

'UN VECCHIO AMAVA UN RAGAZZO': HOMOEROTICISM IN UMBERTO SABA'S LATE POETRY (1935-48)*

To date, the homoerotic aspect of Umberto Saba's *Canzoniere* has been often alluded to but rarely seriously analysed. This article seeks to redress this lacuna, concentrating on Saba's late poetry and, in particular, on the collections *Ultime cose* (1935-43), *Mediterranee* (1945-46), and *Epigrafe* (1947-48), notable because of their focus on the long-standing relationship between Saba and the young Federico Almansì. This love story emerges as the dominant narrative nucleus of Saba's late poetry, while also amounting to a considerable expansion of the *Canzoniere*'s previous homoerotic narrative.

More broadly, the present study aims to question the current critical standing on the expression of male same-sex desire in modern Italian literature. Whereas scholars have highlighted the delay of the Italian narrative tradition in bringing same-sex desire into literary discourse, I argue for the recognition of Italian poetry of the Novecento as a field where the expression of love and desire between men has flourished.

I. INTRODUCTION

The pervasive presence of same-sex desire in the work of Umberto Saba is, to date, a contentious issue. As Massimiliano Jattoni has recently pointed out in *The Italianist*: 'Dell'omosessualità di Saba si è detto poco e quel poco è stato spesso solamente alluso. Cercando nella critica di mezzo secolo, non troviamo che brevi annotazioni a margine, scritte con la fretta dovuta ad una sospetta reticenza e ad un evidente imbarazzo.'¹ Although Saba's bisexuality is nominally acknowledged by scholars, the memorable poems he wrote for his wife, together with the widespread homophobia of the Italian academic world, have conspired to obscure the fact that his poetic production, collectively known as the *Canzoniere* (1900-54), is the first work of modern Italian literature which strives to articulate a self-aware homoerotic subject. A different reception has been accorded to *Ernesto*, the autobiographical and overtly homosexual novel written by Saba in 1953-55 and published posthumously in 1975. Probably due to an explicitness which makes it almost impossible to overlook the presence of sex and desire between men in this text, *Ernesto* has been the object of some gay-affirmative readings both in Italy and abroad.² Yet, as far as the poetry is

*This article is a reworking of a chapter of my doctoral thesis, 'Man and Boy: Homoeroticism and Myth-Making in Umberto Saba's *Canzoniere*' (University of London, University College, 2005).

¹Massimiliano Jattoni, 'Gli umani amori: La tematica omoerotica nell'opera di Umberto Saba', *The Italianist*, 24 (2004), 31-45 (p. 31).

²See Claudio Gargano, *Ernesto e gli altri. L'omosessualità nella narrativa italiana del Novecento* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 2002), pp. 31-38, and Francesco Gnerre, *L'eroe negato. Omosessualità e letteratura nel Novecento italiano* (Milan: Baldini & Castoldi, 2000), pp. 43-60. Gargano does not mention Saba's poetry at all, while Gnerre provides an introductory overview of it on pages 43-49. For a discussion of the film adaptation of *Ernesto*, see William van Watson, 'Adapting to Heterocentricity: The Film Versions of Saba's *Ernesto* and Giorgio Bassani's *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*', in *Queer Italia: Same-Sex Desire in Italian Literature and Film*, ed. by Gary P. Cestaro (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 153-72. Interestingly in his 'Introduction' to this collective volume (pp. 1-17), Cestaro affirms that 'a frank male homoeroticism finds expression in some of Italy's most celebrated modern poets' (p. 9), though he only mentions in this connection Penna, Pasolini, and Bellezza, omitting Saba.

concerned, the only other scholar before Jattoni to have lifted the veil on this issue is Rosita Tordi, in a study dating back to 1984.³

My broad aim in this article is to start to fill this scholarly lacuna. Homoerotic desire, with greatly varying forms of expression and self-awareness, in fact traverses Saba's *Canzoniere* from the very beginning with the *Poesie dell'adolescenza e giovanili* (1900-06) through to the late collection, *Epigrafe* (1947-48). The amount of material and its critical neglect is such that no one could hope to give a satisfactory analysis of it in the space of a single article. I have therefore decided to concentrate here on Saba's late poetry, and in particular on the collections *Ultime cose* (1935-43), *Mediterranee* (1945-46), and *Epigrafe* (1947-48). Through an analysis of this section of the *Canzoniere*, I aim to contribute to the recognition of Saba *qua* poet as a leading presence in the gay male twentieth-century canon.

There is an important reason for singling out these three collections as a particular object of study. Notwithstanding the pervasiveness of homoeroticism throughout the *Canzoniere*, Saba's desire for other men remains, up to his old age, mainly a question of internal yearning rather than of fully-fledged relationships. His adolescent poetry does reveal particularly strong attachments to his male friends, an experience which recurs in subsequent collections and also in the final episode of *Ernesto*. In marked contrast to the poetry of Penna, Pasolini, or Cavafy, however, the numerous *fanciulli* dotting the *Canzoniere* are observed, revered, and certainly desired, but without the reader getting the impression that the poet is necessarily engaging in any sort of real contact with them.

This state of affairs changes dramatically in the collections we will be examining, where, for the first time since his adolescence, Saba dramatizes a real relationship with a (much younger) man. Saba met Federico Almansi (b. 1924) when the latter was a boy in the early 1930s in Padua in the course of the poet's frequent visits to Federico's father, Emanuele, a Jewish antiquarian book-dealer with whom he had both professional and friendship ties. The relationship between Saba and the Almansi family appears to have been particularly close and supportive for many years. In the early 1940s (which fall within the chronological span of *Ultime cose*), and again between 1946 and 1947 (a period addressed in *Mediterranee*), Saba lived at the Almansi's home in Milan for prolonged periods of time in the hope of finding work in the publishing industry there. Both he and Federico were thus living under the same roof while Saba's wife, Lina, remained in Trieste. Their relationship flourished until 1948-49 (the period covered by *Epigrafe*), when it imploded due to a mixture of internal and external factors.

From the 1930s onwards, Federico gradually became the almost exclusive referent of Saba's poetry, his presence coming to define the *Canzoniere*'s third volume (which covers Saba's old age) in a way that can only be compared to his wife Lina's (admittedly more intermittent) role in the first. Almansi indeed figures more prominently than she does, to the extent that in these years the other figures that had previously populated Saba's world (his wife, his mother, his father, and his wet-nurse) recede into the background, making only sporadic appearances. In this sense, Saba's passion

³ Rosita Tordi, 'Intorno "A una stella"', in *Il punto su Saba. Atti del convegno internazionale, Trieste, 25-27 marzo 1984* (Trieste: Edizioni Lint, 1985), pp. 367-74.

for Federico should be established as one of the crucial episodes of the *Canzoniere*, to be ranked alongside the better known ones such as those involving his relationships with his wife and his parents.

Despite being in narrative terms a relatively self-sufficient episode, the poetry written by Saba for Almansi also reveals profound links with the *Canzoniere*'s previous homoerotic narrative. In this respect the same-sex landscape that will emerge from my analysis shares a number of features that Tordi and Jattoni have already noted in relation both to other parts of the book and to *Ernesto*. These pertain primarily to the fact that desire for other men appears to be intertwined with the figure of Saba's runaway father and the poet's identification with him. Both desires (for the father and for other men) converge on a forbidden nexus that Saba strives unsuccessfully to tackle in his youth, after which time it starts to become one of the central motifs of his poetry. Tordi has demonstrated that this constellation already lies behind the uncollected early poem, 'A una stella' (1903), where Saba uses a heterosexual relationship as a *schermo* hiding his desire for his father and for his friend Mario Chiesa.⁴ Jattoni's article, which concentrates on poems from *La serena disperazione* (1913-15) to *Cuor morituro* (1925-30), as well as on *Ernesto*, likewise foregrounds 'come pilastri portanti dell'intera narrazione la mancanza della figura paterna e l'attrazione per coetanei belli e svagati'.⁵

It is thus not easy to find a fitting word to do justice to the complexity and multifariousness which characterize the sphere of desire between men in Saba. As Jattoni's words make clear, same-sex longing manifests itself in the early parts of the *Canzoniere* as a desire for 'coetanei'. These relationships respond both to same-sex desire itself, and to a more general need on Saba's part to identify with male peers and to test his shaky sense of masculinity against theirs. Subsequently, Saba adds to this set of experiences the revelation of a deep longing for his father, a figure who shares a number of traits with the young men he celebrates. Through this association, the relationship between father and son is tinged with erotic tones, while desire for other men is also dealt with in terms of paternal guidance and protection. In the period we will be addressing, same-sex desire is inscribed within a pederastic pattern, which is not, however, conceptually and emotionally separated from past experiences, since Saba manages to make his relationship with Federico resonate with a number of concerns characterizing his previous confrontations with this sphere.

Desire, admiration, and longing for identification with other males thus form for Saba a deep emotional and erotic pool, whose energy inflects to varying degrees his relationships with individuals of his own sex. This universe is markedly different from the sex-driven sense of homosexual identity which we find in other Italian poets such as Penna, Pasolini, or Bellezza. With Saba, sexual desire is less dominant and always appears within a broader framework of affectivity, companionship, and mutual mirroring between two males. It is within such a continuum that his relationships with other men, whether they be with a peer, with a much younger man, or centred on the role of fatherhood, are inscribed.

⁴ Tordi, p. 74. Mario Chiesa is an important presence in Saba's adolescence and youth. He will be the model for Ilio, the boy with whom Saba/Ernesto falls in love in the last chapter of *Ernesto*.

⁵ Jattoni, p. 31.

All these elements have led me to avoid using the words 'homosexuality' and 'homosexual' in this article as much as possible. The concept of homosexuality, besides implying, in common parlance, an exclusivity of sexual orientation that does not apply to Saba, would not encompass the variety of eroticized relationships between males emerging from his poetry. 'Homoeroticism', with its slightly looser connotations, seems a more apt term to grasp the multifarious and fluid nature of Saba's male attachments. Since we will be dealing specifically with the late, pederastic phase of his poetry, however, I have also used the term 'pederasty' when referring to dynamics that appear to be specific to a relationship between an adult man and a boy rather than between two adult males. In general terms, however, 'homoeroticism' remains my preferred lexical choice when addressing Saba's same-sex universe in its entirety.

2. LATE PRODIGIES

Federico Almansì makes his first appearance in *Ultime cose* in the poem 'Amico'. Within the *Canzoniere*'s wider plot, this text is called upon to perform a crucial two-fold function. On the one hand, it aims to do justice to Federico's novel appearance in Saba's world, and as such it must lay emphasis on the uniqueness and momentousness of their encounter. On the other hand, the arrival of Federico is also the fulfilment of a distant longing for a male companion which dates back to the earliest phase of Saba's poetry. Accordingly, in the first two stanzas the poet embeds the blossoming of his new passion within the continuing narrative of homoerotic desire that traverses the *Canzoniere*:

Trovare,
quando la vita è al suo declino, il raggio
che primo la beò: un amico. È il bene
che mi fu dato.

Simile a me e dissimile, ribelle
e docile. Lo guardo
a me vicino respirare come
un figlio fuor d'ogni speranza nato
tenera madre.⁶

Federico's appearance is represented as the point of arrival of a history of longing and desire which reaches back to the poetic subject's adolescence: 'il raggio | che primo la beò: un amico.' The links between the poem and the *Canzoniere*'s wider homoerotic plot are precise, and they lead us back specifically to the year 1924, a crucial one in connection with Saba's confrontation of his homoerotic feelings.

The title 'Amico' is in fact the same as that of the ninth sonnet ('L'amico') from the collection *I prigionieri*; this poem was dedicated to the character of Pylades and formed a pair with the immediately preceding one ('L'eroe') about Orestes. In these two sonnets, and in a related uncollected poem called 'Oreste' (which very likely also dates back to 1924),⁷ Saba uses the story of the *Oresteia* as a foundation of his poetic

⁶ Umberto Saba, *Tutte le poesie*, ed. by Arrigo Stara, 4th edn (Milan: Mondadori, 1998), p. 470. All future references are to this edition.

⁷ See Silvio Ramat, 'L'"Oreste" di Saba', in *La pianta della poesia* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1972), pp. 345-48.

mythobiography in which he casts himself as Orestes, his father as Agamemnon, and his mother as Clytemnestra.⁸ Furthermore, he focuses on the homoerotic friendship between Orestes and Pylades to articulate his desire for other men. This mythical constellation brings to the surface a number of elements which will have a far-reaching impact on Saba's understanding and conceptualization of homoerotic desire, particularly in relation to the continuity between his longing for his distant father and for a faithful male companion.⁹

The first and second stanzas of 'Amico' look back at this previous period of homoerotic breakthrough: Almansì and Saba form a pair in which each partner, like Orestes and Pylades, is both similar and dissimilar, the oxymoronic characterization of Federico as 'ribelle e docile' echoing that of Pylades as 'cauto e audace' (p. 281). But in relation to the idea of fatherhood, Saba's role is reversed: in his earlier poetry he had portrayed himself as a fatherless son, here instead Almansì is referred to as 'figlio' (this happens also in the slightly later 'Avevo' from the collection, 1944). Saba expresses his role as that of a 'tenera madre', while in *Mediterranee* he will explore his relationship with Federico through the prism of the Ulysses/Telemachus pair, casting himself this time in the role of father.

After having acknowledged the link with the past, the third and fourth stanzas of 'Amico' move on to address the immediate implications of the considerable age gap between the two partners. The love object is a fully separate person with an inscrutable destiny ahead of him:

In breve partirà, per la sua via
andrà, dubbia e difficile. Alle angosce
dei miei anni in discesa lascerà
egli la casta dolcezza di un bacio.
Ma, se il tempo gli orrori suoi precipita,
a serena letizia oggi si è volta
per lui la mente mia. (p. 470)

The poet foresees for himself a limited role in Federico's young life, a presence similar to that of a parent, who watches over his/her child until the latter is ready to leave and face the world. It is a specific emotional constellation which from the start gives an often resigned tone to Saba's rapport with Federico, recurring also in 'In treno', for instance ('Ma tu muti conforme la tua legge, | e il mio rimpianto è vano', p. 499). While praising the miraculous effects of this belated passion, Saba remains all too aware of the pragmatic limitations to which it is, and will be, subjected. As will emerge in the rest of this article, 'Amico' is already an indication of the trajectory of Saba's love for Federico in the years between *Ultime cose* and *Epigrafe*: on the one hand, we will witness lyrically exalted tones, counterbalanced, on the other, by elements of frustration and by a growing problematization of the pederastic pattern.

⁸ For the definition of the *Canzoniere* as a 'mitobiografia' I am indebted to Furio Brugnolo, 'Il Canzoniere di Umberto Saba', in *Letteratura italiana. Le opere*, directed by Alberto Asor Rosa, 4 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1992-96), IV.1. *Il Novecento. L'età della crisi* (1995), 497-559 (p. 516).

⁹ For a detailed analysis of the homoerotic implications of Saba's reworking of the myth of Orestes, see Luca Baldoni, 'Padri, figli, amanti. Per una rilettura del mito di Oreste nell'opera di Saba', forthcoming in *Trasparenze*, 25 (2005).

When we turn to the rest of this collection, we notice that Federico's first characterization in terms of light imagery ('il raggio | che primo la beò') gains in strength thanks to the general sense of darkness and exhaustion surrounding his appearance. Throughout *Ultime cose*, Saba exploits the contrast between the desolation of his own life in these years and Federico's growing luminosity in order to create powerful *chiaroscuro* effects:

Quando il pensiero di te mi accompagna
nel buio, dove a volte dagli orrori
mi rifugio del giorno, per dolcezza
immobile mi tiene come statua.

Poi mi levo, riprendo la mia vita.
Tutto è lontano da me, giovinezza,
gloria; altra cura dagli altri mi strana.
Ma quel pensiero di te, che tu vivi,
mi consola di tutto. Oh tenerezza
immensa, quasi disumana! (p. 490)

Federico manages to transform the barren immobility of Saba's life, performing a number of 'prodigi' which in the old poet's eyes are first and foremost the miracles of youth. This theme appears in 'I morti amici' which opens with the following quatrain:

I morti amici rivivono in te,
e le morte stagioni. Che tu esista
è un prodigio, ma un altro lo sorpassa:
che in te ritrovi un mio tempo che fu. (p. 471)

In a similar vein, 'Dall'erta' presents a revisiting, in the company of Federico, of typical parts of Trieste: spaces are at once real and seen by the boy for the first time, and also poetic and hence already known to him through his mentor's poetry. Thanks to the intensity and intimacy of their connection, Saba finds it worth sharing a world which otherwise would appear dead to him: 'Tutto un mondo che amavo, al quale m'ero | dato, che per te solo oggi rive' (p. 473). In these lines Federico is elevated to the role of exclusive interlocutor of the poet's late reawakening. He begins to be represented as the referent of an intimate, amorous discourse which extends beyond *Ultime cose* to *Mediterranee* and *Epigrafe*, and constitutes the central dramatic episode of the third volume of the *Canzoniere*.

The atmosphere of joy and new beginnings brought about by Federico is thrown into sharp relief by the overall setting of the collection. *Ultime cose* is in fact distinguished by a pendular movement between the love object and surrounding factors which is reminiscent of *Trieste e una donna* and its double focus on marriage and the city. In *Ultime cose* the background is more abstract, its barrenness symbolizing the onset of old age. Numerous poems testify to a sense of ending and anguish, and to a poetic voice which almost miraculously finds the strength to speak out from a perspective on the verge of oblivion and annihilation:

Da quando la mia bocca è quasi muta
amo le vite che quasi non parlano.
(*'Da quando'*, p. 481)

Ora è tardi. Si spogliano le cose,
se ne tocca lo scheletro.
(*'Spettacolo'*, p. 496)

Allora,
 come una lavandaia un panno, torce
 la nuova angoscia il mio cuore. Vorrei
 gridare, ma non posso. La tortura,
 che si soffre una volta, soffro muto.
 Ahi, quello che ho perduto so io solo.
 ('Una notte', p. 502)

The sense of ending linked to old age overlaps with, and is eventually overshadowed by, the historical events of the years spanned by *Ultime cose* (1935-43), which were particularly dramatic for Saba. In the summer of 1938 he realized that time was running out in Italy for a half-Jewish citizen and he made a trip to Paris in an unsuccessful attempt to find refuge there with his family. Once back in Trieste, and with the *leggi razziali* in place, he toyed with the idea of exploiting his *sangue misto* status in order to be baptized, a step he eventually rejected on moral grounds. He was therefore forced to hand over the ownership of his antiquarian bookshop and to take up irregular employment in Milan while Lina and his daughter, Linuccia, remained in Trieste (throughout this period he was staying at the Almansi family home). From 8 September 1943, Saba and his family were in danger of being deported by the occupying Germans; they fled and went to Florence, where they survived by taking refuge in various friends' houses until the city was liberated in 1944.

If we look back at the passages just quoted we can see that the ghostly landscape linked to old age increasingly assumes the appearance of an apocalyptic desert in which the pressure of outside events is clearly felt. Images of skeletal barrenness ('Lavoro', 'Spettacolo'), torture ('Una notte'), cataclysm ('Amico': 'se il tempo gli orrori suoi precipita', p. 470), and dark foreboding ('Anche un fiato di vento', 'Il vetro rotto'), coalesce into a grim and desolate terrain which, particularly in imagery and lexis, appears close to Montale's contemporary wasteland in *Le occasioni* (1939) and *Finisterre* (1943). Furthermore, as in Montale this catastrophic landscape is traversed by the presence of the beloved Clizia, so in Saba it is contrasted with the new life brought about by Federico. Yet the figure of Clizia, because of the idealistic and Messianic responsibilities with which she is charged, appears as an increasingly fragile and intermittent presence who must eventually 'entrar nel buio'¹⁰ of the apocalypse of history.

Conversely, in *Ultime cose* we can trace a progressive hiatus between the backdrop of the wasteland and the exhilaration associated with Federico. This is apparent in the final exclamation of 'Quando il pensiero',

Ma quel pensiero di te, che tu vivi,
 mi consola di tutto. Oh tenerezza
 immensa, quasi disumana! (p. 490)

as well as in lines such as 'se il tempo gli orrori suoi precipita, | a serena letizia oggi si è volta | per lui la mente mia' (p. 470), or again in the closing lament of 'In Treno' ('Straziato è il mio cuore come sente | che più non vive nel tuo petto. Tace | ogni altra

¹⁰ Eugenio Montale, 'La bufera', in *Tutte le poesie*, ed. by Giorgio Zampa (Milan: Mondadori, 1994), p. 197.

angoscia per questa', p. 499). In other words, Saba's distance from the dominating idealism of the Italian lyric tradition is translated into the refusal to turn the object of his love into the Messianic lover which still preoccupies Montale. Federico's *prodigi* are all played within Saba's personal sphere, without any illusion that the boy might affect an external historical reality. Yet it is thanks to his encounter with Federico that Saba reaches an explicitness in the expression of same-sex passion which does not find any match in his preceding poetry. It is worth reminding ourselves that direct expressions of such a passion as the ones I have just quoted were extremely rare in the 1930s. If we look beyond Italy at contemporary European experiences, the only points of comparison are Cavafy's poems and Lorca's *Sonetos del amor oscuro*. Significantly, Cavafy's poetry could only be circulated privately during his lifetime, while Lorca's homoerotic masterpiece, though written in 1935, had to wait until 1983 for publication.

3. A HOMOEROTIC TRADITION

The passion for Federico Almansì continues to hold sway in Saba's poetic world in *Mediterranee* (1945-46). The context and texture of the collection differ considerably from *Ultime cose*, and Federico is accordingly the object of a different kind of reworking. The climate of the first half of the collection derives from the poet's stay in Rome for most of 1945. It was a period of great happiness as demonstrated both by his letters and the poem, 'Gratitudine', written in 1946 when he had moved back to the Almansì family home in Milan: 'Un anno, e in questa stagione ero a Roma. | Avevo Roma e la felicità' (p. 546). Returning to Milan, Saba saw Federico again for the first time since 1943, when he had been forced to go into hiding. The boy he had known before the war was now a grown man, and indeed the later poems in the collection are less serene and reflect an atmosphere of growing friction between the two.

Besides the sense of relief after having escaped from turmoil and persecution, Saba's stay in Rome seems to have had a decisive impact on his imagination and cultural awareness. *Mediterranee* is in fact a celebration of classical topoi and of the cultural space of the Mediterranean, which Saba sees in the poem, 'Ebbri canti', as the crucible from which the classical, Christian, and Jewish heritage have emerged.¹¹ The role of Rome as a catalyst for the rediscovery of this ancient heritage was something that Ungaretti also experienced, forming one of the sources of inspiration of his collection *Sentimento del tempo* (1919-35). In Ungaretti's case, the episode essentially represented a delayed encounter with the roots of his national culture on the part of an Italian who had grown up in Egypt and spent his formative years in Paris. Saba's outsider position as a Triestine poet, born and raised when Trieste was not yet part of Italy, is not dissimilar.

Yet the reappropriation of the classical heritage also serves a specifically homoerotic purpose for Saba, providing him, in particular, with material from Greek mythology which he could use to represent his relationship with Almansì. The first

¹¹ 'Ebbri canti si levano e bestemmie | nell'osteria suburbana. Qui pure | — penso — è Mediterraneo. E il mio pensiero | all'azzurro s'inebbria di quel nome. || Materna calma imprendibile è Roma. | S'innamora la Grecia alle sue sponde | come un'adolescenza. Oscura il mondo | e lo rinnova Giudea. Non altro | a me vecchio sorride sotto il sole' (p. 543).

poem of the collection concerning Federico ('Il ratto di Ganimede') is a reworking of a well-established classical homoerotic topos — one of the most enduring ones in Western culture.¹² This said, my reading of it will focus on the way in which the Zeus-Ganymede relationship is also a means for Saba to articulate the relationship between father and son, as regards both his parental role vis-à-vis Federico and his relationship with his own father. By so doing, Saba manages to encapsulate in the same myth two sets of concerns, his longing for his father and his desire for other men, in an even more compressed way than is the case with his earlier handling of the story of Qrestes.

The poet thus brilliantly exploits for the purpose of his own mythobiography an enduring ambiguity in the traditional interpretation of the Ganymede story. As Saslow has demonstrated, this myth was already the object of contrasting readings in the Greek world starting with Plato. The *Phaedrus* acknowledges Xenophon's account of the myth as an allegory of the rapturous ascent of the soul towards the divine (Dante's reworking of the rape of Ganymede in *Purgatorio* x. 19–24 derives from this line of exegesis). In the *Laws*, however, Plato warns that the episode was conceived by the Cretans in order to justify their cult of pederasty. Already in classical times, therefore, there existed a level of unease surrounding the myth's blatant homoerotic meaning, which often resulted in attempts to neutralize it through a spiritual interpretation.¹³ The subsequent use of the myth as an episode of spiritual rapture often depended on a conflation of Zeus's role as father of the gods and mankind with the Christian Godhead. The axis Ganymede/Zeus is comparable to Jesus/God the Father, the vertical nature of their mutual positioning (iconographic but also symbolic), signalling a reclaiming of the son by the father into a celestial dimension where the relationship with the mother and the earthly element is marginalized. Images of Ganymede's rape and of Christ's ascent were often interchangeable.¹⁴

With all this in mind, let us approach Saba's poem in full:

Era un giorno fra i giorni. Era sereno
l'Ida; le capre brucavano in pace,
date in guardia a pastore adolescente.
Solo il cane qua e là vagava inquieto.

Sul volto del fanciullo ombre passavano.
Forse troppo severo il re suo padre.
Forse anelava ai compagni
— sull'Ida
erano molti della stessa età,

¹² Also of interest is the fact that, according to Saba's own account, Federico was somehow instrumental in the writing of the poem: 'Federico ha trovato fra le sue vecchie carte, l'abbozzo di una poesia che gli avevo spedita da Trieste. Era proprio un abbozzo. Ma mi sono accorto che in quell'abbozzo si poteva cavare qualcosa; ne ho cavata infatti una delle mie poesie più "belle". L'immagine dell'ultimo verso è presa da un quadro non ricordo più se di Rembrandt o di Rubens, o forse di un altro, nel quale si vede Ganimede rapito dall'aquila che, dallo spavento provato, fa pipì.' See Umberto Saba, *Atroce paese che amo. Lettere famigliari 1945–1953*, ed. by Gianfranca Lavezzi and Rossana Sacconi (Milan: Bompiani, 1987), p. 53.

¹³ See James M. Saslow, *Ganymede in the Renaissance: Homosexuality in Art and Society* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 1–5.

¹⁴ For early modern English examples, see Gregory Woods, *Articulate Flesh: Male Homo-eroticism and Modern Poetry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 28.

che tutti delle stesse gare amanti,
per il bacio di un serto, violenti
si abbracciavano a un coro d'alte grida. —
Bianche in cielo correivano le nubi.

Sempre il cane su e giù fiutava all'erta,
ed il gregge più unito in sé stringevasi.
Ai presagi insensibile, il pastore,
oblioso al suo compito, sognava.

Fulminava dal cielo aquila fosca.
Si sbandavano greggi, si sgolava
il cane.

Già dell'azzurro il fanciullo
bagnava un'ultima volta la terra. (p. 533)

The source mentioned by Saba in relation to this poem is Rembrandt's painting *The Rape of Ganymede* (1635, now in Dresden) from which he takes the closing image of the boy wetting himself while he is being carried upwards, a detail absent from classical literary accounts and which, to my knowledge, appears only in this work. Rembrandt's canvas completes the process of infantilization and de-(homo)sexualization to which representations of Ganymede were subjected in the post-Renaissance period, particularly in Northern Europe.¹⁵ The most beautiful man on earth is here reduced to a fat, screaming child whose physical reaction is appropriate in the face of a majestic and aggressive display of authority. The rape therefore appears as an episode of punishment rather than one of erotic abduction.

Clearly this is not the context in which Saba is operating. The reader of the *Canzoniere* is at this stage familiar with his relationship with Federico and with the ecstatic pronouncements which characterize *Ultime cose*. Saba's Ganymede is not a little boy, but a 'pastore adolescente' who relishes aggressive fights and games with his friends. Urination therefore loses the infantile connotations it has in Rembrandt and is instead more suggestive of orgasm.

Saba's departure from his painterly model is in part accountable by the fact that in 1946 Federico was already a grown man. We also know, however, that, particularly in its early years, their relationship included a powerful master/pupil component, in which the poet had a senior role vis-à-vis the young boy. A letter from Saba to his daughter, Linuccia, written from the Almansi's home in Milan in 1946, gives us an intimate picture of the growing frictions caused by Federico's attempts to assert his independence from Saba's initially undisputed guiding role:

[Federico] vedendo che ho sempre ragione, mi sta odiando. Da qualche tempo (anche questo è storia naturale dell'uomo) egli è preso da un frenetico desiderio di indipendenza. Ho cercato di fargli capire che non c'era nulla di male nel fatto che, quando aveva sedici anni, abbia seguite le orme di un maestro.¹⁶

Even if in *Ultime cose* Saba makes his acceptance of Federico's independent destiny a central feature of their relationship, the story of Ganymede can be seen as allowing

¹⁵ Saslow, pp. 161-96.

¹⁶ Umberto Saba, *La spada d'amore: Lettere scelte 1902-1957*, ed. by Aldo Marcovecchio (Milan: Mondadori, 1983), pp. 162-63.

him to represent a situation in which he possesses his partner in a more complete way than was probably the case in reality.

A greater fluidity of roles surfaces when addressing the father function within the constellation represented by the poem. The verb used to denote the rape is 'fulminare', which plays both with the suddenness and violence of the action and with the thunderbolt ('fulmine') as the prime symbol of Jupiter's paternal majesty. Writing to his friend, Giordana, about his own father's epiphanic appearance to him in the period of the composition of *Autobiografia* (1924), Saba says:

Ma *Preludio e canzonette*, e tutto quello che ho scritto prima, non è che un pallido riflesso vicino ai quindici sonetti di *Autobiografia*. Un fulgore mi sopravvenne dall'alto (non saprei esprimere quello che mi accadde altrimenti) e in uno stato d'animo che mi ha lasciato ammalatissimo, incominciai e terminai il racconto e redenzione della mia vita.¹⁷

The image of a 'fulgore' overwhelming the poet from above is analogous to the 'fulmine' to which Ganymede is prey. Indeed, *Autobiografia* metaphorically represents the elevation of Saba's world into that of his father, a fundamental step towards adulthood which also fostered the poet's acceptance of his homoerotic desires. From this perspective, Saba's late identification with Ganymede is a poignant recapitulation of the nostalgia for a powerful father figure which traverses his earlier writing. The poet's multi-layered use of the myth results in a flexibility in terms of his identification with both Zeus and Ganymede: he is son to his powerful father, but he is also father to Federico.

The mythological framework of *Mediterranee* also makes itself felt in three poems for Federico grouped under the heading 'Tre poesie a Telemaco'. These, however, differ from 'Il ratto di Ganimede' in that they reflect more directly on very intimate moments of the Saba/Almansi relationship. One has the impression in more ways than one that they were meant to be read primarily by Federico and, given the fact that he and Saba were living under the same roof at the time, he might have been the first person to see them. Federico's role as their primary addressee makes this poetic intercourse between the older poet and the young man a crucial feature of their relationship. In a poem from *Epigrafe* (1947-48) Saba will remind Federico of the gift of the 'Tre poesie a Telemaco', as part of a plea for a benevolent acceptance of the poet's latest 'dono' (p. 563). The poem's very title, 'Lettera', brings home the point that texts on Federico not only speak about the relationship Saba enjoyed with him, but are themselves part of the dialogue between the two.

This said, the actual emotions portrayed in 'Tre poesie a Telemaco' point towards elements of crisis in the pederastic pattern, or at least its growing problematization. Not all the disturbing elements originate from within the relationship, however. The first poem, for example, revolves around Saba's paternal anxiety caused by Federico's restless sleep:

Odo, se veglio la notte, lamenti
del ragazzo nel sonno; odo nel sonno
sussulti d'anime in pena. E al risveglio
ogni volto s'oscura. (p. 547)

¹⁷ Saba, *La spada d'amore*, p. 83.

The image of the poet's wakefulness will return in the later poem 'Vecchio e giovane' (*Epigrafe*), with an identical association with the young man's anxiety. It is impossible to say exactly what Saba is alluding to here, and whether these episodes of nocturnal fears are meant to be more than circumstantial. We do know, however, that from 1949 onwards Federico fell prey to an 'irreversibile malattia mentale che lo cancellò progressivamente dalla vita'.¹⁸ 'Quasi una favola' and 'Vecchio e giovane' may therefore represent Saba's first inklings of Federico's mentally disturbed state.

In the second poem, 'Metamorfosi', the element of crisis is, instead, internal to the relationship and involves Federico's need for independence and a sense of adulthood, a topic also addressed by Saba in the letter to Linuccia which I have already quoted:

Ecco il suo volto al mio silenzio farsi
severo, gli occhi a un odio scintillanti.
Non fosse che pietà rispetto accoglie
dei più vecchi di lui, di lui garanti,
su me si getterebbe, io penso, come
sopra un nemico. (p. 548)

The poem's title makes clear how the transition towards a relationship in which Federico could accommodate his sense of adulthood was certainly very fraught, causing both partners a sense of estrangement. Biographical elements clearly contribute to the creation of this new picture. The earlier poems of *Mediterranee* were written while Saba was in Rome, probably without having seen Federico since 1943 when the poet had been forced to go into hiding. They therefore still reflect their pre-war relationship when Federico was a curious and eager boy. But when Saba met Federico again in Milan in 1946 the boy had grown into a young man whose sense of self must also have been altered by his participation in the Resistance. It is this temporal gap, in which Federico had grown without the presence of his *maestro*, which very likely accounts for the atmosphere of friction perceptible in this case.

The third poem presents us with a far more intriguing situation than the previous two. It is called 'Appena una citazione' because it includes lines from a poem by Federico (a collection of his work was published in 1947 with a preface by Saba), followed by Saba's comments on the issue that the quotation addresses:

Dici che lei ti lasciava, che solo
porti la pena d'esser nato. Un'ombra
insegua a lungo per vie solitarie,
a un barlume di luce dei fanali,
per sempre chiusa nella mia memoria.

Penso che i versi sono belli. E forse,
l'ombra inseguendo, troverai un corpo.

Un dolce corpo ti consolerà. (p. 549)

This is a further example of the crisis of the pederastic model in that Saba forces himself to address the question of Federico's adult (hetero)sexual orientation. We know so little about Almansi that it is impossible to say if at any stage he fully reciprocated Saba's feelings. Their post-war published correspondence is scarce and

¹⁸ Saba, *La spada d'amore*, p. 308.

was written when Federico was already mentally ill, while the pre-war letters have been either lost or destroyed.¹⁹ 'Appena una citazione' and letters by Saba refer to Federico's heterosexual affairs, an element of disruption which appears to have been accepted by the poet as a possible outcome of a pederastic relationship since its inception. I am thinking in particular of lines from *Ultime cose* which we have already discussed: 'Ma tu muti conforme la tua legge, | e il mio rimpianto è vano' (p. 499).

The poem's most interesting feature is, however, the quotation of Federico's lines in italics. This makes of 'Appena una citazione' the *locus* where the relationship between Saba and Federico is not only described on the page, but is embedded in the very texture of the poem. It is a unique episode in the *Canzoniere* and a proof of love and of the strength of this intimate dialogue, which does not abate in spite of the elements of crisis revealed by individual poems. In fact the general framework of both *Mediterranee* and the following collection, *Epigrafe*, is the continuing dialogue between the poet and his male muse. The first poem of the former collection opens with the lines

Per una donna lontana e un ragazzo
che mi ascolta, celeste,
ho scritte, io vecchio, queste
poesie (p. 529)

while in *Epigrafe* the poet asserts that he is writing 'per gli uccelli e un amico' (p. 559). Though Saba's muse is never exclusive, Federico is the only stable presence of these years, the only character in the *Canzoniere* who is not only an object of poetry, but the interlocutor of a dialogue based on reciprocity.

The election of a male muse is after all consistent with what seems to me to be the underlying programme of *Mediterranee*. It is in this collection that Saba exploits to the full a tendency which he had inaugurated in his reworking of the myth of Orestes, namely to appropriate classical myths from a homoerotic perspective. His handling of the figures of Orestes, Ganymede, Ulysses, and Telemachus functions as a continuous deconstruction, or rather reconstruction, of the classical tradition from the viewpoint of a homoerotic subject. Saba's cultural appropriations are strongly inflected by his desire for other men, coming to constitute a personal homoerotic canon through which the poet constantly rewrites the story of his life.

4. LAST DIALOGUE

Epigrafe (1947-48) is the only collection of the *Canzoniere* which Saba chose not to publish during his lifetime (it appeared posthumously in 1959). The only other case of self-censorship on this scale in the poet's career concerns *Ernesto* whose sexual and linguistic explicitness made it unpublishable in his lifetime. In *Epigrafe* the 'scandal' is of a different nature, centring on the particularly intimate nature of the poem, 'Vecchio e giovane', which represents the last episode in the ongoing dialogue between Saba and Federico. In view of the extensive portrayal of Federico in *Ultime cose* and *Mediterranee*, it is not immediately clear why Saba felt that this text had to remain in a drawer until after his death. To an extent, the fact that it opens with a disarmingly

¹⁹ See Saba, *La spada d'amore*, p. 308.

sincere declaration of love ('Un vecchio amava un ragazzo'), that the verb 'amare' is also used by the character of Federico in relation to the poet, and that the two partners are clearly in bed together, might have contributed to Saba's concerns. At any rate, 'Vecchio e giovane' has become the most frequently quoted poem of the *Canzoniere's* third volume, and indeed one of the most critically praised of all of Saba's output. In his widely influential *Poeti italiani del Novecento*, Mengaldo closes his selection from the *Canzoniere* with it, singling it out as 'uno dei più alti che Saba, e non lui soltanto nel Novecento, abbia scritto'.²⁰

This means that, contrary to all the poems on Federico we have been analysing up until now (which have simply been ignored by scholars), this one possesses a substantial critical history which I must briefly address before offering my own viewpoint. The nature of the debate surrounding 'Vecchio e giovane' is, in fact, as symptomatic of academic homophobia as is the crude excision of same-sex desire that has been routinely practised on other areas of the *Canzoniere*. On the whole, scholars have attempted to deny that this poem is relevant as a homoerotic text, focusing on it instead as a depiction of Saba's intrapsychic processes, suggesting, in other words, that the boy described is not really, or not principally, the beloved with whom the poet was living at the time, but a projection of Saba's childhood self, a sort of equivalent of 'il piccolo Berto' (Saba's shadow of himself as a child in the homonymous collection).

This tendency was initiated by Debenedetti, who in 1960 (one year after the poems were made public) argued that

la poesia 'Vecchio e giovane' confessa, e teme di non essere riuscita a espiare, un pericoloso, crudele tentativo di esorcismo, per il quale Saba si valse di una persona che gli era cara. Quel tentativo fallito, come non riuscì a scaricarlo dei suoi mali, così nemmeno lo liberò dai rimorsi di averlo intrapreso.²¹

This 'tentativo di esorcismo' is related by Debenedetti to Saba's handling of the figure of Berto, in which the critic likewise sees the poet's doomed attempt to create an external poetic scapegoat onto which he could project his unresolved complexes. The poem is thus only incidentally concerned with Saba's rapport with Federico, its main stress lying on Saba's repeated failure to face up to his inner conflicts in a fully adult way.²²

This interpretation continues to enjoy an unquestioned critical approval. Lavagetto concurs with Debenedetti's use of the concept of exorcism and also states, with regard to the addressee of Saba's poetry from *Ultime cose* to *Epigrafe*, that 'erede di tutte le figure che popolano il *Canzoniere*, il tu è soprattutto la reincarnazione degli adolescenti di Saba e del loro archetipo, il piccolo Berto'.²³ An identical emphasis informs the essay on Saba in the Einaudi *Letteratura italiana* (1995), where Brugnolo argues that

²⁰ P. V. Mengaldo, *Poeti italiani del Novecento* (Milan: Mondadori, 1990), p. 197.

²¹ Giacomo Debenedetti, *Intermezzo* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1972), p. 84.

²² See, for instance, Debenedetti's assertion that "'Vecchio e giovane" non attinge [il suo] segreto da fatti di biografia empirica, aneddotica e, per così dire, immanente di Saba' (*Intermezzo*, p. 83).

²³ Mario Lavagetto, *La gallina di Saba*, rev. edn (Turin: Einaudi, 1989), p. 190 (for the concept of exorcism) and p. 189 (for the quotation).

il giovane, al di là di qualsiasi riferimento strettamente biografico (Federico Almansì), o, viceversa, mitico [...] è il frutto di un angoscioso sdoppiamento: è, di nuovo, l'immagine di Saba bambino.

'Vecchio e giovane' è dunque l'ultimo colloquio di Saba con se stesso, con il proprio 'cuor morituro', e insieme il congedo da un'opera che il poeta sente ormai staccata da sé.²⁴

All these statements typically try to limit, minimize, or discard outright the homoerotic significance of 'Vecchio e giovane', and indeed of the whole of Saba's late poetry. Having analysed in detail the importance of the figure of Federico in the years from *Ultime cose* to *Mediterranee*, we have already gathered sufficient proof to dispel the notion that he can be seen exclusively or primarily as a projection of Saba's psyche. Indeed, scholars would not dare to propose such a *démarche* for any of the *Canzoniere*'s female figures, which are always granted a greater degree of independence from, and irreducibility to, the figure of Saba as poetic protagonist.

I will not deny that 'Vecchio e giovane', from its very title, is inscribed within the dialogue between *senex* and *puer* which is one of the *Canzoniere*'s overarching mythopoeic motifs. But a recognition that the *senex-puer* pair is used by Saba, from his poems on Orestes onwards, to articulate in the same breath intrapsychic and extrapsychic dynamics, cannot be used to argue that this poem has only an abstract relevance, which can afford to leave out of the picture the homoerotic element informing it. My reading will thus assume the irreducibility of Federico's poetic persona, and will relate the issues raised in the text to the dialogue between this persona and Saba which we have followed through *Ultime cose* and *Mediterranee*.

The poem in full reads:

Un vecchio amava un ragazzo. Egli, bimbo
— gatto in vista selvatico — temeva
castighi a occulti pensieri. Ora due
cose nel cuore lasciano un'impronta
dolce: la donna che regola il passo
leggero al tuo la prima volta, e il bimbo
che, al fine tu lo salvi, fiducioso
mette la sua manina nella tua.

Giovinetto tiranno, occhi di cielo,
aperti sopra un abisso, pregava
lunga all'amico suo la ninna nanna.
La ninna nanna era una storia, quale
una rara commossa esperienza
filtrava alla sua ingorda adolescenza:
altro bene, altro male. 'Adesso basta —
diceva a un tratto; — spegniamo, dormiamo.'
E si voltava contro il muro. 'T'amo —
dopo un silenzio aggiungeva — tu buono
sempre con me, col tuo bambino.' E subito
sprofondava in un sonno inquieto. Il vecchio,
con gli occhi aperti, non dormiva più.

Oblioso, insensibile, parvenza
d'angelo ancora. Nella tua impazienza,
cuore, non accusarlo. Pensa: È solo;

²⁴ Brugnolo, p. 518.

ha un compito difficile; ha la vita
non dietro, ma dinanzi a sé. Tu affretta,
se puoi, tua morte. O non pensarci più. (p. 560)

Even by the standards of the fraught situation depicted in the 'Tre poesie a Telemaco', this text reveals an even deeper crisis, which will mark the disappearance of Federico from Saba's world. From the start, the boy's characterization is violently polarized (he is a 'bimbo [...] fiducioso' but also a 'giovinetto tiranno', with 'occhi di cielo' looking at 'un abisso'), and this latent conflict is acted out in the micro-drama described in the second stanza, where Federico first begs Saba for a 'ninna nanna', only to refuse it abruptly and to turn his back on his partner, who is left alone and restless in the dark.

What exactly is the content of this micro-drama? It is, I would argue, a specifically erotic content, in the sense that it centres on Saba's rejection *qua* lover by Federico, rather than on any defeat of a broader psychological nature. Federico asks Saba for a 'ninna nanna', i.e. he frames the relationship between himself and the poet as that between a child and a parent. The 'ninna nanna' is not meant to be the exalted talk of a lover, but the soothing lullaby that puts the infant to sleep. Saba, at least initially, seems to be comfortable with this position, since in the first stanza he has depicted himself in a parental role ('il bimbo | che, al fine tu lo salvi, fiducioso | mette la sua manina nella tua'). But what slips out of his mouth instead of a simple lullaby is a whole 'storia' filtered by a 'rara commossa esperienza', the talk of a lover rather than that of a caring guardian. His intensity and emotional investment appear disproportionate, or simply on another plane, compared with what Federico had originally asked for. Hence the latter's aggressive reaction, and Saba's laconic admission of the incommensurable sense of otherness existing between their worlds ('altro bene | altro male').

The poem thus reveals the fragility of the double role, parental and erotic, that Saba had carved out for himself. The two functions had already appeared to cause a degree of conflict in 'Tre poesie a Telemaco', but here the absence of any feeling of a specifically (homo)erotic nature from Federico (as opposed to a more general kind of filial affection) is more painfully prominent. Significantly, when the boy uses the verb 'amare' in relation to Saba, he does so from the position of son, not lover ('T'amo | [...] tu buono sempre con me, col tuo bambino'). I am therefore tempted to suggest that the main reason why Saba decided not to publish this poem was because it addresses the level of self-deception he had to sustain in order to keep the illusion that he had found in Federico *both* a friend *and* a lover. From the boy's perspective this was very likely a problematic aspect from the start, and 'Vecchio e giovane' meditates on and exposes the very ambiguity upon which their relationship was built.

On the other hand, it is equally possible to explain the disintegration of their relationship by taking external factors into account. I have mentioned that in 1949 Federico was committed to a mental institution where he eventually died in 1979 and have suggested that the first of the 'Tre poesie a Telemaco' might express Saba's inklings of the young man's deteriorating mental state (these are unambiguously voiced in his letters from 1946 onward).²⁵ There, Saba had written:

²⁵ See the letters to Lina (Milan, 13.6.46) and Linuccia (Trieste, 14.5.47 and 20.5.47) in Saba, *Atroce paese che amo*, pp. 65, 98, and 100 respectively.

Odo, se veglio la notte, lamenti
del ragazzo nel sonno; odo nel sonno
sussulti d'anime in pena. (p. 547)

In 'Vecchio e giovane' the boy's refusal to listen to Saba's story results in a similar restless sleep ('E subito | sprofondava in un sonno inquieto'). Federico's gesture can therefore be seen, rather than as expressing an act of independence and/or informed rejection, as the compulsive withdrawal of an already mentally ill person. Indeed, his initial request for a lullaby is connected with a fear of falling asleep on his own ('temeva | castighi a occulti pensieri'), so that Saba's overreaction can be seen as appropriate, or at least related to, Federico's needy mental condition.

Whatever the exact reasons why Federico disappeared from Saba's life, his departure represented a blow from which the poet never recovered: he called it a 'colpo mortale'.²⁶ The last poem of the collection (originally meant by Saba to be the last of the *Canzoniere*) is a couplet which testifies to a mood of hopelessness and isolation and also, for the first time in his career, to a diminished sense of the worth of poetic activity: 'Parlavo vivo a un popolo di morti. | Morto alloro rifiuto e chiedo oblio' (p. 564). Now that Federico's prodigies have come to an end, the desire to sink into oblivion surfaces again and looms large in Saba's last years.

After *Epigrafe* he would write three more collections, *Uccelli* (1948), *Quasi un racconto* (1951), and *Sei poesie della vecchiaia* (1953-54), which, however, stand in relation to the overall narrative of the *Canzoniere* in a less cohesive way than the previous ones. If we look at their dates, we notice that, for the first time in the *Canzoniere*, the chronology is not continuous, i.e. there are events in Saba's life that his poetry does not attempt to cover. In this period, as well as Federico's disappearance, Saba experienced Lina's prolonged sickness and eventual death, continuous poverty, and extremely bad health. His letters reveal a profound sense of despair, and further testify to the sense of detachment from poetry-making hinted at in the last lines of *Epigrafe*.²⁷

It is with *Epigrafe* that I will close my analysis, namely the last collection which is still an integral part of the narrative of the *Canzoniere* and of the homoerotic universe we have explored. With *Epigrafe* Saba says the last word on a passion which, from an initially unexpected miracle, established itself in the course of fifteen years as the driving force of his late poetry. Saba's poems for Federico represent a very striking expansion of the *Canzoniere*'s already diverse homoerotic dimension. They add to his mythobiography the experience of a long-standing relationship with another male, something that apart from his adolescent experiences had surfaced only in a sublimated and phantasmatic way in the rest of his life. It is for Federico that Saba writes his most honest, intimate, and compelling body of homoerotic poetry, ranging from the elated exclamations of love in *Ultime cose*, through the richness of the mythical re-workings of *Mediterranee*, to the final and sober solemnity of *Epigrafe*.

5. POETRY AND HOMOEROTICISM IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY ITALIAN LITERATURE

I would like to conclude with a few observations aimed at broadening the framework of our discussion, and suggesting some of the wider issues affected by the path we

²⁶ Saba, *La spada d'amore*, p. 308.

²⁷ See the letter to Nora Baldi (Gorizia, 30.1.57) in Saba, *Atroce paese che amo*, p. 283.

have followed. To recognize Saba as a leading homoerotic voice means more than just doing justice to a major focus of his inspiration and poetry. It also implies, in my view, the beginning of a second stage in the mapping of the homoerotic element in twentieth-century Italian literature. Our current understanding of this nexus is limited by the fact that scholarship published in Italy on the male same-sex presence in the *Novecento* has, up to now, focused on prose.²⁸ The central datum emerging from these studies is that of a historical delay of Italian culture in bringing homoeroticism into literary discourse. Francesco Gnerre has summed up this situation in his poignantly titled *L'eroe negato*:

anche la letteratura che pure si caratterizza come eversione di linguaggi e di valori codificati, come sperimentazione di situazioni e di rapporti interpersonali che vanno oltre la Norma, che sperimenta l'utopia del possibile, *almeno fino agli anni Sessanta* raramente ha osato rappresentare amori omosessuali, e quando qualche scrittore lo ha fatto ha dovuto fare i conti con enormi e spesso insormontabili problemi di censura e autocensura o con un indifferente silenzio, spesso più oltraggioso della stessa condanna.²⁹

When we turn to the most recent contribution to this debate, the collective volume *Queer Italia*, this overall picture is indirectly confirmed by the fact that the articles focusing on twentieth-century Italian fiction deal with works either written in the decade following the war (in which case they were inevitably published years later or even posthumously), or dating from the 1960s onwards.³⁰

Cestaro, in his introduction, rightly reminds us that 'a frank homoeroticism finds expression in some of Italy's most celebrated modern poets, from the unabashed Sandro Penna (1906–1977) through Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975) to Dario Bellezza (1944–1996)', at the same time stressing how 'twentieth-century narrative and in particular the bourgeois novel have proven a more problematic setting for homosocial desire'.³¹ Regrettably though, no essay in the collection concerns itself with poetic production. It is a pity, since I think that a reassessment of the role played by poetry in twentieth-century Italy in the articulation of a homoerotic subjectivity would turn what appears to be an Italian *delay* into an Italian *anomaly*. The pioneering work of Saba, together with that of Penna, Pasolini, and Bellezza, can be read as a continuous tradition of homoerotic writing which can only be compared in scope and chronological amplitude to poetry written in English both in Britain and in America (including W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Hart Crane, Allen Ginsberg, Thom Gunn, and Gregory Woods). Such a strong homoerotic presence in the national poetic landscape, remarkable as it is, is not even limited to the four 'canonical' writers, since their influence has continued to make itself felt in the Roman school of countercultural queer poetry of the 1970s (I am thinking for instance of the names of Massimo Consoli,

²⁸ Gnerre and Gargano.

²⁹ Gnerre, p. 20. My emphasis.

³⁰ See William Van Watson; Sergio Parussa, 'Reluctantly Queer: In Search of the Homoerotic Novel in Twentieth-Century Italian Fiction', pp. 173–86; Derek Duncan, 'Secret Wounds: The Bodies of Fascism in Giorgio Bassani's *Dietro la porta*', pp. 187–206; Marco Pustianaz, 'Transitive Gender and Queer Performativity in the Novels of Mario Mieli and Vittorio Pescatori', pp. 207–25.

³¹ Cestaro, p. 9.

Renzo Paris, and Antonio Veneziani),³² as well as in the work of two leading gay voices which have emerged since the 1980s, Biagio Arixì and Elio Pecora.³³

It is thus possible to claim that the role played in other literatures by the novel in negotiating a sense of same-sex identity, has been fulfilled in Italy for most of the twentieth century by poetry. As for the reasons that may have contributed to this anomaly, the issue is clearly too complex to be addressed in this article. It is to be hoped, however, that besides paving the way for the recognition of the *Canzoniere* as a central homoerotic document of the *Novecento*, this study will also contribute to the establishment of Italian poetry as one of the fields where the expression of love and desire between men has flourished.³⁴

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³² See Luciano M. Consoli, *Viva l'omosessualità. Poesie, prefazione di Elio Pecora*, special edition of *Ompo*, 16 (1976), and Antonio Veneziani, *Brown Sugar. Poesie sull'eroina, con una nota di Dario Bellezza e una postfazione di Renzo Paris* (Rome: Castelvechi, 1998). Paris and Veneziani are also editors of the volume, *L'amicizia amorosa. Antologia della poesia omosessuale italiana dal XIII secolo a oggi* (Milan: Gammalibri, 1982). Significantly, the expression 'amicizia amorosa' is taken from a homoerotic text by Saba (Sonnet 6 from *Autobiografia*, p. 260).

³³ Biagio Arixì, *Cayba d'amor. Poesie scelte (1978-2000)* (Venice: Edizioni del Leone, 2001); Elio Pecora, *Poesie 1975-1995* (Rome: Empiria, 1997).

³⁴ For a preliminary treatment of the homoerotic tradition in Italian poetry, see Luca Baldoni, "L'uccello alto nella notte." Spazio e corpo (omo)erotico della poesia italiana del Novecento', forthcoming in *The Italianist*, 25, 2 (2005).