Franco Baldasso

Curzio Malaparte and the Tragic Understanding of Modern History

Abstract: This contribution focuses on Curzio Malaparte and his works *Kaputt* and *La pelle* during Italy's transition from Fascism to democracy. I argue that in his books he rejected the narratives of collective sacrifice and national redemption that were dominant after the end of WWII, from the Resistance myth of "Nuovo Risorgimento" to historicist readings of Fascism as a malady in an otherwise healthy national body. On the score of biopolitical theory, the article concentrates on Malaparte's critical appraisal of the tragic contrast between modern technology and the fragility of creaturely life. Malaparte depicts an irredeemable conflict through Christological allegories of scapegoating deployed from a radically secular perspective, resisting any historical progress or any dialectical superior solution.

Key Words: Fascism, totalitarianism, WWII literature, technological warfare, Christological allegories, creaturely life, Allied bombings, Secondo Risorgimento, secularization.

1. *Malaparte: A Long-Avoided Encounter*

When in 2009 Milan Kundera's collection of literary critiques *Une Rencontre* was translated into Italian, what most surprised reviewers was not the author's subtlety, but that he dedicated a last chapter to Curzio Malaparte.[1] In the essay, Kundera expresses his complete admiration for the Italian writer and journalist, a controversial yet pivotal figure of the Fascist *ventennio* and of early postwar Europe. The Czech author highly praises Malaparte's novel *Kaputt* (1944) as invention of "a new form that is totally a new thing and that belongs to him alone" (160). He furthermore celebrates Malaparte's second major work, *La pelle* (1949), as a landmark event in the history of the novel: "The new Europe as emerged from WWII is caught by *The Skin* in complete authenticity, that is to say, caught by a gaze that has not yet been revised (or censored) by later considerations and that therefore shows it gleaming with the newness of its instant birth" (173-74).

Kundera's praise of Malaparte is at odds with the Italian literary establishment's resolute rejection of him. Deeply compromised by his

[1] *Une Rencontre* appeared in Italy as *Un incontro* (Milano: Adelphi 2009). In this article, I follow the American edition, published as *Encounter* in 2010. Reviewing *Un incontro*, influential journalist Scalfari commented, "L'incontro di Kundera con Malaparte è il più inatteso," dryly adding that, if Malaparte was one of the best novelist of the 20th century, as Kundera has it, "il pubblico italiano non se n'è accorto."

association with the Fascist regime, Malaparte polemically refused to align himself with the new intellectual strands that characterized early postwar Italy. When in a 1982 interview Alberto Moravia claimed that Malaparte "è stato il rappresentante dell'illusione fascista," adding that his old friend "fu preso in contropiede dal mondo moderno," the Roman author voiced the shared verdict of the Italian intellectual elite (qtd. in Buonuomo 11).

Malaparte's conspicuous and obtrusive *persona*, from his early commitment to Mussolini's regime to the later incarnation as cosmopolitan dandy always eager to *épater la bourgeoisie*, occupied the full screen, and prevented a more nuanced understanding of his literary accomplishments, which extensively affected writers in Italy and abroad.[2] For Moravia, Malaparte's endorsement of Fascism determined the limits of his engagement with the present. Thus, the Roman writer wrongly circumscribed, and ultimately missed, the far-reaching aspects of Malaparte's writing that are not just eccentric but in conflict with Fascist ideology.[3]

Following the way paved by Kundera, in this essay I argue that Malaparte's works such as *Kaputt* and *La pelle* insightfully signal the tremendous epistemological shift that occurred in the West during the first half of the 20th century and culminated with WWII. By witnessing first-hand the unpredictable atrocities on the war's principal fronts, Malaparte critically challenges traditional or ideological assessments of history as an ongoing process of progress and civilization. Malaparte's polemical target was not only Croce's neo-Hegelian historicism but also populist narratives of national expiation and redemption, exerted by both Catholic and Communist sides, which became prominent in early postwar Italy and Western Europe.[4] Unlike most

[2] As Greco shows, Elio Vittorini worked as ghost writer for Malaparte's propaganda pieces. The iterative techniques of Vittorini's novel *Conversazione in Sicilia* are indeed redolent of Malaparte's narrative and journalistic style of those years. The influence of his writing can be found in authors antithetical to him, such as Carlo Levi, in particular his *L'orologio*, American novelist John Horne Burns and his WWII bestseller *The Gallery*, or even Anna Maria Ortese's *Il mare non bagna Napoli*. For further testimonies of Malaparte's influence on other authors, see Serra. Still, a stylistic study of Malaparte's impact on writers and journalists between the first and the second postwar periods has yet to be done.

[3] On the uneasy relationship between Moravia and Malaparte, see the posthumously published novel that Moravia left unfinished, *I due amici*.

[4] For an accurate assessment of the many ideological threads of anti-Fascist forces, as well as the continuities that characterized the transition from Mussolini's dictatorship to post-Fascism, see Ward and Zunino. Drawing from Enrico Rusconi's essay *Se cessiamo di essere una nazione*, Schwarz aptly described the early postwar resurgence of patriotism as "patriottismo espiativo." For the cultural politics of liberals, Catholics, and Communists facing the issue of the "lost generation" which grew up and fought for the regime and had to be won over to democratic values, see La Rovere. For the relevance of

contemporary commentators, Malaparte is not concerned with finding an overarching or redeeming significance to the dire spectacle he witnesses; his gaze focuses instead on the *biopolitical* consequences of total war.

With *Kaputt* and *La pelle*, Malaparte portrays the collapse of the values that cemented bourgeois Europe. Crossing war zones from Poland to Ukraine, from Finland to Naples, he concentrates on the abysmal spectacle of human abasement that the conflict unleashed at an unforeseeable level. In the two novels, he exposes the material and ideological debris of Western civilization. To this end, Malaparte's formal investigation is equally outstanding. He explores traditional *and* modernist vocabularies of violence, scapegoating and sacrifice, but profoundly transforms them for his unique agenda of representing the unredeemable quality of modern historical delusions, from the myth of palingenetic war, to Fascist, as well as Communist, attempts to "correct" life with ideology.[5]

"L'errore della mia generazione," Malaparte writes in 1952, near the end of his intellectual trajectory, "era stato credere negli uomini, nella possibilità di redenzione degli uomini" (*Mamma marcia* 160). Therefore he enriches the unveiling of modernity's delusions with two complex motifs: the Christological allegory of sacrifice, and the perception of the break between human imagination and technological progress in terms of potential destructiveness. Both of these two distinguishing motifs highlight what biographer Maurizio Serra described as the main preoccupation of Malaparte's WWII narrative: "accusare ancora una volta l'essere nella storia di assassinare l'essere nella natura" (360). Although he never really unmoored himself from his past position as former ideologue of Fascism, Malaparte's postwar narrative elaborates a compelling indictment of the dire consequences of totalitarian revolutionary politics. From this prospective, Malaparte's contentious insights unexpectedly approximate influential historical and philosophical analysis attempted in those same years, such as Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. "What totalitarian ideologies therefore aim at," Arendt cogently argues, "is not the transformation of the outside world or the revolutionizing transmutation of society, but the transformation of human nature itself" (458).

As Malaparte had argued in 1931 in his contentious pamphlet *Technique du coup d'état*, the conquest of power is not a matter of ideology, but of technique (131-39). In the same vein, when in *Kaputt* he narrates WWII's uncompromising struggle for biopolitical power, it will not be any Fascist or Bolshevik "New Man," which propaganda fancied as the utmost achievement of totalitarian regimes, to focus his attention. On the contrary, the writer reveals that the great new protagonist of the conflict is no longer the human race but

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redemptive narratives for mourning and working through national defeat see Schivelbusch.

[5] For the modern myth of palingenetic war and its last manifestation in WWII, see Mosse.

technology. In fact, he portrays how technology impacts the lives of nations, of individuals, even of animals, with an appalling yet sublime spectacle of violence. His war reports are ripe with disquieting instances of technology's prominence over life, as experienced during the total war on an unprecedented scale. Malaparte's accounts openly demand a new set of ethical questions whose radical significance can hardly be tackled through traditional approaches.

In search of an adequate literary rendition for his observations, Malaparte craftily combines modernist solutions with classical *enargheia* (literally, "vividness in demonstration"). He mercilessly portrays Nazi efficiency in the bureaucratic organization of genocidal practices, the employment of weapons of mass destruction on a large scale all over Europe, and finally the massive aerial bombings on the civilian population by both sides of the conflict. As a result, his disturbing and highly provocative writing posed a polemical counterargument to any return to humanistic values, which were widespread in early postwar responses to the atrocities of the war from Croce and Sartre to Resistance narratives in both Catholic and Marxist circles.[6]

Malaparte choreographs in *Kaputt* the dramatic resistance of any form of life — that of individuals, peoples, and very often animals — to the dire scenario of technocratic Nazi power. This collective yet undeniably individual struggle finds in his narrative unexpected analogies with the image of Christ, his passion, and his ultimate sacrifice. Devoid of any supernatural connotation, Malaparte's Christological figurations would take central stage in his following novel, *La pelle*, which narrows the scenario from Europe under Hitler's yoke to Italy during the Allied occupation.

Malaparte is not alone in conjuring up the story of Christ as a blueprint for victimization and scapegoating. In Italy, for instance, Christological references are rife in other influential works such as Roberto Rossellini's neorealist film trilogy, (*Paisà*, *Germania anno zero*, and especially *Roma città aperta*,) as well as the two most successful books of the time, Carlo Levi's *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, and Giuseppe Berto's novel *Il cielo è rosso*. Malaparte's treatment, however, diverges from these outstanding if heterogeneous works in one crucial, ideological aspect. In *Kaputt* and especially *La pelle*, the Christological pattern of sacrifice is stripped of any atonement and of any redemptive meaning. Christ is not portrayed as the "Redeemer," as the canonical Catholic tradition would have him, but he is recovered for his creaturely essence, as a representation of what modern biopolitical thought has named "bare life" — that is, what remains to human life once it has been stripped of any political and ideological value.[7] In

[6] On the postwar return to humanism in Italy, see fundamental texts by Croce and Pavese. For a general overview, I refer again to Zunino. Regarding Sartre and the debate in France, see Baring.

[7] On these concepts, I draw from Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, and *Quel che resta*; as well as Santner.

this sense, from its very title, *La pelle* represents a voyage to the end of the night, to WWII's human abasement in search of its purest creaturely constituency. Malaparte's narrative aims to retrieve a *tragic* sense of history by reclaiming center stage for the irreconcilable aporias at the roots of modern Europe that WWII pushed to the foreground, such as the unredeemable conflict between technology and creaturely life. Ultimately, Malaparte's Christological figures underscore the tragic fallacy behind totalitarian secularization of religious concepts.

2. *Creaturely Life and Technological Warfare*: Kaputt

Malaparte crafts his novel *Kaputt* around a series of conversations he participated in while working as a correspondent in the main war theaters. On these occasions, he encounters the war's protagonists and their respective entourages: from the Nazi *Generalgoverneur* of Poland Hans Frank to the Fascist Minister of Foreign Affairs Galeazzo Ciano, from the young Jewish girls obliged to prostitution in a brothel for German officials in Ukraine to the animated discussions in Finland with European ambassadors. *Kaputt*'s skillfully embroidered structure allows Malaparte to wander all over Nazi-occupied Europe and to accompany the reader to see and taste the atrocities, as well as to spot the contradictions, the weakness and the arrogance of the winners of today — who the author knows will be the losers of tomorrow. The structure of the book is paratactic: Malaparte accords equal dignity to Swedish aristocrats' and Ukranian peasants' stories. His principal message — the collapse of European civilization — emerges as a sum of the polyphonic architecture of stories which the book presents. *Kaputt* is simultaneously a multi-centered and centrifugal novel, yet its narrative unity is provided by the testimonial persona, Malaparte himself.

As Primo Levi, the most articulate witness of modern European literature, understood all too well, testimonial literature is anti-modernist.[8] Testimonial literature stands in opposition to avant-garde action. It is not a rupture with a preceding tradition but a quest to recuperate the fathers and the forefathers of storytelling in order to provide authority and rhetorical evidence to the new, unheard-of, narrative.[9] It is an "archeological" research in the sense given by

[8] See Levi's polemic with Giorgio Manganelli in his article, "Dello scrivere oscuro."

[9] In his essay *Demeure*, Jacques Derrida argues for the "common source" of both testimony and fiction. By considering testimony first of all as "an act," he thus concentrates on its "iterability": it is in the space created by this iterability, Derrida concludes, "where literature insinuates" (29-38). From the point of view of rhetorical strategy, it is therefore evident how testimonial literature is in stark contrast with avant-garde claims of "aesthetic autonomy," but requires instead the authority of a tradition to confirm its credibility. On this specific aspect of testimonial literature and Levi's peculiar use of literary tradition to support the credibility of his testimony, see Baldasso, esp. chapter 1, 17-45.

Michel Foucault: it is a disclosure of the archive. In *Kaputt*, Malaparte faces the downfall and scattering of the European home that he himself contributed to dismantling with his Fascist revolutionary pretenses. His archeological research is geared towards the defining moments, the archetypes (*Urbilder*) of Western culture, the only ones able to account for the denouement of the most consequential myth of modern Europe since the French Revolution and the Romantics: the myth of the palingenetic war, which was turned by the Nazis into the kitsch spectacle of total destruction.

Under the aerial bombings of Belgrade, in the Romanian pogrom of Iasi, the Warsaw ghetto, and the Finnish tundra, Malaparte's narrative avoids any metaphysical escapism by focusing on the technological and biopolitical aspects of the war and the new totalitarian power. In doing so, he anticipates what will be the great paradigm change of the postwar era. Attention will shift from the figure of the soldier, as occurred in the aftermath of WWI, to that of the victim, considered first of all in its corporeality, in its creaturely life, in its being a suffering animal. Most of the victims of *Kaputt* are in fact animals: horses, mice, dogs, birds, reindeer, and flies. The novel's sections are indeed named after these animals, yet they are more than just emblems of the human condition under Nazi-occupied Europe. According to Malaparte, these animals are subjects of history on their own; the frozen horses on Lake Ladoga, the dogs exterminated by the Nazis in Ukraine, or the salmon engaging in a virile but unequal fight with an armed German official in Finland are the agents of stories expressing human aberration and *hybris*. The Nazi assault on humanity is first of all a crime against nature.

There is a sense of blasphemy in these episodes, like the rupture of an arcane covenant which is nevertheless inborn in all living beings. Nazi crimes against nature violently clash with the "religious" recognition of life's sacredness, that is, the communal belonging of all beings to life. Effaced by Nazi crimes, this sacredness is according to Malaparte immanent in biological life — an original perception which he calls Christian for its creaturely aspects, to the exclusion of the theological-political ones. When the author recounts his dream of a crucified horse in Golgotha to the Swedish Prince Eugenio at the end of the first part of the book, besides the artfully crafted conventional comments of the noble host, it is his post-surrealist image that stands out. Unfolding some of the possible interpretations of this image, Malaparte associates the "sacrificio del Cristo-cavallo" with the ideological denial and political annihilation of bare life wrought by Europe on its own body politic. Remarkably, he concludes: "Muore tutto ciò che l'Europa ha di nobile, di gentile, di puro. La nostra patria è il cavallo" (499).

Kaputt is replete with disturbing images in which totalitarian power attempts to suppress bare life and reduce humanity to its political and ideological existence. Yet Malaparte's grandiose WWII fresco is even more nuanced, for he neither condemns technology as the ultimate reason for the

human fall from grace nor does he indulge in supernatural or ideological escapism. In his war correspondence from the Eastern front for *Il corriere della sera*, which he collected in 1943 in a volume entitled *Il Volga nasce in Europa*, his admiration for military and technological power of both the German and Soviet armies is unaffected. In his private diary, he enthusiastically comments on the spectacle of aerial bombings on the Gulf of Salerno with an ambiguous "bellissimo."[10] However, unlike Marinetti or Ernst Jünger, this appreciation of modern technological warfare is never detached from a profound comprehension of the finitude of the human condition experienced by the simple soldier in the battlefield. Behind many descriptions of Nazi and Red armies colliding on the Eastern front, the excitement for the display of modern warfare's technological power, typical of Fascist modernism, yields to an unusual interest in the bodies of the dead — men and animals alike.

Beginning with *Kaputt*, Malaparte describes what philosopher Günther Anders in his tormented inquiry into modernity would, a few years later, call "Promethean shame" (*prometheische Scham*). According to Anders, the second industrial revolution determines the historical separation between what man can imagine and what technology can produce. The divorce between representation (*Vorstellung*) and production (*Herstellung*) is total and the two terms become more and more irreconcilable. The Promethean shame is therefore the humiliation man feels facing the perfection and the power of his own technological creations. One of the devastating ethical consequences of the increasing distance between representation and production is our incapacity to think and comprehend in its totality the destructive power of our own technological achievements. Anders concludes his analysis asserting that technology has become the first subject of history, hence the "obsolescence of man," which is also the title of his major work.[11]

In his *Giornale segreto*, written during the war years, Malaparte meditates: "Il trait d'union fra noi e Dio, fra l'uomo e Dio, è l'animale" (Agenda 1942 a fogli mob). If the divorce between representation and production is at the core of the collapse of values occurring in European civilization since WWI, the effects of this rift will not be clear when discerned solely on human bodies. Human bodies are already affected by this breakdown, for they are both agent and target of this unintelligible destructive capacity. The separation can be read (and portrayed) only on the bodies that testify to the *before* of this catastrophe and are still untouched by it — animal bodies. The suicide of Europe is thus consequential to the biopolitical utopia of sacrificing the constitutive animality present in men. According to Malaparte, this animal side is the residual common

[10] On September 9, 1943, Malaparte writes in his *Giornale segreto*: "Bombardamento aereo della flot. ingl. nel golfo di Salerno. Bellissimo." Now in *Malaparte.* Vol. 6, 445.
[11] For a concise yet revealing introduction to Anders's philosophy, in particular for the historical concerns at stake here, see Traverso 83-108.

ground of our existence. Disposing of this animal constituency is tantamount to refusing the humanity of men and its most basic sense of belonging. In *La pelle*, Malaparte further develops this argument, finding in the human skin a powerful symbol of this biological, pre-political affinity. This same theme will also be the core motif behind his film *Il Cristo proibito*, in which the modern tragedy is represented by the impossible encounter between Christian eschatology and unredeemable human history, finding a haunting visual double in the horrifying display of butchered animals.[12] Malaparte's further intuition is that in the post-humanistic world in which technology is the subject of history, no ethical discourse can avoid including creaturely life in its scope.

Nowhere in *Kaputt* does the divorce between imagination and technological destructive capacity become more apparent than in the description of aerial bombings.[13] Malaparte brilliantly expounds this separation in "Il fucile impazzito," the concluding chapter of the section "I cani." The writer chronicles the appalling bombing of Belgrade in 1941 when the Nazis occupied Yugoslavia. The bombing is told from the point of view of Italian ambassador Mameli's dog, named Spin, who is unable to cope with this unforeseeable destructive power coming from the sky. Spin reacts by utterly refusing this new world, characterized as a sudden break with the past. The dog's subsequent withdrawal from the world could almost be described as a Freudian melancholy. Malaparte recounts the dog's reaction to the aerial bombing thus:

> Il mondo era crollato, qualcosa di spaventoso, di sovrannaturale, doveva essere accaduto, di cui Spin non riusciva a darsi ragione [...] Nessuna legge umana e naturale esisteva più. Il mondo era crollato.
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> (729)

Poignantly, the opposition here is not between nature and civilization. Spin is a hunter dog, and Malaparte tells how he loves the sound of his master's rifle during the hunting. Spin considers that roar the perfect completion of his own world, in which the dog is on the side of the powerful hunter, free to run in the woods after the prey.

With the story of Spin, Malaparte introduces a pathetic element in the shocking description of Belgrade's destruction, referring also to the ferocious plunder and hideous violence that followed the aerial bombing. As do many

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[12] In a review of the film that appeared in 1951 in *Cahiers du cinéma*, Bazin describes thus Malaparte's search for a modern tragic aesthetics: "If this universe of stone, of earth, and of men is nevertheless as real as it would be in a documentary, its *time* and its *space* are as unreal and artificial as those of nightmares and tragedies" (97).

[13] Additionally, this contrast is key for the chapter "Sangue," which concludes *Kaputt* by describing people's struggle for survival in the poorest quarters of Naples during aerial bombings (938-63). See also the opening scene of *Il Cristo proibito*, with the panoptical view from the plane encompassing the entire Tuscan landscape.

other episodes in the novel, the story echoes and corrects a previous piece written during the war for *Il corriere della sera*. On April 27, 1941, Malaparte published an article titled "L'ora che segnò la sorte di Belgrado," the last of a series of columns narrating the Nazi takeover of the Serbian capital. In line with official propaganda, the original piece is aimed at showcasing the technological perfection of the German war machine, in contrast with the racial disorder of the Balkan city, a confusion finally terminated by the Axis intervention. Even on that occasion, though, the story of "Spino, il cane che aveva paura" vitalizes the narration (620-24).

It is no coincidence that the dog, becoming protagonist in *Kaputt*'s new version, changes his name from the Italian Spino to the anglicized Spin. First, casting the dog in the foreground allows Malaparte to concentrate of the effects of technological warfare on the natural landscape, explicitly criticizing the apparent message of his own propaganda piece. Second, Malaparte significantly veers from his *Corriere* article, describing Spin as "un bravo cane inglese, di razza pura, un cane ariano nel miglior senso della parola: non aveva nelle vene neppure una goccia di sangue di colore, era un bravo cane inglese educato nel migliore canile del Sussex" (731).

Malaparte's biting irony is here twofold. With the portrayal of Spin, he dismisses warfare as the noble prerogative of an elite, a heroic conception that was the basis of nationalist propaganda all over Europe and of colonial rule beyond the European continent. In fact, for the "educated" British dog "le fucilate erano un elemento d'ordine della natura, un elemento tradizionale del mondo, del suo mondo. Senza fucilate, che sarebbe la vita?" Face to face with the massive killing capacity of aerial bombing, nevertheless, "pure breed" and assumed racial primacy do not count much. The piece is a subtle polemic with the supposed moral superiority of the liberators, a remark that the writer will further articulate in *La pelle*. In fact, Malaparte is alluding to the catastrophic experience of Italians in 1944 — daily devastation caused by unremitting Allied bombing. It is the so-called strategy of the "wings of democracy," which annihilated Axis forces and crushed their populations.

In a recent study, historian Leonardo Paggi described Allied aerial campaign as openly terroristic, making clear that after the infamous September 8, 1943 armistice

> l'offensiva aerea ben lungi dall'arrestarsi diverrà sempre più intensa ed endemica, non più riconducibile, in modo analogo a quanto avviene per le stragi naziste, ad una logica di calcolo razionale tra mezzi e fini.
>
> (113)

The destruction provoked by aerial bombings has been addressed for the German case by W. G. Sebald's well-known essay *On the Natural History of Destruction*. In that piece, the author lamented the lack of a *Luftkriegsliteratur* in postwar German culture, that is, a literature narrating the material and moral

ruins caused by aerial warfare. According to Sebald, literature failed to recount such a crucial experience, avoiding the inclusion of its memory in Germany's reshaping of a public identity after the Nazi years. He portrayed this lack as a case in which German literature gave up its supposed critical role in the national public sphere:

> There was a tacit agreement, equally binding on everyone, that the true story of the material and moral ruin in which the country found itself was not to be described [...]. The darkest aspects of the final act of destruction, as experienced by the great majority of the German population, remained a kind of taboo like a shameful family secret, a secret that perhaps could not even be privately acknowledged.
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> (10)

Sebald's argument is applicable to the Italian case, but with a crucial difference. As Paggi points out, in postwar Italy the problem is not the lack of a shared memory of the aerial bombings, but of a historically accurate memory:

> I bombardamenti, nonostante il prezzo altissimo in termini di vite umane che hanno comportato, saranno rigorosamente espunti dalla memoria repubblicana quale si definisce interamente attorno alla violenza nazifascista.
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> (133)[14]

Together with other examples of Allied violence in Italy, such as the mass rapes in Southern Lazio by the French Army led by General Guillaume,[15] the destruction of Italian cities and the ensuing wreckage are either silenced or associated with Nazi violence, whose coterminous devastation over the country and retaliations on its population escalated in the conclusive years of the conflict. As Paggi correctly observes, the "wings of democracy" policy deliberately ignored the values that antifascism set at the core of its political agenda, sealing the end of Europe's central position in the world. "I prefer starting anew, rather than accepting everything as if it were an immutable heritage," Malaparte writes in *Kaputt*'s introduction (431). The book assumes the end of Europe's centrality as a given, as a historical fact. Nevertheless, the story of Spin represents a main example of the *Luftkriegsliteratur* that Sebald lamented as lacking in German culture after WWII. Aerial bombings are, instead, a constant presence in postwar Italian literature, from the above-mentioned novel *Il cielo è rosso* by Berto to Beppe Fenoglio's *Il partigiano Johnny*.[16]

The aerial bombing of Italy is present throughout *La pelle*, in many of the

[14] A striking example of this altered shared memory is the case of the massacre of the Duomo di San Miniato, July 22, 1944, examined in Foot 22-29.
[15] On these issues see Gribaudi; Malaparte's critical portrayal in *La pelle* of Guillaume's military occupation of Southern Lazio is insightfully examined by Escolar.
[16] For an overview of WWII literature in Italy, see Gordon.

stories told by the Neapolitans about the devastation of their city. Malaparte, however, develops the ground-breaking theme of the massive violence provoked by the "wings of democracy" well beyond national borders. The annihilation of German cities found an iconic representation in Roberto Rossellini's *Germania, anno zero* (1948). In *La pelle*'s chapter "Le rose di carne," Malaparte provides a detailed and horrifying description of the effects of white phosphorus bombing on the population of Hamburg, with explicit references to Dante's *Inferno* (1074-77).

Dogs intervene in the hell of Hamburg to rescue their owners whose skin is burning after the white phosphorus bombing. In the economy of Malaparte's fiction, animals are not only a metonymy for what is purest in mankind, for in his view they explicitly embody Christian sacrifice, recast in a secular light. In that baroque liturgy of Christ's passion, which *Kaputt* epitomizes, and which each of its chapters repeats, animals are victims and heroes, scapegoats and martyrs. They acquire a Christological function and share their destiny with the human victims of the biopolitical war.

Kaputt introduces the fundamental features of a theme — Christological sacrifice in a world without redemption — that would find full articulation in *La pelle*. Still, Malaparte provides in the earlier novel a remarkable conclusion for an unsettling topic that will haunt his later writings: the issue of political theology embodied by the modern State. Modernist myths of the new man and of revolutionary politics, both on the Fascist and Communist sides, are debunked by the war. In *Kaputt*, however, political theology survives the collapse of European civilization, as the chapter "La notte d'estate" expounds.

In the isolation of the Finnish summer, in which the sun never sets and sheds its pale light over timeless evenings leading to no night, Malaparte recounts meetings and discussions of the European diplomats, gathered not far away from besieged Leningrad. Through the spectral northern light, the suspended atmosphere of these conversations appears more a disquieting parody of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* than the fine rituals of European cosmopolitan society. After an exchange about the wonders of Turkish tapestry, the discussion shifts to the relation between modern politics and God:

> "Ma è orribile!" esclamò la contessa Mannerheim. "Come si può concepire l'idea di uccidere Dio?"
> "Tutto il mondo moderno tenta di ammazzare Dio" disse Agah Aksel. "Nella coscienza moderna, la vita di Dio è in pericolo [...]. L'assassinio di Dio è nell'aria, è un elemento della civiltà moderna."
> "Lo Stato moderno" disse Costantinide, "s'illude di poter proteggere la vita di Dio semplicemente con misure di polizia."
> "Non è soltanto la vita di Dio, quel che lo Stato s'illude di proteggere, ma la propria esistenza" disse de Foxà. "Prendete l'esempio della Spagna. Il solo modo di rovesciare Franco è quello di ammazzare Dio: e ormai gli attentati contro la vita di Dio, nelle strade di Madrid e di Barcellona, non si contano più."
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> (723)

The passage displays how illusory the conflict between politics and theology is. The existence and the security of the State intertwines with that of God after the main concepts of theology have been appropriated by the new secular religions of politics — and of the State. Through the words of his friend de Foxà, Malaparte here pits Kafka against Carl Schmitt. Again, after the secularization of religious concepts, the State lives on as the depository of sovereign power. Yet, the State is no longer the expression of the common will of the people — if it ever was — but survives as a mere sign of its power, totally devoid of any meaning. The State lives on as a fully opaque signifier, expressing nothing but itself. Through the cynical words of the ambassadors of two Fascist states, Costantinide and de Foxà, the ideals of social and cultural reorganization that originally fostered Fascism are on the brink of collapse. In the new religion of the State, what survives of those momentous tensions is clericalism and blind violence. In the new totalitarian order, politics and religion are a matter of police and assassination. Ten years later, in his criticism of Stalinism in *Mamma marcia*, Malaparte would continue his indictment of totalitarian power: against the "monstrous power" and the "stupid and dull wickedness of the state," the only solution is "lottare perché la società moderna non diventasse una 'società statale'" (255-57).

3. *Christological Figures of Sacrifice:* La pelle

As Hannah Arendt insightfully argued, "The problem of evil will be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe — as death became the fundamental question after the last war" (134). In Malaparte's writing, nothing redeems evil. Although the question occupies many of his pages, he never addresses the problem of evil *per se*, as an ontological category. Rather, in his books, he elaborates figures of victimization and sacrifice that flesh out the profound continuity of creaturely life. In *La pelle*, this natural continuity unreservedly questions what he describes as modern "Cartesian reason," which for him is utterly inadequate to confront recent traumatic history and thereby understand the problem of evil as newly posed by WWII. Against his so-called Cartesian reason, Malaparte turns to Christological allegory, although in a radically immanent perspective. By projecting Christ's story of suffering and ultimate scapegoating onto the many victims of WWII, he points to creaturely life as the decisive correspondence among the many figures of sacrifice crowding his narrative. Malaparte's Christological figures are devoid of any metaphysical underpinning; the evil and suffering inflicted on their flesh is not redeemed by any superior design or ideological rationale. Their unwieldy presence and torn bodies withstand consoling interpretations — first of all vulgar Marxist and liberal readings of recent history as one of emancipation and progress — and testify to the impossibility of finding a response to the many ghosts haunting Europe after its WWII downfall.

An incisive entry from his *Giornale segreto* during his stay in Finland may

be helpful to illuminate this aspect:

> Il pensiero della morte non mi opprime, in questi giorni pur così "vicini alla morte". Mi sono sorpreso, l'altra notte a pensare che forse io non ho il senso della morte. Ecco, forse, perché il mio distacco dalla fede, la mia religiosità anarchica. De Foxà dice che non ha mai incontrato un uomo che sia più religioso di me. Sì, ma anarchico. Chissà come tutto questo si risolverà. E chi sa come si risolverà nel fatto artistico. Perché è lì che tutto, alla fine, si chiarisce e si risolve. Certo, Febo [Malaparte's dog] mi ha aiutato molto a sviluppare il mio senso religioso. Il trait d'union fra noi e Dio, fra l'uomo e Dio, è l'animale.
>
> ("22 settembre 1942")

The dog Febo in *La pelle* is an explicit Christological representation, consistent with the seminal position animals hold in *Kaputt*, where the spectral dead bodies of the "Cristo-cavallo" appeared to the author's eyes as "la nostra patria." Febo was Malaparte's favorite dog, who died before the war. In *La pelle* the author invents the fiction of Febo's atrocious death: the dog is utilized as a guinea pig for a scientific experiment, with his belly surgically opened and his vocal cords cut so he cannot make any noise. The position of this story in the economy of the book — right after the recollection of his disturbing nightmare featuring East European Jews (*Ostjuden*) crucified in Romania and before the agony of the American soldier dismembered by a landmine — points to the universality of suffering and the creaturely continuity among these heterogeneous figures, for which death is nothing but a relief. Febo and the American soldier are furthermore associated by the similar disquieting details of their dying. Their atrocious deaths have the features of a blasphemy against humanity, as I explained above. Their ends also challenge natural causality and human imagination alike, as they are provoked by the peculiar "technological" cruelty of modern man and of modern war. Nothing redeems the suffering of these Christological figures, equated by violent death. With their sacrifices, Malaparte retrieved the tragic understanding of history that he would put forward once again in his movie *Il Cristo proibito* by casting an unredeemable conflict at the center of his modern representation. Malaparte's search for the tragic in modern history is in polemical dialogue with the "patterns of conversion"— as David Ward named them — offered by coeval realist and neorealist accounts, which narrated individual death in the larger scheme of a collective redemption.[17]

[17] Malaparte's idiosyncratic blend of fiction and testimony in his novels is starkly at odds with the widespread return to realism of early postwar Italian literature, which prescribed both male and female models to navigate the transition to post-Fascism — from both Catholic and Communist sides. Cases in point are Ruggero Zangrandi's influential memoir *Il lungo viaggio* (1948) or Renata Viganò's novel *L'Agnese va a morire* (1949). Equally relevant was the return to "chronicle" in literature theorized by the Communist journal *Società*, or Rossellini's movies *Roma, città aperta* and *Paisà*, which, from a Catholic perspective, attained artistic results exceeding any other ideological reading of

In his classic study *The Death of Tragedy*, George Steiner traces the decline of the tragic genre, after the seminal works of Greco-Roman culture and its Early Modern revival, back to the aporias of the Romantics, who ventured to combine the unique tragic sense of life and history of the classics with the Christian master narrative of redemption. According to Steiner, after "Rousseauism close[d] the doors of hell," establishing the foundations of a positive anthropology and relegating to society the responsibility of all evil, the result was at best the "sublime melodrama" of Goethe or the "apotheosis of redemption" of Wagner (127-35).

After witnessing the tragedy of Europe, Malaparte interpreted Christian eschatology and technological modernity as inherently incompatible. His dismissal of the well-established tradition of the "romantic tragedy" resounds in his special treatment of Christological figurations. After the analogy "Cristo-cavallo-patria" operating in *Kaputt*, in which creaturely life conflicts with the ruptures of history and ideology, this correspondence finds a new haven in *La pelle*, the book Malaparte dedicates to the controversial spectacle of Italy's (and Europe's) abasement during the Allied occupation. In fact, the very insistence on the spectacle of European degradation is a stark criticism leveled at any redemptive reading of Italy's recent past.

Christian or secular, each dominant narrative on the recent past during the early postwar period features eschatological pretenses. Benedetto Croce interpreted Fascism as a "parenthesis" or as a "foreign sickness" in an organism that was otherwise healthy and that recuperated its true shape through the antibodies gained during the war. With the myth of the "Secondo Risorgimento," anti-Fascist forces celebrated the armed Resistance as the moral rebirth of the nation. In the speeches of their leaders, from actionist Ferruccio Parri to monarchist Luigi Einaudi, Risorgimento's moral legacy turned into a rhetorical call for action.[18] Its appeal also functioned as historical legitimization for the new political forces aiming to ground post-Fascist Italy on the values of the Resistance.[19] Encompassing opposing visions of the anti-Fascist political spectrum, "Secondo Risorgimento" narratives furthermore fostered many disillusioned young Italians to take up arms in the anti-Fascist Resistance for their moral *riscatto* (literally "ransom"). This younger generation was educated

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recent events. Regarding a broader articulation of these "patterns of conversion," see Ward; for Neorealism in literature, and especially the poetics of the "chronicle," see Re; for a detailed overview of Resistance literature in Italy, see Cooke, *Legacy*.

[18] The mutual influence of rhetoric and politics at the basis of the new post-Fascist state in Italy has been evidenced by Lanaro.

[19] Despite its prominence during the civil war and in the years immediately following national Liberation, the "Secondo Risorgimento" narrative has a multi-layered history which predates WWII and will continue in the ensuing decades of the Republican state, through the processes of memorialization of the Resistance. On this topic, see Ponzani, Focardi, and Cooke, "Resistenza."

to the civic religion of the fatherland under Fascism, but grew sour with the regime's ethical failures and military setbacks. As Giaime Pintor stressed in his influential 1943 article "L'ora del riscatto," this trope displayed the moral crisis that propelled personal participation within the collective struggle for national redemption, pitting the "new" revolution of his generation against the discredited and now disavowed Fascist revolution (241). Finally, Italian Communists, whose brigades constituted the major constituency of partisan organizations, perceived the Nazi-fascist defeat as a confirmation of the Marxist master narrative and the triumph of the Soviet "new man." In the immediate postwar period, the utopia of a new leftist society seemed imminent, galvanized by the striking victory of the Red Army on the Eastern front and the landslide success of Clement Attlee's Labor Party in Great Britain in the 1945 elections.[20] In fact, each of these readings of the recent past projected present-day Italy, which had miraculously survived the death threat posed by Fascism, onto a historical background of progress and regeneration — a collective redemption from the shameful subjugation to Mussolini's regime.

Against this ideological background, *La pelle* looked totally untimely. The novel is a visionary, baroque, self-indulgent and highly sophisticated narrative of the new wave of moral corruption, a new plague depicted in an almost Boccaccian style, which followed the liberation of Italy. In *La pelle*, Malaparte narrates Europe's encounter with its own "other" — an *internal* other — and its many dissonant voices (1002). The author introduces this consequential encounter through the viewpoint of unaware outsiders, that is, of young American officials who land in Naples biased by their readings of classics and confident to liberate European civilization from Hitler's exceptional yoke. Crucially, Malaparte portrays the young officials' dismay when they discover instead "the other Europe," which rebuffs all their anticipations. The one before their eyes is "un paese misterioso, dove non la ragione, non la coscienza, ma oscure forze sotterranee parevano governare gli uomini, e i fatti della loro vita" (1001). The contrast between the American gaze, full of expectations, and the sordid reality they uncover in Naples inflates the contradiction that, the author maintains, lies at the core of European identity. Malaparte stresses how the war violently disclosed the many aporias that any idea of progress inevitably entails. He polemically brings to the surface the numerous fallacies of "Cartesian reason" and its inadequacy to make sense of European history and its recent tragic developments. Ultimately, *La pelle* details the Enlightenment's failure to

[20] For a more detailed account of Communist Resistance narratives in Italy see Sassoon, for its legacy and aftermath, Gundle. For a more nuanced assessment of the Italian case in the broader context of the emerging Cold War, see Tony Judt's *Postwar*, especially "Part one: Post-War: 1945-1953," 13-237.

tame life and its polyphonic yet vital baroque spectacle.[21]

The overlapping of different languages and layers of reality, the juxtaposition of contrasting *Europes* that somehow coexisted side by side for centuries, are all major features of this novel. Still, few commentators, too concerned about the moral problems raised by Malaparte's graphic representations,[22] accessed the novel from the main entry suggested by its author, as we read in the first epigraph: "Se rispettano i templi e gli Dei dei vinti i vincitori si salveranno." This quotation is taken from Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, the first tragedy of the *Oresteia* trilogy. Its solemn, religious tone is contradicted by the ironic juxtaposition with another quotation, from Paul Valéry: "Ce qui m'intéresse n'est pas toujours ce qui m'importe" (qtd. in *La pelle* 966). Aeschylus's *Oresteia* cycle is a meditation on the theme of justice, from the primordial law of vengeance to the institution of civil courts able to administer justice on equal terms and to thenceforth avoid long chains of crimes. Salvation is possible — Malaparte seems to admit — but only for the Allies, if they are able to overcome their differences and cease the ideological struggles that reduced Europe to rubble. And only if they are able to acknowledge the inherent continuity of this heterogeneous, complex, contradictory Europe, from the Champs-Elysées in Paris to the slums of Naples, from the ancient nobility of the West to the peasants of Ukraine and Russia, from Latin pastoral poetry to Hitler. The author recognizes how national divides and ideological conflicts crushed European civilization by insisting on a total restructuring of the old society through the violent annihilation and the scapegoating of its internal other — the South, the Slavs, the Jews. In the subsequent pages of *La pelle*, Malaparte will directly address this fundamental issue. Naples is the "città levantina" par excellence, its depiction echoing the hallucinatory portrait of Belgrade after the Nazi aerial bombings that shocked the Serbian city in 1941, as described in his war reportage for the *Corriere*.[23] In his words, Naples is the mysterious — if alluring and titillating — image of this *other* Europe, its "naked ghost," alien to

[21] Orsucci has recently offered a compelling reading of Malaparte's oeuvre in light of his not infrequent references to 17th-century literature and philosophy, from Daniello Bartoli to classic French moralists such as La Bruyère, Pascal and Saint-Simon.

[22] The sensational case *La pelle* unleashed in Italy and abroad, including a political process and the official condemnation by Catholic authorities, is detailed in Serra, esp. 376-89. The dozens of articles and reviews of the book, most of them attacking its author for the outrage to public decency, are collected in *Malaparte,* edited by Edda Ronchi Suckert, esp. vol. 8 "Seconda parte 1949 – *La pelle*" (309-671); vol. 9 "Parte prima 1950 - Accoglienza a *La pelle* e altre opere" (9-430), "Parte quinta. 1951 – L'accoglienza a *Il Cristo proibito*. Il Volga nasce in Europa" (595-827), in which the controversy regarding *La pelle* continues by affecting the appraisal of his following works. For the reception abroad see vol. 10, "Parte prima. 1952 - L'accoglienza della Germania a *Kaputt* e degli Stati Uniti a *La pelle*" (9-221).

[23] See the articles by Malaparte, "Risveglio di Belgrado" (April 22, 1941) and "L'ora che segnò la sorte di Belgrado" (April 27, 1941) now in *Malaparte*, vol. 5, 608-12; 620-24.

"Cartesian reason" (1001).

Such a portrayal of Naples was an outrage for the early postwar intelligentsia, even beyond the boundaries of Italy. The city is represented for the first time neither as the triumph of the picturesque (alongside clichés such as "Vedi Napoli e poi muori"), nor as the miserable *locus* of the "malavita" that epitomizes the Southern question. It is not the sick limb of the nation, of Europe, that can only be cured and redeemed through Northern paternalistic intervention. According to Malaparte, the maladies of Naples are not dissimilar to the chronic diseases that plague Eastern European cities, as portrayed in *Kaputt*.

To fully understand *La pelle*'s novelty, one must go back to the long-standing cultural tradition of the Italian *letterato*, which started with Dante but took on special prominence during and after the Risorgimento.[24] For such a tradition, the exemplary biography of the man of letters is more significant than his own work, merging together classical references with Christian martyrdom. This obsessive re-writing of Dante's *Inferno*, with the personal trajectory from perdition to redemption, from darkness to light, finds its nemesis in the 20th century with the works of the best Italian writers, from Pasolini to Primo Levi. Conversely, *La pelle* questions the possibility of a Christian redemption until the very last line. In the novel, Malaparte begins his personal voyage throughout a modern *Inferno* taking for his own persona the most unconventional and tragic role — that of Virgil. Dante's *maestro* is the truly tragic figure of the *Divine Comedy*, for he is condemned not to see the light of redemption although, arguably, he had not sinned. At the end of *La pelle*, Malaparte accepts Virgil's destiny, which he alleges is also the destiny of European civilization. As in Aeschylus's tragedy, the possibility of salvation is accessible only for the winners, but only if they respect the gods of the vanquished. However, by aligning himself with Virgil's fate and figuratively following in his footsteps, Malaparte avoids any direct confrontation with his *own* Fascist past, which remains surreptitiously unresolved.

The true Dante of *La pelle* is instead Jack Hamilton, the American officer whom Malaparte guides during the liberation from Naples to the North of Italy. For the reader, the main anchor of the story is of course Malaparte himself, but *La pelle* is also the *bildungsroman* of Jack, from the initial innocence where Europe is but "the banlieue of Paris," to the understanding of Naples as the mysterious image of "quell'*altra* Europa." *La pelle*'s ultimate rationale is Jake's comprehension — and Malaparte's contention — that "anche Hitler appartiene a quell'*altra* Europa, che la ragione cartesiana non può penetrare" (1003).

No message could be more polemical in early postwar Italy than claiming that Hitler (and Fascism) were deeply rooted in European civilization. No *Sonderweg* for the Germans, and no "invasione degli Hyksos" in Italy, as Croce

[24] This tradition had received a prominent codification in the 19th century by De Sanctis with his *Storia della letteratura italiana* (Jossa 61-64).

also emphatically called the Fascist *ventennio* (101).[25] In fact, no redemption is really possible for the winners either, if only on the personal level of conscience. That strange Dante embodied by Jack, who arrived in hell without having sinned, dies on the battlefield in the final pages of the book, a few days before the end of the war. Only after Jack's death it is possible to interpret the most ambiguous passage of the text, the initial dedication looming large over the entire book. *La pelle* features the meaningful subtitle "storia e racconto" and is dedicated to the memory of a dead American official:

> *All'affettuosa memoria del Colonnello Henry H. Cummings, dell'Università di Virginia, e di tutti i bravi, i buoni, gli onesti soldati americani, miei compagni d'arme dal 1943 al 1945, morti inutilmente per la libertà d'Europa.*
>
> (965)

Here, italics are in the original. Jack Hamilton is the name Malaparte used in his novel for his friend Henry Cummings. The message is now clear, and it is not a judgment on the American military intervention in Italy and Europe. Malaparte addressed it to the vanquished: between testimony and fiction ("storia *e* racconto," he writes), his book argues that the winners did not achieve their ultimate goal to restore European freedom. Regardless of the liberation from Hitler and Mussolini, the author contends that Europe did not regain any substantial freedom, which would probably coincide with its lost innocence. Malaparte insists that the Allies' military intervention did not bring about any professed moral regeneration, as old maladies — such as factionalism, clericalism and conservativism — still persist.[26]

Despite the huge public success it attained at the time, *La pelle* received mixed reviews. A young Giovanni Spadolini — later Italy's Prime Minister —

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[25] A long historiographical tradition, now discredited, interpreted the Nazi political aberration as a logic consequence of the German people's "special path" (*Sonderweg*) to modernity. This teleological reading of national German history "from Luther to Hitler," has been further popularized in English-speaking countries by journalist William Shirer, author of the greatly influential *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (1960).

[26] Similar passages elucidate both the distance between Malaparte's populism and the conservative stances of other former ideologues of Fascism, such as Leo Longanesi, and the reasons for his long-standing friendship with Giuseppe Prezzolini. His belief in an anti-bourgeois popular revolution against the conservative elites that suffocate vital national forces guided Malaparte throughout his life. From his voluntary military service in WWI to his allegiance to early Fascism, from his 1920s articles for the journal *La conquista dello stato* and the daily *La stampa*, to the reports on the Liberation of Florence that he wrote under the pseudonym "Gianni Strozzi" for *L'Unità* in 1944, the myth of a popular revolution able to regenerate the nation is a constant presence in his political and polemical output. In this sense, *La pelle* and his later production are also a bitter reappraisal of his revolutionary past. Countering popular and scholarly appraisal of Malaparte as an incurable turncoat, both Pardini and Serra argue in their biographies that his political ideas were in fact consistent.

emphasized in *Il messaggero* how the book's focus on national defeat was truly unique in postwar Italy (49). In *La gazzetta del popolo*, Lorenzo Gigli added: "In fondo, *La pelle* è l'emozionante racconto di una disfatta morale [...]. Non è la storia romanzata della sconfitta e della degradazione d'un popolo vinto, ma la storia di una generazione che per i suoi trascorsi ne porta tutte le responsabilità" (62). These positive appraisals were nonetheless exceptions. The general critical response can be summed up with the *stroncatura* (demolition) of the novel written by the authoritative *letterato* Emilio Cecchi: "[Malaparte] ha fatto, Dio lo perdoni, una di quelle cose che veramente non si fanno. Meglio allora il silenzio e l'ipocrisia, che coteste equivoche bravure" (68).

If Gigli praised *La pelle* for revealing the moral disaster of the generation that wielded power, in his review he nevertheless regretted that its author did not trace the responsibilities of the European abasement and its tragic consequences back to their origins: Fascism's revolt against human reason, tolerance and freedom (61-2). Malaparte would always avoid taking moral responsibility for his writing, a most prominent contradiction that he would never fully come to terms with.[27] Gigli, however, stresses approvingly that his novel opened a real Pandora's box in working through the war trauma in Italy. If anything, the critic bemoans the fact that *La pelle* did not take a more radical stand. Cecchi, instead, laments exactly the opposite: he criticizes the book by arguing for a full silencing of the past. The critic concludes thus: "Purtroppo noi non stiamo con Dalì né con De Sade; noi stiamo con Manzoni." Against *La pelle*, Cecchi advocates the moral monumentality of the Italian literary tradition, personified by the author of *I promessi sposi* and his rectitude. This hypocritical stance is the postwar update of what Leo Bersani called "the culture of redemption": "Art redeems the catastrophe of history. To play this role, art must preserve what might be called a moral monumentality" (22). Bersani then concludes his analysis of such a strictly ideological conception of art, which is historically grounded in European modernism despite its classicist undertones, with a piercing argument:

> Claims for the high morality of art may conceal a deep horror of life. And yet nothing perhaps is more frivolous than that horror, since it carries within it the conviction that, because of the achievements of culture, the disasters of history somehow do not matter.
> (22)

Since his 1940 article titled "Cadaveri squisiti" for the journal *Prospettive*, Malaparte claimed that the moral quality of his writing lay in his "cruelty" (6).[28]

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[27] As suggested above, the role of Virgil, which Malaparte carved for himself in *La pelle*, has the advantage for its author of outlining a safer space, wherein he can avoid any question of personal responsibility for the crimes of Fascism.

[28] Malaparte's first association of his writing with cruelty, which he would further elaborate in "Storia di un manoscritto" (his preface to *Kaputt*), dates back to 1937, to

Yet his impassive depiction of the horrors of the war and of their legacy betrays an uncompromising passion for life. This love for life is evident in the creaturely dimension of his recurrent Christological figures of sacrifice. Their suffering is universal, calling for a compassion that is beyond any ideological or national divide. It is also beyond human boundaries, for in Malaparte animals are often depicted — and named — the truly new Christ.

European Jews, too, figure as the new Christ, since they have been reduced by Nazi power to that creaturely residual to be banned in the new order. In *Kaputt*, the section "Mice" recounts the atrocities committed by the Nazis on the European Jews — the Warsaw ghetto, the Rumanian pogroms, the Wehrmacht's mass executions of Ukrainian Jews, and the cattle trains directed to the concentration camps. In *La pelle* instead, a hallucinatory dream further illuminates Malaparte's understanding. The scene is not different from what occurred to horses in *Kaputt*, but the crucifixion involves Eastern European Jews, ousted from the West not only by Nazi genocidal politics, but also by the European self-reflective gaze and intrinsic politics of exclusion. Here, animals and *Ostjuden* are Christological figures, the scapegoats Europe needs to reaffirm itself while seeking to eliminate its own *other*. In a prose that is redolent of Surrealist and magical realist experiences,[29] Malaparte represents animals and *Ostjuden* as both historical victims and allegories of the surgery Nazi-controlled-Europe sought to carry out on its own body, in an effort to remove the creaturely, pre-political and pre-ideological parts of its own nature.

In traditional Christian ethics, Christ is the historical *and* super-historical, human *and* super-human medium between man and God. In Malaparte's approach, however, transcendence is not even contemplated. When in his narrative he employs animals as allegories of Christ, and explicitly names them the "new Christ," their violated bodies testify to a compelling paradox, a tragic conflict that is at the heart of all his later artistic elaboration. In Malaparte's figurations, animals and WWII victims senselessly repeat the passion of Christ

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"Confessione," the introduction to his collection of short stories entitled *Sangue*, especially 43-44.

[29] Only recently scholars have begun a reappraisal of Malaparte's multi-faceted meditation on French Surrealism and of magical realism in the Italian context. Despite the official prohibition of Fascist authorities to discuss the avant-Garde movement and its Marxist poets in Italy, Malaparte's articles in his journal *Prospettive*, and especially the 1940 special issue fully dedicated to the French avant-Garde guided by André Bréton, attest not only a keen attention to the movement and its aesthetic achievements, but also the clear intention to disregard the regime's censorship. Malaparte's intellectual independence, however unique in Fascist Italy, does not necessarily imply political emancipation from the regime — *Prospettive* itself was indeed founded by Mussolini. In 2016 the second series of *Prospettive* (1939-1943) was reprinted in facsimile by Cesati and Vallecchi publishers in collaboration with Casa Malaparte. Martellini recently published a thorough introduction and detailed indexes of the journal, which boasted in its pages the best Italian intellectuals of the period.

without any possibility of religious resurrection or ideological redemption. Stripped of super-historical resolutions, their deaths are interpreted in a radically immanent prospective. Their individual suffering and ultimate death defy the collective or national sublimations provided by the redemptive readings of national history, from Croce to the "Secondo Risorgimento" trope.[30]

Historical contingency notwithstanding, Malaparte's "religiosità anarchica" argues for a correspondence between animals and Christ as a means to God. Consequently, he casts both Christ and God in a radically secular prospective, where the latter is, as in Kafka's tales, demoted to a pure sign without any attribute, not unlike the stories told by the European ambassadors in *Kaputt*. In Malparte's works Christ is reduced to his human, if not merely to his animal, component. Thus, his figure resists any transcendent design, as he epitomizes not redemption, but creaturely life. Christ's victimization and sacrifice is recovered as the exemplary and universal narrative of human condition and its frailty — first of all facing the terroristic behavior of biopolitical power — and yet this narrative is devoid of any aspect of faith to a super-historical justice.[31] For Malaparte, the radical meaning of Christ's sacrifice resides not in the revelation of a higher order, even less in the metaphysical challenge that faith can constitute, but in the acknowledgment of a communal belonging that withstands what Arendt called "the totalitarian attempt to make man superfluous" (457). In this sense, the above-mentioned analogy "Cristo-cavallo-patria," which was pivotal in *Kaputt*, testifies against the political and technological excesses of modern man. Still, it finds a full disclosure only in his later novel, when Malaparte concludes towards the end that "la nostra vera patria è la pelle" (1284).

Malaparte's appeal to animals as Christological figures is a confirmation of his "anarchic" religious understanding of life which requires neither institutions nor orthodoxy. Rather than subverting or emptying the original meaning associated with Christ, Malaparte carries out a deconstruction of his figure, in order to strip it of any metaphysical — and therefore, super-historical — significance. The goal is to recover the foundation of the immanent religious sense of life that Malaparte thought to be the real basis of European civilization, as opposed to its totalitarian aberrations — a radical secularism that he saw go hand in hand with his own attempt to highlight the tragic understanding of history. His indictment of Nazism finds accusatory evidence not only in its reckless use of violence; on a creaturely level, it signals the inconsistency of Nazi biopolitics with the ethical basis of the state of nature, of which the animal, and Malaparte's interpretation of the figure of Christ, are prime examples.

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[30] It is worth mentioning here how even Risorgimento's heroes were depicted in popular culture and celebrated in public speeches through a Catholic imaginary of sacrifice, as thoroughly analyzed by Banti.

[31] For a philosophical inquiry concerning secularization and modernity, see Marramao.

The removal of the divine effected by Malaparte with the superimposition of the animal and Christ is first of all a criticism of Nazi political theology. Deeply controversial, this subversive strategy was however rhetorically effective, although few people took it seriously in Italy when Malaparte's works were published. As exemplified by Cecchi's review, the cultural establishment preferred to overlook Malaparte's radical and piercing arguments, concentrating instead on the vanities of an intellectual deeply compromised by his personal involvement with Mussolini's regime and unable to fully come to terms with his Fascist past. And yet, the utmost achievement of Malaparte lies in the double recovery of a truly tragic understanding of history together with the universality of the Christological message, both played out completely on a secular basis and deployed as incompatible strands in stark conflict with each other. The conflict between the two remains unresolved, devoid as they are of any progress or any dialectical superior solution. Malaparte's rejection of the "romantic tragedy" is the prime reason for the ostracism he received from postwar Italian culture.

Bard College

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