

# Potentiality and Impotentiality in The Viceroy (1894) by Federico De Roberto

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## Résumé de l'article

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POTENTIALITY AND IMPOTENTIALITY IN *THE VICEROYS*  
(1894) BY FEDERICO DE ROBERTO

ANDREA SARTORI

*Abstract:* This essay furnishes a critical interpretation of Federico De Roberto's novel *The Viceroy* (1894) within the theoretical coordinates provided by Giorgio Agamben's notions of "potentiality" and "impotentiality" (*dynamis* and *adynamia*, respectively, in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*). The essay argues that two apparently marginal characters in the story—Chiara's aborted fetus and Cavaliere Eugenio—embody a possibility that is open to a radical unpredictability, which is to say, to an "impotentiality" that contrasts both Benedetto Croce's naturalistic reading of the novel and Vittorio Spinazzola's materialist account of it. In fact, Chiara's fetus and Eugenio are presented as metaphors of the power of imagination and literature embedded in life (in the *bíos*). Such a power is opposed to that of "race," upon which critics usually flatten their interpretations of *The Viceroy* and, in particular, their readings of Consalvo's concluding speech to his aunt Ferdinanda ("no, our race has not degenerated; it is the same as it ever was").

According to a commonly accepted interpretation of Federico De Roberto's (1861–1927) *The Viceroy* (1894), the meaning of the novel lies, in the last analysis, in the vicissitudes and personal development of one character in particular, that of Consalvo Uzeda. According to this interpretation, the young man is the one who, *by necessity*, brings to completion his family's mandate—that is to say, the entitled authority of the Uzedas to govern a region, first in Sicily, and later in a united Italy.

This essay challenges such a reading by focusing on two apparently marginal characters: Chiara's aborted fetus and Cavaliere Eugenio. Before critically analyzing these two figures, however, let us review the key principles of the widespread interpretation of De Roberto's most famous novel.

## The power of race and inheritance

In *The Viceroy*s, Consalvo succeeds in keeping his family's grip on power through his election as deputy to the Parliament in Rome in 1882. Thanks to Consalvo, the Sicilian and Bourbonic aristocracy, to which the Uzedas belong, maintains its power, despite the historical "trauma" represented by the annexation of Sicily to the unified Kingdom of Italy in 1861.

At the end of his discourse addressed to a speechless aunt Ferdinanda, the young Uzeda, in fact, famously says, "No, la nostra razza non è degenerata: è sempre la stessa" ("No, our race has not degenerated; it is the same as it ever was"; *Vicerè* 304; *Viceroy*s 627). Qualifying his family as a biological, unmodifiable "race," Ferdinanda's nephew seems to declare that he has become what he *potentially* was as a child—that is to say, a *true* Uzeda, a man whose vocation, in *essence*, has always been *power*. If we borrow Aristotle's terminology from *Metaphysics* book 9 (Theta), we can say that Consalvo's *potentiality* (*dynamis*) inevitably develops into *actuality* (*energeia*). Indeed, over the years, the young Uzeda moves, in a more or less linear and consistent manner, from one place and from one professional identity to another.

It is true that Consalvo shifts from the unorganized and chaotic life of the Benedictine monastery in Catania, where he studied with his cousin Giovannino, to the productive experience of cultural estrangement in England, where he reads the modern works in political economy, natural science, and sociology written by Adam Smith, Charles Darwin, and Herbert Spencer. However, such a geographical and cultural displacement is not a *deviation* from Consalvo's existential path; it is, instead, something functional in his professional progression plan, as it were: from aristocratic child around 1855 to student with the Benedictines; from student to member of the city council of Catania; from this marginal administrative appointment in his birthplace to mayor; and in conclusion, from mayor to member of the Parliament of the new state, when the collapse of *Destra storica* in 1876 made the political praxis of *trasformismo* possible.

In all of this there is no *degeneration*—quite the opposite, because from Catania to London, and from London back to Catania and then to Rome,<sup>1</sup> Consalvo's potential fully realizes itself. The actualization of his life's potentiality implements the *essence*—the *ousia*, according to Aristotle's terminology—that

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<sup>1</sup> De Roberto writes about Consalvo's experience in Rome in his unfinished novel *L'imperio* (*The Dominion*), posthumously published by Arnoldo Mondadori in 1929.

Consalvo has inherently personified. If we read Consalvo's story in this way, we can say that his only *possibility* was that of becoming a figure of power and authority. In a sense, he never had the option to be someone *different*, to the point that his *Bildungsroman* developed against a background that was only ostensibly historical.

Such a background, if we maintain this line of argument, has much more to do with nature and biology, which is to say, with the sameness of the Uzeda's heredity, than with the changing events of the Risorgimento and the "capture" of Rome in 1870. These events, in other words, do not alter the *telos*—the ultimate purpose or end—that orients Consalvo's education and development towards an outcome inscribed in his biological constitution and in that of his family.

Vittorio Spinazzola's reading of *The Viceroy*s shares this interpretation of the novel and of Consalvo's character from within a Marxian theoretical framework. The critic, in fact, remarks that "nei *Viceré* non prende corpo alcuna vera dialettica di forze sociali antagonistiche" ("in *The Viceroy*s there is not any true dialectics among contrasting social forces"; 128; my trans.). The Uzedas are aristocratic, and the only bourgeois, Benedetto Giulente, is isolated by his particular class membership. Therefore, for Spinazzola the novel is an anti-historical one because its events are not "mobilized" by a fight for better socio-economic conditions and other progress; they are instead invariantly flattened upon a merciless form of social Darwinism, which translates into sociological terms the harsh and ahistorical necessity of nature. In Spinazzola's reading, even Consalvo's performative abilities displayed at a political rally in preparation to be elected deputy are to be interpreted as a natural inheritance: "dalle sue origini spagnolesche, ai tempi della fastosità barocca, la nobiltà isolana ha tratto un'attitudine sperimentata a manipolare suggestivamente le coscienze: nulla di più facile che riattualizzarla in chiave di demagogia, così da ottenere il consenso" ("Sicilian nobility has formed its ability to manipulate consciences suggestively out of its Spanish origins, at the time of the baroque splendor. Now those abilities are to be revived in terms of demagoguery, so as to gain consensus"; 52; my trans.). Consalvo's success as a politician was *already there, in potentia*, even before he was born; that success was somehow present in his aristocratic class's Spanish origins since the end of the sixteenth century.

Before Spinazzola, and working from a liberal point of view, Benedetto Croce (1866–1952) opened the way for an interpretation of *The Viceroy*s as an anti-historical novel. Indeed, Croce—a fierce opponent of positivism (and of abstract, pedantic idealism as well)—read De Roberto's book as an example of an unproblematic naturalistic novel. He wrote that the novel's thesis lies in nothing

but the idea that a dominating family, because of its unchanged and *inherited* capacities, can keep being powerful despite all the social and political upheavals it goes through:

Zolianamente vi apportò l'intenzione di dimostrare [...] che una gente, usa per secoli a dominare, non abbandona questa sua pratica per larghi e profondi che siano i rivolgimenti sociali e politici accaduti, attraverso i quali gl'individui di quella famiglia, armati della capacità ricevuta ereditariamente, riescono a sormontare e continuano, in modi nuovi, a dominare [...]. Questa idea [...] non aveva in ogni caso bisogno di un così grosso libro per essere esemplificata, dato che ciò fosse necessario e dato che contenesse una verità dimostrabile, della quale cosa è da dubitare. (143)

*À la façon de Zola*, De Roberto wanted to demonstrate [...] that certain people who are used to dominate across the centuries, do not abandon their practice despite huge and deep social and political changes. The individuals of such a family, because of their inherited capacities, manage to overcome those changes and keep being dominant in new ways [...]. This idea did not need such a big book to be explained, provided such an explanation was necessary and demonstrable, which is doubtful. (my trans.)

Croce's negative assessment contributed to De Roberto's *damnatio memoriae*, and it implied that there is no need to write a novel in order to demonstrate that a family's offspring will be powerful, if that family is powerful by nature—or, in other words, by *design*.

### **The impotentiality of imagination: an error in evolution**

At this point, however, there is a question: Are we sure that when De Roberto published *The Viceroy*s in 1894, the general understanding of nature and biological life was still furnished by natural theology? To put it differently: Was that understanding still centred on the *teleological* notion of *divine design*?

William Paley's (1743–1805) *Natural Theology; or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity* was published in 1802, while Charles Darwin's

(1809–82) innovative if not “revolutionary” (Ruse)<sup>2</sup> text, *On the Origin of Species*, became available to the public more than fifty years later, in 1859. De Roberto had all the time he needed to become familiar with Giovanni Canestrini and Leonardo Salimbeni’s 1864 translation of Darwin’s book into Italian.

From the point of view of Paley’s natural theology, the evidences of the existence of God are not provided by any revelation: they are instead visible in nature, in the *prescriptive* design that governs the development of each natural organism belonging to different animal and vegetal species. Paley does not see any room for contingency, fortuity, or *possibility* in Aristotle’s notions of *dynamis* and *energeia*. Therefore, for him, each animal organism in nature is *necessitated* to become what it *essentially* is: its potentiality must develop or *actualize* itself in a designed and entirely *predetermined* way. The egg, we might add, *must* become chicken, because being a chicken is the egg’s *ousia*, or essence; it is the “final cause” that moves the egg from being a potential chicken to being an actual one, and so the eternal dilemma—Which came first, the egg or the chicken?—would be solved in favour of the chicken, the true essence of the egg.

Darwin’s theory of evolution, along with his idea of natural selection, undermines this understanding of biological life. As John Dewey remarked at the beginning of the twentieth century, Darwin’s contribution to philosophy is represented by his criticism of essentialism, finalism, and philosophical absolutism. Darwin’s theory of evolution provides a non-teleological (or non-finalistic) explanation of “variation” in animal and vegetal species. His theory, in more abstract terms, includes the possibility of deviating from an established norm.

For Darwin, natural selection comes into play precisely when he has to account for variations in the morphology and instinctual equipment of animals and plants. When tackling this topic, Darwin writes:

Any variation, however slight, and from whatever cause proceeding, if it be in any degree profitable to an individual of any species, in its infinitely complex relations to other organic beings and to external nature, will tend to the preservation of that individual, and will generally [*but not necessarily*] be inherited by its offspring. (50)

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<sup>2</sup> Peter J. Bowler, and today many other science historians, maintains instead that the understanding of Darwin’s contribution to science in the terms of a “revolution” is a myth produced under historical conditions.

An even ostensibly marginal variation in the wing shape of a species of bird, for instance, can occur *by chance*, but if that variation is “profitable” to the individual living in mutual dependence on other beings and the environment, it *tends* to preserve the individual and its offspring from the negative effects of the struggle for life. In other words, variation and deviation from what seems to be once-for-all acquired, stable, and *normative* by divine right—that is, *diversity*—can help the individual and its offspring survive. If the profitable variation reaches a high degree of differentiation, it can give birth to a new species—an *incipient* one, as Darwin says—and it can determine the extinction of the previous species (“the extinction of the old forms is the almost inevitable consequence of the production of new forms”; Darwin 252). Therefore, no predetermined design, nor any inevitable development from potentiality to actuality, regulates, by necessity, the variety of the forms of life in nature: nature is the realm of *unpredictability*.

In *The Viceroy*s, De Roberto seems to be aware—despite what both Croce and Spinazzola think—that for Darwin, there are no unquestionable laws operating at the level of biological life; or, at least, that those laws’ fixity is called into question by a noticeable number of exceptions and contingencies. This circumstance is clear when the author directly tackles the *bios*—that is to say, when he addresses the heredity apparent in the mirror of his character’s physical appearance.

The two sons of Teresa Risà Uzeda di Francalanza, Giacomo and Raimondo, do not resemble each other. Accordingly, De Roberto writes an extended descriptive paragraph about the unpredictability and turnarounds of heredity across the family:

I due fratelli, quantunque avessero la stess’aria di famiglia, non si rassomigliavano neppure fisicamente: Raimondo era bellissimo, Giacomo più che brutto. Nella Galleria dei ritratti si potevano riscontrare i due tipi. Tra i progenitori più lontani c’era quella mescolanza di forza e di grazia che formava la bellezza del contino; a poco a poco, col passare dei secoli, i lineamenti cominciavano ad alterarsi, i volti s’allungavano, i nasi sporgevano, il colorito diveniva più oscuro; un’estrema pinguedine come quella di don Blasco, o un’estrema magrezza come quella di don Eugenio, deturpava i personaggi. Fra le donne l’alterazione era più manifesta: Chiara e Lucrezia, quantunque fresche e giovani entrambe, erano disavvenenti, quasi non parevano donne; la zia Ferdinanda, sotto panni mascholini, sarebbe parsa qualcosa di mezzo tra l’usuraio e il sagrestano; ed

altrettante figure maschilmente dure spiccavano fra i ritratti femminili di più fresca data; mentre, negli antichi, le strane acconciature e gli stravaganti costumi, gli strozzanti collari alla fiamminga che mettevano le teste come sopra un bacino, le vesti abbondanti che chiudevano il corpo come scaglie di testuggine, non riuscivano a nascondere la sveltezza elegante delle forme né ad alterare la purezza fine dei lineamenti. Tratto tratto, fra le generazioni più vicine, in mezzo alle figure imbastardite, se ne vedeva tuttavia qualcuna che rammentava le primitive; così, per una specie di reviviscenza delle vecchie cellule del nobile sangue, Raimondo rassomigliava al più puro tipo antico. (*Vicerè* 43)

The two brothers, though having the same family look, did not even resemble each other physically; Raimondo was very handsome, Giacomo very ugly. The two types could be seen in the Portrait Gallery. More distant forebears had that mixture of strength and grace which gave the young count his charm. Gradually, as the centuries passed, features began to alter, faces lengthened, noses grew, skin darkened; extreme fatness like Don Blasco's, or extreme thinness like Don Eugenio's, disfigured the portraits. Changes were most obvious among the women. Chiara and Lucrezia, though both of them fresh and young, were so hideous they scarcely looked like women at all. Aunt Ferdinanda, in male attire, would have been taken for a money lender or a sacristan. And there were other harsh, mannish faces to be seen among feminine portraits of recent date, while in older ones the strange head-dresses and extravagant costumes, the huge Flemish collars, which made heads look as if they were on a basin, the ample robes enfolding the body like tortoiseshells could not quite hide slimness of form or alter pure lineaments of features. Now and again among the degenerate faces in more recent generations could be seen one or two reminiscent of the earliest; thus, as if by a kind of recrudescence of the old cells of noble blood, Raimondo was like the purest ancient type. (*Viceroy*s 105–06)

Giacomo and Raimondo have a vague “family look,” but they differ from each other, and no specific, somatic relation can bridge their dissimilarity. In retrospect, and more importantly, “as the centuries passed” and temporality affected the



“original” type of the family, the *divergent* features of the Uzedas started to become remarkable, to the point of *disfiguration* and unrecognizability. Nonetheless, and in an unpredictable manner regardless of any law of heredity, among “the degenerate faces” of the present there are some that are “reminiscent” of the past, as in Raimondo’s case. The explanation for such a phenomenon does not rest upon any easily identifiable regularity; rather, it should be traced back to some indeterminate “kind of recrudescence of the old cells of noble blood,” as though blood harboured within itself a *groundless and playful impulse*, in a sense, to disfigure and reconfigure its cells arbitrarily.

In this passage of his novel, De Roberto seems to make room, within biology, for a *possibility*, detached from its necessary actualization, to say that a scientific account of the *bios* does not exclude in principle an imaginary one. This is probably the reason why Jobst Welge argues that the identity of the Uzedas does not consist of a peculiar biological trait, but instead of a “pseudo-biological” (or maybe *bio-fictional*) one “that makes them internally divide against themselves” (54) and leads to the characteristic bifurcation of types, as in the cases of Giacomo and Raimondo.

If we draw a comparison between De Roberto’s novel and Giovanni Verga’s *I Malavoglia* (1881), we could argue that the pseudo-biological bond among the members of the Uzedas differs from the Malavoglia family continuity. The Malavoglias bear exclusively positive connotations, because the core of their identity is biological, as it were, in a *narrow* sense, as when Padron ’Ntoni praises Luca or Mena as being a true, or *born*, Malavoglia. Such a circumstance in De Roberto’s novel is denied even to the matriarch Donna Teresa Risà, who *acquired* the name through marriage: she was not *born* Uzedà; her original name was Francalanza.

In the last chapter of the first part of *The Viceroy*s, De Roberto makes the point even clearer and breaks the finalistic and teleological connection between potentiality and actuality to the point of equating potentiality with the potentiality-to-not-be(-an-Uzedà); or, with the potentiality-to-not-have-power, which is the same. At this point in the novel, the Uzedas’ potential seems to transform itself into a subversive impotentiality (*adynamia* in book 9 of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*), which is to say, into a possibility that is open to radical unpredictability. In arguing this, we are elaborating on what Giorgio Agamben writes about a well-known passage from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (1046b29–30). In this passage, Aristotle replies to the thesis of the Megarians, who affirm that *dynamis* exists only as *energeia* in the act. The meaning that Agamben attaches to Aristotle’s *dynamis* (potentiality)

and *energeia* (actuality), as we will see soon, is not the same as that upon which William Paley's natural theology relies. As Agamben underscores, Aristotle replies that, if the Megarians were correct, we could not consider the architect an architect when he or she does not build. For Agamben, this argument supports the idea that *dynamis* "is defined," fundamentally, not by a visible power, nor by potentiality's actualization into something definite, but "by the possibility of its non-exercise," which means that "every power to act is constitutively a power to not act" (483, 486).

Keeping these remarks in mind, we can now focus on the last chapter of the first part of De Roberto's *The Viceroy*s. Chiara, the marquis of Villardita's wife and one of Donna Teresa's daughters, gives birth to a "cosa innominabile" ("unnamable thing"; *Vicerè* 124; *Viceroy*s 267) that no one in the family will ever call an Uzeda. The "unnamable thing," in other words, personifies the potentiality-to-not-be-an-Uzeda, and, out of its radical *passivity*, it breaks its family's law of heredity. When the midwife sees the creature, she goes pale, "vedendo disperse le speranze di ricchi regali" ("seeing her hopes of rich tips vanish"; 124; 267). The newborn is described as "un pesce col becco, un uccello spiumato; quel mostro senza sesso aveva un occhio solo, tre specie di zampe, ed era ancor vivo" ("a beaked fish, a featherless bird; this sexless monster had one eye, three things like paws, and was still alive"; 124; 267). The "sexless" and unidentifiable "monster" is more an animal than a human, and it seems to recombine, unpredictably and "unnaturally," the cells of the Uzedas' blood; the thing is a hybrid, a product, as it were, of imagination escaping any fixed and expected "natural" regularity. Even Princess Margherita, Giacomo's wife, "voltava adesso il capo, dal disgusto prodottole da quella vista" ("turned away her head in disgust at the sight"; 124; 268). When Giacomo enters the room, he sees the "aborto il cui unico occhio erasi spento" ("abortion whose single eye was now lifeless"; 125; 268). The "abominio" ("abomination"; 125; 269), the dead fetus "giallo come la cera" ("yellow like wax"; 126; 270)—"quell pezzo di grasso" ("that piece of fat"; 126; 270)—is then introduced by Ferdinando, at the wish of Chiara, into a glass jar, which Ferdinando filled with spirits and then corked up. "Quel pezzo anatomico, il prodotto più fresco della razza dei Vicerè" ("that lump of anatomy, the latest product of the Viceroy's race"; 126; 270), is now observed—like an admonishing object in a monstrosities museum—by Chiara and her husband. The other relatives leave the room where the abomination, for a while, has seen the light of the world with its only eye.

Whereas the ungendered thing is repulsive for the family because of its biological mutation, its short biography is the only one in the novel exempt from any ferocity and guilt. The innocent monster born the same year that Italy is unified is, in a sense, a figure of anti-deterministic possibility, of impotentiality, or of a possible story that nonetheless has no *visible* continuation, unlike that of Consalvo as a champion of *trasformismo*. Although Chiara's creature represents shame and infamy for the Uzedas' delimited family milieu, its brief existence embodies the peculiar "power" of imagination—and of literature—embedded in life.

If Consalvo is the one who in the end succeeds in keeping the "political" power, the power of imagination embodied by Chiara's monster could be termed "impolitical." In fact, according to Roberto Esposito (as explained by Rhiannon Noel Welch), the "impolitical" is "the unrepresentable origin of politics" (135n8)—that which politics has to exclude in order to keep being *powerful*. The Uzedas' "abomination" plays the role of such an unrepresentable, powerless, and "excluded" origin: it is introduced in a jar, and it is kept at a safe distance in a sort of domestic monstrosities museum, to which only Chiara and her husband have access.

In the essay "L'uomo e la teoria darwiniana" ("Man and Darwinian Theory," 1907–09), Italo Svevo (1861–1928) introduces an idea similar to that of De Roberto's "monster" or "abomination," and he will go so far as to identify himself with it (638). The *uomo abbozzo* ("human sketch") is a man with a sense of possibilities, like Robert Musil's (1880–1942) Ulrich in *The Man without Qualities* (1930–43), someone whom Svevo does not hesitate to define as an "errore dell'evoluzione" ("error in evolution"): "Io sono quell'uomo [...], aspetto sapendo che è nient'altro che un abbozzo" ("I am that man [...], I wait knowing that he is nothing else than a sketch"; 849; my trans.). According to Giuliana Minghelli, this typology of human being and man, because of its impotentiality, opens the perspective of radical futurity: "the man of the future [...] displaces the struggle [for life] to an existential level: he is unfinished, constantly changing, a man who 'waits knowing that he is nothing else than a sketch'" (4).

Despite what Paley's natural theology maintained, there is no metaphysical necessity binding together *dynamis* and *energeia*, potentiality and actuality. *Becoming* someone, from this point of view, is not a process governed by a prescriptive necessity. As Luigi Ruggiu argues when he comments on Aristotle's definition of "divenire," or "becoming" (*kínesis*), in book 3 of *Physics* (201a10), "becoming" (or "motion") is something unstable, always on the edge between *being* and *not*

*being* (xxxviii; my trans.). According to Jonathan Barnes's translation, Aristotle's definition of *kinesis* equates "becoming" with "the fulfillment of what is potential, as such" (475). Ruggiu highlights that the "fulfillment" of "what is potential" does not exhaust the potential embedded in potentiality, since "what is potentially" has always to be considered "as such"—that is to say, as something that is always open to more possibilities, despite its temporary actualizations and fulfillments. Therefore, in Ruggiu's reading, "becoming" essentially is "sempre diverso e altro da sè stesso" ("always different from, and other than, itself"; xxxviii; my trans.).

### **A megalomaniac *parrhesiastes*: the "powerless power" of fiction**

In *The Viceroy*s, besides Consalvo and Chiara's creature, there is another figure on whom it is worth focusing if we want to understand how potentiality and impotentiality matter for Italian literature: Cavaliere Eugenio. Eugenio's character in *The Viceroy*s is not as marginal as might first seem. Eugenio has tried to sell the vanity books he wrote (including his "masterpiece," the new *Sicilian Herald*), in which imaginary and fictionalized aristocratic genealogies are described. Anyone willing to pay for these books could find his or her family name in Eugenio's forged genealogies, nourishing the narcissistic dream of being considered an aristocrat, like the Uzedas, by the people of Catania—all of this while Sicily's aristocratic class was trying to survive, economically and politically, after the annexation of the island by the Kingdom of Italy.

Whereas Consalvo is about to have success as a politician in Catania, and later on in Rome, Eugenio is now a beggar, since he has failed in his intellectual and economic endeavours—that is, in his attempts at forging for himself a sort of bourgeois identity as a businessman by fraudulently expanding the notion of aristocracy. He is definitely a loser in the struggle for inheritance, family name, money, power, and life; he is a helpless—and powerless—megalomaniac, self-suggested both by his greed and by his aspiration to revitalize Sicily's traditional way of life at the exact turning point of its crisis.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, he is the one who speaks out the truth about Blasco's will, the official document that, once and for all, should clearly determine the destination of the Uzedas' *inheritance*, which is a

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<sup>3</sup> By depicting Eugenio in this way, De Roberto's satirical intention has to be taken into account. Welge writes: "The satire here is clear: Eugenio's capitalist marketing of aristocratic pedigree shows that the new rhetoric of liberalism and social equality actually fosters the pride in family trees, real or imaginary" (56).

term in *The Viceroy*s that should always be interpreted as a metaphor for biological *heredity*.<sup>4</sup> Eugenio is the only one able to tell the truth about inheritance/heredity, not only because he has lost everything, but also because of his familiarity with the deceptive traits and the possible mystifying nature of language. He cries out loud, “[...] m’hanno spogliato, m’hanno ridotto alla miseria! Mio fratello il Benedettino [Blasco] m’aveva lasciato cinquecent’onze, e stracciarono il testamento, ne fecero uno falso! Il principe mio nipote m’ha rubato la mia grand’opera dell’*Araldo sicolo*! [...] Mi chiudono la porta in faccia!” (“[...] they’ve despoiled me, reduced me to poverty, they have! My brother the Benedictine [Blasco] left me five hundred *onze*, and they tore up his Will and made a false one! My nephew the prince stole my great work the *Sicilian Herald*! [...] And they shut their gates in my face!”; *Vicerè* 262; *Viceroy*s 545).

This truth—the *truth that there is no truth*, because nowhere, by now, is there a true will, nor a true aristocratic genealogy—can be grasped and told only by the scapegoat of the fading world of the past, by the one who has been excluded from it, and from his attempts at survival (“they shut their gates in my face!”). In this way, Eugenio acts, from a position of *absence* of power, like the *parrhesiastes* upon whom Michel Foucault lingered in his six lectures delivered at the University of California at Berkeley in the fall term of 1983. The lectures were part of a seminar, titled “Discourse and Truth,” devoted to the study of the ancient Greek notion of *parrhesia*, or “frankness in speaking the truth” (Foucault 7).

The truth, in the case of Blasco’s will, is a paradoxical one. The authenticity of his handwriting cannot be proved by the court, and we might say that this happens because when the old, reassuring, and seemingly unmodifiable traditions *inherited* from the past crumble under the pressure of history and its unpredictable contingencies, language and writing, as such, turn into falsity, illusion, and fiction—or rather, into nothing but (contested) words emptied of their bygone, “natural” reference. Such reference, as Donna Ferdinanda illustrates, was granted in the past by the *Golden Book of Nobility*, which was the only authority that could tell, beyond any doubt, who was noble and who was not. Eugenio, the *parrhesiastes*, is a black stain, as it were, in that *Golden Book*. He is a man, now made abject, who “owns” just his language and nothing else: he has no power. He employs his

<sup>4</sup> As Spinazoola writes, “Le elucubrazioni derobertiane sull’eredità di doti e tare biopsichiche rinviano a una questione ben concreta di eredità, materialmente intesa” (“De Roberto’s elucubrations about the heredity of bio-psychical abilities and flaws are linked to a concrete and material notion of inheritance”; 124; my trans.).

language to beg for alms and to “[dare] spettacolo della sua pazzia” (“make a show of madness”; *Vicerè* 263; *Viceroy*s 547) publicly in the streets of Catania.

With Cavaliere Eugenio, the story of the Uzedas, in a sense, is trapped in a dead end; Consalvo, on the other hand, is able to reinvent its future by ferrying the Uzeda name to Rome, to the new Kingdom of Italy. However, from another point of view, Eugenio, not Consalvo, shows for the first time—as a *parrhesiastes* does—the emptiness and the fraudulent nature upon which the Uzedas’ ostensible success has been built. In fact, it could be argued that Consalvo’s intelligence rests on Eugenio’s madness, and that the young Uzeda’s power postulates Eugenio’s powerlessness and impotentiality—which is to say, the “powerless power” of illusion, fiction (or literature), and madness itself. According to such a “powerless power,” even “race” and the nobility of blood and soil are fictional products of imagination, mad and illusory ideas.<sup>5</sup>

### **Conclusion: What did he say, in the end? Nothing.**

The decisive electoral meeting for Consalvo’s appointment to Montecitorio in Rome takes place on 8 October 1882, in the gymnasium (*palestra ginnastica*) of the ex-Benedictine monastery. This is the place where Consalvo and his cousin, Giovannino, studied when they were children, and where Blasco conducted his dissolute life.

Consalvo’s speech, in preparation to be elected as a deputy in Rome, does not bear any traces of objective concerns (the street sprinklers working, the fire brigade, etc.) that distinguished his debut as a politician at the council of Catania. In 1882, Consalvo instead moves a decisive step towards the incarnation of a self-referential notion of power, of power as such, a notion according to which politics is not an instrument useful to obtain certain results in and *for* the community; it is, rather, a way of maintaining power for itself: nothing other than the *will to power*, if we are allowed to borrow this expression from Friedrich Nietzsche while recontextualizing it, as Luca Bani does (60).

Despite the effort he puts into his performance, Consalvo’s speech does not gravitate around a centre—a political idea, a subject matter, a specific goal, or a resolution. Instead, it leaves a void at its centre. The velvet-draped balustrade from which the candidate speaks is telling, with its disparate portraits piled upon it, and with the absence of any recognizable political standpoint in Consalvo’s

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<sup>5</sup> For the scientific demonstration that nothing like a pure “race” exists, see Cavalli-Sforza et al.

words, not to mention the basic issue of meaning in the words themselves. Those portraits represent the transformistic nature of his conception of politics. The balustrade, with its theatrical open curtain, shows images of “Umberto e Garibaldi; poi Mazzini e Vittorio Emanuele; poi Margherita e Cairoli; e così tutto in giro Amedeo, Bixio, Cavour, Crispi, Lamarmora, Rattazzi, Bertani, Cialdini, la famiglia sabauda e la garibaldina, la monarchia e la repubblica, la destra e la sinistra” (“Umberto and Garibaldi, then Mazzini and Victor Emmanuel, then Queen Margherita and Cairoli; and so on, round with Amedeo, Bixio, Cavour, Crispi, Lamarmora, Rattazzi, Bertani, Cialdini, the family of Savoy and Garibaldi, Monarchy and Republic, Right and Left”; *Vicerè* 293–94; *Viceroy*s 606–07). It would not be misleading to hypothesize that Consalvo’s balustrade already alludes to the balcony in Piazza Venezia, from which, as Stephen Marth argues, Benito Mussolini delivered his “protean performances” in front of an enthusiastic and devoted audience (73).

Accordingly, the value of Consalvo’s language is not rooted in *what* is said, but in *how* the future deputy speaks—in his *style*. Language cannot be separated from performance to the point that its referential and locative function is obscure, self-contradictory, and even meaningless. *Trasformismo*, before being a parliamentary praxis, is a way to address the audience (or the Parliament). For *trasformismo*, differences in content, matters of principle, and a variety of political ideas have lost any relevance and, above all, the distinctive ideality they had during the Risorgimento.

All of this shines through the words De Roberto puts into Consalvo’s mouth: “La monarchia democratica di Casa Savoia spiega e legittima i sentimenti democraticamente monarchici degli italiani. (*Benissimo!*)” (“The democratic monarchy of the House of Savoy is a legal expression of the democratic-monarchist sentiments of all Italians. *Excellent!*; *Vicerè* 297; *Viceroy*s 614). And, again in violation of the Aristotelian principle of noncontradiction: “Amministrazione della giustizia [...]. Giustizia nell’amministrazione. Discentrare accentrando, accentrare discentrando” (“Administration of justice [...]. Justice in administration. Decentralize by centralizing, centralize by decentralizing”; 297; 616). The (absent) meaning of these sentences is summarized by the rhetorical question of a group of students present at the political rally: “Adesso che ha parlato, mi sapete ripetere che ha detto?” (“Now that he has spoken, can you tell me what he said?”; 299; 617). The obvious answer is *nothing*.

It is certainly true, as we have noted at the beginning of this essay, that in the conclusion of another discourse, the one addressed to his aunt Ferdinanda, Consalvo says, “No, la nostra razza non è degenerata: è sempre la stessa” (“No, our race has not degenerated; it is the same as it ever was”; *Vicerè* 304; *Viceroy*s 627). Nonetheless, it should be taken into consideration that the content of that discourse—*what* Consalvo says—is undermined by *how* he speaks, by the *site* of his utterances, as it were: “la vecchia stava ad ascoltarlo, senza più tossire, soggiogata all’eloquenza del nipote, divertita e quasi cullata da quella recitazione enfatica e teatrale” (“the old woman lay there listening, without coughing now, subjugated by her nephew’s eloquence, entertained, almost lulled by his emphatic and theatrical acting”; 303; 626). Donna Ferdinanda, who has always been stubbornly faithful to the Bourbon household, is now subjugated just like the crowd in the *palestra ginnastica*, and when he speaks to her, Consalvo is, fundamentally, a leading actor and a theatrical *persona* once again. His power rests on nothing but an *illusion* (Galvagno).

In a well-known article published in *Corriere della sera* on 1 February 1975, titled “Il vuoto del potere” (“The Void Inherent in Power”), Pier Paolo Pasolini denounced the *absence* and the *impotentiality*, in a sense, located at the heart of the “new” fascist power, the one exerted by the consumerist society in which we all live. Being acutely aware of the void and the impotentiality that underlay any form of authoritarian power—as De Roberto and other (Italian and non-Italian) writers seem to suggest—is likely the only way to redirect that very impotentiality—that radical possibility, that *thinking*—towards a different, more viable and more human (although imperfect) actualization.

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