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Whitman, Fascist Ambiguity and Castelnuovo-Tedesco's Covert Critique[1]

Explaining how a work of art came into existence is never simple. While it is tempting to follow the Romantics and simply cite the artist's inner life as sufficient cause, the modernist avant-garde vociferously challenged the equation "art equals self-expression." As someone whose aesthetic was a rich mix of Romanticism and Modernism, Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco invites us to imagine in complex ways the circumstances that led to the Whitman songs. Of course, that the cycle was composed in year fourteen of the *Ventennio* renders particularly prescient the question of how the *Leaves of Grass* cycle came to be. Considered in the shadow of Fascism, Castelnuovo-Tedesco's decision to end the cycle with a poem invoking "the dear love of man for his comrade" can only intrigue modern listeners.

In his *Symposium*, Plato proposed that no poet could hope to achieve greatness minus the madness that results from possession by the Muses. Following a period of nervous exhaustion, Castelnuovo-Tedesco composed his *Leaves of Grass* cycle in a Bacchic frenzy itself in keeping with Whitman's pagan sensibility (and references to Socrates and Plato!) So debilitated by exhaustion and loneliness that this typically prolific composer could not work, Castelnuovo-Tedesco had received a book of Whitman's poetry, in 1936, from his family doctor, Vincenzo Lapiccirella, and "what medicine could not do, poetry could!" As he recounts in his autobiography *Una vita di musica* (*A Life with Music*) the composer immediately "fell in love" with Whitman's poetry, "so full of warmth, of enthusiasm, of human solidarity." Castelnuovo-Tedesco considered the songs among [his] best; "I found in them a freshness of inspiration and a warmth of inflection I had long lost." He had hoped to have them published in the US but archly confessed, "I found in American editors a strange bias against the poetry of Whitman (who is nonetheless considered *the* national poet, but only due to his patriotic poetry)."

Given that Whitman was known internationally as the preacher of brotherly love and the poet of democracy, how was it possible for Castelnuovo-Tedesco – a Modernist (at least according to Fascist

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hardliners) and a Jew – to write these songs without fear of retribution? The composer's efforts coincide with the struggle to determine a properly Fascist aesthetic and the debates, conducted in the Italian press, around Modernism – specifically, the tendency among certain "fascists of the first hour" to equate Modernism with "internationalism," "Hebraism," and "Bolshevism." It is well remarked, however, that, unlike Hitler, Mussolini himself refused to denote a single Fascist aesthetic, the catholicity of his patronage on the one hand an attempt to secure the loyalty of artists and on the other, a kind of gambit: hoping that *someone* would bring glory to Fascist Italy, Mussolini gave financial support even to artists who were not strong advocates of the regime, as long as they did not publicly voice their opposition (Sachs, Stone).

Italian fascism's attitude toward anti-Semitism was ambiguous; certain fascists were anti-Jewish from the regime's beginnings. Their position was strengthened after the Concordate in 1929, and they used the fact that Italian Jews had a tradition of sending money to their co-religionists in Palestine as an occasion to question Jewish patriotism. The scholarly consensus today is that Italian anti-Semitism was homegrown and not merely a "foreign" import from Germany, as the post-war myth of Italians as *la brava gente* asserted (Del Boca; Sarfatti).

The long history of Italian anti-Semitism, however, is itself quite complex. On the one hand, the medieval and early Renaissance periods saw incidents of persecution, a particularly horrific one following what is termed the blood libel, invented by Franciscan friars like Fra Bernadino da Feltre, wherein the Jews of Trent were accused of murdering a Christian infant and using his blood to make matzo (Roth). Italy is also responsible for the invention of the ghetto, and at various periods in history, Jews were required to wear badges or other identifying signs. On the other hand, the Jewish presence in Rome dates to the late Republican period, enforcement of anti-Jewish measures was often uneven (and in some cases, nonexistent), many areas of Italy welcomed Jews from the 1492 Spanish expulsion, and, unlike their European neighbors, many regions in Italy never banished their Jews. Until 1938, Fascist anti-Semitism did not include anti-Jewish laws, and Jews were allowed to be members of the Party. Castelnuovo-Tedesco's Jewish identity did not automatically endanger his career.

Whitman was first introduced to Italian audiences in 1879; in 1887, the first Italian volume of his work appeared. 1907 saw the publication of a two-volume edition of the complete poems that was then revised in 1923. Giuseppe Mazzini and Giosuè Carducci were both champions of Whitman's work.

In fact, Whitman's poetry appealed both to Fascists and anti-Fascists alike. Castelnuovo-Tedesco set poems from what is today considered Whitman's most homoerotic cluster, *Calamus*. The

extent to which the composer heard these homoerotic overtones can be imagined as consistent with the same tolerant cultural and humanist outlook with which he regarded Shakespeare's Sonnets, which inspired him with their powerful expression of love, free of prejudice and constraints. We know that these homo-tones were perceived by Cesare Pavese (arrested in 1935 on suspicion of participating in anti-fascist activity). Pavese's response is itself fascinating: he accepts Whitman's pansexually as a product of the poet's healthy, prelapsarian sensibility – an attitude similar to one adopted by Renaissance scholars like Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino toward antiquity (Carman), and also typical of how European intellectuals of that time regarded America as a land of "innocence."

The idea of Whitman as prelapsarian also found expression, however, in Giovanni Papini's embrace of the poet, Papini locating in Whitman's lyrics a modern primitivism or barbarism in keeping with Fascist ruralism, anti-intellectualism, and critique of the "soft" bourgeoisie – a phrase used to vilify the leaders of liberal Italy. That is, the same characteristics that led Pavese to praise Whitman were also those that could be admired by anti-Semitic fascists like Papini. For Whitman's sensibility could be read as consonant with fascist calls for a new Italian male characterized by his virility and allegedly modeled after Mussolini himself.

That both allies and foes of Fascism could find in Whitman a fellow traveler alerts us to the contradictions of Mussolini's dictatorship – for the critique of the bourgeoisie did nothing, for example, to dissuade Italian industrialists from turning to the regime to "solve," via thuggery, strikes and labor disputes. These contradictions are to some degree what made it possible for Castelnuovo-Tedesco to write his Whitman songs minus fear of reproach. For the history of virility is itself traversed by contradictions. To refer to just one Italian example: in Carlo Goldoni's *La locandiera*, il Cavaliere di Ripafratta equates the pursuit of women with effeminacy and weakness: "Moglie a me! Piuttosto una febbre quartana (26) . . . Pazzi! Pazzi! Quelli che s'innamorano delle donne" (34).

The past two decades have seen the publication of studies of Italian fascist culture that, owing to the fascist determination to produce a "new man" who might redress all the perceived inadequacies of liberal Italy, include examinations of masculinity. But the role of the arts in *resisting* this new man has been overlooked. Barbara Spackman, for example, argues that Italian fascism must be understood as "a discursive formation whose principal node of articulation is 'virility'" (ix). Virtually absent from her book, however, is an analysis of a masculinity not in keeping with the stated values of the regime.

Parallel to Spackman, Lorenzo Benadusi begins his *The Enemy of the New Man* by contrasting the representation of masculinity offered by Francesco Hayez's "I Vespri Siciliani" with images by

fascist period artists Mario Sironi and Gerardo Dottori: Benadusi asks, "How was 'the romantic man,' the effeminate dandy of little virility, transformed into his anti-thesis, the 'new man' of the twentieth century?" According to the author, during the twenty years of fascism, "This stereotype of masculine virility reached its peak." (3)

This idea of a "model of masculinity under fascist Italy" is now so common as to have generated a Wikipedia page. That page defines this model as espousing the values of anti-intellectualism and ruralism and as being anti-Modern, anti-feminist, and anti-bourgeoisie. It cites Mussolini as the prototype of the "hegemonic male" and argues that this model of fascist masculinity was institutionalized via the Opera Nazionale Balilla, the fascist youth group.

But the fascist cultural context—and the representations of the masculine body it produced—was more complicated than this Wikipedia page implies. Specifically, in an attempt to imagine itself as the predestined heir of imperial Rome, fascism frequently employed an antiquarian aesthetic that of necessity alluded to Platonic homoeroticism (as well as Roman pansexuality). Imperial Roman male sexuality was itself a combination of on the one hand a long-standing freedom to make use of the bodies of social inferiors of whatever gender and on the other, a very different model, that of the Greek philosopher and his ephebe (Cantarella). This Greek inspired model achieved a kind of apotheosis in the relationship between the "virile" Emperor Hadrian and his lover Antinous. Following Antinous's death by drowning in the Nile, the young and purportedly beautiful man was deified. The last God added to the Roman pantheon, Antinous and his cult were ultimately fused with that of Dionysus, and there are many surviving representations of Antinous as Dionysus (and, to a lesser extent, Osiris, reminding us of the syncretism of the Roman religion.)

Fascism's references to ancient Rome could not side-step this historical reality. What the Renaissance, the poetry of Whitman, and the fascist appropriation of Greco-Roman culture could not contain are precisely the contradictions of Platonism. Today we use the term platonic love to define intimate, nonsexual friendships. As described by Plato, however, these friendships were highly eroticized. The homosociality of ancient Rome could be deployed by fascism to both homoerotic and homophobic ends, promoting Platonic bonds but vilifying "passive" homosexuality as effeminate and a threat to the Italian race. During the fascist years, a number of homosexual painters, including Filippo de Pisis, Corrado Cagli, and Guglielmo Janni, pursued a strategy of painting nude male figures that masked their homoeroticism by referencing the Greco-Roman world. Janni and Cagli also reworked Renaissance images of saints and religious figures (including images of St. Sebastian, but also King

David and St. Francis) that themselves borrowed from classical, pastoral antecedents.

The fascists' obsession with virility and their appropriation of images from Ancient Rome, however, is only half of the story. For the fascist years also saw the production of representations of masculinity not in keeping with a single, classical model. To understand how and why, we must turn once again to the contradictions of the regime. Despite his paeans to ruralism, perhaps most characteristically embodied in the photographs of the time period – Mussolini driving a tractor, Mussolini threshing wheat – *Il Duce* was committed to industrializing Italy. He was not anti-capitalist but instead encouraged a limited consumption in keeping with the realities of the Italian economy.

The early decades of the twentieth century saw, in response to changes in capitalism, transformations in Western masculinity. A process begun in the late nineteenth century with the appearance of the dandy continued, accelerated by Fordism and Taylorism and their demand for a managerial class (Floyd). That process required the increasing targeting of men as consumers. Masculinity increasingly became something that could be purchased. (Prior to the Wilde trials in 1895, the dandy was not, contra Benadusi, perceived as effeminate and/or homosexual; in the Italian context, Gabriele D'Annunzio, whom Castelnuovo-Tedesco personally knew and admired, is perhaps the most famous example, though Castelnuovo-Tedesco appears in some photos to himself reflect the model of refined, dandified elegance. Breward.)

Fascism could not insulate itself from these transformations, including the gradual if uneven adoption in Italy of Taylorism and Fordism and their attendant deskilling of labor and expansion of the "new" lower middle class of functionary intelligentsia, many of whom staffed the fascist bureaucracy. (Recall that Antonio Gramsci's "Americanism and Fordism" ("Americanismo e fordismo") was written from within the walls of a fascist prison.)

As Victoria de Grazia has argued, in the 1920s, Italy's managerial class was slow to develop and relatively small compared with its counterpart in other European nations, and yet this class fraction bore a certain representative burden. A fascinating early intervention in these debates is Roberto Cantalupo's *La Classe Dirigente* of 1926, Cantalupo being a Fascist deputy to the Italian parliament. Blatant propaganda, Cantalupo's book asserts that the fascist syndicates and accompanying corporatization of society will solve the problem of the clash of interests between owners and workers.

The way that Cantalupo fudges fascism's anti-bourgeois ideology is particularly noteworthy. Reminding them that only Mussolini can protect Italy from Bolshevism (82), the author assures the members of the bourgeoisie that fascism has two historical functions: that of revolution-limiter and that

of revolution-initiator. Regarding limiting revolution, it has accomplished an eminently conservative act, snatching from ruin Western society in general and that of Italy especially, preserving the centuries old sum of artistic, economic, and political civilization that the Asian subversion menaced with death. If Fascism were limited to its conservative action, however, it would have been deprived of originality and would have easily degenerated into a reactionary movement. It was also a revolution-initiator.

Insisting that Mussolini had declared as much from its beginning, Cantalupo argues that fascism is a revolution of both "*soldiers* and *producers*." "Fascism is the most harmonic fusion of nationalism and syndicalism able to be imagined . . . . in order to be a regime, it must comprehend all the interests of the national collectivity and all of the individualism of the producer, merging them and harmonizing them in a single system, robustly united and uniting" (84). Unfortunately for the author, such "harmonizing" was not always possible.

The fascists realized that, in order to compete with the US and Britain, they needed to "Taylorize" not only work, but also leisure (de Grazia 60) This was accomplished chiefly through the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro, the fascist after-work program that sought to use leisure to create a sense of worker solidarity to replace and circumvent class-based forms of identification that preceded the regime, as well as to produce consent for fascist rule. It specifically took the place of union clubs and socialist circles that had survived into the mid-1920s, when they had been a means whereby workers addressed their own needs.

Mussolini thus offered the new managerial class on which the regime was increasingly dependent a scaled down version of the benefits provided by Fordism. Fascist anti-bourgeois ideology acted as a check on conspicuous consumption, while fascist discourses of virility attempted to calm the potential homosexual panic unleashed by the increased commodification of masculinity. For concern with one's mode of appearance always threatened to conjure the specter of effeminacy, particularly in an Italy with a long tradition of figures like the *cicisbeo* – the indolent aristocrat – and the dandy.

To return to the Whitman cycle: within this complex historical context, should Castelnuovo-Tedesco's setting be considered a felicitous exploitation of the regime's own contradictions? I suggest that we imagine Castelnuovo-Tedesco's cycle as a covert critique of Fascism that redeploys some of the fascists' favorite tropes – the land, the crowd, brotherhood, blood, and glory – to mask that critique.

The months of Castelnuovo-Tedesco's depression – mid 1935 to mid 1936 – coincided almost exactly with fascist international aggression: seeking to expand its colonial possessions, Italy invaded Ethiopia, ultimately deploying chemical warfare. Thanks to victory, King Victor Emmanuel III added

"Emperor of Ethiopia" to his title, and both the regime's and Mussolini's personal popularity were at an all time high. Two years later, the 1938 race laws would force the composer and his family to flee Italy. In one of the poems chosen by Castelnuovo-Tedesco, the speaker suggests that, if he were to know the "yearning and thoughtful" of the entire world, "I should become attached to them as I do to men in my own lands." Perhaps, in writing his songs, Castelnuovo-Tedesco was also moved by another kind of madness Plato describes: the madness of love.

I have dealt with this topic in further detail in my *Aesthetic Modernism and Masculinity in Fascist Italy*. New York and London: Routledge, 2013.

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