

LA TERRA MADRE: AN ITALIAN AMERICAN READING OF CARLO LEVI'S *CRISTO SI È
FERMATO A EBOLI*.

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ABSTRACT

CALE JAMES LASALATA: LA TERRA MADRE: AN ITALIAN-AMERICAN READING OF
CARLO LEVI'S *CRISTO SI È FERMATO A EBOLI*.
(Under the direction of Dr. Federico Luisetti)

This thesis' objective is to offer a personal interpretation of Carlo Levi's narrative, Cristo si è fermato a Eboli. This thesis evaluates Levi's narrative according to a specific reading of the modern, realist novel. This dialogue evaluates Levi's narrative as providing textual evidence for a work in realism as conceived by Giacomo Debenedetti. This thesis further addresses the questione meridionale by means of engaging the text with the theory of Antonio Gramsci. The following chapters elaborate on the capacity of the narrative's subject to speak to a current, socioeconomic situation generating an evaluation that speaks to fundamental elements of the questione meridionale. This thesis examines in what way a distinctive aesthetic evaluation of Carlo Levi reaffirms the novel as a realist text as conceived by Giacomo Debenedetti. This thesis' ultimate aesthetic evaluation considers Levi's narrative as speaking to the specific reality of the Italian-American community.

DEDICATION

To my parents, David and Kathleen LaSalata, may I always be worthy of their confidence in me.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Lucania is one of those words that most people don't really think they've heard correctly. Even the first time that I heard it pronounced (or its modern counterpart, Basilicata) I had no idea what it was. As Italian-Americans my family never spoke of regions or the nation of Italy. We perceived Italy to be the towns from which our grandparents and our great-grandparents emigrated. As an immigrant community, we always talked about that one specific town, that idealized realm about which our forbearers told us. We dreamed of going back to that Italy, that town, seeing that which no one in our families had seen since our forbearers left in the late nineteenth century. We see the Southern Italian landscape replete with small villages and older women clad in black, just like the pictures of our aunts, now long since gone. We envision an Italy that serves the same food, speaks the same language, and is in everyway like our small communities throughout the United States. We understand the reality of Italy to be like the memories of our family, a native land frozen in time. We romanticize our Italy because it is tied to our filial affections and because it is all we have ever known of our ancestry. We know abstractly what modern Italy is, but essentially we believe that this country is still that of our ancestors: buried in the sands of time and sentiment. As a community within modern America of the twenty-first century we objectively know better, but there are still influences on the person that are much stronger than fact. We maintain an identity that over the course of the years becomes more amorphous and less tangible. As the centers of our traditional

communities, i.e., our families and neighborhoods, are dispersed and no longer composed solely of people from the same ethnic background, we still preserve that one fundamental aspect of who we are: we know that our ancestors were and we ourselves, to a certain point, are Italian. This fundamental attribute of Italian-Americans reinforces the very nature of our perception of Italy and, as stated earlier, facilitates the sustaining of certain memories. We have never been back to the town whence our ancestors came but we can describe it to someone in detail. As a community we will always remain on the margin of American society, in terms of ethnic identity, because we still feel ourselves placed somewhere in the middle. We are Americans but slightly different. We are no longer Italians or immigrants, either. Our ethnic reality bears the imprint of a time that no longer exists; yet if it does exist, it does so only in our collective memory and it is still, nonetheless, our reality. Our ethnicity is understood juxtaposed to this static image, and it is with this in mind that I have undertaken a reading of Carlo Levi's Cristo si è fermato a Eboli.

Carlo Levi's Cristo si è fermato a Eboli is a narrative of great significance to an Italian-American audience. It speaks as one of us, metaphorically, to that which we have left behind. Levi's narrative finds the interlocutor in exactly the same realm as the immigrant or Italian-American, somewhere in between. This narrative can be read solely from an aesthetic, philosophical perspective, as the following chapter will bear out. This narrative can also be read as the exposition of the inherent inadequacies and problems associated with Gramsci's analysis of the "Southern Question," as chapter two will demonstrate. I believe, ultimately, that this narrative can be read as one that has great significance for the Italian-American. I believe, much as Barbara Hernstein Smith avers, that this novel is a "contingent value" for our ethnic community. We are products, in the end, of that concept of time that Carlo Levi describes: "Sono passati molti anni, pieni di guerra, e di quello che si usa chiamare la Storia. [...]. Ma, chiuso in una stanza, e in un mondo chiuso, mi è grato riandare con la memoria a quell'altro mondo, serrato nel dolore e negli usi, [...]" (3).

It is my thesis to demonstrate in what way Carlo Levi's narrative demonstrates a fundamental reality and how Levi achieves this goal through an analysis based on a principle of the aesthetic theory of Giacomo Debenedetti. It is also my contention to demonstrate, textually, how Levi's narrative exposes the essential aspects of Antonio Gramsci's analysis of the South of Italy in his treatise, La Questione meridionale. Finally, it is my intention to demonstrate why, through an analysis of the aesthetic theory of Giacomo Debenedetti and Barbara Hernstein Smith, Levi's narrative creates a work of great significance to the Italian-American community. These elements, when read together, constitute an attempt to understand the reality of the Lucanian peasant during the Fascist period in Italy but also as an attempt to understand my own history, as a descendant of Lucanian immigrants, as one who lives between these two realities: one of the historical, temporal Italy and that of the ahistorical, atemporal Italy of my ancestors. It is what we have left behind as viewed by one who remembers in as much as the narrative is written by one who remembers.

CHAPTER II

L'EPICA DELLA REALITÀ: A DEBENEDETTIAN READING OF CARLO LEVI'S CRISTO SI È FERMATO A EBOLI

Questa Italia si è svolta nel suo nero silenzio, come la terra, in un susseguirsi di stagioni uguali e di uguali sventure, e quello che di esterno è passato su di lei, non ha lasciato traccia, e non conta. (Levi 123)

Cristo si è fermato a Eboli by Carlo Levi has a rather innocuous title and would almost appear to be a theological text rather than a work in fiction. Cristo si è fermato a Eboli evokes an image of Christ standing at the periphery of Eboli, gateway to the “desolate terre di Lucania” (3), who decides rather to proceed in the opposite direction. Christ’s abandonment, metaphorically, of Lucania is significant. The exterior world pertains to “history,” the shared past of the world north of Lucania. Levi’s portrayal of Gagliano exists on the boundary, on the fringes of the author’s preconceived world. This is an environment in which the peasant’s reality goes no further than the horizon. Levi’s Lucania is ancient and barren, desperate and dignified, fraternal and suspicious. A metaphorical abandonment pervasive throughout the work asks larger questions about the existential condition of man and about the South. Carlo Levi’s novel is not solely an account of a year lived in exile but a narrative that relates an acute understanding of its subject and its relation to the exterior world. Levi’s retelling of his year in exile can also be understood as a means of reconciling events of those years he spent condemned by Mussolini’s Fascist reality. Levi’s narrative constructs a verisimilitude in its depiction of this forsaken land’s people by one who is from without; the world of

the “cristiano:” “Lei resterà qui qualche tempo. Lei è straniero alle nostre questioni, e potrà giudicare” (21).

Carlo Levi’s essay, “Il nome di Lucania”, in the collection of essays Le Mille Patrie: Uomini, fatti, paesi d’Italia, postulates that the State’s imposition of the name Basilicata on a region that its inhabitants define as Lucania represents a continued exterior misunderstanding of the Southern question:

Se questo è il termine dell’uso del popolo e, mi sembra, il solo legittimo: il solo che può avere un senso quando, come si dovrebbe (e come la Costituente, malgrado il nome diverso, prescrive), la regione possa avere una sua vita autonoma, ed essere sentita come una realtà. (227)

This passage underlines an interesting and vital concern to any reading of Levi’s narrative, directing the reader’s attention to a contentious issue of the region’s nomenclature, even amongst meridionalisti¹. It also emphasizes a fundamental characteristic of Levi’s novel, the authenticity of the characters and the accuracy of their depiction. Cristo si è fermato a Eboli begins with an interesting observation

Ero avvezzo ormai alla serietà nuda e drammatica di Grassano, ai suoi intonaci di calce cadente, e al suo triste raccoglimento misterioso; e mi pareva che quell’aria di campagna con cui mi appariva Gagliano, suonasse falso in questa terra che non è, mai, una campagna. (7)

The opening pages of the novel prepare the reader and draw one into a narrative that exists in a land unknown, unheard of and unseen. It invites the reader and the author together to answer the question: who would live here? As the year unfolds, Cristo si è fermato a Eboli develops into a novel whose main focus is the prosaic events of Gagliano which explicate this primary question. This narrative’s background evokes the passage of days and years of unchanging hardship; this verisimilitude authenticates Levi’s narrative of reality

¹ Levi cites an occurrence at the *L’Esposizione Internazionale* in Turin in 1911: “L’associazione detta ‘Fascio lucano’ aveva espresso il voto che il Consiglio Provinciale di Potenza chiedesse al governo di provvedere e sostituire al nome di Basilicata quello di Lucania” (226). Levi later quotes Giustino Fortunato (1848-1932) who, in two letters to *Libera parola* of Potenza in 1910, summarizes those events as: “una melensaggine non degna di gente seria fanciullaggini appena spiegabili cinquanta anni, se non addirittura novanta anni addietro” (226).

Il mito dell'uomo nello spazio comporta una nuova immagine della vita e anche una nuova dimensione del tempo, in cui i movimenti, i gesti e i destini degli uomini si caricano di nuovi significati. L'antico mondo magico- afferma Levi- che vive in noi con i suoi poteri, 'cioè nelle nostre parole, nei gesti, nelle costumanze, nelle etimologie, nella memoria inconsapevole di tempi e di Dei remoti eppure presenti', è messo in crisi, sostituito da una realtà diversa e da nuovi rituali e da simboli che si apprestano a custodire i nuovi misteri. (XXXVII)

This citation of Carlo Levi from Maria Pagliara's introduction to a collection of Carlo Levi's writings, Le tracce della memoria, presents an interesting induction. Tied by the hand of gravity to the other, to the old world laden with ancient significance, man is liberated of said gravity. Man discovers a new realm, in which the marks of our existence have yet to be created. If the boundary is to remain respected, that which falls beyond it will remain the other. Carlo Levi's exile in Gagliano is the "Missa est" of the future's values, symbols, and customs to revisit their forbearers and of a people whose nature is trapped in the oblivion of time, brought out of obscurity through the faithful depiction of their deplorable conditions. Levi's narrative coalesces the memories of his exile and revisits them in events that authenticate Levi's narrative. Levi's analogy of the man in space may be read as underlining a theme of "atemporality". This "atemporality" is linked to the Lucanian peasant by the monotonous repetition of their collective history as Carlo Levi describes in the novel regarding time in Lucanian vernacular: "L'altra parola, che ritorna sempre nei discorsi è *crai*, il *cras* latino, domani. Tutto quello che si aspetta, che deve arrivare, che deve essere fatto o mutato, è *crai*. Ma *crai* significa mai" (163).

Levi continues to develop and actually defines the "atemporality" of the Lucanians as

Non arrivavano i giornali né la posta, per la neve che chiudeva le strade: l'isola fra i burroni aveva perso ogni contatto con la terra. Il mutarsi dei giorni era un semplice variare di nuvole e di sole: il nuovo anno giaceva immobile, come un tronco addormentato. Nell'uguaglianza delle ore, non c'è per la memoria né per la speranza: passato e futuro sono come due stagni morti. Tutto il domani, alla fine dei tempi, tendeva a diventare anche per me quel vago 'crai' contadino, fatto di vuota pazienza, via dalla storia e dal tempo.[...] Crai è domani, e sempre; ma il giorno dopo domani è *prescrai* e il giorno dopo ancora è *prescille*; poi viene *prescruflo*, e poi *maruflo* e *marufione*; ed il settimo giorno è *maruflicchio*.

Ma questa esattezza di termini ha più che altro un valore di ironia. Queste parole non si usano tanto per indicare questo o quel giorno, ma piuttosto tutte insieme con un elenco, e il loro stesso suono è grottesco: sono come una riprova della inutilità di voler distinguere nelle eterne nebbie del crai. (184-85)

Very much like the man in space, Levi generates a narrative that exists against a background of which, conceptually, Levi is aware but of which, physically and realistically, the interlocutor was unaware. In this way, by the applied analogy to the “terre desolate” Lucania represents a space that has always existed but of which the “cristiano”, the outsider, is ignorant. Moreover, the ignorance of the other, within the modern state of Italy, continually reinforces a sentiment of isolation throughout the narrative. To elaborate on Levi’s metaphor, it would appear that, as a nation, Italy has left the confines of the understood, exterior world and have established new marks of civilization; whereas Lucania continues in its static, indeterminate subsistence. The question then becomes how to relate to the world of the “cristiano” that which occurs at the boundary of the conceived margins of the modern State.

The issue at the center of the novel is the preponderance of actuality in the events of Levi’s exile. The Lucanian peasant of Levi’s memory is juxtaposed to the tangible historical and political realities and how they impact the differing subjects’ narratives. Giacomo Debenedetti’s theory, which the following pages will treat, considers a novel of realism that is rooted in the condition of the present; one that treats the modern subject by looking at the subject as a product in evolution. Debenedetti’s theory places the onus not on the imaginative skills of the author but on the adherence to a perception of self-awareness and a consideration of the influences in the life of the subject. This epic of modernity necessarily must speak to conceived perceptions of the self that we maintain, philosophically challenging those convictions: “La nostra partecipazione alla narrativa e al teatro- abbreviamo con una parola inesatta: all’epica moderna- è di tutt’altra specie. Questa epica ha una sua speciale facoltà di comprometterci, di rimestare entro i nostri disturbi morali e di lasciarli più agitati di prima” (105).

Giacomo Debenedetti begins his assessment of the modern realist novel by summarizing in distinct terms the theoretical ideal of a reevaluation of the human conscience. Debenedetti theorizes that the modern epic requires a willingness both to subject oneself to this reassessment and to accept that which is uncovered in this process. The introductory pages of the chapter, “Personaggi e destino” (1947), in the collection of Debenedetti’s philosophical essays entitled, Il personaggio uomo: l’uomo di fronte alle forme del destino nei grandi romanzi del Novecento (1998), begin with the conception of the modern realist novel or “epica” in contrast to the novels produced during the late nineteenth century. This epic of the nineteenth century is problematic as it is seen, according to Debenedetti, to provide a fixed model for future styles of the realist narrative. This epic dangerously approaches narrative determinism, essentially presenting a work in realism where the characters appear to still display a sense of control with regard to their own destiny: “Postulato fondamentale di quell’epica della realtà: la vita sa quello che vuole, sa come arrivarci per le vie del male o per quelle del bene, e questa sua volontà è del tutto conveniente con quello che noi vogliamo che la vita voglia” (109).

Debenedetti’s observation touches a tenet fundamental to any epic of modernity. Debenedetti theorizes that an epic born of modernity and conceived in realism must speak to the modern condition which he conceives as based on a correlation between human existence and psychoanalysis. These novels would inherently lack a characteristic of spontaneity with respect to the so-called realist narrative, if they were to follow previous patterns of this style of narrative from the previous century

Meno di un secolo è passato da quando, sotto i nomi di realismo, naturalismo, sperimentalismo, verismo, o come altrimenti si vogliono chiamarne le non sensibilissime sfumature, quell’epica celebrò uno dei suoi consapevoli trionfi. Oltre le opere, essa ci ha trasmesso un copioso apparato di dottrine. Paul Bourget, che non era un caposcuola, e ha quindi la diligenza del buon discepolo, scriveva nell’84: ‘La scuola molto impropriamente detta realistica e naturalistica, dovrebbe con maggiore esattezza chiamarsi scuola dell’osservazione’. [...] Vuol dire che per quegli, per narrare bastava osservare la realtà. Vuol dire che, secondo loro, la realtà bastava lasciarla fare, notarne i comportamenti, ed essa provvedeva a raccontarsi da sola, era un’epica in atto. Che la Terra accettava di essere rivelata attraverso l’opera

d'arte. Che il contegno della Terra, il suo modo di manifestarsi, la 'logica' - se così possiamo chiamarla- dei suoi fenomeni era omogenea e conforme. (109)

The modern narrative cannot be strictly an observation of the exterior world. The critical element is not solely the observation of but the interaction with the conceptualized reality enveloping the narrative. Following this criticism the vital characteristic of this narrative would be predicated on events or interactions reverberating with elements of the reader's own reality or the reality of the reader's epoch. Addressing the nineteenth century vision of the modern epic, Debenedetti again stresses that any attempt of the past century to produce a work in realism are apt to produce foreign phenomena which are estranged from the reader's existential experience

Chi frequenti l'epica moderna, ne riceve una sconcertante impressione di insieme. Per lo più, ci troviamo di fronte a personaggi familiari a un tempo ed estranei, conosciuti ed assenti. La loro circolazione sanguigna e umorale non deve essere dissimile dalla nostra; eppure quel sangue ci sembra d'altro colore, quegli umori d'altra crasi. Camminano sul pianeta Terra; eppure la forza di gravità che li tiene attaccati sembra emanare dal suolo di un altro pianeta. Strana compagnia: fratelli complici, e, quando occorre, impudichi; ma non ci danno confidenza. E guardiamo le loro avventure. Esse non hanno mai l'aria di prodursi con quella spontanea successione di cause e di effetti, che noialtri, per una inveterata abitudine di regolarci nel mondo. (106)

Cristo si è fermato a Eboli emerges as a novel that, according to my reading, understands the character's narrative as a collective memory and present, based on Carlo Levi's faithful rendering of the Lucanian peasant's shared existence; an existence subject to the "powers that be" that have long since forgotten them. Carlo Levi's novel, with respect to an epic of reality based on a reading of Giacomo Debenedetti, is in keeping with the essential evaluation of the epic of reality. Debenedetti's conception is essentially a criticism of a static genre which is conceptually dynamic. Giacomo Debenedetti sees the realist novel removed from a normalized construction and asserts that any attempt to do so would only produce a deficient observation of reality. These narratives maintain a component of other-worldliness and, ultimately, a "surreal" experience.² What I believe to be a major

² Debenedetti comments on the works of Pavese and Vittorini (*Paesi Tuoi* and *Conversazione in Sicilia*) and ultimately judges the deficiency in each novel's rendering of the human experience: "[...] prende come una realtà

component in conceptualizing a narrative according to Debenedetti's theory is that the conceived novel is structurally grounded in a modern reality, a reality that fundamentally challenges/maintains accepted mores. Levi's narrative exhibits the decisive characteristics of Debenedetti's narrative of reality. My assertion is that the presence of the "other" in the reality that is being depicted is the method that Levi uses to attain this realism.

The interlocutor begins the novel by naming towns through which he passes en route to exile in Gagliano. The towns of Irsina, Mantalbano, Pisticci, etc., anchor the novel in Lucania.³ Levi's narrative, however, understands itself to be outside the geographical and homogeneous world of Fascist Italy, therefore enabling the narrative to convey a comprehensive element of isolation. As the reality of modernity meets its ancient counterpart, Levi demonstrates isolation's influence on the history and present of the peasant of Gagliano

Non erano fascisti, come non sarebbero stati liberali o socialisti o che so io, perché queste faccende non li riguardavano, appartenevano a un altro mondo, e non avevano senso. Che cosa avevano essi a che fare con il Governo, con il Potere, con lo Stato? Lo Stato, qualunque sia, sono 'quelli di Roma', e quelli di Roma, si sa, non vogliono che noi si viva da cristiani. C'è la grandine, le frane, la siccità, la malaria, e c'è lo Stato. (67)

History should be understood as a sequence of events created by those who, in some part, have agency and as the text points to the inexistence of agency. Essentially Levi's focus is the lack of influence the peasant maintains regarding their condition; yet, here the subject acquiesces to the will of that which will always remain foreign to the peasant. That is his reality; that is his history, just as it was his father's, and so on. It is fate and the malicious hand that moves it that remains the peasant's ever constant lord, inflicting its will indiscriminately

umana un'aria travisata, di non appartenenza" (108) and "E il Vittorini ha vinto la sua partita a patto di sfogare nel surreale la carica che il linguaggio aveva addensato nel protagonista" (108), respectively.

³ "Si è come in mezzo a un mare di terra biancastra, monotona e senz'alberi: bianchi e lontani i paesi, ciascuno in vetta al suo colle, Irsina, Craco, Montalbano, Salandra, Pisticci, Grottole, Ferrandina, le terre e le grotte dei briganti, fin laggiù dove c'è forse il mare, e Metaponto e Taranto" (Levi 5).

Peccato! Qualcuno ti ha voluto male-. Anche tu dunque sei soggetto al destino. Anche tu sei qui per il potere di una mala volontà, per un influsso malvagio, portato qua e là per opera ostile di magia. Anche tu dunque sei uomo, anche tu sei dei nostri. Non importano i motivi che ti hanno spinto, né la politica, né le leggi, né le illusioni della ragione. Non c'è ragione né cause ed effetti, ma soltanto un cattivo Destino, una volontà che vuole il male che è il potere magico delle cose. (69)

Carlo Levi's state within the narrative, as an exile and victim of a cruel fate, shares in the same misery as the depicted subject. The interlocutor's exile to almost complete isolation allows for the virtually tangible sense of reality. Gagliano is too unreal not to be real. It continues to subsist in its timelessness, an unending passing of years never bringing change or what one would call "history." The essential component to Debenedetti's conception of the modern narrative is based on an appreciation of innovations generated by psychoanalysis. Debenedetti avers that Freud's innovation in treatment of the "mostro" of the irrational, the unconscious, is still philosophically predicated on the theory that there could exist a relationship between logic and life

Ma Freud era ancora un galantuomo dell'Ottocento empirico e positivista. Quantunque collocasse nel cuore della vita il mostro e addirittura l'emblema dell'irrazionale si potesse, non che evocare, trattare con la ragione; conservava intatta la sua fede nell'accordo tra la logica e la vita. Il suo scopo era di guarire il male dell'orfano. E guarire un uomo significa rimmetterlo nella circolazione della vita: significa pensare che la vita è qualcosa che 'vale la pena.' (120)

It would be interesting to consider the last sentence from the above Debenedetti quote. To truly treat the human condition, it would be necessary to readmit the subject to life, and as Debenedetti considers, a conviction that life is worth living. As a narrative following the conception of Debenedetti, in my view, Carlo Levi's Cristo si è fermato a Eboli seeks to demonstrate to the reader the indifference produced by isolation. For the peasant of Gagliano the world of their reality is comprised of the bitter present, in Gagliano and the amorphous concept of Rome.⁴ Levi's narrative

⁴ "Per la gente di Lucania, Roma non è nulla: è la capitale dei signori, il centro di uno Stato straniero e malefico" (108).

exposes the “value” of life in Lucania as seen through the eyes of the immigrant returning to Lucania.

La terra comperata è carissima, hanno dovuto pagarla con tutti i risparmi di tanti anni di lavoro americano, e non è che argilla e sassi, e bisogna pagare le tasse, e il raccolto non vale le spese, e nascono i figli, e la moglie è malata, e in pochissimo tempo è tornata la miseria, la stessa eterna miseria di quando, tanti anni prima, erano partiti. E con la miseria torna la rassegnazione. (109)

The singular nature of the Lucanian, peasant condition is relational to the reader’s own concerns: children, taxes, life in general. The narrative’s appeal is that it speaks to a condition, while artistically it depicts an ancient existence that still exists in the modernity and reality of the reader. The connection between the concerns of the daily life of all readers and the peasant of Gagliano, is the narrative tool that Carlo Levi employs to reconstruct the reality of his past. Poverty as an aspect in the narrative is at once illustrated with brutal imagery of malnutrition and disease, as was the case in Levi’s depiction of the young children of Gagliano; yet, the dignity with which the peasants of Gagliano endure their abandonment is inspiring.⁵ Debenedetti’s treatment furthermore considers Freud’s analysis of the role of the father and his culpability for the subject’s present condition

La scoperta della psicanalisi, una tra le prime imprese del figlio abbandonato, riconosce-sotto il nome di nevrosi- il viatico di dolore che accompagna l’orfano lungo le vie della sua avventura; ma obbedisce anche a motivi di rivincita, quasi di ritorsione. E’ facile vedere come Freud, attraverso tutto il tessuto orchestrale delle sue teorie, ipotesi, *Traumdeutungen* e psicopatologie della vita più o meno quotidiana, cerchi sempre di riaffermare il tema originario e massiccio del conflitto col padre. Ridotte alle note elementari, quel dice: ‘Tu soffri, t’incolpi e ti umilii del tuo male di vivere. Danne invece la colpa al padre. E’ stato lui a fabbricare il coperchio di divieti, con cui reprime il naturale, sacro ribollire dei tuoi istinti e lo ricaccia nel fondo a fare da corpo estraneo.’ (119)

Ultimately Debenedetti’s reading of Freud’s theory is one that speaks to a metaphorical act of abandonment of the child by the father. It is not solely a literal abandonment but a narrative veiling of the father figure, rendering his presence invisible but still inflicting his will, obliging the child to

⁵ See 194.

suffer from the father's non-participation in the subject's life⁶. This conflict and abandonment serve as an interesting approach to Levi's narrative. The sense of isolation lends an essential nature to the text, one that compounded by the sense of abandonment and neglect. What Levi's novel essentially does other than acting as an allegory of Freudian thought, it changes the nature of the narrative discourse. Debenedetti avers that the narrative of reality cannot start at a predetermined point, a change in the perception of the individual is required. One example of this theory worthy of consideration is Levi's depiction of the peasant's perception of himself

Noi non siamo cristiani, - essi dicono, -Cristo si è fermato a Eboli-. Cristiano vuol dire, nel loro linguaggio, uomo: e la frase proverbiale che ho sentito tante volte ripetere, nelle loro bocche non è forse nulla più che l'espressione di uno sconsolato complesso d'inferiorità. Noi non siamo cristiani, non siamo uomini, non siamo considerati come uomini, ma bestie, bestie di soma. (3)

How does one create a narrative of reality when the subject does not consider itself part of the common sociopolitical and historical world as the one who seeks to create this reality?

Estrangement from the greater world outside of Gagliano develops the theme of abandonment and resignation; sentiments echoed throughout the strata of Gagliano's society

A Matera fanno finta di voler appianare le nostre liti, - mi diceva il tenente Decunto,- ma in verità fanno il possibile per fomentarle. Hanno istruzioni in questo senso da Roma. Così tengono in mano tutti, con la minaccia o la speranza. Ma che abbiamo da sperare?- e qui il gesto caratteristico della mano, che vuol dire: niente. - Qui non si può vivere. Bisogna andarsene. (25)

Another dismal assessment of Gagliano's citizenry is given by "il dottor Millilo," whose less than impartial evaluation of the Lucanian peasant elaborates on the greater point: the supposedly educated "dottor Millilo" appears to suffer from the same ignorance similar to that of the supposedly uneducated peasant

E' chiaro che egli non è molto lieto del mio arrivo: ma cerco di rassicurarlo. Non intendo di fare il medico. [...] Ma attraverso il suo balbettio capisco una cosa sola: che egli di medicina non sa più nulla, se pure ne ha mai saputo qualcosa-Buona gente ma primitive. Si guardi soprattutto dalle donne. [...]

⁶ "Non è vero che il padre se ne sia andato, è stato più maligno. Si è nascosto nell'angolo del buio, per continuare a farti soffrire coi suoi divieti, senza più aiutarti con la sua presenza" (119).

Non accetti nulla da una donna. Né vino, né caffè, nulla da bere o da mangiare. Certamente ci metterebbero un filtro. [...] Non accetti mai nulla dalle contadine [...] Son gente ignorante. (13)

Dottor Millilo, ultimately, is comprised of the two fundamental elements of Levi's narrative: the devastation inflicted on the human potential and its eventual descent to resignation. This final acquiescence to resignation is encouraged by continued centuries of a concealed yet still ever present "father" figure of the State. Debenedetti's final analysis considers Freud's exculpation of the self through the redistribution of culpability for the subject's condition.

Al tempo di Freud erano ancora la colpa di avere perduto il padre, l'inferiorità di essere rimasti orfani e privi di guida. E Freud poteva scaricare tutto sul padre. Ma ora, su chi gettare la colpa? Non rimane che metterla sul conto della stessa esistenza. Ma lei è sorda, muta, non risponde: il carico che le abbiamo lanciato addosso rimbalza su di noi. Prima, col padre accanto, potevamo spiegare il mondo: ora siamo noi a doverci piegare col mondo. E la necessità di giustificarci, rimescola il senso di colpa e di inferiorità. (122)

This thesis of Giacomo Debenedetti establishes the need for a narrative of reality to reconsider the source of human discontentment, as we no longer have the example of our father. Abandoned and alone, the subject relates his narrative according to his subjective rendering of his present. According to my reading, Carlo Levi's Cristo si è fermato a Eboli is a narrative that deserves recognition as an epic in reality as envisioned by Giacomo Debenedetti. In this context, Levi's peasant narrative identifies an underlying issue that has concerned Italy since 1861: the "Question of the South". Levi's novel reassesses the southerner and his perception in the modern Italian State. What of the contadino lucano? How is national identity achieved? How should the economic shortcomings of the South be addressed? These elements find their assessment and implication in the work of Antonio Gramsci. With these ideas in mind, Gramsci's analysis will serve as the starting point.

CHAPTER III

LUCANIA: GRAMSCI, LEVI, AND THE SOUTHERN QUESTION

In his article entitled “Casting off the Southern Problem,” John Davis examines the inherent polemical nature of the Southern Question

But despite the vitality of these postwar debates, the South had to some extent become a prisoner of its own notoriety-not least because the immensely rich documentation provided by the classical studies of the *Meridionalisti* until only very recently continued to provide the sole documentary base for discussion. The established images of backwardness that were inherited from the past were now to be reinforced by a new vocabulary of developmental sociology that, with concepts like “amoral familism,” locked the South into a time-warp of social primitivism and economic immobilism. (206)

Davis’ article describes the nature of the “Southern Question” by reconsidering the sources of knowledge. The concept of “primitivism” is interesting. Rather than confronting directly this vision of the South, the narrative subtly represents the dignity of a humble, to say the least, dignified existence against an exteriorly constructed reality.⁷ This theme is essential for this particular reading of Levi’s novel, with regard to l’epica della realtà. Davis highlights a fundamental flaw in the question itself: who is asking the question and who is answering the question?

⁷ “Sono passati molti anni, pieni di Guerra, e di quello che si usa chiamare la Storia. [...] Ma, chiuso in una stanza, e in un mondo chiuso, mi è grato riandare con la memoria a quell’altro mondo, serrato nel dolore e negli usi, negato alla Storia e allo Stato, eternamente paziente” (Levi 3).

One interesting aspect inherent in this analysis of the questione meridionale, as stated by John Davis, is the evaluator. Antonio Gramsci refers to the exterior nature of the analysis due in part to the lack of middle class culture in the South and the imposition of the question from outside

Abbiamo detto che l'Italia meridionale è una grande disgregazione sociale. Questa formula oltre che ai contadini si può riferire anche agli intelletti. È notevole il fatto che nel Mezzogiorno, accanto alla grandissima proprietà siano esistite ed esistano grandi accumulazioni culturali e di intelligenza in singoli individui o in ristretti gruppi di grandi intellettuali, mentre non esiste una organizzazione della cultura media. Esistono nel Mezzogiorno la casa editrice Laterza e la rivista 'La Critica', esistono Accademie e imprese culturali di grandissima erudizione; non esistono piccole e medie viste, non esistono case editrici intorno a cui si raggruppino formazioni medie di intellettuali meridionali. I meridionali che hanno cercato di uscire dal blocco agrario e di impostare la questione meridionale in forma radicale hanno trovato ospitalità e si sono raggruppati intorno a riviste stampate fuori del Mezzogiorno. (37-38)

Gramsci indicates that the Italian bourgeoisie, after popular insurrections in Sicily and in Milan, were faced with a choice: on the one hand a rural democracy, representing the inherent rights and “universal suffrage” or a capitalist conception with the centralized State (20). With these options in mind, the concept of the centralized State and the involvement of the bourgeoisie in this State, are all important factors that need to be considered when evaluating the “Southern Question” but also to serve as a method of textual analysis for this particular reading of Levi’s novel. In the novel itself, Levi speaks of this relationship between the bourgeoisie and the State, not in the sense of an outsider’s evaluation of this relationship, but rather Levi allows the Lucanian peasants and also those who directly represent this centralized State to depict the condition of life in Lucania. One such example is the barone, a representative of the Fascist regime who also is also a man of faith⁸. Barone’s illustration of the Lucanian, peasant condition speaks to this relationship with the centralized State

Gli chiesi come andava il suo lavoro, qui a Gagliano.- Male, - mi disse.- Oggi sono venuto per fare dei pignoramenti. Le tasse non le pagano. Si viene a

⁸ “Era un uomo di chiesa, e portava all’occhiello della giacchetta, invece del solito distintivo fascista, quello rotondo dell’Azione Cattolica” (Levi 30).

pignorare, e non si trova nulla. Sono stato in tre case: mobili non ne hanno: non c'è che il letto, e quello non si può prendere.[...] Le tasse sono forti, per dire la verità: ma questo non mi riguarda: non siamo noi che le mettiamo: noi dobbiamo soltanto farle pagare. E lei sa come sono i contadini: per loro tutte le annate sono cattive. Sono pieni di debiti, hanno la malaria, non hanno da mangiare. (32)

Gramsci, in his treatment of the questione meridionale discusses a necessary altering as to the self perception of the common worker be he a Northern factory worker or Southern peasant

[...] il consenso dei contadini e di alcune categorie semiproletarie della città, superare alcuni pregiudizi e vincere certi egoismi che possono sussistere e sussistono nella classe operaia come tale anche quando nel suo seno sono spariti i particolarismi di professione. Il metallurgico, il falegname, l'edile, ecc. Devono non solo pensare come proletari e non più come metallurgico, falegname, edile, ecc., ma devono fare ancora un passo avanti: devono pensare come operai membri di una classe che tende a dirigere i contadini e gli intellettuali, di una classe che può vincere e può costruire il socialismo solo se aiutata e seguita dalla grande maggioranza di questi strati sociali (17-18).

Gramsci's underlying point is that a fundamental revisal of the conception of the self is in order if the "Question of the South" is to be addressed. As previously discussed Levi's narrative examines the self from the perspective of one who has no conception of himself. This points to, politics aside, an interesting approach that I believe is essential to an analysis of Levi's narrative.

Levi's novel, when read with Gramsci's theory in mind, presents a vital aspect that is omnipresent: the solitude characterized by the Lucanian peasant. This desperation and solitude are fundamental elements to Levi's novel and demonstrate the profundity of Levi's realistic rendering of the Lucanian peasant condition. Levi's depiction expresses profoundly the existential condition of the peasant in the continuous cycle of repetition; of desperation and alienation

Essi vivono immerse in un mondo che si continua senza determinazioni, dove l'uomo non si distingue dal suo sole, dalla sua bestia, dalla sua malaria: dove non possono esistere la felicità, vagheggiata dai letterati paganeggianti, né la speranza, che sono pur sempre dei sentimenti individuali, ma la cupa passività di una natura dolorosa. (69)

Davis, in his article, also examines the "Southern Question" from an economic perspective. What is of note with respect to this analysis is not Italian economics, but rather the psychology of the

central government with regard to the South in general. The analysis that Davis cites states that any change, economically speaking concerning the South, was, “almost exclusively external in origin” (Davis 211), and that the response of the privileged class of the South was, “Things must change to stay the same” (Davis 211). Understanding the nature of the problem Gramsci’s analysis offers a possible, albeit class oriented, mode of interpretation. In Gramsci’s analysis of the questione meridionale the prospective from which one addresses the question is essentially changed. Rather than being strictly a theoretical reassessment of a recurrent problematic, present since 1861, Gramsci’s analysis comprehends the historical and social inadequacies of the South, with regard to the State of Italy, and attempts to provide a plausible solution. The efficacy of the solution is not what is in question; what concerns the reader is that the possible solution is one that should be organic, stemming from a reliance on the social history of persons destined for self-governance. To use an uncouth aphorism: to tame a beast one must understand the nature of the beast. Gramsci’s assessment of the questione meridionale is one that understands that the ultimate success of any political or social entity depends on its ability to speak to and address the needs of the people. It is possible to amplify this thought in one political direction or the other, but what is of interest is that the analysis of the questione meridionale is cognizant of the perceived problematic of the South and its place in the Italian State. Gramsci’s evaluation, I believe, sustains a unifying characteristic in that by creating a union between the Northern factory workers and the Southern peasants, a bond is created through shared labor. The question, therefore, is no longer what distinguishes the two from each other; rather, the question becomes: what is it that the two share in common? The solution to the questione meridionale is ultimately, for Gramsci, a political one. I believe Gramsci’s analysis illustrates the fundamental flaw of the “Question of the South” in that it presupposes and it begins at a point of inherent differences. Gramsci’s point, I believe, is: how can speak of national identity and unity from a point of disparity? Can a perceived divergence be reconciled without resulting in the static, socially, and politically conditioned responses? The idea of the South as a political and social

entity that, as a result of the Italian Unification, necessitates a degree of attentiveness when considered as part of the greater State seems unfair. It is this sense of difference that provides the backdrop, against which Carlo Levi constructs his narrative. Levi gives a plausible explication of the development of Lucanian social history

La Lucania era dunque una testimonianza di vita, della esistenza di un mondo vero, fuori della storia e dei suoi orrendi risultati. [...] Chi nasceva, chi viveva e moriva in Lucania in quegli anni? [...]. La Resistenza sconfitta nelle proprie terre, diventa il movimento contadino. Comincia una storia lunga e nascosta, che è, per la prima volta, la storia di un paese senza storia, la storia dell'Italia popolare. (125)⁹

This experience of exclusion from the greater social environment has created a culture and a history predisposed to confraternity amongst those who labor. As Levi points out in the text in numerous instances, because of the historical isolation, there is a shared empathy for any person, regardless of the person, who works by the sweat of their brow and shares in the repetition of hardship.¹⁰ In this way the appreciation of a common background is elemental to the Gramscian goal of ultimate national cooperation. To cooperate, as a nation, would require a willingness to unite behind the flag of reciprocal appreciation; sympathies demonstrated well throughout Levi's narrative

Era il primo e solo morto, in tanti mesi, tra coloro che avevo curati. Tutti pensavano che, se io avessi potuto andar subito, lo avrei certamente salvato: e che la sua fine era dovuta soltanto al ritardo, e alle esitazioni del podestà. Quando io dicevo che probabilmente, anche arrivando qualche ora prima, senza mezzi, [...]. L'episodio era per loro soltanto una conferma tragica della malvagità che aveva ispirato il divieto che mi avrebbe, d'ora innanzi, impedito di soccorrerli. I contadini avevano dei visi che non avevo ancora mai visto loro: una torva decisione, una disperazione risoluta faceva più neri i loro occhi. Uscivano di casa armati, con i fucili da caccia e le scuri.- Noi siamo dei cani,- mi dicevano. – Quelli di Roma vogliono che moriamo come cani. Avevamo un cristiano buono, per noi: quelli di Roma ce lo vogliono togliere. Bruceremo il municipio, e ammazzeremo il podestà. (201)

⁹ Carlo Levi. Le tracce della memoria.

¹⁰ See Levi 109, 117, 120, 121, 124, 175, 201, 216.

Gramsci's work expresses the necessity to reevaluate, not the question itself, but the means of resolving the question. Levi's novel is an impressive evaluation of not just the economic, societal, and legal inadequacies prevalent in this Lucanian village, but a profound appreciation of the much larger historical and cultural characteristic of the "Southern Question" itself. Levi's narrative points to aspects of the "Southern Question" by attempting first to address the question from the perspective of the Lucanian peasant. Levi understands the question from the position of one who shares in the common misery of the peasants; his reality is seen through the eyes of those who have experienced that aspect of human existence. Levi's depiction reflects a psychological element that is fundamental to understanding the Lucanian peasant's present. As a theme present in the text, resignation is the unifying characteristic of the peasant of Gagliano: "Finché gli affari del nostro paese, la nostra vita e la nostra morte, saranno in mano a quelli di Roma, saremo dunque sempre come bestie" (202).

Levi's depiction of his experience in Lucania and the South, leads to an understanding of the "Southern Question" by means of comprehending an indispensable aspect of the question itself: the actual perception of the peasant by the peasant. What Levi's text demonstrates is an intricate series of revelatory conversations with the characters in the novel, but chiefly with the peasants. The condition of the Lucanian peasant, as presented by Carlo Levi in the novel, presents another interesting aspect in connection with Antonio Gramsci's analysis. A continuous repetition of centuries of unchanging hardship, gives way to resignation and suspicion of the State

Per i contadini, lo Stato è più lontano del cielo, e più maligno, perché sta sempre dall'altra parte. Non importa quali siano le sue formule politiche, la sua struttura, i suoi programmi. I contadini non li capiscono, perché è un altro linguaggio dal loro, e non c'è davvero nessuna ragione perché li vogliano capire. La sola possibile difesa, contro lo Stato e contro la propaganda, è la rassegnazione, la stessa cupa rassegnazione, senza speranza di paradiso, che curva le loro schiene sotto i mali della natura. (68-69)

The prospect of a new government, be it the monarch, dictator, or prime minister, seems not to elicit emotions of hope and idealism; rather, it is a matter of indifference. Political theories,

differing from one pole of the philosophical spectrum to the other, are meaningless to those who have never experienced change in any part of their common, cultural, and historical condition throughout the centuries. As a result, the Lucanian peasant is shown to have a natural, innate tendency towards cooperation.

Essentially Levi's novel constitutes an epica della realtà because of the comprehensive nature of Levi's narrative, one that sets an interlocutor, personification of the modern, outside world set against an ancient world set in its own history of atemporality. The Lucanian peasant is shown as conditioned to resignation. This aspect is conceived as the logical result of the static isolation experienced by Lucania: "[...] e sentivo con ribrezzo il contatto attaccaticcio della assurda tela di ragno della loro vita quotidiana; polveroso nodo senza mistero, di interessi, di passioni miserabili, di noia, di avida impotenza, e di miseria. Ora, come domani e sempre [...]" (55). Levi demonstrates, I believe correctly, one of the key components of the "Southern Question" is the overwhelming sense of isolation of the South, and in particular Lucania. Levi has access to those whom the State and time forgot. Levi presents a Lucania that is steeped in its isolation and submissive to its fate. This psychological and sociological aspect, in the novel, reveals that the question of unity within the Italian State is more complex. Gramsci's point is well-taken and the objective set forth in his treatise is an overhauling of the status quo. The primary question raised by Levi's novel and Gramsci's evaluation of the questione meridionale is how to incorporate the North and South. This analysis, in literary terms, observes the fundamental elements of the epica della realtà.

Davis, in his article, continues to reconsider the identity of the southern peasant, and its manifestations in the years after Unification. What is interesting to note, with regard to Levi's work, is Davis' attempt at minimalizing the commonly-held image of the "southerner" during the late nineteenth century and seeking to redefine it according to a revision of accepted history

The 'Southern Problem' in the decades after Unification was of course constructed from perceptions of common features of the South and of southerners- defective social organizations, criminality, racial inferiority, and

so forth. [...] But rather than dwell on image-making, the new historiography is more concerned to explore and reconstruct the economic and social realities of the South after Unification and to document the conditions and experiences that were common to the South as a whole. (Davis 208-09)

What concerns this discourse is the manner in which Levi, throughout the novel, re-examines this history from the position of the Lucanian peasant. The fundamental characteristic of the epica della realtà is its foundation in the “actuality” of the events/places/people the author seeks to portray. In this conception, Levi shares in the misery of the peasantry as he is understood to be one of their own

Quando, nei primi giorni, mi capitava d'incontrare sul sentiero, fuori del paese, qualche vecchio contadino che non mi conosceva ancora, egli si fermava, sul suo asino, per salutarmi, e mi chiedeva: - Chi sei? *Addò vades?* (Chi sei? Dove vai?) – Passeggio,- rispondevo, - sono confinato. – Un esiliato? (I contadini di qui non dicono confinato, ma esiliato). – Esiliato? Peccato! Qualcuno a Roma ti ha voluto male-. E non aggiungeva altro, ma rimetteva in moto la sua cavalcatura, guardandomi con un sorriso di compassione fraterna. Questa fraternità passiva, questo partire insieme, questa rassegnata, solidale, secolare pazienza è il profondo sentimento dei contadini, legame non religioso, ma naturale. (68)

Levi's personal experience during his isolation in Gagliano from 1935 to 1936 is what creates this genre and this reading of Levi's novel as an epica della realtà. If Carlo Levi is to be understood as one of the peasant class of Gagliano, this assimilation into the common plight of the Lucanian peasant only reinforces the realism necessary in this conception of the novel.

The plight of the peasantry of Gagliano should elicit human emotions of empathy for the condition of the less fortunate. What Carlo Levi was able to achieve in the novel was a definition of the experience of the forgotten. The novel elaborates on the rare condition shared amongst the peasants of Gagliano, resignation, and the society and State that have confined them to that state. This exposé of the existential condition of the Lucanian peasant confronts the inequality prevalent in Gagliano and in Lucania during this period. I believe that Levi's novel is an indispensable resource for understanding more completely the “Southern Question” and allowing the possibility of different approaches for possible responses. It typifies a disregard that the State (be it the Bourbons, the

Savoys, or Mussolini) has maintained with Gagliano and its peasants. Gramsci's reading of the "Southern Question" conceives of a State that, in its manifestation, would be comprised primarily of the Northern factory worker and the Southern peasants, working in conjunction for the common welfare. As with Levi's novel, Gramsci's reading of the "Southern Question" is an explication of the Italian State and its theorized counterpart of Antonio Gramsci. The philosophical and political treatise raises issues that dominate Levi's novel (i.e., historical neglect, exploitation by the bourgeoisie and the State, etc.) and are addressed by the peasantry so that, Levi's work becomes an epic based in the present condition of the character, and predicated on the historical/cultural/sociological events common to all who share in the misfortune of the Lucanian peasant existence. Levi's novel coalesces the events of the Lucanian past and presents this history as the root cause of the Lucanian peasant's present condition. I believe that one of the more striking and hauntingly beautiful lines of the novel addresses the past and its influence on the present

[...] I grandi viaggiatori non sono andati di là dai confini del proprio mondo; e hanno percorso i sentieri della propria anima e quelli del bene e del male, della moralità e della redenzione. Cristo è sceso nell'Inferno sotterraneo del moralismo ebraico per romperne le porte del tempo e sigillarle nell'eternità. Ma in questa terra oscura, senza peccato e senza redenzione, dove il male non è, ma è un dolore terrestre, che sta per sempre nelle cose. Cristo non è disceso. Cristo si è fermato a Eboli. (4)

Carlo Levi's narrative is one in which the present and the past are melded together; the superstitions and paganism of the ancient world intermingle with the present's modern logic. As a narrative that depicts provincial, Southern Italy, Cristo si è fermato a Eboli can also be read as a work in the collective, immigrant experience. I believe Levi's narrative delineates cultural patrimonies that are still relevant within the Italian-American community's understanding of itself. Levi's narrative can be read as a work that elaborates on a collective memory, that of the immigrant.

CHAPTER IV

AN AMERICAN PARADIGM: RECIPROCAL ECHOES OF BARBARA HERNSTEIN SMITH AND GIACOMO DEBENEDETTI IN CRISTO SI È FERMATO EBOLI

As stated in the first chapter, Giacomo Debenedetti theorizes an epic of modernity that sustains that any work that seeks to depict human reality must find, as its inspiration, the human experiential condition. The narrative of reality requires a genesis within the self to depict the human experience. This conception inverts the former authoritative theories of an epic in reality. What was once a narrative understood to be static and in which the subject was tied to the author's imagination is liberated under Debenedetti's construction. An epic in modernity is such as it seeks to depict the human condition and this reality is that which we understand to be our shared existence. As a matter of consistency Debenedetti cites the importance of examining the sources of knowledge in his essay, "Personaggio e destino"

Non potendo ancora trovare noi le risposte alle nuove esigenze dei personaggi, contengiamoci di offrir loro quelle indicate degli antichi miti. I quali raccolgono, simboleggiano le primordiali intuizioni che l'uomo ha avuto del proprio destino, e noi sappiamo che non ci sono conflitti, o drammi, o paure, o disagi, o speranze- per quanto differenziati e in apparenza inediti- che non si lascino ai loro moventi primordiali. (115)

Perceiving that a return to the models of the ancient past is necessary to confront the concerns of the character in the narrative, Debenedetti illustrates that we collectively know that using models already laden with significance cannot serve as the basis for the subject's relation to the narrative. Even as Levi avers that humanity is marked indelibly by these primordial elements, there is still

the opportunity to consider how these elemental approaches are to be reconsidered so that they will appeal to a modern condition. The fundamental aspect to this progression of Debenedetti's theory is the contrast between primeval symbolism recurrent in past attempts to create a character narrative, and the discovery of the "new," metaphorical self through psychoanalysis.

The main objection cited by Debenedetti to the emphasis on the role of observation by schools of realism, is that essentially they become projects locked into conformity. As such, they would almost appear to be works of art, artificial in their presentation of the reality they seek to evoke. After a dismissal of the former artifices of reality Giacomo Debenedetti prescribes a narrative that is relational to an outside reality, that of the collective, human experience. Set in the reality of the character, this narrative of modernity converses with the evaluator, i.e., the reader, and depicts the author's perception of himself within the text. This psychoanalytical addendum to the modern narrative creates a plausible link between the tangible reality of one who evaluates and the author's ability to communicate his own experiential, psychological reality. In this way it is possible to consider the postmodern criticism of Debenedetti and how this conception can potentially be linked to the American, philosophical enterprise of Barbara Hernstein Smith.

Barbara Hernstein Smith's (1988) study, Contingencies of Value, contemplates the personal, experiential element of aesthetic evaluation. It aims to reconfigure a modern interpretation of the post-Kantian aesthetic that is predicated on the "contingent" experiences of the evaluator, its goal being to promote an aesthetic that is conscious of the observer's needs/desires. Juxtaposed to previous aesthetic evaluative processes, Smith's ultimate assertion is that evaluation is contingent on factors that have been excluded from accepted aesthetic philosophy of the past century.¹¹ The objective value of the work, the role of the evaluator, the

¹¹ See Smith, Ch. 2, pp. 20-29.

independence of aesthetic judgment, and social/cultural influences in aesthetic judgments are all elements that Smith attempts to incorporate in the evaluative process. When considered together, these relationships demonstrate an appeal to psychoanalysis that is at the intersection of the narrative's encounter between subject and author. This conception of the narrative, in which the reader and the interlocutor journey together, recognizing in each their imperfections and commonalities, is excellently represented in Carlo Levi's Cristo si è fermato a Eboli. Cultural, historical implications contribute to Levi's narrative a confraternity between those who have experienced or endured hardship in Gagliano and any subject that has the capacity for empathy. As will be elaborated further on, Smith's philosophical treatment on the evaluative process and its implications acknowledges the role that existence, life, exerts on evaluation. Smith's theory, as she engages the works of Hume and Kant, also continues a trend that takes into account factors that contribute to the modern understanding of the self, i.e., psycho- physiological influences, linguistic differences, historical differences, and others. Smith's work speaks to an aesthetic analysis that understands itself to be the effect of a coalescence of these stimuli into a comprehensive, aesthetic analysis

[...] 'sensation' and/or 'perception' is now understood as the always complexly contingent product of a global interaction in which the subject selects and configures elements of her environment in relation to the current state of her own system as that system has been produced by her own quite individual history. [...] the human creature always experiences it through her total sensory/perceptual/cognitive system and in relation to *memory, context, and meaning* [...]. (69)

Smith's point from the very beginning of her analysis is that all evaluative judgments are contingent. The evaluation of the goodness or badness of a work does not occur in a vacuum; rather, the individual doing the evaluating is responding to a work from a position that is highly dependent

All value is radically contingent, being neither a fixed attribute, an inherent quality, or an objective property of things but, rather, an effect of

multiple, continuously changing, and continuously interacting variables or, to put this another way, the products of the dynamics of a system, specifically an *economic* system [...], fixed attributes, unidirectional forces, and simple causal and temporal relationships, they obscure the dynamics of value and reinforce dubious concepts of noncontingency: that is, concepts such as 'intrinsic,' 'objective,' absolute,' 'universal,' and 'transcendent.' It is necessary, therefore, to emphasize a number of other interactive relationships and forms of interdependence that are fragmented by our language and commonly ignored in critical theory and aesthetic axiology. (31)

Smith contextualizes the term "value" not as a constricted absolute; rather, it is a term that is utterly contaminated and completely varied

In the account outlined in this study, all human preferences, and the variations and convergences among them, are referred to the particular values of certain fairly general variables, including historical, social, and institutional conditions *and* psychophysiological structures, mechanisms, and tendencies. The first point to be emphasized here is that the latter, in this account, are seen to operate not as a substratum of underlying 'determinants,' 'forces,' or 'constraints' but, precisely, as *variables*- that is, they develop and function differently among different human beings and, equally significantly, always interact, for each of us, with the other variables mentioned. With respect to human preferences, nothing is uniform, universal, natural, fixed, or determined [...]. (78)

Smith is pragmatic, endowing this theory of aesthetic criticism a collectivity of terrestrial variables that are always dynamic. Fundamental elements of Smith's critical endeavor are, I contend, relational to Debenedetti's contention that the aesthetic tools which one would use to construct a narrative of reality are a response to the existential concerns of the modern person. This theory is defined by an authentic conception of the subject, as a reflection of his/her "actual" condition. Considering Zola's distinction between *homo sapiens* (one who accepts his condition in life) and *homo fictus* (born from a collection of words), Debenedetti's aesthetic can in one way be linked to Smith's aesthetic analysis in that Debenedetti sees the construction of this realist narrative as an acceptance of and a dialogue with the world in which the subject lives

Forse Zola, distinguendo un tempo dell'immaginazione e un tempo, che gli subentra, di senso della realtà, segnava i corsi e i ricorsi della storia dell'epica. Tocca infatti all'immaginazione di prestare i suoi buoni uffici di inventare storie piacevoli e straordinarie- signori e cavalieri che

v'adunate...*- affinché *homo sapiens*, nato di donna, accetti l'invasione, nello spazio della propria vita, di *homo fictus*, nato da una massa di parole [...] Noi vediamo un'epica della realtà, che cerca di prolungare e rinnovare i suoi giorni, inoculando alla chetichella dosi di sconosciuto sotto la vecchia pelle del personaggio, poi guarda stupita le risposte e i silenzi di costui. Sull'altra riva, vediamo un'epica dell'esistenza, la quale sembra approfittare di quella condizione di sconosciuto per supporre in essa i problemi e le difficoltà personali dell'autore. Su quell'essere che non è più l'autore e non è ancora personaggio, è impossibile lavorare di immaginazione. Inventargli dei casi sarebbe come per l'uomo inventare le circostanze del proprio domani. (115-16)

Smith also points to the impossibility of aesthetic assessment fixed and using predetermined standard stylistic forms

What is desirable, rather, is an inquiry pursued with the recognition that, like any other intellectual enterprise, it would consist, at any given time, of a set of heterogeneous projects; that the conceptual structures and methodological practices adopted in those projects would *themselves* be historically and otherwise contingent, reflecting, among other things, prevailing or currently interesting conceptual structures and methods in related areas of inquiry; that whatever other value the descriptions and accounts produced by any of those projects might and undoubtedly would have [...], their specific value as descriptions and accounts would be a function of how well they made intelligible the phenomena within their domain to whoever, at whatever time, and from whatever perspective, had an interest in them; and that its pursuit would be shaped by- that is, energized and transformed in response to- those various, historically emergent interests, and its descriptions and accounts variously interpreted and employed accordingly. (29)

It's my contention that both Barbara Hernstein Smith and Giacomo Debenedetti both theoretically conceptualize a narrative that is, to use Hernstein's words, contingent (30). As Hernstein theorizes that any aesthetic evaluation will be predicated on any number of external variables much in the same way as Debenedetti's concept of the epica della realtà is conceptualized as a narrative that would respond to modern conditions and create a "contingent" value for the reader. These aspects of the modern narrative are, in my view, striking components of Carlo Levi's Cristo si è formato a Eboli. One of the most striking, "contingent" values of Levi's novel is the discussion on immigration and conceived notions of America: "[...]

Gerusalemme celeste, oh! Allora, quella non si può toccare, si può soltanto contemplarlo, di là dal mare, senza mescolarvi: i contadini vanno in America, e rimangono quello che sono: molti vi si fermano, e i loro figli diventano americani” (109). In Smith’s terms Levi’s narrative creates, in this instance, a “contingent” value for this specific reading. I would argue that most readers would be well-aware of the predominance of the image of America as being the land of the immigrant’s dream at the turn of the nineteenth century. In Levi’s narrative America, and in particular New York, is idealized as the peasants “true” capital (108). This contingency is also reinforced by another scene taken from the novel

[...] Da un lato c’era la faccia negra ed aggrondata e gli occhi larghi e disumani della Madonna di Viggiano: dall’altra, e riscontro, gli occhietti vispi dietro gli occhiali lucidi e la gran chiostra dei denti aperti nella risata cordiale del Presidente Roosevelt [...]: ma Roosevelt e la Madonna di Viggiano non mancavano mai. A vederli, uno di fronte all’altra, in quelle stampe popolari, parevano le due facce del potere che si è spartito l’universo. (107)

This conception of America, as stated previously, is a “contingent value” for any person who shares the common past of immigration, especially with regard to the Italian American community, but it also addresses an interesting topic underlined in an article by Pier-Paolo Biasin entitled “The Periphery of Literature.” This article underlines a central idea common to the aesthetic axiologies of both Giacomo Debenedetti and Barbara Hernstein Smith. The concept of the “periphery” in literary criticism is interesting and the following quote from Biasin’s article will begin our analysis

Someone might object that the point of entry into a text is always the first word on the first page and there is no doubt that the *incipit* of a novel or more generally of any literary text is absolutely important in establishing, or, at the very least, in suggesting its tone. But readers know from experience that often the true entry into a text occurs later on during the reading, when an image, a stylistic particularity, or a lexical choice sets in motion a mechanism of illumination, understanding, and identification that reverberates throughout the entire text, both retrospectively and proleptically. (977)

Biasin highlights a fundamental act of connection with the narrative. Defined by Smith as a “contingency” (30), the process of aesthetic evaluation changes so as to create a decidedly more comprehensive analysis; one informed by the external forces that have been traditionally overlooked in aesthetic evaluation. As Biasin avers in his article and I agree with Smith’s contention that the changing of the boundaries of aesthetic discourse alters the evaluation. This analysis comes from a perspective that is historically and culturally contingent. This analysis of the narrative sees the Levi narrative as creating a contingent value for the Italian American community and their collective experience

[...] The diversity and resulting conflict of conceptual styles just mentioned, however, certainly crucial for this study [...], insofar as such a metaphoric flagrantly transgresses the borders that segregate the two discourses of value, it threatens not only the security of those borders but the entire- dualistic- conception of the universe that defines humanistic redemptionism and that grounds its belief in, and promise of, an ultimate deliverance from *all* economy. (116)¹²

What Smith is ultimately conceptualizing is an aesthetic axiology that endeavors to dispose of the weighty fundamentals of criticism and change the nature of evaluation. Smith rebuffs the notion that aesthetic analysis is or can be freed of external impulses. It is precisely because of these external forces that we render aesthetic judgment. There is not a singular “type of expression;” there is and always will be diversity and that should also include flexibility in evaluation (90). In Debenedetti’s conception of the modern narrative, one reads that the modern novel should be based in and for the needs of the modern subject. I see in these two aesthetic visions a commonality that is reinforced throughout Levi’s Cristo si è fermato a Eboli. The authentic depiction of the Lucanian peasant and the interlocutor’s revelation of an unknown entity, creates a “contingent” narrative, in a sense, of discovery. Following Debenedetti’s analysis, Levi’s narrative value is essentially the accurate depiction of the Lucanian peasant’s

¹² Smith, pp. 114-116.

condition. Levi is able to create a narrative that, while examining this specific society from within, the evaluation will come from the reader's capacity to relate to that which is depicted from a position of "without". Levi withholds his appraisal of the events and allows the subject to provide the elements or tools for the aesthetic judgment. Following that thought, if a narrative is to be, as Debenedetti theorized, an epica della realtà, then the realism depends solely on the preponderance of authenticity with regard to the narrative and its subject. In this way Debenedetti's theory can be, in my view, linked to Barbara Hernstein Smith's aesthetic axiology. In order for the narrative to be a work in realism, as Debenedetti envisioned, the narrative must have resonance with the modern condition of the reader. Is this not the "contingent" value of which Smith speaks? If both aesthetic approaches significantly, as Biasin cites, restructure and reconfigure the evaluative process, would that not also provide a common, critical link?¹³

It is my contention that by incorporating Smith's aesthetic axiology and Debenedetti's theories on the modern epica della realtà, the product that is created has in se attributes that will create, theoretically, "contingent values" for the reader. This narrative will comprehend the fundamental nature of the subject and will represent a work in realism that, through aesthetic evaluation, emphasizes the actuality of the occurrences within the narrative. This relation to actuality is ultimately the aesthetic goal of any narrative in this conception, as conceived by Debenedetti and in my view Levi's narrative can be evaluated as one that achieves Debenedetti's aesthetic goal of realism. Levi's narrative is a fulfillment of Debenedetti's theory and also represents, for outside the Italian peninsula, a relational, "contingent value" for the Italian American community. Levi's novel depicts the Lucania of the nineteen-thirties as the "terre desolate" (3), from the perspective of one looking in. As a "contingent value" for the Italian-American it relates a reality that, although no longer true, presents the world that was left behind,

¹³ See, "The Periphery of Literature," pp. 980-983.

the “other.” As demonstrated by the women of Gagliano, Lucania has suffered greatly from emigration

Ma l’emigrazione ha cambiato tutto. Gli uomini mancano e il paese appartiene alle donne. Una buona parte delle spose hanno il marito in America. Quello scrive il primo anno, scrive ancora il secondo, poi non se ne sa piú nulla, forse si fa un’altra famiglia laggiú, certo scompare per sempre e non torna piú.[...] Gran parte dei figli sono illegittimi: l’autorità delle madri è sovrana. [...] In paese ci restano molte piú le donne che uomini[...]. (89)

The historical attribute of the topic of emigration broadens the narrative appeal so that it can no longer stay strictly a contribution to the Italian literary tradition fixed in its possible evaluations; speaking only to a specific moment in time and social history. According to my reading Cristo si è fermato a Eboli speaks also to the conception of Italy as it is remembered or conceived by the Italian Americans, one that was abandoned by the immigrant. It will always be the “other” who resides within, as a conception of a reality that no longer exists, yet is maintained through images transmitted over the years in Italian American culture and in its self perception. In as much as Levi strives to depict a region/town lost to the history of the greater nation of Italy, Levi ultimately depicts an immigrant reality. In a paper delivered at the twenty-third conference of the American Italian Historical Association, Dr. Richard N. Juliani speaks to this idea

It is difficult, if not impossible, to reproduce faithfully the attitude toward either homeland or the new society that might have been found in immigrant households. To be sure, there must have been great variation in such situations. But for many second generation Italian Americans, growing up in an immigrant household meant hearing countless stories about and references to remote villages from which treasured memories often sprang. With the proximity of the ordeal of everyday survival in America, the distance of the homeland probably obscured its defects and magnified its virtues. (43)

It is my contention that Levi’s novel creates a “contingent value” for Italian Americans.

Following the previous chapter’s interpretation, let us take into consideration the modern narrative as conceived by Giacomo Debenedetti. The theoretical abandonment of the father and

his complete absence from the subject's life, as a theme within the text, creates a link between the Italian immigrant experience and the narrative of Carlo Levi. Very much like the experience of Giulia, Levi's housekeeper, where her son leaves for Argentina with his father only to return later to reconnect with his mother. In this way the Italian American would be, metaphorically speaking, the son reconnecting with the mother we've only remembered

Il marito della Giulia era partito, con il figlio, il primo dei diciassette anni che la Santarcangelese avrebbe avuto poi, per l'Argentina, e non se ne era poi mai saputo più nulla. Ma un giorno la Giulia ricevette una lettera, e me la portò perché gliela leggessi. Era scritta in un linguaggio misto di italiano e di spagnolo, e veniva da Civitavecchia. Era quel primo figlio, perduto da quasi vent'anni, cresciuto a Buenos Aires [...]. Si era ricordato della madre. Non le parlava del padre: diceva che sperava di avere una licenza prima di partire dall'Italia, per venirla a conoscere e a salutare [...]. Anche su questo giovane, partito prima di ogni possibile ricordo infantile, l'America era passata, come sugli altri emigrati, senza lasciar traccia; ed egli sarebbe tornato ad un paese che non aveva mai visto [...]. (215)

If the modern narrative of reality is to have any significance it must address certain aspects that can be seen as answering the fundamental aspects of human existence through a process of self realization. I find the following passage dealing with the absence of men in the village of Gagliano to be of particular interest

[...] chi siano i padri non può più avere un'importanza così gelosa: il sentimento d'onore si disgiunge da quello di paternità: il regime è matriarcale. [...] I bambini sono amati, adorati, vezzeggiati dalle madri, [...]. Molti ne muoiono, gli altri crescono precoci, poi prendono la malaria, si fanno gialli e melanconici, e diventano uomini, e vanno alla guerra, o in America, [...]. (89-90)

This region of almost complete male abandonment speaks of this non-existent father figure who leaves in search of better fortunes in the unknown world across the boundaries of Lucania. In this sense America represents that absent father and, for our discourse, Lucania represents the mother figure that the immigrant has left behind or has never known. This relational aspect between the Italian text and an American aesthetic interpretation, in my view, creates an outstanding

“contingent value” for the American reader, especially one who pertains to the specific history of the immigrant. As an epic in that reality, Carlo Levi’s narrative achieves the aim of realism as conceived by Giacomo Debenedetti and also serves as an example for an American evaluation of the text that, at least from the perspective of the Italian American experience, is a “contingent value” of the collective immigrant experience. In this way one can view the narrative as continually existing on the boundary of discourse (to reconsider the thoughts of Pier-Paolo Biasin’s article). Biasin cites the example of Jacques Derrida’s own philosophical enterprise

Perhaps even more significantly, a philosopher-critic like Jacques Derrida always starts (particularly in his early and ground-breaking works) from the most extreme periphery of the text he examines with the tools of a punctilious and idiosyncratic philology, not so much in order to arrive at the center, to disassemble the logocentrism of that particular text. (980)

Examining the boundaries and what they can offer to textual analysis is a critical element to this thesis. Conceptualizing narratives of reality, much like that of l’epica della realtà of Giacomo Debenedetti, requires a reevaluation of the point from whence the criticism or analysis comes. Richard Juliani’s paper continues to illuminate that particular aspect of the marginalized sentiment amongst the Italian American community in that it has always been an ethnic group that considers/understands itself as existing on the margin of American society

As the children of immigrant families assumed a double identity as Italian Americans, they found themselves facing complex adjustments and difficult choices. While they moved away from the traditional culture of their parents, their experiences in the public school, the settlement house, the parish life, and the urban neighborhood reshaped their identities as Americans. Yet at the same time, sociologists pointed out that the dominant society would allow only an incomplete acceptance of these newer Americans. (39)

In this regard Juliani’s sociological analysis provides a base for our textual analysis. The Italian American experience is one that is lived on the margin of American society. The Italian American experience is one that is still, as Juliani avers, seeking to understand itself

The bulk of the Italian American population probably falls somewhere in between these boundaries¹⁴. This segment is composed of those individuals and families who are still in the process of becoming fully American, whatever that means. It consists of younger generations who are nearly indistinguishable from peers of other backgrounds. But it also includes a vast middle-age population that participates in the material affluence and psychological condition that characterizes what just a few years ago was being widely called “middle America.” It is not altogether clear that any segment of the Italian American population has entirely experienced the eradication of the marginality that was so emphatically argued to have been part of the lives of the immediate predecessors. (43)

This notion of total inclusion within the modern, American society still presents problems for Italian Americans in that there still remains this sense of marginality. As an ethnic group we are still not completely “Americanized” and we remain on that boundary, at once participating in the larger society yet maintaining a very specific identity outside of time. In this vein Smith’s aesthetic analysis and Debenedetti’s conception of the narrative in reality, as applied to Cristo si è fermato a Eboli, creates a reading of the novel that specifically speaks to the marginal nature of the Italian American experience. It is the memory of our Italy and our Italian culture that remains in ageless continuity .It is an Italy that only exists in our collective memory, just as Juliani points out

While social changes in American society are undoubtedly of major importance, Italy has experienced a profound transformation in recent years, which also bears upon the aspirations of Italian Americans. Various observers have pointed out that Italian Americans, when they think about Italy, frequently become victims of a “frozen image,” that is, their beliefs and impressions are basically informed by the outdated information and obsolete memories of a society long ago passed down by an immigrant generation to their children and to their grandchildren. (46-47)

If this is to be our collective perception of the reality of Italy then Carlo Levi’s Cristo si è fermato a Eboli is a narrative that responds to that conception. It is that Italy, one nurtured by poverty and want, the Italy that sent our forbearers in search of other shores. “La Santarcangela” represents a continuity of centuries of cultural history, one that is only recognized in the common history of

¹⁴ See pp. 42-43 for the full discourse on the economic status of the Italian American population.

Italian immigrants. Our mother is kept alive in the tradition and culture of our Italian-American community. While the presence of our American father has served to better the plight of the immigrant worker and has provided us with a new national identity, the Italian-American community seeks, even to this day, to reconcile these two cultures to which we pertain. Levi's narrative, in this sense, is particularly suited to this form of evaluation. Cristo si è fermato a Eboli is able on one side to speak to the Fascist, pre-war history of Lucania and the South, while at the same time delineating fundamental characteristics of the Italian American experience. In following this specific evaluation, Levi's narrative is the ultimate work in realism, specifically as it speaks to the historical reality of the immigrant.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Cristo si è fermato a Eboli is a narrative that has been viewed as a realistic rendering of the plight of the contadino lucano during the Fascist period in Italy. As a narrative in the Italian literary tradition one sees that its importance would solely be viewed juxtaposed to the political, social elements present in the narrative. It has been my endeavor to examine and analyze this text from the perspective, not solely based in Italian, aesthetic tradition, but also to try to understand this narrative as one that speaks to another historical, social reality: the Italian-American experience. In so doing, I view this narrative as an epic in reality, very much in keeping with what Giacomo Debenedetti conceptualized in his aesthetic treatise Personaggio Uomo. In contextualizing this narrative according to Debenedetti's theory I have found that not only does the realism of the narrative present much more than just events that come across as very realistic, but that these elements in the narrative create "contingent values" for a specific audience, the Italian-American audience. In keeping with Barbara Hernstein Smith's theory on aesthetic evaluation, this notion of a connection between the evaluator and the evaluated presents the fundamental characteristic of Levi's narrative for the Italian American community: the frozen image of Italy. This Italy, as described in chapter three, is the Italy that we associate with idea of Italy. Levi's narrative is the description and the reality of that which

we imagine to be “our” Italy. In this vein our analysis of the text will always differ, even though slightly, from an Italian analysis because the history, of which the evaluator is part, is completely different. The cultural, historical, sociological experiences of the period that have shaped the modern evaluator, speaking in terms of the Italian tradition, have certainly influenced the evaluation of the narrative. It is one read with the aid of history, understanding the essential changes that have taken place within the Italian State. The opposite can be said for the Italian American reading of the narrative. It is one that does not utilize history as a “secondary text” as it cannot. This reading of the narrative comprehends the text as outside time and space. It becomes the “everyman” novel of the immigrant experience. Cristo si è fermato a Eboli is a work that encapsulates that atemporal, ahistorical place of origin for Italian Americans, regardless of actual immigration history, with respect to individual families and from whence they come. This narrative is a work that is one that encapsulates a collective experience and speaks to a reality that, although passed, remains vivid and alive within the Italian-American conscience. Carlo Levi’s Cristo si è fermato a Eboli is a narrative in realism, but distinctly an Italian American realism.

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