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Version last revised: 18.10.2019

Jenny Ponzo

Adveniat regnum tuum: Revolutionary paths toward religious transcendence in Italian contemporary narrative

The future is an operating presence in the finitude as the area of hope
[...] I have always thought poetry as the relief of a Parousia
Invocation of this hidden presence operating the truth
from truth light from light in such a refracted darkness.

*Il futuro è presenza operante nella finitudine come area della speranza [...]
Pensai da sempre la poesia come rilievo d'una parousia
Invocazione di questa presenza nascosta ed operante il vero
Da vero luce da luce in tanta oscurità rifratta.*

Giulio Prospero Porta, Parousia (1980: 7)

1 Transcendence in Catholic theology and culture

This chapter¹ intends to explore a particular facet of Catholic culture, namely its proposal of a set of values implying self-transcendence in the name of a dimension which is superior to the individual. Such a transcendent dimension is often represented as “Heaven” or as the “Kingdom of God.” The Church, basing itself on the Bible and on its tradition has elaborated a well-codified style of action for the individual to attain this. However, an orthodox idea of following the laws and the ritual path traced by the Church is hard to find in post-Vatican II literature. On the contrary, a certain number of novels seem based on an intense questioning of how humans should act in order to reach such a kingdom or to bring it about in this world, on how and when the evangelical promises will be fulfilled. What prevails in Italian narratives is therefore a hard individual quest for such a fulfillment, involving the subject on both the intellectual and the pragmatic level. In most cases the way to transcendence is “revolutionary,” either because it implies the reversal of the Church’s positions (Silone 2014; Testori 1975), or be-

1 The research exposed herein began in the frame of an LMU Research Fellowship at the Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich and was concluded at the University of Turin in the frame of the research project “NeMoSanctI – New Models of Sanctity in Italy (1960s–2010s),” which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 757314).

cause it passes through the breaking of the earthly order and the irruption into ordinary life of “exceptional” states (Troisi 1986).

The idea of transcendence can prove to be a useful analytical concept to shed light on this issue and on the related clash between the Church as an institution and the intellectuals (i. e. the writers). A concise definition of the theological notion of transcendence developed by Catholic tradition can be found in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*:

From the Latin *transcendere*, meaning to climb over, to surpass, or to go beyond, a term describing the relation existing between two things when one is superior and extrinsic to the other [...]. It implies an aspect of discontinuity, hiatus, or break between both the realities involved and the means of passing from the one to the other, and this either in reality or in knowledge. Transcendence is opposed to immanence, which stresses the remaining within or under, although the two can be regarded as complementary. (Gendreau 2003: 141)

This definition provides a serviceable basis for the analysis proposed herein, in that it interprets from a Catholic theological standpoint a generic notion of transcendence which is common to a number of religious and theological traditions, as Ugo Volli’s chapter in this volume clearly shows.

When they speak of transcendence, theologians thus often recur to the semantic fields of “border” (“discontinuity,” “hiatus,” “break”) and of “ascent” (“superior,” “under”): the realm of transcendence is separated from the world and can be reached through a vertical movement of ascent. This ascensional movement is not only to be interpreted in soteriological terms, as an approach to God, but also as a specific intellectual movement or kind of reasoning from the visible to the invisible: “Theology is not some kind of pure reasoning on the divine nature, but must rely on tangible manifestations in order to *ascend* toward the Creator” (Boulnois 2005: 27; emphasis mine).

In the nineteenth and especially in the twentieth century, a process of secularization² led to the affirmation of a worldview implying the refusal of the intellectual movement of ascent towards a transcendent dimension characterizing traditional religious thought: “Secularization [...] denotes the complete autonomy of a world that is to be understood intrinsically on its own terms” (Bedouelle 2005: 1466). The influence of secularization led many Catholic thinkers to extend theology beyond its traditional and institutional borders and to establish a different and more personal and free relationship with transcendence. For example, in the late nineteenth century and in the twentieth century, Catholic apologists and theologians proposed the “method of immanence” (Fabro 1951), consisting

² On this theme see Weber (1922); Jenkins (2000); Norris and Inglehart (2004); Sharp (2011).

in the interpretation of the revelation and of religion according to the individual consciousness. This method, which can easily turn into heterodoxy when it subordinates the dogmas to subjective experience and thought, was labelled as “modernist” and firmly condemned by Pius X (*Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, 1907).

Moreover, the arts, and especially literature, progressively assumed a new role: if, during the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), the Church encouraged artists to spread its doctrine and message³, numerous writers did not limit themselves to being the vehicle of the Church’s message, but practiced literature as a form of theology. For example, the writer Ferruccio Parazzoli (2012) refers to the concept of “narrative theology”—first coined by Harold Weinrich (1973) as a search for meaning in the stories narrated in the Scriptures—and he reverses the terms by proposing a “theological narrative.” Parazzoli affirms that, in present times, the Bible “keeps closed, completed in itself. The Character God does not come out of it, he walks to and fro inside it among impassable walls.”⁴ A new narrative, therefore, should not start from the Bible and apply it to today’s life and issues, as the narrative theology suggests, but it should instead start from the human dimension with the intention to reach the divine:

The terms are inverted: not the path from the Word of a “God who speaks” and acts to narrative language, but from narrative language to the Character God. Theological narrative: a narrative that tries the way of verticality and that starts no longer in the *incipit* of the Scripture, but inside man, and it develops and expands beyond the visible. Therefore, it is no more a language that transposes the Scriptures, but a language of the man who has God as his horizon, and believes he can bring God back to activity after his eclipse. Michelangelo’s hammer blow on Moses’ statue: “Why don’t you speak?”⁵

3 “Literature and the arts are also, in their own way, of great importance to the life of the Church. They strive to make known the proper nature of man, his problems and his experiences in trying to know and perfect both himself and the world. They have much to do with revealing man’s place in history and in the world; with illustrating the miseries and joys, the needs and strengths of man and with foreshadowing a better life for him. Thus they are able to elevate human life, expressed in multifold forms according to various times and regions. Efforts must be made so that those who foster these arts feel that the Church recognizes their activity and so that, enjoying orderly liberty, they may initiate more friendly relations with the Christian community. The Church acknowledges also new forms of art which are adapted to our age and are in keeping with the characteristics of various nations and regions. They may be brought into the sanctuary since they raise the mind to God, once the manner of expression is adapted and they are conformed to liturgical requirements.” *Gaudium et Spes* (Paul VI 1965: n. 62).

4 Parazzoli (2012: 93): “[...] la Bibbia, resta chiusa, completa in se stessa. Da essa il Personaggio Dio non esce, vi passeggia avanti e indietro tra insuperabili mura.”

5 Parazzoli (2012: 93–94): “Si rovesciano i termini: non più il percorso dalla Parola di ‘un Dio che parla’ e agisce al linguaggio narrativo, ma dal linguaggio narrativo al Personaggio Dio. Narrativa teologica: una narrativa che tenta la via della verticalità, che trova il proprio incipit non

This kind of thought proposes the typical movement of ascent of theology, but applies it to literature. At the same time, the stress on human authorship, on the role of the purely human faculty of narration to search for God, seems to recall the “modernist” method of immanence. A similar concept is expressed in Prospero Porta’s poem (1980: epigraph), which describes poetry as “the relief of a Parousia,” that is, the expression of the sudden disclosure or manifestation of truth.

Contemporary Italian literature abounds in religious themes, but they are often elaborated in ways that do not conform to the Church’s doctrine. This varied ideological and doctrinal landscape, the lack of literary masterpieces proposing a Catholic worldview, and the difficulty of identifying a proper “Catholic front” in Italian literature, can be attributed to socio-cultural and historical circumstances. In particular, these phenomena probably derive from the progressive effort to free literature from the influence of religion that started in the nineteenth century (Segre 2005; Dalmás 2013), when the Church lost its temporal power (1870) and a liberal, and often anticlerical, elite took power in the newly unified Italian state (created in 1861).

The independence of Italian literature from Catholic orthodoxy is detectable in its treatment of transcendence. In Catholic tradition, to reach the transcendent dimension called “Heaven” or “Kingdom of God” should be the believers’ supreme goal, and the Church has elaborated a well codified style of action that can allow the individual to attain it. This is evident for instance in the precise regulation of canonized sanctity,⁶ in hagiographic literature, as well as in the didactic prescriptions contained in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.⁷ Nevertheless, many literary texts seem based on an intense questioning regarding how humans should act in order to reach the Kingdom. In most texts, the path toward transcendence presents revolutionary features. A first instance of the revolutionary way to transcendence is the reversal of the traditional behavior promoted by the Church. For example, in *Passio Letitiae et Felicitatis* (Testori 1975), the carnal

più negli incipit della Scrittura, ma all’interno dell’uomo e si sviluppa e si spinge oltre il visibile. Non più, dunque, come linguaggio di Dio in trasposizione dalle Scritture, ma linguaggio dell’uomo che ha Dio per orizzonte, che ha fede di riportarlo in attività oltre l’oscuramento dell’eclisse. La martellata di Michelangelo sulla statua di Mosè: ‘Perché non parli?’” This last sentence refers to a famous legend according to which when Michelangelo had just finished his statue of Moses and was contemplating its perfection was caught by an impetus of anger and hit the knee of the figure with his chisel crying out: “Why don’t you speak?”

6 See for instance Prospero Lambertini (2010–2017), a seminal eighteenth-century treatise regulating sainthood.

7 Which is available online: http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM (accessed 1 August 2019).

love that blossomed between two nuns in a monastery is defined as “ianua coeli,” the door of Heaven.⁸ Of course, this homosexual, physical love is the reversal of the Church’s precepts: it represents a radical transgression.

In many other cases, the path toward Heaven begins with the irruption of an extraordinary experience into ordinary life, an event that breaks the natural borders of human life. Maslow (1970) calls this kind of individual and mystical event a “peak-experience” or “experience of transcendence,” in opposition to the legalized, organized, institutionalized religious practices.⁹ In Italian novels, in many cases the “transcendent experience” constitutes a “liminal” moment, a sort of *rite de passage* which transforms the identity and the status of the individual.¹⁰ For instance, in *Carolina dei miracoli* (Parazzoli 1979), illness and a miraculous near-death experience upset the life of the protagonist, changing completely her way of living, thinking, and acting. In many novels, it is this kind of liminal experience, more than a ritual or doctrinal tradition, that leads the subject to believe in a transcendent dimension, which becomes the supreme value to gain.¹¹

A third revolutionary path toward transcendence in Italian literature is represented by narratives centered on the wait for the Kingdom of God and on the problem of the failed fulfilment of the eschatological promise expressed in the Scriptures, that is, the theme of the Parousia. The term Parousia (παρουσία) indicates in the New Testament the arrival of the Christ in glory in the conclusive phase of the Messianic Kingdom (Oepke 1954–1959). The return of the Christ as a judge and a king will set the beginning of the Kingdom of God. In Jesus’s teachings, the Kingdom of God is present already (Matt 11:12, 12:28; Luke 17:21), but at the same time it develops progressively before reaching its full realization (Matt 13:24–33). The time of the Parousia cannot be determined (Matt 24:25–36): it is described as a sudden and threatening event (Matt 24:36, 24:42, 24:44, 24:50; Luke 23:39; 17:22–37), which humans should carefully await by doing good (Matt 25:1–13; Romeo 1952). In passages such as Matt 24:34 (“Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have hap-

8 A similar reference to the subversive power of homosexual love can be found in Testori (1974).

9 This idea of peak-experience is close to that of epiphany, perceived as a sudden illumination or an immediate experience of the divine. On this subject, see Ponzio (2021).

10 On liminality see Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1967). This last book also contains a piece on the thought and work of a famous Italian novelist, Tomasi di Lampedusa (Kuiper), providing an example of how the concept of liminality can be applied in the study of literary works.

11 This kind of experience is common to all forms of Christianity; see, e.g., William James (1902), who used mostly Protestant examples, but also some Catholic ones.

pened”¹²), the Parousia seems imminent. However, since the apostolic age (2 Pet 3; 2 Thess 2), the theme of the Parousia has been connected to doubts, impatience, and fear about its coming. In Catholic – and, more generally, in Christian – culture, the Parousia represents the point of encounter between transcendence and immanence. Moreover, the imagination of the advent of the Law and of perfect Justice confers to the theme of the Parousia a strong utopian character.

Indeed, literary works about the Parousia depict the Kingdom of God as a utopia that exceeds natural and human order and law. These works are of particular interest, first, because they pose the problem of transcendence in terms of justice and law, i.e. they advance reflection on the relationship between human and divine justice, but they do so in terms that significantly differ from theology in both form and content. Second, they relate the theological reflection on transcendence to the contingent social issues of their times. Literary works featuring the theme of the Parousia are under many aspects similar to the utopias proposing moral-civic values, often in association with socialist, communist, or anarchic worldviews (Ponzo 2015). It is no coincidence that many religious utopias are proposed by authors and thinkers related to the post-Second World War Left Catholicism.¹³ Third, works about the Parousia constitute an interesting subject for narrative studies because they are particularly concerned by the problem of the “end.”

As the literary critic Frank Kermode (1967) affirmed, human beings, in order to make sense of their lives, need fictions providing conclusions that, being consonant with the origins, confer meaning to their frightening present existence. The end is immanent in the narrative structures, because in some way it determines them and gives them their sense. The Apocalypse “is a radical instance of such [simpler, more ancient] fictions and a source of others [more elaborated and complex contemporary fictions]” (Kermode 1967: 6). Indeed, “although for us the End has perhaps lost its naïve *imminence*, its shadow still lies on the crises of our fictions; we may speak of it as *immanent*” (Kermode 1967: 6). According to Kermode, the wait for the Parousia, i.e. for the end of times promised in the Bible, provides a narrative structure that is fundamental to Western thought. And this structure is intimately connected to “transcendence,” which is its main characteristic, as John Collins (1979: 10) observes in his study of the morphology of the apocalyptic genre.

¹² New International Version.

¹³ See Bedeschi (1974); Vecchio (2001); Di Carlo (2008).

In order to explore how the discourse about the Parousia is connected to a non-conventional quest for transcendent values in Italian literature, I shall now analyze one Italian novel, *L'inquisitore dell'interno sedici* (Troisi 1986).

2 Troisi: an inner Parousia

Dante Troisi (1920 – 1989) was a magistrate, and his profession deeply influenced his literary production (Troisi 1962; Beneduce 2012). He published the novel *L'inquisitore dell'interno sedici* [The inquisitor of the apartment sixteen] in 1986. The whole action takes place in one day, “Friday 17th August of the current year.” Friday the 17th is an unlucky day in Italian superstition, but that particular Friday is placed out of the ordinary time. The city is like a still desert, “suspended between heaven and earth,” seized up in the wait of some dramatic and imminent event, as if “an abyss had been opened in everyday time.” It is a “boundary day, a day of deceit.” It is the day of “a conclusive, as much as uncertain, confrontation between Good and Evil.”¹⁴

The protagonists of this battle are three judges: Father Sergio, an inquisitor monk, and two secular judges, Ignazio and Egidio. They constitute a sort of Trinitarian person, but the deep union between them was broken because of an interpretative dissent concerning the “Mystery of Iniquity” mentioned in 2 Thess 2:3, where Paul incites the Thessalonians not to believe that the coming of Jesus is at hand: “Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction.” The failed fulfilment of the evangelical promise of an imminent Parousia originates the division between the three characters, who adopt different paths to understand and to bring about the Parousia.

Ignazio decides to challenge Paul of Tarsus and the Mystery of the Iniquity by sacrificing his father, mother, wife, and son. His family has agreed to “become holocaust for the Good that is finally going to reveal itself, or victims given up to the Evil which will continue to be invincible.”¹⁵ The massacre is repeatedly described as a sacrifice, as a ritual following a precise “liturgy of the slaughter.” Ignazio intends to use the sacrifice to unmask the deceitful narrative of the Parousia, which is based on the same illusion governing earthly justice, namely the

¹⁴ Troisi (1986: 46): “venerdì diciassette Agosto del corrente anno”; “Sospesa tra cielo e terra” (83); “si sia aperta una voragine nel tempo quotidiano” (184); “giorno di confine o di inganno” (ibid. 150); “un confronto conclusivo quanto incerto tra Bene e Male” (48).

¹⁵ Troisi (1986: 47–48): “diventare olocausto al Bene che finalmente sta per rivelarsi oppure vittime cedute al Male che continuerà a restare invincibile.”

illusion that it is actually possible to separate good from evil. Moreover, the fact that the Parousia did not take place in history leads Ignazio to think that there is no transcendent authority possessing the legitimate power to install justice and law on earth:

According to Ignazio, the Judge, by assigning right and wrong, fault and innocence, retraces the fiction of separating the Good from the Evil in the creation, with the same result of a constant defeat. The Judge is a sort of mean Paul of Tarsus reassuring the beseechers of a near or rather immediate, advent. The Judge substitutes the “not yet” of Paul’s *Epistle* with the “already” of the sentence that assigns now punishment and recompense and simulates the Parousia dividing redeemed and damned.¹⁶

Ignazio was “suspended” (that is, undecided) in his will of killing until, on that Friday, his brother Egidio offers himself as a killer under his command, as a “faithful executor” of his plot: what could have remained a utopia, “the utopia of the salvific slaughter”¹⁷, irrupts into the contingent reality. Egidio is often called “sicario,” that means “hitman,” hired assassin. He makes a vow of total obedience to Ignazio and offers himself in a kind of self-sacrifice:

Egidio accepts the erosion of the person [...] it is precisely this reduction to anonymity, the renunciation to be the master of himself, the absolute nakedness that confers [a solemn] decorum to his making himself a hitman [...]¹⁸

After the slaughter, Ignazio and Egidio reach a sort of transcendent status, above human and moral law.¹⁹ They understand that

16 Troisi (1986: 96–97): “Per Ignazio, il Giudice, nel distribuire torto e ragione, colpa e innocenza, ricalca la finzione di separare nella creazione il Bene dal Male, con l’eguale risultato di una costante disfatta. Il Giudice è una sorta di meschino Paolo di Tarso che rassicura i postulanti in un avvento ravvicinato, anzi immediato. Al ‘non ancora’ della *Lettera* di Paolo, il giudice sostituisce il ‘già’ della sentenza che assegna adesso castigo e premio, simulando la parusia che divide redenti e dannati.”

17 Troisi (1986: 17): “fedele esecutore”; “Utopia della strage salvifica” (ibid. 29).

18 Troisi (1986: 36): “Egidio accetta la corrosione della persona che è stato finora. Pensa che è appunto questo ridursi anonimo, la rinuncia a possedersi, la nudità assoluta a conferire [...] solenne e stabile decoro al suo farsi sicario...”

19 This figure of the man who places himself above the morals and the law and believes that he can decide for the others’ life may be a reference to the Nietzschean superman, a model that actually influenced some criminal actions, see for instance the famous case of Leopold and Loeb (see Baatz 2008): in 1924, two young men fond of the Nietzschean ideal of the superman killed a boy just for the sake of accomplishing the perfect crime.

There is no hierarchy between Good and Evil. [...] between God-God and God-Devil. The one and the other, since forever, challenge without overpowering each other, and together they cooperate to the deceit of the Parousia [...] Egidio and Ignazio, discovering and repudiating the cruel mockery of the endless deferment, have killed. [...] apparently an unmotivated slaughter, it is a votive and sacred death, offered as a confirmation of the ruthless and unacceptable imperfectability of the creation dissembled by the Mystery of the Iniquity [...] nourished by the One and the Other to induce men to hope for an impossible epilogue of redemption.²⁰

The slaughter is therefore “the willing, undifferentiated offer to the One and to the Other.”²¹ The sudden consciousness of the impossible distinction between good and evil causes a striking sense of “panic and horror for life” in Ignazio.²² In the meanwhile, Sergio, the Inquisitor, spies on Ignazio and Egidio and prepares their trial for heresy. He does not interfere with their action; he plans to intervene just after the slaughter purging with physical torture their sin and presumption of breaking the Mystery of the Iniquity. He sees the delay of the Parousia as an authorization to judge on the earth “with the double measure of the natural and of the supernatural”²³, thus anticipating the definitive Judgment. Trying to accelerate the advent of the day of the Lord is blasphemous according to the Inquisitor. His brothers lost themselves in the pride of questioning the principles of the universe. By accepting a sacrilegious violence, like the political terrorists do, they take for themselves the role of the “man of sin, son of perdition,” who has to induce the Parousia according to the Scriptures. Yet, Father Sergio himself has many doubts, and he hopes to find an answer thanks to his brothers. Thus, after the slaughter, he joins them in their apartment with the intention to take them to trial. But, unpredictably, the roles reverse and it is Ignazio and Egidio who accuse Sergio: he is as well an instigator and a killer. This is a leap that astonishes the reader: the borders between the identity of the three characters thus become more and more blurred. And actually, by accepting

20 Troisi (1986: 135): “Non c’è gerarchia tra Bene e Male [...] tra Dio-Dio e Dio-Diavolo. L’uno e l’altro, da sempre, si sfidano senza mai sopraffarsi, e insieme collaborano all’inganno della parusia... [...] Egidio e Ignazio, scoperta e ripudiata la crudele irrisione del rinvio illimitato, hanno ucciso. [...] in apparenza una strage immotivata, è una morte votiva e sacrale, offerta a conferma della spietata e inaccettabile imperfettibilità della creazione dissimulata col Mistero dell’Iniquità [...] alimentato dall’Uno e dall’Altro per indurre gli uomini a sperare in un impossibile epilogo di riscatto.”

21 Troisi (1986: 96): “la volontaria, indifferenziata offerta all’Uno e all’Altro.”

22 Troisi (1986: 95): “panico e orrore del vivere.” Literary precedents of such an existential panic and horror can be found, e.g., in Conrad (1899), Sartre (1938), Camus (1942) and Beckett (1952).

23 Troisi (1986: 105): “con la duplice misura del naturale e del soprannaturale.”

this truth, namely that he is as guilty as his brothers, Sergio gets back to be “one” with them:

And he sees with horror and panic that the border placing on the one side those who foster the Love and the Truth, and on the other side those who believe in the Lie, is erased [...]. The religious habit slides down from him and the Impious reveals himself, and the Impious, the man of perdition, is himself, Sergio M., and now that he is naked the Lord annihilates him, he destroys him with the breath of his mouth [...] The Lord, though, is late. He does not come. And so Sergio M. confesses that he is also Ignazio and Egidio, and he has always thought and concealed their same thoughts; he confirms that there will never be cognition of the Mystery of the Iniquity, because there is no Mystery, and even after [the slaughter], what has happened until now will continue to happen, because there exists no end to the time of the iniquity. [...], and we will remain in it without apocalypse. The epilogue was already in the creation; the world, imperfect and not perfectible anymore, was finished when it had its origin [...]²⁴

Paul of Tarsus is also taken to trial as the instigator of the crime by means of his fraud of Christ's advent, but in the end the Judge and the Apostle arrive at a conclusion:

[...] the promise of the salvation from sorrow and death has been given to us with love and truth, and the failure of the wait and the non-fulfillment of the promise have been until now a punishment originating after the Word, a punishment that man has inflicted on himself by using the world with violence and fraud, [...] against the intention of the Creation [...] our dissolute frenzy of corrupting ourselves protracts and overturns the challenge between God and Satan, perhaps to the point of making them allied to repudiate a world that does not deserve either the One or the Other.²⁵

24 Troisi (1986: 173–174): “E vede, con orrore e panico, cancellato il confine che poneva da una parte chi favorisce l’Amore e la Verità e dall’altra chi crede alla Menzogna; vede una turba senza peccati e senza virtù, nomade in un deserto, e lui [...] non distingue le vittime dai carnefici [...]. Il saio gli cade di dosso e l’Empio si rivela, e l’Empio, l’uomo della perdizione, è lui, Sergio M., e adesso che è nudo il Signore lo annienta con la venuta, lo distrugge col soffio della sua bocca... Il Signore, però, tarda. Non viene. E allora Sergio M. confessa che lui è anche Ignazio e Egidio e ha sempre pensato e occultato i loro stessi pensieri; conferma che non ci sarà mai cognizione del Mistero dell’Iniquità, perché Mistero non c’è, e che anche dopo [...] l’uccisione del padre, della madre, della moglie e del figlio, continuerà ad accadere quel che finora è accaduto, giacché non esiste un termine al tempo dell’iniquità. Siamo nel tempo dell’iniquità e non nel Mistero dell’Iniquità, e vi resteremo senza apocalisse. L’epilogo era già nella creazione; il mondo imperfetto e non più perfettibile è finito quando ha avuto principio[...].”

25 Troisi (1986: 186–187): “la promessa di salvezza dal dolore e dalla morte ci sono state date con amore e verità, e il fallimento dell’attesa e l’inadempienza della promessa sono finora un castigo di dopo la Parola, un castigo che l’uomo si è inflitto usando il mondo con la violenza e la frode [...] contro l’intenzione della Creazione... [...] ammettono che la nostra dissoluta frene-

Now aware of his own sin, Sergio undergoes torture as a “salvific martyrdom.”²⁶ Regaining his innocence, he understands that:

[...] the lighted candles of those who live in the certitude of the imminent redemption are blind and do not propitiate the Parousia more than the candles kept off by those who are tired to believe and to wait. The Parousia does not give itself to impatience, to nagging devotion, to sacrilege and to raging refusal [...].²⁷

It was the very separation of the individual in victim, killer, judge, and inquisitor that brought about the Evil: “The Good wins the Mystery of the Iniquity when we are not enemies of ourselves, and then God does not regret the Creation and does not betray the Crucifixion.”²⁸ This illumination is the arrival point of Sergio’s spiritual and intellectual travel. The day turns to its end, and time can reassume its natural order. And we learn that Sergio only had killed his family in his thought.

The interpretation of Evil as a consequence of this inner division conforms to Catholic doctrine.²⁹ Nevertheless, the story of this multifold character implies

sia di corromperci protrae e sovverte la sfida tra Dio e Satana, sino a renderli forse alleati per ripudiare un mondo che non merita né l’Uno né l’Altro.”

26 Troisi (1986: 60): “martirio salvifico.”

27 Troisi (1986: 202–203): “le candele accese di chi vive nella certezza dell’imminente riscatto sono cieche e non propiziano la parusia più delle candele tenute spente da chi è stanco di credere e aspettare. La parusia non si concede all’impazienza, alla petulante devozione, al **sacrilego** e al rabbioso rifiuto[...].”

28 Troisi (1986: 203): “Il Bene vince il Mistero dell’Iniquità quando non siamo nemici di noi stessi e allora Dio non si pente della Creazione e non tradisce la Crocifissione.”

29 This concept is clearly stated in the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (Paul **IV** 1965: n. 13; emphasis mine), published in the frame of the Second Vatican Council: “Although he was made by God in a state of holiness, from the very onset of his history man abused his liberty, at the urging of the Evil One. Man set himself against God and sought to attain his goal apart from God. Although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, but their senseless minds were darkened and they served the creature rather than the Creator. What divine revelation makes known to us agrees with experience. Examining his heart, man finds that he has inclinations toward evil too, and is engulfed by manifold ills which cannot come from his good Creator. Often refusing to acknowledge God as his beginning, man has disrupted also his proper relationship to his own ultimate goal as well as his whole relationship toward himself and others and all created things. *Therefore man is split within himself. As a result, all of human life, whether individual or collective, shows itself to be a dramatic struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness.* Indeed, man finds that by himself he is incapable of battling the assaults of evil successfully, so that everyone feels as though he is bound by chains. But the Lord Himself came to free and strengthen man, renewing him inwardly and casting out that ‘prince of this world’ (John 12:31) who held him in the bondage of sin. For sin has diminished man, blocking his path to fulfillment. The call to grandeur and the depths of misery, both of which are a part of

that an experience exceeding the established rules, i. e. the real—or at least imaginary, intellectual, fictional—transgression of the schemes proposed by the Church, by the Scriptures and by the secular juridical system, is necessary in order to understand the true meaning of the Revelation. Once more, the path toward transcendence is a revolutionary one. The revolutionary event around which the divided selves of the characters revolve, the tragic moment causing the interruption of the ordinary time, takes the form of a paradoxical ritual sacrifice, as if the breaking of the established religious and secular laws could only be brought about by a powerful, primitive sacred act. The inner, individual, even solipsistic experience of the judge-inquisitor seems to constitute a narrative representation of the controversial method of immanence. Ultimately, in Troisi's novel, the man of law (the Judge) passes through a state of transgression, of lawlessness, and comes back to a new state of law, a spiritual, transcendent law purged of earthly discordances and of the arrogance of a contingent judgment.

Troisi's novel can also be interpreted as a metaphorical rewriting of the Gospels.³⁰ The three brothers are related to one another in a way that resembles the Holy Trinity: Ignazio can be compared to the Father because of his actantial role of "sender," Egidio can be compared to the Son as the "embodied" subject who brings about the act of sacrificing himself, while Father Sergio resembles the Spirit as the one who "thinks" and "hides the thoughts" of the three of them. From this perspective, the ritual sacrifice represented in the novel can be interpreted as an elaboration of the themes of Incarnation and Crucifixion: thus, to be Christian does not mean to wish that Jesus's murder had never happened, but to bless the event, although this in itself was also evil. This fact reveals a moral tension in Christianity, which is evident for instance in the Catholic liturgy, such as when, during the collective reading of the evangelical episode of the Passion at the Easter Mass, the assemble has to pronounce the words spoken by the crowd during Pilate's "trial" of Jesus, "Crucify Him!"³¹

human experience, find their ultimate and simultaneous explanation in the light of this revelation."

30 I wish to thank Robert Yelle for suggesting this idea to me.

31 I owe this idea too to Robert Yelle.

3 Conclusion: A transcendent value in Italian narrative

The novel of Troisi is part of a significant corpus of twentieth-century Italian novels that express a preoccupation for the end of human history by relating it to biblical and Christian motifs. For instance, *L'avventura di un povero cristiano* by Ignazio Silone (2014) narrates the story of the monk and eremite Pietro Angeliero, who was elected Pope Celestine V in 1294 but then stepped down from this dignified office after only a few months to return to ascetic life. The entire work revolves around an opposition between the Church, a hierarchical institution focusing on questions of earthly power and led by unscrupulous prelates, and popular Christian spirituality, based on a utopian view and disdaining earthly interests to focus exclusively on transcendent values. Silone identifies the root of this opposition in the delay of the Parousia: since the Kingdom of God has not come as announced in the Scriptures, some members of the Church (for instance the successor of Celestine V, Boniface VIII) consider the mundane world as the only reality available to humans, so that they try to realize God's Kingdom on the earth exclusively. Others, like Celestine V and the members of the ascetic movements inspired by Joachim of Fiore's doctrine, continue to wait for the Parousia, delegating the realization of their utopian values to the transcendent Kingdom of God.³² Another interesting example is the dystopic novel *Il mondo nudo*, by Raffaele Crovi (1975), which represents a world dominated by technology and by the negative figure of a demiurge, "the general." The story is set in eight days, and it can be interpreted as a reversal of the story of the creation in the book of Genesis, because it narrates a progressive destruction of the world. One last example is constituted by the tale "Visita di congedo" in the collection *Eroi di vetro* by Italo Chiusano (1989). Inspired by the God-is-dead idea,³³ the tale narrates the visit of God, represented in anthropomorphic terms as a distinct old man, to say farewell to a vaticanist who was the last believer but now has lost his faith and thinks that God is useless. God acknowledges that humans refused and forgot him, thus showing the failure of his project. As a consequence, he decides himself to retire from the world. With God's decision "to annihilate" himself, to

32 For an extended analysis of Silone (2014) and for further reflections about religious themes in Italian contemporary literature, see Ponzio (2019). On Silone's thought see also Lifonso (1991), Martelli and Di Pasqua (1988), Atzeni (1991), Scurani (1991), Soave (2005).

33 For considerations on the questioning about God's existence in twentieth-century Italian fiction, see Castelli (1989). Regarding the "God is dead" theological theme, see for instance Altizer and Hamilton (1968); Mondin (1968).

“cease to exist,” no final judgment will take place after death, and human life loses any transcendent dimension. When God definitely leaves, the vaticanist regrets this loss and cries: “You take away all the good, rob the bank of the world and leave us here, poor, abandoned, starving to death.”³⁴

In order to grasp the notion of transcendence emerging from such narratives, it can be useful to adopt a semiotic-narratological perspective considering the values endorsed by the different subjects acting in the stories. A semiotic study of a vast sample of twentieth-century Italian novels’ characters (Ponzo 2015) showed that characters and, more generally, subjects can act in order to realize different kinds of values, and that the adoption of a certain set of values determines a different way of acting (or “style of action”). For example, subjects can act in order to realize purely material values, such as personal riches, or abstract and collective values such as justice or freedom for their people. However, the protagonists of the work analyzed herein adopt a more complex kind of value, which we can classify as transcendent.

In the frame of his “theory of basic human values,” the social psychologist Shalom Schwartz (2012) theorized values of self-transcendence (universalism and benevolence) presupposing that the subject goes beyond him/herself in the name of values exceeding the limited borders of his/her person. Self-transcendence is surely one fundamental aspect of the values that can be individuated in the works considered herein, but it is not exclusively peculiar to the religious worldview that they convey. Indeed, it is also typical of socio-political revolutionary and utopian narratives, which abound in the second half of the twentieth century. These narratives are based on abstract and collective, or universal, values, such as freedom, justice, and equality, which often require the self-sacrifice of the revolutionary hero endorsing them (Ponzo 2015). The values informing such narratives are therefore transcendent in Schwartz’s sense. Moreover, they can be defined as transcendent even because their realization implies the breaking of the order, the overturning of the dominant socio-political system and the realization of a new kind of sovereignty. In this sense, paraphrasing the theory of Agamben (2003), such perspectives have a transcendent value because they imply the instauration of a state of exception, which breaks the law and upsets the whole social system.³⁵

34 “Ti porti via tutto il bene, svaligi la banca del mondo, ci lasci qui, poveri, abbandonati, morti di fame” (Chiusano 1989: 141).

35 Agamben widely draws on the theory of exception elaborated by Carl Schmitt, whose thought was in turn deeply influenced by 2 Thessalonians, as Meier (1998) shows. For further reflections of the relationship between transcendence and revolution see Yelle (2019).

Nevertheless, in the civic-humanitarian utopian perspective, values such as freedom and equality have to be realized in the here-and-now, in the contingent dimension of earthly life. Therefore, they differ from the values displayed in the works we analyzed because they do not imply a fulfilment in a superior, other-worldly, dimension. It is precisely the belief in such a transcendent dimension that gives sense to Catholic values and actions. So, the “transcendent” values in literary works featuring a Catholic worldview can be defined as implying:

1. self-transcendence (sacrifice);
2. a state of exception (breaking of the existing contingent order);
3. fulfillment in an ultramundane dimension.

Stories inspired by transcendent values can have a strong utopian character, as Silone (2014) and Troisi (1986) well exemplify. Such utopian narratives work as fictional “states of exception.” The protagonists look for a breaking point in the earthly natural order and in the human law. The social, religious, and natural law of the here-and-now can be subverted in different ways, such as a transgressive behavior, an extreme and ascetic choice, a counter-ritual. What all of these actions have in common is that they create a breach in the natural and social schemes that allows the subjects to undertake a path toward an exceptional state of superior perfection. Therefore, in this kind of narrative, the traditional Catholic ideal of ascent is reinterpreted as an individual, inner, extremely personal, indeed almost anarchic spiritual journey.

Since in contemporary Italian fiction containing Catholic motifs the path toward transcendence often presents the features of a revolution, it is reasonable to hypothesize that these narratives were influenced by the revolutionary utopias of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, the revelation, the Word and the divine agency are still inescapable references in this kind of narrative, and this differentiates them from purely socio-political utopias. Indeed, in literature of Catholic inspiration the path toward transcendence is also unavoidably an interpretative itinerary starting from the Scriptures. The discrepancies between the Scriptures and contingent reality leads the protagonists to undertake a quest for a deity perceived as too distant, mysterious, and transcendent, which they fight to bring back to immanence; or for a ritual (like the ritual slaughter and also the subsequent trial in Troisi’s novel) to propitiate and trigger the Parousia. So, the Catholic literary utopia of the second half of the twentieth century can be studied very effectively with a concept of transcendence as a fictional state of exception. Nevertheless, it cannot be fully understood if we exclude the facet of transcendence as an ultramundane dimension: this is another fundamental component of a particular kind of utopia governed and revealed by a divine

agency and placed in a dimension which is necessarily not of this world, non-earthly, and non-contingent, but super-human and supernatural.

As Agamben (2012) puts it, in such a perspective human history is “penultimate” in relation to the Kingdom. The consciousness of such a penultimate status and the longing for the ultimate reality imply a different way of considering and living the earthly life. According to Agamben (2012: 41), the Church should remember its messianic mission and conform its action to such an eschatological value, otherwise it will be “swept away by the disaster menacing every government and every institution on earth.” Agamben’s position seems close to the one expressed by Italian writers such as Silone. Indeed, although Italian narratives still abound with Catholic themes, they often present a strongly polemical view with regard to the Church, seen as an earthly institution and sometimes as a part of the system that has to be thrown off.

Contemporary Italian literature often represents unconventional and revolutionary paths to reach the status of transcendent perfection promised by the Scriptures. In Silone (1968) and Troisi (1986), the reaction to the problem of the failed fulfillment of the biblical promises takes the form of a difficult and intense quest involving a lonely subject both on an intellectual/semiotic level (a tormented effort to interpret and to understand the Scriptures) and on a pragmatic level (the attempt to perform an action that finally makes the fulfillment happen). In these works, the traditional ideal of overcoming the hiatus between heavenly transcendence and earthly contingency entails an original and heterodox reinterpretation of theological concepts and has a strongly utopian and revolutionary character. These kinds of narratives represent a contemporary declension of the narrative model of the Parousia, but further diachronic research could shed new light on this topic by finding out if in different epochs the representations of the human paths towards the final Kingdom of God were imagined in different ways. Particularly striking in the narratives considered herein is that the “Kingdom,” even if it is surely based on an idea of sovereignty, is not really imagined as a monarchy, but as something different from any earthly system of power. Further research could verify for example if, in the past, the imagination of the Kingdom conformed more closely to a standard monarchical model, reducing its transcendence to the earthly pattern of a human system of power (a monarchy) heightened by the idea of an absolute, divine sovereignty. According to the sociologist Benedict Anderson (1983), the imagination and the advent of the modern model of community as a nation-state was possible only after overcoming some basic ancient conceptions, such as the non-arbitrariness of the sacred language and the paradigm of the monarchy being based on a divine dispensation. Therefore, given the importance of the monarchic model in pre-modern times and its gradual overcoming in the subsequent epochs, and also

the prominence of the revolutionary theme that emerged in the analysis proposed herein, it is possible to hypothesize that the revolutionary character of the paths towards religious transcendence is particularly accentuated in—if not peculiar to—modern and post-modern narratives.

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