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‘An Entirely New land’? Italy’s Post-War Culture and its Fascist Past

Charles L. Leavitt IV, University of Reading

Abstract: Scholarship has for decades emphasised the significant continuities in Italian culture and society after Fascism, calling into question the rhetoric of post-war renewal. This essay proposes a reassessment of that rhetoric through the analysis of five key metaphors with which Italian intellectuals represented national recovery after 1945: parenthesis, disease, flood, childhood, and discovery. While the current critical consensus would lead us to expect a cultural conversation characterised by repression and evasion, an analysis of these five post-war metaphors instead reveals both a penetrating re-assessment of Italian culture after Fascism and an earnest adherence to the cause of national re-vitalisation. Foregrounding the inter-relation of Italy’s prospects for change and its continuities with Fascism, these metaphors suggest that post-war Italian intellectuals conceived of their country’s hopes for renewal, as well as its connections to the recent past, in terms that transcend the binary division favoured in many historical accounts.

Keywords: Italy, Fascism, Post-War, Metaphor, Benedetto Croce, Roberto Rossellini

‘Una terra completamente nuova’? Passato fascista e cultura del dopoguerra

Negli ultimi decenni, la critica ha enfatizzato le significative continuità tra il fascismo e la società e la cultura italiane del dopoguerra, sollevando delle perplessità sulla retorica del rinnovamento impiegata da molti intellettuali nel periodo. Questo saggio propone un riesame di tale retorica attraverso l’analisi di cinque metafore ricorrenti, attraverso le quali gli intellettuali hanno rappresentato la ripresa nazionale: parentesi, malattia, diluvio, infanzia, e scoperta. Tale analisi consente un riesame della cultura italiana all’indomani della caduta del Fascismo, mettendo in luce una intensa adesione alla causa della rivitalizzazione nazionale, laddove ci si aspetterebbe una retorica caratterizzata da evasione e repressione delle responsabilità accumulate durante la dittatura. Mettendo in primo piano la relazione tra le opportunità per il cambiamento e le continuità con il Fascismo, queste metafore suggeriscono che gli intellettuali del dopoguerra concepirono le speranze per il rinnovamento in termini che trascendono l’opposizione binaria che si riscontra in molti studi storico-culturali sul periodo in questione.

Even before the Second World War had finished, prominent cultural commentators began to proclaim the necessity, even the inevitability, of a new beginning for the Italian people. In recent decades, however, historians and cultural critics have tended increasingly to call into question the extent, indeed the very existence, of Italy’s post-war renewal. Most now

believe that, after 1945, Italian politics, culture and society largely continued on from and perpetuated movements, tendencies, and even ideologies that had emerged during the Fascist *ventennio*. Since the late 1960s, when rising political turmoil occasioned a critical re-assessment of the formation of the Italian state in the aftermath of the Second World War, studies have placed growing emphasis on post-war continuities rather than ruptures with Fascism (Focardi 2005, 37-53; Scoppola 2007, 5-22; Cooke 2011, 111-13). Just as noted historians began to draw attention to the ‘continuity of the State’ after 1945 (Pavone 1995, 160-84), cultural critics including Giorgio Bàrberi Squarotti ([1968], 72), Ruggero Jacobbi ([1969], 11), Romano Luperini ([1971], 9), Alberto Asor Rosa ([1972], 153), Mario Isnenghi ([1977], 104), and the critics and filmmakers gathered at the 1974 and 1976 Pesaro conventions, insisted upon ‘a certain continuity’ between pre- and post-war literature and cinema (Aprà and Pistagnesi 1979, 24). More than forty years have now passed since this revisionist tendency first took hold, and belief in what David Forgacs has termed ‘deep patterns of continuity between the 1930s and the 1950s’ has only strengthened (Forgacs 1996, 56). As a result, the scholarly consensus now appears to favour the outright rejection of the post-war claims to national renewal, with the apparent conviction that ‘[s]uch claims were obviously absurd’ (Torriglia 2002, 6).

Instead of dismissing these claims, however, it would be more profitable to interrogate them critically, investigating the gaps between rhetoric and reality and working to understand how an evident faith in transformation could have flourished in a historical moment that was often discouragingly resistant to change (Battini 2007; Tranfaglia 1999). Scholarship’s insistence on continuity, which seemingly obviates the very need for such an investigation, risks concealing the complexity and acuity of the Italian cultural conversation after the Second World War. Moreover, presupposing that all the talk of a ‘new culture’, a ‘new society’, and a ‘new Italy’ was intended ‘to repress the past’, this account rests on an

assumed motive that is not entirely substantiated by Italy's post-war cultural discourse (Ben-Ghiat 2010, 162; Serri 2005; Torriglia 2002, 3, 6).

That discourse was suffused with sophisticated and often discordant metaphors for Italy's fraught situation after Fascism—metaphors that did not so much repress as reframe and refract the recent past, and that were far less forgiving, and far more confrontational, than the standard historical narrative seems to suggest. Research in the fields of psychology, sociology, and linguistics continues to underline the shaping force of metaphor, which not only reproduces but also determines our understanding of reality. Because they 'constitute basic schemes by which people conceptualize their experience and the external world', the psycholinguist Raymond Gibbs has shown, metaphors 'create social realities for us and become guides to action' (Gibbs 1994, 1, 203).¹ The cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have argued, in fact, that '[m]uch of cultural change arises from the introduction of new metaphorical concepts and the loss of old ones' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 145). With their *'imaginative rationality'*, metaphors necessarily produce 'a coherent network of entailments', logical corollaries and consequences, both intended and not, which organize our perception of events and ideas (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 157).

Whether Italian intellectuals sought to conceal or to confront their Fascist past, therefore, the signs are inevitably to be found in the metaphors they employed in order to understand and to articulate their situation after the Second World War. Those metaphors, which proliferated across political speeches and literary essays, lyric poetry and party manifestos, feature films and newspaper editorials, Resistance novels and partisan memoirs, policy papers and cultural journals, reveal both a penetrating re-assessment of Italian culture after Fascism and a profound commitment to the promise of national re-vitalisation.

That commitment was far from universal, however. There were many who wished for post-Fascist 'renewal' to take the form of an unequivocal return to the pre-Fascist past. In

justifying this view, these critics of the calls for a ‘new Italy’ tended to dismiss the Fascist *ventennio* as a temporary interruption in the nation’s illustrious tradition—a ‘parenthesis’, in the well-known formulation of Benedetto Croce—and to locate the foundations for post-war Italian culture and society in the traditions of the liberal state (Casucci 1982, 33-4; Zunino 1991, 132-42). The parenthesis metaphor used to signify this conservative position seems to have been designed not only to salvage aspects of recent Italian history, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to assuage a sense of national guilt. A tireless advocate for Italy on the international stage, Croce characterised Fascism as a parenthesis at least in part so as to argue for the country’s inclusion among the victors at the end of the war (Zunino 2003, 284-86). Implying that Italy was more responsible for Fascism’s defeat than for its rise and decades of rule, the parenthesis metaphor paralleled and reinforced Croce’s exhortation to the Allies not to castigate the Italians for their momentary lapse, but rather to celebrate them for their millennial civilization. ‘What is the significance of a twenty-year parenthesis in Italian history?’ asked Croce in a January 1944 speech before the Congress of the National Liberation Committees (Croce 1963a, 56-7). As he went on to explain in a talk in Rome in September of the same year, Croce wished for the architects of the post-war order to recognise Italy’s historical contributions to world culture and thus to forgive the nation for the Fascist parenthesis, the brief ‘Fascistic interregnum’ (Croce 1963b, 102). Croce was far from alone in seeking to minimise Italy’s responsibility for Fascism in this way. In 1944, Francesco Flora, one of Croce’s intellectual heirs, similarly assured the readers of the journal *Aretusa* that the country was ready now to move on from what he termed ‘the dead-end Fascist parenthesis’ (Flora 1995, 2).² For Flora as for Croce—and for many other conservative commentators, as well—Fascism was little more than an aberration, a detour from which Italians would re-route and recover after the war.

Not everyone agreed, however, and Croce's judgment was rather more controversial than some accounts would seem to suggest. Indeed, the post-war years witnessed the widespread and defiant rejection of what Croce's one-time protégé Luigi Russo dismissed as the philosopher's 'historicist pride', his 'Olympian rhetoric' (Russo 1949, 571, 581).³ Across the ideological spectrum, but particularly on the political Left, Italian intellectuals evinced an evident dissatisfaction with what they perceived as the quietism of Croce's historical outlook, in which the dangers of Fascism were consigned entirely to the past (Ward 1996; Roberts 1987, 224-38; Rizi 1984). As a result, there was a decidedly polemical turn away from what Elio Vittorini and others referred to vituperatively as Croce's 'dictatorship of Idealism', and the parenthesis metaphor became a prime target of critique (Vittorini 2008a, 210-12).⁴ Many deemed the metaphor an 'absurd pretence', as Russo put it in 1953 (Russo 1955, 347), or 'a historicist error', as the anti-Fascist journalist and translator Giaime Pintor had described it in his diary a decade earlier (Pintor 1978, 118). Likewise, the liberal politician and future Senator Eugenio Artom brazenly asserted in a 1945 essay in *La Nazione del popolo* that 'Fascism was not a simple parenthesis in our history which, upon closing, allows us again to take up the rhythm of life that was broken for twenty years' (Artom 2008, 247). Significantly, Artom was here signalling his desire for real change and his dissatisfaction with historical complacency, as well as his defiance of Croce's intellectual authority, by questioning the parenthesis metaphor itself.

The rising opposition to Croce, and in particular to Croce's interpretation of recent Italian history, is all the more evident in the response to another prominent metaphor he employed to characterise the country's rejection of Fascism: that of disease, with Fascist ideology figuring as a 'noxious germ' (Croce 1963c, 48). In a November 1943 article in the *New York Times* entitled, portentously, 'The Fascist Germ Still Lives', Croce portrayed Fascism as a virus that was neither born from nor confined to the Italian nation, but rather so

widespread as to constitute an international pandemic, ‘a contemporary sickness from which Italy was the first to suffer’ (Croce 1943, 9). The country was thus not to be condemned for its Fascist ailment, Croce argued, but celebrated for its quick convalescence and emulated by those who would seek to inoculate against the Fascist virus worldwide. Croce insisted that ‘now Italy is free of the Fascist infection’, and indeed that, in its recovery, the Italian body had become stronger—strong enough that ‘she can teach other people about’ the virulent disease of Fascism, and its cure (Croce 1943, 9).⁵ Again, others followed Croce’s lead in adopting the virus metaphor in order to advance the case for Italy’s relative innocence, insisting that the country had been merely the first infected by a highly contagious, allochthonous disease. Two prominent representatives of the Action Party, Adolfo Omodeo and Piero Calamandrei, both characterised Fascism in this way (Omodeo 1960, 139; Calamandrei, 172). So, too, did the liberal Mario Pannunzio, who declared in an April 1945 essay that ‘Fascism was above all a moral sickness’, while arguing at the same time that the victory of the Resistance had inoculated Italy against any further Fascist ‘contagion.’ ‘We are rid of both Mussolini and the most notable instance of our century’s ailment, which seemed capable of infecting a sizeable percentage of the human race’ (Pannunzio 1993, 354-57). Pannunzio, like Calamandrei and Omodeo, and like Croce as well, was insinuating through metaphor that the Italian body had been cured of its Fascist ailment, and that Italians had fought off an external foe by virtue of powerful political antibodies generated by an admirable national immune system.

Many more intellectuals, however, employed the disease metaphor in an opposing sense, warning of Fascism’s lingering threat, questioning Croce’s historical optimism, and deriding more conservative commentators for their apparent complacency in the face of contagion and crisis.⁶ Offering a sustained critique of the liberal position, they devised an alternative disease metaphor, portraying Fascism not as a virus that had attacked the healthy

Italian body from outside, as Croce had done, but rather as a kind of cancer, a mutation born within the Italian organism itself. This interpretation is evident, for instance, in essays by Vittore Branca, Carlo Levi, and Eugenio Montale published in 1944 in *La Nazione del Popolo* (Branca 2008, 152; Levi 2004a, 61; Montale 2008, 647). It is all the more apparent in one of Umberto Saba's 'Scorciatoie' (Shortcuts), from 1945, in which the poet opined that

each era has its own disease and a corresponding moral ailment. [...] The twentieth century has cancer and Fascism. The entirety of Fascism's development—manifesting its true nature when it is too late for effective surgery; its inability to be killed without killing the patient to whom it clings; its tendency to spread far from its original location; the despair and suffering that it exacts on those who are afflicted; the terrible damage revealed in autopsies of the bodies (or countries) which have suffered its totalitarian rule—its entire development offers surprising similarities to cancer. (Saba 1964, 278-9)

For Saba, Fascism, like cancer, was a disease whose origins were to be located in an internal breakdown, whose pathologies fundamentally altered the host body, and whose cure was neither obvious nor assured. With palpable antagonism, Saba's polemic repurposed an idea first put forward by Croce, who had argued earlier and in a more general context that 'each period has sicknesses that we might say are particular to it' (Croce 1938, 157), a formulation that Saba paraphrased even as he worked to overturn the historical judgment of the philosopher who had first coined it.

There were many more who similarly re-purposed Croce's metaphors in order to challenge his interpretation of Fascism. The editors of the Florentine journal *Società*, for instance, disputed the Crocean 'idyllic conception of Italy's modern history, in which Fascism is seen as a random, fleeting aberration, like a foreign body violently introduced into our social organism' ('Situazione' 1945b, 5). Comparable assessments would follow from Italo Calvino ([1995a], 2106), Ignazio Silone ([1945], 3), and the journalist Giacinto Cadorna, who asserted in *Socialismo* in March 1947 that the liberal account of Fascism was 'contradictory and anti-historical' because of its 'generic conception of moral ailment', and

who insisted instead that ‘Fascism was anything but a sudden occurrence, a momentary aberration’ (Cadorna 1947, 91-92). Like Saba, these commentators all saw Fascism not as an outside invader to be beaten back by the body’s own defences, as Croce’s ‘germ’ metaphor would have it, but rather as a disorder or breakdown of the body itself. In a posthumously published essay in *Quaderni italiani*, Giaime Pintor argued similarly, stressing that the effects of Fascism were neither as temporary nor as easily repairable as Croce had optimistically insinuated. ‘Fascism was not a parenthesis’, Pintor opined, ‘but a grave illness that corroded the very fibre of the nation’ (Pintor 1965, 181). The reversal of Croce’s confident disease metaphor was not confined to the political left, either. A July 1944 essay in *L’Uomo qualunque*, for example, likewise presented Fascism as ‘a monstrous political disease that has invaded our blood, our tissues, our nerves, our bones. Limited or widespread, virulent or latent, it is still present in many Italians’ (Ventrone 2004, 325).

Deploying the disease metaphor for two contrasting purposes, Italian intellectuals were effectively debating Fascism by contesting its figural representation. Re-working and re-deploying a set of metaphorical entailments, they were attempting to ask and to answer a series of pressing questions: Was Italy responsible for Fascism or a victim of Fascism? What had caused Fascism’s rise and how had Fascism been defeated? Indeed, had Fascism been defeated, or was its threat still lingering? Through their differing iterations of the same metaphors, Italy’s political and cultural commentators arrived at opposing answers to those questions.

Many insisted that all of Italian culture had been complicit in Fascism and degraded by Fascism’s corrupting influence, that it all unavoidably reflected Fascism’s governing principles and instantiated Fascism’s unspoken assumptions. They were convinced, as Carlo Levi put it, that Fascism was ‘a profound disease affecting the whole of society’—a widespread and long-lasting ailment, whose root causes had yet to be eradicated (Levi 2004b,

112). Developing this point, and shifting his metaphor, Levi argued in a 1946 essay in *Italia libera* that ‘Fascism did not rain down from the sky’ (Levi 2004b, 112).⁷ The origins of Fascism, he insisted, had grown up within Italy itself; they were to be located on the ground, in the humus of Italian civilisation. Yet even among those who would agree, and who likewise believed that profound flaws in society had given rise to Fascism, the metaphor of the Fascist deluge was remarkably popular in Italian critical discourse (De Cèspeles 1944, 3).

This metaphor’s most eloquent advocate was the novelist and journalist Dino Terra, who, in his introduction to the 1947 collection of essays *Dopo il diluvio (After the Flood)*, compared the task facing Italians after the war to that of Noah after the covenant recounted in Genesis. In Terra’s words,

now the Italians, like pious Noah, have survived the divine punishment of national catastrophe. This was no mere forty-day Biblical flood! We have had about two thousand days of steel and fire, only to find ourselves in the fortunate conditions to which we have been reduced. (Terra 1947, xii)

For Terra, Fascism was not the deluge but rather the depravity that had inspired a redemptive flood, like that recounted in Genesis. With Fascism washed away by the rising waters of the Second World War and the Resistance, Italy was left to rebuild and to renew itself in a landscape purged of past sins. Terra was not the only one to invoke the story of Noah to characterise the Italian situation. Montale similarly allegorized the Second World War in his poem ‘L’Arca’ (The Ark), first published in the collection *Finisterre* in 1943 (Montale 1984, 208). So, too, did the director Mario Mattòli in his 1945 film *La vita ricomincia (Life Begins Anew)*, in which Eduardo De Filippo delivers a monologue admonishing the film’s protagonist, played by Fosco Giachetti, for not appreciating the scope of the war’s destruction: ‘There’s been a Biblical flood here. Can you imagine Noah [...] just going about his own business after the Biblical flood [...]? Tell me: how would the world have begun

again?’ Despite these resonant precursors, however, it was Terra’s *Dopo il diluvio* that gave the flood metaphor its definitive and most substantial expression.⁸

Yet, even in *Dopo il diluvio* itself, Terra’s metaphor came in for serious critique. In a provocative contribution to the collection, the essay ‘Quelli dell’Arca’ (Those on the Ark), the poet and essayist Giacomo Noventa attacked the central premise of the project, drawing attention to the difficulty if not the impossibility of post-war recovery. Noventa argued that it was terribly presumptuous to assume, as Terra’s metaphor implied, that the worst was over, that a new era had begun. ‘No one has seen the Rainbow appear. [...] Is the Flood really over?’ Noventa asked sceptically (Noventa 1947, 402). Lest his readers miss the point of his metaphor, and of his efforts to undercut Terra’s interpretation of events, Noventa went on to make things explicit.

We cannot say [...] that the Flood is over. Fascism and Nazism are both still present, not only among those Fascists and Nazis who have survived, and who are much more numerous than many in Europe believe, but also in the midst of the anti-Fascists and anti-Nazis, who have the defect of being the victors, or of considering themselves as such, even if they belong to the defeated nations. (Noventa 1947, 405)

The conflict was ongoing, Noventa insisted, Fascism had not yet been vanquished, and Italians were not Noah. That they remained afloat despite the inundation should not be taken as a sign that they had been spared. Death might still await.

So, however, might rebirth. For many Italians, in fact, the end of the war seemed to signal a new life for the nation. It appeared, as Roberto Battaglia explained in his 1945 *Un uomo, un partigiano* (A man, a partisan), a first-person account of the anti-Fascist Resistance, ‘almost as if, after so much indifference or cruelty or egotism, Italians needed to reacquire the energetic and sprightly sensibility with which a child faces reality’ (Battaglia 1965, 196). For Battaglia, in other words, the spirit of the Resistance was akin to a return to childhood, just as, for the celebrated screenwriter Cesare Zavattini, Italians after the war were like ‘children,

stunned at taking their first steps alone’: uncertain, but hopeful; unsteady, but unencumbered (Zavattini 2002, 684-5). Leaving behind the death and destruction of the Second World War, this metaphor suggests, was like beginning a new life. The novelist, journalist, and editor Romano Bilenchi thus noted that Italians after the defeat of Fascism had assumed ‘the defenceless ingenuity of men only recently reborn’, and he referred pointedly to the post-war period as ‘our infancy of today’ in a 1945 essay in *Società* (Bilenchi 1980, 49-53). That journal’s editors had made a similar case in the inaugural issue, arguing that ‘our anguish, and the anguish of the entire human race, is meaningless if it does not presage the impending birth of a new society’ (‘Situazione’ 1945a, 6). *Società*’s was perhaps the most explicit elaboration of the logic buttressing this metaphor, according to which the struggle to overthrow Fascism was necessarily the struggle for a new life, for a new society born from the demise of the old.

The redemptive metaphor of rebirth, often expressed through post-war representations of childhood, underpins some of the most famous films of the age of neorealism (De Luca 2009; D’Antonio 2004). To cite only the most prominent instance, Roberto Rossellini’s 1945 classic *Rome Open City* closes with a paradigmatic image of a band of Roman children—who have just witnessed a Nazi firing squad carry out the execution of the anti-Fascist parish priest Don Pietro—marching on a hillside overlooking the city of Rome. Critics have tended to read this scene as symbolizing Italy’s impending post-war rebirth, the country’s hopes for the future embodied by the children who will be tasked with creating a new Italy, freed from the distorted values of Fascism. For Schoonover, the children’s ‘youthful innocence grants the political and social future of Italy an open-ended optimism’ (Schoonover 2012, 134); for Rocchio they represent ‘[t]he vision of a new society’ (Rocchio 1999, 49). As Lichtner has interpreted the scene, then, Rossellini’s ‘children have the power to heal the wounds of twenty years of Fascism, cleanse the slate, lead their parents onto the right path’ (Lichtner

2013, 50). Others, however, have seen in the conclusion to *Rome Open City* a more tempered message: the recognition that the scars of Fascism and war remained, that Italy's hopeful future was indelibly marked by its troubled past. Noting that Romoletto, the leader of the band of youths, is maimed and forced to walk with crutches, Marcus insists that '[t]he boy's physical mutilation serves as a reminder that post-Fascist Rome operates under the literal and figurative handicaps incurred by the events of its immediate past' (Marcus 1986, 49). Seizing on the same ambiguity embodied by Romoletto, Gelley highlights 'the trauma and deep ambivalence underlying the film's hopeful vision of a united Resistance as the basis for national identification' (Gelley 2012, 32), while Lawton argues that 'it is clear that the future is not seen by Rossellini as simplistically as has been suggested elsewhere' (Lawton 1979, 14). The final image of *Rome Open City* may symbolize the hopes of the Italian future through the metaphorical representation of children, that is to say, but those hopes, like the children themselves, have not escaped the past unscathed.

This same point, similarly represented as a problematic regeneration, was emphasized by Elio Vittorini, who argued that, after Fascism, Italians 'were delivered from the filthy uterus of recent history, with the inheritance of that period' (Vittorini 2008b, 1108). In Vittorini's metaphor, as in Rossellini's much-debated conclusion, there is an evident sense that, despite the rebirth of Italy, Italians had not been re-born innocent. Instead, they were the heirs to a troubling past even as they sought a brighter future, the inheritors of a problematic cultural history even as they worked to create a 'new culture'. Vittorini represented this complicated social and cultural renewal, moreover, not only by problematizing the metaphor of rebirth, but by developing his own extended metaphor, which linked the end of the war in Italy with the European discovery of America. In this way, Vittorini was revising the celebrated Italian 'myth of America' of the 1930s, of which he had been one of the intellectual leaders (Dunnett 2005). That American mythology tended to present America as

an analogue for Italian culture: in the evocative description offered by Italo Calvino, ‘America was a gigantic allegory of our problems, as Italians at that time, of our evil and of our good, of our conservatism and of our need for rebellion’ (Calvino 1995b, 63-4). Looking to America, that is to say, Vittorini and his fellow *americanisti* discovered Italy, grounding their critique of Italian society under Fascism in American intellectuals’ critical representations of the United States (Leavitt 2013, 11-14).

The American analogy took on new contours after the war, particularly in Vittorini’s own multi-part ‘Breve storia della letteratura americana’ (A Brief History of American Literature), a 1946 analysis in which the symbolic anti-Fascism that had characterized the earlier mythology was replaced by analogies to Italy’s post-Fascist struggles.⁹ Echoing his vision for a ‘new culture’ in Italy, Vittorini repeatedly insisted in his ‘Brief History’ that culture and society in America were radically new despite their inheritance of the European legacy. American culture ‘began in an entirely new land. And yet this beginning was also a continuation’, Vittorini argued, so that, in tracing its development, ‘we see American culture create for itself new goods out of the historiated wood of the galleys that had come from Europe’ (Vittorini 2008c, 346-7). Cesare Pavese, Vittorini’s erstwhile co-advocate of Italian *americanismo*, made a comparable point, stressing that American literature was ‘heavy with all the past of the world, and at the same time young, innocent’ (Pavese 1970, 199). Emphasizing this perhaps paradoxical vision of originality and continuity, innocence and experience, Vittorini insisted that ‘American culture will always contain within it the experience of European culture. In its childhood, it bears all the years of human consciousness’ (Vittorini 2008c, 349). American culture was youthful and ‘new’, therefore, but at the same time it remained as old as its European counterparts, whose traditions it both upheld and renewed.

That Vittorini was speaking of Italian society—that this vision of repurposing a historical culture so as to create something new was a vision for post-war Italy—is made apparent by the text’s frequent recourse to the key words and phrases of Vittorini’s own polemical essays on the Italian ‘new culture’. Most importantly, Vittorini insisted in his ‘Brief History’ that on the American continent ‘culture sought *to take power*’, just as he had argued, in an article published only a few months earlier, that in Italy, too, ‘culture should, finally, “take power”’ (Vittorini 2008d, 254). What is more, responding to the objections mounted against his vision for a new Italian culture, and in particular to what many saw as the implied claim that he was himself an emissary of the ‘new culture’ Italy was now to adopt, Vittorini had maintained, instead, that he and his fellow post-war intellectuals ‘are aware that we too belong to the “old culture”’, but ‘precisely because we belong to the “old culture”, we believe it must transform from an “old culture” to a “new culture”’ (Vittorini 2008d, 247-48). To put this another way, Vittorini demanded a new Italian culture, but one that could be assembled from the material of the old, just as American culture had been assembled out of European culture. Italy needed a new childhood, but it needed at the same time to conserve a mature, adult sensibility, just as a new American civilization had been born already possessing a fully formed European consciousness. Vittorini’s vision for a new culture entailed both thus continuity and rupture, and although these two needs may appear to be in conflict, he nevertheless found them resolved in America, which thus served as a model—and indeed a metaphor—for post-Fascist Italy.

Was the metaphor successful? After the war, could Italy in fact be characterized as ‘an entirely new land’, as Vittorini described America in the age of discovery? Had its collective sins been washed away by the redemptive waters of a Biblical flood? Was Italy thus like a child, returned to a state of naïveté, and perhaps even innocence, after Fascism’s defeat? If so, what scars, what deformities, what traumas would that national child carry with

it as it matured? Could its past illnesses and maladies be cured completely, or had it been struck with a particularly aggressive form of cancer, one that would persist into adulthood, or perhaps even cut short the lifespan of the nation? The metaphors commonly employed to represent post-war Italy do not definitively answer these questions, but they do raise them. Symbolising—I would say foregrounding—the problems of continuity with the past, of Italy's difficult inheritance, of its national guilt and national aspirations, of its national responsibility, of its prospects for change and risks of regression, the metaphors of parenthesis, disease, flood, childhood, and discovery framed the post-war epoch in ways that are contentious, complex, and worth parsing.

Those metaphors merit renewed consideration and contextualisation, since they suggest that post-war Italy's politicians, artists, and intellectuals articulated their relationship to the Fascist past, as well as their hopes for renewal, rather more scrupulously than we have been led to believe. Indeed, they serve unmistakably to demonstrate Italy's profound and protracted debate over Fascism's post-war legacy and Italy's post-war recovery—a debate that was no less real, no less consequential, for having been conducted largely in metaphorical terms. On the contrary, by encouraging, embodying, and disseminating radically divergent images of the country's situation after Fascism, metaphorical formulation appears to have offered the very condition for Italians' penetrating (but often overlooked) post-war national self-examination..

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¹ Research has likewise established that metaphors have a significant influence on social policy (Thibodeau and Boroditsky ([2011], 1-11).

² On Flora's essay and its Crocean foundations, see Daniela La Penna's contribution to this issue.

³ Gramsci likewise famously criticized Croce's 'Olympic serenity' (Gramsci 1975, 1207 [Quaderno 10 (XXXIII)]). On Russo and his contemporaries' 'rebellion [...] against Crocean hegemony' even (especially?) among those whose anti-Fascism had been inspired by Croce, see Setta (1979, 157-60); Garin (1966, 501).

⁴ On this attempted cultural overthrow of Croce, see Asor Rosa (1993, 106).

⁵ For analyses of Croce's earlier uses of the disease metaphor, see Ciliberto 1985. On the subject of metaphors of disease more broadly, see especially Sontag 1977.

⁶ An earlier instance of this tendency is Alberto Moravia's 1943 short story "L'Epidemia", in which Fascism is mocked as a peculiar sickness (Moravia 1957).

⁷ The same metaphor, depicting Fascism as a force that had rained down upon Italy from above, had been challenged more than a decade earlier in Ignazio Silone's 1934 tract *Der Fascismus*, from which Levi had perhaps borrowed his phrase (Silone [2002], ix-xxvii).

⁸ The metaphor was subsequently employed by Franco Fortini, who suggested in a 1949 review of Vittorio De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* that Italy's post-war poor were the 'Noah's of a submerged Europe' (Fortini 1949, 3).

⁹ Scholars have tended to read Vittorini's "Brief history" rather differently, seeing it as a mere repetition of the "myth" as it had been presented in the 1930s. Klos, however, comes close to my own interpretation when he writes that Vittorini's text 'establishes a certain relationship between American culture and the Italian situation after the Fascist parenthesis' (Klos [1985], 209).