reality’.¹⁵ Clifford Geertz, in his essay ‘Religion as a Cultural System’, makes a similar point. Definitions, he argues, provide useful orientation or reorientation of thought and ‘unpacking’ them is an essential practice for the cultural anthropologist; to do so can open up new analytical perspectives or a ‘novel line of

¹⁴ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp.1-6.

¹⁵ Robert Wuthnow *et al*, *Cultural Analysis: The Work of Peter L. Berger, Mary Douglas, Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1987), pp.240-2.

inquiry'.¹⁶ When theories and approaches of different critics are adapted, employed, and 'unpacked' as part of one's own 'cultural apparatus' they become effective tools. This is especially the case when one also seeks to clarify the key definitions that guide the 'line of inquiry'. Prior to considering modernism, to seek an understanding of ways of thinking about and approaching culture is, therefore, a vital task: by way of the analysis of a variety of perspectives, an apparatus appropriate to this study may be constructed.

The importance of such an approach to the present work is clear. In the second chapter of the thesis, the analytical focal point of the work, the cultural apparatus formed from the dialogue between modernism and culture will be applied. This chapter will 'map' avant-garde Florence and subject to analysis the group of intellectuals who surrounded the journal *La Voce*. The journal itself and the respective literary outputs of individual contributors were the main loci of expression of the group. As such, their activities were eminently cultural. However, the focus of their writings was invariably political and social: theirs was a reaction against their lived experience in an industrializing Italy in the early twentieth-century and a perceived shift in their subjective reality. Giovanni Papini's *Un uomo finito* will be subjected to analysis through the cultural apparatus formed. In his text, Papini depicts the interaction between the cultural, social, and subjective in powerful terms. Italy, in his presentation, is stagnant; its people are disoriented; he, himself, is 'a disagio'¹⁷ – he is lost and rootless. In light of this confluence of spheres, the cultural apparatus takes on an important role: it will allow the interaction between them to be examined in an effective and critical manner, to be 'read' rather than considered superficially.

Raymond Williams and the Complexity of Culture

Across scholarship on culture and within cultural criticism itself, the problematic nature of the term 'culture' is clear. It carries inherent semantic ambiguity and also bears the weight

¹⁶ *Interpretation*, p.90.

¹⁷ Giovanni Papini, *Un uomo finito* (Florence: La Libreria della Voce, 1913), p.34.

of a panoply of historical, social and academic applications which further complicate its usage. In part, this semantic complexity is attributable to the historical development of the term across European languages. Rather than the abstract notion that its modern usage signifies, in its earliest English usages culture was a noun of process, suggesting the tending of something- predominantly crops or animals. In the German language, Johann von Herder provoked a decisive change in the late eighteenth century by declaring the need to speak of a plurality of cultures. In Williams' terms, this is culture seen as the 'specific and variable cultures of different nations and periods [...] the specific and variable cultures of social and economic groups within a nation'.¹⁸ Prior to the paradigm shift prompted by Herder's approach, *Kultur* had been synonymous with *civilization*: on the one hand, it could refer to the process of becoming 'cultivated'; on the other, to the 'secular process of human development'. In the same period, French usage of the equivalent terms was similar: 'culture' was used more or less synonymously with 'civilization'.

Ultimately, Williams outlines three predominant categories of contemporary linguistic usage. First, in an abstract sense, signifying a 'general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development'. Secondly, to refer in either a general or a specific sense to a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general. Thirdly, and most widespread today, to describe the 'works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic endeavour' - which is to say, music, literature, painting, film, theatre, sculpture, and even history, philosophy, and academic scholarship.¹⁹

Such linguistic complexity poses obvious problems when framing a notion of culture. Yet elsewhere in his critical work Williams emphasizes that much of the difficulty surrounding the term stems from its cross-disciplinary usage. The term 'culture', he says, is regularly employed across diverse systems of thought which do not necessarily overlap in object of analysis, scope, or methodological approach. This renders problematic the selection of a 'proper' or 'scientific' definition for the term, for each will apply it differently. However,

¹⁸ *Keywords*, p.89.

¹⁹ *Keywords*, p.90.

Williams argues that the complexity goes further: the ‘complex of senses’ that this leads to ‘culture’ points to a similarly complex debate over the relationship that exists between general human development and the practices that one considers to be constitutive elements of human life, from the creation of art to theatre to poetry; put differently, it is indicative of the tensions which exist in the relationship between ‘progress’ in the social sphere and that in the realm of culture. In this sense, human activity in the social world is part of the complexity surrounding ‘culture’: the role of the intellectual and the impact of cross-disciplinary cultural production must be considered. The complexity is, therefore, a derivative of the interaction between the varied social and cultural activities of man in the world. The world-construction of human beings, the geopolitical conflicts, the institutional structures, the political ideologies, the scientific advances, and the way in which these act upon and profoundly alter the human experience: all are responsible for the complexity that surrounds ‘culture’ and the tendency to appropriate the term in a multi-disciplinary and often ambiguous manner.²⁰

With this complex socio-cultural relationship in mind, Williams expresses a highly dynamic view of the interaction between culture, society, and the individual. He considers that this interaction exists across all human societies. Of course, the products are varied; every permutation of human society is unique in shape, in purpose, in its own meanings. Accordingly, the manner in which each society expresses these constitutive elements is diverse: each develops its own institutions, arts, and forms of learning. The process which enables this is two-fold: it is both macro- and micro- in nature. In the first instance, on a macro-, institutional level, active debate creates a framework of structures, norms, and values; this is followed by a process of amendment and refinement in response to collective experience, contact with other societies and individuals, and discovery through collective learning. Society is the product. Concurrently, the process operates on a subjective level. Society acts directly upon each individual. Indeed, this is clear in the manner in which society enables the learning of shared observations, shapes, and meanings. Individuals in a

²⁰ *Keywords*, pp.87-91.

given society come to participate in a shared symbolic universe. Subsequently, this universe not only acts upon the individual but is itself shaped by the individual upon which it acts; the process is dynamic, defined by a constant state of flux. In Williams' terms, the macro- and micro- elements are the two 'aspects' of a culture: in the first part, members are trained in established meanings; in the second, they develop and offer new observations and meanings of their own. Through this dialectic, the dual nature of culture- as both traditional and creative- is revealed.²¹

Kevin Avruch: 'Orders' of Culture

Building on the ideas of the American anthropologist Franz Boas, the critic Kevin Avruch offers a similarly dualistic view of culture. He notes two 'orders' of culture: *generic* and *local*. Generic culture is a universally shared 'adaptive feature' of the human species. It points to shared attributes, to human behaviour. In Avruch's terms, it is 'foundational': it offers a basis for shared meaning, understanding, and comparative analysis. Local cultures, by contrast, are 'complex systems of meaning', inherited socially by both individuals and social groups. It is plural and diverse and, as such, it moves away from any universal notion of culture. While they are contrasting ways of understanding culture, Avruch's assertion is that, together, these two 'orders' constitute a whole; they are mutually compatible. The examination of local culture opens up the 'observable facts' of cultural pluralism. Meanwhile, a consideration of generic culture, being foundational, avoids a state of postmodern solipsism in which one rejects the potential for social and experiential learning. Avruch's notion of culture is thus expressed as a heterogeneous derivative of individual experience. It is something learned or created by individuals or, equally, something passed on socially by contemporaries or ancestors. Rather than a built-in pattern which may be explored and uncovered, culture can be said to be profoundly linked to the social and

²¹ Williams, 'Culture is Ordinary', in *The Everyday Life Reader* ed. by Ben Highmore (London: Routledge, 2002), pp.91-93.

cognitive processes by which man interacts with – and seeks to make sense of – the world.²²

Academic usage of the term has complicated matters, too. On a basic level, two usages are noted by Avruch: as a useful holdall term for persons belonging to a social group and, in a more profound manner, to signify ‘an evolved constituent of human cognition and social action’.²³ However, he looks beyond these, citing three nineteenth-century perspectives that together formed a basis from which twentieth-century notions of culture have developed. The idea of culture as an endeavour of intellectual exertion and of artistic production derives from critics such as Matthew Arnold. This is a highly aestheticized view. Indeed, it can be seen in the present-day label of ‘high culture’. Suggestions of class division and differences between social groups pervade such a view. Edward Tylor offered a similar yet more expansive view, defining culture as ‘that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society’.²⁴ The suggestion is made that culture is a universal quality which all social groups possess to a greater or lesser extent; this perspective posits a ‘development continuum’, ranging from ‘savagery’ to ‘barbarism’ to ‘civilization’. In the third instance, Franz Boas’ work opposed sharply that of men such as Tylor and Arnold. In contrast to them, Boas rejected any universal notion of culture. Instead, culture, he argued, is variable, heterogeneous, and resistant to the value judgements assigned elsewhere by his contemporaries. The Boasian view stresses a plurality of diverse cultures over universally shared attributes. To do this was to disentangle culture from ideas of race, language, and imperial rule: he expressed a moral equivalence of culture. In essence, it was a classically liberal worldview applied to the realm of anthropology.

²² Kevin Avruch, *Culture and Conflict Resolution* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1998), pp.6-10.

²³ *Culture*, pp.3-4.

²⁴ Edward Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p.1, cited in Avruch, p.6.

Subscribing to the moral equivalence of cultures rather than positing a view of a morally relative continuum, the Boasian view correlates with the notion of culture which we have developed thus far through contact with Avruch and Williams. Culture, in these terms, is a heterogeneous product of social and cognitive processes which are active on both a collective and individual level; as a complex whole which is universal only in the sense that it is present across all societies.

Clifford Geertz: Culture as an ‘Acted Document’

To this point, the argument has been made strongly in favour of the heterogeneity of culture. Culture, it is argued, is more than a built-in pattern which may be objectively perceived, uncovered, interpreted, and mapped in the manner that anthropologists such as Tylor and Arnold have argued. Rather, culture is defined by its pluralism. To state that questions of methodology, analysis, and interpretation are vital to any attempt at cultural analysis is a natural progression. Such questions are present throughout the work of Clifford Geertz, who develops a semiotic conception of culture. He suggests that, rather than approaching cultural analysis as an experimental science, one must seek to *read* culture. This derives from a perspective which holds that culture is an ‘historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge and attitudes towards life’.²⁵ In essence, therefore, culture is a humanly-constructed ecosystem; it is a meaning-giving structure through which men and women orient themselves and order their experiences. To draw on the terms of Max Weber as Geertz does, human beings are surrounded by ‘webs of significance’ that they have themselves spun. Together, these webs constitute an ‘acted document’, to be read, internalized, and subjected to analysis; it is an ‘imaginative universe’ in which acts have been rendered signs.²⁶

²⁵ *Interpretation of Cultures*, p.89.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.5.

To engage in the process of reading these symbols is to undertake an interpretative process in search of meaning. As a product of the actions of man, culture is both public and objective; equally, however, it is, by nature, subjective – it is prone to the vagaries and creativity of the human mind. As Geertz states, ‘though ideational, it does not exist in someone’s head; though unphysical, it is not an occult entity’.²⁷ That it acts on the objective world roots it in the physical, thereby giving value to cultural analysis. The role of the ethnographer, anthropologist, or analyst of cultural products is, Geertz says, a dual one: to uncover the ‘conceptual structures that inform our [...] acts, the “said” of social discourse’ and to develop a ‘system of analysis in whose terms what is generic to those structures [...] will stand out against the other determinants of human behaviour’.²⁸ The acceptance of this role is to undertake to construct a vocabulary that will allow a more profound understanding of human life. Culture, by Geertz’s reading, is a complex process of symbol-construction, linked to social discourse, and open to analysis. Put differently, therefore, the cultural analyst takes as his focus those fundamental structures which enable human communication, experience, and meaning.

Peter Berger: A Sociological Perspective

Across his work, Peter Berger has also offered a sociological perspective on culture. His approach is highly empirical. In this regard, it builds on the phenomenology of those such as Alfred Schutz and Maurice Merleau-Ponty more than the ‘transcendental’ phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and German idealism.²⁹ Such empiricism is evident in Berger’s focus on human experience in everyday life. He posits that ‘socially significant’ elements of human consciousness are shared with others and that, by extension, human experience and culture can be subjected to analysis and described objectively.³⁰ From this socio-cultural standpoint, the task that Berger sets himself is essentially one of dealing with

²⁷ Ibid., p.10.

²⁸ Ibid., pp.27-28.

²⁹ Wuthnow *et al*, *Cultural Analysis*, p.73.

³⁰ Berger, *The Homeless Mind* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1973), p.14.

human experience as it is. That is, as it is lived, collectively and individually, as opposed to the manner in which it has been theorized about.³¹

In doing this, Berger develops a notion of culture which is closely linked to his understanding of the human condition and the biological and environmental constraints imposed upon human existence and actions. At the heart of this is an ongoing dialectic between the subjectivities of men and women and the objective socio-cultural reality. To Berger, when human beings are born into the world they are biologically incomplete; they are 'unfinished'. Unlike other animals, however, humans do not have a 'prefabricated' world, a 'species-specific' environment. Humans must therefore actively construct a world for themselves. Accordingly, the human infant exists in a state of 'plasticity' and 'world openness'. This is essential to the process of 'becoming man', since such a process takes place through the interaction with an 'extra-organismic environment', which consists of the physical and human world. This, says Berger, leads to a complex, perpetual 'balancing act' between the biological need for completion and the non-biological means to which humans can achieve this: man alone can create his environment, complete himself, and realize his life. The objective environment, produced through man's world-building actions, is culture. It is the 'totality of man's product'.³²

For Berger, as we have seen, the main purpose of culture is to enable the structures that man's biological condition demand. At the heart of this process of world construction is a dialectic of socialization which places man, his condition, and his products in constant interaction. By way of this, man creates and reinforces the conditions – both biological and social – which are necessary for human life; it is a *nomos*-creating process or, in Berger's

³¹ Wuthnow *et al*, p.73.

³² *The Sacred Canopy*, pp.3-28.

See also, Peter L. Berger & Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, (London: Penguin Books, 1966), in which the authors express and develop an insight into the dialectic between social reality and individual existence. In keeping with Berger's work in *The Sacred Canopy* the argument is made that human reality is to be understood as socially constructed. Further, it is argued that the major object of sociological inquiry should be 'society as part of a human world, made by men, inhabited by men, and, in turn, making men, in an ongoing historical process' (p.211).

terms, the creation and maintenance of a 'Sacred Canopy' which offers both existential affirmation and the biological completion required by human beings. There are three stages to the process: *externalization* arises in response to the biological underdevelopment of human beings; it is the 'outpouring of individuals' physical and mental being into the world' to enable the 'completion' of man. Once externalized, this product - material or non-material - stands outside the subjectivity of the individual, thereby attaining the character of objective reality. This effect of this stage of *objectivation* is dual. Firstly, it projects culture as 'there'; that is, as an external reality, as a collection of things. Simultaneously, culture is rendered objective in the sense that it may be experienced and perceived 'in company'. Man thus comes to confront the world as a reality which is collectively produced and maintained. Formulated this way, the coercive power held by society is clear: it has the capacity to direct human behaviour by assigning roles and identities that the individual then seeks to validate through participation in the social structures of institutions, customs, and social norms. This validation and participation in human society is *internalization*. The result is that the objectivated world is 'reabsorbed into consciousness'. Indeed, the process is coercive: the structures of the world come to act upon and actively 'determine the subjective structures of consciousness itself. The individual gains a comprehension of the objective socio-cultural world and, moreover, is able to identify with and be shaped by it.³³

It is clear, then, that Berger's view of culture consists of a profound link between the construction of society, the human condition, and human activities. By way of his phenomenological method, one can say that the 'cultural apparatus' one can develop from his work depends greatly on the assertion that culture is both subjective and objective. The argument is clear: culture is a product of humans yet also an external 'facticity' which acts coercively upon our species; it is an essential element of our biological formation and physical existence; and, by allowing the world to be inscribed with meaning, it is a fundamental element of psychological and existential well-being. When viewed in this

³³ Berger outlines the dialectic of *socialization* in *The Sacred Canopy*, 1967. See especially the chapter 'Religion and World Construction', pp.3-27.

manner, to undertake a study of culture is, in reality, to ask what it is to be human, to consider how our species creates its environment, and to analyse the way in which we live within it and interact with one another.

Geertz and Berger: A Useful Dialogue

Without a doubt, this is highly congruent with Geertz's notion of 'webs of significance' spun by human beings to create an ecosystem of transmitted meanings, requiring an interpretative 'reading' process in order to attain full understanding. It is equally congruent with Geertz's rejection of a hermetical approach. The approach rejected by Geertz and Berger understands culture as a purely symbolic system. This necessitates 'isolating the elements [of a culture], specifying the internal relationships among those elements, and then characterizing the whole system in some general way'.³⁴ This approach, in contrast to that demanded by Berger and Geertz in their respective work, is to obscure the proper object of cultural analysis: human life as lived, cultural products as created and perceived. This approach attempts further to impose formal orders for cultural analysis where none truly exist. That is to say, it seeks a science where there is not one to be found. The 'reading process' which one can draw from the writings and methods of Berger and Geertz contrasts sharply with one that isolates in this manner. They examine the object of analysis directly and, rather than seeking to impose order, attempt instead to elicit meaning and understanding through an analysis of the human world and activities which one can, as has been shown, define as 'culture'.

The analysis undertaken in the later chapter of the present study proceeds from this view. It has sought in the first instance to outline the ways in which 'culture' has been spoken about and to attain a notion that is useful for this study of the Florentine avant-garde. This notion of culture emphasizes its heterogeneous nature and rejects the idea that culture is a universal continuum that may be linked to social 'progress'. Furthermore, culture is

³⁴ Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, p.17.

considered to be a product of human action, which in turn acts upon the species on both an individual and collective level. From this perspective, it is both subjective and objective in nature. Culture is everywhere, shaping human institutions, cultural practices, and social norms; in addition, it consists of those objects that one may instinctively label 'culture', from literature, to art, to architecture, to language. Together, these elements are - to adopt Geertz's terms once more - 'webs of significance' that surround us. To seek an understanding of any cultural product in relation to the socio-political context is, therefore, to engage with that which is fundamental to human life: our modes of communication, of experience, of self-expression; it is to engage, too, in the search for existential meaning on both a collective and individual level. This is an interpretative process which deals with the 'said' of human discourse, with that which is open to 'reading'.

The Reading Process

Our reading process seeks to uncover meaning and thereby elucidate a particular socio-political context: early twentieth-century Italy. Across Europe at this time, in its different permutations - social, cultural, and political - modernism was arguably the dominant element of both social and cultural discourse.³⁵ In Italy in the same period, the Florentine avant-garde engaged with those political discourses that dominated political thought, action, and rhetoric, from socialism to radical syndicalism, nationalism to anti-clerical Catholicism. Alongside their assessments of these ideological standpoints, the avant-garde pursued a cultural revolt: it was through this that their own cultural politics was developed and propagated. In light of the notion of culture developed, the next part of this thesis will open up a dialogue between modernism and culture. By following this with a close analysis of the cultural politics of the avant-garde group surrounding the journal, *La Voce*, the approach of the thesis will be wholly in keeping with the approach outlined by Geertz and

³⁵ Regarding 'cultural modernism', see especially, *Modernism* ed. by Bradbury and McFarlane. Regarding the notion of 'political modernism', see Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), in which Griffin argues persuasively that both Italian Fascism and Nazism can be viewed as forms of political modernism, and that the modernist sensibility can therefore be said to have had a profound political impact. Of particular interest, too, is Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2008).

Berger: it will avoid hermeticism, focussing on those ideas, individuals, and forms of expression that formed the social world during the period. The journal's contributors produced both literary and journalistic writing that took impetus from social, economic, and political issues. Their engagement with the world was not limited to a single sphere. It is essential, therefore, that the analysis is undertaken in the critical manner advocated so forcefully by Geertz and Berger.

Ultimately, rather than imposing order or totalizing narratives, the analysis will attempt to 'read' and 'map' the social, cultural, and political discourses of early-twentieth century Italy, thereby offering the possibility of a more profound understanding of the period in question and, in particular, of the Florentine avant-garde and its relationship to the wider context of the period.

(ii.) Modernism

Problems of Definition

Modernism, like culture, suffers from similar difficulties of categorisation and definition. It is, suggests Peter Gay, 'easier to exemplify than to define'.³⁶ This problem persists, too, in spite of – or, perhaps, because of – a remarkable output of critical work on the subject. The scale of the critical output is of little surprise. As Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane emphasize in the preface to the 1991 edition of their seminal work on the phenomenon, modernism is now seen as the dominant spirit in the art and literature of the early twentieth century.³⁷ The forces of modernity – acting on the realms of science, technology, philosophy and politics – reshaped the everyday experience of human life; the modern movement, inciting fundamental changes in the arts, permanently transformed both the human consciousness and the artistic form. And its influence and power persist into the present age, casting a shadow over both literary theory and artistic production. It remains intricately and inextricably woven into the fabric of contemporary form, thought and consciousness. It is, Bradbury and McFarlane argue, the 'shaping art behind the art of our own times', a 'usable past' which allows the artist of today to look both forwards and backwards. Being subject to continued revision, reassessment and reinterpretation, it is a *living* past.

Characteristics and Protagonists of the Modern Movement

Certainly, the term is a powerful one. Yet it is unstable. Finding a clear date for modernism is difficult; placing it geographically is equally challenging, due in part to its international character; and semantically, too, modernism confounds. The critic Lionel Trilling, in an essay in 1966, highlighted the fluidity of the concept, stating that it can 'swing around in

³⁶ Peter Gay, *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy. From Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond* (London: Random House, 2007), p.1.

³⁷ *Modernism*, p.11. My understanding of modernism draws greatly on the work of Bradbury and McFarlane. The present discussion of their view of modernism derives from their preface to the guide (pp.11-16) and the chapter they contributed together, 'The Name and Nature of Modernism', pp.19-55.

meaning until it is facing in the opposite direction'.³⁸ As has been stated, this study does not seek to construct a totalizing narrative for modernism, nor simply to present those writers, artists, poets, and dramatists who have been linked by the term and thereby seek points of convergence: the analytical value of such a task is limited. Nonetheless, a brief consideration of the forms of innovation associated with the modern movement points to how the fluidity of which Lionel Trilling speaks has arisen. Useful, too, in this regard is to link those innovations with certain protagonists.

In the novel, realist and objective representation were subjected to examination: the omniscience of a third-person narrator was rejected; as was the notion of the linear experience of time. Modernist fiction acknowledged the gap between the external world and the manner in which it is perceived. James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Marcel Proust: in their collective interest in the exploration of psychological landscapes rather than the physical world the modernist rejection of the objective is clear. In poetry, form was challenged as poets sought new methods that could achieve coherence in the modern world. In *The Waste Land*, for instance, T.S. Eliot rejected the linearity of experience and narrative structuring of poetry, imposing instead a spatial method of ordering. Similarly, W.B. Yeats innovated with metre and form as the content of his poems shifted; the stylistic and thematic elements of his art were inseparable.³⁹ In the drama of writers such as Pirandello, Strindberg, and, later, Beckett, a similar desire to reject convention is present. Artists, notably those such as Braque, Picasso, Matisse, Kandinsky, and others associated with the Expressionist and Cubist movements, appeared to move beyond reality altogether, such was the dissatisfaction that they felt with regard to inherited modes of artistic production. In their abstraction, spiritualism, and fascination with the primitive, is a powerful sense of a search for a reality other to that of Western modernity. In music, too, composers such as Bartok and Rimsky-Korsakov, imbuing their compositions with Eastern motifs, expressed a longing for an 'other'. Stravinsky, meanwhile, shocked in the atonality, dissonance, and

³⁸ Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning* (London: Penguin, 1967), p.29.

³⁹ Stan Smith, *W.B. Yeats: A Critical Introduction* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990), pp.2-3, p.184.

regressive rhythms of his work.⁴⁰ By transforming nursery rhymes into symphonic phrases-imbued, moreover, with a sense of the funereal- Mahler challenged the limits of musical interchange, and sought to induce the simultaneous feeling of familiarity and discomfort - a sentiment Freud has described as the 'Uncanny' (*Das Unheimliche*).⁴¹

Even the presentation of such a limited cross-section of cultural practices and innovators emphasizes Trilling's remarks. Certainly, to seek coherence across art forms would be fruitless. 'Experimentation' and 'revolt' are terms which one could apply regularly; yet the diversity is such that they signify little. Baudelaire's description of modernity ring out: 'the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is the one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immutable.'⁴² As David Harvey has suggested, armed with the knowledge that such a tension pervades modern existence, the diversity of modernist expression is to be accepted.⁴³ By extension the accompanying complications of the term 'modernism' must be accepted too.

The Pluralist Nature of Modernism: Bradbury & McFarlane's 'Janus-headed' Entity

Bradbury and McFarlane point to three different usages of the term 'modernism'. One can either use the term historically, to signify a 'distinct stylistic phase'; or to refer to a 'modern state of mind and view of man'; or to express the historicist feeling that one is living in 'totally novel times', in a period of great significance which has fostered a unique consciousness.

For Bradbury and McFarlane, modernism is essentially a compound of these three elements. In its pluralism, it is the 'main stream' of our time. Yet it is not a single, unified style. Following Irving Howe, they suggest that this is, in fact, a defining quality. This view

⁴⁰ Rajeev S. Patke, *Modernist Literature and Postcolonial Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p.21-22, pp.36-37.

⁴¹ In the third movement of the Symphony No. 1 in D Minor, Mahler reworked '*Frere Jacques*'. For Freud's theory of the 'Uncanny' which he originally elaborated in an essay in 1919, see Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin Books, 2003). Freud expresses the way in which objects have the ability to induce simultaneously a feeling of familiarity and unfamiliarity; to attract and repel. This cognitive dissonance provokes a crisis in the subject who, unable to rationalize the feelings, rejects the object.

⁴² Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (London: Phaidon, 1964), p.13.

⁴³ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.10.

is in keeping with the development of recent modernist scholarship, which has looked beyond formalist approaches and focussed instead on contextual and historical methods of understanding the innovations and achievements of the major protagonists associated with the movement.⁴⁴ The emphasis in scholarship - as here - is that the manifestations of the modernists were varied and, though techniques were shared- a focus on the subjective or a tendency towards abstraction, for example- these were not defining features of the modern movement: instead, the focus ought to be on shared sensibility and reaction to socio-historical context.

Shared Assumptions

Nonetheless, one can follow Bradbury and McFarlane in identifying a number of shared assumptions which allow a centre to be discerned. One can look firstly to a broad aestheticism. Nietzsche demanded that art abandons reality: 'No artist tolerates reality', he stated.⁴⁵ From this, the modernist notion of non-representationalism and aesthetic self-awareness - a preference for style, technique, and form as a means to gaining a greater understanding of human life - gains clarity. The role and position of the artist in society was re-thought in line with a shift in human consciousness towards the poetic and the artistic. Art could, Bradbury and McFarlane suggest, 'now fulfil itself'; aestheticism offered the means to transcend history and reality. An avant-garde view of the artist can be discerned here. When viewed in relation to a crisis of culture in which myth and structure lost their organising power for both historical and artistic reasons, a relationship of crisis between art, the artist and history is revealed. In McFarlane and Bradbury's reading, this symbolist aesthetic, avant-garde view of the artist, and notion of crisis constitute the loose, coalescing

⁴⁴ Notable examples of academic work that takes such an approach include Eksteins, *The Rites of Spring*; Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1982); Frederic Jameson, *The Modernist Papers* (London: Verso, 2007).

⁴⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Complete Works*, ed. by Oscar Levy, 18 vols (London, 1909-15), vol. 15, *The Will to Power*, trans. by Anthony M. Ludovici, p. 74.

centre of modernism. It is, they say, less a style than a search of style: a compound of the aesthetic and the social.

Appropriately one can trace its predominant characteristics through overlapping yet distinct movements and periods. The notion of a special, social imperative is seen in Nietzsche. The challenge to naturalism and realism was present in artistic circles even as early as Britain of the 1870s. The view of modernism as a form of response to the urban world dominates Baudelaire's existential anxieties in *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857) and *Peintre de la vie moderne* (1863). The rejection of conventional forms can be traced back to Donne and Sterne; likewise, the sense of anguish and the notion of adversary culture.⁴⁶ In the early twentieth-century, this thesis argues, it can be seen in Italy in the literary output of the Florentin *vociano* group, whose aesthetics was defined most notably by a focus on the subjective world and an engagement with the social and political context of an Italian liberal democracy that they perceived to be politically ineffective and culturally stagnant. In this sense, therefore, it was entirely the product of the period in which it was formed: Bradbury and McFarlane draw on August Strindberg to highlight the transitory nature of late nineteenth-century existence, which they see as fundamental to the compound of modernism. His characters, Strindberg stated in 1888, were 'living in an age of transition [...] split and vacillating conglomerations of past and present'.⁴⁷ It is this sense of continuity and discontinuity which pervades the modern, combined with a fascination with the evolving, shifting nature of consciousness- whether aesthetic, psychological or historical – and a sense of history altered under the strains of modernity. With this notion of flux, modernism can be the powerful, unpredictable, unstable amalgam that Bradbury and McFarlane describe as:

[a compound] of the futuristic and the nihilistic, the revolutionary and the conservative, the naturalistic and the symbolistic, the romantic and the classical. It was a celebration of a technological age and a condemnation of it; an excited acceptance of the belief that the old regimes of culture were over, and a deep despairing in the face of that fear; a mixture of convictions that the new forms were escapes from

⁴⁶ *Modernism*, p.30.

⁴⁷ Strindberg's words derive from the preface to his play 'Miss Julie'.

historicism and the pressures of the time with convictions that they were precisely the living expressions of these things.⁴⁸

It is from this sense of a ‘Janus-headed’ compound and the cultural relativism of different epochs that one can point to the complexities that, according to McFarlane and Bradbury, define modernism. First is the notion of an age in transition, along with a consonance between fragmentation and discontinuity of the self under the effects of these historical pressures. Second, the ‘explosive fusion’ that this engenders, pervasive in events, characters, and discoveries and products of the modern age: the desire to create paradoxes by objectifying that which is subjective, rejecting the familiar, and seeking order where there is chaos. Breeding uncertainty, this destroyed categories of thought and traditional links; it demanded that the world be re-patterned and that new forms of unity be found. Third, then, is a spatial ordering of history and human life, creating meaning through symbols that interact with layers of the human consciousness rather than operating in a linear sequence- a new form of unity. Fourth, and building on this ordering method, is a particular notion of time, which relates to the sense of a moment of transition into the new. Apocalyptic in nature, it is the sense of a time imbued with an unidentifiable yet profound significance. Bradbury and McFarlane point to the Great War itself as the particular moment of transition into this new, qualitatively different epoch. Yet in arguing that such a moment existed, they draw, too, on Frank Kermode’s notion of end-time, which he expresses as the millenarian sense of living on the cusp of apocalypse, when myths have failed to provide order. Kermode argues that, across European society, the *fin-de-siècle* period provoked a questioning of time and human existence, bringing into focus the cyclical nature of history, of revolution, and a sense of crisis.⁴⁹ For Bradbury and McFarlane this confluence of crisis and questioning ushered in both a questioning of form and sense of significant time. As such, each is fundamental to understanding modernism, attempting to distil its essential elements, and understanding the compound and its complexities.

⁴⁸ *Modernism*, p.46.

⁴⁹ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Modernism as a Political Entity

For the historian Roger Griffin, these complexities are not mere abstractions. Rather, they are powerful formative structures, which have exerted political, social, and cultural influence over European history. Griffin has written extensively on Fascist ideology, its origins, its political manifestations, and its national permutations. Of greatest interest to this study is the thesis he elaborates in *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler*. In Griffin's view, contrary to the arguments made by much scholarship surrounding Fascism, the ideology cannot be considered to be anti-modern. On the contrary, it is a wholly modern phenomenon: Fascism sought to inaugurate a new modernity, to create a new type of society; it was future-oriented. From this perspective, the regimes of Mussolini and Hitler were profoundly linked to the modernizing processes that had taken place; the regimes were, in essence, attempts to master modernity by building upon those elements that the regimes perceived to be healthy: from the German *Volk* to the Italian nation-state. Griffin's argument is clear and sustained: Fascism must be viewed as a political form of modernism, which is itself a cultural, social, and political entity born of a Western modernity defined by a subjective and objective structural crisis. Behind modernism, therefore, Griffin sees a search for transcendence and regeneration above the experiential uncertainty of the modern world. Yet it is not limited to a personal quest for fleeting moments of enlightenment or epiphany. The search for transcendence, he argues, was also rooted in collective action and political endeavour: in the construction and maintenance of ideologies which would provide a spiritual basis for the people by seeking to offer a new modernity.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). My discussion of Griffin derives mainly from the first section, 'The Sense of a Beginning in Modernism', pp.15-186.

Somigli and Moroni: a ‘Network of Cultural Responses’

That the separation between art and life was challenged by what Griffin calls ‘political modernism’ is a powerful corollary to his conception of modernism and his reading of the development of the Fascist regimes of Mussolini and Hitler. In introducing the volume *Italian Modernism: Italian Culture between Decadentism and Avant Garde*, Luca Somigli and Mario Moroni draw on Bradbury and McFarlane’s notion that a pluralistic reading of modernism is most appropriate and useful for critical application.⁵¹ The nature of the volume itself is indicative of characteristics of modernism that have already been highlighted in the present work. Firstly, it draws together an array of contributors, movements, and styles that can be subsumed under the blanket term of ‘modernism’. In the Italian context, for instance, one can cite movements as varied as D’Annunzian Decadence, the Milanese Futurists, the *scuola metafisica* of Giorgio de Chirico, and autobiographical writings of the Florentine avant-garde, and the theatre of Luigi Pirandello. Secondly, the problem of placing modernism in a precise temporal period.

For their part, Somigli and Moroni are aware of this. They object strongly to a monolithic notion of the movement, opting instead to adopt the term as ‘an “open” or “weak” epistemological category’. Modernism, they argue, ought to be considered as a ‘network of cultural responses’, reflecting the impact of the institutions of modernity and its relationship to society and human activities. Expressed in such terms, modernism is placed squarely within the dialectic of *socialization* of Peter Berger that was expressed in the first part of this thesis. The dialogue between the social and cultural worlds is emphasized, lending greater hermeneutic power to the term. It provides access to the ‘constellation of cultural phenomena’ which exemplify the experience of modernity.

Put differently, modernism not only allows an understanding of the cultural responses to a modernity that provoked a cultural crisis. It also permits a vast range of experiences and

⁵¹ *Italian Modernism: Italian Culture between Decadentism and Avant-Garde*, ed. by Luca Somigli and Mario Moroni (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015) pp.8-9

relations to be brought into contact and for new links to be created between them; it opens up a far broader understanding of the social, economic, and political context. For Somigli and Moroni, modernism offers this insight by highlighting - in their terms, thematising – the issues which are fundamental to the development of a holistic understanding of a cultural period. They go beyond the objective cultural output of the time. One can suggest that it casts a light on the relationship between the artist and the institutions of culture; the relationship between the artist and tradition; the nature and impact of modernity, from technology that altered the production and circulation of art and literature to technology which changed the day-to-day experience of life, such as travel, communication and consumer choice; the role of the metaphysical, the occult and the sacred; and the emergence of counter discourses of marginalized groups which called into question any notion of a single unified culture.

From the definition that Somigli and Moroni develop, modernism can therefore be said to allow the construction of a cultural-historical framework, capable of informing a wider understanding of a specific time period. Modernism is not merely a movement or a ‘mode’. Being read as a symptom of modernity and applied as a ‘weak’ category, its nature is malleable, shifting according to one’s needs: it is not only the object of investigation but a useful investigative tool in its own right. It opens up a society at a particular point in time, its ordering principles, its self-conception, and the relationships that existed within it.

The Maelstrom of Modernity: Marshall Berman’s Marxist Conception of Modernism

Present in all the interpretations of modernism examined so far is a powerful sense of paradox and contradiction. Bradbury and McFarlane suggest that this was conscious on the part of the protagonists of the movement. The modern tradition, they say, ‘was, and knew it was, a paradox’.⁵² Roger Griffin describes a quest for meaning which was at once personal and collective, cultural and political. As will be shown, Peter Faulkner, in positing that the

⁵² *Modernism*, p.16.

modern movement rendered art and the artist as both subject and object of modernity, concurs implicitly.

Marshall Berman certainly agrees. *All That is Solid Melts into Air* is a searing account of the destructive capacity of modernity, the role of capital - both social and fiscal - and class in shaping both the physical and psychological spaces of the modern world, and the post-war neglect of public space by artists, thinkers, and politicians. Its focus is the panoply of problems created by a world in flux.⁵³ To be modern, he argues, is to be consumed by paradox and contradiction; it is to hold simultaneously apparently opposing positions; to be at once revolutionary and conservative. To be 'fully modern', he says strikingly, could even be anti-modern. In his reading twentieth-century modernism conceives of modernity as a closed monolith, which frustrates man's attempts to find purchase and meaning in life; yet the modern man persistently seeks to react to this situation, whether through action, acceptance, or withdrawal. One option for the modern individual, Berman argues, is to seek refuge in the 'pure, self-referential art object' and to confront the 'world of objects without going through any of the forms of History or social life.' Another: the adoption of a form of unending revolution against the totality of modern existence. Alternatively, he says, one considers the world to be imbued with opportunity, a world from which one ought not to seek to withdraw but should, on the contrary, be embraced: the individual who adopts such an approach, exposes him or herself to the variety and richness of 'things, materials and ideas brought forth by the modern world'. The modern mind-set, suggests Berman, is plural; as such, it is contradictory.

But why is this the case? How to explain such contrasting approaches in response to a single external context? For Berman the plurality of modernist impulses derives from the nature of modernity: unity and disunity are forced to co-exist. Modernity, in his Marxist reading, is both a highly disruptive force and a mode of being; it is the product of world-historical processes. The product of these processes is a state of 'perpetual-becoming'. Moreover, it

⁵³ Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1982), pp.15-37. My discussion of Berman's text derives mainly from his fascinating introduction.

provokes a shift in the relation between time and space, between the self and others. Discoveries in the physical sciences; the industrialization of production; massive demographic changes; rapid urban growth; the development and pervasiveness of systems of mass communication; the rise of nation states; mass social movements of people and peoples; and the fluctuating, expanding, capitalist world market: together they have formed a 'maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish'. The true modernist, faced with this context, seeks unity in the disunity and locates some degree of rootedness and belonging in the surrounding maelstrom; the maelstrom which the modernist confronts is productive rather than destructive. Modernism, therefore, is the attempt to create out of the maelstrom in the manner of Eliot, Yeats, Stravinsky, Woolf, Braque, in their respective cultural fields; or, in socio-political terms, Mussolini and Hitler. In the example of Giovanni Papini such struggles to create from the destabilising and de-racinating effects are present, too, as the close study undertaken in the later chapter of his autobiographical work, *Un uomo finito* (1912), will show. Written in a two-year period between 1910 and 1912, the text relates the formative experiences of the writer, in particular those pertaining to his intellectual development. The account is dominated by Papini's desire for personal conquest and attainment, his struggles against the objective world, and withdrawal into the subjective. As with Woolf, Braque, Eliot or others, his internal turmoil produced a cultural output which, in one manner or another, seeks unity through a re-patterning of reality, in a rejection of normal aesthetic practice. Modernism, says Berman, is 'the attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it.'⁵⁴ In the cultural figures of the period and their respective work, such endeavours are recurrent and powerful.

The View of the Literary Critic: Peter Faulkner

⁵⁴*All that is Solid*, p.5.

Peter Faulkner writes from a different perspective. He approaches modernism as a traditional literary critic, rather than the cultural sociology with which this study has engaged elsewhere. Nonetheless, the notion of modernism which he elaborates is not far removed from that which derives from Berman's trenchant and moving account of the experience of modernity. In Faulkner's view, modernism is a highly mobile term. Its semantic ambiguity allows it to be used effectively not only in relation to literature but also to art. It breaks down the boundaries between the artistic spheres, enabling a broader discussion and wider apprehension of the context of production. Modernism in his view - like that of Berman, Griffin, and others - is not merely a cultural phenomenon; it is at the heart of - and a product of - the historical processes of the period.

Fundamental to Faulkner's argument, however, is the idea that this relation to the wider context can be taken further. Modernist art, he says, is characterised by its own awareness of the world around it. The period of 1910-30, which Faulkner offers as a period of particular 'intelligible unity' for modernism, was, he says, one of fragmentation in every sphere of life. Politically, capital was being challenged by the forces of labour. Socially, dominated groups, such as women and the poverty-stricken, were questioning their position in society and its ingrained values. On a psychological level, Freud and Jung were probing the human mind and revealing it to be fractured, complex, and disturbing. Collectively, changes of this kind provoked a relativism and subjectivity. This pervaded everyday life in the collective rejection of previously unquestioned assumptions, from Christianity to Enlightenment values - absolutes which had previously maintained the respective unity of the social and subjective worlds of humankind.

This, says Faulkner, was a highly disruptive situation. That it was recognized as such by the modernist writers informs his criticism of their writing. Virginia Woolf's engagement with the human psyche has already been stated. Indeed, she was highly aware of a collective and subjective shift in sensibility. In 1910, she would state some time later, 'all human relations [...] shifted' and a simultaneous 'change in religion, conduct, politics and literature' was

seen.⁵⁵ The protagonists of the movement confronted a reality suddenly rendered more complex. As such, they sought an appropriately complex art in response. New methods of organization were needed in order to achieve coherence as realism and other nineteenth-century methods were deemed inadequate. Faulkner suggests this was the desire for a ‘new language of forms’: a spatial, rather than narrative, structure, like that of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* or Proust’s novels; the use of myth, from the cycle of life and death to those more literary in nature as in Joyce’s *Ulysses*; and an assertion of the dual status of a literary or artistic work, being an imaginative act in which subjective and objective reality are profoundly bound rather than considered to be separate. Culture and, as a cultural product, modernism can, then, be said to be more than a reflection of or window onto the wider historical processes as Somigli and Moroni suggest. Possessing an acute awareness of the complexity of the context, it takes on a more active function: experimentation in the arts offered the means to react to and understand the effects of modernity and the changed human sensibility. The role of literary creation, suggests Faulkner, was no longer to examine human action. Instead, it sought to examine the human sensibility and achieve coherence in a world of profound complexity.

A Dualistic Phenomenon of the Mind

James McFarlane, in his essay exploring the modern mind and intellectual backdrop of the modernist phenomenon, highlights the semantic instability of the very notion of the ‘modern’.⁵⁶ He points to the merging of distinct *Weltanschauungen* - the mechanistic and the intuitive - to form a single, seemingly contradictory whole. Indeed this dualistic conception of the modern is particularly interesting in large part informing his wider view of the modernist mode: that it is defined not by fragmentation and disintegration which disrupted the normal structure of life but by the exertion of a centripetal force by the centre, leading to a ‘superintegration’ of all things and the consequent threatening of the

⁵⁵ Woolf’s remarks are made in her novel, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* (London: Hogarth Press, 1924), p.4.

⁵⁶ James McFarlane, ‘The Mind of Modernism’, in: *Modernism*, ed. by Bradbury and McFarlane, pp.71-94.

conventional order. And, further, that this change was linked to a fundamental shift in conceptual categories as new patterns of existence and human experience developed and an understanding of them was sought. A consequence of this– which he deems to have been inevitable in the face of such profound change – was the commencement of an entirely new ‘civilizational phase’.⁵⁷

For McFarlane, the modern movement in the arts, and the experience of modernity and modernization was thus profoundly transformative. The dimensions and tempo of life were altered in this new phase, most notably from the 1890s onwards. A parallel altering of sensibility – of the collective consciousness – was also evident, as is most notably seen in the nature and influence of ideas promulgated by Nietzsche. Technological change was at its heart: developments in communication had the effect of ‘shrinking’ distances; industrialisation and urban living created new rhythms which imposed themselves across society; the movement of individuals around the European continent broke down borders, producing chance meetings, and enabled cultural exchange. The human spirit was subject to ‘oscillations’ and the development of a sensibility characterised by a revolutionary impulse. It was an impatience, a frustration, a drive which engendered anti-movements across the political spectrum. In intellectual circles, McFarlane argues, the impulse was expressed by a commitment to ideology, in the form of declarations and manifestos. By way of these social actions in response to the changes which were being observed in both the objective and subjective worlds; readjustment and revaluation was necessary. In Nietzsche’s writing, for example, this can be observed in his questioning of social norms and assault on the foundational ideas of western nineteenth-century society, most strikingly those of Christian theology. His declaration in favour of a ‘revaluation of all values’ and prediction of a convulsed and profoundly altered world were, in McFarlane’s reading, the prime evocation of the modern mind-set: they signified the way in which the dimensions of human existence, both internal and external, were being altered. Nietzsche’s vision was

⁵⁷ ‘The Mind of Modernism’, pp.91-3.

apocalyptic, depicting human history at a moment of seismic shift, at a point of destiny, at an end point.

By McFarlane's reading this was a state of flux and contradiction. It was the product of a profoundly destabilizing process. A comprehensive shift in psyche and culture was visible. Acknowledgement of this shift leads us back to the dualistic nature of the modern sentiment which McFarlane emphasizes and which, having drawn on Berman and Faulkner, forms the basis of our notion of modernism, too. One can look, he argues, to the relationship between the subject and the object and the manner in which the barriers between them were broken down; to the changes in science as scientists were forced to accept laws which defied common logic, such as Einstein's General Theory of Relativity; to Freud's concept of 'ambivalence', in which ideas of love and hate were fused; or to the notion of dream as a mode of communication which was capable, it was argued, of revealing the subtleties, complexities and supraliminal elements of the human mind in spite of an apparent lack of coherence or congruence. Reality and unreality were held in unity. On an experiential level this was a feeling of a dual existence:

[a] feeling that we live on two different levels, in two different spheres, but also that these regions of being penetrate one another so thoroughly that one can neither be subordinated to nor set against the other as its antithesis [and] the double meaning and the duplicity of existence, the snare and the seduction for the human understanding... lie hidden in every single phenomenon of reality.⁵⁸

This feeling of pervasive dualism, he goes on to add, had never before been experienced so powerfully. It is from this perspective that one can understand McFarlane's notion of a centripetal force being exerted over the entire world, re-working the conventional order through integration rather than disintegration, instigating a crisis of culture and inaugurating a new civilizational phase: the modern world was subject to new forces – particularly of a technological nature – which provoked a destabilizing process of which a

⁵⁸ 'The Mind of Modernism', p.86

wholly new, dualistic human experience was the product and from which a re-patterned and re-organised world emerged.

Returning to the Socio-Political Context

To this point, this study has highlighted the complexity surrounding the term ‘modernism’; the protagonists associated with the movement; the changes in the qualitative experience of human existence that took place, which one can attribute to the processes of modernity; and the cultural innovations which, it has been argued, can be linked to a desire to express more accurately the external reality against which many of the protagonists were reacting and, more pertinently still, the inner turmoil felt by many members of the European avant-garde. In moving towards the end of this chapter, the unique nature of the socio-cultural context of the early twentieth-century will be restated. This is done with the aim of presenting the macro-view of the period in which the Florentine avant-garde were active; the later chapter, which addresses the Florentines directly, will offer the micro-perspective. The aesthetic practices propagated by the *vociano* group, examined through Papini’s autobiographical work, will then be fully contextualised. This will be the application of the ‘cultural apparatus’ that was developed across this first chapter.

Peter Gay offers a view of modernism which brings the socio-political context back into focus. For Gay, the *fin-de-siècle* period saw the flourishing of the modernist movement. Modernism, he argues, could only establish itself as a cultural force when the economic, political, and cultural conditions aligned and its ideas could be supported. By offering a climate in which a departure from received artistic practices was accepted, new notions of beauty were developed, and new forms of expression were formed, the period was pivotal to the development of this revolution. It found expression, Gay argues, in the collective conviction that innovation was essential: for the avant-gardes of Europe, the ‘untried’ was preferable to tradition. That is, the cultural revolt was the terminus of a path of ‘rebellious non-conformity’, initiated by the challenges initiated against the bourgeois capitalist world-

in the arts, by the Romantics; in the economic sphere, by Marx and Engels; in political terms, by the French Revolution of 1789. As this study has shown, new forms of spatial ordering were sought by poets; novelists and playwrights mined the subconscious in their respective ways and challenged traditional practices; painters and composers, too, rather than looking to the external world of Western modernity for subjects of inspiration, looked self-questioningly inwards or beyond Europe, to an alternative, 'other' modernity.

The scope of Gay's study is vast. He examines cultural products and the modes of production from the middle of the nineteenth century to the turn of the millennium. His aim is to account for all the permutations of modernism, to place them within context, and ultimately to express a linear dialogue. The account stretches from the Romantics to the architecture of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. For Gay, however, Baudelaire offers the greatest insight into the modern psyche and the modernist revolution. The poet is depicted as a creative and solitary individual. The formal clarity, licentious subject matter, and existential despair of his work, most notably *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), reinforces this further. For Gay this is the modernist individual and the modernist aesthetic: the challenging of conventional values and a commitment to self-scrutiny by an individual troubled by his sense of self and place in the world. Baudelaire's modernism was, of course, that of the *flâneur*, of the cities, of self-liberation. In Baudelaire's own words, an art of 'the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent'. Even his self-presentation - bared fully to the public - was revolutionary. By Gay's reading, in this de-nuding of the self, he was, and is, wholly modern.

As this work will show in the latter chapters, even some fifty years later, self-presentation and internal examination, such as that undertaken by Baudelaire, was radical. This thesis argues that it is, in part, due to similar literary innovation that the *vocianti* may be considered through the prism of modernism that this chapter has constructed. Literary innovation and internal struggles were fundamental to the aesthetics developed by the Florentine group in the early twentieth-century. In *Un uomo finito* Giovanni Papini shaped his text around subjective explorations. His internal narrative, desires, fears, and perceived

failings dominate the work. Other members of the group show that this was a common feature rather than one that defines Papini's individual output. Giovanni Boine and Scipio Slataper, in works such as *Frammenti* and *Il mio Carso* respectively, undertook powerful examinations of the internal spaces of man. The collective work of the group consistently problematized the self and its relationship with the objective world. This was the sole path, the *vocianti* considered, to the spiritual, artistic, and, ultimately, political vitality of the Italian people and the Italian nation. In light of this, the dialogue that can be drawn between Gay's conception of Baudelaire and the Florentines is highly useful.

A Critique of Peter Gay's Conception of Modernism

Overall, Gay's evocation of place, context, and individuals is arresting. His portrait of Baudelaire is convincing and highly relevant to the dialogue with the *vocianti* that this thesis constructs. However, Modris Eksteins offers a useful critique of Gay's conception of modernism which also correlates with the argument the present work puts forward. For Eksteins, Gay's account is highly selective in its depiction of the period. Most notably, Eksteins challenges his depiction of the forces which drove the startling creativity of the modernists. Gay argues that the 'fundamental principle of Modernism' was liberalism. This is the socio-political prism through which he reads and narrates the flourishing of modernism. In this way, Eksteins argues, Gay sees 'the Modernist instinct as essentially an affirmative urge'. This is a misreading. Eksteins considers that Gay avoids analysing the negativity surrounding the intellectual and cultural output of the period; he avoids the contradictions that were present. By doing so, Gay constructs the 'anti-modern Modernist'.⁵⁹ As this chapter has asserted regularly, at the heart of the modernist urge was the desire to de-construct, to re-pattern the world. It was, in both cultural and political terms, a desire to inaugurate a new reality.

⁵⁹ Eksteins, 'Drowned in *Eau de vie*', *London Review of Books*. 30(4), February 2008: 23-4.

The Absurdity of the Modern World

In his own work, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, Eksteins argues persuasively that the socio-political and cultural context cannot alone be said to have driven the profound introspection of individuals and artists of the *fin-de-siècle period*.

Present, too, he argues was an impulse behind the great experimentation in the arts at the turn of the century. Like Gay, he too sees it as a quest for liberation, in aesthetic and moral terms, from conformity, patriarchy, and comforting bourgeois notions of behaviour.

However, he strongly rejects Gay's dichotomization of the Great War and the Second World War and the contention that millenarian *fin-de-siècle* sentiments can account for the bursting forth of an affirmative, creative urge. For Eksteins, both a wider, negative, sentiment – an existential crisis – was the force which drove this shift in cultural practice.

The avant-garde and the wider public attempted to confront an experiential loss which he argues can be traced to the Great War: the man of 1914, and his set of social values and psychological disposition, were profoundly changed by the experience of war; they were 'diminished as social and moral beings'⁶⁰ and traditional modes of expression became inadequate for them. The modernist impulse, by Eksteins' reading, was less one of affirmation and creative freedom than of existential uncertainty faced with an absurd, changing, and destabilising world.

⁶⁰ Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), p.212.

Chapter II Avant-Garde Florence

(i.) A Summary

The first part of the present work undertook to examine the concept of modernism and thereby develop a sense of how one can talk about and understand the phenomenon. Being first and foremost a task of cultural analysis, to achieve this it was necessary to consider firstly what one means by the term 'culture'. As was shown, the term is nebulous and complex. It has drawn wide scholarly consideration- due, at least in part, to the cross-disciplinary nature of its application. The notion of culture that informed the discussion of modernism was one that acknowledges this complexity and goes beyond attempts to view culture as a collection of habits or practices transmitted and received across generations and people. 'Culture' has often been used as little more than a useful term for social groupings or to signify a product of the human mind that has emerged parallel to the development of human beings and our societies.⁶¹ In place of such a limited view, our discussion expressed a profound link between the construction of society, the human condition, and human activities. This relationship is critical to understanding culture. Such a view argues that the cultural universe created by human beings is both subjective and objective: it is a human product yet also an external facticity that acts coercively upon him or her.⁶²

In Clifford Geertz's terms, culture is an objective, all-encompassing ecosystem formed of 'webs of significance'. The cultural universe - this ecosystem - is one that demands interpretation in order to be understood.⁶³ To do so, one must engage in a 'reading process' that takes as the direct object of analysis the ecosystem itself, does not seek to impose order where there is none, and attempts instead to elicit meaning by elucidating the conceptual structures of the humanly-created world. To approach the cultural world in this manner is to examine human communication, experience, and meaning. This, it is argued, opens up the

⁶¹ Avruch, *Culture*, pp.6-10; Williams, *Keywords*, pp.87-91.

⁶² Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, pp.3-28.

⁶³ *Interpretation of Cultures*, p.17.

possibility of a more profound understanding of the social, political, and economic climates in which a body of culture has been produced.

This idea of culture informed the notion of modernism that was developed subsequently. Modernism, it was shown, is a powerful yet unstable term, for which the development of a monolithic notion is neither desirable nor possible. It can be studied from both socio-historical and formalist perspectives. The first treats it as an 'alternative culture', challenging modernizing forces at work in a given society. The latter posits that the modernist 'sensibility' can be identified with certain stylistic traits and techniques. The notion informing this study is one that combines elements of both these approaches. To do so avoids isolating either the cultural products or their social function.

Modernism was expressed as a dualistic phenomenon, a highly mobile, 'Janus-headed' compound that can be seen as a network of cultural responses, predominantly in the cultural sphere, to a socio-political, cultural, and spiritual context that provoked a questioning of the self and of artistic practices. These responses, it was argued, developed in the context of technological modernization and concomitant social processes, which had profoundly transformative impacts at both an objective and subjective level.⁶⁴ In particular, the notion of a modernist 'sensibility' or 'impulse', was highlighted. Defined by a crisis of values, a loss of vertical reference points, and a sense of *anomie*, this describes a highly subjective sentiment. Yet, running through culture, politics, and social thought, it offers a fascinating viewpoint from which to explore the matrix of ideas and social processes which can be said to have been at play.

⁶⁴Somigli and Moroni in *Italian Modernism*, ed. by Somigli and Moroni, pp.8-9; Bradbury and McFarlane in *Modernism*, ed. by Bradbury and McFarlane, pp.19-55.

II (ii.) 'Mapping' Avant-Garde Florence

Our notion of modernism provides a framework that will inform the remainder of this work. This part of the thesis will consist of a discussion of the Florentine avant-garde movement centred predominantly on the journal *La Voce*. It will consider the world-view elaborated by the principal protagonists of the group, the way in which this informed their cultural expression, and what impact their cultural activities can be said to have had. In keeping with the notion of culture that has been outlined, this study will seek to understand the relationship between the socio-political, cultural, and economic climates in which the movement operated and the cultural expressions that emerged as a response. In doing so, the argument is made that an examination of the cultural and political activities of the Florentine avant-garde opens up vital perspectives on the political, social, and cultural landscape of Italy. By mapping these constitutive parts, the analysis will seek to juxtapose the avant-garde movement with those ideas that drove the modern movement across Europe. That modernist impulses, similar to those that drove a period of cultural foment and upheaval in Europe, can be traced in Italy – and that the philosophical and socio-political basis for such revolt can be seen in the writings of the Florentine avant-garde - forms the premise of this study.

Such an approach is consistent with that outlined by Walter Adamson in his examination of the Florentine avant-garde, *Avant-Garde Florence: From Modernism to Fascism*. Drawing on the work of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, Adamson argues that society should be viewed as a 'field' in which individuals, collectives, and institutions are 'agents'. This 'field' can be considered an ecosystem that consists of and reflects the attitudes, ideas, prejudices, and values of those that live within it; it is a socio-ideological nexus that allows an understanding of the intellectual currents running through a society. Agents each occupy a position in the web, from which they articulate their views, which Bourdieu describes as 'social, political or aesthetic choices' or 'position-takings' (*prises de position*). In doing so, their views are objectified; they are themselves registered as positions within the wider

‘field’. To articulate a view, therefore, is to engage in a mediating process between the position of the agent and the ‘field of positions’ that the objectified ideological viewpoints collectively form. Viewed in this manner, public expression is at once a structuring practice and an object that is itself structured by the social world. Most fundamentally, ideas cannot be considered independently: exerting a structuring effect over other ideas, agents, and the ‘field’, while being acted upon themselves, ideas become inter-defined and positionally situated. Only through a broader perspective that examines the relationship between the ideas and the agents of expression can the ideas themselves be understood. To do so is to reconstruct the ‘field of positions’ and the spaces that exist between the constitutive elements. This, argues Adamson, is the task of the cultural historian.⁶⁵

For the present study, the relevance of such an approach is clear: the interactions between individuals, political and social groupings, and cultural movements in Italy were dense and complex. Moreover, they existed simultaneously within a larger, international context. That these agents exerted structuring influences over one another, while being structured themselves, is the premise that underlies this study. The examination of the Florentine avant-garde will exemplify this argument. Modernist writers across Europe, deprived of the points of reference – social, spiritual, cultural, and political - by which they had previously anchored themselves, were highly sensitive to their social environment. New ‘agents’ were formed by the articulation of new ‘position-takings’. These objectified positions, in turn, exerted a structuring impact and relationally defined other positions. The environment was plural, dynamic, and international. Indeed, European culture has been shaped in great part by a dialectic mediating process between different cultural centres- Paris, London, Berlin – and other peripheral areas. To understand any single centre – to ‘reconstruct’ any ‘field’ and its constitutive parts – thus necessitates a pan-European perspective that takes into account not only the cultural, but also the social, economic, political, and philosophical

⁶⁵ Walter L. Adamson, *Avant-Garde Florence: From Modernism to Fascism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp.4-6.

discourses of the period. To do so through the example of Florence is the aim of this chapter.

Fascism and the Avant-Garde

The interaction between the social, political, and cultural spheres in early twentieth century Italy lends itself to this approach. Through their cultural politics, the members of the avant-garde groupings had great political impact. Fascism, it has been argued, was the socio-political - and, one could quite plausibly add, economic - product of the revolt enacted in the cultural sphere by avant-garde movements across Europe.⁶⁶ While the ideological basis for the Italian Fascist regime lost clarity as its twenty years of rule (*ventennio*) progressed, the connection between Mussolini's early views and the various Italian avant-garde groupings is striking. It has been suggested that writers of *La Voce* (the '*vocianti*', as they were known) were influential in shaping Mussolini's principal ideas and that the *vocianti* were the group to whom he felt greatest intellectual attachment; most notably one can look to their shared interest in the *attualismo* of Giovanni Gentile and attraction to Sorelian irrationalism, as well as a belief in the power of the Italian nation as an entity.⁶⁷ Further to this, the intellectual origins of Fascism were regularly asserted. In a speech delivered on 27 March 1924, Giuseppe Bottai, a leading figure of the movement, sought to underline this feature. The 'nucleus' of Fascism was, he stated, formed of ideologues; thus in its very origins it was 'decidedly intellectual'. Furthermore, this intellectualism was not limited to Fascism's roots: even once established (as it was by 1924), Fascism was, first and foremost, a 'revolution of intellectuals'. This cadre of individuals was engaged, Bottai argued, in 'both a destructive and a constructive revision of modern civilization' which was

⁶⁶ See especially, Gentile, *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista*. (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996) and *The Struggle for Modernity: Nationalism, Futurism and Fascism* (Westport, CT: Praeger Press, 2003); Adamson, *Avant-Garde Florence: From Modernism to Fascism*; Burdett, *Vincenzo Cardarelli and his contemporaries: fascist politics and literary culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). In a similar manner, in *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (New York, Anchor/Doubleday, 1989), Modris Eksteins has established connections between pre-war avant-garde cultural politics and German fascism.

⁶⁷ Adamson, 'Modernism and Fascism: The Politics of Culture in Italy, 1903-1922', *The American Historical Review*, 95(2) (1990), 362.

fundamental to the success of the regime.⁶⁸ Indeed, among the Florentine avant-garde, one can cite as committed supporters of Mussolini's movement Giovanni Papini, Curzio Malaparte, and Ardengo Soffici. To address the texts produced by the avant-gardists is therefore essential if one seeks to construct a complete picture of the ideology that drove Italian Fascism. It offers, moreover, an insight into the relationship between Italian writers of the period and the subsequent regime.

Italy, 1901-14: '*L'Italia giolittiana*'

The Italian avant-garde emerged onto a political landscape that was dominated by a liberal ruling elite associated principally with the statesman Giovanni Giolitti. The period from 1901 to 1914 during which he was dominant (*L'Italia giolittiana*) was one of stable parliamentary democracy, economic progress, civil modernization, cultural renewal, and democratic reforms that enfranchised large tranches of the popular classes. Perhaps the most striking feature of the period was the economic growth that *giolittismo* achieved. It saw the industrialization of agricultural production, improvements in national infrastructure, the continuation of protectionist methods to encourage growth of heavy industry, the facilitation of the banking system's role in the provision of capital to sectors that were vital for economic modernization, and the repositioning of the state itself as a driver of growth and 'customer' of industry (as indicated by a 50% increase in government spending on public works between 1900 and 1907).⁶⁹ Progress was substantial: between 1896 and 1907 gross domestic product grew at an annual rate of 6%;⁷⁰ industry, accounting for 19.4% of the country's gross domestic product in 1896, was contributing 26.1% by 1908.⁷¹ In hand with this economic progress were attempts at social change, principally

⁶⁸ For Giuseppe Bottai's full speech, see *A Primer of Italian Fascism*, ed. by Jeffrey Schnapp (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), pp.75-86.

⁶⁹ Clark, *Modern Italy*, p.165.

⁷⁰ Anna Cento Bull, 'Social and political cultures from 1860 to the present', in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Italian Culture*, ed. by Zygmunt G. Baranski & Rebecca J. West (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p.44.

⁷¹ Burdett, *Cardarelli*, pp.10-14. My discussion of Giolittian Italy derives predominantly from Burdett's work, in addition to that of Emilio Gentile, in particular *The Struggle for Modernity*; Clark, *Modern Italy*, pp.164-169.

through social legislation. Laws imposed limits on the length of the working day for women and prohibited the employment of children under the age of twelve. In 1898, accident insurance was made compulsory in industry and the responsibility to provide such cover was placed upon the employer. At an institutional level, the Ministry for Labour was established in 1902 and Giolitti also actively encouraged prefects to pursue solutions that would enable social and economic improvement rather than law and order alone.⁷² Action of this kind, combined with the industrialization of the nation, suggests a general shift for the better in both living and working conditions (for the popular classes, in particular), while also accounting for the formation of a modern bourgeoisie as the nature of social life mutated in response to technological change.

Despite overseeing economic progress and some tangible social improvements, Giolitti's policies were less successful in achieving social and national cohesion, which had been primary goals of his governments. Industrialization and improved agricultural production was ultimately limited to the north and central regions of the country, notably the 'industrial triangle' of Turin, Genoa, and Milan where new sectors- such as engineering, banking, and manufacturing- flourished. In the south, interventionist policies were unsuccessful. Short-termism, a piecemeal approach to reforms, and alliances with landowners further limited Giolitti's attempts to modernize the region. Due to its ineffectiveness, in the South the state had become little more than guarantor of the existing social order. As a consequence, economic transformation was impossible and differences in living standards between the north and south of the country were merely accentuated.

Opposition to *giolittismo*

The multifarious opposition that Giolitti faced in both the parliamentary system and wider society is indicative of the tensions that existed in the first decade of the twentieth century.

⁷² Cento Bull, p.44.

The opposition consisted of the Socialists, organized mainly around the Italian Socialist Party (PSI); the Catholics, such as those surrounding the organization Catholic Action (AC); and the Nationalists, who were loosely-structured but dominated by Enrico Corradini's Italian Nationalist Association (ANI). To these groups one can add the syndicalist faction of the PSI, the Futurists, and the Florentine avant-garde itself. In composition, the opposition was formed of activists of differing social class, ideology, and aims. Yet, through the movements one can trace shared ideological undercurrents and, to an extent, they united them. All were aligned against the liberal modernity that had come to dominate Italy and each expressed opposition through the creation of an alternate myth of the Italian nation, of nationalism, and of modernity.⁷³ In rhetoric, too, there were similarities: the Nationalists, for instance, adopted a notion of struggle from the Socialists, albeit one that presented the national community in conflict with other nations rather than one of workers seeking repression from the exploitative ruling elite. Similarly, both Socialists and Nationalists diagnosed a state of contemporary decline, while offering differing views on the cause and response required. While critiquing similar elements of Giolittian Italy, the core ideas, organization, and politics, the groups that opposed Giolitti were, therefore, essentially diverse.

A consideration of the Socialists and the Nationalists is particularly useful in seeking to understand the origins and ideology of the Florentine avant-garde. Indeed, it has been argued that the rhetoric of all three groups derived from the interaction of the same four discourses: philosophical, political, religious, and technical.⁷⁴ While the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) had initially offered Giolitti and his reforms moderate support, this was due chiefly to a fear of a return to power of the reactionary right and the repressive politics that would follow such a shift. By 1904, this support, reinforcing divisions between different

⁷³ Gentile, 'From the Cultural Revolt of the Giolittian Era to the Ideology of Fascism', in Frank J. Coppa, *Studies in Modern Italian History* (New York: P. Lang, 1986), pp.103-119.

⁷⁴ Adamson, 'The Language of Opposition in Early Twentieth-Century Italy', *The Journal of Modern History*, 64 (1) (1992), 38.

Socialist factions, had become increasingly problematic. Filippo Turati's reformists, who had maintained their support for Giolitti, were opposed by the radical syndicalist wing of Arturo Labriola, which came to gain ascendance in the party. For the radical syndicalists, to cooperate with Giolitti in the manner of Turati's *riformisti* was to prop up a bourgeois regime and maintain a system that exploited the proletariat. Labriola and his supporters considered that liberalism and its associated products- notably humanism, democracy, and positivism - had left Italy and wider European society decadent, lacking in morality, and devoid of the vitality required by nations in the modern world. Indebted to the ideas of Georges Sorel, they saw their mission as one of reawakening the nation. The general strike was considered the means by which the working classes would be mobilized and imbued with a sense of the reawakening mission envisaged for them. As expressed by Sorel, the general strike was a quasi-religious myth that would incite the proletariat to rise up and overthrow the bourgeois order that had come to dominate. With this aim in mind, the radical syndicalists saw violence as necessary: not only was it the sole means to disrupt the bourgeois order; more fundamentally, it was considered crucial to the generation of a collective energy among the popular classes and the creation of a new morality that would be based upon atavistic ideals.

The focus on values and collective action can be seen, too, in the Italian Nationalist movement that flourished in the early years of the twentieth century. Like the syndicalists, its antirational character defined Italian nationalism. Myth; the appeal to fantasy rather than reason; the exaltation of character, human agency, and the will to power; the construction of a heroic elite: these were the ideals that the Nationalists considered necessary for the formation of an alternative modernity to the one cultivated by *giolittismo*. The revolt was cultural as well as political. Indeed, it is in the cultural sphere - through intellectual groupings and influential journals - that one can particularly examine the contribution of

the nationalist movement.⁷⁵ Enrico Corradini was a key figure in the growth of Italian nationalism and its opposition to Giolitti. Firstly through the anti-positivist, aestheticizing periodical, *Il Marzocco*, but chiefly through his more overtly political journal, *Il Regno*, Corradini stirred nationalist sentiment through vituperative attacks on Giolittian Italy. Emotive in language and imagery, *Il Regno* evoked an image of the Italian nation in a state of degeneracy and stasis; its commentators posited a failure of the *Risorgimento* project of creating a unified Italy and an Italian people. This was, the journal argued, the result of enlightenment values and the liberal governments of Giolitti, along with other elements of Italian political culture, notably Socialism. Parliamentary democracy was rejected as an agent of the bourgeoisie. Based upon a rational view of the world, a desire to reconcile competing interests, and the rights of the individual, it was considered incapable of fulfilling the ideal of national community. Neither, by extension, could it engender moral unity. In this context, the Nationalists took as their task the re-spiritualisation of politics in order to achieve the moral renovation of the nation. The nation was to be given primacy over individual and political liberty. The myth of the nation - the assertion of the power and moral value of the imagined community of Italians - was key to this; it was to be a mobilizing force. So, too, were the notions that underlay the belief in national power: an ethics of strength, a Sorelian notion of the power of myth to incite quasi-religious devotion, and a desire for self-affirmation.⁷⁶

The context, then, was one in which profound change was sought across the political spectrum, both from the left and the right. With this in mind, one can understand Carlo Rosselli's assessment of the opposition to Giolitti and Italian political culture of the period. For Rosselli, a journalist and prominent Socialist who would later oppose the regime, the political culture was pervaded by a moral crisis, expressed as a collective 'spirit of revolt'

⁷⁵ Emilio Gentile emphasizes this element of nationalist revolt in his essay, 'From the Cultural Revolt of the Giolittian Era to the Ideology of Fascism', in *Studies in Modern Italian History*, ed. by Coppa, pp.110-111.

⁷⁶ Burdett, *Cardarelli*, pp.19-20.

that sought to alter the 'existing order of things'.⁷⁷ As the historian Emilio Gentile has argued throughout his work, the political culture that developed was future-oriented: it envisaged a new order that would be imbued with energy and vitality. The product of a new moral conscience - one that was tainted by neither the policies of nineteenth-century *trasformismo* nor the period of Giolittian dominance - and a profound shift in values, this new order would have a transformative effect on both the international standing of the nation and the ability of its people to act in the world. The Nationalist and Socialist movements, positing the need for new myths and forms of collective organization, were emblematic of this.

Florence: City of Cultural Revolt

Similarly dissatisfied with the Italy that emerged as the product of the unification process were those intellectuals living in Florence at the time - most notably Giuseppe Prezzolini (1882-1983) and Giovanni Papini (1881-1956), among other associated intellectuals. Both had contributed to Corradini's *Il Regno* and were animated by antirational ideas. Their reactions to Giolittian Italy were sentimental and ideological: their political and cultural thought was formed of philosophical idealism, a belief in the need for national renewal (*rinnovamento*), and a desire to construct a new Italian culture inspired by the French avant-garde. Despite the distance of Florence from the centres of industrialization that embodied Italian modernity, the avant-gardists considered that the positivist culture associated with the modernity of industrialism and technology constituted a profound threat to the Italian nation. The nation they saw around them was not that which the *Risorgimento* had promised: the contemporary Italy was *Italiotta* ('small Italy'), restrained and stymied by the small-minded mediocrity of the bourgeois elite whose power the *vocianti* despised.

⁷⁷ Carlo Rosselli, 'Filippo Turati e il socialismo italiano,' *Quaderni di Giustizia e Libertà*, June 1932, p.27. Cited in Gentile, 'Cultural Revolt' in *Studies in Modern Italian History*, ed. by Coppa, 103.

In their view, the city of Florence exemplified these problems. The patronizing culture of *moderatismo*, a product of the aristocratic elite, dominated the city. Its timidity restrained the city both culturally and politically, inhibiting the creation of a genuine civic society in which intellectual expression and social progress was possible. In this sense, to the generation that was born in the 1880s, Florence had become little more than a provincial outpost, detached from the currents of the wider European intellectual climate.⁷⁸

***Leonardo* (1903-07)**

The sense of revolt in the city was clear in both the intellectual polemics and political action of the avant-gardists. At times, their revolt against this perceived state of decay took the form of mocking or derisory action. Writing some years later, Prezzolini told of how his and Papini's 'contempt for the crowd of *endimanchés* [bourgeois Sunday dressers] was expressed one festival day when we turned our jackets inside out and, so sheathed, walked against the oncoming crowd after a Cathedral mass'⁷⁹. Being intellectuals first and foremost, however, journals were the primary locus of expression. Prior to *La Voce*, in the years 1903 to 1907, they published *Leonardo*, which, to a great extent, inaugurated the avant-garde in Florence. It engaged in a synthesis of politics, cultural criticism, and artistic and philosophical inspection. The journal took as its impetus the problems that the avant-gardists perceived around them: complacency in public life, corruption in the political sphere, academic learning, and decadence in Italian culture. In their reading, both society and culture were trapped in a spiritual abyss. Political groupings, moreover, offered little to them. Society was lacking in both spirit and leadership.

French Influence

⁷⁸ Adamson, 'Modernism in Florence', in *Italian Modernism*, ed. by Somigli and Moroni, pp.222-224

⁷⁹ Cited in Adamson, *Avant Garde Florence*, p.58.

In response the group envisaged a new secular-religious framework aimed at the revitalisation of the nation. The call for ‘renewal’, ‘rebirth’, and ‘regeneration’ was sustained. Certainly, this avant-garde desire for revolt was indebted to the previous generation of Italian intellectuals and artists - men such as Gabriele D’Annunzio and Benedetto Croce who viewed the *Risorgimento* as a failed project and considered Italian culture to be lacking in spirit. Yet, while seeing themselves as continuing the Mazzinian task, both culturally and philosophically their greatest identification was with the city of Paris and its avant-garde culture. Paris offered a vision of a vital and dynamic culture, which was driven by influential intellectuals who were prepared to experiment, debate, and cast aside rationalist ideas.⁸⁰ Through the critical writing of Ardengo Soffici, *Leonardo* was influential in bringing Florentines into contact with the art and poetry of the Parisian avant-garde - the vibrant, innovative, and controversial work of Picasso, Renoir, and Rimbaud, in particular. For Soffici, French Impressionism offered ‘the possibility of a vigorous education that, absorbed by our youth, might serve them as an impulse towards personal quests that can produce vital results.’

Henri Bergson

Yet it was the French philosophy and social thought underlying this cultural experimentation that influenced Papini and Prezolini’s own thinking more directly and gave philosophical impetus to the cultural revolt expressed in *Leonardo*. Most notable was the influence of Henri Bergson, whose ideas correlated with the Florentine avant-gardists’ call for cultural renewal and a new secular religion based on anti-rational ideas. Bergson

⁸⁰ Adamson, ‘Modernism in Florence’, pp.225-227. Adamson emphasizes that the influence of French culture came not only through intellectual contact with the ideas of the Parisian avant-garde but also through the formative experiences in the city of Papini, Prezolini, and Soffici (and, indeed, the leader of the Futurist movement, Filippo Marinetti). As Adamson argues convincingly in *Avant-Garde Florence* (1993), the period of seven years during which Soffici lived in Paris can be cited as particularly important in the formation of his intellectual thought, as well as that of the others. Despite coming to regard the city’s culture as decadent and eventually seeking refuge in what he saw as the solidity of the moral values of rural Tuscany (*toscanità*), the formative influence of the city cannot be overstated. For Papini, in particular, the bohemian lifestyle and avant-garde thinking that Soffici described on his visits back to Florence were especially intoxicating. Interestingly, he would relocate to the city for a short period, with the aim of achieving success as a writer- a period of his life that was an unhappy one, ultimately leaving him in a state of existential malaise, which would prefigure the sense of failure expressed in his autobiographical work *Un uomo finito* (1912).

posited two modes of human knowing: intuition and analysis. Engaging with life through intuition is, he argued, a revelatory, qualitative experience; it lies deep within man. Analysis, in contrast, is focused on the objective, external world. By extension it lacks the profundity of intuition; it is superficial. Such a view rejected a rational basis for existence, suggesting that boundaries between science and art were not insuperable, that faith and reason can coexist. Reality, moreover, could not be seen as fixed. The world, being subjectively apprehended, took on a dream-like character, fluid and malleable, defying concrete representation. To seek objective, realist representation in art was therefore flawed; it was incongruent with the reality of human existence. In his evocation of the power of irrationalism and the subjective, the influence of Bergson's ideas on the Florentine avant-gardists is clear.⁸¹ Providing a basis for their opposition to rationalist ideas, it gave philosophical credence to their generational revolt against the 'old Italy' of *giolittismo* and nineteenth-century *verismo*. In the Florentine context, it offered a sense of vitality, which stood in opposition to the smothering culture of *moderatismo*. The notion of intuition, moreover, informed the assertion- present throughout *Leonardo* - of the need to uncover the primal self in search of a new form of collective faith and a new moral basis for politics, culture, and society.

***La Voce* (1908-1914)**

Despite locating a philosophical basis for their cultural revolt, *Leonardo*, positing a radical form of individualism, was ultimately unable to form the nucleus of intellectuals that Prezzolini and Papini came to believe was necessary to achieve the realization of the 'second Italy'. Following the end of its publication in 1907, a new journal, *La Voce*, was conceived. If *Leonardo* was an eruption of energy, irrationalism, and generational revolt, which inaugurated the Florentine avant-garde, it was *La Voce* that gave concrete organizational direction and intellectual prestige to the Florentine avant-gardists. Its

⁸¹ Adamson, 'Modernism in Florence', pp.226-227.

circulation was modest but its cultural impact was great.⁸² Published weekly from December 1908 to the end of 1913, followed by 24 biweekly issues in 1914, the journal was active throughout the most highly charged moments of the Giolittian period, culminating in a role as a major mouthpiece for the interventionist campaign that led to Italy's participation in the Great War- a position which would ultimately have a catastrophic impact on the unity of the journal. In its rhetoric, targets, and goals the journal engaged profoundly with the major issues of the period; in its influence on Mussolini's thinking, its significance beyond the Giolittian period is equally evident.

La Voce never had a clear political programme or 'uniting credo', yet one can discern key targets within the project. Unsurprisingly, it continued many of the themes of *Leonardo*. Yet it also had much in common with Corradini's *Il Regno* and occupied itself more directly with the social and political problems that the nation faced, in addition to those of an aesthetic nature. Prezzolini and Papini's diagnosis of national decline remained: it was necessary, Prezzolini argued in an early issue, to examine and comment upon the vile nature of contemporary Italy.⁸³ As in *Leonardo*, they railed against *giolittismo*, blaming it for a lack of national consciousness, a stifling Italian cultural tradition, and for facilitating the spiritual exhaustion of Italian culture under the impact of positivism. The journal was concerned with social problems, focusing notably upon the discrepancies between the north and the south, the centralized state, the condition of the national education system, and poor national infrastructure. However, it was a commitment to radical cultural renewal that defined the journal. Indeed, in the inaugural edition, Papini took aim not at social ills but at the cultural malaise that he perceived. Italy, he declared, no longer spoke. The nation had lost its cultural voice and, moreover, respect for its own intellectual culture.⁸⁴ The

⁸² This argument is made across scholarship on *La Voce*. Walter Adamson, in particular, develops the argument in the course of *Avant-Garde Florence* and more directly in 'Modernism and Fascism: The Politics of Culture in Italy, 1903-1922'. It is also a key argument in Emilio Gentile's *The Struggle for Modernity*.

⁸³ Giuseppe Prezzolini, 'La Nostra Promessa', *La Voce*, 1:2 (December 1908), p.1.

⁸⁴ Giovanni Papini, 'L'Italia Risponde', *La Voce*, 1:1 (December 1908), pp.1-2. Papini states: 'Basta. L'Italia non parla più. Parlo io e ripeto che non voglio invitare nessuno a fare il nazionalista arrabbiato della cultura. Ho un grandissimo piacere che si leggano e si studino i grandi stranieri, ma vorrei che si leggessero e studiassero un po' di più i grandi paesani. Si legga pure Comte, ma anche Galileo [...] Si tratta di ridare all'Italia non soltanto il

reassertion of generational conflict is implicit. Giovanni Amendola, a regular contributor to the journal, expressed similar feelings. ‘L’Italia come oggi è non ci piace [...],’ he wrote, ‘il nostro ideale della vita pubblica e privata, i nostri valori intellettuali, morali e politici non sono quelli degli uomini che oggi costituiscono la classe dirigente’.⁸⁵ Writing some time later, the poet Giuseppe Ungaretti affirmed that such a division had been present in Italian culture as well as in politics. He wrote: ‘It was right that the youth of those days felt the whole debate had to be taken up again from the very beginnings, that everything needed to be renewed.’⁸⁶ The new generation, as the *vocianti* conceived of themselves, was to be different to that which had preceded them: it would have a voice that could engage the Italian people. A movement, Prezolini declared, ‘ought to speak to people, to contemporary people, to today’s Italians in their own language, in their own modes of expression’.⁸⁷

To undertake this task, the journal sought to break down the barriers between culture and politics. There had been, Prezolini argued, a ‘ruinous divorce between political activity and the other intellectual and moral activities of the human spirit’. In his view, such a division was false: problems of culture were inseparable from the social and political issues that the country faced and the sole way to resolve them was to bring them into relation with one another.⁸⁸ This was a rejection of the materialist notion of politics produced by *giolittismo* and the constricting categories of thought and cultural expression fostered by

contatto colla cultura europea ma anche la coscienza storica della cultura sua ch’è pur tanta parte della cultura europea. Io mi contento di poco: Nazionalisti no, ma Italiani si!]

[‘Enough. Italy no longer speaks. I speak and I repeat that I do not seek to impel anyone towards an angry form of cultural nationalism. It pleases me if people read and study the great foreign writers. Yet I want them to study their great countrymen a little more. Read Comte by all means, but also Galileo [...] It is a question of bringing Italy into contact with European culture once again, but also of restoring its historical consciousness of its own culture, which is to a great extent part of European culture. I content myself with this: Nationalists, no; but Italians, yes!’]

⁸⁵ Giovanni Amendola, ‘Il Convegno nazionalista’, *La Voce*, 2:51 (1 December 1910), p.446. ‘Italy in its current state does not please us [...] Our ideals of public and private life, our intellectual, moral and political values ‘are not those of the men who today form the governing class’]

⁸⁶ Cited in Joseph Cary, *Three Modern Italian Poets: Saba, Ungaretti, Montale* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p.9.

⁸⁷ *L’Italia 1903-1912* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1984), pp.85-6. Cited in Adamson, 2015, p.225.

⁸⁸ ‘Perché siamo anticlericali’, *La Voce*, 1:6 (21 Jan 1909), p.1. Cited in Adamson, 2015: 221.

moderatismo. In its place was posited an organic view of culture and politics; to alter one would be to alter the other - to provoke a deep change in moral values would result in a profound shift in politics.

At the heart of this amalgamation of the cultural and political realms was a project to create a new ruling elite, which was to be supported by a secular religion that could offer the people a new faith in response to the spiritual abyss of modernity. Writing as early as 1900, Papini had recognised a lack of spiritual direction in his own generation, which he perceived to be dangerous. For Papini, this was rooted in a distrust of the ruling elite. 'We lack a unity of philosophical doctrine', he wrote, 'we lack faith and steadfastness [...] nowhere is there unity, action, or a goal. We are sceptics and pessimists, indifferent or feckless optimists; we are neurotic, strange, abnormal products of generations who have done too much, thought too much, enjoyed too much'.⁸⁹

To address this generational gap, the elaboration of a moral and cultural alternative that could form the basis of the new secular-religious framework was sought. The new elite would be at the heart of this construction process. The restoration of the intellectual energies of the Italian nation and its people would result only from new forms of political representation. Papini and Prezzolini considered that intellectuals would provide the cultural and critical grounding for such a shift. That they saw themselves as the individuals capable of forming this new elite - a 'party of intellectuals' - is clear. In this belief, a prefiguring of notions of elite rule that would define Mussolini's Fascist regime can be seen. The influence of the elitist theories of the sociologists Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca point to this dialogue. Both observed that power is most often held by a relatively small minority of society and expressed doubts over more collective-based forms of rule, such as popular sovereignty and socialism. They argued that minority rule is, in fact,

⁸⁹ *Diario 1900*, pp.20-21. Cited in Adamson, 1993, p.65.

preferable; coherence and consistency and the prevention of political corruption were, they argued, only possible through the rule of the few. *Leonardo*'s failure had been its inability to create a cadre of intellectuals that could provide moral, intellectual, and, indeed, political leadership for the Italian people. As a new focal point of expression and cultural revolt, *La Voce* was to be the vehicle through which the elite could be constructed, educated, and, ultimately, take on the task of national leadership.

Points of contrast between *Leonardo* and *La Voce* make clear the seriousness with which this role was accepted by the young avant-gardists. The bravado and daring of the earlier journal was not to be seen in *La Voce*. In tone it was austere and free of embellished language. Typographically, it was devoid of ornament. In 'La Nostra Promessa' ('Our Promise'; 27 December 1908, p.1), an article in which he outlined the aims of the journal, Prezzolini emphasised the moral nature of the journal's task, citing a lack of 'character, sincerity, openness, and gravity' in Italian culture and society. Italy's failure, he argued, had not been due to a lack of ability or intellect. Rather, it suffered from a dearth of values. Hindering it, too, was the nature of the goals towards which the ruling elite had directed the country. For Prezzolini, these ends were 'frivolous, vulgar [and] base'.⁹⁰ In this generational revolt, the opposition evoked between the 'new' and 'old' Italy is clear. The liberal ruling elite lacked seriousness, courage, and moral fibre; the new generation, through their cultural revolt, exemplified a new order based upon ethical and heroic principles.⁹¹

Vocianti. Moralisti

In its role of drawing intellectuals into confronting the social, political, and cultural ills of the nation, the *vocianti* thus endowed their journal with an ethical purpose. The *vocianti*,

⁹⁰ *La Voce*, 1:2 (27 December 1908), p.1. Prezzolini states: 'Crediamo che l'Italia abbia più bisogno di carattere, di sincerità, di apertezza, di serietà, che di intelligenza e di spirito.'

⁹¹ Gentile, 'Cultural Revolt', pp.106-7.

self-ordained ‘*moralisti*’ who felt ‘profoundly the ethical character of intellectual life’,⁹² depicted themselves as the new elite that could lead the reanimation of the nation. Further to this, the journal targeted the consciousness of the individual. *La Voce* was to be an institution of civic and cultural education that would address the ethical character of the Italian people through a process of moral restructuring.⁹³ The modernist character of this project is clear: in response to the vortex of cultural modernity, the journal sought to inaugurate a new moral consciousness, which would constitute new points of spiritual reference and rootedness for the Italian people. It was a project for a new form of secular faith. Prezzolini, in particular, refused to see nationalism as a vehicle for national regeneration through imperialist endeavour. Rather, he conceived of it as a source of impetus for the regeneration of the Italian nation. Nationalism was the starting point for a new collective consciousness- one based on a shared understanding of the cultural power of the Italian nation, a shared conception of aesthetics, and clear ethical imperatives. ‘It makes no difference what their age or sex, nation or period is’, Prezzolini stated, one ‘cannot make good Italians if you do not first make good men. You cannot create citizens useful to their own country if first a conscience is not created’. This conscience, he argued, was to be based on the ‘human values of truth, beauty, the sacred and the good’.⁹⁴

The Individual

Seen in these terms, the cultural revolt and desired moral revolution were aimed at producing a wholly new Italian people. Yet the focus was on the individual as the source of change.⁹⁵ In this sense, the *vocianti* drew heavily on early Crocean idealism, which posited

⁹² Prezzolini, *La Voce*, 1:2 (27 December 1908), p.1. ‘Noi sentiamo fortemente l’eticità della vita intellettuale [...]’.

⁹³ Francesca Billiani, ‘Political and Aesthetic Transgressions: Florentine Reviews à la mode: *Il marzocco* (1896-1932); *Il regno* (1903-05); *Il Leonardo* (1903-07); *Hermes* (1904); and *La Voce* (1908-14)’, in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines: Europe 1880 – 1940*, ed. by Peter Brooker et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.459. The same point is emphasized by Adamson, *Avant-Garde Florence*, p.124; and Burdett, p.22. Billiani notes that this was a point of divergence with Corradini and the other nationalists. Nationalism, for Corradini, meant restructuring the nation through class-oriented reforms. For the *vocianti*, it was to be addressed through the moral and philosophical reform of the individual.

⁹⁴ Prezzolini, ‘Come faremo “*La Voce*”’, *La Voce* (7 November 1912). Cited in: Gentile, *La Grande Italia: The Myth of the Italian Nation in the Twentieth Century* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), p.108.

⁹⁵ Burdett, p.23.

the capacity of the individual for creativity, agency, and action. At the heart of the *vociano* project of regeneration was the desire to foster a sense personal morality by way of a Nietzschean process of creative-destruction in which the Italian ‘man’ was both subject and object. Looking back on the period, Prezzolini saw in this conflict the new generation’s desire to confront the future without being tied to the past, to construct a new history. The individual, he argued, ‘was enough to make [the future]- however he wanted it made’;⁹⁶ will, freedom, and creativity were inherently bound together. The synthesis between international modernist ideas, which posited a state of crisis and spiritual malaise, and the call of the Italian avant-gardists for the cultural renewal of the Italian nation and the construction of a new moral conscience is clear. Undoubtedly present in this project is a Sorelian notion of revolutionary change, of the reawakening of the people through a quasi-religious myth, the product of which would be an empowered national proletariat. A Crocean view of art as the prime activity through which paradigms can be constructed and a Gentilean enthusiasm for spiritual regeneration are equally evident. Present, too, through the entire project is a Nietzschean call for a ‘transmutation of values’ and for the creation of a new spiritual basis in response to the ‘death of God’. Re-engaged with Italian culture as well as that of wider Europe and re-activated by the values of ‘honesty’, ‘sincerity’, and ‘courage’, Italian individuals would be endowed with a stronger moral conscience. They would foster a stronger Italian nation. Re-oriented away from the positivist, liberal culture that had come to dominate, the ‘Second Italy’ would emerge re-activated and capable of re-asserting itself in the wider world.

⁹⁶ *L’Italiano inutile* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1964), p.97. Prezzolini makes this argument in discussing the manner in which he and Papini employed pseudonyms in their early journalistic work. He states: ‘erano i nomi di setta, che escivano in pubblico, quasi a celebrare la nuova personalità, non più quella delle famiglie e dello Stato, della storia, insomma, che ci aveva fatti, ma di nuova storia, nella quale credevamo di esserci rifatti nuovi e senza antenati, da tutto sradicati, senza impegni od obblighi verso nessuno, soli di fronte all’avvenire, che doveva pure essere nostro, perché bastava l’individuo a farselo, e come voleva farselo lui. Volontà, libertà: Gian Falco, Giuliano il Sofista.’

[‘They were our cult names, which went out into the public almost as a celebration of the new personality, which was no longer that of the family or of the State- of the history, in short, that had made us- but of a new history in which we believed ourselves to be re-fashioned anew and without ancestors, uprooted from everything, without commitments or obligations to anyone, alone before the future, which was to be ours as well, because the individual was enough to make it, just as he desired. Will, freedom: Gian Falco, Julian the Sophist.’]

Sharing in these aims for national regeneration was a wide range of contributors. While one can suggest that the 'field' examined in this study is early-twentieth century Florence, it is clear that this ecosystem was formed of individuals of diverse backgrounds. Papini and Prezzolini had their roots in Tuscany, yet the journal drew contributors from across the country, from the Piedmontese Piero Jahier, to the Neapolitan Giovanni Amendola, to the Triestines Scipio Slataper and Gianni Stuparich. In total the contributors numbered more than 300.⁹⁷ The connections of individuals with their respective provincial centres remained invariably strong; the extent to which the journal was prepared to champion regional causes and focus upon provincial issues was striking. On one level this was simply indicative of the pluralistic origins of the contributors. Certainly, for instance, the evocations of the Tuscan landscape of Papini and Ardengo Soffici or Slataper's irredentist pieces are unsurprising. However, the provincial attachment went beyond this: the rural regions and peasant cultures of Italy constituted more authentic versions of the Italian nation and were, in their respective ways, each repositories of the values with which the *vocianti* envisaged the moral renewal of the nation. In the Tuscan countryside Papini saw strength, vitality, and a connection to the elemental which went beyond the rational. During a period of existential crisis that followed the failure of *Leonardo*, it was his 'return to the earth' - that is, to his native Tuscan countryside- which allowed Papini a sense of personal rebirth. For Soffici, this same land was a source of inspiration for his artistic work.⁹⁸ As Walter Adamson has argued convincingly, in their spiritual revolution the *vocianti* envisaged using 'the dormant sensibilities and energies of regional, peasant-based culture to overthrow the false and hypocritical values of liberal democracy'.⁹⁹ This is fundamental: by offering an antithesis to Giolittian Italy, notably to its decadent culture and supposedly 'false' politics, provincial attachments formed part of the *vociano* self-conception as crusading intellectuals engaged

⁹⁷ Adamson, *Avant-Garde Florence*, p.116.

⁹⁸ Adamson, *Avant-Garde Florence*, pp.96-98. Adamson suggests that *toscanità* was the 'distinctive element of [Soffici's] conception of modernism'.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.161.

in an attempt to make contact with the masses: to be a voice. Provincial life thus connected the cultural exploits of the *vociano* project with the collective impulse for national cultural renewal.

The diversity of the group was clear, too, in the intellectual interests of the various contributors and the (often conflicting) viewpoints that they held on different issues. Of those who wrote on almost all areas that the journal addressed- current affairs, art, politics, philosophy, literature - one can cite Soffici, in addition to Prezzolini and Papini. On literary topics, Scipio Slataper, Piero Jahier, Renato Serra, and Emilio Cecchi were the principal contributors. On topics relating to politics and history: Gaetano Salvemini and Giovanni Amendola. On philosophy, totemic figures such as Giovanni Gentile and Benedetto Croce, yet also an array of younger members of the avant-garde, such as Jahier and Giovanni Boine. Intellectuals of international renown, including Henri Bergson and Romain Rolland, also contributed.

Recognition of the inevitable internal differences that this produced was vital; the journal was without ideological preclusions and such diversity contributed to the overall coherence of the *vociano* project. During his time as editor-in-chief, which lasted from 1908 until late 1913, Prezzolini recognised this. He did not seek to create unity from the plurality of views. Rather, the seriousness with which the writing was undertaken and its moral value were of greater importance to him. With the task of the moral education of the population, the cultural renewal of the nation, and the formation of a new ruling elite in mind, he sought to facilitate the contributors' intellectual endeavours and to enable *La Voce* to be the voice that spoke to the Italian nation, as he had envisaged at its inception.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Adamson, 'Modernism in Florence', p.231. Adamson quotes an interesting passage written by Prezzolini in *La Voce*'s 'Progetto' or 'programmatic statement', in which he states that the sole expectation placed upon the writers was that 'quello che scrivono è suscettibile di difesa razionale e non è titillamento delle loro fantasie o uno sfogo dei loro bisogni sentimentali.' ['What they write is capable of rational defence and is not the titillation of their fantasies of the venting of their emotional needs']

Socio-Political Modernism. Modernists in Temperament?

As has been demonstrated, the group of contributors surrounding *La Voce* constructed a form of humanist nationalism, which correlated with a view of the Italian nation in a state of decline. By their reading, degeneracy pervaded every sector of society. It was at once social, political, economic, cultural, and, above all, spiritual. The *vocianti* critiqued the political and economic policies of Giovanni Giolitti, along with the political class he represented. Furthermore, they perceived a lack of national consciousness in the wider population, considered civic society to be deficient, and Italian culture, dominated by positivism, to be decadent. For the *vocianti*, lifting the nation from this malaise required a cultural response: a cultural revolt, generational in both conception and expression, which was to be inaugurated and directed by young intellectuals such as themselves. The aim of the revolt was the formation of a new moral and spiritual basis through the creation of a new cultural and moral consciousness for the Italian people. Envisaged, too, was the inauguration of a 'new' or 'Second' Italy, capable of controlling the forces of modernity rather than being subject to them. The idea that cultural and moral revolution could provoke profound socio-political change derived from wider intellectual thought, a porous view of culture and politics, and a lack of ideological preclusions. Most notable were the idealist discourses of Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile, in addition to those originating in avant-garde Paris, such as Henri Bergson's intuitionism and Georges Sorel's belief in the potential regenerative power of the masses. Thus, while nationalist in objective, the philosophical basis for such action was international.

In its expression of living in a moment of radical change, in which values and moral codes had been rendered inadequate, the project correlated with the feelings evoked by modernists across Europe. The urgent call for change of the *vocianti* and the sense of being on the cusp of radical upheaval evoke the notion of *Aufbruch* ('breaking up', 'breaking out'): a millenarian sense of entering a new phase in history. Such a sentiment can be seen in Frank

Kermode's notion of end time. Expressed in 'The Sense of an Ending', Kermode depicts man as subject to an 'end-dominated crisis'. This feeling, he argues, is irrational yet present across modern society: it 'has not diminished, and is as endemic to what we call modernism as apocalyptic utopianism is to political revolution'.¹⁰¹ Such a 'mood', however articulated, pervaded European society in the early twentieth century and offers a means to understanding the development of modernist tendencies.¹⁰² Certainly, it is evident in the language and readings of the Florentine avant-garde, albeit expressed in terms of national decline and the need for cultural and spiritual renewal (*rinnovamento*).

Modernists can certainly be defined through this shared sentiment of crisis. Yet, at this point in the study, one can also connect the Florentine avant-garde and the wider European socio-cultural 'field' in the shared desire to act - to provoke radical change. To return to the words of Marshall Berman, evoked in the first chapter of this study, modernism can be understood as 'the attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it.'¹⁰³ In their call for cultural renewal and socio-political action, an attempt to take charge of modernity arguably drove the *vociano* project. A sense of change similar to that which one can term *Aufbruch* is undoubtedly present, too, in the striving for regeneration. However, it is one that can be traced not only to a metaphysical sentiment of living in a time in crisis but, in equal part, to a more direct critique of the economic and political context of early twentieth-century Italy.

As this section has demonstrated, with regard to social and political temperament at the very least, the individuals engaged with many ideas that were driving the modernist movement in much of contemporary Europe. The impulses expressed collectively, the socio-political critiques that filled the pages of their journals, and the philosophical basis

¹⁰¹ *Sense of an Ending*, p.98.

¹⁰² Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, pp.9-11.

¹⁰³ *All that is Solid*, p.5.

that was elaborated in their polemics and reviews: all correlate profoundly with the proposition that in political and social terms the Florentine avant-garde may be read as form of modernism that developed in response to the context of early twentieth century Italy.

Aesthetics and Revolt

In such a context, the aesthetics of *La Voce* must be examined not simply as cultural expressions but as acts of political and social revolt. Seen to be at the heart of the project of national regeneration, the socio-political motivations underlying the cultural production and criticism of the *vocianti* are evident. So, too, is the ethical and moral value attributed to such practices. ‘The national duty of writers is to produce art which is not self-referential, [...] that talks to virile, strong readers, dignified citizens’, Prezzolini had argued in *Il Regno*.¹⁰⁴ Throughout *La Voce* the assertion is clear: the relationship between the intellectual and his social context was vital. For the *vocianti*, the relationship informed and gave impetus to artistic expression or cultural criticism. Moreover, the dialectic actively shaped the way in which these ideas were expressed: it dictated which cultural methods were considered appropriate in response to the wider context.

The nature of these cultural methods will be outlined in this section. The focus of study will then be Papini’s *Un uomo finito*, which will be the primary locus of textual analysis. It will be argued that the textual practices Papini employs in his autobiographical work render it a useful document in seeking to understand and exemplify the writing practices of the *vocianti* and the form of socio-political modernist revolt elaborated thus far. In particular, Papini’s focus on the subjective, the ethical value of his cultural activities, and transformed notion of the self are elements that can be seen throughout the work of the members of the group. As the first chapter of the thesis suggested, these practices correlate strongly with the wider modernist mode of expression that was present across Europe. A consideration of the

¹⁰⁴ ‘Fra chi è la lotta di classe?’, *Il Regno*, 1:48 (23 October 1904), cited in Billiani, p.458.

aesthetics of the *vociani* through the example of Papini's work will therefore enable an understanding of the Florentine movement with regard to the cultural modernism of early twentieth-century Europe.

Opposing Literary Tradition

That the texts produced by the *vociani* were heterogeneous fragmented, shocking, and vacillating is unsurprising. It has been argued that a defining feature of avant-garde culture is its opposition to convention.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, in advocating cultural revolt, the *vociani* asserted the need to reject existing models of cultural expression. Methods of literary composition were subjected to particularly intense critique; there was striking contempt among the *vociani* for traditions that they perceived to be archaic.¹⁰⁶ 'The usual formulae of literary expression are like arid and rigid mummies',¹⁰⁷ Giovanni Boine wrote in the journal. More than any other form, the novel was considered to be representative of this. For Boine and the other contributors, novels were little more than fables aimed at entertaining. The novel, they argued, was the embodiment of a rational, determinist view of the human world; it was the product of nineteenth-century modernizing forces, the cultural manifestation of positivist thinking. The novelist set himself the task of depicting human life as ordered and open to comprehension from an objective perspective. This could be seen in the novel's narrative linearity and the conferral of narrative authority on the third person subject. Moreover, it posited the existence of the identificatory self: a single, unified whole, independent of the fluctuations of the social world.¹⁰⁸ For the *vocani*, driven by Bergson's notion of the non-homogeneous and subjective nature of time, the task was absurd in conception. To posit the validity of mimetic art was, they argued, an approach that could

¹⁰⁵ Somigli and Moroni, pp.8-9.

¹⁰⁶ Burdett, pp.54-6.

¹⁰⁷ Giovanni Boine, 'Un ignoto', *La Voce*, pp.4:6 (8 February 1912), cited in Burdett, p.55.

¹⁰⁸ Timo Muller, *The Self as Object in Modernist Fiction: James, Joyce, Hemingway* (Wurzburg: Konigshausen & Neumann, 2010), pp.13-15. A key component of Muller's thesis is that much modernist fiction erases the 'identificatory self' and constructs instead the 'self-as-object'. He argues that this was pioneered by the aesthetic theory of men such as Pound, Eliot, and Hume, and that it constituted a break with nineteenth-century philosophical tradition. Clearly the thesis developed in my own study is based on a similar reading of modernist literary experimentation.

construct only a fallacious, contrived, and inauthentic perspective of the world; it could never be a source of sociological truth or moral education.

Literary Experimentation: Autobiography and the Interior World

The alternative aesthetic culture pursued by the *vocianti* was rooted in the internal, rather than external, world. Scipio Slataper called for a literature that would occupy itself 'with the internal drama of the mind'.¹⁰⁹ Asking of what one can talk other than oneself,

Giovanni Boine summarized the *vociano* perspective neatly.¹¹⁰

Naturally, the group gravitated towards the autobiographical literary form. Papini's *Un uomo finito*, Slataper's *Il mio Carso* (1912), Soffici's *Lemmonio Boreo* (1912), Vincenzo Cardarelli's *Prologhi* (1916), along with Piero Jahier's *Ragazzo* (1919) and Boine's *Frammenti* (1914-15): all are examples of self-exploratory *vociano* work. For the avant-gardists, autobiography offered the only authentic mode of expressing the subjective experience of human existence. To undertake the process of introspection was, Emilio Cecchi claimed, the means by which truth could be located. The documentation of external events, rationally ordered, was rejected. Constructed along these lines, *vociano* literary works took the internal functioning of the self - the emotions, impressions, and meditations of the individual - as their primary focus. Perhaps more than any other individual associated with the journal, Slataper embodied the *vociano* desire to do so. In his view, a rational order could not be placed upon human life. Indeed, he pursued this notion to such an extent that it would inform criticisms of Prezzolini's approach to *La Voce* on the grounds that the editor sought to 'schematize life'.¹¹¹ Human existence, as understood- and lived - by Slataper, is

¹⁰⁹ Scipio Slataper, 'Il Futurismo', *La Voce* 2:16 (31 March 1910), p.3. Slataper issues this call in the course of his polemic against the Milanese Futurists. He berates the Futurists for their failure to formulate an art that looks inwards, at the interior of man. He argues that they occupy themselves instead with the 'aesthetic fiction' ('finzione estetica') of 'external appearance' ('la sua apparenza esteriore'). He states: 'Marinetti's Futurists do not examine the internal drama of the mind; indeed, they scream so as not to hear it.' ['Ma i futuristi di Marinetti non si rendono affatto conto del dramma interiore; anzi per non sentirlo, urlano.']

¹¹⁰ *Il peccato. Plausi e botte. Frantumi. Altri scritti.*, ed. D. Puccini (Milan: Garzanti, 1983), p.187, cited in Burdett, p.56.

¹¹¹ *Lettere*, p.119. He states: 'Il torto della *Voce* è stato di schematizzare la vita', cited in Adamson, 'Modernism in Florence', p.234.

inherently irrational, defined by emotion, instinct, dreams, and the primitive: these, in his view, should therefore be the focus of art if truth was desired.

Il mio Carso, his best-known work, is a lyrical text, which is profoundly introspective. The author-protagonist narrates the 'the growth of a soul', as he attempts to gain a philosophical and epistemological basis for his life; it is a search for integrity through self-analysis.

Defined by confession and self-examination, coupled with a rejection of narrative events, the aesthetics of *Il mio Carso* is typical of those that drove the cultural production of the *vocianti*. The result is a radically transformed notion of the self: one which operates as the object, rather than the subject of the text. The autonomy of the self- or the 'I' of the text - is rejected: one is shown to be always subject to forces and effects both external and internal, from environmental, social, and political forces, to those of the unconscious.¹¹² Driven by emotion and the irrational, this changed notion of personhood runs in hand with the *vociano* desire to uncover the primal self through instinctive yet profound introspection. Through this literary practice, the *vocianti* sought to reduce man to his inner essence. First-person narrative opened up a space in which the modern male subjectivity could be explored and given poetic form.¹¹³ Indeed, rather than ordered and rational, it was suggested that man is unpredictable, instinctive, and intuitive. These were, moreover, the elements of his character with which he ought to engage. As such, the internal examination undertaken through the text simultaneously allowed the liberation of the masculine self and the assertion of Bergsonian notions of intuition and subjectivity.¹¹⁴ Cultural renewal, Papini asserted, could not be achieved by creating new absolutes or new values; it was to be

¹¹² Bennett & Royle (2009, pp.129-137) explore the autonomy of the self in their examination of literary theory and criticism, suggesting that it has been demonstrated to be a false concept. The subject, they state, 'is in many respects historically and ideologically determined' (p.132); in light of the theories of Freud, Foucault, Derrida, and others, the human subject is 'decentred'. Human beings are radically dependent on the context into which we are born, environmental factors, our subconscious desires, and even the language that we internalize and use. This view is useful for this examination of the political rhetoric and cultural production of the *vocianti* for two reasons: firstly, literature offers a space in which these factors, both internal and external, can be explored; secondly, in the focus on the self which is present in *vociano* aesthetics.

¹¹³ Robin Pickering-Iazzi, *Politics of the Visible: Writing Women, Culture, and Fascism*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.62.

¹¹⁴ Burdett, p.57.

achieved by unleashing the ‘subliminal self’, the ‘power that is personal, secret, awe-inspiring, quick-moving that resides in every person.’¹¹⁵

By seeking to examine man’s internal spaces through the spatial ordering of the text, *vociano* aesthetics were at the heart of their moral task. The self became a coalescence of anarchy and order; it was shown to be a construct which man maintains with the aim of giving authenticity to his existence. However, by attempting to maintain this visage, he comes to live in an inauthentic manner. To explore such paradoxes was to engage in a task that defied a rational, objective world-view. By extension, self-analysis attained a metaphysical function.

Above all, the spiritual and ethical value of the process resided in the notion of internal struggle as much as in the process of introspection itself.¹¹⁶ Heightened self-awareness through the reduction of the self to one’s inner essence was certainly of ethical value to the *vociani*. Yet it was in the willingness to explore and depict the internal conflict between intuition and analysis, desire and reason, that the *vociani* derived a true ethical purpose from their literary exploits. Hence Emilio Cecchi’s referencing of Rimbaud’s phrase that the poet must ‘seek out his soul, examine it, grasp it, learn it. And as soon as he knows it, he must cultivate it.’¹¹⁷ Soffici’s exaltation of Baudelaire’s poetry is equally revealing. Most notably he emphasized the poet’s capacity to move beyond his fixed identity through aesthetics.¹¹⁸ Implicit above all in this praise - and in the *vociano* call for introspection - is an echo of the Nietzschean demand to subject oneself and one’s values to examination. Through their autobiographical works the *vociano* took up the call. They did so in the belief that they were engaging in a struggle for moral elevation. In his evocation of Baudelaire’s fluidity of identity, Soffici reinforces this: the suggestion is that subjective examination

¹¹⁵ ‘Atena e Faust,’ *Leonardo* (February 1905), cited in Adamson, *Avant-Garde Florence*, p.82.

¹¹⁶ Burdett, p.59.

¹¹⁷ *Taccuini*, p.168, cited in Burdett, p.58.

Rimbaud’s words derive from his letter to Paul Demeny, 15 May 1871, in which he states: ‘Il cherche son âme, il l’inspecte, il la tente, l’apprend. Dès qu’il la sait, il doit la cultiver.’ In A. Rimbaud, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), pp.269-74.

¹¹⁸ Adamson, *Avant-Garde Florence*, p.157.

through the means of art- that is, the desire to engage with the paradoxes the modern soul- offers the means to address the spiritual void of the individual. Ultimately, too, it was a process of addressing the faulty goals towards which positivism and liberal democracy had directed Italian culture and society and the perceived dearth of values. The moral action of internal struggle would cultivate the ‘hard virtues’ of sincerity and openness in response to the decadence of nineteenth-century culture; it would be the restoration of the spirituality of the ‘interior man’ against the materialism of ‘external man’.¹¹⁹ The primary goal of Papini and Prezzolini was the ‘awakening and transforming [of] souls’ and the locating of a spiritual basis for the nation from which the *Risorgimento* project of ‘making Italians’ could be completed: the goals being evoked in spiritual and metaphysical terms, addressing the internal struggles of the subjective world was essential.¹²⁰

A focus on subjective introspection was not the sole form of revolt against literary tradition. In addition to this shift in narrative perspective was the exploration of new forms of narrative logic and temporal organisation within the text. If the rational self was rejected through a focus on the inner processes of the individual, a notion of temporal homogeneity and logical spatial ordering was rendered obsolete by the fragmented style (*frammentismo*) employed by many of the *vocianti*. Reality, they argued, was complex and non-linear; for a literary work to offer truth and hold artistic value, it must, therefore, represent it as such. To a great extent, the value placed on poetic fragments rather than extended prose drew on the *vocianti*’s (oversimplified) reading of Benedetto Croce’s aesthetics: their reductionist view posited a dichotomy between ‘poetry’ and ‘non-poetry’; that is, between the lyricism of the fragmented form and the mimeticism of the novel. In Slataper’s *Il mio Carso*, the fragmented form is particularly evident. His exploration of the self, his homeland, and other individuals that made up his life is constructed through narrative blocks that differ in

¹¹⁹ Adamson, *Avant-Garde Florence*, p.89.

¹²⁰ The influence of Nietzsche’s ideas on many of the *vocianti* is clear. See especially, Adamson, *Avant-Garde Florence*, pp.89-91 and pp.133-41.

linguistic style, register, and narrative perspective¹²¹. In a similar fashion, Boine's works, such as *'Frammenti'* and *'Frantumi'*, explore the space between poetry and prose. His language is lyrical and removed from traditional ordering structures. Conventional syntax is rejected and new words are coined: language is pulled to its limits in the author's attempt to attain a more expressive form of inspection. The result is disorienting and suggestive of a world in which normal spatial, temporal, or communicative ordering is difficult and in which perception is more complex than had been acknowledged previously.¹²²

Vociano Aesthetics. A Summary:

Vociano aesthetics can, therefore, be defined in five principal ways: firstly, in the opposition to literary conventions of the period; secondly, in the attention to the interior world of human subjectivity, rather than external action; thirdly, in a transformed notion of the self, which renders the subject the object of the text; fourthly, in the ethical value placed upon the process of reducing the self to its inner essence and recognising the internal struggles of man; and finally, in the temporal reorganisation of many of the texts in an attempt to depict the true complexity of human existence. That these aesthetic elements correspond directly with the socio-political rhetoric expressed in the pages of *La Voce* is evident. In particular, the opposition to positivist values is seen in the rejection of both the objective world and literary traditions. Equally, in the call to search for the 'subliminal' self and 'hard virtues' through self-enquiry one can see the *vociano* diagnosis of national spiritual degeneracy.

¹²¹ Somigli, 'Modernism in Italy', *The Cambridge Companion to European Modernism*, ed. by Pericles Lewis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.82.

¹²² Charles Klopp, 'Giovanni Boine', in *Encyclopedia of Italian Literary Studies: A-J*, ed. by Gaetana Marrone and Paolo Puppa (New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 2007), p.270.

II (iii.) Examining *Vociano* Aesthetics: Giovanni Papini and *Un uomo finito*

Papini's Un uomo finito

Written in a two-year period between 1910 and 1912, Papini's *Un uomo finito* relates the formative experiences of the writer, in particular those pertaining to his intellectual development. It is the account of Papini's desire for personal conquest and attainment. The first half of the text relates countless impossible tasks which, driven by intellectual curiosity and a desire to achieve 'genius', Papini sets himself. Each is a failure, from the attempt to write a comprehensive account of human history, to tasks of philosophical introspection. As the text progresses, however, the emphasis is increasingly upon the author-protagonist's desire to subject the contemporary world to violent intellectual assault. To do so will, he envisages, enable the propagation of his values, which he considers to be superior to those of others. The task became one of leadership, of rising up above normal men: 'Essere un di quelli che danno il nome a un'idea, a una moltitudine di uomini, [...] che hanno il loro dominio proprio, il loro campo a parte, la loro bandiera riconosciuta' (p.149).¹²³ In particular, the rhetoric of the text is defined by a stress on regeneration and the cultural renewal of the nation. Dominant, too, is the process of self-definition elaborated through the text and the striving for an idealised masculine self, misogynistic and violent, wholly the product of the social context of the period and the *vociano* notion of morality. Indeed, Papini envisages that he will be the man 'chi fa [...] 'l'uomo che dette un nome, un'idea, un manifesto alla spinta di questa piccola folla' (p.95);¹²⁴ the self-conception as such an individual reveals the unequivocal connection between the speaking self, the surroundings, and the future self which the text is constantly in a process of constructing.

¹²³ ['To be one of those who give their name to an idea, to a multitude of men, [...] who have a have a place apart, who hold sway beneath a banner that commands recognition!']. Quotations and page numbers are from Giovanni Papini, *Un uomo finito* (Florence: La Libreria della Voce, 1913). Translations are my own.

¹²⁴ ['He who acts, [...] the man who gave a name, a thought, a direction to the efforts of the little band.']

While not conforming to every aspect of the *vociano* aesthetics, the work is certainly the product of the same matrix of ideas that informed the other autobiographical works produced by members of the Florentine avant-garde.¹²⁵ Formally, it is not as innovative as, say, Boine's *Frantumi* or Slataper's *Il mio Carso*. Indeed, the text unfolds within a narrative framework: chapters signpost different - mainly metaphysical - points in his existence, producing a linear path that is traced through Papini's life, from childhood to adolescence to the age of thirty. Yet the work is confessional in tone and, rather than the material events of which his life had consisted to that point, it takes as its focus the emotional and moral textures of Papini's subjectivity. Papini recounts his periods of existential and moral crisis. He polemicizes against his cultural and philosophical targets. And, above all, the work depicts Papini's quest for the infinite: he seeks boundless historical knowledge, revolution-inducing cultural expression, a comprehensive understanding of philosophy, the attainment of true genius, and the cultural restoration of the Italian nation. Papini asks:

Cosa volevo imparare ? Cosa volevo fare ? Non lo sapevo. Né programmi né guide : nessuna idea precisa. Di qua o di là, est od ovest, in profondità o in altezza. Soltanto sapere, sapere, saper tutto [...] Fin d'allora sono stato di quelli per cui il poco o la metà non contano. O tutto o nulla. E ho voluto sempre il tutto. (p.17)¹²⁶

In this, the dynamics of the text are shown to be exclamatory and dramatic even as it is revelatory of internal emotion and intimacy. In tone and focus, then, if not in formal terms, it correlates greatly with those other examples of *vociano* autobiography.

¹²⁵ Burdett, p.60. Burdett emphasizes the extent to which texts such as Boine's *Frantumi*, Slataper's *Il mio Carso*, Cardarelli's *Prologhi*, Soffici's *Lemmonio Boreo*, and Papini's *Un uomo finito*, while structured in diverse ways, all draw on a common set of theoretical, formal, and philosophical assumptions. That is, that they proceed from those ideas that this study has defined as '*vociano* aesthetics'.

¹²⁶ ['What was it I wished to learn? What did I propose to accomplish? I did not know. I had neither guide, programme, nor precise conception. I wandered here and there, from east to west, no in the depths now up high. Just to know, to know, to know *everything!* [...] From the beginning I have been one of those to whom a little or even half is nothing. Everything or nothing! And I have always wanted everything.']

Papini's Sense of Failure

Of contextual importance is the upheaval in Papini's life at the time of writing. He was questioning the direction of *La Voce* and his personal participation in the project. In particular, he found both its tone and moralistic focus constricting and insufficiently radical.¹²⁷ His wider intellectual activities were a cause for concern, too. In 1908, with the failure of *Leonardo* complete, he had announced his abandonment of philosophy, rejecting it as a source of rootedness and truth for man. In a letter to Prezzolini he declared: 'I have still not understood what I really believe, what the interior foundations of my personality really are, not even (imagine!) the philosophical ones'.¹²⁸ Added to this was his perception - despite being not yet thirty years old - that his creative powers were on the wane and insufficient to achieve all that he desired. He considered that his life to that point had been a failure.

Morality

Un uomo finito constructs a figure that is by defined by morality. Yet the most prominent contours of his moral universe are conflict, action, and self-affirmation. Conflict is seen in the sense of despair rooted in both the internal and external worlds. The dynamic interaction between the two realms is the process that constructs the text and the self that emerges from it, in spite of the opposition between them: 'L'universo,' Papini says, 'è diviso in due parti : io e il resto' (p.281).¹²⁹ Likewise, his self-conception, expressed in the simplest terms possible, is one of diametric opposition, imbued with a desire to break up that which he cannot accept:

Io son rimasto, insomma, *l'uomo che non accetta il mondo* e in questo mio atteggiamento ostinato consiste l'unità e la Concordia delle mie anime opposte. Io non voglio accettare il mondo com'è e perciò tento di rifarlo colla fantasia o di mutarlo colla distruzione. Lo ricostruisco coll'arte o tento

¹²⁷ Adamson, *Avant-Garde Florence*, p.147.

¹²⁸ Papini and Prezzolini, *Storia di un amicizia*, 2 vols. (Florence: Vallecchi, 1966), 1: 120-1. Cited in Adamson, *Avant-Garde Florence*, pp.97-8.

¹²⁹ ['The universe is divided in two parts: myself and the rest.']

di capovolgere colla teoria. Son due sforzi diversi ma concordi e convergenti. (p.284)¹³⁰

In outlining his malaise, however, rather than the objective world, Papini first subjects human existence itself to questioning. For like the other *vocianti*, it is here, in the irrational of human life, that he considers there to be the possibility of another reality- one that is ‘migliore, più vero, più profondo’ (p.122).¹³¹ The questioning is urgent and profound. ‘È tutta qui?’ he asks, ‘A ogni desiderio una ripulsa, a ogni aspirazione una smentita, a ogni sforzo uno schiaffo — a tutta la voglia di felicità che ci prende a sedici, a diciott'anni la promessa del nulla. [...] Fede, gloria, arte, azione, paradiso, conquista’ (p.51).¹³²

Equally, the objective context informs the dominant traits of the author’s temperament that reappear through his exploration of the self. The rhetoric is vituperative and unrestrained. Papini rejects Italy in its contemporary state: ‘pantano bigio della moltitudine sciocca ed inetta,’ he argues, had consumed the nation; the Italian people, ‘avvilita e umiliata’ (p.100), were not to be the source of their own spiritual renewal.¹³³ The Italian masses are depersonalized by Papini’s rhetoric to such an extent that the result is to deny them any agency; in his representation of them, they amount only to ‘la frenesia solidarista e socialista che allora ammortiva gli spiriti della gioventù’, living an existence of ‘le deliquescenze e le vigliaccherie’ (p.100).¹³⁴ The juxtaposition of the collective noun, ‘frenzy’ with the notion of a base, primitive existence is striking. The suggestion is of a society devoid of elevated individuals of creative genius and limited in its ability for

¹³⁰ [‘I have remained, in essence, *the man who would not accept the world*, and within this attitude of mine resides the unity of my conflicting spirits. I cannot accept the world as it is; therefore I strive to remake it through the imagination and attempt to alter it through destructive means. I reconstruct it with the help of art, and attempt to disrupt it through theory. These are two different forms of effort; yet they are concordant and convergent.’ (emphasis is Papini’s own)]

¹³¹ [‘Better, truer, deeper.’]

¹³² [‘Is this all? Each desire encountering a repulse, every aspiration a defeat, every effort a felling blow, all the longing for happiness that sixteen and eighteen know met by the promise of nihilism? [...] Faith glory, art, action, paradise, conquest’]

¹³³ [‘The grey morass of a stupid and incapable multitude [of] a disheartened and humiliated Italy.’]

¹³⁴ [‘That solidaristic and socialistic frenzy that was at that time enfeebling the spirits of the youth [whose lives consisted of] delinquencies and baseness.’]

cultural expression. 'Mal congegnato; la vita senza armonia e senza grandezza' (p.86), the cultural basis of the nation demands re-patterning.¹³⁵

The reconstruction of this collective world, Papini implies, requires men such as him - those freed from the systems of thought and the ideas of the past. Violent upheaval, with the aim of social regeneration, is evoked; antagonistic and constructive in nature, the rhetoric structures both the self and the text. 'Ogni anziano è il nemico' (p.85), is his declaration against the cultural order of the previous generation.¹³⁶ The call to his contemporaries is one which demands that the task of reconstruction be undertaken in the cultural sphere: 'Tutto è sulle nostre spalle; ogni cosa tocca a noi !'(p.88) is Papini's proclamation.¹³⁷ Destructive action is placed at the centre of this task, albeit in metaphorical form. An ethics of cultural action, dominated by the masculine self, is constructed:

Ecco qua noialtri, bravi ragazzi, che abbiamo voglia di lavorare. In maniche di camicia, coi capelli al vento, collo zappone in mano e la carabina a tracolla, muratori e soldati nello stesso minuto [...] Che tonfi! che polvere! Quanti calcinacci! Cascano i muri con fracasso di bombe; il polverio che ci intornia è denso come quello di una battaglia ancien regime; [...] ogni parola fosse una fucilata a bruciapelo e ogni idea un'infallibile bomba da fortezza. (p.87)¹³⁸

When these lines are placed within the context of the protagonist's stated desire for cultural renewal, the suggestion is that the source of national hope resides not in the people but with the introspective, spiritually uplifted, educated individual; the spiritually rich, masculine figure who is capable of violent confrontation. It is the desire for the self to attain domination over the surroundings, and others. Implicit is the assertion of the Nietzschean call for the individual to reconsider his values through a creative act with the aim of

¹³⁵ ['Life, ill ordered, ill harmonious and devoid of dignity.']

¹³⁶ ['Every greybeard is an enemy.']

¹³⁷ ['The world's burdens rest upon our shoulders! It is for us to accomplish all things!']

¹³⁸ [Here we stand, ready! All brave lads, eager to work. Here, in our shirtsleeves, bareheaded, armed with mattock and gun, at once masons and soldiers [...] What blows we strike! What a lot of dust we raise! How much rubbish we stir up! Walls collapse with a noise like the exploding of bombs; the dust that encompasses us is as thick as that of old-time battles; [...] Each word should be a shot at close quarters and each new idea a bomb fit to demolish a fortress.']

constructing a new moral basis. A Crocean notion, which posits the capacity of the individual for creativity, agency, and action, is present, too.

The Self as Individually Constructed

In these terms, Papini's examination of the internal functioning of the self appears to be based on an ethics of opposition. Yet, in response to this crisis, which was both ideological and spiritual, he sought an alternative form of constructive intellectual activity. This would be removed from the value systems of 'religions, moralities, [and] laws', which Papini believed to operate on a level inferior to that of the liberated individual 'genius'.¹³⁹ In view of this, his task was the assertion of action.

If, to a great extent, Papini's prose offers a notion of the self as defined in opposition to what surrounds it, more complex processes of self-definition are also present. Papini's introspection asserts his radical individualism. This goes beyond his self-elevation above the 'socialistic' masses and notion of elite leadership. The emphasis, instead, is on the subjective as the only source of truth and, by extension, the only source of action. His soul is inaccessible to all others, even to his parents who were 'troppo lontani da quest'anima che da loro veniva' (p.50).¹⁴⁰ In wider society, too, his isolation is clear:

Io mi ci trovavo a disagio. Non conoscevo nessuno e odiavo tutti. Ero vestito male ; ero brutto ; ero bianco in viso ; avevo l'aspetto severo del malcontento : sentivo che nessuno mi amava e poteva amarmi. (p.34)¹⁴¹

The suggestion is not merely of rejection; rather, it is an assertion of the fluidity of the human soul, of the complex and opaque nature of that 'vita propria, personale, interna, sensitiva, intellettuale, metafisica' (p.114).¹⁴² Yet, in response, Papini does not gravitate

¹³⁹ Adamson, *Avant-Garde Florence*, pp.165-6.

¹⁴⁰ ['all too far from this soul that they had brought forth.']

¹⁴¹ ['I felt completely out of place. I knew no one and I hated them all. I was poorly dressed, ugly, and pale of face; I wore the severe look of the discontented: I felt that no one cared for me, that no one could possibly care for me.']

¹⁴² ['a personal, inner, sensitive, intellectual, metaphysical existence.']

towards a desire for participation in the collective rites of the wider world; nor, indeed, in search of the acceptance of others. Rather, he finds shelter in his subjectivity, in that which he can claim to be his own: ‘mi rintanavo, mi nascondevo, mi distendevo in me stesso, nell'anima, nella fantasticheria bramosa, nella solitaria ruminazione dell'io e del mondo rifatto attraverso l'io’ (p.6).¹⁴³ The proclamations of his own genius reinforce this further; the self, and his self-conception is a ballast for Papini: ‘Tutta la mia vita è piantata su questa fede : ch'io sia un uomo di genio’ (p.223).¹⁴⁴ Indeed, his genius is attributed to an ‘irrequietezza perpetua’ (p.241).¹⁴⁵ That is, to his autodidactic pursuits, to the desire to immerse himself in ideas and to be the product of them: ‘Sono l'enciclopedico, l'uomo dei dizionari e dei manuali’ (p.228)¹⁴⁶ Knowledge is endowed with great moral value, for it offers the means to nurture his own self. On a semantic level, knowledge and learning are bound repeatedly with notions of the celestial, the sacred, and the awe-inspiring: a childhood book contains not mere stories, but a ‘meraviglia’ that is ‘sempre nuova’ (p.9);¹⁴⁷ the library is a place that induces powerful sentiments Papini had felt ‘neppure in chiesa da piccino’ (p.15).¹⁴⁸ Bewilderment, spiritual exaltation, and the attainment of an idealised masculine self are present, urgent feelings: ‘lo smarrimento e il piacere e lo stupore e il senso d'esser divenuto ad un tratto come più grande e più uomo’ (p.15).¹⁴⁹ Moreover, his library visits are engrained in his daily life. Indeed their ritualistic nature elevate his subjective experience of existence to the realm of the spiritual. Through his language, Papini instils these rituals with great power and the extent to which it is forms part of his process of self-cultivation is highly striking.

¹⁴³ [‘I took refuge within myself, in dreams full of yearning, in lonely contemplation of a world reconstructed through my own subjectivity.’]

¹⁴⁴ [‘My whole existence rests on the conviction that I am a man of genius.’]

¹⁴⁵ [‘A perpetual restlessness.’]

¹⁴⁶ [‘I am the encyclopaedia, the man of dictionaries and text-books’]

¹⁴⁷ [‘A marvel [...] ever new’]

¹⁴⁸ [‘Not even in church as a little child.’]

¹⁴⁹ [‘Bewilderment, pleasure, amazement, and the sense of having grown suddenly older, to have become more of a man.’]

Parallel to the radical individualism that Papini demonstrates is his desire to regain and reassert his sense of self. The writing is ceaselessly egocentric. As has been shown, Papini's perceptions are rooted in the subjective, in his feelings and internal struggles. From the outset, however, the notion of self extends beyond the simple evocation of the subjective 'I'. The depiction of his intellectual journey reveals Papini's desire to mature and shape the self as it emerges from the text. In the linear presentation of the narrative and its division into exactly fifty chapters, the notion of the self as a project is clear. The self and the objective world coalesce in a process of sublimation:

Che meravigliosa scoperta, quale improvvisa illuminazione ! [...] Tutto il mondo non era che una parte del mio io : da me, dai miei sensi, dalla mia mente dipendeva la sua esistenza. (pp.77-78)¹⁵⁰

In this it is Papini's awareness of the objectified self that emerges from the writing of his text. It is the self that, in the terms this study has adopted, can be said to occupy a position in the socio-cultural 'field' of avant-garde Florence. In response to this objectification, his first-person narration seeks to cultivate an authorial presence that possesses self-analytic authority. That is, Papini not only writes himself into the text; he simultaneously constructs an auto-myth that the text then serves to externalize. This mythologised self emerges from the process of writing the text and its subsequent reception by the reader, or its expressions in the 'field'. Thus, in *Un uomo finito*, the self is raised to the normal experiential level of man, becoming something that is subject to his actions:

E lo spirito è duttile, è malleabile, perfettibile. [...] Se qualcosa di nuovo e di grande uscirà fuori nella vita dell'uomo uscirà dallo spirito ; se vogliamo perfezionare l'uomo bisogna render perfetto lo spirito. (p.155)¹⁵¹

Within this, however, is a paradox, which is bound up with the polyvalent nature of the self-as-object. The self is at once posited as subject to the authorial presence, yet Papini also claims: 'nessuno può conoscere sé stesso - nessuno può vedere con severità e dire con

¹⁵⁰ ['I am the world. What a marvellous discovery! [...] The whole world was but a part of my subjectivity; its existence depended upon me, upon my sense, my mentality.']

¹⁵¹ ['The spirit is ductile, malleable, and capable of being perfected [...] If in the course of man's existence anything new and great shall appear, it will be of the spirit; if man is to be perfected the spirit must be made perfect.']

franchezza tutto quello che sente, pensa e fa' (p.159).¹⁵² Yet, another assertion repeated throughout is another opposing one: that through his self-exploration Papini is revealing an authentic self. It is his ego- desires, conflicts, and all- that he claims to present. Introducing another of his absurd literary endeavours in an early chapter, for instance, he suggests that what he did was 'al solito' (p.28) – true to his nature. Even in the closing pages of the text, the proposition remains. Indeed that authentic self is asserted more strongly than ever.

'Eccomi qua,' he declares:

Mi sono aperto e sparato [...] Non è questa un'opera d'arte; è una confessione a me stesso e agli altri [...] Io mi presento ai vostri freddi occhi con tutti i miei dolori, le mie speranze e le mie fiacchezze. (p.298)¹⁵³

The gap between the rhetoric of authenticity, that of the unknowable self, and that of the self-as-object is there for the reader to see. The claim is of authenticity; yet, in reality, to engage with Papini's text is to reveal a constructed, mythologised self, which has been shaped carefully by the first-person narration.

Papini's *toscantità*

Through his writing, Papini also carefully evokes the attachment he feels to his native Tuscany. Beyond its literal significance as a place of physical refuge, isolation, and detachment from a material world to which he felt no sense of belonging, the Tuscan countryside acts a metaphor for the quest for truth through learning, cultural expression, and spiritual nourishment: 'soltanto lassù, col vento in viso, senza cappello, senza pensiero preciso, sentivo di vivere come avrei voluto sempre' (p.43), Papini pronounces.¹⁵⁴ He had declared the wider world to be lacking in harmony and in need of reconstruction; Tuscany,

¹⁵² ['No one can know himself, no one can view calmly and speak openly of all that he feels, thinks, and does']

¹⁵³ ['Here you have me. I have opened up and dissected myself [...] This is not a work of art, it is a confession both to myself and others [...] I stand before your unsympathetic gaze with all my sorrows, all my hopes and weaknesses']

¹⁵⁴ ['Only up there on the hill-top with the wind in my face, bareheaded, without a definite thought in my mind, did I feel I was living as I wished I might always live.']

in contrast, is expressed as a single, unitary whole. The tone of the lyrical verse is reverential. The land itself is imbued with spiritual, moral, and pedagogic value:

Oltre che a' libri ed a' morti debbo ranima mia agli alberi ed a' monti. La campagna mi educò quanto la biblioteca. Una certa e determinata campagna : tutto quel che c'è di poetico, di malinconico, di grigio e di solitario in me l'ho avuto dalla campagna di Toscana, dalla campagna ch'è intorno a Firenze. (p.42)¹⁵⁵

The land is thus rendered an authentic space, existing in counter-position to the wider Italian nation. To the protagonist, the stability, sincerity, and moral unity of the region is clear. It is evident to the reader, too: all are evoked in both the sensory experience of the land and the visual composition of the landscape:

Campagna un po' monacale e francescana, un po' aspra, un po' nera, ove senti lo scheletro di sasso sotto la buccia erbosa, e i grandi monti bruni e spopolati si rizzano [...] campagna eccitante e morale della mia gioventù, campagna toscana magra ed asciutta, fatta di pietra serena e di pietra forte, di fiori onesti e popolani, di cipressi risoluti, di quercioli e di pruni senza moine. (p.44)¹⁵⁶

The sensuousness of the language breaks through the otherwise frenetic, urgent narration. In Papini's recollections of the land, there is a languid quality, which is not present elsewhere. A metaphysical deferral or shift in identity takes place in these moments; certainly a sense of nostalgia, and an accompanying breathlessness, pervades the memories. While evidently not written in the *frammentismo* style, the powerful evocation of the subjective is similar to the effect of texts such as those of Slataper or Boine:

Toscana, quella dove ho imparato a respirare e a pensare ; campagna nuda, povera, grigia, triste, chiusa, senza lussi, senza sfoggi di tinte, senza odori e festoni pagani, ma così intima, così familiare, così adatta alla sensibilità delicata, al pensiero dei solitari. (p.45)¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ ['Other than that which my soul does owe to books and to the dead, it owes all else to the hills and trees. The country contributed as greatly towards my education as the library. I am talking of a single, definite region. All that is poetical, melancholy, grey, and solitary in me I derived from the rural regions of Tuscany, from the country around Florence.']

¹⁵⁶ ['A monkish, Franciscan country, rude and black, where one is conscious of the skeleton of stone beneath the green sod, where the great, dark, lonely hills rise suddenly [...] The stimulating, sternly moral country of my youth, the lean, dry Tuscan country, with its granite, its honest, common flowers, its bold cypresses, sturdy oaks, and rough brambles.']

¹⁵⁷ ['Tuscany, where I learnt to breathe and to think; a poor, grey, enclosed region, lacking luxuriance and bright colours, lacking perfume and pagan garlands; yet so intimate, so friendly, so well suited to sensitive natures, to the thoughts of solitary individuals.']

The textures of both descriptions are strangely vibrant and evocative, in spite of the nature of the tones and emotions depicted: ‘erbosa’, ‘nera’, and ‘pietra; ‘morale [...] magra, asicutta’. Of course, the semantics evoke the solidity of values which Papini seeks to bestow upon the wider Italian nation. In the pivotal chapter of the book, ‘La missione’, in which Papini announces his shift towards a desire to lead, the Italian man depicted is ‘lente, pesante, addormentata, volgare, fisica, infernale’ (p.155).¹⁵⁸ The contrast is striking.

In the attempt to acquire intellectual greatness, Tuscany is present once more. The self which is present in the text attempts aggressively to co-opt all objects - values, ideas, places, and events - into becoming an aspect of the self. It is from this perspective that one can understand the linear construction of the text: each page, each event, each intellectual shift is rendered a block upon which Papini builds. His subjectivity, like that of all people, is active, dynamic, and constructive. ‘Questo mio nòcciolo interno,’ he says:

deve dar vita a tutto, deve animare e tramutare quel che mi circonda, deve aiutarmi a tollerarlo’. (p.281)¹⁵⁹

The connection to rural Tuscany reaches beyond the physical or, indeed, the sentimental. ‘Ho bisogno di appoggiarmi a qualcosa, di rimetter le radici in qualche posto,’ Papini states (p.273).¹⁶⁰ On one level, this is what his Tuscan land provides: it offers spiritual support, something upon which Papini can lean, a place in which he can anchor himself. Being his place of birth, however, it is more. For Papini it is maternal and his contact with it allows him, at his time of greatest crisis, to ‘ricominciare da capo, rinascere - tornare, cioè, alla matrice prima, non quella di carne della mamma, ma quella più vera e maggiore della patria (p.274).¹⁶¹ His land is the ultimate embodiment of the primal. The connection extends still further: to the cultural. Dante, Boccaccio, Machiavelli, Capponi, and Carducci: all are evoked as more than historical documents. ‘Questa vecchia roba rinfrescava lo spirito’,

¹⁵⁸ [‘Slow, heavy, drowsy, vulgar, physical, and damnable.’]

¹⁵⁹ [‘This inner kernel of mine must animate and transform my surroundings, must help me to tolerate them.’]

¹⁶⁰ [‘I must lean upon something, must, once more, take root somewhere.’]

¹⁶¹ [‘To begin anew, to be born again, to return to the primal womb, not to my mother’s flesh, but to that country, which is truer and greater.’]

Papini states (p.279).¹⁶² Their work, though old, exerts a powerful rejuvenating effect: they are repositories of the spiritual, 'friends and brothers' of Papini through their shared rootedness in the Tuscan land in which both his politics and his aesthetics are rooted. He is, once more - as ever - a certain embodiment of the modernist: a dualistic, paradoxical figure. His exaltation of the rural space of his country is physical, rooted in the experiential and the sensory. Simultaneously, however, his existential debt to the culture of the land, to his 'friends', is abstract, transcendental, and ephemeral.

¹⁶² ['This literature of the past rejuvenated my spirit.']

Conclusion

The present study examined Papini's autobiographical work as the final stage of a dialogue between modernism, culture, and the Florentine avant-garde. The thesis first considered the notion of culture. The aim was to demonstrate the inherent complexity surrounding any 'cultural phenomenon'. Culture, it was shown, goes beyond cultural practices, social norms, or aesthetic products. This complexity also goes beyond the semantic: it is rooted in the role culture plays in human activities and human world-construction; that is, its role in society. For Clifford Geertz, culture is an objective, all-encompassing ecosystem, formed of conceptual structures that are formed by human action in the world. To be understood, they must be 'read': human communication, experience, and action must be examined.¹⁶³

Likewise, in Peter Berger's terms, culture cannot be detached from the human world. It is the fundamental world-constructing process in which human beings engage. Culture is a form of *nomos*, a sense-giving entity which humans require both spiritually and biologically.¹⁶⁴

Following this notion of culture, the first chapter then sought to express an understanding of modernism - a highly complex, unstable concept in its own right. In seeking to understand modernism, multiple approaches are possible: the formalist and the socio-cultural. In light of the notion of culture this study expresses, a formalist approach was shown to limit any attempt at cultural analysis. This study therefore argued that, rather than a purely aesthetic phenomenon, modernism is best understood as a network of cultural responses, seen predominantly in the cultural sphere, to a socio-political, cultural, and spiritual context that provoked a questioning of the self, of artistic practices, and of social and political institutions.¹⁶⁵ Its aesthetics challenged conventional artistic and literary form; its political permutations, most notably Fascism, sought to re-pattern the social world at a fundamental level.

¹⁶³ *Interpretation of Cultures*, p.17

¹⁶⁴ *The Sacred Canopy*, pp.3-28.

¹⁶⁵ Somigli and Moroni, pp.8-9; Bradbury and McFarlane, pp.19-55.

The second chapter of this thesis focused on the members of the Florentine avant-garde who were grouped around the journal *La Voce*. The group was just one of numerous avant-garde groupings that were organising themselves around journals and artistic movements around Florence and northern Italy at that time. The Milanese Futurists were attempting to meld innovative artistic expression with ambitious political goals; the group surrounding the Florentine journal *Il Marzocco* engaged closely with avant-garde literary experimentation; meanwhile, Enrico Corradini's *Il Regno* was overtly nationalist in tone and focus. It is the premise of this thesis, however, that those individuals surrounding *La Voce* provide a particularly powerful prism through which to the nexus of issues that were present in Italy at that time has been of this study. Their targets, ethics, and responses to their socio-cultural and political context drove both the wider rhetoric and cultural aesthetics of movements contemporaneous to them. The example that their writing offers is therefore both useful and fascinating.

Their focus was varied. The *vocianti* vehemently opposed the liberal elite that governed Italy. They considered that the country was in a state of political, cultural, and social stagnation. This world-view, coupled with a philosophical basis drawn predominantly from the ideas of men such as Benedetto Croce, Henri Bergson, and Georges Sorel, dominated the group's cultural politics. They expressed a rhetoric of renewal; the need for a youthful, masculine elite; an avant-garde view of the artist; and a Nietzschean demand for the creation of new values in place of those derived from decadent, positivist culture. Both politically and socially, it was radical and destructive; yet it was also future-oriented, seeking the wholesale re-patterning of reality and a new form of human being.¹⁶⁶

Above all, the *vocianti* envisaged the fulfilment of their political and social goals through cultural revolt. Giuseppe Prezzolini argued that there had been 'a ruinous divorce between political activity and other intellectual and moral activities'.¹⁶⁷ In the view of the avant-

¹⁶⁶ Gentile, *The Struggle for Modernity*; Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*.

¹⁶⁷ 'Perché siamo anticlericali', *La Voce*, 1:6 (21 Jan 1909), p.1.

garde, one could not be separated from the other. To seek a new order, therefore, required a cultural and spiritual effort. At the heart of this were both *La Voce* and the cultural endeavours of the *vocianti*. As such, a new aesthetics was developed, based upon a transformed notion of the self, in which the subject was rendered the object of the text; the reduction of the self to its inner essence; a focus on the internal struggle of human subjectivity; and a re-thinking of the spatial and temporal ordering of literary texts. From Slataper, to Boine, to Papini, their works resist spatial, temporal, or communicative ordering and perception is shown to be more complex than objective reality suggests. Papini's *Un uomo finite* offers a concentrated example of this aesthetic outlook. In his work the external world is perpetually rejected in favour of the interior processes of the protagonist: from this emanates the idealised, masculine self which dominates *vociano* aesthetics. To engage in such cultural production, would, the group envisaged stronger, spiritually uplifted Italians, imbued with 'hard virtues' associated with the idealised masculine self.

In political and social terms, the *vocianti* were wholly men of their time. One need only cite their political rhetoric, misogynistic language, and urgent call for violent action. Their journalistic output exemplifies this; their literary endeavours reinforce it further. Yet, through the dialogue which this thesis has enabled, a further assertion can be made: that in their radical world-view, creative-destructive aesthetics, and future-oriented politics, dominated by calls for cultural and political renewal, they can be said to have been imbued with the modernist 'sensitivity'. Their participation in and influence over the dominant cultural discourse of the period is evident both in their stated aims and lasting legacy. Certainly, the permutation of the modernist 'mode' that one can discern in early-twentieth century Florence was one that could only have developed in the highly-specific context in which the individuals played out their lives: that of *giolittismo*, spiritual malaise, and a yearning for the restoration of national greatness. Nonetheless, it correlates consistently and profoundly with those ideas that were driving cultural, social, political revolt across Europe at the time; the modernist spirit is pervasive.

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