

The Persistence of the Sacred

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The *sacred* has occupied a prominent position in research in the humanities and social sciences over the course of the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Confounding the confident forecasts of the prophets of modernism (Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, among others), the importance of the sacred has not diminished with the passage through the respective phases of industrial and consumer capitalism. On the contrary, from today's vantage point it is now evident that the overarching narrative of modernity—the myth of the progressive and emancipatory secularization of the West—is fundamentally myopic in regard to the persistence of the sacred.¹ The latter was supposed to release its grip on the Western mind as science gradually took the place of faith, or, in other words, as transcendental reason replaced transcendence, a process presumed to be underway since the Renaissance.² This account of the overcoming of the sacred, in which the sacred was destined in the West to be cast aside like a worn-out shoe or shed like the old skin of a snake, was the *grand récit* of the demystification or “disenchantment” (Weber) of the modern world.³ According to this narrative, disenchantment through the power of science, technology, and rational thought was to mark the liberation of the human mind from the shackles of superstition, as well as to signal a key transformational moment in history: namely the transition from the archaic age of myth and magical thinking to that of enlightened reason, which would figure as “a point of no return” in relation to the ever-receding origin.

A number of key early- to mid-twentieth-century thinkers, including among many others Émile Durkheim (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1912), Rudolf Otto (*The Idea of the Holy*, 1917) and Mircea Eliade (*The Sacred and the Profane*, 1957), nevertheless have emphasized the persistence of the sacred in modernity, although none of them agree upon the causes or effects of this phenomenon. For Durkheim, the French sociologist who is still the single most influential thinker among these, the sacred stands at the very heart of religion, for the former is by definition that which is excluded from the everyday routine world of the profane. Religion is that which emerges *from* the human experience of the sacred, which now appears as an origin or presence to which we have no other means of access. The ritual and symbolic order of religion has been generated in order to surround the sacred and to protect it from contact with everything impure and unholy. Religion thus connects a community of believers, linking them together around its ceremonies and rites designed to envelop and preserve the sacred as the highest expression of that community's values, whatever these may be. In Durkheim's optic, religious believers make something sacred by doing, not just by thinking or feeling: they participate in rituals and ceremonial acts that confer sanctity upon that which has been designated by common accord as beyond contamination by the

¹ A penetrating recent analysis of the myth of secularization may be found in Vincent P. Pecora, *Secularization Without End: Beckett, Mann, Coetzee* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2015).

² Massimo Rosati, *Ritual and the Sacred: A Neo-Durkheimian Analysis of Politics, Religion, and the Self* (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 8.

³ This is not to suggest that Weber fully approved of the “disenchantment of the world,” for in fact he never overcame his ambivalence concerning what he saw as the waning of the sacred in modernity.

profane. And the power over individuals of such collective practices, even with the apparent decline of traditional religious belief in the West, has not vanished. Modernity has not made the sacred disappear, in other words, but has continued to depend upon ritual and ceremony—and to invoke “sacredness,” however remote it may now seem to be—to structure the subject’s experience. Rather than validate the master narrative of the triumphant secularization of the West, i.e. the rise of the autonomous self who freely exercises the power of reason, religion and modernity should instead be understood to share often porous boundaries, and to sustain a mutual influence.

The sacred would seem inseparable from religion, although the former may remain forever invisible to—or beyond the reach of—the faithful, exactly as the Ark of the Covenant is held to be hidden in the inner sanctum of one of the many hundreds of Christian churches scattered around Ethiopia, or as transubstantiation is said to occur mysteriously but invariably—the miracle of the Eucharist—each time that communion is given in a Catholic Mass. This issue of *California Italian Studies* will look at the entanglement of the sacred with religion in Italy over more than seven centuries, from the Middle Ages to the present day. This intertwining may be traced through its many manifestations in ritual and performance (prayers, processions, relics, feasts, sacraments, drama), devotional art (literature, painting, sculpture, architecture and the decorative arts, patronage), pious institutions (the Curia, monasteries, seminaries, hospitals, confraternities, schools and parishes), politics (republics, dynastic regimes, the papacy, Fascism, liberal democracy), and so on. Even in contemporary culture, however, the sacred may persist where it might not otherwise be expected to, for instance in avant-garde art, postmodernist philosophy or feminist fiction. Theology—as the science of the divine—does not figure prominently in the essays in this issue, although it is tangential to many of them, perhaps most evidently in the case of Umberto Eco’s contribution. If the sacred itself remains elusive, unknowable in itself, it is nonetheless a constitutive element of any attempt to define subjectivity within the Italian tradition, even if only in the form of the negation of the sacred (as in the various currents of nihilism or Marxism, for instance). For Italy is the country where, more than any other in Western Europe, religion has permeated all levels of social, cultural, and political life, including mass culture and the media, thus keeping the sacred in play to the present day. The work of the postmodern philosopher Gianni Vattimo is exemplary in this regard. In the 1970s and 1980s he adopted and revised the concept of *Verwindung*—which Heidegger had appropriated from Hegel—to influentially define postmodernity as a “distorting” or “twisting” of the tradition rather than its Hegelian overcoming (*Überwindung*) through progress. In Vattimo’s version of postmodernity some traces of the historical past are invariably borne into the present day, although that past is now weakened, if not exhausted, and largely drained of its original plenitude. Almost as if to prove this point—and despite the hermeneutical nihilism of his position affirming the “death of God,” or perhaps because of it—Vattimo’s later writings extensively engage with the sacred and, more specifically, Catholicism.⁴

⁴ See, among others, Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988; Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988 [paperback 1991]); *Belief*, trans. Luca D’Isanto and David Webb (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); and (with René Girard) *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith: A Dialogue*, ed. Pierpaolo Antonello and trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

Since late antiquity the population of the Italian peninsula and islands has been predominantly Roman Catholic, although Jews, Muslims, Orthodox Christians, and Protestants alike have played important roles in the history of religion there. It should therefore not be surprising that the great majority of the essays in this issue address Catholicism in some way. Against all odds, the Church remains the last living institution to have survived the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West, and its significance in Italy over the centuries would be difficult to overestimate. The incontrovertible fact that Italy never experienced a true revolution (unlike many other European nation-states) may be considered either a cause or an effect of the Church's prominent role in the affairs of the peninsula and its inhabitants. Despite the Vatican's sway over Italians past and present, however, and despite the passage of some seventeen hundred years since Christianity became the official religion of Rome, pre-Christian religious attitudes and practices never entirely disappeared. To give just one example, popular religious cults of the saints, frequently drawing on originally "pagan" beliefs and rituals, continue to flourish in various parts of the country, often in alliance with Church and State authorities. The territories around Mount Vesuvius, for instance, provide numerous examples of these cults—of which St Januarius, patron saint of Naples, is the best known—and of their integration into the contemporary social and cultural life of the local inhabitants.⁵ The recent waves of immigrants from the Middle East and Africa will undoubtedly bring further changes to institutional religion, and to the role of the sacred, in Italy; for the past two decades the largest mosque in Europe has stood in Rome (the land for the mosque was originally donated by the City of Rome in 1974).

If the sacred and religion are profoundly important for understanding the history of Italian society and culture, this has nonetheless often been a blind spot in intellectual inquiry both within and beyond the borders of Italy. Of course, for evident reasons scholars of the Middle Ages have rightly devoted a great deal of analysis to the topic. From Romanesque architecture to the *Divine Comedy*, from the great monastic orders to the communes, from feudal lords and peasants to the urban classes, belief and faith have been widely acknowledged to play a central role in nearly all arenas of human activity in medieval Italy. Starting with the mid-nineteenth century, however, Western scholarship began to privilege the master narrative of secularization in regard to the study of the Renaissance, especially in Florence and Venice. The revival of classical antiquity that began in the late Trecento, both in regard to historical awareness of pagan culture and the democratic ideals of classical Athens, was seen in this teleological optic to provide the very cornerstone of modernity. Indeed, the term often preferred today to designate the 1350-1700 period, "early modernity," would in fact seem to suggest this much, i.e. that there exists a rupture between the intensely religious focus of the Middle Ages and *all* the phases of modernity to follow. Particularly from the Enlightenment onward, progressive intellectuals in Italy have tended to posit an essential discontinuity between the supposedly retrograde forms of religious life and its institutions, on the one hand, and the emergence of a modern Italian State, on the other hand. The Futurists of the 1930s and early 1940s, with their twin interests in modernity and spirituality, constitute a notable exception to this trend. The dominance of the PCI (*Partito Comunista Italiano*) in

⁵ See Helen Hills, "Beyond Mere Containment: The Neapolitan Treasury Chapel of San Gennaro and the Matter of Materials," *California Italian Studies* 3.1 (2012), last accessed 20 June 2015: <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/7d49p517>.

postwar Italian culture further favored this perspective, which ultimately reduced religion—as per Marx’s and Engel’s analysis—to a form of false consciousness or mystification of the real.

This, however, presumes that the sacred is something instrumental, a tool of domination that has been and can be exploited by the powerful. Over the centuries, in this view (influenced by Machiavelli’s scandalous remarks on religion in Chapter XVIII of *The Prince*) the Italian elites ably manipulated the masses through appeals to faith in order to defend and promote their own interests. Following the many revisionary studies of the past thirty-odd years by historians, art historians and others, which have given us a far more complex and nuanced picture of not only the subject, but the scope of his or her agency in early modern and modern Italy, we are now in a position to grasp that this was never quite the case. As Tanya Kevorkian has recently argued about Baroque religious practices, for instance, it would be a mistake to assume that “rulers’ strategies were implemented” as mandated. Rather, “when actual practices and interactions between elites and ordinary people are examined, a more complex picture emerges: rulers and clerics were not a monolithic group; they often adjusted to popular practices; and major initiatives from above might fail. Clerics were sometimes at odds with rulers, aggressively pursuing agendas of their own. And while rulers aimed to control those they governed by manipulating religion, townspeople and peasants often evaded official policies or used them to their advantage.”⁶ In other words, one of the foci for recent research into the sacred in Italy is the matter of how much, or how little, the authorities may have mattered to the faithful or to one another. In Issue 1 of this volume of *California Italian Studies*, Simonetta Marin’s remarkable and scrupulously documented essay on the diffusion of the new devotion of the Sacred Heart in the Po valley of Northern Italy in the eighteenth century (“The Fleishy Heart of Jesus”) explores these very same issues, such as local evasion of official policies, clashes within the hierarchy of the Church, and tensions between Church and State over popular religious fervor, whose profound consequences for modern Western Christianity are with us even now. The essays in this same issue by Alessandro Arienzo, Pasquale Palmieri, and Margaret Bell, among others, examine similar challenges to religious authority posed by popular practices and beliefs in different parts of the peninsula.

Starting in the Middle Ages, but with increasing frequency in the modern era, we may also detect a recurrent tension between the sacred as an ineffable experience, on the one hand, and the various cultural institutions that seek to give it a form that will last though time and sustain a community, on the other. Perhaps because the Catholic Church and its particular formalization of religion is undeniably most deeply ingrained in Italian culture, we also find in Italy a long lineage of religious rebels and mystics, from Saint Francis to the Futurist Fillia (both of whom are discussed in this issue of *CIS*). For these devout figures, sometimes ostracized or persecuted for their heterodox views, ecclesiastical administrations and governments could dictate the rules of religious life, but not the word of God, without which there is no faith. This divine language could only be heard with the greatest effort, and only within the heart and soul of true believers, because in the world it seemed to be increasingly inaudible: and with this growing silence the Christian tradition was in danger of becoming merely the past. In the 1980s the

⁶ Tanya Kevorkian, *Baroque Piety: Religion, Society and Music in Leipzig, 1650-1750* (Burlington, VT; Aldershot, Hampshire, U.K.: Ashgate, 2007), 4.

French historian and anthropologist Michel de Certeau laid the theoretical groundwork for many contemporary studies of mysticism and the “mystic voice” in works such as *La Fable mystique*.⁷ Although he was not primarily concerned with the Italian mystics, de Certeau made it possible to recognize that the attempt to give voice to the sacred involved not a fixed body of doctrines, but rather the opening up of a field in which specific procedures and processes (prayers, poems, bodily regimes, etc.) can be deployed toward this elusive end. This insight has been reaffirmed by recent revisionist studies that more generally reexamine the relationship of the subject and his or her agency to institutions. In different ways, historians such as Adamson or Banti have invited us to reconsider the role of religious sentiment and procedure not only in terms of artistic objects or their production and consumption, for example, but in the often fraught relation that the subject’s religious emotions and practices—sometimes intimate and sometimes public—may have to both the Church and the political order in Italy.⁸

Hence if there is one element that runs like a red thread through the essays in this special issue of *CIS*, linking them together despite their very varied subject matter, it is the effort to remap the approach to the sacred in Italy, often leading us along unexpected highways and byways: oranges are not only symbols of faith, but of contemporary political struggle against the exploitation of immigrant workers (Mazzoni); the Madonna appears in Sannazaro’s poetry as an active “hero” in the Virgilian sense of the term, rather than as a submissive and docile young virgin (Brazeau); born in the era of industrial capitalism, Divisionism may have been a radically modern artistic practice, but the sacred nonetheless remains one of its central themes (Greene); Pasolini famously sought to reclaim the sacred for communism (Smith); the Mafia long used religious beliefs and rituals to sanctify criminal violence with the consent and blessing of the Church in Sicily (Merlino); Giorgio Agamben’s critique of modern philosophy draws on the writings of Saint Francis and speaks to contemporary issues of shared property on the Internet (Ricciardi), and so on. If the Vatican and the Church of Rome are impossible to dislodge from the conversation on the sacred in Italy (it would be neither useful nor desirable to do so), these venerable institutions with their vast global networks of power and influence clearly do not circumscribe or limit the field of inquiry.

Volume 5.1-2 contains circa eight hundred printed pages of innovative interdisciplinary scholarship, published in English or Italian, on topics ranging from Dante’s views on Islam to the provocative contemporary artist Maurizio Cattelan, internationally the most widely known Italian cultural figure of his generation, with works featured in major museums the world over. The special theme issue on the sacred (*California Italian Studies* 5.1) is almost evenly split between essays on pre-modern and modern Italy, yet another confirmation of the profound persistence of the sacred in Italian culture and society. Approaches to the sacred in Italy range here from in-depth archival studies to theoretical inquiry, reflecting the volume’s mix of several different generations of scholars and numerous fields of scholarship. The arrangement of the essays into five thematic sections could have been done in any number of ways, given the interdisciplinary focus of these studies and the multiple affinities between them. For

⁷ Michel de Certeau, *La Fable mystique, XVIe-XVIIe siècle*, ed. Luce Giard (Paris: Gallimard, 1982-2013), 2 vols. The remarks here on de Certeau are drawn from these path-breaking studies.

⁸ See, for instance, Walter L. Adamson, *Embattled Avant-Gardes: Modernism's Resistance to Commodity Culture in Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), and Alberto Mario Banti, *Sublime madre nostra: la nazione italiana dal Risorgimento al fascismo* (Rome: Laterza, 2011).

instance, Bell's essay on the pilgrimage site of the Sacro Monte di Varallo equally belongs in the "Popular Religion" section, as does Marin's essay on the Sacred Heart, while Brazeau's essay on Sannazaro dovetails with the "Literature" section. These examples could be multiplied many times over. Readers should therefore treat these sections as a means to an end, rather than as hard-and-fast definitions of the subject or field to which a given essay speaks.

To give some idea of the range and scope of the collection of essays included in this special theme issue, we include here some brief considerations on each of these essays in the order in which they appear in the issue. The following remarks are not meant to be exhaustive: we hope that they may serve to suggest possible itineraries or paths—often winding, sometimes forking—that the reader might wish to follow in making his or her own way through the labyrinth of the sacred in Italy.

The sacred

Umberto Eco's previously unpublished 2009 lecture, "Rappresentazioni del sacro," addresses the issue at the very heart of *California Italian Studies* 5.1, namely the appearance of the sacred in and through representation. Eco offers a sweeping and occasionally whimsical overview of the ways in which Western culture makes visible that which by its very nature is not to be seen. He notes: "The fundamental problem of the sacred is that, in order to allow it to appear and to consist as something that gives meaning to our experience, it may be spoken of and made evident as a sort of idol, amalgam, image. But how can images of the sacred be made if the sacred is by definition that which is beyond our experience?" For Eco, this leads to the central paradox of Christianity, namely the Incarnation, through which God chose to appear to humanity in the form of his son Jesus Christ. Leaping across centuries and analyzing a mixture of artifacts from high and low culture, from famous medieval sculptures to celebrated film actresses like Jennifer Jones and Monica Bellucci, Eco shows that "the sacred assumes various forms, according to the historical period and the artistic tastes of that time": a saint or divinity will always be represented, in other words, as the contemporary culture would expect to see him or her. Thus the sacred may always only be represented partially and contingently, because its image is based upon the possibilities and the limits of the subject (individual or collective) who creates or perceives it (*JRS*).

The Sacred and Popular Religion

In the town of Galatina (Puglia) the small Cappella di San Paolo still stands in the center of town, with a well in the courtyard behind it. It was to this chapel that, for many years, local peasant women known locally as *tarantolate* were brought in a kind of trance or hysterical state, supposedly brought on by a spider bite, in order to be "cured" through strange rituals involving music, dance and the miraculous waters of the well. Cultural sociologist Simonetta Falasca Zamponi, in her essay entitled "Of Tears and Tarantulas: Folk Religiosity, de Martino's Ethnology, and the Italian South," looks at the career of the prominent twentieth-century Italian ethnologist, Ernesto de Martino, especially his studies of archaic beliefs and rituals in the poorest regions of Southern Italy, including *tarantismo*. In particular, Falasca Zamponi analyzes de Martino's ethnological research

on expressive ritualized emotions as they appeared in certain subaltern folk practices, which “exposed the peculiarities of Italy’s uneven development in the post-war years and became [for him] a means through which to rethink the South.” After WWII de Martino pushed ethnology in a new direction by discovering the archaic “other” within the West, rather than in some distant exotic locale; but his was not a nostalgic or aestheticizing attempt “to consider residual folkloric forms as active alternatives to the dominant culture.” On the contrary, although magic had a positive social function for these marginalized subjects inasmuch as it allowed them to confront history and to participate in it to some degree, de Martino saw that “magic as compared to religion [i.e. Christianity] remained a crippled form of the sacred, an expression of the vulnerability of those peoples and societies operating within that cultural system.” The suffering of the *tarantolate*, or the pain expressed by ritual lamenters at funerals, was real rather than imaginary, but for de Martino it was due to what he called a “crisis of presence,” namely the crushing psychic burden borne by those being rapidly left behind by modernity and historical becoming, a crisis of loss for which in the last analysis a magical world-view could not fully compensate. As Falasca Zamponi observes, in the ethnologist’s eyes “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.” In other words, the subalterns needed to abandon their rituals in order to be brought into history and to participate in making the modern world. This, however, left de Martino to theorize the survival of the archaic in pockets of the deep South as nothing other than a failure of the religious “civilizing process” of Christianity, whose rationality was alone capable of aligning the sacred with the forces of history, and thus of “achieving a cultural victory over nature,” implementing an authentically modern subjectivity (what he termed *esserci nella storia*) (JRS).

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A compelling contribution to understanding the central role of sacredness in Italy, Cristina Mazzoni’s essay looks at the symbolics of oranges as a way to read the events leading to the 2010 revolt of African immigrant orange pickers in Rosarno, Calabria. “Of Blood Oranges and Golden Fruit: A Sacred Context for the ‘Rosarno Events’” perceptively points out that the media discussion of those events, as well as the protagonists’ narratives, draw from the vocabulary of the sacred. In particular, they subscribe to what many scholars consider the ambiguity of the sacred, i.e. its dual nature, as that which is simultaneously pure and impure, attractive and repulsive. Thus oranges are represented “as desirable and dangerous at once, and as ultimately belonging to a dimension experienced as separate from everyday life and bound both to moral imperatives and to looming, if not actualized, violence.” Through an examination of scriptures and myths, literary and folkloric descriptions, commercial advertisements and the popular press, Mazzoni traces a brief history of the symbolic meanings attached to oranges ever since they were first introduced in Europe in the early modern period. The citrus fruit was believed to be “a sign of desire, wealth, and of the ability to acquire exotic objects” until the twentieth century, when it became so inexpensive that it required underpaid labor to be picked. The depreciation of the economic value of the fruit led to the reality of the miserable conditions suffered by the workers of Rosarno, inspiring the

“repulsive” tones with which the oranges came to be represented in the discourse surrounding the events at Rosarno. They have become “arance amare”—the quintessence of the workers’ bitter sorrow or, in the case of blood oranges, contaminated with the blood (itself full of sacred connotations) spilled by the pickers. The African immigrant workers themselves draw on the communal understanding of oranges as sacred to denounce their working conditions and to make demands for more humane treatment (*SFZ*).

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Pasquale Palmieri’s contribution presents a case of the crossing over between sacred and profane through a careful yet provocative reading of *rotocalchi*—illustrated magazines that through popular narrative constructions participate in hagiographic celebrations of religious figures. “Raccontare Padre Pio e Giovanni Paolo II: agiografia e rotocalchi in Italia fra XX e XXI secolo” shows that, in the case of Padre Pio and Giovanni Paolo II, in particular, these figures’ sainthood is “made” through a variegated and (one could even add) apocryphal interpretation of official religious beliefs that builds on a superficial but engrossing reading of phenomena considered paranormal. Magazines such as *Miracoli* introduce “new narrative paradigms, linked only in part to the hagiographic schemes of the past and to the models recognized by the Church of Rome.” They rely instead on sensationalism and the desire for a freer interpretation of the ecclesiastical canon to attract audiences’ interest. Through a close reading of articles and images surrounding the cult of Padre Pio and the beatification of Giovanni Paolo II, Palmieri produces a fascinating tableau displaying both the prevalence of popular religiosity in Italy and its impact on traditional Catholic tenets. He reconstructs the way in which Padre Pio and Giovanni Paolo II were turned into mass phenomena by a publishing industry utilizing the model of gossip magazines to offer the public weekly stories on their favorite religious heroes. At the same time, Palmieri points to the powerful role the popular press played in steering Catholic hierarchies towards the decision to canonize Padre Pio and Giovanni Paolo II. Paradoxical and often irreverent, the *rotocalchi*’s narratives contributed to elevate these popular religious figures to the status of sainthood while pushing the Church to adapt and to modify its orthodox perspective (*SFZ*).

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Rossella Merlino’s “Sicilian Mafia, Patron Saints, and Religious Processions: The Consistent Face of an Ever-Changing Criminal Organization” examines the Sicilian mafia’s involvement in local religious festivals on the island. Looking at judicial papers, police reports and video footage, Merlino unpacks the seemingly contradictory practices of a crime organization like Cosa Nostra. If, on the one hand, it appears to be highly adaptable to changing circumstances and innovations, as long as it can reach its lucrative goals, on the other hand it is still attached to traditional religious rituals and constructs its identity through them. Focusing on the micro-social level of interaction, Merlino considers several instances where the organization’s historically long-standing practice of participating in religious processions, both in physical terms and through financing and organizing, is enacted to this day. Carrying the statue of the patron saint during Easter celebrations was the privilege of Momo Grasso, mafia boss of Misilmeri, for example;

mafia “soldier” Vincenzo Scarantino, who was accused of preparing the bomb that killed Italian state prosecutor Paolo Borsellino, used to be one of the carriers of the statue of Saint Anne during the annual festivity. The close link between popular religious rituals and organized crime also emerges from the practice during the procession of stopping with the statue of the patron saint in front of the home of the local mafia boss. In all these instances, sacred authority becomes split between a) the divine as defined by the Catholic tradition and b) the terrestrial in the guise of top Mafiosi figures. Cosa Nostra profits from a proximity to the sacred sphere that is often supported by the local clergy, and it draws legitimacy from this proximity both in terms of its self-identity and the authority and prestige it gains in the eyes of the devout who partake in the same popular rituals. By applying performance theories to organized crime, Merlino accounts for the cultural dimensions of the mafia and shows how popular religiosity, through its ability to inspire and forge a communal bond among its participants, can help to sustain a criminal system while also legitimizing it (*SFZ*).

The Sacred and the Saints

Working in the interdisciplinary spaces between history, religious studies and art history, in her essay entitled “The Fleishy Heart of Jesus” Simonetta Marin “examines the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and its contested beginnings” in northern Italy in the eighteenth century. The author recounts a surprisingly fierce theological and political struggle over this innovative image of the incarnate divine heart and the religious practices surrounding it—a struggle with important repercussions for “the representation of the sacred during the Enlightenment” and beyond. Thanks to a treasure trove of previously unpublished documents held in the Archivio di Stato di Venezia and the Vatican Archives, Marin is able in her essay to reconstruct in detail the clash over the new devotion between Jesuits (who promoted the cult) and Jansenists (who opposed it); the consequences of this clash for Catholicism continue to be felt today. Originally triggered by the abolition of many local saints and their feast days by the Church, which was seeking to modernize itself in the eighteenth century as the Enlightenment built momentum, the Sacred Heart over time came “to fulfill a different quest for the sacred” by believers and their local religious leaders. Depicted in religious imagery and texts as at once utterly physical (“fleshy”) yet charged with universal symbolism, the heart of Christ became the center of a devotion that transcended the limits of the cult of the saints, addressing instead “another [and more contemplative] dimension of human spiritual life.” The image of the Sacred Heart is today still central to Catholic piety worldwide, for to date it is the last image to have been produced for the Catholic faithful “to focus on while worshipping Jesus.” Indeed, this little-known episode from the final phase of early modernity in northern Italy has exercised a vast influence on Christianity *tout court*, Marin concludes, for “the rhetoric and the images of the Sacred Heart of Christ, with their emphases on empathy, tenderness, and sentiment, would become the religious language of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (*JRS*).

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Born in Brescia around 1485, the northern Italian painter Gerolamo Savoldo produced at least four exquisite oil paintings of a “luminously veiled” woman between c. 1527 and c.

1540, likely for Venetian patrons. In her essay “Rethinking Savoldo’s *Magdalenes*: A ‘Muddle of the Maries’?” Charlotte Nichols sifts the iconographic and contextual evidence to argue that the identification of the figure in these four pictures, believed since at least the seventeenth century to portray Mary Magdalene at the tomb of Christ, needs to be reconsidered. These pious and sensuous religious works are fundamentally ambiguous, she contends, for in their “blended imagery” they also display numerous Marian traits, from the veiling of the body to the pose of the woman that they depict. For instance, Nichols notes that the Virgin was a “weaver of veils”; moreover, “having left no bodily remains, Mary’s secondary relics, such as clothing, were critically important to her cult” (and a fragment of her veil was supposedly held in the Basilica of St Mark). Although the two Marys, both of whom were present at the sepulchre on the morning that Christ rose from the dead, traditionally represent the female thematic polarities of purity and penance, accounts of the Resurrection in sacred texts and hagiographies instead reflect “longstanding and inherently contradictory theological assessments” of their respective roles on the morning of the first Easter. Nichols contends that the “lack of narrative clarity regarding the identity of the woman” in Savoldo’s four paintings may well have been the artist’s “intentional” reflection of these inconsistent accounts of the Virgin and the Magdalene, designed “to challenge the viewer’s understanding of the image/s” and to provoke multiple possible interpretations of the paintings as well as of their relation to the sacred. In other words, the holy female figures in these works seem to have been intended by their “capriccioso e sofisticato” (as Vasari called him) creator to present a visual aporia for the contemporary viewer in Venice, perhaps “patrons who delighted in the nuances of intellectual speculation” rather than in following religious orthodoxy (*JRS*).

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Alessia Ricciardi argues for a reconsideration of Franciscan monasticism—in a distinctly Agambenian register—in terms of contemporary digital culture. In “Specters of St. Francis: Agamben’s *The Highest Poverty* and the State of Digital Culture,” she concentrates on the issue of property and, more specifically, the notion of “simple use,” defined as “the use of things without property rights.” Ricciardi applies this problematic to the Internet, wherein a panoply of users often feel entitled to make use of things over which they have no proper claim. In both monasticism and digital culture, despite their temporal distance from each other, we find a similar effort to articulate a praxis and “form of life” outside of or beyond the law. In a wide-ranging analysis that canvasses most of Agamben’s recent philosophical output, Ricciardi argues that, on the Internet, “our longing for a return to the natural law of pre-lapsarian sharing” is expressed through what she terms “digital profanations.” Incorporating into her analysis recent developments such as online education platforms and the controversy over net neutrality, Ricciardi brings centuries-old debates to bear upon some of the most pressing, urgent, political and philosophical problems of our technological landscape (*LW*).

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Like many other devout poets in the Italian Renaissance, Iacopo Sannazaro sought to compose his works in a manner at once modern and authentically Christian, drawing on

both the humanist revival of classical culture and the religious faith of his own age. The project of remapping secular poetic traditions onto a devotional framework is apparent in his religious epic *De partu Virginis* (1526). Sannazaro's "poetics of the sacred," as Bryan Brazeau calls it in his essay "'Emotional Rescue': Heroic Chastity and Devotional Practice in Iacopo Sannazaro's *De partu Virginis*," requires a "radically new model of heroism" in order to Christianize the genre of the epic poem. Sannazaro inherits from antiquity not only Virgil's *Aeneid* as his generic epic precursor, but Virgil's pagan protagonist Aeneas as the quintessential hero. By replacing the latter with the Virgin Mary, who instead "embodies a [Christian] model of heroic virtue," the author of the Neo-Latin *De partu Virginis* seeks—as did Dante—to transform the epic tradition, but in this case in the very same language of Virgil. Mary's exemplary heroism is not displayed by Sannazaro through accounts of battles and voyages (as is the case for Aeneas), but rather in her subjective and deeply felt experience of the Annunciation and Incarnation. The poem thus offers itself as a "devotional itinerary" to the contemporary reader, who may attempt to participate imaginatively in the successive phases of "Marian emotion," as was indeed a common practice among the faithful in early modern Italy. The *De partu Virginis*'s approach to writing the sacred is modern—even daring at times—and thus is wholly consonant with the most advanced developments in the literary culture of the early sixteenth century. For Sannazaro's epic work also seeks boldly if devoutly to supplement its other great target text, namely the New Testament, which has relatively little to say about the inner world of the Mother of God. As Brazeau concludes: "Mary is a new Aeneas in the *De partu*—an epic heroine characterized by religious piety; a new Anchises—a parental figure that signals a transition from an old to a new order; and, finally, a character whose emotions are described in greater detail and with more nuanced complexity than either Virgil or the Gospels portray" (*JRS*).

The Sacred and the Visual Arts

The famed Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan's major Guggenheim retrospective, which took place between November 2011 and January 2012, is the subject of Christine Poggi's "*All: Maurizio Cattelan's Infernal Comedy*." This show was perhaps most notable for the way that it reinvented the Guggenheim's well-known exhibition space: leaving the walls bare, most of Cattelan's works on display—some 128 of them—were instead hung from steel cables suspended from the ceiling in the museum's rotunda. Members of the public were invited to circumnavigate the exhibition by winding their way around the chaotic, disarming array of hanging artworks, many of which provided a humorous, grotesque commentary on Italian culture and society. In her essay, Poggi focuses on the apocalyptic tenor of Cattelan's Guggenheim retrospective, interpreting it as "a delirious Last Judgment infused with references to the *Inferno*, a call to judgment at once personal and social, satirical and serious." Situating Cattelan's works in Italian culture, art history, and religious tradition, she shows how the Italian artist's obsession with death aims to defamiliarize the world and remind us of all its features that we take for granted, to both comic and tragic effect (*LW*).

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Vivien Greene's essay, "*Pittura ideista: The Spiritual in Divisionist Painting*," draws on the joint resources of art history and cultural history in studying the spiritually-oriented thematics and aesthetics of some of this late nineteenth-century avant-garde movement's key members, such as the painters Giovanni Segantini, Gaetano Previati, Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo and Vittore Grubicy De Dragon. In the late 1800s the new nation of Italy was very much in the process of coming to grips with modernity in economic, political, social and cultural terms. At the same time, millennia of artistic production at the highest levels had left the peninsula awash in an unrivalled heritage of extraordinary artworks. The Divisionist artists were modernists whose works sought to define an Italian identity in the face of the rapid transformation of the new country into an industrial economy, parliamentary monarchy, and urban mass society. In order to do this, they employed innovative pictorial techniques in their works, often in synchrony with the optical and psychological theories of the day, together with non-nostalgic references to "the religious art of the past," especially that of the Italian Primitives and the Renaissance, as well as—paradoxically—Catholicism itself, even though the latter refused to accept or acknowledge modernization. The Divisionists' rejection of positivism and empiricism (which they shared with the Symbolists) led them to place emphasis on a secularized and at times abstract experience of the sacred, a transcendental emotional and spiritual dimension that defied scientific analysis but that deliberately did not draw on standard Christian iconography, like the play of light in mists dissolving over an Alpine lake. Thus the Divisionists discovered a way to negotiate with the heavy burden of the long Italian artistic tradition, whose masterpieces they found to offer "new icons of spirituality for Italians, once they were reinterpreted and recast with a rational painting method and modernist forms" (*JRS*).

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Margaret Bell's essay, "Image as Relic: Bodily Vision and the Reconstitution of Viewer/Image Relationships at the Sacro Monte di Varallo," examines this extraordinary and "emotionally provocative" early modern pilgrimage site in northwest Italy in light of a key moment in the several centuries of its construction. As a simulation of the Holy Land, the Sacro Monte di Varallo (a number of such sacred mounts were built in early modern Italy, principally in the foothills of the Alps in Lombardy and Piedmont) offered the devout an opportunity to recreate the experience of visiting Jerusalem by following an itinerary through dozens of chapels scattered about the site. Starting in the early years of the sixteenth century, Bell points out, "life-size terracotta and wooden figures representing biblical figures were added" to the various chapels to form religious tableaux, allowing visitors to "move among and touch them as if they were living beings." This immersive experience of the sacred was drastically altered in the *secondo* Cinquecento, however, with the installation of "floor-to-ceiling glass screens called *vetriate* designed by Milanese architect Galeazzo Alessi between 1565 and 1569, just after the Council of Trent." Bell asserts, on the basis of archival documents, that these screens did not have a solely "disciplinary purpose"—i.e. a distancing effect for those forced to view the tableaux through them—but were also intended to enhance the

pilgrim's experience of the sacred at the site. For at the Sacro Monte di Varallo, as elsewhere in Counter-Reformation Italy, vision eventually became a "primary conduit for devotional experience." The *vetriate* thus served as a framing device with two seemingly contradictory functions, namely to separate the faithful from the figures in the tableaux (in order to "decorporealize" the latter) while at the same time mandating perspectives that call for the viewer's veneration, almost as if these same figures were relics or holy objects displayed in a monstrance. This "tension between proximity and distance at Varallo" reappears throughout the site and defines the experience of the sacred there. As Bell concludes: "At once geographically close to European pilgrims and simultaneously offering immersive simulacra of the Christian *loci sacri* from a world away, Varallo has always been balanced between here and there, then and now. The place as a whole is itself a reliquary, allowing the visitor to come close to the Nativity Grotto, Christ's last footprint, or the stone that covered the Holy Sepulcher. Yet the knowledge that these are replicas never lets the pilgrim arrive completely." Even when the subject of a hugely ambitious and complex representational mechanism, such as the Sacro Monte di Varallo, in the last analysis the sacred remains essentially ungraspable (*JRS*).

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In "Contemporary Perspectives on the Sacred in Pasolini's *La ricotta*," Gregory Smith articulates a "civic idea of the sacred," that is, one divorced from institutional strictures, by way of Pier Paolo Pasolini's controversial 1962 short film *La ricotta*. Smith puts Pasolini into conversation with thinkers such as Ernesto de Martino and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (as well as Durkheim before them) in order to show how they influenced Pasolini's conception of a "civic sacred" that "both expresse[d] and promote[d] our integrity as social agents." This reinvention of the sacred, Smith argues, is a form of social commitment that aims to combat the "entropy of civilization" brought on, in Pasolini's eyes, by an all-encompassing, techno-rational logic that transforms all value into merely consumeristic value. Specifically, Pasolini seeks a more genuine form of value in society's marginalized classes, which are for him a representation of an "archaic"—and authentic—humanity. Discussing Pasolini's reaction to the religious debates of his time, his conception of Christianity, and his appropriation of the techniques and imagery of religious painting, Smith demonstrates *La ricotta* to be a crystallization of many of the themes and concerns that permeate Pasolini's work both on screen and on the page (*LW*).

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In "*Arte sacra futurista: Fillia Between Conformity and Subversion*," Adriana M. Baranello examines Futurist "sacred art" through the works of Luigi Colombo, better known as "Fillia." She focuses on a series of religious paintings that Fillia produced in the early 1930s, situating them in the Futurist tradition of *aeropittura*, a style whose aim was to construct a new reality predicated on the experience of perpetual motion. *Aeropittura*, with its emphasis on flight, provided Futurist art with a new mythology upon which to draw; in Fillia's case, Baranello argues that the artist used the style to carry out a "heterodox reappropriation of Christian tropes for the purpose of articulating his alternative, Futurist spirituality." She shows how Fillia made strategic use of

conventional symbology to undermine its traditional meaning and to recast it in a new light, one that is not easily reducible to Catholic doctrine, Futurist ideology, or fascist rhetoric. By analyzing his works and theoretical writings alike—along with the theoretical writings on art by other Futurists—Baranello reconstructs Fillia's artistic project, showing that it is of a piece with the Futurist fascination for the mechano-spiritual, yet is also wholly original (*LW*).

The Sacred and Politics

In its account of the controversies that arose among reformers concerning the Council of Trent in late Renaissance Italy, Diego Pirillo's "The Council and the 'Papal Prince': Trent Seen by the Italian Reformers" discusses the relationship between the pope, political power and the Catholic Church. Through a detailed analysis of the heretic Giacomo Castelvetro's annotated papers found at archives in Britain, Europe and North America, Pirillo investigates the connection "between the hopes of religious reform spurred by the council and the practice of religious simulation." Religious simulation was performed by critics who opted to compromise with Catholic orthodoxy, instead of rejecting the Church outright, in the hope that the council would resolve the controversy. Among these critics were the uncommitted Nicodemites who sought to wait out the conflict by engaging in dissimulation and other practices meant to disguise their thoughts. For Castelvetro, the Nicodemites' suspect behavior confirmed his view of history as "the reign of hypocrisy and dissimulation, in which the protagonists always masked their intentions and the real causes were never transparent." Included in Castelvetro's unforgiving critique was the Catholic Church, which, as the Council of Trent demonstrated, used religion as a cover for the political will of the popes. Dashing the expectations that an angelic pope would put an end to the Church's political involvement in worldly affairs, as the irenicists wished, Castelvetro's annotated papers testify to the crucial role that the meshing of temporal and spiritual power played in the whole debate about the reconciliation of confessions in late Renaissance Europe, providing yet another example of the inextricable entanglement of the sacred and the profane (*SFZ*).

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The Papacy and the Curia were the most powerful religious institutions in Renaissance and Baroque Italy, governing a vast "transnational, universal, and spiritual community." Although the Pope was the monarch of a territorial state and therefore a political actor on the Italian and European stage, in an era of the rapid growth of centralized absolutist states and great world empires, his authority alone transcended national and imperial borders: he was a sovereign unlike any other. Stefania Tutino argues in her essay "A Spanish Canonist in Rome: Notes on the Career of Francisco Peña" that the Church and its territories (the *Stato della Chiesa*) were therefore a political, administrative, and theological experiment without precedent, whose temporal and spiritual policies had to evolve with the changing circumstances and times. Above all the Church had to face the challenge of imperial Spain, which in the Cinquecento had become the first early modern European super-state, dominating large parts of the peninsula while nominally owing allegiance to Rome. Digging through the Vatican archives, Tutino analyzes the career of Francisco Peña—Spanish "canonist, theologian and political agent"—in the early

seventeenth-century Roman Curia, where he was an outspoken papalist and key partisan player in defining its relationship with the increasingly hegemonic power of Spain. As Tutino's research demonstrates, Peña was a skilled in-fighter who battled not only against heretics but against the Jesuits and others in the Church who aimed, in his eyes, to weaken the temporal and spiritual authority of the Popes, which he instead sought—with only limited success—to mesh seamlessly with Spanish interests in Italy and elsewhere. If three consecutive popes reacted in different ways to Peña's agenda, this was due not only to the shifting historical context of their respective papacies, but to the fact that the doctrine of the dual role of the Papacy—incorporating both the sacred and the profane—was itself provisional and still a work in progress (*JRS*).

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In an essay that chronologically intersects with and thematically complements Tutino's, Alessandro Arienzo argues that we cannot attribute the project for integration of the spiritual and temporal powers of the early modern Church solely to the Pope-King, who stood at the apex of the ecclesiastical and political hierarchy. Rather than come from the top down, this project emerged instead in those pastoral activities that “disseminated the sacred” among the faithful, such as rites, feasts, cults of saints, sacraments, sermons and so on. In other words, Arienzo suggests in his “Percorsi del sacro e del politico nell'Italia di prima età moderna: lo stato pontificio e il pastorato cattolico post-tridentino,” we should look to the *cura animarum* at the parish level, rather than solely to the Vatican and its centralized institutions, in order to understand the ways in which subjects were governed by and subscribed to the doctrines of the Church, which had interposed itself as the mediator in the complex and multifaceted relations between the sacred and the profane in the Italy of the Cinque-Seicento. For instance, contemporary treatises (both lay and religious) on proper behavior and the government of the self, along with manuals on confession and devotional practices, suggest to Arienzo how secular and ecclesiastical authorities sought to reach into the individual conscience and transform the most intimate and private space of subjectivity in order to promote “conformity and consensus” politically and spiritually. These disciplinary efforts focused on the minutiae of the individual's existence, however, paradoxically did not result in passive obedience to the Church and its leaders. Instead, the practices they promoted tended to create a “diffuse” spirituality centered around “a relation with the divine consisting of small daily gestures that are sacred in themselves” and that were largely voluntary rather than legislated, such as devotions to the cult of a specific saint. This lengthy and by no means univocal process distinguishes the role of the Papacy in Italy, not only because it differs distinctly from the Hobbesian model concentrating the sacred in the hands of the absolute sovereign alone, but because it lays the groundwork for the construction of the communities that will eventually come to constitute modern Italy (*JRS*).

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In her fascinating analysis of posters used by the Christian Democratic Party (DC) during the 1948 national electoral campaign, Rosaria Leonardi addresses the political significance of references to the sacred in post-World War II Italy. Although posters were

only one means through which the DC communicated with the voters, “Il sacro come strumento politico: le elezioni del 1948, la Democrazia Cristiana e i manifesti elettorali” shows that their images’ sustained allusions to religious themes were part of a larger strategy adopted by the Christian Democrats in collaboration with the Catholic Church and Catholic associations to draw in the electorate. The DC did not believe that the Italians would be receptive to its political program merely on the basis of an anti-communist and pro-American stance. Conscious of the need to establish a deeper connection with the electorate, the party’s leadership sought to form an alliance with the Catholic Church. At the same time, Catholic associations saw in the pact with the DC an opportunity to expand their influence over the Italians. Based on her research on the *Comitati Civici*—the political branch of the influential association *Azione Cattolica*—and a close reading of the symbolic messages portrayed in electoral posters, Leonardi’s contribution offers a vivid example of religion’s link to politics in modernity. Playing on the emotional, irrational side of the Italian popular conscience, the Christian Democratic Party relied on the voters’ familiarity with sacred themes to manufacture propagandistic visual material that would inspire people to choose the party supported by the Church. The sacred and the profane coexisted in postwar Italian politics to each other’s advantage (*SFZ*).

The Sacred and Literature

Paolo Valesio’s “Antonio Barolini fra radicamento ed espatrio” offers readers a portrait of the twentieth-century Italian and American writer Antonio Barolini, author of numerous poems, short stories, and novels. Specifically, Valesio meditates on what it means for Barolini to be a “writer between two worlds” — in this case, in a literal sense, the United States and Italy. However, much of Valesio’s analysis shows that Barolini moves between worlds that are not merely geographical. As Valesio points out, Barolini inhabits a space between the secular and the religious, the poetic and the prosaic, the journalistic and the essayistic, and between long and short prose (that is, novels and short stories). Ultimately, in his analysis, Barolini is a poet of *espatrio*, as opposed to *emigrazione* or *esilio*—his poetry is uprooted or, to put it in the Weilian language from which Valesio draws, *déraciné*. For the author of this essay, the language of *espatrio* is “the potentially prosaic language that desublimates individual experience in the ups and downs of the quotidian.” Haunted by its opposite, i.e. the *rimpatrio*, Barolini’s poetry can be defined as existential in its examination of the free act, and dramatic precisely in its lack of drama, writes Valesio, for whom this unique body of work represents an under-acknowledged literary expression of modern spirituality (*LW*).

§

The literary treatment of the divine in its plural and often contradictory characteristics is the subject of Laura Wittman’s essay “‘Divine Women’ and the Poetry of Alda Merini.” Wittman engages with the poetics and conceptual aspects of Merini’s work, and elegantly makes the case that her poetry combines modern elements with mystical themes in an original and somewhat displacing approach to the religious. Drawing on Luce Irigaray’s idea that “women lack a female god who can open the perspective in which *their* flesh can be transfigured” and identifying the figure of chiasmus as central to Merini’s

understanding of the divine, Wittman first asks whether a female god is present in Merini's poetry and, if so, what its relationship is to the flesh. She then examines Merini's "dark night of the soul," namely a situation in which "the mystic feels utterly abandoned by God, and experiences the loss of any ontological ground." Finally, she assesses metaphoricity's role in Merini's spiritual experience through the example of the rose. All along Wittman raises the questions: how does Merini confront the paradoxes on which she builds her poems? How can we interpret her infusion of the sacred with the profane, devotion with transgression, sanity with madness, self-deprecation with feminism? Although apparently uneven, and often clichéd and trite, Merini's poetry, Wittman argues, is characterized by an unfailing strategic use of modern compositional patterns that play off seemingly contradictory elements. With particular reference to the metaphor of the rose, Wittman captures the inner tension between the mystical and the erotic typical of Merini's original approach to spirituality, along with her simultaneous embrace and denial of metaphoricity's power. "Merini's poetry is a provocative clash between the immediacy and presentness of prayer and the ironic vocation of modern poetry," Wittman suggests; it ultimately testifies to the linguistic difficulties of expressing spiritual longing in modernity and its aftermath (*SFZ*).

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Beatrice Manetti explores the possibility of an alternate form of the literary fantastic, propelled by a feminist re-reading of Freud's notion of the uncanny, in her essay "Donne al cospetto dell'angelo: il sacro come epifania del fantastico in Paola Masino, Elsa Morante e Rossana Ombres." The "feminine" fantastic described by Manetti involves the appropriation and reinvention of the sacred, understood as the generative experience of the fantastic. As suggested by her title, Manetti devotes her attention to the fantastic in the works of three prominent Italian women writers, Paola Masino, Elsa Morante, and Rossana Ombres. Despite their stylistic and thematic differences, these writers' works retrieve features of the 19th-century fantastic that 20th-century iterations of the genre had abandoned, among them an interest in exploring sexuality, and what Manetti describes as "an irreducible, almost ontological antagonism between reality and imagination." Perhaps most importantly, these works recuperate the "perturbante," that is, the genuinely transgressive element at the heart of the sacred and fantastic alike that, in the work of other 20th-century writers, had been abandoned or else survived only in domesticated form (*LW*).

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It would be difficult indeed to speak of the sacred in Italy without making mention of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. In his essay entitled "Beheading the Son: Muhammad and Bertran de Born in *Inferno* 28," Andrea Moudarres examines the great Florentine poet's puzzling decision to place the prophet Muhammad in the ninth *bolgia* of the Eighth Circle of Hell (*Inferno* 28) as one of the "sowers of discord." Many commentators on the poem have pointed out that medieval readers would have expected to find the founder of Islam among the heretics instead. Taking into account the commonplaces about Islam and Muhammad that spread in Western Europe during the Middle Ages, Moudarres contends that the key to Dante's choice is to be found in "the Muslims'

rejection of the dogma of the Trinity,” which at a theological level “severed the ties between father and son,” thus—in the eyes of medieval Christians—triggering religious conflict across the Middle East and Mediterranean region. As Muhammad says to Dante and Virgil, his sin was that “io feci il padre e ‘l figlio in sé ribelli,” and this act of theological anti-Trinitarian violence is paralleled on a political level by the sin of Bertran de Born, another resident of the ninth *bolgia* who in life sowed discord by turning Prince Henry of England against his own father, Henry II. Moudarres concludes that “not only did these two sinners break the cohesion of the *corpus mysticum* and of the *corpus politicum*, respectively, but both of them also separated fathers from their sons—the prophet of Islam did so on theological grounds, the Provençal poet from a political standpoint.” Although this provides another instance of the complex symmetry in the poem’s treatment of faith and power, there is still more to Dante’s consideration of the indissoluble link between the sacred and the profane here. For the central mystery of Christianity, namely the Trinity, is seen in the *Divine Comedy* to structure three interrelated discursive fields: the theological (God), the political (the sovereign), and the *social* or, more precisely, patriarchy (the father), which Dante views as the very foundation of contemporary medieval Italian society (*JRS*).

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“From *Kohelet/Ecclesiastes* to *Montedidio*: The Rest of the Story,” by Myriam Swennen Ruthenberg, offers a reading of Erri De Luca’s 2001 novel *Montedidio* and its Biblical subtext, specifically, the Book of Ecclesiastes, a text De Luca himself had translated into Italian. As Ruthenberg herself puts it, “De Luca’s manipulation of the Neapolitan dialect and the Yiddish language alike [...] betrays the author’s awareness of the metaphorical nature of language itself and the sacred nature of its origin.” Ruthenberg connects the contemporary Italian writer’s biblical exegesis with his own practice of prose writing, including in her analysis a consideration of Walter Benjamin’s reflections on language and, specifically, on the connection between divine language and human language. She shows through textual analysis that Ecclesiastes—“Kohelet” in Hebrew—provides De Luca with a kind of “self-referential guide to writing.” In Ruthenberg’s analysis, De Luca’s work is characterized by the fact of its *corporeality*, a trait that also pervades the vivid text of his own sacred book (*LW*).

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Regardless of the original critical intent behind it, at its most basic level a literary parody functions through the rewriting of a prior target text. A parody is always a repetition-in-difference, involving formal and/or thematic elements appropriated from the target and reconfigured in order to produce a new, often substantially different meaning. In the Italian literary tradition, one of the most prominent examples is of course Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, with its highly self-conscious reworking of (among many other classical texts) Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Early in his stellar career the fifteenth-century polymath Leon Battista Alberti authored the monologue *Ecatonfilea* (c. 1429), a multifaceted disquisition on the art of love as practiced by contemporary Italian ladies. In his essay on this surprisingly unorthodox vernacular soliloquy, “Leon Battista Alberti e la parodia sacra: la predica di

Ecatonfilea,” Matteo Largaiolli argues that the sole speaker in the text—Ecatonfilea herself—exploits the rhetorical structure of the religious sermon in order to assert the unquestionable authority of her precepts concerning the subject of eroticism. Parodies of sermons were already familiar to readers in the Middle Ages, but Alberti adopts the mechanism of parody in order to generate a deliberately provocative mixture of the sacred and the profane, the serious and the comic, that undermines any possible linear or univocal reading of *Ecatonfilea*. The genre of the sermon, because it is in this case employed by a woman who “preaches” the “doctrine” of earthly love to a “congregation” of women, acquires an essentially ironic function that allows the skeptical Alberti to represent multiple—and conflicting—discursive positions without having to resort to the use of dialogue (as he does in many other writings). The *Ecatonfilea* is an instance of the secularization of the sacred in Quattrocento Italy, for it seems clear to Largaiolli that Alberti cannot parody the form of the *sermo modernus* without also, at least implicitly, calling into question its thematics or content (*JRS*).

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Giovanni Boccaccio, renowned for his collection of novellas entitled *The Decameron*, was another giant of late medieval Italian and European literature. In his “The Gods Which Are Not: Religious Boundaries and Exchange in Boccaccio’s *Il Filocolo*,” Corey Flack takes a fresh look at one of Boccaccio’s lesser-known works, *Il Filocolo* (1336), a *romanzo* retelling the popular medieval tale of *Floire and Blancheflor* about the travails and travels around the Mediterranean of a pair of star-crossed young lovers. Once again, the context is the ongoing struggle between Christianity and Islam across the region, but this is complicated by Boccaccio’s humanist appropriation of the pagan gods of antiquity as actors in the narrative, especially Venus, Mars, and Diana. If Christian history is providential, i.e. begins with the Incarnation, then how can the pantheon of ancient gods possibly serve to signify Christian values? In Flack’s reading, Boccaccio’s efforts to isolate the sacred from the profane, while nevertheless allowing for a certain permeability between them (pagans and their gods who are Christians *ante literam*), creates a richly productive textual ambiguity, inasmuch as the sacred is always “at once holy and unclean, held together in a point of contamination.” This fundamental narrative duplicity or oscillation at the heart of *Il Filocolo* profoundly affects in turn the rest of the work, because it “permits the various categories of religion, gender, and ethnicity to be represented as porous” too, rather than as pure and fixed. The text’s fluidity, which cannot be contained by a predefined theological or political scheme, Flack concludes, bears in fact a striking resemblance to “the true reality of the medieval Mediterranean” (*JRS*).

Over the past five years *California Italian Studies* has grown from a shared intuition into a global enterprise, with submissions from several continents and circa 130 peer reviewers from around the world taking part in the production of this volume. We sincerely thank all these scholars for their interest in, and collegial support of, this journal, which otherwise would not exist. Special thanks go to the Managing Editors of Volume 5, Dr. Aria Dal Molin (UC Santa Barbara) and Cindy Stanphill (PhD candidate, UC Los Angeles), both of whom performed a plethora of tasks with great skill and professionalism. Copy editors are an essential cog in the complex wheels of journal publishing, and this volume and special issue of *California Italian Studies* are no exception: thanks are due to Sarah Kaplan (PhD candidate, UC Santa Barbara), Marina Romani (PhD candidate, UC Berkeley), Dylan Montanari (PhD candidate, Stanford) and Dr. Rich Kaplan. For efficiently keeping our finances in order, we thank Elizabeth Lavarge-Baptista and Moriah Van Vleet at UC Berkeley. Our gratitude also goes to the staff of the University of California's eScholarship platform, as well as to the California Digital Library, which respectively host and archive *California Italian Studies*.

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This volume of *California Italian Studies* is dedicated to our late colleague and friend from UC San Diego, the historian and humanist John Marino, who passed away during its production phase.

*E tu certo comprendi
Il perché delle cose, e vedi il frutto
Del mattin, della sera,
Del tacito, infinito andar del tempo.*

—Giacomo Leopardi, "Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia"