

Of Tears and Tarantulas: Folk Religiosity, de Martino's Ethnology, and the Italian South

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Between 1952 and 1959 Ernesto de Martino traveled to Lucania on a series of “ethnographic explorations” originally meant to study forms of personality disorders among the most economically and culturally depressed areas of the Mezzogiorno.¹ Somnambulism, hallucinatory states, oneirism and dissociative experiences were known to affect local women, as well as peasants, at particularly critical moments in their existence (birth, puberty, death) or at times of physical fatigue related to work cycles. Yet until de Martino's excursions to the South research on the Mezzogiorno had neglected to examine the “psychological misery” suffered by the most vulnerable subjects in these remote regions.² Studies instead tended to focus on general inquiries into the South's poverty; conversely, they approached indigenous traditions, practices, and superstitions through the old schema of folkloric discovery and retrieval. Not only were psychological maladies ignored, but there was no awareness of the interconnectedness of psychological indigence with what de Martino defined as “cultural misery,” that is, the persistence in modern times of archaic beliefs and practices, including *malocchio* and *fatture*, the cult of spirits, and more generally the use of magic.³ According to de Martino, psychological, cultural, and economic misery were all linked together in the Mezzogiorno, and only a holistic approach to the life of the “forgotten people”—those described by Carlo Levi in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (Christ Stopped at Eboli)—could account for the nature and extent of the South's problems.⁴ Ethnology, as conceived and performed by de Martino, was meant to play a central role in the task of understanding the South's predicament. Ethnology probed cultural norms and their impact on a world increasingly polarized between the inevitable march towards rational modernity and the appeal of a magical pre-modern time. For de Martino in particular, I would argue, ethnological research on expressive ritualized emotions exposed the peculiarities of Italy's uneven development in the post-war years and became a means through which to rethink the South.

De Martino and his teams of researchers at first focused on the funeral lament as a ritualized expressive practice that residents of Lucanian villages still deployed to contain the sorrow they experienced at the death of a loved one. What was the meaning of ritual weeping in these cases?

¹ See Ernesto de Martino, “Inchiesta etnografica in Lucania,” in *Mondo popolare e magia in Lucania* (Rome-Matera: Basilicata Editrice, 1975), 103. On de Martino's travels, see *I viaggi nel Sud di Ernesto de Martino*, ed. Clara Gallini and Francesco Faeta (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1999). I have adopted the spelling “de Martino” throughout the paper but maintained “De Martino” when citing sources that adopt the latter spelling: “de Martino” was a more common spelling in earlier publications by the author, though its use is generally inconsistent.

² De Martino borrowed the expression from Pierre Janet, who had written about “*misère psychologique*” in *L'Automatisme psychologique : essai de psychologie expérimentale sur les formes inférieures de l'activité humaine* (Paris: Alcan, 1889).

³ In Italian *malocchio* and *fatture* mean the ‘evil eye’, and in the latter case, may also mean a ‘spell’ or ‘charm’.

⁴ For de Martino's references to Carlo Levi see, “Intorno a una storia popolare del mondo subalterno,” *Societas* 5, no. 3 (September 1949): 411-35, and *L'opera a cui lavoro: apparato critico e documentario alla “Spedizione etnologica” in Lucania*, ed. Clara Gallini (Lecce: Argo, 1996). For a comparison between de Martino's view of the South and Carlo Levi's, see David Forgacs, *Italy's Margins: Social Exclusion and Nation Formation since 1861* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

de Martino asked. What did the rite of funeral lament reveal about the state of those communities that resorted to it? Ultimately, what was the role of seemingly marginal cultural phenomena in societies at a very critical stage of their existence? For de Martino, answering these questions would reveal the critical value of employing a historical “dynamic” approach to understanding social formations traditionally considered backward and “static.” One needed to recognize that the use of magic and rituals did not place people outside of history.⁵ In contrast, practices such as the funeral lament denoted the struggle to be in the world (*esserci nel mondo*), to confront, that is, what de Martino called the “crisis of presence” (*crisi della presenza*)—namely the risk of being overcome by the weight of uncontrollable forces and events when faced with precarious living conditions. Magic implicated history, and de Martino entrusted ethnology with the task of helping to illustrate this mutual relation.

How did de Martino expect ethnology to play such a role? After all, as a new discipline emerging at the turn of the twentieth century from the forced encounter between powerful “advanced” nations and societies “without history,” ethnology seemed to uphold those same divisions that de Martino was keen on challenging. In this paper I propose to illuminate this apparently intractable conundrum by examining key moments in de Martino’s intellectual journey. I first introduce de Martino’s research on ritual weeping and situate it within the ethnologist’s larger theoretical agenda. I discuss de Martino’s philosophical and intellectual orientation and show that his support for historicism, combined with his commitment to rescuing ethnology from the entrapments of naturalism, led him to problematize the relationship between nature and culture. His interpretation of *magismo* as a historical epoch is a particularly original case in point, and I underline its centrality in his theoretical as well as political development and empirical approach. I then closely analyze de Martino’s interpretation of ritual weeping as an effort to assess the role of magic and rationality within the context of modernity’s displacement of the sacred. Set in Lucania, Italy’s poorest region, the study focuses on a time and space that is here rather than there, now more than then, and vividly captures the political underpinnings of magical practices in societies at risk. Furthermore, I suggest some reasons why de Martino ignored Marcel Mauss’s earlier contribution to oral funerals, despite the fact that both shared a reading of cultural norms as embodied and symbolic of a society’s state of being. I conclude with a discussion of the interpretive cruxes de Martino faced in his intent to place the forgotten onto the stage of history, while using ethnology to broaden the “civilized” world’s self-understanding.

Before moving to the substantive discussion, some preliminary remarks on de Martino’s approach to ethnology and the sacred are in order. First, through the examination of funeral laments in Lucania, de Martino became one of the earliest ethnographers to confront “the primitives” and “otherness” within the confines of the West. He overcame the “us versus them” dichotomy on which anthropological studies had been built, and rather than traveling outward to exotic foreign lands he looked inward at his own culture’s foreignness. The “other,” de Martino claimed, was within us.⁶ Second, the irrational currents that swept through Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, including Hitler’s “shamanism,” convinced de Martino that “the civilized” had not left “the primitive” behind.⁷ What “primitive” meant and what could be

⁵ On “societies without history,” see Claude Lefort, “Société ‘sans histoire’ et historicité,” in *Les Formes de l’histoire: essais d’anthropologie politique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 30-48.

⁶ See de Martino, “Etnologia e cultura nazionale negli ultimi dieci anni,” in *Mondo popolare e magia in Lucania*, 55-78.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

learned from it became, in de Martino's eyes, one of ethnology's main missions and indeed its prime task. Ethnology served to illuminate the present.

As for the sacred, de Martino conceived it broadly as a "mythical-ritual technique" that contained both religion and magic;⁸ in addition, and in contrast to the dominant theories of the time, de Martino rejected the idea of the sacred as irrational. With a singular formulation, he argued that the sacred displays "human coherence"; it is a process that can be retraced historiographically.⁹ The sacred is also connected to being in history (*esserci nella storia*)—the movement through which we adopt culture and overcome nature at critical moments in human existence.¹⁰ Techniques of *destorificazione* or de-historicization help us exit the actual critical moment by turning it into a ritualized recurrence, i.e. into something not new; these may then ease our opening to secular values and sociality.¹¹ Within this interpretive framework, for de Martino religion and magic played the same function, with only a difference of degree separating them.¹² In magic, as compared to religion, the awareness of "values" that we can reach once we surpass the crisis is low, and the technical aspect of controlling the crisis becomes more relevant than the moment of opening up to the future.¹³ The Lucanian funeral lament was a case in point.

Nature and culture

De Martino published *Morte e pianto rituale nel mondo antico: dal lamento pagano al pianto di Maria* in 1958.¹⁴ Described as a "historical-religious" study, the book focused on ancient practices of lamentation and their modern iterations in the Mediterranean area during the 1950s. Contemporary folkloric material supplemented information gathered from antiquity in order to illuminate an issue that de Martino considered as especially pressing in the less modernized Italian South: the crisis to which bereavement was leaving people vulnerable. The inspiration for the research came to de Martino from the idealist philosopher Benedetto Croce, who in a passage in his work *Frammenti di etica* wrote: "[E]veryone cries in a certain way. But by expressing sorrow, in the various forms of celebrations and cults of the dead, one overcomes the pain by making it objective. By trying not to let the dead die we actually begin to let them die in us."¹⁵ De Martino argued that grief constitutes our cultural effort to confront and overcome loss. Failure to accomplish the work of bereavement would lead to a "second death": losing oneself. Knowing how to weep instead stops us from falling into the abyss of despair; crying expresses

⁸ De Martino uses this formulation in several of his works. See for example *Morte e pianto rituale: dal lamento funebre antico al pianto di Maria* (Turin: Boringhieri, 1975).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁰ "I fondamenti di una teoria del sacro," in de Martino, *Storia e metastoria: i fondamenti di una teoria del sacro*, ed. and intro. Marcello Massenzio (Lecce: Argo, 1995), 99-138.

¹¹ For example, de Martino writes: "Presence is the movement that transcends the situation into value" (*ibid.*, 103). Among secular values de Martino listed: "technical domination of nature and production of economic goods, organization of social and political life, ethos, art, logos" (*ibid.*, 110).

¹² On these issues, see also de Martino, "Crisi della presenza e reintegrazione religiosa," *Aut Aut* 31 (January 1956): 17-38, and "Storicismo e irrazionalismo nella storia delle religioni," *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni* 28 (1957): 89-107.

¹³ "I fondamenti di una teoria del sacro," in de Martino, *Storia e metastoria*, 137-138.

¹⁴ The book was republished, at the wish of de Martino, with a slightly different title in 1975. See note 8 above.

¹⁵ Cited in de Martino, *Morte e pianto rituale*, 4: "tutti piangono ad un modo. Ma con l'esprimere il dolore, nelle varie forme di celebrazione e culto dei morti, si supera lo strazio, rendendolo oggettivo. Così, cercando che i morti non siano morti, cominciamo a farli effettivamente morire in noi."

our ability to turn nature into culture and, as such, has the power to ease the crises that threaten to undermine people's ability to exist in the world.

The interpretive thread guiding *Morte e pianto rituale* is the pivotal relationship between nature and culture, an issue that had already emerged in de Martino's first important book, *Naturalismo e storicismo nell'etnologia*, published in 1941.¹⁶ Here de Martino dismantled theories that disavowed the need for historical sensibility when dealing with "other" societies. In contrast, he originally proposed a historical approach to ethnological research that proclaimed the superiority of individual knowledge over positivism's pursuit of universal laws following the model of the natural sciences. By pitting naturalism against historicism, de Martino asserted the centrality of Croce's idealist philosophy for any ethnological work worth of its name, showing his total subscription to Croce's immanentist conception of history as well as to Croce's idea of the irreducibility of historical categories to the laws of nature. Although de Martino eventually scaled down his ambitious, yet naïve, effort to glorify Croce's system, he never abandoned his faith in historicism when confronting the world of the "primitives." Ethnology became the key element in his life-long commitment to reexamine the principles of a Western world in crisis and to engage intellectually and politically with the issue of cultural difference and divisions.

Methodologically oriented, *Naturalismo e storicismo* introduced several epistemological innovations that widened the scope of Crocean idealism and extended its reach. First of all, it applied Crocean philosophy to social formations (the "primitives") and areas of knowledge (ethnology) that Croce's Eurocentric point of view ignored. In addition, and at the same time, the book put into question the existence of "societies without history." It made the case for rescuing ethnology from the degrading status of mere ornamental knowledge or a "manomorta culturale," as de Martino put it, calling for ethnology's "riassorbimento nel circolo vivo del sapere non ozioso" (reabsorption into the living circle of engaged knowledge) once all current ethnological theories and their essentially naturalistic presuppositions were exposed.¹⁷ In his sweeping critique of ethnological approaches, he included research- and philosophically-oriented schools, evolutionary ethnology and natural historiography, prelogism, and diffusionist theories. He especially lambasted Lucien Lévy-Bruhl as representative of all the aporias vexing the positivist approach to ethnology. More importantly for the purposes of this discussion, through his critical analysis of Lévy-Bruhl de Martino began to sketch out his views on magic and rationality in a comparative perspective with the goal of enhancing "our historical self-awareness."¹⁸

De Martino laid out his critique of Lévy-Bruhl in the book's opening chapter and focused on two tightly connected points: first, Lévy-Bruhl's characterization of the "primitives" as a group different from us and outside our experience; second, Lévy-Bruhl's attribution to the "primitives" of a pre-logical mentality, a collective way of thinking dominated by the "law of participation."¹⁹ For Lévy-Bruhl, emotions, i.e. an affective principle, guided the "primitives'" synthetic mental operations; objects and phenomena were grouped following affective connections rather than abstract logic. The "primitives" ignored contradiction and understood the categories of space and time through a mystical experience, namely an invisible link that made them indifferent to empirical evidence and secondary causation. In Lévy-Bruhl's account, mystical forces overpowered practical knowledge and turned the "primitives" into irrational creatures swayed by sentiments and feelings—a romantic-decadent vision that, according to de

¹⁶ Ernesto de Martino, *Naturalismo e storicismo nell'etnologia* (Bari: Laterza, 1941).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10 (*autocoscienza storica*).

¹⁹ "Saggio critico sul prelogismo di Levy-Bruhl," in *ibid.*

Martino, vitiated and negatively affected Lévy-Bruhl's theorization of the "primitive" world as ultimately incommensurable.

In de Martino's mind, part of the blame for Lévy-Bruhl's myopic views fell on Émile Durkheim, the founder of the French school of sociology.²⁰ Durkheim's "speculative vulgarity,"²¹ and more specifically his idea of society as hypostasized, transcendent, and superior to the individual, his distinction between collective and individual representations, and his argument that categories and concepts have a social matrix were all supposedly merged in Lévy-Bruhl's notion of pre-logic and determined its interpretive narrowness. Not only did prelogism presume the undifferentiation of the "primitive" world and fail to distinguish between abstract logic and a practical use of logic. By defining the "primitives'" logic as collective, it also hampered any analysis of the "primitives" in terms of individual logic (based on the principle of identity and non-contradiction) and precluded the individual from being considered a source of spiritual innovation. The consequences of this mode of thinking were an accentuated pragmatism that turned away from spiritualism and idealism, or rather history in de Martino's Crocean conception. If it was impossible to equate the "primitive" mentality to the "civilized" one, then neither was it possible to make of the "primitives" an object of history, a problem that vexed Lévy-Bruhl's ethnological work and undermined any original intention on his part to reevaluate the "primitives'" experience.²²

Lévy-Bruhl's version of naturalism disallowed knowledge of magic's historical function in relation to secular thought, de Martino feared, a concern he especially expressed in the final paragraph of his essay on Lévy-Bruhl. After denouncing prelogism for assuming as an exclusive characteristic of the "primitive" mentality something that a closer analysis would reveal to be a fundamental feature of all religious life, de Martino raised the issue of Lévy-Bruhl's failure to contribute to the understanding of magic and its becoming.²³ Because Lévy-Bruhl did not realize that religion is an eternal moment of the spirit and cannot be derived from social structure, he was unable to offer any tools for gauging how the sacred affects the categories of the intellect.²⁴ Nor could he help to identify the historical process that led to the dissolution of the sacred from intellectual categories (such as space and causality). What were the consequences of desacralization on the development of a unified subject? de Martino asked. And did magism play any role in this transformation? Although de Martino could not formulate an answer to these difficult questions in his essay on Lévy-Bruhl, he took advantage of that occasion to begin addressing issues that became increasingly central to his work. *Il mondo magico*, published in 1948, provided a response to the call for answers Lévy-Bruhl's controversial work had generated.²⁵

²⁰ De Martino identified Lévy-Bruhl with the Durkheimian school, although Lévy-Bruhl was never quite part of it. On the relationship between Durkheim and Lévy-Bruhl, see Dominique Merllié, "Lévy-Bruhl et Durkheim: notes biographiques en marge d'une correspondance," *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 179, no. 4 (1989): 493-514.

²¹ De Martino, *Naturalismo e storicismo*, 52.

²² See "Introduzione di Cesare Cases," in de Martino, *Il mondo magico: prolegomeni a una storia del magismo* (Turin: Boringhieri, 1973), vii-xlvi. The book is translated into English with the title *Primitive Magic: the Psychic Powers of Shamans and Sorcerers* (Kensington, Australia: Bay Books, 1972).

²³ De Martino, *Naturalismo e storicismo*, 67.

²⁴ De Martino writes of the "ideale eterna natura della religione" (ibid., 68).

²⁵ According to Cesare Cases, the book was prepared in 1941 and written in 1944-45. See "Introduzione di Cesare Cases," in de Martino, *Il mondo magico*.

Il mondo magico

De Martino envisaged *Il mondo magico* as the reconstruction of the role of magic in the historical development of the spirit. According to his idealist reading, the era of magic was a specific moment in the process of spirit's becoming and constituted the genesis of the historical production of the unified subject, i.e. our being in the world. If some critics, especially the rationalists, expunged magic from this view of history, it was because they believed in a subject already made and ontologically opposed to nature as its other.²⁶ For de Martino, in contrast, the era of magic indicated that "individuation is not a fact but a historical task."²⁷ In the epoch of magic, he argued, blurry boundaries separated the individual from nature, or subject from object, and the uncertainty of humans' position vis-à-vis the natural world created a drama for them. Because in this scenario the unity of the person—the person's "presence"—is fragile, it risks being undermined during situations of crisis such as those provoked by emotional events. Unable to absorb the resulting shock, the presence remains trapped in the event and "abdicates" as presence.²⁸ For de Martino, magic served to fight the risk that people experienced of being overcome by the uncontrollable and overwhelming forces of nature. Magic did not equate to a psychic structure or type of mentality; it rather denoted a cultural historical process that responded to the lability of reality through techniques that helped to maintain a stable sense of being.²⁹

In de Martino's account, magic constituted an active cultural form that intervened to contain the crisis of presence—a presence that, because not individualized, was in principle in flux. Examples of labile presence were especially instructive on this point, and de Martino referred to a particular psychic condition, called *olon* by the Thungesians, but differently named by other indigenous groups, in which specific individuals lose, for some time, control over their actions due to a sudden event or emotion.³⁰ A person affected by this condition would, for example, mimic the tree whose leaves are moved by the wind through a repetitive act of *koinonia*. Another might mechanically and unconsciously imitate the gestures of a fellow group member. In these instances, presence becomes an "echo of the world" due to its own fragility and instability. Lacking the means to confront, let alone master, the trauma provoked by an emotional occurrence, presence remains caught in the event—the prisoner of a world that enraptures it to the point of erasing the distinction that separates them. It follows that, rather than merely observing the leaves fluttering in the wind, the person becomes the tree and moves as if swept by currents of air. A violent reaction can also accompany the loss of presence, confirming the enormous impact of emotional states on the subject who becomes unfit at controlling the situation.

The person's active response to an emotional burden could, however, reverse the loss of presence. The same examples reported in the ethnological literature showed that magic provided the techniques to accomplish this task. For de Martino, this was a critical point and the confirmation of his theory on the historical role of magic. He concluded that when the crisis of

²⁶ On de Martino's critique of "lazy historicism," see Diego Fusaro, "E. de Martino: mondo magico, fine del mondo ed etnocentrismo critico," 12 June 2013, http://www.filosofico.net/inattuale/de_martino.htm.

²⁷ De Martino, *Il mondo magico*, 97.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁹ See "Introduzione di Cesare Cases," in de Martino, *Il mondo magico*.

³⁰ De Martino, *Il mondo magico*, 91.

presence is not overcome, it means that culture has been absent or so underdeveloped as to be useless at channeling the emotions' overwhelming power. When instead there is resistance to accepting the fragility of presence, that is, when the risk of the loss opens up a will to be, this positive mode leads to the creation of cultural forms that help solve the drama of the individual. The world of magic emerges right here as a way to elaborate solutions to the problem. Magic's intervention demonstrates the crucial role played by cultural values in overcoming the crisis brought about by nature's unlimited power.

Il fatto negativo della fragilità della presenza, del suo smarrirsi e abdicare, è incompatibile per definizione, con qualsiasi creazione culturale, che implica sempre un modo positivo di contrapporsi della presenza al mondo, e quindi una esperienza, un dramma, un problema, uno svolgimento, un risultato.³¹

(The negative fact of the fragility of presence, of its loss and abdication, is by definition incompatible with any sort of cultural creation, which instead always implicates for presence a positive mode of opposing itself to the world, and thus an experience, a drama, a problem, a putting-into-work, a result.)

Between the loss of presence and the redemption of a presence that wants to be in the world, the *mondo magico* unfolds. A solidified presence that does not feel the problem of its own lability eventually means that magic has, however, become obsolete; the *mondo magico* is no longer.

According to de Martino, in sum, magic moves and develops within a historical existential situation in which a presence that feels threatened struggles to overcome the risk of losing itself. Death events are particularly telling in this regard, as they constitute the most emotionally strenuous situations in the life of a person, and especially in the existence of societies at risk. Not by chance, de Martino's scholarly attention after concluding *Il mondo magico* focused on the ancient funeral laments.³² Equally telling is the fact that he took the Italian South as the example for illuminating the fate of fragile social formations confronted by death. Indeed, the South showcased an emergent preoccupation in de Martino's ethnological work: namely the issue of being left behind by progress and not keeping up with changes sweeping through the rest of the world or, in the specific case of Italy, the more "advanced" North.

The South

By the time he wrote *Morte e pianto rituale*, de Martino had incorporated criticisms to his previous work and revisited the original theory he had advanced in *Il mondo magico*. Croce's scathing rebuttal of the idea that the categories of the spirit are not eternal pushed de Martino to reintegrate his ethnographic analysis within Crocean orthodoxy.³³ He thus framed the ancient lament as an example of "knowing how to weep" (*saper piangere*), which he believed illustrated

³¹ Ibid., 94.

³² Previously, de Martino had researched a case of existential drama among the Arunta. See "Angoscia territoriale e riscatto culturale nel mito achilpa delle origini: contributo allo studio della mitologia degli aranda," *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni* 23 (1951-52): 51-66.

³³ See Croce's response in *Il mondo magico* in the above-cited edition's appendices. For Croce, spirit creates history, not vice versa.

the deployment of culture through the whole process of grieving, from the crisis to its resolution. Most consequentially, however, de Martino also accepted and embraced Croce's assessment of Christianity's superior cultural approach to death. He thus argued that Christianity had been able to control more effectively than magic the overwhelming power of emotions and, over time, had helped to reduce, if not eliminate, extreme reactions to the loss of a loved one. With this new theoretical stance, de Martino moved the target of his interpretive efforts from demonstrating the cultural effectiveness of magic to evaluating the role of Christianity in achieving a cultural victory over nature (and at the same time overcoming pagan approaches to death). According to this reading, the advent of Christianity had sounded the death knell for the pagan lament. Even though both the pagan and Christian approach to death enabled the transcending of loss, the overcoming of crisis, and the reentering of life through the process of bereavement, Christianity offered a more successful way to channel destructive emotions in a positive direction. For de Martino, this was Christianity's fundamental advantage, and he lamented the stalled cultural choice that condemned subaltern societies to a magical approach when confronted with the crisis brought about by grief. For the central question for de Martino remained: How can one participate in the cultural process that is history without falling back into nature? How can one be a subject, a historical actor? With these questions in mind, and through a syncretic reference to idealism and existentialism, *Morte e pianto rituale* concentrated on the existential moment of death and the risk it presents when the person is unable to objectify the experience.³⁴ Here de Martino discussed how, if this is the case, then an "inauthentic presence" is caught in a frozen time, namely an unhappy static condition that keeps presence enchained to nature and unable to enter into history/culture. He also examined the ancient world as a window onto early techniques for managing the crisis of mourning. As he saw it, ancient rituals provided an early, if imperfect, device for controlling negative emotions:

Il lamento antico ci permette di sorprendere il modo col quale, in un ambiente storico dal quale direttamente proveniamo e che ci siamo appena lasciati alle spalle, la dispersione e la follia che minacciano l'uomo colpito da lutto furono istituzionalmente moderate nel rito.³⁵

(The ancient lament allows us to grasp the way in which, in a historical setting from which we descend directly and which we have only just left behind, the breakdown and the madness that threaten the individual who must mourn were institutionally moderated through ritual.)

Morte e pianto rituale, however, went far beyond a historical reconstruction of ancient lament in order to fulfill several aims: (1) it tested Crocean historicism in areas, such as the ancient world, that expanded the limits of the modern West considered by Croce; (2) it assessed the passage from nature to culture through the Crocean idea of "knowing how to weep"; (3) it probed the transition from paganism to Christianity as well as the transformative power of religion; (4) it used ethnology to understand our own world; (5) finally, it raised the issues of those societies left behind by both Christianity and "progress." This latter point is particularly

³⁴ Several interpreters cite Martin Heidegger's influence on de Martino's existentialism. See among others Fabrizio Ferrari, *Ernesto de Martino on Religion: The Crisis and the Presence* (Bristol: Equinox, 2012). This book is one of the very few commentaries in English on de Martino.

³⁵ De Martino, *Morte e pianto rituale*, 10.

evident in the area selected by de Martino to reconstruct the technique of lament. Since ancient practices could not be resurrected, de Martino argued, current folkloric forms would vicariously show the technique at work in funeral orations. Without advancing any claims to historical links or arguing for genealogical attributions, de Martino focused on the Italian region of Lucania to make his case about the lament's pivotal role in overcoming the crisis of death. The economically marginal South became the defining thread of the book, the core of its entrancing narrative, and the heart of its existential drama. De Martino and his team visited several villages throughout Lucania to study the lament; wherever possible, they conducted direct observation of actual funeral rituals, and in many cases also resorted to reenactments.³⁶ By the end of its fieldwork, the team had collected a vast array of typical funeral orations, and was able to identify the lament's main mimicry and melodic dynamics as well as expressive stereotypes.³⁷ The ritual, de Martino claimed, involved a basic set of traditional gestures and common melodies (especially within the same village); individual variations, in contrast, mostly pertained to the text, i.e. the words used to speak to the dead. Moreover, the lament was mostly carried out by women, the *lamentatrici*, and was practically limited to the lower classes, particularly the peasantry. De Martino emphasized the perception diffused among the lower classes that the poor and the rich grieve differently. In the words of an informant, the poor weep, while the rich instead “cry in their heart, but their mouths, their mouths do not cry.”³⁸ The separation of the classes, an issue that was not originally central to de Martino's research, began to emerge as a fundamental variable in the analysis of Lucanian funerary rituals: it also indicated that different means for overcoming the crisis of death were available to the bereaved. The rich did not need to weep; the poor did.

But how did the poor weep, and what did it mean to “know how to weep” in their case? According to de Martino's report, the ritual lament turns the emotional screams of the mourner into refrains that are repeated throughout the lamentation as counterpoints to the individual expression of the loss inflicted by death. Ritualized weeping is replete with monotonous iterations that follow rules in terms of verbal model, melody, and rhythmic mimicking.³⁹ De Martino described these conventions as showing the passage from *planctus* as free expression (*irrelativo*) to ritualized *planctus* in which weeping becomes a “protected speech” (*discorso protetto*).⁴⁰ This does not mean that, when ritualized, the lament loses its emotional characteristic or becomes a routinized soulless practice. The ritual actually allows the person's pain to be

³⁶ On the interpretive challenges of reenactments, see *ibid.* On the whole experience of fieldwork in Lucania, see de Martino, *Note di campo: spedizione in Lucania, 30 sett.-31 ott. 1952*, ed. Clara Gallini (Lecce: Argo, 1995) and *L'opera a cui lavoro* (see note 3).

³⁷ For this purpose, de Martino also relied on research in Romania. See *Morte e pianto rituale*, ch. 4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 77 (“Nel cuore loro piangono, ma le bocche, le bocche non piangono”).

³⁹ Examples of ritual crying taped by de Martino and the ethnomusicologist Diego Carpitella are archived at the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia's Bibliomediateca (in the Ethnomusicology section). Accessed on 21 January 2015:

http://bibliomediateca.santacecilia.it/bibliomediateca/cms.view?munu_str=0_1_0_5&numDoc=128&physDoc=2322&pflag=personalizationFindEtnomusicologia&level=brano (11/2/1954, Roccanova [Potenza], 40);

http://bibliomediateca.santacecilia.it/bibliomediateca/cms.view?munu_str=0_1_0_5&numDoc=128&physDoc=2336&pflag=personalizationFindEtnomusicologia&level=brano (11/2/1954, Calvera [Potenza], 40);

http://bibliomediateca.santacecilia.it/bibliomediateca/cms.view?munu_str=0_1_0_5&numDoc=128&physDoc=2929&pflag=personalizationFindEtnomusicologia&level=brano (8/2/1956, Castelsaraceno [Potenza], 40);

http://bibliomediateca.santacecilia.it/bibliomediateca/cms.view?munu_str=0_1_0_5&numDoc=128&physDoc=2949&pflag=personalizationFindEtnomusicologia&level=brano (8/5/1956, Montemurro [Potenza], 40).

⁴⁰ De Martino, *Morte e pianto rituale*, 85.

mediated by a dual state of psychic disposition in which the lamenter passes from a semi-oneiric condition, lost in the suffering of the moment, to an awakened presence that leads her to be distracted by mundane reality. The intensity of the state of pain is then reduced, thanks as well to this alternation of moments allowing the mourner's mind to focus on the world around her while continuing to "recite" her lament. Incidental comments also make their way into the text, as when the lamenter adds a warning to the children who are playing around the place where mourning is occurring.⁴¹ All together these elements help to further de-historicize individual loss: iteration, monotony, and distractibility depersonalize the crisis itself. Indeed, de Martino concluded that the more formulaic the approach, the more effective it turned out to be at reconverting fury and desperation into a controlled grieving. Expressive modules also contributed to this end. Letting one's hair down was an obligatory component of the mimicking and needed to be followed closely according to local traditions. All iterations of the module served to exercise a protective function for individual expression: one acted according to conventional scripts that provided questions and words, because "if one had to fully accept the historicity of the situation and the personal initiative one would be exposed to catastrophe."⁴² The process of de-historicization through myths and rituals was fundamental for getting through the crisis.

De Martino argued that what might appear as artificial in the lament actually guarantees that pain and crisis are overcome. To know how to weep—*si piange così*—protects the survivor. It is a form of "technical hypocrisy" that de-historicizes pain and mediates the individualization of grief.⁴³ Within this context, the existence of professional lamenters, a disappearing institution by the time of de Martino's research, testified to the importance of organized ritual lament; people not necessarily connected to the dead could reenact weeping. "Vocational" lamenters, women who were not paid for their services but went to funerals because they felt the need to do so, were also welcomed by the deceased's relatives for "knowing how to weep well."⁴⁴ Even the remembering of and grieving for the dead at periodic dates had the function of letting the dead come back, but in a regulated manner—one that was less threatening for the living because it had undergone a cultural process.

According to de Martino's theory of ritual lament, death has potentially catastrophic consequences for the survivors, and the loss of presence is inevitably at stake in such situations; madness and rage, but also catatonic reactions, compromise the normal state of the person hit by loss. These paroxysmic explosions, including self-aggression (such as scratching one's own face) and convulsive crying, need to be contained and resolved into a cultural response, an organized controlled act: i.e. a technique of weeping. The ritualization of individual weeping allows mourners to overcome the risk of madness; the lament channels the crisis of despair. Ritualized, scripted responses exercise control over uncontrollable impulses and emotions and eliminate the risk of losing oneself, ultimately reflecting people's ability to convert nature into culture.

Christianity and magic

While the folkloric examples from Lucania revealed the structure and function of ancient lament, de Martino knew that at some point weeping had changed in ancient times. Its public character

⁴¹ For example, "*Attinti a li pisi ca po perdimmu li pisi co' la valanza, attàne mie*" (ibid., 87).

⁴² Ibid., 101.

⁴³ Ibid., 113.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 80 (*sanno piangere bene*).

had become less tolerated, as had other extreme death customs, such as the paroxysmic reaction to loss recounted by Homer in the case of Achilles desperately rolling in the dust at the news of Patroclus' death.⁴⁵ The determining factor in the move against lament, and its eventual quarantine, was the advent of Christianity. The figure of Jesus introduced by the new religion proposed a view of death as less of a curse than a reward: the dead will rise again, according to the Scriptures. Christianity brought to an end the pagan approach of the ancient world and with it the public display of grief. The idea of resurrection definitively closed the epoch in which "death was death."⁴⁶ At that point, public funeral laments became out of place: weeping was rather an individual, private matter, better exemplified by the figure of the Virgin Mary as the *Mater dolorosa* who was composed, restrained, and collected.

Of course, this cultural change did not necessarily bring to an end the orbit of funeral lament that originated in ancient times. De Martino was well aware of Christianity's failure to reach the most forgotten and neglected strata of the Italian population in remote pockets of the South. As his research showed, in Lucania the pagan roots of the popular traditions were still powerful—a last piece of resistance to the transformative force of Christianity and the Catholic Church's imposition of orthodox textual meanings and new ritual customs. Thus the way the dead were addressed by the Lucanian lamenters, for example, surely implied the Christian belief in life after death, but also considered the dead not as disembodied spirits: rather, these remained physically the same. That is why the dead were sent into the other world with mundane everyday objects they had used in their life on earth: a towel for washing up, two shirts, a pipe.⁴⁷ It occurred to de Martino that the Lucanians were still struggling to control on their own the consequences of death by resorting to the traditional resources available to them, including ritual weeping: Christianity had doubtless failed to co-opt them. One important reason for this outcome, de Martino speculated, was structural: the economic backwardness of Lucanian villages exacerbated the scant penetration of Catholic doctrine.

For de Martino, pre-capitalist relations in the South hampered the march of religion (Christianity) and determined that the *signori* and the *cafoni* wept differently.⁴⁸ The economic precariousness of the *cafoni* left them more vulnerable to the crisis of presence and the risk of being unable to overcome it. In other words, the advent of a systematic religion did not seem able by itself to end the attachment to millenarian mythical and ritualistic practices: social forces were as oppressive as natural forces. What was needed, de Martino concluded, was "a society in which man—any man—feels himself to be a *pleno iure* citizen to the point of being able to come to terms with the death that weakens society by accompanying it with only a suffocated weeping."⁴⁹ Influenced by Marxism, de Martino denounced economic inequality while calling for political and cultural solutions to the problem of the South.⁵⁰ He rightly understood the

⁴⁵ Ibid., 83.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 354.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 81.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 357.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 359 ("una società in cui l'uomo—qualsiasi uomo—si senta a tal punto suo cittadino *pleno iure* da poter accettare il morire che la vulnera accompagnandolo soltanto con un somnesso pianto").

⁵⁰ Several commentators cite Antonio Gramsci's role on this matter. See George R. Saunders, "'Critical Ethnocentrism' and the Ethnology of Ernesto De Martino," *American Anthropologist* 95, no. 4 (1993): 875-893. See also Carlo Severi, "Une Pensée inachevée: l'utopie anthropologique d'Ernesto De Martino," *Gradhiva* 26 (1999): 99-107. Indeed, de Martino's field notes make continuous references to socialism and its role in the South: see, for instance, *L'opera a cui lavoro*. On de Martino's political and anthropological formation see Giordana Charuty, *Ernesto De Martino: les vies antérieures d'un anthropologue* (Marseille: Éditions Parenthèses-Éditions de la MMSH, 2009).

intricacies of the Southern predicament and recognized the need for a concerted response to the peasants' regressive state in Lucania. What is of interest here, however, is that as de Martino assessed the South's sobering conditions and proclaimed the need for emancipation from a state of both economic and cultural stagnation, he ended up contradicting his own original goal of rehabilitating "other" cultures. Ritual weeping, after all, was a taxing way of confronting death; it offered little opening to worldly values, and demonstrated the higher risk of loss of presence in areas where official religion had not established itself.

According to de Martino, the bourgeois revolution was a rational revolution that had defeated magic through a secularizing process in which religion was assigned a separate space within modern life activities; Western culture reconfigured the role of the sacred in the struggle against obscurantism. The South, however, never fully felt the impact of this revolution—a reality that drove de Martino to paint the South as the victim of unequal development when compared to the better-off North of Italy. In his later work, especially *Sud e magia* (written in 1959), de Martino directly denounced the Southern upper classes and their inability to participate in the project of modernity as responsible for the remnants of magical elements in the Catholic doctrines popular in the South.⁵¹ He increasingly felt compelled to downgrade the cultural function of magic, and firmly upheld the superiority of the Christian approach to death as compared to the weeping of the *cafoni*. His claim concerning the South's victimhood, in other words, implied at the same time a negative evaluation of Southern culture. Even more consequential was the fact that his perspective indirectly questioned the current fascination with the "primitives," thus staunchly criticizing the heart of current ethnographic reevaluations. How did de Martino's thinking reach this point? What role did ethnology end up playing in his overall attempt to focus on the neglected?

No doubt, one of the aims of de Martino's early work had been to legitimize magic as a proper element in the discussion of philosophical systems in order to endow magic with a specific historiographical content. In this project, ethnology played a crucial role, in light of the limits of Western thought, when dealing with forms of culture that did not fit the blueprint of Enlightenment rationality. As de Martino wrote in his commemoration of Adolfo Omodeo, what was needed was "an enlargement of the historiographical horizon thanks to the inclusion of forms of civilization remote from our own."⁵² These forms of civilization could be understood rationally, if and when they were able to transcend situations of risk by creating values and acting in the world.

Originally, de Martino's main reason for approaching ethnology had been his desire to better understand contemporary life during particularly dark times (war, fascism, Nazism). Indeed, in spite of his harsh critique of the Durkheimian school, he eventually redeemed the French sociologists merely on the basis of their efforts to contextualize ethnology within contemporary culture. In his preface to a small volume by Durkheim, Hubert, and Mauss, first published in Italian by Einaudi in 1951, de Martino claimed that they were able "to raise this material to a

⁵¹ See *Sud e magia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1959). A religious history of the South, the book examines several popular magical practices, including the evil eye, possession, exorcism, etc. In the Preface, de Martino specifically makes the argument that the Neapolitan Enlightenment failed to participate in the critique of magic. In particular, it did not engage in the polemic against the most exterior aspects of confessional religion, and actually participated in creating the ideology of *jettatura* as a *compromesso* between magic and reason. Although de Martino recognizes that the economic conditions that had allowed the French Enlightenment to succeed were missing in the kingdom of Naples, he ascribes part of the responsibility for the magical aspects of Southern Catholicism to Neapolitan intellectuals as a hegemonic cultural force.

⁵² Cited in Carlo Ginzburg, "Momigliano and de Martino," *History and Theory* 30, no. 4 (December 1990), 45.

moment in the development of our cultural self-consciousness, transforming scattered, unrelated, and dead data into a series of links apt at making more understandable our own cultural destiny, our own history.”⁵³ Although de Martino continued to disdain the approach typical of the French school of sociology—a disdain that he had previously expressed in his critical remarks about Lévy-Bruhl—he displayed new tolerance for the school’s supposed “defects,” including its “positivist” presuppositions, in light of what he esteemed to be that school’s highest achievement: opening the way to transformation of the dialogue between the “primitives” and moderns into “a dialogue with ourselves” with the aim of deepening our “historicist humanism.”⁵⁴

Although his idealist formation could not but push de Martino to reject the Durkheimians’ insistence on the power of the social, he admired their contribution to ethnology as an indication that one could learn from the “primitives” about issues close to us. Ethnology helped us to situate ourselves as moderns and to retrace our historical journey. In this sense, de Martino’s approach to ethnology was already “vitiating” by a superseding quest for making sense of his own very different reality. Even his interest in magic depended on the larger purpose of identifying ways to avoid the crisis of presence; magic, not differently from religion, indicated the cultural movement away from nature’s constraining force. Magic, religion, and their syncretistic forms all represented “the request for psychological protection in the face of the extraordinary power of the negative in daily life.”⁵⁵ They denoted culture’s powerful overcoming of nature through the entering of values and through historical action.

It is becoming clear from this discussion that ethnology presented a double-edged challenge for de Martino. While it helped him to redeem subaltern cultures, it also showed the latter’s inadequacy when it came to overcoming both the crisis of presence and the hierarchical structure that separated the peasants from the bourgeois class. De Martino indeed saw religion as a more advanced response than magic to the death crisis, although both helped the individual constitute itself as presence. It is true that de Martino later abandoned his focus on magic/religion and committed himself more exclusively to studying the cultural specificities of the South. At that point, religion and magic were both conceived in their common status as obstacles to reason—the proof of failed rationalization, the survival of techniques that modern civilization was supposed to have made obsolete. Within this context, for de Martino ethnology increasingly became a tool that, while contributing to illuminate our “humanism,” negatively identified residual cultural practices. Keenly aware of the precarious destiny of vulnerable groups, de Martino approached the peasant classes in the Italian South in terms that highlighted the unfairness of their position. At the same time, however, his approach undermined the group’s social valence, and ended up dismissing the peasants’ cultural world and historical conditions to the point of advocating their annexation into the more composed worlds of Christianity (in part and if free from superstitions) and, more generally, modernity. In short, de Martino upended the peasants’ values on the assumption of both their inadequacy in the face of Western rationality and the need for them to align with the “superior” achievements of the West. In this controversial reading, Christianity and Western rationality became saviors of plebes deprived of the means to achieve higher degrees of cultural competence. The utopian impulse at the core of at-risk

⁵³ See “Prefazione” in Émile Durkheim, Henri Hubert, and Marcel Mauss, *Le origini dei poteri magici* (Turin: Einaudi, 1951), 10. The book contains the famous essay by Durkheim and Mauss, “Primitive Classification.”

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁵ De Martino, *Sud e magia*, 9.

cultures was obviously deflated by this reading, as was the critical potential of de Martino's ethnological approach to the South.⁵⁶

This is not to deny the importance of de Martino's original research into the "abnormal" forms of Western civilization. Indeed, as Cesare Cases points out, his analysis implicitly indicted the West's failure to embrace all equally in its illuminated circle.⁵⁷ Yet ethnology seemed to lose relevance in this interpretive framework and risked realigning itself with exoticism and voyeurism—something that de Martino was far from advocating, and had in fact adamantly tried to oppose, both in theory and in practice. I would argue that this contradictory outcome is symptomatic of an insurmountable divide that de Martino erected when he drew a definitive line between reason and unreason, and shunned the 'social' in favor of categories such as 'existence' and 'ideal.' The latter point is evident in his evaluation of the Durkheimians as extremely socio-centric, an evaluation that led de Martino to ignore those potential affinities that he shared with Marcel Mauss. Both Mauss and de Martino believed that expressive practices are part and parcel of humans' existential experience, serving to mediate one's relationship to the world in its natural state and historical becoming. Mauss's pioneering reflections on the funeral lament especially presented remarkable similarities with de Martino's analysis of ritual weeping. And yet there is no mention of this particular essay in de Martino's writings, whether for lack of information or out of misjudgment on his part. One reason might be that de Martino remained stubbornly attached to an idealist conception of the person and focused on the drama of individuation rather than community.⁵⁸ A short excursus on Mauss's study of funeral lament will help to elucidate the constraints that idealism imposed on de Martino's ethnological work.

Weeping as communication

In 1921, Mauss wrote an article for the *Journal de psychologie* with the title "L'Expression obligatoire des sentiments (rituels oraux funéraires australiens)."⁵⁹ It was the first in a series of essays that Mauss would dedicate to the relationship of sociology to psychology and biology within the context of his own innovative concept of "total man." This concept embedded subjects in a concrete reality that took into consideration the person's body as well as individual and collective conscience. Although the notion underlined the relevance of society's influence on seemingly private practices, it also emphasized the interconnectedness of the social with the mental and the physical, a claim that Mauss had already advanced in earlier works.

For some years, Mauss had been advocating an approach to the social that would overcome the division between rational logic and the logic of feelings or affectivity.⁶⁰ According to him,

⁵⁶ See "Introduzione di Cesare Cases" in *Il mondo magico*. One should, however, note that de Martino's anti-ethnocentric perspective also led him to contextualize folk magic within the overall history of Italy, identifying the role of hegemonic cultural, political and economic forces in the circulation and survival of magic practices. Once again, the history of magic could not for him be separated from the larger historical dynamics, and ethnology constituted a reminder for the West of its own cultural choices and journey. In *Magia e civiltà* (Milan: Garzanti, 1962), in particular, de Martino traces the trajectory of the Western notion of magic, and shows it to be the product of different attitudes and perspectives that developed in the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

⁵⁷ "Introduzione di Cesare Cases" in *Il mondo magico*, xvii.

⁵⁸ Cases sees de Martino as operating within idealism (ibid.). See also de Martino's discussion of the social in his "Prefazione" to Durkheim, Hubert, and Mauss, *Le origini dei poteri magici*, 11, where he suggests that socio-centrism is a residue of magical influence, a "theology" that tends to supersede both the individual and rationality.

⁵⁹ Marcel Mauss, *Oeuvres*, ed. Victor Karady, 3 vols. (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1968-1969), 3: 269-279.

⁶⁰ See Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, "Introduction à l'analyse de quelques phénomènes religieux," in Mauss, *Oeuvres*, vol. 1, 48.

sentiments can be logical, and only by illuminating the total psycho-physiological complex of the person—the relationship between mentality and organism—would it be possible to comprehend beliefs and behavior. In his visionary attempt to “recompose the whole,”⁶¹ Mauss looked at sociology as a science of relations; within this context, his interest in the case of ritual weeping among the Australians helped to show the impact of non-spontaneity (i.e. society) on the expression of feelings. Mauss argued, for instance, that funeral oral rituals followed a scripted ceremony in which screams and songs were performed in groups and allotted specific times. Furthermore, a restricted number of people were assigned the task of doing the crying, and most of the time only females constituted the selected group, depending on the kind of relationship that linked them to the dead person. As a matter of fact, people with specific relationships to the dead were obliged to specific expressions of grief, although those closer to the dead were not necessarily in charge of the orations.

The lament’s stereotypy, rhythm, and unison contributed to the constructed social character of the ritual mourning. Even when delivered emotionally, for example, the lament followed specific melodic rhythms. Weeping did not exalt the individual manifestation of feelings of sorrow and despair at the death of a close one; in contrast, it was regulated, codified, and externalized. The repetitiousness of texts testified to the rigidly scripted nature of the ritual. Texts followed a two-part repertoire in which appeals and calls to the dead were accompanied by tales about the deceased’s daily activities when still alive (this repertoire was also at times complemented by questions about why the dead abandoned the living.) Weeping was, in short, controlled; there were conventions about the content as well as the modes and times of lament. All these elements suggested the unmistakable social aspect of the practice, and Mauss ultimately concluded that weeping, as a highly ritualized and regulated response to someone’s death, was a form of language, an expression of grief that people understood: “these cries are like sentences and words. One has to say them, but one has to say them because the whole group understands them. It is essentially a *symbolique*.”⁶² As people shared experiences, they also communicated. Weeping was a sign, or as Bruno Karsenti argues, weeping is a social act because it is an act of language; it is a public rather than private affair.⁶³ The interjections that punctuated Australian funeral songs were the most evident concrete proof of a dialogue; they attested to the presence of an interlocutor and a public.

The social aspect of funeral weeping did not lead Mauss to interpret funeral rituals, in the manner of Durkheim, as a reaffirmation of social solidarity—i.e. the link uniting vulnerable groups in the face of a crisis.⁶⁴ For Mauss, a ritual lament was not an effect of the power of the social, but the element that called for the social (one might evoke the notion of *interpeller* in the Althusserian sense) and actively produced the social through individual emotions, not by

⁶¹ Ibid., 59.

⁶² “L’Expression obligatoire des sentiments,” in *Oeuvres*, 3: 277.

⁶³ Bruno Karsenti, *L’Homme total: sociologie, anthropologie et philosophie chez Marcel Mauss* (Paris: PUF, 1997), 179.

⁶⁴ Mourning as a way to understand the social had been a strong point in Durkheim’s work. Durkheim had looked at what he called piacular rites, those reserved for sad ceremonies, to explain the ambiguity of the sacred, namely its ability to inspire simultaneously love and horror. Mourning, with its ritualized expressions in collective ceremonies, offered Durkheim the best vehicle to account for the split nature of the sacred. Durkheim pointed out the obligatory nature of mourning as an example of the role rituals play in absorbing the crisis brought upon society by uncontrollable and unforeseeable events. Durkheim’s ultimate goal was to reinforce the notion of the communion uniting individuals of the same social group. Mauss’s approach to mourning had gone much further than Durkheim’s, even if Mauss never reclaimed his innovative role away from his uncle’s orthodox teaching.

suppressing them or showing their sincerity. Moving away from his more famous uncle's position, Mauss emphasized the public orientation of emotions and pointed to a system of correspondences between social and individual.⁶⁵

Based on one of de Martino's few references to Durkheim and Mauss, we know that—whether or not he was aware of Mauss's work—he disagreed with the theory of language as communication.⁶⁶ In a passage from *Naturalismo e storicismo* in which he attacked Durkheim's conception of language, de Martino revealed that he did not appreciate Durkheim's lack of consideration for the individual contribution to language. More specifically, he critiqued Durkheim's definition of language as a “social fact,” “a system of signs fixed in the vocabulary and independent of the individual.”⁶⁷ De Martino warned that one should not confuse communication and expression, because expression was the only way to prove the individual dimension of language and therefore to maintain the primacy of the categories of the spirit. As idealism remained unabated in de Martino's work, we could speculate that it forced him to draw a dividing line between person and community, while hampering him from overcoming the stark opposition between reason and unreason, progress and regression.

Thus we come to the paradox that de Martino was at one and the same time the best interpreter of subaltern cultures—the life of the *vinti*—and their most devastating critic. His idea of *riscattarsi*, of achieving the level of the dominant culture, undermined the legitimacy of the subalterns' practices, or still better, required that they be more oriented to the creation of new values on par with those of the larger (national) collectivity. Within this context, de Martino saw magic as serving to confirm the critically vital role of the sacred within a community at risk. However, magic as compared to religion remained a crippled form of the sacred, an expression of the vulnerability of those peoples and societies operating within that cultural system. Magic did not keep up with historical becoming; it rather subscribed to a notion of the sacred that was historically frozen. The Italian South constituted a classic example of this situation. As it struggled to join the national conversation amidst the remnants of past inequities and differences, the South represented an “unfinished” mode of reason (if one can echo Habermas's qualification of modernity as an “unfinished project”). De Martino seemed torn between the need for the sacred in order to ensure being or presence, and the impulse to promote reason as the most viable means to achieve the life of the spirit. At this theoretical crux, de Martino vacillated but increasingly appeared to opt for the second alternative, which fit with his opposition to the idea of two different histories: the popular and the learned, the South and the North, paganism and Catholicism. For this reason, although he recognized the creativity of peasants' syncretic forms of religiosity—the incorporation of Christianity and official religion into traditional sacred practices—de Martino refused to examine the ritual lament aesthetically as a poetic form. That approach risked looking at the *mondo popolare* as a separate and relatively autonomous reality; it undermined the fact that the history of magical-religious practices in the South was tightly linked to the larger history of a growing religious civilization.⁶⁸ It also neglected to point out that the South had suffered discrimination within that history.

⁶⁵ Karsenti, *L'Homme total*, 189.

⁶⁶ Besides the preface mentioned above, de Martino's references to Durkheim include a four-page extract from Durkheim's book, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, in his anthology *Magia e civiltà*, although he disagreed with Durkheim's view of magic and its difference from religion.

⁶⁷ *Naturalismo e storicismo*, 52.

⁶⁸ De Martino writes about a “civiltà religiosa in espansione.” See *La terra del rimorso: contributo a una storia religiosa del Sud* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1961), 27.

To summarize: ethnographic work on ritual emotions provided de Martino with a critical tool for elaborating cultural interpretations of societies at risk. He was interested in the world of the oppressed and, more specifically, as he wrote in the notes that he took during his research in Lucania, he was driven by an “interest in cultural formations born of the experience of a radical existential precariousness and coming of age in the struggle against the anguish of maintaining their personhood in the face of critical moments in historical existence.”⁶⁹ Convinced that individuation is a process that takes place in a struggle between nature and culture, de Martino thought that the era of magic best exemplified this relationship. The era of magic, however, also showed that the crisis of presence was much more severe whenever cultural advances failed to reach oppressed social groups in less developed geographical areas. The Italian South was a case in point—an example of late or failed modernization, both in cultural and economic terms, marked by people’s painful emotional bouts and a high risk of loss of presence. For de Martino, the response to the precarious conditions in which the subalterns lived was unequivocal. Relics of a folkloric-religious worldview needed to be overcome and replaced by the belief system founded on reason already dominant in the culture at large. Those under the yoke of magical-religious beliefs deserved the opportunity to ascend to the level of rationality required in order for anyone to be in history (*esserci nella storia*). All of de Martino’s works express this intellectual position, including *La terra del rimorso*, a book on the phenomenon of *tarantolati* in Puglia that was published three years after the study on the Lucanian lament.

Tarantismo and remorse

La terra del rimorso explicitly addressed the reasons for de Martino’s original stance on the Italian South through an epistemological engagement with the question of both ethnography’s and the ethnographer’s role. At first, de Martino spelled out his view that the voyage into “foreign” realities needed to be driven not by attraction for the exotic but by a “passion” linked to “a vital problem of the civilization to which one belongs.”⁷⁰ Subsequently (citing Claude Lévi-Strauss), he claimed that the ethnologist studied these realities in order to question “the system in which one is born and raised.”⁷¹ Such analysis, he added, was not intended to attack our civilization; it rather aimed at enhancing the West’s humanistic project. De Martino supported Lévi-Strauss’s statement that “the condition of the ethnographer is a symbol of expiation,” and the title of his book on the *tarantolati*, *La terra del rimorso*, seemed to address exactly this issue.⁷² For de Martino, Italy faced the South as its “remorse,” the product of its failures, and the outcome of its uneven development.⁷³ The South’s eccentricity, in other words, was directly linked to Italy’s overall history and should not be considered an isolated, autonomous phenomenon. The ethnologist’s responsibility was to expose this connection by engaging with the South not as if on a mythical voyage in search of exotic pieces of truth, but in order to raise awareness of the limits within which our own culture rests. Ethnology implied and required social-political engagement. That is why it led de Martino right into the thorny issue of the “Southern question.” And in following that same logic de Martino could not but advocate

⁶⁹ See “Note di viaggio,” in *Mondo popolare*, 107.

⁷⁰ *La terra del rimorso*, 20.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ The title, however, also played with the double meaning of the term *rimorso* (“bit again” or “second bite”).

reintegrating the oppressed into the dominant culture, in order for these victims to be able “to be in history” and to put an end to their suffering and existential drama.

The Lucanian lament had provided de Martino with a strong example of the extreme pain and risks of loss of presence that, in the precariousness of their existence, the peasants underwent. *La terra del rimorso* offered an even more poignant case of the impact of religious-folkloric relics on peasant communities, especially women. A brief discussion of the phenomenon of *tarantismo* will elucidate further de Martino’s intellectual choice to advocate the absorption of the South’s “outmoded” cultural models into Italy’s mainstream culture.

In *La terra del rimorso*, de Martino examined *tarantismo* as another case of emotionally charged responses to critical existential moments.⁷⁴ He described the phenomenon as a peasant-religious formation characterized by the symbolism of the tarantula, a venomous spider whose victims could be freed of the effects of its deadly bite through periodic rituals, generally taking place at the beginning of summer and involving extensive use of music, colors, and dance.⁷⁵ The persons affected by *tarantismo* were normally young women of marrying age who suddenly became overwhelmed by intense forms of suffering to the point of losing consciousness.⁷⁶ In need of being reintegrated into normal life, the women were relieved of their symptoms through a complex ritual led by musicians who would play different combinations of vibrations with their instruments, sometimes for days on end, in an attempt to alleviate the victims’ distress. The music, called the *pizzica*, and generally produced by the *tamburello* (although the violin and other instruments were also often used), had a frantic rhythm, wild tones, and was often played at the victim’s house or in the village’s main square. The ritual comprised a hectic dance by the *tarantolata* (or *pizzicata*) to the sound of the *pizzica*; this phase served the task of identifying the particular spider that had bitten the woman. Afterwards, the *tarantolata* played a game of colors in which, through often violent gestures against the surrounding people who sported different colored cloth, she showed attraction for a specific color, supposedly identified with the spider that attacked her. In this part of the ritual, the woman was prone to convulsions, became possessed, tended to isolate herself from other people, and behaved as if impersonating the tarantula. The end of the ritual included the elimination of the tarantula, symbolically trampled on by the victim.⁷⁷

Against prevailing interpretations of *tarantismo* as a psychopathology, and in line with his idealist formation, de Martino made a strong case for contextualizing the phenomenon of the *tarantolate* historically.⁷⁸ The subtitle of *La terra del rimorso*, not coincidentally, was *Contributo a una storia religiosa del Sud*.⁷⁹ De Martino traced *tarantismo*’s origins back to the Middle Ages within an expanding Christian civilization, and described its decline at the time of

⁷⁴ De Martino discussed *tarantismo* as displaying the symptoms of a medical condition called arachnidism (which is caused by a spider bite), even though the victims were not actually bitten by a spider.

⁷⁵ De Martino emphasized that the *tarantolate*’s psychotic symptoms recurred annually after the summer harvest season, and argued that this link should be examined at the symbolic level.

⁷⁶ Some of the reasons for this condition were thought to be psychological problems caused by sexual frustrations and unhappy love, among others.

⁷⁷ See the documentary *La Taranta (1962)*, directed by Gianfranco Mingozzi, with music by Diego Carpitella and commentary by Salvatore Quasimodo, YouTube video, posted by Vittorio Ciurlia, June 10, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PTi_hAdwsR0.

⁷⁸ The fact that the crises of *tarantismo* were seasonal and reenacted cyclically by the same victim indicated a “cultural determinism” (*condizionamento culturale*), according to de Martino, reflecting the impact of tradition (*La terra del rimorso*, 48).

⁷⁹ The English translation does not maintain this subtitle. See *The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism*, trans. Dorothy Louise Zinn (London: Free Association Books, 2005).

the Enlightenment, followed by its subsequent absorption within Catholic rituals.⁸⁰ He argued that *tarantismo*, similar to the case of the funeral lament, had become disconnected from its roots and emptied of cultural meaning. Although, as with all rituals, it was supposed to be based on a de-historicization process to allow the overcoming of the crisis of presence, the practice was now looked on as anachronistic in the face of broader historical developments. Its orbit, tied as it was to the larger history of Western civilization, had come to be caught between two great forces: on the one hand, Christianity, and, on the other, science—both of these were hegemonic forces that reduced *tarantismo* to a mere residue or cultural relict. Ultimately, de Martino made the case that *tarantismo* needed to be seen within the history of the conflict between Christianity and paganism in the South. In this guise, *tarantismo* also constituted a sign of the limits of hegemonic power-blocs at imposing their dogmas on this part of Italy, even as they contaminated the indigenous cultural forms.⁸¹

For de Martino, the historical-religious contextualization of *tarantismo* was crucial because it exposed the South's "misery" as the result of specific historical junctures—a combination of factors involving more than just an economic perspective—that had left the South's spiritual life at a standstill. On the one hand, *tarantismo* had run its course and stood as an anachronism in the face of history's rapid forward march. On the other hand, the remnants of a vanishing *tarantismo* exposed the psychological burden suffered by those whose recourse to ossified magical-religious practices only temporarily reduced the risks raised by the crisis of presence that they experienced. The exaggerated, uncontrolled, and violent practices through which the *tarantolate* expressed their malaise and embodied it indicated the heavy toll that they had to pay in order to overcome the precariousness of their lives. The magnitude of their pain, visible in the extreme affective states that pushed them to engage in these rituals, negatively equaled the exacting nature of the magic-religious beliefs on which they drew in order to respond to a critical moment in their existence.

Research on *tarantismo* confirmed to de Martino that Southern Italy was the victim of crippling beliefs and practices that were both psychologically oppressive and symptomatic of an uneven socioeconomic progress. *Tarantismo* also heightened de Martino's belief that ethnology made sense, and was ethically and "scientifically" justified, only when it looked at religious-cultural residues as testimonials of the destructive realities caused by hegemonic forces, and not as mere isolated folkloric peculiarities or poetic-artistic expressions. In de Martino's view, ethnology had a responsibility towards emancipation and needed to be driven by political interest, which he expressed with his desire to be "in the *same* history" as his "subjects," or to share together "one only common human history."⁸² As he poignantly commented with reference to the *lamentatrice* Rosa during his research on the Lucanian laments: "I can't avoid thinking

⁸⁰ As it was adopted by the Catholic Church, the cult began to be located in the Chapel of St. Paul in the town of Galatina in the Salento region of Apulia. The music and dance were, however, banned from the church. See *La Taranta*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PTi_hAdwsR0.

⁸¹ For more recent assessments of *tarantismo*, see Brizio Montinaro, *San Paolo dei serpenti: analisi di una tradizione* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1996); Giulietta Livraghi Verdesca Zain, *Tre santi e una campagna: culti magico-religiosi nel Salento fine Ottocento* (Bari: Laterza, 1994); Gino Leonardo Di Mitri, *Storia biomedica del tarantismo nel XVIII secolo* (Florence: Olschki, 2006); and Jerri Daboo, *Ritual, Rapture, and Remorse: A Study of Tarantism and 'Pizzica' in Salento* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010). On trance and music, see Gilbert Rouget, *Music and Trance: a Theory of the Relations between Music and Possession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); and *Performing Ecstasies: Music, Dance, and Ritual in the Mediterranean*, ed. Luisa Del Giudice and Nancy van Deusen (Ottawa: Institute of Mediaeval Music, 2005).

⁸² "Note di viaggio," in *Mondo popolare*, 123, 124.

that only a wretched society could have reduced us, Rosa and I, in such a way that we meet as if we were inhabitants of different planets.”⁸³

While reflexivity deepened de Martino’s sense of commitment to his fellow (oppressed) humans, ethnology led him to the South and the “Southern question” via an analysis of religious history.⁸⁴ Both *Morte e pianto rituale* and *La terra del rimorso*, even if structured differently, suggest that ethnology’s critical potential rests for de Martino on its ability to uncover situations such as the one in Southern Italy displaying the limits of a “civilizing” process gone awry. In his role of ethnologist, de Martino saw it as his responsibility to call on Southerners, and especially the peasant classes, to “*riscattarsi*,” to reach, that is, the level of cultural mastery that, by ensuring control over emotionally devastating events and the limits imposed by nature, would enable them to be in the world. For de Martino, redemption involved overcoming residual folkloric forms and magic-religious practices to the end of acquiring the right to participate in history.

Final remarks

In 1963, only four years after its Italian debut, de Martino’s *Sud e magia* was translated and published in French, followed three years later by *La terra del rimorso*.⁸⁵ A significant milestone in de Martino’s career (if we consider that his work did not have much dissemination outside Italy, and even in Italy was not particularly appreciated), the introduction to the French public of the Italian ethnologist’s work was sponsored by the prestigious Gallimard publishing house on the recommendation of Michel Leiris, an ex-surrealist, ethnographer, and prominent cultural figure in twentieth-century French intellectual life. Leiris shared with de Martino an interest in ethnography conceived as focused not on differences or “curiosities,” but on treating the research “object” as embedded within a larger history—whether colonialism in Leiris’s case or modernization in de Martino’s case. Leiris had also collected material on phenomena of possession in Africa during his participation in the Dakar-Djibouti mission (1931-1933), and we may presume that de Martino’s study of the *tarantolate* struck a chord with him. The analysis of *tarantismo* raised crucial questions for any engaged ethnographer involved in the study of emotions and rituals; even more importantly, de Martino’s discussion of *tarantismo* seemed to support Leiris’s earlier intuition about the need to overcome “false” dilemmas, such as authentic and inauthentic, instinctual and scripted, natural and artificial, when confronted with the cult of possession.⁸⁶ One could further speculate that for Leiris the case of *tarantismo* confirmed the significance of the reason/unreason dichotomy for any understanding of emotionally (and also physically) demanding rituals within the economy of existence of societies at risk. That is, at least, what Leiris seemed to suggest when reflecting on his participation in the *Collège de sociologie*—a self-constituted study group that, inspired by Durkheim’s and Mauss’s respective

⁸³ Ibid., 130 (“e non posso evitare il pensiero che solo una società sciagurata può averci ridotto a tanto, Rosa e io, da incontrarci come se fossimo abitanti di diversi pianeti”).

⁸⁴ On ethnology, ethnocentrism, and cultural relativism, see de Martino’s discussion, “Promesse e minacce dell’etnologia,” in de Martino, *Furore, simbolo, valore* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1962), 65-103.

⁸⁵ A third book of de Martino’s, *Il mondo magico*, was translated into French in 1971.

⁸⁶ On this issue, see Irene Albers, “Mimesis and Alterity: Michel Leiris’s Ethnography and Poetics of Spirit Possession,” *French Studies* 62, no. 3 (2008): 271-89.

research on the “primitives” and led by Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois in the late 1930s, set out to explore the nature of the sacred in modern societies.⁸⁷

Central to the *Collège*'s works was the figure of a man without his head, the *acéphale*, which, as Leiris specifically stated, represents a man whose faculty of reason has been amputated, as in the case of a possessed person—i.e. someone who has lost his head while in a trance. Leiris apparently made these reflections after rereading the texts of the *Collège* for the 1979 edition of the group's collected work, concluding that his own ethnographic interest in possession was probably connected to the theme of reason and its other.⁸⁸ At the *Collège*, as he put it, they were trying to “rationalize the Surrealist valorization of the irrational.”⁸⁹ Trance, possession, and voodoo were all part of this larger phenomenon of consuming oneself through an irrational leap away from the regulated pattern of the system of production. Leiris saw a critical impulse in the loss of reason achieved during a trance—losing oneself was an implicit, if inarticulate, form of contestation that transfigured “poverty” and became a mode of “defensive aestheticization.”⁹⁰ Although he was aware of the potential risks of romanticizing the “other” inherent in such a view, Leiris took up the challenge and opted to engage in ethnological field-experience through a poetic approach.

For de Martino, such a perspective was not in the cards; in contrast, reason was the ultimate goal of his cultural-political program for reassessing the Southern question. The cultural work of *destorificazione* necessary to maintain presence, which de Martino had witnessed being carried out in the South, signaled the articulation of force-fields (on the one hand, magic; on the other hand, social and power relations) that contributed to maintaining Southern Italy in a precarious situation. Within this context, the ritual lament stood as a sign of unequal progress or, in other words, as an incomplete degree of cultural competence in the face of advancing rationality. The same went for *tarantismo*.⁹¹ Thus, although both Leiris and de Martino focused on possession, what stood between them was de Martino's unassailable conviction that residual cultural forms had a negative valence due to their irrationality and uncontrolled nature. Whereas Leiris regarded possession as an aestheticization of the life of the poor, de Martino saw only injustice and backwardness, i.e. the result of the unequal development thanks to which a portion of the Italian populace had failed to emerge from their local cultures onto the national scene.

It is true that at the end of his life de Martino opened up to a different perspective on the dichotomy ‘reason/unreason,’ as he confessed to Cases in a bedside conversation held at the hospital.⁹² In this dialogue with the Italian literary critic, de Martino addressed the scholarly

⁸⁷ On the *Collège de sociologie*, see *The College of Sociology 1937-39*, ed. Denis Hollier (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), and Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Rethinking the Political: The Sacred, Aesthetic Politics, and the Collège de Sociologie* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011).

⁸⁸ See Daniel Fabre, “Un Rendez-vous manqué: Ernesto De Martino et sa réception en France,” in *L'Homme* 39, no. 151 (1999), 211. Leiris wrote in his *Journal*: “Mon intérêt pour la possession (perdre la tête dans la transe) se rattache à cela [...] L'acéphale, c'est l'homme décapité (= amputé de sa raison).”

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*: “Peut-être pourrait-on dire de ce qui s'est fait autour de Bataille—*Documents*, ‘Collège de Sociologie’ etc.—qu'il s'agissait de rationaliser la valorisation surréaliste de l'irrationnel.”

⁹⁰ Fabre, “Un Rendez-vous manqué?,” 218.

⁹¹ An anecdote recounted by Vittorio Lanternari about a talk de Martino and he were supposed to give on voodoo, on the occasion of a show in Rome by a Haitian dance group, is quite revelatory of de Martino's intellectual position. When Lanternari asked de Martino what he was thinking of saying, de Martino replied, “I will talk about our national voodoo, tarantism.” See Vittorio Lanternari, “La mia alleanza con Ernesto de Martino,” in *Ernesto de Martino nella cultura europea*, ed. Clara Gallini and Marcello Massenzio (Naples: Liguori, 1997), 102.

⁹² See “Un colloquio con Ernesto de Martino,” in Cesare Cases, *Il testimone secondario: saggi e interventi sulla cultura del Novecento* (Turin: Einaudi, 1985), 48-55.

debate between Marxists and Catholics and faulted it for ignoring a key question: what was the meaning of religious experience for those living in the post-Cartesian era? De Martino asked: could the crisis of presence be overcome solely by the rational domination over nature, or would not religion reemerge at the limits of a rationalized world, that is, in those marginalized groups that lacked the ability to control the crisis of presence? As Cases states, de Martino pointed to the need for a secularized symbolism as guarantor for the integration of the individual into the social world. Rationalization and bureaucratization would not be able by themselves to respond to people's needs. Death, in particular, could not avoid being met with drama, and rather called for a symbolic solution.⁹³

This was quite a turnaround for de Martino, and it is difficult to predict how he would have developed this new perspective had he not died so prematurely.⁹⁴ In the end, de Martino seemed to recognize that the nature/culture split was not and could not be mended in modernity. The crisis of presence was an ongoing fact of life, and the individual could never become definitely absorbed or incorporated into the species. Yet this conclusion does not necessarily shake the foundations of de Martino's ethnological scaffolding, nor did it lead him to consider residual folkloric forms as active alternatives to the dominant culture. On the contrary, the inevitability and negativity of a presence in flux might make the need to lift the emotional burdens carried by societies at risk even more urgent. For de Martino, ethnology's contribution to the Southern question required a sober acknowledgment of the taxing burden that ritualized affective states exerted on the existence of fragile social formations. Exaggerated weeping as the expression of the dominated subject's emotional misery had no role for an emancipated public waiting to make its mark in history.⁹⁵

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⁹³ According to de Martino, Marxism had been unable to take into account the drama that would still exist in a socialist society. The issue also remained whether religion could still play a role in modernity after losing its central place as the glue of the social—i.e. as that which holds everything together.

⁹⁴ On the possibility that de Martino put into question his previous writings in his posthumous work, see Severi, "Une Pensée inachevée."

⁹⁵ In the famous passage in which he defined religion as the opium of the people, Marx wrote: "*Religious* suffering is at the same time an *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering" (italicized in the original). See "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 54. Thanks to Richard L. Kaplan for directing me to this quote.

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