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Empires within and without: the conquest of the self and the Florentine avant-garde

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This article examines the relationship of the young Giovanni Papini to the notion of imperialism. The period of Papini's intellectual formation was a time of intense debate among the Italian intelligentsia concerning imperialism and its relationship to nation and culture. He joined the conversation with a distinctive interpretation of the idea, one that could at once make him heir apparent to the tradition of Umbertian nationalism, while also rejecting the positivist slant of his forebears. William James's porous conception of the subject and Papini's sense of his own fragmented subjectivity provided the ground for a psychological understanding of imperialism: one that relied on knowledge and appreciation, which translated into literature at the individual level, and into culture at that of the nation. Ultimately, however, disappointments abroad, the demands of nationalist politics, and Papini's own avant-garde posture, led him to abandon his intellectual empire in favour of a more concrete one.

Keywords: avant-garde; Giovanni Papini; imperialism; modern Italy; philosophy; Romanticism.

Introduction

In 1972, Mario Isnenghi deplored the limited and one-sided reception accorded to Papini (1881–1956), which he found often 'construct[ed] out of this polyhedric and contradictory intellectual and literary figure an image diminished and unilateral, to the convenience of one particular group: polemical idol or edifying symbol' (1972, 5).[1]

Forty-five years later, following the historical unbracketing of the Fascist regime and a reassessment of the role of culture in its emergence, the Florentine and his many ventures have received ample editorial and critical attention, both in Italy and abroad. Yet identifying a common thread in this polyhedric and contradictory career is no easy task. Papini himself was very aware of the motley and mercurial character of his thought: proclamations, repudiations and conversions, all cannily documented in his literary output, served throughout his life to both renew and unify his literary persona.

In this article, by examining Papini's early project of an 'intellectual Empire over all the essences of the universe' as it is outlined in his first article for *Leonardo* (Gian Falco 1903), I seek to unearth a universalist strand within his thought, which from the start existed in tension with his political aspirations and agonistic rhetoric. Identifying the sources and the legacies of this imperialism of the spirit, I will show how his successes in Italy and his failures abroad led him to fall back on the more tangible vision of nationalism.

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Il Marzocco

From unification onward, massive emigration, the *Mezzogiorno* problem and Italy's precarious position as Europe's last great power, all conspired to make the colonial question a pressing one (Ben-Ghiat 2007). Before even the annexation of Rome, Italian commercial interests had settled in Assab (today Eritrea), an enclave that would come under state control in 1882. Two years before, the lukewarm Cairoli government had fallen after France thwarted Italian claims over Tunisia. From its footing on the Red Sea, Italy would attempt the conquest of Ethiopia for the next 15 years, suffering two resounding defeats at the hands of Africa's last sovereign army, first in Dogali in 1887, and most dramatically in Adwa on 1 March 1896. This second humiliation, depriving the state of half its standing army and of an international prestige already in short supply, was to remain an enduring blight on the young nation's self-image.

The year 1896 also saw the founding in Florence of a new literary weekly, *Il Marzocco*: with contributors ranging from Serao and Pascoli to Marinetti and Pirandello, the journal would play a key role for decades to come in introducing modern ideas and European authors to Italian culture. Six weeks before the Adwa defeat, the first issue had declared its hostility to all 'creation, literary or more generally artistic, which does not spring from a quest for the purest beauty' (*Il Marzocco* 1896*b*). Yet in its sixth issue, a pompous article entitled 'Abba Carima', after the monastery standing near the Adwa battlefield, appeared in the journal. It voiced the lament of a suffering nation whose humiliating undoing was reconstrued as a diluvian trial, a 'calamity' visited not by an African army but by an 'unknown and ferocious divinity, a cruel fate'. The anonymous author, in all likelihood Enrico Corradini (De Taeye-Henen 1973, 15), then sought in the best Tennysonian tradition to turn the debacle into a spiritual victory, a proof of Italy's resilience that could 'light up some superb enthusiasm' in the heart of its people (*Il Marzocco* 1896*a*). Corradini, a poet and playwright of limited success, defended at the time a militantly bourgeois nationalism, and would go on to found in 1910 the *Associazione Nazionalista Italiana*, Italy's first nationalist party and a key contributor to the later collapse of its parliamentary regime.

In 1897, at the initiative of Corradini, now the journal's editor-in-chief, a Genovese jurist named Mario Morasso published in *Il Marzocco* an attack on the decadent aloofness and cosmopolitan taste of the Italian literati (Morasso 1897a), soon followed by a two-part article calling on the young to lead the Italian bourgeoisie in the coming all-out class war (Morasso 1897b). Under Morasso's second text, Corradini conceded in a footnote that 'the political and social views expressed by the author are not shared by all of us'. The article was not only an attack on the journal's core programme of *ars gratia artis*, but was also bound to stir discord among its politically misaligned founders. And indeed, two of the journal's founding members soon published hostile retorts to Morasso's articles: first, Adolfo Orvieto, who would succeed Corradini at the helm of the journal in 1900 (Orvieto 1897) and soon after, Diego Garoglio, a left-leaning teacher and poet based in Florence (Garoglio 1897).

L'ideale imperialista

At the twilight of the liberal era, Corradini would recall how Adwa had converted him from literature to politics (Drake 1980, 205–206). After the Second World War, Papini would write that, when first meeting him in 1903, he was already familiar with Corradini's 'brusque and manly, very beautiful' article on the defeat (Papini 1948, 131).[2]

In the same essay, Papini claims to have taken an immediate liking to the man. This seems unlikely given that Papini's first encounter with the milieu of *Il Marzocco* came through his

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formative friendship with Diego Garoglio, for a time his teacher at the *scuola normale* on Via San Gallo in Florence. In 1900 a teenage Papini notes approvingly in his diary that Garoglio shared his dislike for Morasso, full of Dannunzian verses and Lombrosian positivism, trying to resurrect 'the old instincts of the past' whereas Papini and Garoglio, 'individualists who look to the future, want to foster superior qualities in the greatest number' (Papini 1981, 15).

In those same years, Papini also struck a close and enduring friendship with fellow student Giuseppe Prezzolini. Shortly after his father's death in October 1902, Papini writes excitedly to his friend, then in France to hear Bergson, about his first article for *Leonardo*, the new journal he is putting together, offering to forward the relevant issue: it is a response 'full to the brim of philosophical ingenuity and of provincial contradictions' (Papini and Prezzolini 2003, 178) to an article published in *Il Marzocco*, which he offers to forward. In that same issue Prezzolini would have found Corradini's appraisal, enthusiastic as ever, of Morasso's latest book *L'imperialismo artistico* (Corradini 1902). A month later, commenting on his friend's decision on how to position their new journal with regard to the debate arising from Morasso's text, Prezzolini would write: 'You do well not to miss out on an occasion to refute those people, who share some of our sympathies, but who for this very reason are all the worthier adversaries' (Papini and Prezzolini 2003, 225).

Morasso's new book returned to the theme of his *Marzocco* articles, urging that the new generation abandon the formalist, mystical and nostalgic fantasies of symbolism, to focus instead on glorifying an Italian empire that would soon outdo all decadent imaginings in actual greatness and beauty (Morasso 1903). Review copies did circulate at the time, but from the structure of his article, Papini seems acquainted only with the praises published by Corradini.[3] Though he and Prezzolini were certainly sympathetic to their elder's attempt at blurring the distinction between art and life, Morasso's imperialist realism remained principally a grand synthesis of positivist jargon and Byzantine nostalgia, both aspects of the *fine secolo* which they explicitly endeavoured to leave behind.

'L'ideale imperialista', the riposte of January 1903 by Papini (writing as Gian Falco), portrays imperialism as a mindset and a philosophy independent from its political or economic expression: driven by *thymos* and desire, and departing from the bourgeois 'democratic, humanitarian, Christian or christianising' doxa, it can take many forms – concrete and pragmatic in Chamberlain's England, theoretical and negative in Nietzsche's Germany, or aesthetic and literary in the Italy of Corradini and Morasso. The proposal of these two fell short because they could only conceive of brute force and barbaric violence to fulfil Italy's destiny: art and philosophy were left to glorify and celebrate the achievements of generals and dictators, when they ought to have occupied centre-stage. The soldierly and materialistic vision of Corradini and Morasso was not modern because it failed to recognise that 'the path of mankind moves from the strength of muscle to that of the spirit, from external to internal action, from the axe that kills to the thought that enlightens'. It even contradicted their claims to aristocratic individualism, because, all politics involving compromise, 'every contact between unequals tends toward levelling' (Gian Falco 1903). As we saw, the modern individualist sought instead to foster 'superior qualities in the greatest number' (Papini 1981, 15). True individualism is creative, 'deeper and stronger' and rather aspires to 'an intellectual Empire over all the essences of the universe'.

His criticisms, Papini concludes, should not be taken as 'a sign of hostility' but rather as 'a necessary distinction' (Gian Falco 1903). These caveats did not go unheeded, since Corradini, when later that year he began publishing his nationalist weekly *Il Regno*, made the 22-year-old Papini its editor-in-chief (Papini 1948, 133). Those developments help to explain how Delia Frigessi and others could overlook Papini's attacks on imperialism and write that '[b]etween the

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"brutal and equivocal dream of the domination of men" of Corradini, and the Papinian yearning for an "intellectual Empire over all the essences of the universe", there is no deep-rooted divergence' (Frigessi 1979, 15). Below I will seek to retrieve this Papinian intellectual Empire, to show how it fitted into his ever-changing projects, and how it came to be supplanted.

Romantic imperialism

Much like *Il Marzocco*, Papini's *Leonardo* would establish its authority in the peninsula by introducing the Italian public to modern European culture. To those like him familiar with the Parisian literary scene, Morasso's rejection of symbolism in favour of a synthesis of positivism, nationalism and realism, would have seemed a stale variation on the themes of the royalist mass-movement *Action Française* (Décaudin 2003, 109). Though Charles Maurras, its chief theorist, was at best ambivalent with regard to imperialism (Maurras 1921, 156–157), Morasso's embrace of *politique d'abord* placed him unambiguously under his considerable influence in Italy (Musiedlak 2009).

Maurras and his movement had gathered a number of prominent authors in an unending polemic against Romanticism, which stood in the cultural sphere for Teutonism, Protestantism and narcissism (Jones 1930). Among the key contributors to this literary crusade was the Germanist Ernest Seillière, who, at the time *Leonardo* printed Papini's 'L'ideale imperialista', published the first instalment of his multi-volume diagnosis of the romantic sickness in European thought (Seillière 1903). If years later T. S. Eliot could still wonder 'to what extent Romanticism is incorporate in Imperialism' (Eliot 1997, 18), for Seillière the answer was clear: inasmuch as it is grounded in mysticism, egotism and instinct (Estève 1913). Though there is no sign that Papini was familiar with his work, the romantic imperialism Seillière indicts – solipsistic and pathologically mystical – could have served as a blueprint for Papini's own project.[4]

Thus Papini, writing as Gian Falco in *Leonardo*, welcomed the distinction between mature and disciplined classicism on the one hand, and self-absorbed, irrational Romanticism on the other, as propounded by Maurras and others at the time:

> *The universe represents the product of the constant and universal opposition of the classical principle and of the romantic principle, of the unique and of the diverse*. I call *classical* all that is universal, unitary, passive – and *romantic* all that is personal, particular, active. (Gian Falco 1905, emphasis in original)

Unlike them, however, he sided with the romantic enemy, and went on to claim that '[p]assing from metaphysics to action interrupts the conflicts and at the same time gives a new ideal to liberated man, in the shape of Romanticism' (Gian Falco 1905).

Varieties of imperialism

No matter how worthy their 'fundamental polemic against the present in the name of the future' (Corradini 1902, 2), Morasso and Corradini's brand of authoritarian nationalism remained, for Papini and Prezzolini, both derivative and mired in philistine materialism. A few years earlier, Gabriel Tarde had proposed a remedy to French military vicissitudes, which could have proved more congenial to those attentive readers:

> Must it be through war that our ascendency and expansion take place? I do not believe so. The Popes are not the only ones whose spiritual power can expand while their temporal power retracts or wanes. Certain nations too have a spiritual power. … Will, in turn, this aerial empire of poetry and thought be our last refuge? (Tarde 1898)

Imperialism could be conceived along an axis stretching between cultural influence and military might, from 'the axe that kills to the thought that enlightens' as Papini puts it. Whereas the military

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expansion favoured by Corradini and his followers led to the fraught political choice between overseas colonialism and continental irredentism, cultural expansion proved considerably more flexible: years later, Ciarlantini (1925, cited in Gennaro 2012, 43), a proponent of Fascist cultural imperialism, would expand on the notion in some detail: 'I think … that the first element of our expansion will have to be … the spiritual element which comprises all the forms of our creative activity, from arts to mathematics, from science to philosophy.'

Cultural and material expansion, then, were not mutually exclusive; similarly, a second distinction between individual and collective imperialism did not need to amount to an opposition: for Édouard Rod (Rod 1907, 401), one of Seillière's exegetes, '[t]he trees of a forest, when they suffocate each other in their shade of timid vegetation, are individual imperialists: the forest itself practises collective imperialism, when it disperses its seeds over neighbouring colonies.' Elsewhere, Rod elaborates:

> [I]t is rare that individuals feel strong enough to practise [individual imperialism], and even the strongest only practise it in collaboration with the collectivities to which they belong. Such is the case of heroes … such is also that of artists. (Rod 1907, 395)

Heroic art, certainly, was more congenial to the Papinian character: it seemed to allow greater freedom, demand fewer compromises and present fewer opportunities to be suffocated by the forest. Whereas Corradini and Morasso stood for military and collective conquest, Papini's romantic imperialism emphasised the importance of cultural expansion, and gave the individual precedence over the collective.

Revolt against positivism

Papini's rejection of 'universal, unitary, passive' classicism is best understood in the context of his 'revolt against positivism' (Hughes 1958, 34). To him this was the philosophical correlate to classicism, an ideology whose 'kingdom of unity would be the kingdom of calm, of repose, of immobility, of death' (Papini 1906b, 161). Papini owed some of his hostility to positivism and most of his militant pluralism to William James.[5] James's radical empiricism endeavoured to turn the principled scepticism at the heart of positivism against its own monistic presuppositions: '*Prima facie* the world is a pluralism … and there may be in the whole universe no one point of view extant from which this would not be found to be the case' (James 2012, viii, emphasis in original). For Prezzolini and most of all for Papini, this commitment to pluralism seemed in part to justify the meandering twists and turns of their self-taught intellectual trajectory, as if multiplying partial viewpoints to gain some perspective. Papini's 'furious and disorderly reading' (Papini 1913, 13) spawned numerous grandiose but aborted projects and caused him lasting anxiety: 'What to think? Where to go? … Poet or Philosopher? Magician? Hermit? Suicide? I am in a forest: the voices are infinite' (Papini and Prezzolini 2003, 203–208).

Janice Ho (2011, 59) has noted that 'modernism's imagination of the interior self – fragmentary, psychologically fragile, permeable by external forces, and frequently intersubjective – offers a model of consciousness that differs considerably from the rational and free-willed subject posited by liberalism'. Both Papini and James, though for very different reasons, were committed to restoring to the subject its autonomy and integrity. The latter's struggle to do so he described as *The Rivalry and the Conflict of the Different Selves*:

> Not that I would not, if I could, be both handsome and fat and well dressed, and a great athlete, and make a million a year, be a wit, a bon-vivant, and a lady-killer, as well as a philosopher; a philanthropist, statesman, warrior, and African explorer, as well as a 'tone-poet' and saint. But the thing is simply impossible … to make any one of them actual, the rest must more or less be suppressed. (James 1890, 309–310).

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Elsewhere, James notes that '[n]ot only the people but the places and things I know enlarge my Self in a sort of metaphoric social way' (James 1890, 291). But such expansion is not without risk, for '[n]either threats nor pleadings can move a man unless they touch some one of his potential or actual selves' (James 1890, 311): it places the individual at the mercy of the world, and of their own intellectual profligacy. The 'man of sensibility in many directions, who finds more difficulty than is common in keeping his spiritual house in order' would descend into psychosis if he failed to achieve 'the straightening out and unifying of the inner self' (James 1985, 169–170).

James identified two typical reactions to this quandary of the expanded self. One we might term the *autonomous individual*, attempted by 'narrowing and at the same time solidifying [their] Self to make it invulnerable …. Thus may a certain absoluteness and definiteness in the outline of my Me console me for the smallness of its content' (James 1890, 312–313). The other's decentred participation proceeds instead by 'way of expansion and inclusion. The outline of their self often gets uncertain enough, but for this the spread of its content more than atones'. We may call them *mystics*, as they

> feel a sort of delicate rapture in thinking that … they yet are integral parts of the whole of this brave world, have a fellow's share in the strength of the dray-horses, the happiness of the young people, the wisdom of the wise ones, and are not altogether without part or lot in the good fortunes of the Vanderbilts and the Hohenzollerns themselves. (James 1890, 313)

Crisis of subjectivity

Despite the fact that Papini's difficulties in keeping 'his spiritual house in order' dogged him for at least the next 15 years, making his life 'a succession of enormous ambitions and perpetual renunciations and defeats' (Papini 1913, 31), his writings offer little in the way of a theory of the subject. The most interesting elaborations of his views on this question are to be found in his fiction.

In the first two books, *Il Tragico Quotidiano* (1906) and *Il Pilota Cieco* (1907), Papini introduced an 'internalised fantastic' that dramatises his own fragmented subjectivity by collapsing the divide between introspection and the world of day-to-day experience (Phelps 1923, 835). In 'Due immagini in una vasca', for example, Papini portrays his encounter, while gazing into a basin, with the reflection of his own younger self. Nostalgic at first, he soon finds this 'ridiculous and ignorant boy' irritating, and after a day or two, brings him back to the pond:

> I turned suddenly, grabbed my past self by the shoulders, and forced his face in the water, where his image was reflected. I shoved his head under the water and held it immobile with all the energy of exasperated hatred. (Papini 1907, 5–16)

In part because these stories were more readily welcomed abroad than his philosophy, but also because they displayed a fragmented and insecure persona, Papini remained ambivalent about them, noting in the preface to the third and final collection that he 'had promised [himself] – and others as well – not to write any more tales of this kind' (Papini 1912, 5).

Where Corradini's imperialism was martial and collective, Papini's was personal and cultural. But even within this project, we may distinguish two moments: one concerns the artist's expansion of his public and authority, and here Papini's models are poet laureate Petrarch (Papini 1913, 32–33), or the *sacer vates* Carducci and D'Annunzio. Yet Papini's 'intellectual Empire over all the essences of the universe' points to a second, complementary form of conquest: his aspiration to 'only knowing, knowing, knowing everything' (Papini 1913, 17) is an attempt, 'in a sort of metaphoric social way', to feel that delicate rapture of the Jamesian mystic. Such metaphoric participation is distinct from, but a precondition to, the expansion of the artist's audience. The Papinian Renaissance man, perpetually at risk of overextension, had to seek through personal discipline '[t]he greatest of empires,' that is, 'the empire over one's self' (Syrius 1856, 74).

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Imperialism of the spirit

Papini's use of the *doppelgänger* to portray a fragmented subjectivity was far from unique: his Viennese contemporary Hugo von Hofmannsthal made frequent use of the device, but his famous 'Letter from Lord Chandos' (Hofmannsthal 2007, 89), written in 1902 like 'L'ideale imperialista', takes instead the form of a missive sent by the fictional seventeenth-century playwright Philip Chandos to the godfather of empiricism, Francis Bacon. Having abandoned all learned and literary pursuit, Chandos describes how, for two years, he has lost any sense of the coherence of world and self. Once, 'all of existence appeared to be one great unity: there seemed no contradiction between the spiritual and the corporeal world … and in all Nature [he] was conscious of [him]self'. But now, having reached an 'extreme state of despondency and impotence', mundane and religious meanings elude him, and words disintegrate in his mouth 'like mouldy mushrooms'.

Jacques Le Rider has offered a compelling reading of Chandos and Hofmannsthal's crisis, which might clarify Papini's contemporary experience. Unlike that of William James, the radical empiricism of Hofmannsthal's teacher Ernst Mach not only stripped objects and ideas of any substance of their own, leaving them as complexes of sensations circulating in abstract space, but went so far as to assert that the subject itself had no substance: it was a 'bundle of sensations' cut from the very same stuff as the rest of the world, only accidentally dense and stable enough to acquire a misguided sense of its own permanence (Banks 2014, 217).

The Machian self, no more than a fiction, caused great anxieties in Austrian and European thought, as its disappearance was taken to herald the collapse of the old order. As Le Rider notes, already in Hofmannsthal's diary of 1894–1895 this also meant that '[e]verything which is, is; being and meaning are the same thing; consequently, all being is symbol' (Hofmannsthal cited in Le Rider 1993, 49). For those moved like him and Papini by mystical longings, this was also an opportunity to collapse the division between subject and object: 'Hofmannsthal's originality … lies in the surprising conversion which allows the "deconstructed" ego, broken down into complexes of sensations, to reconstitute itself in a mystical impulse by reconstructing the world made available to the ego as symbol' (Le Rider 1993, 49). The self might have been unretrievable, but its dislocation allowed for an immediate and ineffable intimacy with the real: an immanent mysticism

> originally felt as a loss and a catastrophe because it went against all preconceived notions, [it] actually dissipates the substantialist illusions of language which make an artificial separation between the ego and the world, whereas, deep down, subject and object are indivisible. (Le Rider 1993, 50)

António Sousa Ribeiro (2007, 561–572) has since developed Le Rider's insights, suggesting that this mystical unification of world and self, in which Hofmannsthal finds a solution to the fragmentation of the ego, should be read in relation to the slow collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire: as briefly proposed by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism*, he finds that modernist writing positions itself as the successor to empire, first through the reformulation of disparate historical and geographical sources, and second through

> the irony of a form that draws attention to itself as substituting art and its creation for the once-possible synthesis of world empires. When you can no longer assume that Britannia will rule the waves forever, you have to reconceive reality as something that can be held together by you the artist, in history rather than in geography. (Said 1994, 229)

Sousa Ribeiro writes that Hofmannsthal finds in writing a solution to both the crisis of empire, and to that of his own subjectivity, allowing for 'the lost unity of the self' to survive 'in the ability of the aesthetic subject to stage his own crisis of identity' (Sousa Ribeiro 2007, 562).

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In terms of our typology, the Habsburg failure at collective and military domination is replaced by what Hofmannsthal calls a 'spiritual imperialism' (Hofmannsthal 2011). This stands simultaneously for a collective cultural imperialism, and for the author's self, retrieved through his identification with the world unified by Austrian culture. In the case of Hofmannsthal as in that of the young Papini, this 'intellectual Empire', as Sousa Ribeiro writes (2007, 562–567), is 'not intent on domination; its essential feature, on the contrary, is the ability to assimilate and to mediate', resulting in a 'peculiar brand of nationalistic cosmopolitanism'.

Apotheosis and multitudes

It is clear that for Papini Italy's 'aesthetic and literary' mission to Europe shares much with Hofmannsthal's spiritual imperialism, as attested by his incessant efforts to promote Italian culture abroad (Giladi 2013), even as his modernist credentials at home depended largely on his access to French and American culture.

A key theme in Papini's writings of the period is that of *uomo-Dio*, central to the *Leonardo* period, eclipsed after the publication of *Un uomo finito* in 1913 (Papini 1913, 167–177), but returning purified in the *Storia di Cristo* of 1921 (Papini 1921, 137–138). Papini never delivered the book on the subject he advertised as imminent in many of his works, but an introduction by Prezzolini (Giuliano il Sofista 1903), and the book's 'enlarged index' (Papini 1906a), both published in *Leonardo*, give us a clear enough picture of Papini's idiosyncratic mysticism. He essentially turns mysticism on its head, and instead of advocating the dissolution of the subject into God or the world through self-negation, he proposes to dissolve the world into the self. In 1906 he writes: 'the method of renunciation … for nearly all men leads to failure and it appears necessary to find another. It is this other I propose. That of *omnipotence*' (Papini 1906a, 8, emphasis in original). Whatever the order of the process, his proposed synthesis of subject and object remain strikingly similar to that identified by Le Rider in Hofmannsthal. He adds:

> The world will be like a greater body, of which man will be the soul and things will obey him like the limbs obey the soul. Man will also be world and the world will be a part of man. (Papini 1906a, 9)

It is unclear whether Papini ever considered Ernst Mach 'with enormous respect' (Albertazzi 2006, 30), as Franz Brentano assured Mach in 1908: he insisted on his mysticism somehow preserving the self, and monism remained anathema. Papini's taste for the frontier spirit made William James a far better fit. In 1948 he would write, concerning James:

> [M]y intellectual cursus was always linked in some sense to the homeland of my great friend. The first poet to illuminate my adolescence was Walt Whitman, the first narrator I took as a model for my very first fantastic tales was Edgar Poe, my first writing in the history of philosophy was published in *The Monist* of Chicago; among the masters of my inquiring youth were Emerson and William James. (Papini 1948, 201)

Such a convenient reminder, in the breaking light of the Truman-backed *Democrazia Cristiana* era, might seem like a self-serving attempt at distancing himself from his many incendiary attacks during the *ventennio* on democracy in general, and on the USA in particular. In the 1923 *Dizionario dell'omo salvatico* he had indiscriminately censured 'the country of millionaire uncles, land of the trusts, of the skyscrapers, the phonograph, the electric trams, of the lynch laws, of the unbearable Washington, the tedious Emerson, the pederast Walt Whitman' (Papini and Giuliotti 1923, 149).

Despite those later pronouncements, there are good reasons to believe that not only had Papini long romanticised the New World – and held a more lenient view of homosexuality before his conversion – but also that the tedious Emerson, and especially Whitman, played a key role in his intellectual formation.[6] In a 1908 article for the *Nuova Antologia* (Papini 1917, 330–367), Papini

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recalled his presence among the fabled few volumes of his paternal library. He credits the American for 'one of the most important discoveries of [his] first adolescence' (Papini 1917, 330), that of poetry, and it soon becomes clear that Whitman's readiness 'to dare to appear immoral for moral purposes' (Papini 1917, 359), and his 'honest accord between life and poetry' rank him high among Papini's role models: Whitman is both 'a universal poet, a poet of the whole, not of the parts … and yet a poet personal, individual, intimate' (Papini 1917, 333), who appears to succeed in the reconciliation of action and contemplation which so long eluded Papini.

More specifically, Papini finds in Whitman the roots of his own *uomo-Dio* project:

> [O]ne could also call Walt Whitman a mystic, but a mystic of a type very different from the usual one, because he does not dissolve himself in God, but he almost aspires to become so boundless that he might welcome God within his soul. (Papini 1917, 339)

Much as Hofmannsthal reconstituted the self by reconstructing the world as symbol, Whitman adores 'the self because he adores the all, and sees the all reflected in the self' (Papini 1917, 338). Papini notes that it is with his frequent cataloguing that Whitman

> endeavours to suggest effectively this sense of participation in all things. He feels himself as the soul of the world, as the animating breath of all things … as the God of a pantheistic world might be conscious of himself. (Papini 1917, 339)

Where Chandos identifies with a watering can, a dog in the sun or a cripple (Hofmannsthal 2007, 50), and James's *mystics* with dray-horses and the Hohenzollerns (James 1890, 313), Whitman finds that quadroon girls and machinists, policemen and half-breeds, squaws and connoisseurs, deckhands and conductors, all 'tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them, / And such as it is to be of these more or less I am, / And of these one and all I weave the song of myself' (Whitman 1904, 18).

When in the same essay Papini writes 'Whitman's soul is as vast as the world, as ample as God, and contains everything' (Papini 1917, 365), he elucidates his own pronouncement two years earlier, that '[t]he human soul is larger than the largest of empires … the new imperative is this: to learn to see the whole world in oneself' (Papini 1906c, 17).

Tout commence en mystique et finit en politique

Papini however never learned to see the whole world in himself. By 1918 he had abandoned Romanticism in favour of a new classicism, 'bare, compact, hyperconscious, disciplined' (Papini 1918, 123), and his 1919 conversion to Catholicism would explicitly renounce his old egotism (Papini 1921, 127). There were however many denials before this rooster crowed, and we may select three key moments in Papini's prewar experience which led to his defection.

The first is Papini's association with the nationalist journal *Il Regno*. For the young Florentine, this was a unique opportunity to make a name for himself, and he readily adapted his politics to those of his new employer Corradini (Papini 1914). He and Prezzolini, however, sought to maintain a distinct voice, at least in their philosophical and literary writings, and when the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) saw Corradini applaud Japanese unity and technological superiority, Papini (and most of the journal's staff) rooted instead for old Russia. The resulting conflicts eventually led to Corradini's replacement at the head of the journal, followed by its closure at the end of 1906 (Drake 1981, 230–239).

After four years wandering the literary wilderness, 1910 saw Corradini's return to politics with the founding of the *Associazione Nazionalista Italiana (ANI)*, followed six months later by the launch of its journal, *L'Idea Nazionale*. One year earlier, Prezzolini, increasingly hostile to his old employer (Prezzolini 1909a), had started his own weekly, *La Voce*, which then vigorously

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opposed the nationalists' agitation in favour of the conquest of Tripolitania (*La Voce* 1911*a*). Papini and a number of *vociani* instead decided to support the war while condemning the ANI's materialist motivations (Papini 1911), thus creating a rift whose depth and bitterness eventually estranged Prezzolini from both his friend and his journal.

The Libyan conquest secured Corradini's immediate prestige and though he was largely sidelined once the ANI took part in the March on Rome and was absorbed into the *Partito Nazionale Fascista*, honorific titles were lavished upon him until his death in 1931, when Mussolini gave his funeral oration (De Taeye-Henen 1973, 95–97).

Following the Lateran treaty and his embrace of the Fascist cause, the regime would also bestow academic positions and prestigious editorships upon Papini. Yet during its first decade the Florentine maintained a critical position, forming with a few others a Right Opposition of sorts (Adamson 2013, 7–12): whereas Mussolini still called on Italian intellectuals to become 'within but above all without, the bearers of the new type of Italian civilisation … to practise what we may call a "spiritual imperialism" in theatre, in books, in conferences' (Mussolini 1926 cited in Gennaro 2015, 79–80), Papini and his fellow *selvaggi* already advocated cultural autarky, in the name of a narrow and militantly provincial Catholicism.

The roots of this *selvaggismo* can be traced to Ardengo Soffici, himself an early convert to the cause of Fascism and a late one to that of Catholicism. A crucial influence on Papini's retreat from universalism, this Tuscan polymath announced in *Leonardo* his return from seven years in Paris with an embittered letter, casting his experience abroad as a cosmopolitan *katabasis*, allowing him to speak authoritatively of the dangers of *déracinement* (Stefan Cloud 1907).

The true reasons for Soffici's decision to return to Italy are difficult to fathom: in part, no doubt, there was genuine fatigue with bohemian poverty, but it is likely that he also came to resent the hybridity of the expatriate, which barred him from fully participating in either French or Italian nationalist discourse. As Walter L. Adamson notes, 'the cosmopolitan associations that modernism had for rabidly nationalist movements, as well as the public at large, often served to intensify nationalist sentiments among modernists' (Adamson 2007, 13).

Though neither he nor Papini ever mention it, they probably encountered widespread italophobia.[7] No matter how modern their ideas, they remained associated with the backward *contadini* that made up the bulk of Italian immigration. At the close of his Parisian years, Soffici seemed to have co-opted some of those French clichés and, giving them a primitivist twist, turned the earthiness of his own origins into a proof of affinity for modernist culture. Papini too had had his share of metropolitan failures, from Paris in the winter of 1905, to Milan in 1907, and was rapidly converted to Soffici's new commitment to find at home, in Tuscany, that radical simplicity which the Parisian *déracinés* had to seek overseas.

After the closure of *Leonardo*, Soffici slowly came to supplant Prezzolini in Papini's intellectual life. His old friend had grown tired of playing sidekick, and before launching his new weekly *La Voce*, he publicly recanted many tenets of *Leonardo*, from its biographical approach to philosophy to its political spontaneism, even deploring an occasional 'lack of a serious discipline of study' (Prezzolini 1909b, 32).

Papini showed little enthusiasm for the role-reversal entailed, yet both he and Soffici eventually published in the new journal's first issue (Adamson 1993, 111). Prezzolini still positioned it as heir to *Leonardo* (Prezzolini 1909a, 86), circulating European culture in Italy, but he also tackled a range of concrete social and political issues such as the 'Southern Question', Trieste, educational reform, universal suffrage or the deleterious effects of Giolittian *trasformismo*. Though he'd go on editing the journal for six months in Prezzolini's absence, *La Voce*'s ethos of substance over style,

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its reformist, pluralist, educational, sometimes even democratic agenda, remained largely at odds with Papini's aspirations.

This brings us to the third moment in Papini's desertion from universalism. By the end of the century's first decade, Prezzolini's commitment to a 'serious discipline of study' had outgrown the outrageous pipe-dreams of *Leonardo*, just as Corradini had abandoned his bourgeois rhetoric in favour of a nebulous but very successful 'proletarian' nationalism (Corradini 1911). Both had made the sacrifices necessary to transform Italian politics *from within*. Papini, on the other hand, was too tangled in his prophetic posturing to work within existing institutions (Sapiro 2009), and could not bring himself to let go of that sacrosanct autonomy inherited from the *fin de siècle* (Adamson 2007, 10).

Despite difficult beginnings (*La Voce* 1911*b*), Papini and Soffici eventually found more kindred spirits among the Futurists: their vision of politics was free from all complexities and compromises, reduced to a stage on which to perform their tautological celebration of becoming and concomitant 'totalizing affirmation of the self' (Sartini Blum 1996, viii). Unable to muster that 'serious discipline of study' demanded by constructive political engagement, Papini fell back on plebiscitary agitation, unencumbered by those distinctions and subtleties that might 'turn enthusiasm cold, reduce impetus, and poison a fighting people with doubt' (Marinetti, Settimelli and Corra 1970, 142).

Conclusion

The aporia of modernist mysticism is that identification with the world, in a 'metaphoric social way' (James 1890, 291), appears to preclude participation in an *actual and practical manner*. Papini's philosophical programme demanded he overturn every idol, the liberal humanist subject most of all. Yet his modernist Romanticism relied on his '[p]assing from metaphysics to action' (Gian Falco 1905, 13), and, as many others in his day, he could only conceive of action as political violence. Despite deploring that 'every contact between unequals tends toward levelling' (Gian Falco 1903), Papini eventually had to make himself intelligible to the common man:

> I publicly confess my decadence without apologies: from solitary creator and destroyer of myths, I have become propagandist and apostle of the people. I go toward men. Am I rising or descending? I do not know and do not want to know. (Gian Falco 1906, 193)

The universalism of Walt Whitman, for all its unaffected boldness, did not then lead 'toward men'. For men, as Papini imagined them, demanded character in a leader: a self sharply outlined and stable, autonomous and coherent. As Quentin Anderson wrote (1971, 208), Whitman's mystique instead entailed his 'coming out of culture', his escape from the duty of 'being a personage on the world's terms'.

Examining characterisation in modernist fiction, Michael Levenson has written:

> The dislocation of the self within society is recapitulated, reenacted, reconsidered, in the dislocation of character within modernist forms. And yet … they pursue their formal disruption of character even as they so often sustain a nostalgic longing for the whole self. A set of works that engage in self-conscious assault on a notion of character persistently associated with the nineteenth century continue to cherish nineteenth-century ideals of the autonomous ego, free and integral. (Levenson 2005, xiii)

Papini's early decision to embrace a resurgent Italian nationalism, later bolstered by French xenophobia, combined with his failure at 'keeping his spiritual house in order', leading him ultimately to perform his own nineteenth-century character, with what James called an 'absoluteness and definiteness in the outline' that made him instantly identifiable (James 1890, 312–313), yet also somewhat superfluous.

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Bertrand Marilier is a designer based in London.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
2. Papini actually refers to an article written in *Il Marzocco* for the anniversary of Adwa, but this must be a mistake as no such article is to be found.
3. Morasso's book was widely reviewed at the time of its release, and later a *Nuova Antologia* article by Alessandro Chiapelli prompted intense debates, to which Pareto, Taddei and Borgese all contributed. For the original reactions, see Giovanni Gentile's scathing review in the brand new *La Critica* (Gentile 1903). For an overview of the discussions, see Luigi Dami's article in *Hermes* (Dami 1906).
4. It should be noted that Papini's writing of the period makes no mention of race, an important theme in Seillière's outline of romantic ideology. The Papini archives do contain a 1910 Seillière article on Bergson, but this seems to be the full extent of their acquaintance.
5. Although *Leonardo* would take an explicitly pragmatist turn only in 1904, Papini and Prezzolini were familiar with James as early as 1900 (Papini and Prezzolini 2003, 17).
6. Ridolfi, for example, mentions Papini's teenage project to write an epic on the discovery of the Americas (Ridolfi 1987, 5). Italo Tavolato, Papini's friend and a contributor to *La Voce*, *L'Anima* and *Lacerba*, was an outspoken homosexual.
7. Albert Gleizes could for example bemoan in 1913 'the detestable Italian influence' as an 'outrage against [French] national genius' (Gleizes cited in Cottington 1998, 161).

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Italian summary

Questo articolo esamina il rapporto del primo Giovanni Papini con il concetto di imperialismo. Questo periodo del suo sviluppo intellettuale era caratterizzato da intense discussioni tra l'*intellighenzia* italiana riguardo all'imperialismo e la sua relazione con concetti quali quello di 'nazione' e 'cultura'. Papini si unì a questo dibattito con una distintiva interpretazione dell'idea di imperialismo: da un lato, sembrerebbe il legittimo erede della tradizione nazionalista umbertina, e – dall'altro – un'esponente del rifiuto delle inclinazioni positiviste dei suoi predecessori. La 'soggettività frammentata' di Papini, insieme alla concettualizzazione 'porosa' del soggetto in William James, hanno – infatti – posto le basi per una nozione psicologica dell'imperialismo: una che dipende dalla conoscenza e dall'apprezzamento, tradotta in una produzione letteraria a livello soggettivo, e in cultura nazionale a livello di stato. In definitiva, le frustrazioni all'estero, le esigenze della politica nazionalista e la sua postura avanguardista, condussero Papini a rinunciare al suo impero intellettuale a favore di un atteggiamento maggiormente concreto.

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