

Corto Maltese, Counterculture Hero:  
A Unifying Figure for Francesco Guccini and Fabrizio De André's Revolutionary Visions

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Hugo Pratt's first Corto Maltese comic, *Una ballata del mare salato* (*Ballad of the Salt Sea*), was published in serial form between 1967 and 1969 in the Italian comic magazine, *Sgt. Kirk*, and has since been acclaimed as groundbreaking in both its art and storytelling. Indeed, the tale's protagonist, the dashing sailor-pirate, Corto Maltese, was an innovative hero in 1967, and in as far as he was specific to and defined by his time, I argue that he can help us conceive of the Italian protest movement—which historian Paul Ginsborg calls “the most profound and long-lasting in Europe” (254)—and how the early counterculture saw itself and its goals. Importantly, as Giovanni Remonato points out, beginning with *Una ballata*, Pratt's characters and stories were more geared towards the young-adult and adult audience than towards children, and their content was culturally more dynamic and relevant (par. 2). For this reason, it was not children but the university-student and young-laborer generation, as well as those who would come of age across the early 1970s, who related to and popularized Corto Maltese's brand of heroism. Hugo Pratt's Corto Maltese stories continued to be published until the author's death in 1995,<sup>1</sup> but as Umberto Eco said in 2003: “Forse dimenticheremo molte storie dove Corto Maltese appare [ma ...] la “Ballata” rimane

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<sup>1</sup> In the Italian magazine *Linus* (1972-1985), then Rizzoli's *Corto Maltese* (1983-1993).

nella mente dei suoi primi lettori come un evento, il modello di un nuovo modo di fare letteratura attraverso il fumetto.” This article is interested, specifically, in Corto’s first adventure, as it was that tale, consumed across three releases between 1967 and 1971, which set the hero’s course towards international comic-stardom.<sup>2</sup>

Hugo Pratt designed Corto as a complex vagabond who, I argue, turned out to be an exemplary hero for the goals and ideals of Italian social activism in the late 1960s and 70s, as those goals and ideals have been laid out retrospectively by historians, and as they were proclaimed in contemporary and near-contemporary songs by the *cantautori* Francesco Guccini and Fabrizio De André, who were both important but very different voices of the counterculture years. This article will consider two aspects of Corto’s heroism: his role as an erring sailor-explorer and his role as a vagabond gypsy-pirate, as well as, to some degree, his setting in the Pacific Ocean during WWI. The hero will act as a lens through which to view the counterculture itself, as he distills two of its distinct aspects as put down by Guccini and De André: Guccini’s romantic and tragic idealism, in search of utopia, and De André’s critique of a penal system that he sees as maintaining class structures and inequity. Interestingly, the heroes of Pratt, Guccini, and De André all have long lineages that return to early-modern Europe and to events that set the West on the trajectory that has, in many ways, brought it to the present day. Given these roots, we can understand all three men as critiquing that transitional moment and we can understand their heroes as resisting the tenants and work of western civilization since the Ages of Discovery and Enlightenment. That is to say, the overarching model of heroism is subversive for the same reason Paul Ginsborg argues the late 60s movement was subversive: “because it challenged directly the model of modernity” (308) that had developed across centuries and emerged as dominant.

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<sup>2</sup> The first serial publication wasn’t read widely in Italy. After success in the French magazine *Pif*, Pratt republished it in 1971 in Italy in *Corriere dei Piccoli* (Remonato par. 2).

### **A New Scene for a New Generation**

Perhaps the best-known and certainly the classic Italian comic-book hero is Tex Willer, who has been a best-seller in Italy since his comic was first released in 1948. Post-WWII children grew up on Tex stories set in the American Wild West that saw the Texas Ranger and his crew battle injustice on the frontier. Though he, as well as his silver-screen *western all'italiana* counterparts, were popular in the 1960s and 70s, Tex's tales gradually began to fall out of line with youth-culture values, due mainly, I argue, to his stance as defender of a territory that was defined by colonialism and unbridled capitalist development. By 1977, his status can be summed up by Umberto Eco's article in *L'Espresso*, which likened a masked shooter—who, as part of a militant activist group, had recently shot and killed a policeman on the streets of Milan—to a cowboy gunslinger: “Questo eroe individuale invece aveva la posa, il terrificante isolamento [...] degli sparatori solitari del West—non più cari a una generazione che si vuole di indiani” (1983: 98). Pratt overcomes some of the problems of Tex's heroism by making Corto Maltese ambivalent and/or adverse to traditional notions of chivalry, loyalty, and propriety, while he neutralizes the setting, to a certain degree, by moving his hero from the desert frontier to the open Pacific Ocean.

In adventure literature, the desert frontier and ocean have much in common. They are unpopulated and unmarked and thus appear as undefined spaces. They hold a sense of the epic in that they are vast settings that, even in a not-so-distant past, can give a sense of the idealized and irrecoverable. The very premise of the frontier desert as ‘unmarked’, however, is part of what becomes problematic for readers of comics like *Tex Willer*, as the frontier ‘wilderness’ is increasingly seen, not as a clean slate, but as a space scrubbed of its native population and marks

of their civilization.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, by the 1960s, frontier lands were becoming a thorny setting for carefree adventure tales, as the space had become a charged one for revolutionary and Marxist youths; frontiers were redolent of colonialism itself, and evocative of so many post-WWII battles for liberation. *Una ballata*'s Pacific setting is still a colonial one, as Pratt makes clear in an important subplot, and as the author, himself, engages in various forms of colonial discourse.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the choice of setting, as well as various other narrative choices,<sup>5</sup> shows a nascent European self-awareness in the global context and a desire to overcome traditional adventure-narrative models predicated on an inherent right of Empire. While this article is not concerned with placing *Una ballata* along the historical trajectory towards the postcolonial,<sup>6</sup> it is important to understand the

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<sup>3</sup> From 1970s and 80s Postcolonialist theory and, subsequently, Ecocritical theory. The concept of 'wilderness' has been discussed via the Postcolonial term 'Place', which in part signifies the rewriting of space by "imperial history, the teleological narrative of civilization and settlement, distinguishes itself by ignoring the place, the environment, as simply the empty stage on which the theatre of history is enacted" (Ashcroft et al. 165). In the Italian context, specifically regarding the U.S. frontier, there has been recent discussion: "L'idea di *wilderness* come realtà intonsa e selvaggia, contrapposta alla cultura rimane comunque un'astrazione di tipo urbano che riflette il punto di vista di persone ben lontane dall'ambiente naturale dal quale dipendono. L'idea di una natura vergine, senza traccia di occupazione umana, acquista, inoltre, una connotazione di tipo politico e sociale in quanto implicitamente 'disumanizza' le popolazioni indigene che [ci] vivono" (Rosso 105).

<sup>4</sup> Pratt's narrative is full of native assistants who have overcome some of the subaltern status of Native Americans in *Tex Willer*. Brunetto Salvarani remembers the Tiger Jack of the postwar period as "troppo silenzioso, troppo 'assente' nella sua onnipresenza, troppo perturbante nel suo essere 'altro' per potere entrare nei nostri giochi" (138). Yet, Pratt's characterization is still far from ideal: the Pacific islanders have gained language but lesser characters still mimic 'pidgin' or 'creole' sounding speech, saying 'Ugh' (Pratt 19, 26), a stereotypical lexical insertion that flatly signifies indigenous speech, seen as early as 1826 in James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*, (spelled 'hugh'). European characters still use colonial terminology like 'selvaggi' (21) and 'cannibali' (48, 52, 58-59, 63) and pejorative nicknames, like 'Macchia di catrame', to refer to native characters (30).

<sup>5</sup> For instance, the tale's morality subverts prior models. While the hero is still privateering within an imperial global economic model that treats people, land, and resources as commodities, there is no veneer of colonial morality, no talk of progress, religion, or civilization, which had served to hide the driving economic purpose. Furthermore, two of the heroes, Cranio and Tarao, have complete personhoods and arguably demonstrate more wisdom and knowledge than any other characters.

Linguistically, the young Maori, Tarao, speaks Italian fluently, having learned it from a teacher in his village in New Zealand, Miss Star. This treatment of Italian, conceptually, as English, the lingua franca of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as the language of colonized New Zealand and, presumably, of Miss Star, raises an interesting issue as it reveals Italy, itself, as situated somewhere between the center and the margins of dominant cultural epicenter, as conceived of by the leading colonizers of the Age of Imperialism. Meanwhile, the Melanesian boatswain, Cranio, significantly, code-switches between perfect Italian with use of subjunctive (Pratt 40, 58, 77-79) and a pejorative pidgin Italian that he speaks to other natives and as a tool to make Europeans underestimate him (45).

<sup>6</sup> Corto Maltese's stories are often cited as Conradian (Eco 2003; Remonato; Guerrera; Boschi). While Conrad's position as a turn-of-the-20<sup>th</sup>-century writer is still debated (Edward Said sees him as relatively progressive for his time (1993), Chinua Achebe argues he is simply a racist (1977)), by 1967 a Conradian attitude is definitively more retrograde than progressive.

steps the author takes to distance Corto from a traditional frontier setting, as the author's choices put into focus budding demands of contemporary Italian readership.

In two ways, Pratt renders Corto's interaction with the frontier at the Pacific non-traditional. Firstly, Corto's is an extreme sort of errancy, in which the hero is without *patria*, without homeland, and, indeed, without land at all, as in the end he always returns to the sea. In fact, if one considers the Pacific Ocean, not as it borders land, but as it exists unto itself, it becomes a new and rather disinterested setting. It is still rife with much of the mystery of traditional land-frontiers, as the ocean is still today nearly 80% unmapped,<sup>7</sup> yet, it is a more realistic wilderness, in that it is largely uncultivated and uninhabited when very far from land. To stress the borderless aspect of the setting, Pratt sets Corto's sights far beyond shorelines and to a side of the globe that is, quite literally, nearly all blue. The exact location of the land-action in *Una ballata* is strategically left ambiguous, the island where the majority of the action takes place, 'Escondida', means *hidden* in Spanish and "non è segnata sulle carte nautiche" (Pratt 147).<sup>8</sup> However, Corto Maltese does give a precise location once in the comic, stating as they arrive near Escondida that they are more or less at "169 longitudine ovest e 19 latitudine sud" (96). This places him at precisely the center of the point of the Pacific that is farthest removed from landmasses. Seen from a distance, the globe around Corto's location appears nearly unmarked by land. It is as if it were truly a space outside of History, where there is little ground on which the palimpsests of the past have been inscribed. This strategic placement allows the setting a certain timelessness and, together with Corto's constant return to his sails and the sea, it allows the hero a degree of historical neutrality, which is further emphasized, in turn, by his highly ambivalent attitude.

Traditionally, knights-errant roamed the wilds between civilized lands to uphold justice

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<sup>7</sup> National Ocean Service, 2021. <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/exploration.html>

<sup>8</sup> This and all further citations of *Una ballata* will be from the Lizard Rizzoli 2012 edition.

and demonstrate valor, as did the cowboys who followed. However, unlike his predecessor, Tex, whose *raison d'être* was the upholding of justice along largely tradition lines, Corto insists he has no altruistic goals. Rather, he is a criminal himself and reluctant to get involved in situations that require normative moral judgment. Indeed, *Una ballata* is set at the start of WWI and regarding the war he is brazenly neutral and unsympathetic. As the tale begins, Corto is set to steal from one side to sell to the other, stating, “Vinca chi vinca, noi saremo ricchi!” (27). So why does he wander, if it not for the traditional reasons that bind errant heroes? As Pratt says on the last page of *Una ballata*: “Il vero marinaio, vagabonda per vagare” (255). This tautological claim means to paint Corto as essentially free: without *patria*, without desire, without goal. Yet, as we find him in the pages of a comic, a variant of the word *vagare* comes to mind: *vagheggiare*, to dream of, to long for, to imagine. And, indeed, Pratt’s nihilist pirate quietly wears romantic nostalgia on his sleeve, for he, perhaps like those who read his adventures, is not just *vagando*, he is *vagheggiando*: longing for and searching for utopia in the strictest sense of the term.

### **Corto Maltese and Francesco Guccini’s Countercultural Narrative**

Corto Maltese, throughout his existence as a sailor across decades of comics, is continually reading and re-reading Thomas More’s *Utopia*, without ever finishing it.<sup>9</sup> In this way, his reading parallels his life, as he refuses to conclude his own tale by putting down anchor somewhere. Thomas More, the British lawyer, philosopher, and humanist, introduced the word ‘utopia’ with his 1516 book. Utopia is understood today as an ideal place, and as such, a place that does not exist. However, More’s original Utopia was proposed as a real, physical place, an island in the

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<sup>9</sup> Corto Maltese does not read *Utopia* in *Una ballata*. However, it becomes such an important part of his identity that it retroactively accounts for aspects of his character. As Giovanni Guerrera says: Corto “è un avventuriero, un uomo avventuroso o un gentiluomo di fortuna, come ama definirsi, lettore de “*L’utopia*” di Thomas More, che peraltro non riesce mai a terminare, Corto Maltese coniuga insieme *utopia* con *anarchia*” (15).

New World, as seen, according to the text, by a sailor on expedition with Amerigo Vespucci. Corto's affinity with those Age of Discovery sailor-explorers, which is emphasized by his obsessive readings of *Utopia*, lends him a nostalgic romanticism that seeps through the lines of his sardonic dialogue. As a 20<sup>th</sup>-century sailor, however, his air of romanticism is touched with a note of the tragic, which can help us to understand why he is at once hopeful and cynical. For, indeed, by 1913, when his tale begins, nearly all lands have been mapped, but a physical utopia has been neither found nor created. Thus, as soon as Corto sets foot on land, he must give up on the dream of/search for utopia and he is, therefore, destined to remain forever landless and homeless.

The actual creation of utopia came to be understood as part and parcel of the drive of progress, beginning with More's book in 1516 and continuing, through the Enlightenment, to today, even in the face of increased disillusionment. The dream certainly continued in earnest at least to the edge of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as this 1891 Oscar Wilde quote suggests:

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias (27).

In this aspect of Corto's character—which appears disappointed by the progress of western civilization that has promised and not delivered a utopia, and which at the same time believes in and continues to look in vain for it—Corto Maltese is a hero with the same sort of idealism as the Modenese *cantautore*, Francesco Guccini, during the very years *Una ballata* was first published.

Guccini's early view of the counterculture was, I argue, a romantic-idealist one that looked nostalgically backwards to find solutions for the future that were more poetic than practical. For example, in his 1965 song "Dio è morto",<sup>10</sup> Guccini recounts modern-day violence and alienation

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<sup>10</sup> Written in 1965 and popularized in 1967 when it was recorded by I Nomadi on their album *Per quanto noi non ci saremo*.

as the only real fruits of the so-called civilizing of the western world. In an introductory stanza that is reminiscent of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, Guccini alludes to his sense of the futility of human progress: "Ho visto / la gente della mia età andare via / lungo le strade che non portano mai a niente" (ll. 1-3). He goes on to sing of polluted cities, vapid dreams, drug and alcohol abuse, concentration camps, violence, and racism. He says that in all these things, we can see that "Dio è morto" (ll. 10-13, 23-26). His claim is a citation of Friedrich Nietzsche's 1882 declaration that "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him" (Section 125). Yet, the critique is rooted in the beginning of the Age of Exploration, the same historical moment in which Thomas More was writing *Utopia*. More wrote *Utopia* two years after Copernicus distributed his new theory of the universe to colleagues, in 1514, and a year before Martin Luther wrote his 95 Theses, in 1517. Though the Enlightenment, and its theoretical drive toward a renewed, ideal State, was still centuries off, it is not mere coincidence that More searched for paradise on Earth in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. Rather, the moment was particularly ripe for the envisioning of an earthly paradise. This readiness was, in part, due to the exploration of the globe, which opened physical spaces that were considered possible locations for a 'fresh start'. However, it was also partly due to Luther's attack on Catholicism and Copernicus's new theorization of the structure of the solar system, which had begun the process of chipping away at the promise of a Christian God and his celestial heaven.

It took over three centuries for the trajectory set in the early 1500s to lead Nietzsche to his well-known charge, and nearly a century longer for that charge to strike a chord with popular culture, which happened around the time Guccini wrote his song. An emblematic example of the zeitgeist is the April 8, 1966 *TIME* magazine cover, which featured the question "Is God Dead?" written in bold red on a black background. The article discussed the marked decrease in church



attendance in the U.S., a trend that, according to historian Guido Crainz, was true in Italy as well.<sup>11</sup> By the 1960s, even the Pope publicly recognized the crisis and John XXIII's Vatican II, which closed in 1965, sought to narrow the widening gap between modern man and the Christian God (Ginsorg 261). Yet, the sudden popularity of the Nietzsche slogan was also due to a loss of faith in western man himself and the promise of progress that had steered him since the Enlightenment. There was a sense that Nietzsche's larger charge was true; for the German philosopher, after his initial claim that man had killed God, had gone on to ponder: "Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us?"<sup>12</sup> That is, Nietzsche wondered whether western civilization was ready to unbridle itself from the Christian God's threat of judgment after death. By the mid to late 1960s, youths in the West began to feel certain that their societies had *not*, in fact, been ready, and rather than Enlightenment progress bringing paradise on Earth, it had brought a hubris that resulted in increasing atrocities across the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Guccini's generation, thus, is rebelling in the song against both the Christian God and the promise of progress and civilization that has killed him: "Ho visto / la gente della mia età [...] contro ad ingoiare la nostra stanca civiltà / e un dio che è morto" (ll. 1-2, 9-10). His youths are charged with having no faith: "Mi han detto / che questa mia generazione ormai non crede / in ciò che spesso han mascherato con la fede" (ll. 14-16). He counters, however, that they have faith in something new, something true, something to base their revolution on, and something that will bring about the long-promised better future:

Ma penso  
che questa mia generazione è preparata

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<sup>11</sup> "All universo dell'Azione cattolica, passata fra il 1962 e il 1970 da 3 500 000 iscritti a 1 600 000, che si riducono a 816 000 nel 1973. Le indagini dell'epoca danno i primi contorni di due opposti processi: la crescita della 'cristianizzazione' e dell'indifferenza, da un lato, e dall'altro il diffondersi di un dissenso animato da suggestioni conciliari" (Crainz 176).

<sup>12</sup> "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. What sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us?" (Section 125).

a un mondo nuovo e a una speranza appena nata, [...]  
ad un futuro che ha già in mano,  
a una rivolta senza armi,  
perché noi tutti ormai sappiamo  
che se dio muore è per tre giorni e poi risorge,  
in ciò che noi crediamo dio è risorto. (ll. 14-16, 27-34)

In the end, however, Guccini's vision of the revolutionary movement only proposes faith in an indeterminate "hope newly born" and in a utopian future that his generation will bring forth. That is, the *cantautore's* critique of progress unwittingly turns into romantic nostalgia for that same progress, as he forwards the very same solution: future man as divine, future man as the solution, future man as bringing about utopia. His position is critically problematic and, if we carry this vague conception of change across the counterculture writ large, it reveals a generation that wants to raze society to the ground, cuts roots with the past (as seen in the 'Voglio essere orfano' slogan), without having rigorously considered what to replace it with other than itself.

Guccini's vision of revolution sets itself up for disappointment in this way and so we see a few years later that his hopeful tone has changed. In his 1971 album *L'isola non trovata*, Guccini starts and ends with two versions of the disc's eponymous song, in which he reminisces about the Age of Discovery:

Il re di Spagna fece vela  
cercando l'isola incantata  
però quell'isola non c'era  
e mai nessuno l'ha trovata.  
Svanì di prua dalla galea  
come un'idea,  
come una splendida utopia  
è andata via, non tornerà. [...]  
nessuno sa se c'è davvero  
od è un pensiero  
se, a volte, il vento ne ha il profumo  
è come il fumo che non prendi mai. (ll. 5-12, 17-20)

The most specific aspect of the promise of Guccini's more-perfect revolution as imagined in the

mid and late 60s was that, unlike the past, it would be a peaceful “rivolta senza armi” (1967: l. 28). But even before *la strategia di tensione* began in late 1969, the movement showed signs of resorting to violence as an inevitable tool (Ginsborg 306). By 1971, the future that youths held in their hands in late 1960s had vanished for Guccini. Like *l’isola non trovata*, it was ephemeral, always just out of a reach, a true utopia, and Guccini’s sailor narrative has a tragic, romantic, and cynical tone, much like Pratt’s. Indeed, Corto Maltese seems just the hero for a generation who, in Guccini’s words, no longer believed in “i miti eterni della patria o dell’eroe” (l. 17). Corto is described in *Una ballata* as one who “non ha patria ed è un uomo libero” (154), and, throughout the tale, Corto refuses traditional heroism, rather proclaiming that his own interests lie in piracy and material gain.

The comic introduces Corto Maltese shipwrecked in the middle of the Pacific and happened upon by sometimes-colleague/sometimes-foe and fellow pirate, Rasputin. WWI is about to begin and Corto and Rasputin—under direction of the pirate-king of the South Seas, *il Monaco*—plan to steal coal from Allied navy and passenger ships and sell it to the German navy. Rasputin, however, is also holding ransom two cousins, a British boy and an American girl, Cain and Pandora Groovesnore, who are the children of Pacific shipping magnates. Corto becomes their unofficial protector and, as the war breaks out, he is tasked with negotiating complex power relations in the South Pacific to keep them alive. Traditional concepts of right and wrong are upturned across the tale, as all characters reveal themselves to be flawed, while the most complete heroes are two men who, in a traditional adventure tale, would be a voiceless, colonized other and a national enemy. The first hero in question is the Melanesian pirate, Cranio, who represents the fight for independence from colonial powers. He sees his people united against the colonial forces and

makes a powerful speech to Corto about leaving piracy to take part in their revolution.<sup>13</sup> The second is the German Lieutenant Christian Slütter, who is dedicated to protecting the kidnapped cousins, and who partakes in the violence of war sadly, out of a sense of duty.<sup>14</sup> Slütter becomes the unlikely romantic interest of Pandora just before he is executed by an Australian firing squad. Cranio, too, dies at the hands of Rasputin before he can join the fight for independence. Corto Maltese, himself, with his constantly flippant and ambivalent attitude, bucks the label of ‘hero’, though his actions speak louder than his words and he proves unwilling to kill, shows little real desire for monetary gain, and acts consistently in the best interest of the individuals he seeks begrudgingly to protect.

Indeed, Corto’s conventional heroism lies less in his swashbuckling actions and more in his refusals, which could be otherwise called resistance. He refuses to kill; he refuses to give up the sea; he refuses to either stop reading or finish reading *Utopia*. As stated, this desire to keep the hope of utopia alive is part of what makes Corto a romantic hero, despite his more-overt tongue-in-cheek nihilism. His rereading of *Utopia* and constant setting-sail, without goal or destination, has the secondary effect, however, of catching Corto up between epic time and novel time, as they were elaborated by Mikhail Bakhtin.<sup>15</sup> Corto, it seems, lives in epic time, which Bakhtin describes in his 1941 essay “Epic and Novel,” as time that is perceived by the reader as romanticized, crystallized, irretrievable. While Corto is not historically far-removed from the present, emotionally, his time is unfathomably distant. This is because the last date given in *Una ballata* is

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<sup>13</sup> “La mia gente è scontenta, e così gli altri popoli del mare, i figiani, i samoia, i tonga, stanno passando la parola... è come se dovessimo ricucire pezzo per pezzo un grande mantello. [...] Sono stanco di fare il pirata. Ora me ne vado” (Pratt 127).

<sup>14</sup> The injustice of men’s conscription into the armed forces and into war was central to *Lotta Continua*’s focus on Italy’s forced 18-month military service, which they spoke out against in their newspaper supplement *Proletari in Divisa* (Ginsborg 323).

<sup>15</sup> The comparison of the comic and novel genres is easier since Will Eisner’s 1978 term, “graphic novel” was popularized in the 1990s. *Una ballata* was one of the first comics to overcome the serial style of traditional comics (published in 1972 as a single volume). “[Pratt era] anche uno dei primi autori di fumetto che vide le sue opere pubblicate in volume, un formato che mima espressamente la forma editoriale con cui si pubblicano romanzi, poesie, ecc.; in poche parole la letteratura vera e propria” (Remonato par. 14).

January 18, 1915, and the story wraps up quickly thereafter (230), which means that, from the point of view of the Italian readership, the tale ends before the local experience of war starts, as Italy entered WWI on April 26, 1915. This end-date—meaning *Una ballata* precedes the first of a stream of wars that would come, largely, to shape the disillusionment of the post-WWII generation—acts like a glass wall in the final vignette and creates an emotional distance that makes Corto's epic time impenetrable from present time.

The epic quality of the time is also artificially maintained by Corto's refusals. As he reads and rereads *Utopia* and as he steps back aboard towards the open sea, Corto's time loops on endless repeat. Crucially, this is not precisely the "novelization" of the genre of epic, which, according to Bakhtin, most importantly involves inserting an "indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present)" (7). Rather, the open-endedness, as well as the crystallization of Corto Maltese's epic time, is predicated on its endless looping quality, never going forward, uncontaminated by the events that await Europeans after 1915, and thus in no living contact with contemporary reality.

Yet, I claim that Corto is stuck between the epic and the novel because his character accrues other of the aspects of novelization that Bakhtin cites as necessary. He argues that these works incorporate "extraliterary heteroglossia and [...] layers of literary language" and become "dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody" (7). As is often noted of *Una ballata*, we find characters either reading or citing authors from Melville to Coleridge, while Corto is nothing if not humorous and ironic. Because of these novelistic qualities, Corto feels 'of our time' though he is cut off in an epic past. His highly contemporary personality, in turn, gives a clairvoyant quality to his refusal to move forward in time, as if he sees what is to

come and has declined it. This sense that Corto controls his own timeline and has prescient knowledge of the future is emphasized by his Romani origins.<sup>16</sup> In fact, he tells Pandora that he tried to read his own palm as a boy and discovered that he had no lifeline, so he took a razor and cut his own, implying a mystical command over and knowledge of his future (93).

Guccini's revolutionary heroism is very similar to Corto's in its complex romantic cynicism; his lyrical voice does not believe in *patria* or heroism, yet constantly sets sail, in a nostalgic past that continues to brood on a future that he at once hopes for and, in the present, knows is a false promise. More than once, Guccini overlays his present disillusionment with the remembered promise of the Age of Discovery. In *L'isola non trovata*, the European expeditions to the New World are symbolic of his own generation's frustrated pursuit. Then again, in his 1978 *Amerigo*, the album's title evokes the Italian explorer who is central to Thomas More's narrative, and after whom the Americas are named. In the title song, Guccini's narrative I remembers America as "Atlantide" and "perduto paradiso" (ll. 18, 22), but it, like *l'isola non trovata* seven years earlier, reveals itself "un'ombra, nebbia sottile" (l. 34). Guccini's belief in the possibility of change was founded on a certainty, like Corto's, that utopia was at hand. Guccini's faith in the 1960s, however, is not circumscribed by hermetic epic time and thus, when the hope comes into contact with contemporary reality, it vanishes. This is the sense of the tragic that darkens many of Guccini's songs of disillusionment across the 1970s, and it is the tragedy that Corto saves himself from by never landing anywhere, thus never concluding his timeless adventure.

Critics of the countercultural years have argued that youth activists were too often held captive by the sort of vague idealism apparent in Guccini's famous protest song,<sup>17</sup> particularly in

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<sup>16</sup> His mother is a *gitana* from Andalusia and his father a sailor from Cornwall.

<sup>17</sup> "The very nature of their critique and of their organization—radical, decentralized, Utopian—militated against them becoming an effective pressure group for reform" (Ginsborg 309).

the final lines: “in ciò che noi crediamo dio è risorto, / in ciò che noi vogliamo dio è risorto, / nel mondo che faremo dio è risorto.” What is the revolution? *We* are the revolution, Guccini claims, and all that has been lost, God himself, will rise again in that which we believe, that which we want, the world we build. To critique the entire social movement by reducing it to stances like Guccini’s is unsophisticated, for there were many more aspects to it than one. Furthermore, “Dio è morto” is exemplary of the sort of countercultural idealism that, crucially, distilled the multifaceted discontent of an entire generation, students and laborers alike, into powerful speeches and protest songs that thousands of young people could align themselves behind. This alignment was essential for the solidarity that collective action demands. However, there is also a critique to be made of the song’s usurping-of-the-throne quality. Indeed, it is illustrative of the slogan-revolution, which saw complex problems boiled down to an ill-defined Us vs. Them mentality. What is the problem? You are (*e quindi voglio essere orfano*). What is the solution? We are. Countercultural voices like Guccini’s were both essential inspirational drives and, perhaps, detrimentally unrigorous stances, particularly when compared to another side of the counterculture, a less romantic, more concrete side, which is similarly represented in Corto Maltese.

### **Corto Maltese and Fabrizio De André’s Countercultural Narrative**

If on the one hand, Corto Maltese is the romantic vagabond, explorer/sailor, who goes in search of the ultimate promise of the Ages of Discovery and Reason, on the other hand, he is the vagabond criminal/pirate, the landless thief, who has been described, like the Genoese *cantautore*, Fabrizio De André, as well as the counterculture itself (Ginsborg 307), as anarchical.<sup>18</sup> I see this aspect of his character, as well as De André’s, as not simply, or not only, anarchical, but more

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<sup>18</sup> “Corto Maltese coniuga insieme *utopia* con *anarchia*” (Guerrera 15).

specifically as refusing modernity and its tenants from the outset, refusing the privatization of the modern world, refusing to possess, refusing to unquestioningly respect the possessions of others, and refusing, above all, to be normalized. Corto as a thief, Corto as a Romani wanderer, and Corto as a subversive anti-conformist/anarchist, are aspects of a personality that is rebelling against modern social and state structures that, for one, protect the wealth of the upper classes while punishing the poverty of the underclasses and that, secondly, conflate subjective social norms with objective moral rectitude. As we will see, Fabrizio De André and contemporary youth activists were speaking up to challenge this structure, which, like Corto's and Guccini's idealistic search for utopia, can be traced back to its roots in early-modern Europe.

Norbert Elias describes in *The Civilizing Process* how at the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, just as sailors took on some of the wandering valor of knights errant, knights themselves were disappearing. This was true particularly in France, where the Hundred Years' War had ended with the rise of the *Ancien Régime*, during which time power was taken from knightly feudal lords and increasingly consolidated under the king. The knights, in turn, slowly transitioned into courtiers and, eventually, bureaucrats (177, 270). At that time, with the rise of the land-owning bourgeoisie class and early capitalism in western Europe, laws that protected property owners increasingly punished rambling and squatting, while certain European countries, particularly England, began to punish unproductive citizens.

Examples of laws punishing vagabonds and loiterers are seen as early as the late 1400s. In 1494, the English parliament under Henry VII passed the Vagabonds and Beggars Act, which stated that "vagabonds, idle and suspected persons shall be set in the stocks for three days and three nights and have none other sustenance than bread, and water and then shall be put out of town" (Blake 6). Then, in the 1570s, as part of the Elizabethan Poor Laws, Elizabeth I sought to



document the poor and to make them productive by requiring parishes to keep a stock of goods, like wool, for rogues and vagabonds to work on, while her Vagabonds Act decreed that “any unlicensed vagabonds were to be whipped and burned through the ear” (Slack 60). These laws, which made aimless wandering a crime, coincided with the process of cordoning off what were once public lands for private production. As Fritjof Capra and Ugo Mattei point out in *The Ecology of Law: Toward a Legal System in Tune with Nature and Community*:

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, legal innovations coherent with the new spirit of the time were introduced to obtain the kind of power and economic concentration that was needed for the modern state to establish itself. [...] For instance, the growing English textile industry required the ability to graze sheep in large quantity to supply wool, which in turn led to a need to fence in land previously in common use and customarily kept accessible by medieval common law. [...] The process of transforming common land into private property, which began in the late fifteenth century, and was completed by the early nineteenth century, has no precedent in history (49).

Furthermore, as Capra and Mattei state (as does Michel Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish* (85)), the privatization of land also led to the criminalization of land-use as ‘theft of property’, as peasants lost the access they had customarily had to water, wood, and other forest goods, such as animal meat (49). Interestingly, Thomas More dreamed the original dream of Utopia precisely as a critical response to this set of laws and practices: the over-criminalization of theft and the privatization of land, which he saw as the root of many contemporary social issues.

More’s protagonist in *Utopia*, Raphael, in his discourse on the state of the commonwealth, recounts a time that an English lawyer mentioned his surprise that “so many thieves sprang up everywhere when so few of them escaped hanging” (15). Raphael objects that there is no reason for wonder, for “simple theft is not so great a crime that it ought to cost a man his head, yet no punishment however severe can restrain those from robbery who have no other way of making a living” (15). He goes on to argue that the principal cause of theft is not a moral one but a structural

one. It is, he argues, “the increase of pasture” by which men are deprived of the opportunity to earn a living. Sheep, he states:

leave no land free for the plough: they enclose every acre for pasture; they destroy houses and abolish towns. [...] Thus, so that one greedy, insatiable glutton, a frightful plague to his native country, may enclose thousands of acres within a single fence, the tenants are rejected; [...] what finally remains for them but to steal, and so be hanged - justly, no doubt - or to wander and beg? And yet if they go tramping, they are jailed as idle vagrants (18-19).

With More’s critique of the criminalization of theft, vagabondage, and squatting in mind, Corto’s obsession with More’s *Utopia*—which paints him on the surface as a romantic dreamer—fashions him, at the same time, a practical dissenter.<sup>19</sup> His piracy becomes a refusal of modern structures that obsessively protect private and state property, and in so doing, maintain the same inequitable class structures that More critiques.

François Villon, another critic of the changing economic and state structures in the late medieval/early modern period, was a poet in France during the beginning of the *Ancien Régime* years. Many of his most famous poems, such as those in his 1461 collection, *Le testament*, find him contemplating death as he was imprisoned and sentenced to be executed more than once in his life, for brawls, duels, and robbery. He was eventually exiled rather than hanged, and he continued throughout his life, and despite his education, to refuse to become part of the growing middle class. Instead, he chose to drink, write, and steal. In his poetry he shows a rancor for the fledgling commercial and bourgeois society around him, and he spurns it and its new morality of possession. Fabrizio De André pulls the title for his 1968 concept album, *Tutti morimmo a stento*, from one of the two songs on that album that were inspired by François Villon’s poetry: “Ballata

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<sup>19</sup> A large segment of the social movement organized around housing. Italians sought fair rent and the question of squatting became central. Some revolutionary groups organized city-wide squats for “homeless or poorly housed families to occupy blocks constructed by public authorities but not yet lived in” (Ginsborg 324-5). Squatting was condemned by the central-right government and the PCI.

degli impiccati” and “Recitativo”. In the album, especially in these songs, he appears to argue quite specifically against the state’s treatment of people like Villon, society’s nonconformists.

De André is not advocating, like Guccini, for a wholesale razing of society and rebirth in the indistinct promise of a new generation but, rather, for a change in the penal system, which would see white-collar criminals punished at least as harshly as poor thieves. In his “Ballata degli impiccati”, the hero is a dead man who recounts hanging before a public who judged him, and against whom he inveighs the injustice of his punishment: “Prima che fosse finita / ricordammo a chi vive ancora / che il prezzo fu la vita / per il male fatto in un’ora” (ll. 9-12). This voice carries over into the song “Recitativo”, in which the narrative ‘I’ becomes a narrative ‘we’ of all people unjustly sentenced to death. In “Recitativo”, De André is speaking directly to those who have rigged the system to suit themselves, the rich men who control the lion’s share of the wealth and the police, lawyers, and judges who protect the unequal division:

Banchieri, pizzicagnoli, notai,  
coi ventri obesi e le mani sudate  
coi cuori a forma di salvadanai  
noi che invochiam pietà fummo traviate. [...]  
giudici eletti, uomini di legge  
noi che danziam nei vostri sogni ancora  
siamo l'umano desolato gregge  
di chi morì con il nodo alla gola (ll. 12-15, 20-23)

De André reveals here, in 1968, that a cultural revolution for him means a change in morality that, among other things, would alleviate the burden of punishment on petty crime and refocus it on the rich, who systemically plunder the underclasses.

Two years before *Tutti morimmo a stento*, in 1966, De André released another gallows song that similarly referred back to the historical time in question,<sup>20</sup> not to the France of the early

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<sup>20</sup> “Geordie” was released as a single in 1966 and again on the 1969 LP *Nuvole barocche*.

*Ancien Régime* this time, but to 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>-century England where, as Capra and Mattei point out, the restriction of access to land led to the criminalization of the use of goods, such as animal meat, which peasants had relied on for centuries. The song, “Geordie”, is an interpretation of a c16<sup>th</sup>-century popular ballad that was in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century collected in Francis James Child’s *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. De André altered his version from a translation done by Maureen and Giorgio Rix that was, perhaps, based on Joan Baez’s 1962 rendition. The story is of a young man who ‘steals’ deer from the king’s land and sells them, one presumes, to feed his loved ones. As a consequence, Geordie is hanged from the London Bridge: “Impiccheranno Geordie con una corda d’oro / È un privilegio raro. / Rubò sei cervi nel parco del Re / Vendendoli per denaro” (1969: ll. 5-8). Significantly, in Baez’s version, similar to the broadside it is based on, Geordie is of noble blood, while in De André’s version, that detail is erased, making Geordie’s crime is more clearly born of poverty.

De André, across his career, dedicated a full 14% of his songs with lyrics to the themes of crime, judgment, and punishment, and these songs’ heroes are often the criminals themselves. They are usually petty swindlers or poor thieves, like Geordie, and, like him, are disproportionately punished by the state penal system. Specifically during the years in question here, there are numerous other examples of this theme in De André’s oeuvre. There is, for one, the doctor from “Un medico” on De André’s 1971 album *Non al denaro non all’amore né al cielo* who recognizes that most of his patients have the same malady, namely, they are “ammalat[i] di fame incapace a pagare” (l. 18). He soon realizes that their poverty is contagious and, because his patients can’t pay their bills, his own family will come down with their same illness. The Doctor goes on to recount how he finally understood that, even as a physician, he couldn’t prosper legally within the economic system: “E allora capii, fui costretto a capire / [...] se non vuoi ammalarti dell’identico

male, / se non vuoi che il sistema ti pigli per fame. / E il sistema sicuro è pigliarti per fame” (ll. 19, 22-24). Thus, to save his loved ones, he decides to sell a fake elixir: “perciò chiusi in bottiglia quei fiori di neve, / l’etichetta diceva: elisir di giovinezza” (ll. 26-27). Finally, the Doctor recounts his eventual imprisonment and humiliation: “un giudice con la faccia da uomo / mi spedì a sfogliare i tramonti in prigione / [...] / bollato per sempre truffatore imbrogliatore” (ll. 28-29, 31). He, like De André’s other criminal-heroes considered here so far, is a petty offender who commits crimes in order to survive and who, like the others, is punished harshly for it.

Perhaps the most poignant example of a thief/hero in De André’s work from the period comes from his 1970 album, *La buona novella* and the song “Il testament di Tito.” The titular character is the Penitent or Good Thief who, in the Gospel of Luke, asks to be remembered by Jesus in Heaven. The thief dies namelessly next to Jesus in the New Testament but in the non-canonical Arabic First Infancy Gospel, he is given the name of Titus, or Tito in Italian. De André says of Tito’s treatment of the Ten Commandments in the song that: “Il ladrone buono confuta, uno per uno, tutti e dieci i comandamenti mettendo in evidenza la contraddizione tra le leggi emanate dalle classi al potere per proprio comodo, e la difficoltà di attenervisi da parte di chi il potere lo deve solo subire, e osserva quelle leggi, quando le osserva, solo per scongiurare la minaccia della repressione” (Gallione 18). When it comes to the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment, which is that which sends him to the cross, Tito underlines the power dynamic that organizes the terrestrial interpretation of “Thou shalt not steal” saying: “Il quinto dice non devi rubare / e forse io l’ho rispettato / vuotando, in silenzio, le tasche già gonfie / di quelli che avevan rubato: / ma io, senza legge, rubai in nome mio, / quegli altri nel nome di Dio” (ll. 33-38). Tito, like Geordie, steals from the rich and pays with his life, yet the Good Thief points out that the rich, too, steal and, worse yet, they justify and validate it in God’s name. Tito’s death in De André’s song is particularly effective

in underlining the fundamental injustice of future Western justice systems that closely resemble the Roman form. For Tito dies next to the very man whose execution becomes a symbol of a new Christian morality that is founded in a loving and compassionate god.

We see in “Il testamento di Tito” that De André saw criminals not only as victims of a class-based penal system but, furthermore, as potential revolutionaries themselves. At the same time, particularly in the late 1960s and early 70s, revolutionaries were viewed, conversely, as criminals. This idea is suggested by De André in 1971 with the thief’s execution next to Jesus Christ, the revolutionary. It is punctuated a few years later in 1973’s *Storia di un impiegato*, which is the De André album that deals most directly with the counterculture years and which does so, once again, in terms of an investigation of the criminal justice system. While De André’s final judgment on the violent actions of his anarchist-criminal protagonist in the album is ambivalent, it is clear in his introductory song, “Canzone del maggio”, that the arrested student protesters are treated as criminals, not because their actions are morally bankrupt, but because they want to change a system that works to protect the ruling class. De André speaks to this ruling class, as he did in “Recitativo” a few years earlier, accusing them of having voted for “la sicurezza, la disciplina” because of “la paura di cambiare” (1973: ll. 36, 38). As with the criminals in *Tutti morimmo a stento*, the revolutionaries are arrested and massacred (ll. 12, 22), while the ruling class passively watches and protects their own wealth. The main difference between the two settings is one of form rather than content, namely, the hangings were witnessed in person in Villon’s time, while in 1973, as De André tells it, the audience watches the arrests from TV and the condemned are hidden away in prison, rather than executed publicly.

Indeed, the deeds and ensuing judgment of thieves, swindlers, and revolutionaries are inextricably connected in the period, as the equalization of economic opportunity and justice-

system reform were concrete aspects of the social unrest of the late 1960s and early 1970s. As is well known, a great impetus for the original student movements was an education reform that would level the playing field at university for so-called ‘worker-students’. Paul Ginsborg explains that the Italian education system “operated a particularly subtle form of class-based selection: the university was supposedly open to all, but the odds were heavily stacked against poorer students ever getting a degree” (300). De André himself seems to have been less concerned with the education system specifically, however, and more concerned with how bourgeois morality was used broadly to control the flow of money and how, to that end, the penal system became the weapon of the upper class. This was a lesser known but important concern of the Italian social movement. Ginsborg states that “young magistrates and judges” tried to “evolve less class-based forms of justice” (322) and he cites one who remembers: “[Our] administration of justice was aimed not, as had always previously been the case, at beggars and thieves, peddlers and petty debtors, but at major economic interests and leading political and administrative figures” (323). Like De André’s numerous songs of judicial injustice, Hugo Pratt’s 1967 tale, demonstrates a disdain for the moral status quo, in which individual pirates and misfits are demonized while, at the national and corporate levels, entire populations are ‘lawfully’ slaughtered and/or oppressed.

*Una ballata* is complex in its storylines, particularly as the fictional and historical intertwine and the micro-adventure of the kidnapped cousins, Pandora and Cain Groovesnore, unravels at the margins of the macro-adventure that is WWI. At the micro-level, the villains are Rasputin and *il Monaco*, but they remain ambiguous baddies, with aspects of vulnerable humanity that endears them to readers. Both men, for example, cite ‘friendship’ as a primary concern across the tale. At greatest stake in the micro-tale, is the reshaping of Pandora and Cain’s moral judgment in the face of their captors, who are a band of men labeled by the world as ‘bad guys’ and ‘freaks’.

The rich youths learn, for one, to judge indigenous people in a new light. To take Pandora as our example, the girl is dismissive and distrusting of both Cranio, *il Monaco*'s Melanesian boatswain, and Tarao, a young Maori boy, when they demonstrate fluency in her language, and knowledge of her history and literature as well as a local knowledge of the political and natural world, of which she is ignorant.<sup>21</sup> By the end, however, Pandora has relearned her judgment of them and stands at odds with her uncle, Admiral Rinaldo Groovesnore, when she defends Tarao's wisdom. Because of her allegiance to Tarao, whose face is covered in tattoos, Pandora's uncle now sees her as she once saw Tarao: as an ignorant 'other' whose discourse, by definition, lacks all sense. He says of her evolved point of view: "Non sei tu il primo caso di follia nella nostra famiglia" (206). As Pandora and Cain relearn their judgment of tradition outcasts, so they must relearn their assessment of good and evil. Until they do, the cousins continually misinterpret the intentions of Corto Maltese who, because of his piracy, is seen by them as entirely morally corrupt.

From the first, Corto protects them from their captors, first Rasputin then *il Monaco*, and he uses the piracy, in large part, as a cover to stay near the cousins until he can free them. Yet, though he shows them constant (if snarky) kindness and forgiveness, and acts continually as their protector, both youngsters take the better part of the adventure to learn to trust him and both try to kill him before doing so. After he has saved Cain's life and rescued Pandora from drowning, Pandora steals Corto's pistol and shoots him in the head, injuring him gravely. When asked by Cranio why she did it, she responds: "Perché è un delinquente, un pirata!" (Pratt 68). That is to say, though he has risked his life to save them, she cannot see beyond his status as 'thief', which, as we have seen, is the most threatening and punishable of ranks in the modern state, especially for those raised in rich families with much to protect.

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<sup>21</sup> "Ma scusi, Cranio, Lei come fa a sapere tutte queste cose?" (154); and "Ma tu Tarao, come sai tutte quest cose? ... Nemmeno io le sapevo" (181).



Pandora, however, begins to see things differently and tries to convince Cain that Corto might not be a bad guy after all: “Se invece cercassimo di farci amico Corto Maltese...Qualcosa di buono ci dev’essere in lui...Dopotutto devo riconoscere che finora ci ha sempre difesi” (102). Cain, ignoring Pandora’s plea, sneaks out and steals a gun with which to shoot Corto while he is showing Pandora around the island. He appears to have thought Corto was planning on isolating and violating his cousin, though he never fully explains his reasons for the attempted murder. Cain, too, eventually learns to see Corto’s individual humanity beneath the label of ‘pirate’, and the final spoken words in the comic are his to Tarao and Corto: “Arrivederci! Non dimenticatemi... Siete... Siete le più belle persone del mondo!” (255). This final line highlights the importance of the cousins’ moral re-education and draws the line of right and wrong, rather than between ‘criminals’ and ‘non-criminals’, between those who judge fairly and those who judge selfishly or with prejudice.

The counterculture, like De André and Pratt, argued for a reevaluation of traditional ‘criminals’, seeing them, rather, as potential revolutionaries. Beginning in 1970, for example, the extra-parliamentary activist group, *Lotta Continua*, included in their newspaper a regular column dealing with the state of prisons, “I dannati della terra”, in which they argued that the imprisonment of young people from poor socio-economic backgrounds was “a miscarriage of justice” (Ginsborg 323). And, as in De André songs, Pratt’s tale ends with an unjust execution that highlights how men in positions of power, who reveal themselves to be the true baddies of the comic, can arbitrarily assign moral labels in order to manipulate the law. The official validity of the execution in question comes down to how the Australian admiral, Rinaldo Groovesnore, decides to label the German lieutenant, Christian Slütter, who bombed and sank a boat, the *Victoria*, as well as other Allied merchant ships. Admiral Groovesnore discusses with another officer the fact that they can

charge him with piracy and execute him on the grounds that he was, in that case, a murderer. However, if they remove the charge of piracy, as Pandora has asked her uncle to do, then Slütter's actions were simply acts of war, and it was simply his duty to perform them. As one officer points out, if they remove the charge of piracy, then Slütter's execution makes him a war hero (239). Groovesnore decides, in the end, to leave the charge of piracy because it will help guarantee his career advancement in the Admiralty.

This bureaucratic discussion does not culminate in any action scene but simply in the altering of a document; yet it is Pratt's subtle scene of the greatest villainy in the tale. In the micro-adventure, all ends well, while at the fringes of the tale, a much more menacing evil lurks, and the macro-adventure ends with the greatest evils prevailing. These evils are colonialism, its unbridled capitalism, and the global war, and they are all represented in the Groovesnore family, who has controlling powers in both the private sector, in international shipping, and in the public sector, in national navies. Cain and Pandora are set to inherit this dynasty, and thus, Pratt's revolution appears to depend on reshaping the minds of the young people who will, someday, come to power.

Pratt's critique of a state's right and tendency to war is clear in his portrayal of many unscrupulous navy officers from various nations, but it is also more subtly expressed in Corto Maltese himself. As stated above, Corto is a globally neutral character, without *patria*, and while he is willing to partake in theft, he does not approve of killing, and detests the violence of war.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, as he constantly sets sail, he does not take part in any national colonial tradition or their auto-sanctioned theft-of-land. This aspect of his character is arguably best made sense of through his Romani ancestry. The Romani people are vilified across Europe for squatting, for being unproductive and lazy, choosing to steal rather than work, indeed, the very behavior early

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<sup>22</sup> He continually admonishes Rasputin when the latter kills an adversary (Pratt 3, 35). When German naval officers bomb an empty raft he states: "Preferirei non aver niente a che fare con questi maniaci del cannone" (84).

modern states began to excise in order to accrue power and control. Yet, as De André pointed out at a concert in 1998, the Romani are more peaceful than any other people, any nation, because they do not war. “Meriterebbero il premio per la pace in quanto popolo,” he says, because they don’t carry arms, and while they steal, it is petty theft, while the great plunder of common man happens, legally, via the state economic structure.<sup>23</sup> In his 1996 song “Khorakhané”, which is dedicated to the Romani people, De André sings: “e se questo vuol dire rubare / questo filo di pane tra miseria e sfortuna [...] lo può dire soltanto chi sa di raccogliere in bocca / il punto di vista di Dio” (ll. 33-34, 37-38). He implies here that a nation in which the extremely poor are punished for stealing enough to remain at the poverty line is a nation that makes laws, not according to common sense or decency, but, rather, according to the whims of those who would claim to know the inscrutable will of a higher being.

In that same song De André describes the Romani people as following the “sentieri costretti in un palmo di mano” and as doing so “per la stessa ragione del viaggio, viaggiare” (ll. 17, 10). That is, he describes them as compelled to follow the paths drawn on the palms of their hands and, in doing so, wandering for the sake of wandering. This echoes Corto Maltese’s own origin story, as he cuts his life’s path into the palm of his hand as a boy (Pratt 93), and it echoes, again, the final vignette of *Una ballata*: “il vero marinaio vagabonda per vagare.” Corto’s landless and aimless wandering is just one way in which he refuses to conform to old definitions of heroism, which were driven by a duty to defend a commonly held belief and/or protect one’s home or homeland.

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<sup>23</sup> “Un popolo che gira il mondo da più di duemila anni [...] hanno la] mania dello spostamento continuo, del viaggiare, del non fermarsi mai in un posto, è un popolo che, secondo me, meriterebbe, per il fatto stesso che gira il mondo da più di duemila anni senza armi, meriterebbe il premio per la pace in quanto popolo. [...] Mi si dirà che gli zingari rubano. È vero, hanno rubato anche in casa mia. Si accontentano, però, dell’oro e delle palanche. [...] D’altra parte si difendono come possono. Si sa bene che l’industria ha fatto chiudere diversi mercati artigianali. Buona parte dei Rom erano, e sono ancora, artigiani. [...] Gli zingari rubano, è vero, però non ho mai sentito dire—non l’ho mai visto scritto da nessuna parte—che gli zingari abbiano rubato tramite banca. Questo è un dato di fatto” (2016: 98-99).

He refuses to conform to modern moral norms, then, in turn, he refuses to conform to pirate norms, as even the pirate-king *il Monaco* charges him: “Sei un sovversivo!” (123), when he resists falling in line.

The nonconformist aspect of Corto’s character is perhaps the most straightforward way in which he is an ideal hero for a counterculture that Paul Ginsborg says, at its heart, was anti-authoritarian (304). This anti-authoritarianism is more than mere rebellion against figures of power, however; it is a rebellion against structures that have increasingly constrained the freedom of the individual for hundreds of years. As both Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault have argued, the civilizing process, beginning roughly in the early-modern period, has sought above all things to control and mold its populace into ‘model’ citizens. This has been done, to a great extent, by conflating morality with social norms so that behavior outside of acceptable normativity is defined as ‘bad’ rather than simply ‘different’. This, too, was of the utmost importance to De André’s decades-long conception of social revolution, in songs ranging from “Suonatore Jones” (1971) to “Princesa” (1996). Looking back, many scholars call the countercultural movement, in Italy and across the West, a “failure” (341).<sup>24</sup> Yet, while it did not overhaul the modern state completely, the youth revolutionaries’ subversion of social norms set the West on a slow path towards an increased freedom of non-normative self-expression in dress, sexuality, and art, among other things. Corto Maltese—who says to Cain Groovesnore, “Accettami come sono o vattene al diavolo” (35), and who then turns around and defends the boy to Rasputin, “Per me il ragazzo va bene così com’è” (37)—is an ideal hero for a cultural movement that, if it fell short in some aspects, succeeded in altering for the better the “openness of the society” (Ginsborg 343) in a trend that has

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<sup>24</sup> Paul Ginsborg states as much, regarding the Italian movement (341). Thomas Frank, in his 1997 *The Conquest of Cool*, sums up the American and global movement by saying that for all its efforts “The story ends with the noble idealism of the New Left in ruins and the counterculture sold out” (5).

slowly allowed more social inclusion and personal freedom to individuals.

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