

# **Man and Boy**

Homoeroticism and Myth-making  
in Umberto Saba's *Canzoniere*

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## Abstract

My thesis investigates the relationship between male same-sex desire and myth-making in the work of the Italian twentieth-century poet Umberto Saba (1883-1957).

I analyse the pervasiveness of homoeroticism in Saba's collected poetic work, the *Canzoniere*, arguing that same-sex desire is not only relevant in itself but also plays a decisive role in relation to the heterosexual and family attachments on which Sabian scholarship has concentrated up till now. The foregrounding of homoeroticism thus results in the first comprehensive reading of the *Canzoniere*, in which the various poles interacting in it are shown to acquire their full meaning only when viewed as parts of a whole.

More specifically, I read the *Canzoniere's* renowned autobiographism as the articulation of a self-aware homoerotic subject through myth-making. The identification of the nexus between homoeroticism, mythopoeia and the process of construction of identity allows me to demonstrate that, contrary to established critical notions, Saba's ostensible traditionalism serves ideological purposes which sharply diverge from the dominating idealistic framework of the Italian poetic tradition. This surfaces in the way in which poetic language is bent to articulate issues of a complex and strikingly modern psychological nature, and to serve goals which are narrative rather than poetic in the strictest sense. It is also exemplified by Saba's tendency to re-appropriate classical myths (the *Odyssey* and *Oresteia* in particular) from a specifically homoerotic perspective, a phenomenon which leads to a proliferation in the *Canzoniere* of male figures whose resonance is at once personal and archetypal.

The connection between mythopoeia and the process of self-understanding and self-fashioning also informs the methodological slant of my research. Whereas scholars still tend to view Freudian psychoanalysis as a major hermeneutic key to Saba's world, I lay great emphasis on the fact that the *Canzoniere's* mythopoeia shows numerous significant points of contact with the archetypal psychology of C. G. Jung. Accordingly throughout this study I have made use of a number of theoretical sources (Karol Kerényi and James Hillman, as well as Jung) which have not previously been applied to Saba and his work.

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Chapter 1. One and Many: the <i>Canzoniere</i>'s Mythopoeia and the Puer Archetype</b>	<b>15</b>
A Modern Odyssey	15
Epistemology of Images	19
Dramatis Personae	24
Puer and Senex	29
Puer 1: Laughter, the Trickster and Festivity	33
Puer 2: Games, Fights and Eros	39
Puer 3: the Sea	47
<b>Chapter 2. 'Tu non sai come sia dolce la vita': <i>Canzoniere</i> Volume primo, 1900-1920</b>	<b>54</b>
The Cauldron of Youth	54
A Male Muse	65
Between two Worlds	72
The Broken Vessel	87
<b>Chapter 3. 'Il dono ch'io ho da lui l'ho avuto': <i>Canzoniere</i> Volume secondo, 1921-1932</b>	<b>92</b>
The Way of the Puer	92
The Epiphany of the Father	96
The Myth of Orestes	106
Fathers, Sons and Lovers	115
Saba and Berto	123
Roses over the Abyss	131
<b>Chapter 4. 'Un vecchio amava un ragazzo': <i>Canzoniere</i> Volume terzo, 1933-1954</b>	<b>134</b>
A New Constellation	134
Late Prodigies	143
A Homoerotic Tradition	151
Last Dialogue	165
<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>173</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>182</b>

## Introduction

My first encounter with the poetry of Umberto Saba (1883-1957) happened, as is the case for most Italian schoolchildren, through a reading of his two most frequently anthologised texts, 'La capra' and 'A mia moglie'. Though both poems belong to one of Saba's early collections, *Casa e campagna* (1909-1910), and as such can hardly be taken as representative of a poetic career which lasted over fifty years, they exemplify aspects of his poetry which have become constituent elements of the way in which his personality is canonically seen. 'La capra' is built on an analogy between the existential situation of the poet and that of a solitary goat tied up in a field. In a few and understated lines, young Saba marks himself out in relation to his contemporary colleagues both in terms of the sober legibility of his poetic diction, and because of the animal and elemental universe to which he feels close. 'A mia moglie' is a long and exuberant text which celebrates his wife Lina as an icon of maternal femininity. It does so comparing her to a number of humble animals (a hen, a heifer and a bitch among others), so that the poem stays in one's memory both as a highly personal tribute of a man to his wife and as a sharp break from the way in which men express their love for a woman in the usually more rarefied atmospheres of the Italian lyric .

In the course of my MA, Saba cropped up again in my curriculum. My attention was drawn this time to a number of poems with boys and young men as protagonists, which clashed with my memory of Saba as a poet of domestic and heterosexual bliss. I soon realised that these poems form a rather substantial and specific corpus within Saba's wider output, and that their source of inspiration is undoubtedly homoerotic. Though they never depict or conceptualise an actual relationship between the poet and another man, they insistently celebrate the beauty,

sensual allure and tenderness of young men, betraying a desire in the poetic gaze which on closer reading appears all the more pervasive the less it is directly expressed. Despite their relative reticence, this group of poems came to constitute in my mind a significant homoerotic corpus, which can be ranked alongside some of the already acknowledged gay male poetic masterpieces of the first half of the twentieth century, such as Cavafis' poems or Lorca's *Sonetos del amor oscuro*.

My desire to see Saba established as a leading homoerotic voice received a first critical boost when I came across Gregory Woods' encouraging observation in *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage* that 'Saba is generally ranked alongside the greatest of modern Italian poets, Eugenio Montale and Giuseppe Ungaretti. He should also be included in the canon of significant gay writers of the modernist period.'<sup>1</sup> Thereafter however, my enthusiasm was cooled by the realization that same-sex desire is still a taboo subject in relation to Saba's poetry and that no scholarly work dealing with it exists. The only two publications available that concern themselves with male same-sex desire in twentieth-century Italian literature focus on prose writing, and Saba therefore appears in them as author of *Ernesto*, the autobiographical and overtly homosexual novel which he wrote in 1953-55 but only appeared posthumously in 1975<sup>2</sup>.

What struck me most however was that Saba's homosexuality is absent not only from Italian scholarship but also from the Anglo-Saxon academic landscape where gay studies are not only accepted but fashionable. The *Oxford Companion to Italian Literature*, which in its gay friendliness does have a separate entry for homosexuality (where Saba is not mentioned), limits its survey of the most 'recurrent themes' in his poetry to 'his relationships with his parents and nurse, his love for his wife Lina and daughter Linuccia, and his affection for Trieste', and conveniently glosses over *Ernesto* as 'a story about a boy's experiences of sexual love.'<sup>3</sup> Even more startlingly the

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Woods, 'Saba', in *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage: A Reader's Companion to the Writers and their Work, from Antiquity to the Present* (ed. by Claude J. Summers), London: Bloomsbury, 1997, 618-19, 618.

<sup>2</sup> See Claudio Gargano, *Ernesto e gli altri: L'omosessualità nella narrativa italiana del Novecento*, Roma: Editori Riuniti, 2002, 31-38, and Francesco Gnerre, *L'eroe negato: Omosessualità e letteratura nel Novecento italiano*, Milano: Baldini & Castoldi, 2000, 43-60. Gargano does not mention Saba's poetry at all, while Gnerre gives an introductory overview of it on pages 43-49.

<sup>3</sup> *The Oxford Companion to Italian Literature* (ed. by Peter Hainsworth and David Robey), Oxford: OUP, 2002, 530.

*Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* totally ignores Saba, despite devoting separate entries to Pier Paolo Pasolini and Sandro Penna.<sup>4</sup>

No matter how discomfoting and biased this critical neglect appeared to me, I could not dismiss it as being exclusively rooted in a homophobic, or at least gay-unfriendly, perspective. There were other obvious factors contributing to this silence, not least the incontrovertible presence of the earliest poems by Saba I had encountered, and most notably of 'A mia moglie'. Saba married and had a daughter, and the poetry he wrote for his wife Lina is undoubtedly one of the apexes of his production, an episode to be reckoned with even by those who choose to lay their main emphasis elsewhere. He also had attachments to a number of younger women who, if they inspired less memorable poems than his wife, are nevertheless important presences in his world. Finally, the spectrum of his poetry, and the sense of self that he projects, are simply wider than the more exclusively homoerotic focus of other gay poets more or less his contemporaries: erotic relationships play as big a role for him as family attachments (particularly to his father, mother and wet-nurse), for whose memorable dramatisation he is rightly famous. So even though homoerotic desire traverses his work from its very beginning with the *Poesie dell'adolescenza e giovanili* (1900-1906) to the late collection *Epigrafe* (1947-1948), Saba's poetic persona does not correspond to the image of the homosexual poet as an absolute outsider living in a dimension radically different from the one familiar to the heterosexual reader, something which is very prominent in an Italian context in the poetic experiences of Penna, Pasolini and Dario Bellezza. In his case same-sex desire must be seen as a central element within a complex system, and not as an all-embracing perspective.

These considerations spurred me to a comprehensive reading of Saba's collected poetic *oeuvre*, the *Canzoniere* (1900-1954), in the effort of mapping out the precise position of homoerotic desire within the wider context of his output. And this is when everything turned a lot more complex, because my vague awareness of various poles interacting within the poet's world was confronted with a poetic project far more cohesive, broad-ranging and interconnected than I had expected. I will discuss at length in the next chapter how Saba's *Canzoniere* is not simply a container of the various collections he wrote during his life, but a unified poetic autobiography of which he is

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<sup>4</sup> *The Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* (ed. by Wayne R. Dynes), 2 vols, London: St James Press, 1990, II, 951-53 and 974-75 respectively.

the protagonist. Scholars emphasise that, in comparison to other twentieth-century works of poetry, it should be read like a novel, a single long epic, or a melodrama. As a consequence each poem, beyond its individual aesthetic merits, gains considerably in significance once it is viewed in relation to the macrotext from which it derives further sets of meaning. This complex narrative is made even more intricate and stratified by the fact that Saba was the first Italian intellectual to embrace the discoveries of psychoanalysis, and that a psychological framework significantly informs the way in which he develops a fuller sense of self-understanding in the course of his autobiographical journey.

This made me realise that the poems on boys I had first been drawn to could not any longer be seen as a separate and self-contained strand of his poetry, but only as part of a wider plot. On closer scrutiny, I noticed that they were indeed related to the macrotext by a number of devices, which ranged from the lexical to the rhetorical to the iconographic and symbolic. They also occupied different positions along the *Canzoniere's* temporal axis. An analysis of their chronological development, together with clues derived from other related texts, convinced me that they expressed a number of psychological meanings whose range I had not at first grasped. These meanings in turn reflected back on other clusters of poems where same-sex desire was not apparently the issue, throwing considerable light on their internal dynamics. I thus started to get not only an impression of the more complex poetic environment in which homoeroticism was being expressed, but also to suspect that it often affected contexts where it was not immediately recognizable.

Also, the very notion of what same-sex desire meant for Saba widened considerably. Beside the celebratory poems on beautiful adolescents, I found it was also located in texts about his childhood and youth, which reflect on his sense of masculinity and on his modalities of interaction with male peers. It also emerged in the collection that he wrote during his year of military service, in which the depiction of his fellow recruits is often reminiscent of his erotic treatment of Triestine boys. I discovered that his late poetry celebrates a long lasting relationship with a younger man with an intensity and sense of intimacy not found in the poems on boys I was familiar with. Most importantly, the figure of his father appeared to preside over these various homoerotic dimensions, and to be consistently intertwined with them at a psychological level.

I thus started coming to terms with the fact that my focus of attention was in itself far more multi-layered and dispersed than I had first envisaged, and that it was furthermore inserted in a cohesive wider context that was similarly stratified and polycentric. This meant that I had to pursue the reconstruction of a dynamic and continuous plot, critically establish homoeroticism as a relevant presence within it, and assess its relationship to it. This process led me to a detailed understanding of the astounding pervasiveness of same-sex desire throughout Saba's work, and above all of its driving function in relation to the overall identity-creating narrative that his poetic book represents. My findings crystallised into one of the main theses of this study, that to the extent that the *Canzoniere* has a plot, this plot is predominantly, albeit not exclusively, a homoerotic one. If homoeroticism is not granted its proper place, its ramifications followed, the story is hardly intelligible, or remains at any rate badly fragmented.

This I claim to be a major contribution of my research to the field of Sabian studies, and an important critical result of my initial emphasis on the homoerotic element in Saba. If in fact the notion that the *Canzoniere* works as 'un libro organico e unitario'<sup>5</sup> is critically well established, this general awareness has not resulted in the comprehensive reading of the book that one would expect to follow from such a premise. In Sabian studies one finds plenty of talk of a continuous and cohesive narrative, of which however only two episodes have been critically assessed and popularised: the first concerning Saba's marriage with Lina, which dominates the phase of *Casa e campagna* (1909-1910) and *Trieste e una donna* (1910-1912), the second dealing with his traumatic relationship with the mother figure, explored in the later and so called 'psychoanalytical' collections *Cuor morituro* (1925-1930) and *Il piccolo Berto* (1929-1931).

Clearly, it is the preliminary excision of same-sex desire from the *Canzoniere* that has prevented a critical project such as the one I am sketching from coming into being. The question of same-sex desire in Saba thus impacts and is relevant beyond a strictly gay-studies perspective. It alters considerably some of the recurrent questions with which scholars have been concerned, and on which they have not gained sufficient focus precisely because of their unilateral critical stance.

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<sup>5</sup> Furio Brugnolo, 'Il Canzoniere di Umberto Saba', in *Letteratura italiana: Le opere* (ed. by Alberto Asor Rosa), 4 vols, Torino: Einaudi, 1995, IV.1, 497-559, 497.

The *Canzoniere*'s breadth and interrelatedness also affected my research in a second and equally fundamental direction. Just as I was surprised to discover a corpus of poetry which works like a continuous narrative lasting over fifty years, I was equally struck by the style of discourse, the overarching perspective, the kind of hermeneutic position which Saba progressively develops, and which started to appear to me as intrinsic to the book's inner cohesiveness as the narrative and structural devices through which its multiplicity is articulated. This mode of reflection is, very broadly speaking, based on myth, and indeed in my view the best definition that has been given of the *Canzoniere* is that of a 'mitobiografia.'<sup>6</sup> In the next chapter we will see in detail what exactly myth means for Saba, how he deploys it, and how his use of it compares with theoretical sources in which the mythical dimension, and mythical thinking, are foregrounded. For now, the crucial aspect to stress is that this mythopoeic perspective is intrinsic to the search for self-consciousness and inner integration upon which the *Canzoniere*'s protagonist embarks. In light of this, any attempt to chart the multifarious sense of self developed by the narrative must inevitably confront the specific means through which such a sense of identity is explored and articulated.

My interest in same-sex desire became in this way firmly anchored to the mythopoeic approach I was discovering in the *Canzoniere*. My initial task branched out to include a second dimension, and developed into an attempt to understand and analyse how Saba had used ostensibly traditional, when not outright 'archaic' poetic and epistemological modes, to articulate a sense of identity of which same-sex desire was a driving component.

This specific connection, I realized, was curiously leading me back into older territory, and specifically toward the very fraught question of the relationship between Saba and Tradition. Though less prominently in recent years, Saba has long been considered the most formally conservative among major Italian twentieth-century poets. In retrospect, it is clear that his allegiance to traditional poetic forms greatly contributed to the belated recognition of his value and of his central role in the poetic canon of the *Novecento*. Moreover, it has tended to act as a pretext for scholars to duck the issue of the kind of ideological preoccupations which transpire in the use that Saba makes of them.

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<sup>6</sup> Brugnolo, 516.

In view of this, the ostensibly traditional means through which Saba forges a homoerotic consciousness began to intrigue me. I started suspecting that the establishing of the connection between same-sex desire and mythopoeia would very likely result in a turning on its head of much of the received wisdom concerning his relationship with tradition. This is indeed what happened the more my research progressed. Throughout this study therefore, the reconstruction of the *Canzoniere*'s homoerotic plot is accompanied by a re-appraisal of Saba's relationship with the notion of tradition. The question is complex, and will be addressed at various stages in the course of this work. My main departure from established practice consists in broadening the concept of tradition, which as far as Sabian studies are concerned has been understood in eminently *Italian* and *poetic* terms. But tradition for Saba includes for instance figurative as well as literary sources; in particular I will discuss his protracted interest in the homoerotic potential of Michelangelo's statuary and drawings. Tradition must also be seen to include classical myths, which Saba, particularly in his confrontation with the *Odyssey* and the *Oresteia*, will use to give shape to some of his innermost complexes. It is only when tradition is understood in these broader terms, which I think reflect better the variety of appropriations noticeable in the *Canzoniere* itself, that the radical creativity with which Saba revisits it can start to become discernible.

More specifically, from the viewpoint of the study of Italian twentieth-century poetics, I will argue that these traditional materials are deployed by Saba as vehicles for an anti-idealistic and anti-symbolist poetics running counter to the prevailing Petrarchan framework informing the Italian lyric, a stance which also set him in polemical contrast with the powerful strand of Crocean idealism that held sway over Italian poetic practice, and indeed over the whole Italian cultural landscape, for a good part of the last century.

This combined effort – to reconstruct the *Canzoniere*'s plot from the homoerotic perspective which lies at its centre, to investigate the conceptual and poetic means through which this poetic autobiography is articulated, and to finally assess the ideological implications of this project – inevitably came up against and linked up to another issue, which looms large in the field of Sabian studies: the issue of psychoanalysis. I have mentioned Saba's precocious (in Italian terms) encounter with Freud. Freudian analysis and theory not only intervened as a momentous experience in his life, informing the background of *Cuor morituro* and *Il piccolo Berto*, but was

considered by Saba the inescapable epistemological stance from which to comprehend the divided consciousness of the modern and post-metaphysical individual. As a result, a good deal of Sabian criticism has applied a broadly Freudian framework to investigate a number of the *Canzoniere*'s episodes, with a correspondingly strong emphasis on the so-called 'psychoanalytical phase' of *Cuor morituro* and *Il piccolo Berto*.

This Freudian slant raises a number of problems that I will address at the appropriate points in the rest of this study; two of which can however be anticipated here. Primarily, it has further contributed to an uneven and localised focus on the *Canzoniere*, privileging those episodes behind which we know for certain that Freudian analysis had a role to play (incidentally, these are again episodes centred on Saba's relationship with women, in this case his mother and wet-nurse). Secondly, and more importantly, the central role accorded to Freud sits oddly with scholars' concomitant recognition, which I will also address at a later stage, that Saba displays a well-developed psychological (hence not strictly psychoanalytical) awareness well before he comes into contact with Freud's thought. However, little effort has been made to investigate this broadly psychological attitude, which continues to shape Saba's worldview even *after* he underwent analysis.

In this study I argue that Freud's thought does indeed play a circumscribed role within the *Canzoniere*, and that consequently the application of psychoanalytical concepts as an interpretative key to it can yield only limited insights. Psychology in Saba is in fact ultimately inseparable from mythopoeia. In this respect, his handling of psychological events, as well as his protracted use of mythical amplifications to deal with them, shows stronger affinities with the analytical psychology of Jung, which up to now has occupied a minor role in Sabian studies. This coincidence spurred me to look for further theoretical contributions which might help me map more precisely the way in which the *Canzoniere* works. I thus came to assemble a number of sources which all focus on mythopoeia, and whose insights provided me with a deeper understanding both of the book's operating mechanisms and of its individual episodes.

These sources include, together with the psychology of Jung, the phenomenology of images developed by Gaston Bachelard, the mythological studies of Karol Kerényi, the archetypal/post-Jungian psychology of James Hillman and the *mythodologie* of Gilbert Durand. I will discuss in the next chapter how these works considerably widen our understanding of Saba. What needs to be stressed now is again

that it is thanks to the reconstruction of the *Canzoniere*'s plot from the viewpoint of a homoerotic subject that I have been able to grasp how a Freudian framework could only account for it partially, and was led to look for other strands of thought whose methodological potential appeared to be greater. Though I arrived at it indirectly, this step eventually clinched the specifically methodological contribution that I aim to make to the field of Sabian studies. The exploration of the *Canzoniere*'s mythopoeia as the central code through which the subject's self-awareness comes into being is revealed in this work by the use of theoretical tools which have only sporadically (in the case of Jung) or not at all (in the case of the others) been applied to the Sabian universe.

A final note on vocabulary. It has become usual for studies dealing with same-sex desire to be prefaced by a lengthy methodological and political discussion on which terms are most apt to address the kind of relationships under the spotlight. This, quite rightly, reflects our keener understanding of the culturally-related inflections that any of the terms defining love between individuals of the same sex carries with itself. None of them is neutral, and their ideological implications run deep. The words that will dominate this study are 'homoeroticism' and 'homoerotic'. Though sometimes I will also use 'homosexual' and 'homosexuality' (mainly to avoid repetitions or when contrasted with 'heterosexual' and 'heterosexuality'), the term 'homoeroticism' defines this study in a way in which 'homosexuality' does not. Why and how?

It seems to me that 'homoeroticism', with its slightly looser connotations, erotic and affective rather than sexual in the strictest sense, reflects better the multifarious and fluid nature of male attachments in Saba. Saba lived in a pre-political age (in terms of gay awareness), and his way of understanding relationships with other men, as well as himself as subject of those relationships, developed outside of our contemporary conceptual framework. Nowhere in his poetry do we find any notions of an exclusively homosexual identity, and indeed one should probably speak of 'bisexuality' when wanting to do full justice to the range of the *Canzoniere*'s erotic spectrum.

Desire, admiration, and longing for identification with other men form for Saba a deep emotional and erotic pool, whose energy to different degrees inflects his relationships with individuals of his own sex. Sometimes these relationships appear 'homosexual' in the strictest sense, for instance in his late love story with the young Federico Almansì (see Chapter 4). But for much of the *Canzoniere* this is not the case,

since in his earlier poetry Saba sublimates his desire, and projects it onto external scenes with young men as protagonists. Even considering the (often reticent) poetic gaze, these scenes are better described as ‘homoerotic’ than ‘homosexual’, since they concentrate on the beauty, eroticism and tenderness of bonds between men which are not strictly, or not at all, of a (homo)sexual nature. This similarly applies to the treatment of Saba’s father, a figure fundamental in the poet’s homoerotic world. A relationship between father and son can hardly be described as ‘homosexual’, while the concept of homoeroticism can be effectively used to reveal Saba’s eroticisation of the figure of his father, and his projecting onto him of a need for identification with other men which takes many forms in the *Canzoniere*. Thus I felt that ‘homosexual’ simply would not encompass the variety of eroticised relationships between males which make up the richness of Saba’s homoerotic universe.

Lastly, a few words on the structure of this study. Chapter One (‘One and Many: the *Canzoniere*’s Mythopoeia and the Puer Archetype’) is introductory as well as methodological. I first discuss (in the sections ‘A Modern Odyssey’ and ‘Epistemology of Images’) the *Canzoniere*’s wide-ranging project, individuating in myth-making and in an image-based poetic approach the over-arching perspective which endows it with structural, psychological and narrative cohesiveness. I then demonstrate (in ‘Dramatis Personae’) how the poet’s psychological concerns arise from mythopoeia, and are translated into a polycentric psychology of figures. In ‘Puer and Senex’ I individuate in the boy (or puer) the central figure of the Sabian universe both as a principal icon of homoerotic desire and as a symbolic and ideologically charged presence onto which Saba directly reflects the development of his own poetic persona. The last three sections (Puer 1, 2 and 3) are therefore devoted to a detailed analysis of the puer figure and its poetic phenomenology, in order to map both his homoerotic implications and the psychological and ideological preoccupations with which Saba invests it.

In the first chapter, and particularly in the first three sections, I also introduce key concepts of the theoretical sources I use, while also starting to address some of the critical issues raised in these pages. The methodologies proposed clearly inform the last three sections on the puer figure, and also run throughout the three following chapters (2: ‘Tu non sai come sia dolce la vita’, 3: ‘Il dono ch’io ho da lui l’ho avuto’, 4: ‘Un vecchio amava un ragazzo’). These should be treated as a block, since they add up to a continuous reading of the *Canzoniere* which follows the book’s internal chronological

division in three volumes. In these three chapters I analyse in detail almost all of Saba's collections, when appropriate also drawing from his prose writing, correspondence and extra-canonical poems in the effort of reconstructing the *Canzoniere's* plot in a comprehensive manner. Through this reading I establish the multifarious morphology of same-sex desire in the *Canzoniere*, its driving role within it, and its relation to the other existential nuclei that make up the book's totality.

The reconstruction of the narrative from a homoerotic perspective, as I have stressed in this introduction, allows the other issues I concentrate on – the specific means through which Saba articulates his mythobiography, the nature of his psychological understanding, his relationship with traditional forms – to surface. As they are deeply embedded in the plot, it would have been impossible to deal with them separately as if they were divorced from chronological development. I discuss them for the most part as they arise along the book's chronological axis because this appears to me the best way to understand their development in relation to the shifting patterns of awareness that the protagonist experiences through time. In this way, the development of the poetic and self-analytic praxis which I address theoretically and methodologically in Chapter 1 is elucidated *in fieri* in parallel with the reconstruction of the *Canzoniere's* narrative in Chapters 2 to 4.

In the Conclusions I first present the findings of the three previous chapters in a more digested fashion, focusing on the narrative's overall architecture and on its organic relationship with the main issues I have raised in these pages. I then conclude by placing Saba's work in the wider context of the construction of same-sex identity in the twentieth century, pointing out how he is the first Italian author to articulate this issue, and to open and explore a poetic space for the expression of love and desire for other men which will prove to be of enormous influence for other gay poets like Penna, Pasolini and Bellezza. Indeed it is possible to argue that the role played by the novel in English, French and German literature in constructing a homosexual subjectivity has been fulfilled in Italy for most of the twentieth century by the continuous tradition of homoerotic poetry inaugurated by Saba and developed by Penna, Pasolini and Bellezza. In this respect I hope that this study will not only change the way in which we view Saba's *Canzoniere*, but also start to establish modern Italian poetry as a major field of enquiry for scholars interested in the expression of male same-sex desire.

## CHAPTER 1

# One and Many: the *Canzoniere*'s Mythopoeia and the Puer Archetype

### A Modern Odyssey

We are already familiar with the notion that the *Canzoniere* is a work which ranges beyond what is usually expected of a poet and that scholars have variously compared it to a novel, a melodrama or a single long poem<sup>1</sup>. The *Canzoniere* contains Saba's collected poetic work spanning the years between 1900 and 1954 (Saba died in 1957). It is made up of twenty-six sections and articulated in three volumes roughly corresponding to youth, maturity and old age. Saba probably first thought of placing the individual collections he had been publishing within a wider poetic project in 1913, but it is not until 1919 that his papers reveal the presence of a first structured *Canzoniere* almost ready for publication<sup>2</sup>. This first attempt will not reach the public because of the Great War, but Saba's endeavour will come to fruition with the publication of the first *Canzoniere* in 1921, subsequent editions appearing in 1945, 1951 and posthumously in 1965.

The recognition that the *Canzoniere* must be viewed in its entirety and that its structure and meaning can be grasped only 'nella durata e nella continuità'<sup>3</sup> is by now

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Cary, *Three Modern Italian Poets: Saba, Ungaretti, Montale*, New York: New York University Press, 1969, 132, and Giacomo Debenedetti, *Intermezzo*, Milano: il Saggiatore, 1972, 61-64.

<sup>2</sup> See the 'Cronologia' in Umberto Saba, *Tutte le poesie* (ed. by Arrigo Stara), 4th edn, Milano: Mondadori, 1998, lxxix-lxxx.

<sup>3</sup> Mario Lavagetto, *La gallina di Saba*, new enlarged edn, Torino: Einaudi, 1989, 12 but see also Brugnolo, 508-23.

well established in Sabian criticism. In his own self-exegesis *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere* (1948) Saba describes it as a complex organism in which ‘tutto... si tiene’<sup>4</sup>, everything being directed toward and gaining its meaning from the construction of the self-aware poetic protagonist of Umberto Saba and of his life story.

One of Saba’s foremost critics, Lavagetto, speculates that the idea of a Book which can contain everything might have come to Saba from the Kabbalah<sup>5</sup>, an intriguing proposition given that the poet’s mother was Jewish and that he received a strict Jewish education in the early years of his life. Saba’s endeavour can also be brought in relation to other late nineteenth-century and twentieth-century attempts to create a poetic Book in which a whole life, or even the whole world, could be articulated. I am thinking for instance of the orphic Book that Mallarmé never managed to write, or of Ungaretti’s arrangement of his output under the comprehensive title *Vita d’un uomo*.

The *Canzoniere* however differs from these examples in that the quest for an all-encompassing work does not originate from the metaphysical urges of symbolist and post-symbolist poetry but from the recovery of mythical narration as a unifying perspective within which difference, variety and fragmentation can be grounded. Pierantonio Quarantotti Gambini, an Istrian writer who was also a long-time friend of Saba and one of his earliest sympathetic critics, was the first to highlight this peculiarity in a letter to the poet dating from 1946:

Mi si è anche ravvivata l’impressione che lei abbia scritto, più che un Canzoniere, una specie d’Odissea d’uomo dei nostri giorni. E il suo frequente ritrovarsi in Ulisse aiuta certo questa suggestione. Mi piacerebbe, addirittura, che la sua opera portasse un giorno un titolo che facesse sentire questo. Altrimenti bisognerà farlo sentire nei commenti alla sua poesia.<sup>6</sup>

Quarantotti Gambini’s observation is of great importance for our discourse, since throughout this study I will lay great emphasis on Saba as a main exponent of modern mythopoeia. I use the word ‘mythopoeia’ following Michael Bell’s suggestion in his introduction to the recent collective volume *Myth and the Making of Modernity* that ‘mythopoeia’ and ‘myth-making’ are preferable terms to ‘myth’ on its own to the extent

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<sup>4</sup> Umberto Saba, *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, in *Tutte le prose* (ed. by Arrigo Stara), Milano: Mondadori, 2001, 343.

<sup>5</sup> Mario Lavagetto, ‘Introduzione’, in *Atti del Convegno ‘Umberto Saba, Trieste e la cultura mitteleuropea’* (ed. by Rosita Tordi), Milano: Mondadori, 1986, 15-18, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Umberto Saba/ Pierantonio Quarantotti Gambini, *Il vecchio e il giovane* (ed. by Linuccia Saba), Milano: Mondadori, 1965, 57.

that they ‘emphasize the focus on continuing and inescapable activity rather than the use of existing contents or structures.’<sup>7</sup> In the *Canzoniere* myth is present at various levels and in various forms, the most obvious of which is Saba’s use of a number of mythical tales, in particular the *Oresteia* and the *Odyssey*, in his efforts toward self-representation and self-understanding. But more importantly mythical narration is deployed with ever greater self-consciousness as the perspective which gives unity and consistency to the whole work, and as such it must be highlighted primarily as an epistemological activity and not only as a use of traditional contents however creatively revisited.

The various contributors to *Myth and the Making of Modernity* also foreground to different degrees the way in which modern mythopoeia articulates a sense of epic and heroism which draws upon ancient concepts but places them within a framework of typically twentieth-century preoccupations. Modern myth-making can in fact become a means to ground meaning, but such grounding cannot proceed from absolute truths, and is therefore forced to find its strength on a purely subjective plane of personal conviction and integrity:

The true interest of early twentieth-century myth-making lies in the consciousness, affirmative as well as tragic, of living in a human world which, in so far as it must embody value, can have no ultimate grounding....

Whereas primary, or archaic, myth, is lived as belief, or reality, the self-conscious, modern use of myth focuses an awareness of living as conviction, which is the only way it can be lived, a world of values which cannot be grounded in anything beyond itself.<sup>8</sup>

Saba himself is keen to stress in *Storia e cronistoria* the ‘epicità’ of his work as one of the main features distinguishing it from that of his Italian contemporaries and their different version of ‘modernità’<sup>9</sup>. The *Canzoniere* is modern to the extent that it takes as its starting point the individual’s expulsion and separation from a world of metaphysical and moral certitudes and the ensuing awareness of self-alienation and loss of innocence. On the other hand we can also speak justifiably of an heroic mythopoietic approach in that the text never stops at the mere observation of modern man’s divided and post-metaphysical consciousness but is equally driven to accommodate the enduring presence in mankind’s psyche of ideas of and needs for unity, self-grounding and value.

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Bell, ‘Introduction’, in *Myth and the Making of Modernity: The Problem of Grounding in Early Twentieth-century Literature* (ed. by Michael Bell and Peter Poellner), Amsterdam – Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Bell, 2.

That these urges are recognised within an existential framework which does not allow for their anchoring in an external, purportedly objective or 'true' form of discourse, is precisely what endows the quest of the *Canzoniere*'s protagonist with heroic connotations. It places an enormous weight and responsibility on the individual consciousness of its protagonist, who must at every step of his tale stand back and find within himself the reason and meaning of his acts and thoughts. He is at the same time actor and interpreter of his own story.

This dialectic between fragmentation and division on the one hand and mythical unity and wholeness on the other is a crucial and challenging aspect of modern mythopoeia, which has all too often and wrongly been dismissed as a nostalgic retreat into an archaic and irrationalist epistemological mode. Bell closes his considerations by rightly pointing out that the main thrust of Joyce's *Ulysses*, a text whose modernist credentials are undisputed, consists precisely in giving expression to the fragmentation into separate realms of modern consciousness while at the same time laying out a single all-encompassing perspective within which this diversity can be accommodated:

Myth represents precisely the lost unity, real or imaginary, which preceded the modern division of realms. The consciousness of such division is one definition of modernity. Joyce's *Ulysses*, with its series of episodic techniques invoking the different disciplinary viewpoints through which the intuitive unity of the whole is narrated, is the classic expression of modern mythopoeic form achieved or suggested within the very terms of diversity. Self-consciously constructed as a unity, it suggests a single form in which they are all contained.<sup>10</sup>

Joyce's use of 'episodic techniques invoking... different disciplinary viewpoints' in the novel is akin to Saba's tendency in the *Canzoniere* to dissect his protean and unstable sense of self from as many perspectives as possible. Saba-protagonist appears in the book as poet, son, husband, father, lover of boys and of girls, infant, book-dealer, soldier and persecuted Jew. He can speak directly in first person or split his personality and engage in a dialogue with his child alter-ego Berto, he can be so literal as to state his name in a number of poems, and yet also represent himself through the prism of the boys he loves or of mythical figures like Orestes, Zeus, or Ganymede. The very surname Saba is a symbolic pseudonym, the one in which the poet came to recognise himself after having toiled in his youth with other *noms de plume* of Decadent derivation.

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<sup>9</sup> See: Saba, *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, 119.

<sup>10</sup> Bell, 5.

Yet such a multiplicity, such a pushing of the metaphorical resources of the personality to their limits, never develops into a poetry of heteronyms like, for instance, Pessoa's, or into something akin to Pirandello's use of the mask as a symbol of twentieth-century self-alienation. In Saba's journey the various metamorphoses that the poetic personality goes through do not obliterate or dilute an abiding sense of individual heroic subjectivity in which the presence of Nietzsche's thought is pervasive. The *Canzoniere* is thus held together not only by numerous structural macro- and micro-features which we will shortly analyse, but also by its pragmatic celebration of the resources of individual subjectivity in a world where the death of God has long been announced. Saba's last and greatest alter-ego will be Ulysses, the *polutropos* hero *par excellence*, under whose name the poet will symbolically subsume the multifarious and contingent meanings that his self has assumed during his modern odyssey.

## Epistemology of Images

But how does this work at the level of the text? What are the strategies that Saba puts in place to endow the *Canzoniere* with the interconnectedness of all its parts which make it more similar to a work of a narrative nature than to a container of different collections? And what are the procedures which give the work the mythopoeic perspective holding it together? Let us begin with Saba's own pronouncements. In a fundamental letter to the Freudian analyst Joachim Fleischer (1 March 1949) he affirms: 'Certo è che gli artisti, diversamente dagli altri uomini (che hanno un modo di pensare più astratto e logico) PENSANO – come i bambini – PER IMMAGINI.'<sup>11</sup> This observation encapsulates the basic principle according to which the *Canzoniere* develops and achieves its interrelatedness and intricacy. Saba is in fact stressing not so much that a vivid and plastic imagination is part of an artist's mental make up, but that in creative works images appear in lieu of thought ('gli artisti... *pensano* per immagini'), thus displaying a similar systematic and coherent character. Images are thus seen not as impressionistic items, isolated results of observation or inspiration, but as the vocabulary of a language.

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<sup>11</sup> Umberto Saba, *Lettere sulla psicanalisi: Carteggio con Joachim Flescher 1946-1949* (ed. by Arrigo Stara), Milano: SE, 1991, 36.

Saba's claim has been taken seriously by Lavagetto, whose detailed analysis confirms that throughout the *Canzoniere* 'le immagini trovano nel loro durare e trasformarsi e convergere intorno a pochi nuclei una profonda coesione.'<sup>12</sup> Lavagetto is particularly insightful in stressing both the dynamism of these images, which are never repeated in a formulaic way, but undergo a process of endless variation and accretion during the fifty years of Saba's poetic career, and their stability in terms of the discursive nucleus which they articulate. In stressing the image-based quality of his poetic discourse Saba places himself within a mythopoeic tradition which in greatly different forms has traversed Western culture since the Romantic period. Reacting against the eighteenth-century dismissal and suspicion of myth, Schelling and Schlegel were among the first to indicate myth-making as an independent epistemological mode, whose language is articulated through images in the same way as logical discourse necessitates concepts.<sup>13</sup> Their stance will prove enormously influential, particularly in its distinction between image- and concept-based discourse, and in its modern emphasis on myth as a *perspective* rather than as archaic belief and conviction.

In the psychology of Jung images and the internal coherence of the systems they give rise to play a central role in the understanding of any product of the imagination. Jung's hermeneutics rests on the belief that the image is 'das unmittelbare Objekt der Erkenntnis'<sup>14</sup>, a stance which still drives and defines the different strands of post-Jungian thought nowadays, and most poignantly the work of James Hillman. In the 1930s and 1940s Gaston Bachelard developed an epistemological praxis broadly consonant with Jung's psychology, particularly in its stress on the organic (systematic) character of poetic images and their configurations.<sup>15</sup> In more recent years the main exponent of image-based approaches has been the French cultural critic Gilbert Durand, who founded the *Centre de recherche sur l'imaginaire* at the University of Chambéry precisely with the aim of charting the inherent organisation of the imaginary from a sociological and anthropological perspective.

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<sup>12</sup> Lavagetto, *La gallina di Saba*, 51.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of Schelling's and Schlegel's influence on modern, and particularly German, thinking on myth see: Peter Ward, *Hofmannsthal and Greek Myth: Expression and Performance*, Oxford-Bern-Berlin-Bruxelles-Frankfurt/M.-New York-Wien: Peter Lang, 2002, 21-27 and also Bell, 3-8.

<sup>14</sup> C. G. Jung, 'Medizin und Psychotherapie', in *Gesammelte Werke. Sonderausgabe* (ed. by Lilly Jung-Merker and Elizabeth Rűf), Solothurn und Düsseldorf: 1995, XVI: *Praxis der Psychotherapie*, 94-102, 99 (original quotations are from this edition, and will be followed by the volume and page number). Engl.: '[the] image alone is the immediate object of knowledge', in 'Medicine and Psychotherapy', in *Collected Works* (ed. by Herbert Read and others), London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953-1990, XVI: *The Practice of Psychotherapy*, 84-93, 89 (English quotations are from this edition followed by the volume and page number).

The names of Jung, Bachelard, Hillman and Durand will reappear at various points in the course of this study, as I believe that the consonance of their epistemologies with some of the *Canzoniere*'s basic operating mechanisms can greatly help us to grasp aspects of the book which cannot be accounted for exhaustively through the prism of other approaches. I am in no way trying to demonstrate the direct influence of Jung or Bachelard on Saba; in the case of Jung Saba's very limited knowledge of his writing has already been investigated.<sup>16</sup> I am however trying to foreground how a number of overlooked or isolatedly observed aspects of Saba's work coagulate in a coherent and self-conscious epistemological, poetic and psychological approach which has numerous points of contact with other modern forms of reflection on myth.

The task seems to me urgent in view of Saba's eccentric position in relation to Italian cultural trends of the twentieth century, something that has contributed to establish the myth, in part cultivated by the poet himself,<sup>17</sup> that his cultural background was somehow backward and limited in relation to that of contemporary Italian writers.<sup>18</sup> In reality, Saba's very personal reception of Nietzsche, as well as his pioneering knowledge of Freud and of the mechanism of analysis, would be enough to place him well ahead of most of his Italian contemporaries. But the originality and complexity of his cultural sensibility are even more evident when we cannot speak of direct influence, as in the case of his intuitive understanding of images and their language.

On the most basic level images in the *Canzoniere* belong to perceptions of the natural elements, of the surrounding environment, of open and enclosed spaces, light and heavy objects and people, but also to corresponding inner sensations of expansion or suffocation and lightness or guilt. As I have mentioned, these images are not casual and free-floating; they tend to gather in homogeneous clusters, i.e. they reappear over and over again in similar groupings, whose elements are thereby perceived as being analogous, consonant and, to an extent, interchangeable. To use Lavagetto's expression they function as 'fattori di una lunga serie di moltiplicazioni'<sup>19</sup> from which the different

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<sup>15</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *L'eau et les rêves: Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*. Paris: Corti, 1942, 6-13.

<sup>16</sup> Michel David, *La psicanalisi nella cultura italiana*, Torino: Boringhieri, 1966, 416.

<sup>17</sup> See Saba's description of his 'backwards' cultural background in *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, 115-16.

<sup>18</sup> Such a tendency is particularly prominent in: Romano Luperini, 'La cultura di Saba', in *L'allegoria del moderno*, Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1990, 158-85.

<sup>19</sup> Lavagetto, *La gallina di Saba*, 113.

realms making up the *Canzoniere*'s totality grow. These accretions become organised along dichotomic lines, in which oppositional pairs like light and heavy, open and closed, sky and earth, happiness and guilt, sentimentality and concreteness, the airy *settenario* and the heavy *endecasillabo*, face each other. This means for instance that everything that is 'light' in Saba is not only so in an accidental and circumstantial manner, but by virtue of being consistently associated with a world of 'light things' (*Cose leggere e vaganti* is the significant title of a 1920 collection) through which the poet voices a number of fixed symbolic and psychological contents.

Lightness therefore is simultaneously an objective property of things or people and a psychological/existential dimension, a symbolic realm of openness and eroticism which the poet can either objectify in an external presence or present directly as part of his mental make-up. There is hence quite a literal meaning to Saba's assertion that in the *Canzoniere* 'tutto si tiene'. Everything holds together because the consistent repetition of homogeneous clusters of images builds up a thick texture of correspondences whereby each image works as a metonym for the world it is associated with. In this way, a recurrent image can be charged with resonances which range from the merely descriptive, to the emotional, the psychological and the intellectual.

Durand has analysed this macro-feature of mythopoeic narratives bringing it in relation with the Jungian concept of synchronicity, which posits the impossibility of dissociating through causal thinking the various levels of meaning which a given image encapsulates. He speaks of a

reconnaissance d'une corrélation entre un phénomène psychique, une image, et un phénomène ou incident non psychique se passant dans le monde 'objectif' - ou tout au moins non strictement 'subjectif' - de la matière. C'est à la fois le constat d'une 'non-séparabilité' et d'une 'symmétrie' entre l'incident matériel et le phénomène psychique. Entre le localisable dans le monde macropsychique et le non-localisable absolu qu'est la pensée. L'absence de séparabilité mécanique et de dissymétrie temporelle produit un a-causalisme radical, dans lequel on ne peut savoir si c'est le phénomène matériel qui a produit le phénomène psychique ou *vice versa*.<sup>20</sup>

For Hillman the image works like a system, amounting to a 'self-limiting multiple relationship of meanings, moods, historical events, qualitative details, and expressive potentialities'<sup>21</sup>. By virtue of the redundant mechanism we are exploring, the more one proceeds in reading the *Canzoniere*, the more the realist detail, its mythical resonance and the psychological state associated with it become impossible to separate. Not all

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<sup>20</sup> Gilbert Durand, *Introduction à la mythologie: Mythes et sociétés*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1996, 76.

layers of meaning necessarily appear synchronically in a given poem, but their consistent association along the book's temporal axis makes their presence always subliminally felt even when not explicitly stated: in this way the book gradually builds its own internal memory.

Such a mechanism by implication calls for a reading along a horizontal temporal axis of duration, as the multifarious symbolism of any of the realms making up the *Canzoniere*'s totality cannot be fulfilled by a single appearance of a given image. In Durand's analysis a consequence of this is that images belonging to the same semantic field reinforce their symbolic potential and coherence the more they are repeated: 'Non pas qu'un seul symbole ne soit pas aussi significatif que tous les autres, mais l'ensemble de tous les symboles sur un thème éclaire les symboles les uns par les autres, leur ajoute une "puissance" symbolique supplémentaire.'<sup>22</sup> This is what Durand also calls the 'redondance perfectionante'<sup>23</sup> of mythical narratives and their symbols, which, far from being an archaic narrative mode, is an arrangement which can hint at the concept of totality (the signified), while at the same time approximating it through endless amplifications which are all metonymic, but which on their own can only express the signified partially. It is, needless to say, a very different kind of symbolism from the one favoured by symbolist poetics, where the symbol is understood to embody an identity between signifier and signified, thus prefiguring a reading based on the epiphanic quality of the individual poem (synchronic) rather than one based on duration (diachronic).

The *Canzoniere* is however also held together by another strategy which arises out of but also appears to invalidate its underlying dichotomic structure. The oppositional nuclei of images are not simply parallel universes, but moods and psychological states whose dynamic interaction guarantees the progression of the plot. 'Light' and 'heavy' are in this sense not 'opposites', but two basic psychological states and existential choices confronting the *Canzoniere*'s protagonist along his path and which we can see as equivalent to the Jungian concepts of an extroverted and an introverted side of the personality. By extension they also represent two basic poetic modes, one centred on solidity of diction and a closer adherence to reality, the other on *cantabilità* and a free-flowing expression of feeling, between which Saba the poet mediates in various ways at different stages of his output.

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<sup>21</sup> James Hillman, *Archetypal Psychology*, Dallas: Spring Publications, 1985, 9.

<sup>22</sup> Gilbert Durand, *L'imagination symbolique*, 4th edn, Paris: PUF, 1998, 15.

Thus we often have the possibility of exchange within a dichotomy, a sense of fluidity and metamorphoses which counterbalances the book's otherwise rigid underlying structure. On the one hand in fact the *Canzoniere*'s imaginary universe can appear very stable and archaic, to the point of reproposing 'l'equivalenza pressocché universale nel mito tra uomo/donna-cielo/terra'.<sup>24</sup> But even in the case of such primordial associations, it is important to stress for instance that the sea functions as the *tertium non datur* which can be associated with both the male and female polarity, thus symbolically hinting at the possibility of a composite sense of gender identity which will be one of the points of arrival of Saba's late poetry. The fact that in the *Canzoniere* opposites stand in a dialectical relationship tending toward a synthesis, and that this process bears strong analogies with Jung's thought and his understanding of psychological events, has already been acknowledged by Lavagetto.<sup>25</sup>

It has not been however sufficiently stressed how this dialectical impetus can produce striking results in the *Canzoniere*'s ideological developments. The example of the symbolic implications of earth, sky and sea is only one instance of how Saba can endow his universe with an underlying archaic quality while at the same time providing it with a dynamism which opens the way for strikingly modern and transgressive solutions.

## Dramatis Personae

The most articulated expression of the symbolic realms animating the *Canzoniere* is to be found in the poetic figures, or *personae*, embodying a given psychological and phenomenological core. The overt and detailed autobiographism of Saba's narrative lends him room to develop numerous poetic figures which impact to different degrees on important aspects of his destiny. In this sense the *Canzoniere*'s novel-like quality is apparent in the fact that in no other Italian twentieth-century poetry book do we find so many characters. The main ones are Saba's mother, his father, his wet-nurse, his wife

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<sup>23</sup> Durand, *L'imagination symbolique*, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Lavagetto, *La gallina di Saba*, 116.

<sup>25</sup> Lavagetto, *La gallina di Saba*, 121-31.

Lina, his daughter Linuccia, his aunt Regina, the girls Paola and Chiaretta, numerous boys from Trieste, his shop assistant Carletto and his lover/disciple Federico Almansi.

Any given figure tends to gravitate toward one of the elemental polarities, for instance Saba's mother and wife are associated with heaviness and enclosed spaces, his father and boys with lightness and vagrancy. Within each system of images the figures can occupy positions of relative importance. In the collection *Autobiografia* Saba will self-consciously lead back his dichotomic and oppositional mental make-up to the different heritages received from his Jewish mother and Catholic father. But in themselves neither Father nor Mother fully embodies any of the two worlds. The world of heaviness, conformity and guilt is also memorably expressed by Saba's wife Lina and, less comprehensively, by his assistant Carletto. The father symbolically presides over a world of lightness, irresponsibility and transgression, but he actually appears directly only in a short and crucial phase of the *Canzoniere*. His heritage is mainly articulated through figures of Triestine boys, and secondarily through the girls Paola and Chiaretta. Whatever their relative importance, by being embedded in the substratum of images we have been discussing, these figures exude a sense of presence which borders on the mythical. They function as major and minor deities presiding over the phenomenological and symbolic world they embody.

In other words Saba places them along a continuum at whose extremities stand the personal and narrowly biographical on one side and the mythical and collective on the other. In this as well the system must be understood in the most flexible terms. For instance the figure of Carletto and those of Chiaretta and Paola tend to remain more confined within the autobiographical circumstances from which they emerge, while the wet-nurse and boys possess more mythical resonance. But it is, nevertheless, a continuum, and Saba-protagonist himself is placed along it: as such he possesses the traits of both a twentieth-century individual, a man with little or few qualities, and those of a modern Ulysses, the man with many qualities by definition.

The recognition of this fundamental oscillation between autobiographism and mythical reading is an acquisition of Sabian criticism<sup>26</sup>, whose implications however have not been pursued. This peculiarity is in fact always treated as a purely literary phenomenon, and never brought to bear upon a major question in Sabian studies, the

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<sup>26</sup> See: Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, *Poeti italiani del Novecento*, Milano: Mondadori, 1990, 190-92, and various contributions to the *Atti del Convegno 'Umberto Saba, Trieste e la cultura mitteleuropea'* (Lorenzo Polato, 'L'"aureo anello" di Saba', 279-90; Franco Rella, 'Il doloroso amore: Nota su Umberto

one concerning the poet's relationship with psychoanalysis and psychology. That Freudian psychoanalysis looms large in Saba's life is universally known. Saba was the first Italian intellectual to enthusiastically receive Freud's discoveries, and in 1929-30 he underwent psychoanalytic treatment with Ernesto Weiss, a Triestine pupil of Freud's and the first practising psychotherapist on Italian soil. At the same time, following Contini's famous assertion that 'Saba nasceva psicanalitico prima della psicanalisi'<sup>27</sup>, scholars also agree that he consistently displays a tendency for a psychological reading of events well before he comes into contact with Freud. But nobody has cared to investigate in detail what kind of psychology Saba deploys before reading Freud, and also if the later attitude supersedes the first, integrates it, or is possibly assimilated into it.

The observation that poetic figures in the *Canzoniere* tend to embody both the biographical and the mythical is for instance a crucial aspect linking Saba's psychology to Jung's. As I have pointed out, Saba's scant knowledge of the writings of Jung has been unquestionably demonstrated. But the documentable presence of Freud in Saba's life has blinded most scholars to the fact that much of the *Canzoniere's* basic mechanisms, which are well in place before Saba reads Freud, and will continue to operate after his treatment by Weiss, show striking affinities with Jungian thought. Jungian and post-Jungian thought can in this way be the most effective theoretical tool to penetrate some of the *Canzoniere's* most intricate questions, laying bare nexi which escape the horizon of a strictly Freudian analysis.

Saba himself insisted that even in the case of the collections *Cuor morituro* and *Il piccolo Berto* (in which he reworks material which surfaced during his treatment) 'nulla v'è in esse di psicanalitico.'<sup>28</sup> Contini concurred observing that *Il piccolo Berto* has got very little which is specifically Freudian, while it certainly shows Saba's usual familiarity and dexterous handling of broad psychological motifs and situations.<sup>29</sup> Lavagetto's by now classic text *La gallina di Saba* covers a number of topics (from the central role of images in Saba's thought, to his personified understanding of psychic forces to the dual biographical/mythical implication with which these figures are invested) which clearly show strong affinities between the *Canzoniere's* operating

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Saba', 291-300; Rosita Tordi, 'Le "gocce d'oro" di Saba e Nietzsche', 315-54; Gian Luigi Beccaria, 'Poesia di Saba', 21-48, Mario Luzi, 'Il mio Saba', 73-74).

<sup>27</sup> Gianfranco Contini, 'Tre composizioni, o la metrica di Saba', in *Esercizi di lettura*, Torini: Einaudi, 1974, 25-33, 30.

<sup>28</sup> Original italics. Saba, *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, 261.

<sup>29</sup> Contini, 28.

mechanisms and Jungian studies (affinities which are however seldom linked by Lavagetto directly to the name of Jung)<sup>30</sup>. In more recent years the work of Rosita Tordi has been at the forefront in investigating the broad epistemological consonance between Saba and Jung and as a consequence the psychological complexity of Saba's universe pre- and beyond Freud. Tordi is particularly keen to stress that the psychology animating the *Canzoniere* is an embodied psychology of *figures*: 'le immagini si presentano come soggetti psichici viventi coi quali l'io è obbligato a entrare in contatto.'<sup>31</sup> This is an important aspect to be stressed, since never in the *Canzoniere* do we find a use of Freudian terminology, images, or concepts which so much abounds in the prose of the *Scorciatoie* or in Saba's letters. In the poetry the working out of psychologically unresolved nuclei is always presented as the dramatic confrontation of the different *personae* inhabiting the protagonist's universe.

The belief that psychic forces and events present themselves to us plastically and dramatically, and not in the abstracted and unilateral language of science and pathology, has an important corollary. Both the different strands of post-Jungian thought, as well as the image-based studies of Bachelard and Durand, link a personified psychological understanding to a strong relativisation of the role of the ego and of rationalistic thinking<sup>32</sup>. If the self is understood as a theatre of different *personae*, then the ego and its field of action are only a partial episode within this bigger picture. This is why the psyche is seen by Jung as an eminently polytheistic dimension.<sup>33</sup> These various positions are in the last instance indebted to Nietzsche who, in a section of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* entitled 'Grösster Nutzen des Polytheismus' ('The Greatest Utility of Polytheism') explicitly links a polytheistic mind set to a deepening of subjective experience in the direction of a recognition of the 'Mehrzahl von Normen'.<sup>34</sup>

As Tordi observes, a similar 'rivoluzione della coscienza' is at the centre of the *Canzoniere*'s thrust and of its tendency to articulate an understanding of the self which finds depth in multiplicity:

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<sup>30</sup> The only instance when Lavagetto uses Jung's name directly is in relation to the symbolic reading of alchemical processes underlying Saba's *fughe* (*La gallina di Saba*, 121-31).

<sup>31</sup> Tordi, 'Le "gocce d'oro" di Saba e Nietzsche', 315.

<sup>32</sup> See: C. G. Jung, *Aion: Beiträge zur Symbolik des Selbst*, IX.2, 12-16 (*Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*, IX.2, 3-7), Durand, *Introduction à la mythologie*, 47-81, Hillman, *Archetypal Psychology*, 21-27.

<sup>33</sup> Jung, *Aion*, 12-45, (Engl.: 3-36), and also Hillman, *Archetypal Psychology*, 10.

<sup>34</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari), 8 vols, Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1967-1995, V.1, 1973, 168. Engl. transl: 'multitude of norms', in *Complete Works* (ed. by Oscar Levy), Edinburgh: Foulis, 1909-1923, X, 1910, 179. All quotations are from these editions and will be followed by the volume and page number.

Ma personizzare comporta anche qualcos'altro: significa policentricità, coinvolgimento di una rivoluzione della coscienza: dal monoteistico al politeistico, laddove, trascurando le immagini, la psicologia si concentra sulla ragione, sulla volontà, sul vecchio io.<sup>35</sup>

Through an understanding of psychic process as *dramatis personae*, the bestowing upon these *personae* of both personal and mythical connotations, the proliferations of doubles, shadows and alter-egos, Saba, concludes Tordi, articulates an epistemological stance in which 'è necessario guardare il mondo diurno dal lato notturno, dalla fantasia e dalle sue "archai"'.<sup>36</sup> Hence, mythopoeia and psychology in Saba can hardly be separated: if we dismiss or lose sight of the *archai* his system loses profundity and articulation, and the question of psychology remains therefore within the Freudian episode. When however we understand mythopoeia in light of the recent critical acquisitions I have discussed at the beginning of this chapter, and against the background of the studies of Jung, Bachelard and Durand, then the ground-breaking complexity of Saba's stance becomes apparent.

The *Canzoniere*'s mythopoeia is a comprehensive and articulated epistemological approach broadly comparable to contemporary European artistic and theoretical experiences, whose originality in the Italian cultural context has however prevented the full recognition of its architecture and meaning. It is also a prime example of a self-conscious, reflective and individualistic use of myth, in that it skirts close to the primordial spheres with which modern mythopoeia has often been accused of consorting, while remaining truthful to a fundamental drive toward *chiarezza*<sup>37</sup>. The book's exploration and attempts at articulation of what lies behind the shores of ego-rationality unfolds in accordance with the ethos heralded by Nietzsche in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*: 'Wer sich tief weiss, bemüht sich um Klarheit.'<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Tordi, 'Le "gocce d'oro" di Saba e Nietzsche', 316.

<sup>36</sup> Tordi, 'Le "gocce d'oro" di Saba e Nietzsche', 320.

<sup>37</sup> *Chiarezza* was envisaged by Saba as one of the *Canzoniere*'s possible titles.

<sup>38</sup> Nietzsche, V.2, 178. Engl.: 'He who knows he is profound strives for clearness' (X, 190).

## Puer and Senex

The figure of the boy stands out among all other presences in the *Canzoniere* on a number of counts. Firstly, it is the only figure continuously present in Saba's poetry from its earliest to its latest phase. The presence of the other figures on which critical attention has overwhelmingly dwelt, those of Saba's mother and of his wife, is in comparison intermittent and acquires full prominence only in particular sections of the book. Lina dominates the period 1909-1912 which includes the collections *Casa e campagna* and *Trieste e una donna*, while his mother is central in the first collection, *Poesie dell'adolescenza e giovanili* (1900-1907) and later in *Cuor morituro* (1925-1930) and *Il piccolo Berto* (1929-1931). With the figure of the boy we face instead a horizontal extension which reaches from 'Ammonizione', the opening poem of the *Canzoniere*, to the late masterpiece 'Vecchio e giovane' included in *Epigrafe* (1947-1948). This horizontality is matched by an almost constant 'thickness', that is the sheer number of poems that Saba dedicates to the puer in almost all of his collections.

Despite such an obvious centrality the figure of the boy is the one which to date has suffered the greatest amount of scholarly neglect. It is easy to see how this critical omission arises from the fact that such a proliferation of poems on boys and young men is an unequivocal sign of the pervasiveness of homoerotic desire in Saba's poetic autobiography. The *fanciullo sabiano* is the icon of same-sex desire in the *Canzoniere*, and I say 'icon' on purpose. For two thirds of the *Canzoniere* Saba's homoeroticism is in fact something sublimated rather than acted out. The poetry does not portray any relationship happening between the poet and another man/boy. Desire as such remains unfulfilled, but it spills over and projects itself eagerly onto the various figures of male adolescents populating the urban landscape of Trieste.

By being the embodied figure of same-sex desire, the boy is also invested with a very delicate psychological and symbolic function. In the course of the *Canzoniere* Saba-protagonist will in fact tackle and unravel a number of issues of a psychological nature which are still uncommon material for poetry nowadays and which appeared even more disconcerting at the time when they were written. Of all these the most forbidden and concealed is clearly the poet's homosexuality. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the poetic phenomenology revolving around the puer is also associated by Saba with the figure of his runaway father and his legacy. The protagonist's desire for other men, and his longing for his father, are also objects of a

similar 'curse', which the collection *Autobiografia* (1924) will lead back to the destructive and repressive role that Saba's mother played in the poet's childhood.

Both desires are unravelled slowly, particularly the longing for the father, and in the face of enormous internal resistances. The progression of the psychological plot is represented through the shifting relationships established by Saba-protagonist with the puer and the world this figure articulates. We will see in detail in the following chapters that, even when the poetic centre of a collection appears to revolve around his wife or his mother, at a deeper level the figure of the puer is always present within the *dramatis personae* as the embodiment of the most hidden drive, the one which often determines the outcome of the dynamic taking place on the more superficial level.

The poetic scope of the figure of the boy also ranges beyond that of other figures on account of Saba's tendency to identify himself archetypally with it. Whereas for instance Mother and Father are symbolic of two worlds which the protagonist carries within himself, but as poetic figures are different and autonomous from him, the boy *is* also metaphorically Saba. This identification is neither constant nor complete, but it is fair to say that out of all of the *Canzoniere*'s figures the boy is the only one which we can see as an alter ego of Saba-protagonist. To be more precise, this is the case for almost two thirds of the *Canzoniere*, because from *Il piccolo Berto* (1929-1931) onwards, we witness a phenomenon which can be analysed in terms of a tendency I have already mentioned, that is that in the *Canzoniere* dichotomies and oppositional figures tend to move toward a synthesis and a state of equilibrium. Accordingly, Saba's self-understanding in terms of puer will develop into a more composite vision, where the figure of the boy gives rise to a double self-representation of the book's protagonist as *puer-cum-senex*. The poem where this integration takes place for the first time is aptly called 'Trasformazione' (*Il piccolo Berto*), but this possibility is present in previous collections (*L'uomo* and *Preludio e fughe*) and characterises Saba's late poetry as a hard-won point of inner articulation and balance.

Lavagetto points out that by representing himself as *senex-cum-puer* Saba is revisiting one of the oldest *topoi* of Western culture, and that the internal organisation of this archetypal couple acts as the central and continued metaphor through which the book's wider plot is emblematically condensed: 'Il vecchio e il giovane formano nel *Canzoniere* una coppia inscindibile; segnano, con la precisione di un barometro, il

clima'<sup>39</sup>. The relevance of this figure for Saba is such that *senex* and *puer* transcend their embodied appearances in the *Canzoniere* and are used by him as abstracted images to articulate aspects of his poetics. The following *scorciatoia* is one of Saba's most important theoretical statements, and also a notable example of his avoidance of intellectual jargon in favour of a thinking through figures:

PER FARE, come per comprendere, l'arte, una cosa è, prima di ogni altra, necessaria: avere conservata in noi la nostra infanzia; che tutto il processo della vita tende, d'altra parte, a distruggere. Il poeta è un bambino che si meraviglia delle cose che accadono a lui stesso, diventato adulto. *Ma fino a che punto adulto?*

Tocchiamo qui una delle differenze che corrono fra la piccola e la grande poesia. Solo là dove il bambino e l'uomo coesistono, in forme il più possibile estreme, nella stessa persona, nasce – molte altre circostanze aiutando – il miracolo: nasce Dante.

(...)

Se l'uomo prevale troppo sul bambino (Montale ci suggerì, per questo caso, il venerato nome di Goethe), il poeta (in quanto poeta) ci lascia freddi. Se quasi solo il bambino esiste, se sul suo stelo si è formato appena un embrione d'uomo, abbiamo il 'poeta puer' (Pascoli); ne proviamo insoddisfazione e un po' vergogna.<sup>40</sup>

Saba deploys here the images of man and boy in a de-literalised way, as different but complementary ways of experiencing and seeing the world which coexist in all human beings as psychic potentialities, but which are then actualised in different proportions according to individual circumstances. Such an understanding of the concepts of old and young is deeply Jungian: in analytical psychology concepts like youth, maturity and old age, and the figures which are called to represent them, are not seen in their biographical literalness, but as fundamental aspects of the psyche engaged in shifting relationships in the course of one's life, as a 'theatre of archetypal personae.'<sup>41</sup> Saba sketches a scenario in which poetic personalities are characterised by their relative degree of identification with an archetypal figure. Moreover, these psychological inclinations are seen as the ultimate source of an ideological and poetological stance, as the jibe to Pascoli's *poetica del fanciullino*, which also recurs in *Storia e cronistoria*, illustrates.<sup>42</sup>

If the gradual fashioning and advocating of a dual *puer-cum-senex* awareness is the *Canzoniere*'s leading psychological and poetological motif, on the empirical poetic level the two figures are not symmetrical and hence call for a differentiated focalisation

<sup>39</sup> Lavagetto, *La gallina di Saba*, 176.

<sup>40</sup> Umberto Saba, *Scorciatoie e raccontini*, in *Tutte le prose*, 13-14.

<sup>41</sup> James Hillman, 'Archetypal Theory: C. G. Jung', in *Loose Ends: Primary Papers in Archetypal Psychology*, Zürich: Spring Publications, 1975, 170-95, 182.

on two counts. Firstly, the circumstances of Saba-protagonist's early years are represented throughout the book as having greatly repressed and obstructed the embracing of the transgressive and libertarian sphere that the puer symbolises. The fact that the boy is also the main referent of the poet's homoeroticism further contributes to turn him into a highly problematic presence. As a consequence the paradoxical situation we witness for about two thirds of the *Canzoniere* is that on an ideological level the puer is celebrated as the main symbol of the spirit of transgression, eroticism and self-overcoming which is at the basis of Saba's poetics, while the underlying psychological plot bears witness to the fact that the poetic protagonist's identification with the boy is to a considerable extent fraught and destructive. For most of the *Canzoniere*, Saba-protagonist strives to move ideologically and erotically *toward* the puer and *away* from concepts broadly associable with the senex, like responsibility, consolidation and awareness of limits, which he had negatively experienced in his early youth through the repressive and narrow-minded mould that his mother had tried to force upon him.

The puer therefore acquires in the *Canzoniere* a more sharply defined role by virtue of the repression, both maternal and social, which it must confront. The universe associated with the boy is thus imbued by Saba with a culturally-critical meaning, and it gains within the book's ideology the same kind of significance that the concept of the dionysian plays in Nietzsche's early thought. Many of the puer images which we will address in more detail in the following sections from a mainly psychological perspective are hence also the most revealing instances of a transgressive and self-surpassing individualism fuelled by Saba's embracing of Nietzsche's and, to a lesser extent, Stirner's thought.

The later identification with the senex principle is not ideologically charged as the preceding quest for the puer. It occurs toward the end of the *Canzoniere*'s second volume, that is only *after* Saba-protagonist has reached the end of his *à rebours* journey (in *Il piccolo Berto*) and removed many of the obstacles which prevented him from being at peace with his inner puer image. It is presented far more neutrally, as the stoic and almost biblical acceptance of the harshness of the reality principle and of the limitations to which each human being is subjected, and contributes little to the book's ideological position.

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<sup>42</sup> See the following passage (*Storia e cronistoria*, 142): 'La poesia fa pensare piuttosto – come abbiamo detto – ad un improvviso ritorno all'infanzia; un ritorno però che non esclude la contemporanea presenza dell'uomo (Se questa fosse mancata, Saba non sarebbe Saba, ma Pascoli).'

The second difference to stress is that the figure of the senex tends to appear in the more abstract form of a *senex-cum-puer* configuration, through which Saba can hint at an intrapsychic dynamic but also address his love for younger men or his relationship with his father. But the figure of the boy is independent of such arrangements, it appears in a far greater number of poems and also in a far more figuratively detailed way. In other words the senex in the *Canzoniere* is mainly treated as a concept or as a psychological position, whereas the puer is first and foremost an embodied figure with its accompanying poetic phenomenology.

The concluding sections of this chapter will therefore be devoted to a detailed analysis of the figure of the boy and the poetic images and situations with which he is associated. As I have said, the intricate range of meanings and personal experiences which Saba voices through them are the very driving force behind many of the fundamental episodes of the *Canzoniere*'s meandering plot. But the puer is not only crucial for Saba-protagonist. It is also vital for Saba-poet, who articulates through this figure the book's thrust toward an initiation into multiplicity and the metaphorical light of the *archai*.

## Puer 1: Laughter, the Trickster and Festivity

We have said that the *Canzoniere* in its entirety proposes a dialectic between unity and multiplicity. This dialogue is refracted at all levels of the work, some of which we have already observed, and also decisively affects the representation of the book's characters. Figures in Saba are in fact not monolithic, but articulated in a number of sub-realms. They thus function as a system where various forces coexist. As for the macro-dynamics traversing the *Canzoniere*, our main way of circumscribing these different aspects is by charting the repetitions of homogeneous clusters of images within the broader semantic nucleus ascribable to the puer figure. In this way items pertaining to the puer can be organised in three broad groups, the first revolving around images of laughter, the second around games and fights and the third around the sea. I will call

each of these clusters a *mythème* (mytheme), a term which in Durand's methodology defines the smallest semantic unit of mythical significance.<sup>43</sup>

In the course of this study I will stress how the figure of the boy acts for Saba as an important catalyst for the exploration of eros and sex, and that as a consequence within the *Canzoniere*'s economy representations of boys are notable for the way in which the body and bodily functions are foregrounded. This holds true when the poetic depiction of the boy is compared with that of other figures, most notably the female ones in Saba's world, where the sphere of the body is hardly a matter of concern at all. But when looking at images pertaining to the puer from within, i.e. as a self-sufficient system, the first thing to point out is that descriptions of the body are less numerous in comparison to other items. The colour of a boy's hair is for instance mentioned in only one case in the whole *Canzoniere* ('un fanciullo dalla chioma bionda'<sup>44</sup>). We then find a few mentions of his eyes which can either be seemingly plain descriptive notes ('dall'occhio sereno', 44; 'un ragazzaccio... con gli occhi azzurri', 89; 'occhi di cielo', 560) or, more frequently, notations on the quality of the boy's look ('fanciulli... con nuove in attoniti occhi voglie', 33; 'l'occhio non abbassi, lo guardi con fierezza', 104; 'lo sguardo immobilmente a terra chino', 115; 'i buoni occhi ridono sportivi', 455; 'la bontà del tuo sguardo', 497). Otherwise hints at the puer's physical *allure* are very general as in 'bel fanciullo' (106) or 'snelli corpi' (59) and 'snelle forme' (104), which imply the puer's beauty rather than dwelling on its description.

Throughout the *Canzoniere* stress is laid on boys as dynamic and mercurial creatures, devoting far more images to what they actually do than to what they look like. Out of all images linked to the body and bodily functions, the majority pertain to the boy's voice and laughter, i.e. to an element which is physical but more abstracted and mobile than anything that might have to do with parts of the body. Laughter and voice speak to us more about boys' spirit and mood than about their looks. The examples of these occurrences are numerous: 'con gioconda voce' (25); 'fanciulli... vociano' (33); 'ridere t'ascolto' (104); 'ride' (106); 'a gran voce si tien la strada aperta', 'si dimena e canta' (147); 'l'allegra ragazzaglia urge e schiamazza' (155); 'un po' ride schiamazza' (156); 's'ode... la voce di un fanciullo' (220); 'E l'udivo cantare', 'sempre cantando, si affrettava il mozzo' (225); 'un sorriso fugace', 'galletto è alla voce il fanciullo' (440);

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<sup>43</sup> Gilbert Durand, *Figures mythiques et visages de l'oeuvre: De la mythocritique à la mythanalyse*, Paris: Dunod, 1992, 344-46.

<sup>44</sup> Saba, *Tutte le poesie*, 25. All quotations from Saba's poems are from this edition and will be followed by the page number in parenthesis.

'chiassosa giovanezza' (474); 'fanciulli con estrose grida' (488). In most of these cases, the voice is not neutrally presented but is pitched toward laughter and implies the idea of noise and excitement, particularly through the recurrent use of the verb 'schiamazzare'.

I will call this fairly large and homogeneous cluster of images the mytheme of the *fanciullo chiassoso*. In a minority of cases the stress falls on the sweetness of the boy's voice, emphasising his goodness and innocence. This is the case of 'Glauco' (25), where the boy's 'occhio sereno' is matched by his 'gioconda voce' and by his desire to help young Umberto Saba, while in 'Sobborgo' (455) laughter and goodness are woven together in a single expression where eyes and voice are synaesthetically merged ('i buoni occhi ridono sportivi'). A similar emphasis on purity is achieved when singing is substituted for laughter, as in 'Il canto di un mattino'. In this poem singing accompanies all the actions of a young sailor who is about to set sail in a small boat. His song spreads to the surroundings, endowing them with an atmosphere of intent calm and serenity:

Lieto appariva il suo bel volto; intorno  
era la pace, era il silenzio; alcuno  
né vicino scorgevo né lontano;  
brillava il sole nel cielo, sul piano  
vasto del mare, nel nascente giorno. (225)

In these examples speech, laughter and singing have a crystalline and melodic quality which brings to the fore the angelic component within the boy. But on the whole Saba appears more willing to focus on other emotional constellations where laughter and singing are brought into relation with a propensity for the subversive.

In these cases laughter is an element always carefully poised between innocence and mischievousness. Boys' laughter erupts out of their being totally immersed in their games and in the pleasure they receive from them, oblivious to senex concepts of guilt, duty and responsibility. At the same time these puer qualities are so blatantly in contrast with the adult world around them that they *de facto* acquire a subversive quality. An example of this is the poem 'Il garzone con la carriola':

un garzone con una carriola,  
che a gran voce si tien la strada aperta,  
e se appena in discesa trova un'erta  
non corre più, ma vola.

La gente che per via a quell'ora è tanta  
non tace, dopo che indietro si tira.

Egli più grande fa il fracasso e l'ira,  
più si dimena e canta. (147)

Let us dwell on the following elements. Saba is careful to mention that the boy's deeds take place at a time of the day when the street is particularly busy with people. The boy literally 'opens' the street to his passage through his shouting and is oblivious to the disruption caused to people's normal routine. The crowd manifests its annoyance ('La gente... non tace') but this only causes the cheeky 'garzone' to double his efforts to exasperate them. The noise he produces and on which the poem repeatedly insists ('a gran voce'; 'il fracasso e l'ira'; 'si dimena e canta'), is the element which breaks the equilibrium of a normal day. It is a noise which raises itself above the normal daily hubbub and tries to impose itself upon the order of routine and normality. Significantly the co-presence of noise and of mischievous action is to be found also in poems where the boy does not actually shout, as in 'Fiera di San Niccolò', where a 'monello' causes disruption during a fair by throwing a cracker amongst the crowd. The clamour produced by Saba's *fanciulli* possesses an explosive quality which always signals 'with a bang' their arrival in an otherwise fairly realistically described and prosaic setting.

What we find represented in these and other similar scenes are the trickster aspects of the *fanciullo sabiano*. The trickster, in its most primitive form, is a figure which has barely and only partially left the world of instinct and which acts as the carrier of a number of functions regarded as low and inferior by the civilised mind. These encompass a tendency to sly and malicious pranks, unpredictable and socially unacceptable behaviour, vulgarity, and roguery mixed with naivety. Hence the style of trickster episodes often displays a marked taste for the absurd and for uproarious and comic entertainment traceable in the choreographies of Roman *saturnalia*, which then passed on to medieval *tripudia* (the forerunners of Carnival), where the world was represented upside down and all hierarchies were revoked for the duration of the feast. Once the Church forbade such remnants of pagan rituals during the Counter-Reformation, they eventually found their way into popular theatre in stock-characters like Hanswurst or Pulcinella<sup>45</sup>.

Saba's boys are purged of the most archaic and farcical features of the trickster, but they do maintain close links with it through their capacity and careless propensity to

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<sup>45</sup> C.G. Jung, 'Zur Psychologie der Trickster-Figur', IX.1, 274-79, ('On the Psychology of the Trickster-Figure', IX.1, 256-61).

disrupt the normal order of things. This is indeed the deepest function of the trickster who, in Kerényi's words, is

the spirit of disorder, the enemy of boundaries... the exponent and personification of the life of the body: never wholly subdued, ruled by lust and hunger, forever running into pain and injury, cunning and stupid in action. Disorder belongs to the totality of life, and the spirit of this disorder is the trickster.<sup>46</sup>

The 'garzone con la carriola' does exactly this: he unashamedly takes possession of public space as if it was his own play-ground, disregards all questions of decorum and performs playful and totally unexpected acts which bring a sense of completeness and outpouring of joy to an otherwise prosaic dimension. The closing image in particular ('Egli più grande fa il fracasso e l'ira,/ più si dimena e canta') pictures the boy in a kind of boisterous paroxysm which brings to the fore the Dionysian element within him.

All these features reappear woven together in another poem called 'Il fanciullo':

Come d'un balzo arrovesciata preda,  
nell'ora che più l'uomo affretta il passo,  
di sé ingombrava un angolo di via.  
Non cercava al suo gioco compagnia;  
ed il suo gioco era trarre dal sasso  
schegge e scintille a colpi di scalpello.  
Io pensavo Alcibiade monello,  
che in altro tempo e più gentil contrada,  
non guarda se di lì altri lo scacci,  
non teme il carrettiere con la frusta  
alzata contro i suoi nudi polpacci;  
ma si getta bocconi nella strada,  
e ride, ed i cavalli fa impennare.  
Senza un grido la folla il suo daffare  
lascia, e par solo quel periglio veda.  
Il bel fanciullo la sua gloria gusta. (106)

The boy again appears at a time of the day when his games and incursions are likely to be most unwelcome. In comparison to 'Il garzone con la carriola' though, a further nuance is added. The sentence 'l'ora che più l'uomo affretta il passo' points to the fact that everybody else's activity seem to be purposeful and to strive actively toward a goal. This by contrast highlights the boy's activity as spontaneous and purposeless. Whereas for the normal person the street is something leading from the place one has left to the

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<sup>46</sup> Karol Kerényi, 'The Trickster in Relation to Greek Mythology', in Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (with commentaries by K. Kerényi and C. G. Jung), London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956, 173-188, 185.

place where one needs to go, i.e. it has a mainly utilitarian function, for the boy the street is something where any sort of activity can take place.

Places for him do not have a specific and preordained function but are rather like a non-descriptive space where his imagination and eagerness can contrive any sort of activity. Both 'Il fanciullo' and 'Il garzone con la carriola' are notable examples of the transformative potential that the figure of the boy displays throughout the *Canzoniere* in relation to the use and the nature of social spaces.

The overarching feature that connects all puer appearances where laughter, tricks and impishness are central is the idea, or better the atmosphere, of 'festivity'.<sup>47</sup> Festivity is a unique psychological state where normal concerns and modes of experience are momentarily set aside to participate in the contemplation and/or direct experience of some event which is thought to be on a level of meaning 'other' – though by no means unrelated – to that of ordinary life. The boy brings an element into the world which we cannot but call festive since it breaks the normal flow of time and the habitual use of places. Festive moments are also unique for the naturalness with which they mix elements of seriousness and of playfulness. This clearly emerges in the behaviour of Saba's *fanciulli* who are indeed *just* playing, but who seem to take their games with the utmost seriousness, their sense of ridicule being reserved for the shocked self-importance of adult onlookers.

The mood of festivity is redemptive to the extent that it opens up the habitual response of human beings to their destiny onto a higher dimension, putting the two in relation and thus redeeming mankind from the unilaterality that an exclusively quotidian perspective implies. The trickster, who is central in unleashing this subversion of established order, is therefore also a redemptive creature. Behind his most archaic traits we can discern, according to Jung, 'seine Annäherung an die Gestalt eines Heilbringers'.<sup>48</sup> In the poems we are discussing the role of the puer is both subversive and redemptive, in that his boisterousness redeems time and place from the deadly fixity of received order and habits. Equally his smile and laughter participate into, or rather embody, the coexistence of these two aspects within him. The tricksterish smirk connecting him to the lower spheres of human experience, close to the animal, and the

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<sup>47</sup> For an analysis of the concept of festivity I refer to: Karol Kerényi, 'Vom Wesen des Festes', in *Die antike Religion. Ein Entwurf von Grundlinien*, Düsseldorf/Köln: Diederichs, 1952, 45-70.

<sup>48</sup> Jung, 'Zur Psychologie der Trickster-Figur', IX.1, 273. Engl.: 'his approximation to the figure of a saviour' ('On the psychology of the Trickster-Figure', IX.1, 255).

divine laughter which looks down at the toil of man from a position of self-assured indifference.

In the mytheme of the *fanciullo chiassoso* therefore Saba articulates through images of laughter, excited noise and irregular body movement, a subversive order which can, unexpectedly and at any moment, creep into the fabric of normality. The tricksterish acts performed by boys explode on the surrounding world both in terms of the disruption they cause and of the socially aggressive reactions they elicit. While Kerényi's analysis of festivity and its implications takes place in a context (the ancient Greek world) in which they were institutionalised, Saba deals with them from the viewpoint of a twentieth-century individual. Hence Kerényi can argue that festivity and its transgressive implications are an intrinsic trait of the Greeks' experience of the world, while in the *Canzoniere's* modern universe the very possibility of festive moments is threatened and the dis/order of the *fanciullo chiassoso* can only happen in *opposition* to the surrounding world and its normative status. It is precisely by being the primary symbol of the polemic and heroic resurgence of the uncanny and lower side of the *archai* that the boy also becomes the figure presiding over realms and experiences associated by Saba with artistic production. Saba stated (in a letter to Joachim Flescher dated 1 March 1949) that 'l'arte si volge SEMPRE al proibito; e... si fonda, nella sua ultima essenza, sulla magia',<sup>49</sup> and in the *Canzoniere* both the forbidden and the magic/festive are the exclusive territory of the puer. Boy figures preside over them with the same bravado with which they inhabit the realm of eros and its accompanying phenomenology centred on images of games and fights.

## Puer 2: Games, Fights and Eros

The idea of festivity and its relatedness to the dimension of game and playfulness allow us to move directly into the second subsystem of images characterising the boy in Saba. These can be seen as making up the mytheme of the *fanciullo pugnace*, since they have

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<sup>49</sup> Umberto Saba, *La spada d'amore: Lettere scelte 1902-1957* (ed. by Aldo Marcovecchio), Milano: Mondadori, 1983, 203.

to do with games involving the idea of physical effort, competitive fights and pursuits, and simulated war:

Chi gli si appressa ode fanciulli guerra  
fingere e paci rotte da improvvisi  
inseguimenti;  
(‘La cappella chiusa’, 30)

Guardi fanciulli con nudi i ginocchi  
forti, con nuove in attoniti occhi  
voglie, che tra i sudati  
giochi nacquero a un tratto in cuore ai più.  
Escono a stormi, vociano, ed il più  
alto con gesta tra di bimbo e d’uomo.  
(‘A mamma’, 33)

In cortile quei due stavan soletti....

quando l’un l’altro, dopo due sgambetti,  
fece presentat’arm colla ramazza.  
Seguì una lotta ad una corsa pazza,  
colle schiene cozzarono e coi petti.  
(‘In cortile’, 59)

E, chi ti ammiri, l’occhio  
non abbassi, lo guardi con fierezza,  
come un nemico, in volto;  
mentre al compagno nella finta guerra  
parli sommesso e ridere t’ascolto.  
La guerra è intorno ad una palla enorme,  
che si lancia col piede;  
(‘Il giovanetto’, 104)

O mi chiami onde in gran fretta si vada  
qualche passo più in là sull’ampia terra,  
dove quei maschi giocano alla guerra,  
e le bambine come te alla casa.  
(‘Sul prato’, 151)

L’allegra ragazzaglia urge e schiamazza,  
che i bersaglieri colle trombe d’oro  
formano il cerchio in mezzo della piazza.  
(‘La ritirata in piazza Aldovrandi a Bologna’, 155)

Là un po’ s’annoia, un po’ ride schiamazza;  
che il mastro, o un più di lui grosso monello  
lo insegue in una lunga corsa pazza.

Chi lo giunge lo mette rovescioni,  
e se lo serra fra i duri ginocchi.  
Ride il vinto, trattato a sculaccioni,

e ridendo si sente punger gli occhi.  
(‘Guido’, 156)

Nella mia prima infanzia militare  
schioppi e tamburi erano i miei giocattoli;  
come gli altri una fiaba, io la canzone  
amavo udire dei coscritti.  
(‘Eroica’, 424)

fanciulli con estrose grida vagano  
in corsa.  
(‘Finestra’, 488)

In quite a number of the instances quoted the mytheme of the *fanciullo pugnace* overlaps with that of the *fanciullo chiassoso*, since unbridled games, noise and screams seem often to go hand in hand, contributing to the boy’s transformative and redemptive power. In this connection it is important to dwell on a feature that both mythemes illuminate and which is revealing of Saba’s approach to the representation of the boy in general.

On the one hand it is clear that Saba projects onto his figures of Triestine boys a number of mythical resonances which we have started to explore. At the same time though he refrains from placing the puer in either a fully natural environment or an abstract aestheticising dimension. This is indeed the way in which the figure of the boy appears in most European decadent and symbolist poetry: whether we consider Hofmannsthal’s poems ‘Der Jüngling in der Landschaft’ and ‘Ein Knabe’, or most of Stefan George’s output, or the apparition of a flute-playing boy in ‘Il fanciullo’ in D’Annunzio’s *Alcyone*, we face an exclusively literary and mythical creature appearing in a poetry which shows no inclination to take into its stride the phenomenological world outside of itself.

On the contrary almost all of the poems we have seen up to now depict city scenes, and Saba’s pueri are all clearly city boys, whereby the contrast between their free-spirited nature and the buzzing and contemporary urban environment surrounding them is all the more poignant. But what does it mean to be at play in this context? What meaning does Saba read in the activities of his boys? Within the context of festivity the element of game bears a role which is closely linked to the transformative power of such peculiar moments. Kerényi observes that ‘der Spielende gestaltet die ganze Welt zu seiner eigenen Welt um, und wird dadurch zu deren Schöpfer und Gott: Spiel ist Machtvoll. Und darin ist es mit der Magie gleich. Wodurch das Spiel sich von der Magie auszeichnet, das ist nur die Freiheit vom Zweckgedanken.’<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Kerényi, *Die antike Religion*, 68. Engl.: ‘The man at play shapes the whole world to a world of his own and becomes thereby its creator and god. Play is power, and in that it is like magic. Where it is distinct

Playing therefore does not only impact on the outside world, but is also transformative in relation to the player, who enjoys a position of power and freedom absent from non-festive and non-playful moments. Through playing the puer acts as a little god, shaping a universe with a peculiar sense of time and space which mirrors his inner needs and nature. The boy's playfulness in the words of Hillman lights up 'that moist spark between any complex or attitude that is the original dynamic seed of the spirit. It is the call of a thing to perfection of itself, the call of a person to the Self, to be true to itself, to maintain the connection with its own divinely created *eidōs*.'<sup>51</sup>

This explains why Saba's boys are represented in connection with their games and escapades with an aura of glory surrounding them. This is apparent both in 'Il garzone con la carriola' and 'Il fanciullo' ('Il bel fanciullo la sua *gloria* gusta', 106); it also appears in the 'Squadra paesana' section of 'Cinque poesie per il gioco del calcio', where the poet, looking at the young boys playing football, exclaims 'La gloria/ vi dà un sorriso/ fugace' (440), and in general in all those poems where the boy takes on an attitude of haughty distance toward the onlooker, as in 'Dall'erta' where the young protagonist in the middle of the street 'mette l'ali/ a ogni cosa, per te vola', and then passes by the poet 'altero' (473). A sense of detached and glorious self-containment is the hallmark of the puer also in those situations where there is no direct representation of games and therefore the idea of victory is not explicit, for instance in 'Sobborgo', where 'il giovane barista... mi fa un caffè come un trionfo, e i buoni/ occhi in volto gli ridono sportivi' (455).

Let us now dwell on the exact nature of the games played by Saba's boys. Primarily they are outdoor games and as such they operate outside the enclosed spaces and boundaries of any official institution, be it family or school, and for the most part they consist of chases and fights. To gain a clearer understanding of their psychological significance we need to look at a number of youthful poems by Saba which were originally part of the collection *Poesia dell'adolescenza e giovanili* but were later excluded from the definitive version of the *Canzoniere*. These poems shed a more precise light on the meaning and implications of children's and adolescents' games because Saba speaks in them in the first person, describing longings and urges that will later be projected onto external boy figures.

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from magic is in its freedom from the idea of purpose.' (Karol Kerényi, *The Religion of the Greeks and Romans*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1962, 64.)

<sup>51</sup> James Hillman, 'Senex and Puer: An Aspect of the Historical and Psychological Present', in *Puer Papers* (ed. by J. Hillman), Dallas: Spring, 1979, 6-48, 26.

In 'Intorno a una fontana' he re-evokes some of his childhood fantasies. He is looking at a bay where he often goes swimming, and the habitual setting is transformed by his reverie of being an admiral conquering 'quell'ampia marina' (669) with a handful of vessels. The second section of 'I risvegli' shows us young Saba between waking and sleep, with a novel by Jules Verne by his side. He daydreams of 'nude pagane/ genti' whom he defeats in 'isole lontane' (738). 'L'insonnia di una notte d'estate' is another dreamy *anamnesis* of similar childhood dreams:

Socchiudo gli occhi e un sogno vi ritrovo  
 de la mia infanzia.  
 I marinai di varie  
 razze àn sbarcate le mie ricche e care  
 merci, àno accese grandi luminarie,  
 che si specchiano in mare. (699)

In all cases a reverie of exoticism and adventure is opened up by spaces and activities which are in themselves totally familiar: the beach where young Saba goes habitually to swim, the reading of his favourite book, or the observation of activities which would have been commonplace in a port city like Trieste. Indeed in these youthful poems Saba relies particularly on the characterisation of Trieste as a colourful harbour city where different peoples and cultures come into contact, the door of the West toward the fabulous *Levante*.

In these early poems the presence of Trieste is as important as that of literary texts which somehow seem to reflect, or amplify, the nature of the city, of its activities and its inhabitants. We have already found mention of the adventurous universe embodied by the novels of Jules Verne which Saba clearly worshipped in his youth ('I risvegli': 'il suo Verne, il suo Dio', 738). The image of the 'levantino' in 'Canzonette pisane' is also of literary derivation ('lessi del suo destino/ gli strani casi un dì'), most probably being inspired by the *Thousand and One Nights* where similar flights across time and space are common. The collection of oriental tales was the other favourite text of young Saba, who mentions them in one of his *scorciatoie* as being 'bellissime'<sup>52</sup>. In this way details drawn from the observation of Trieste, which at the time by virtue of its links with the East must have had a distinctly exotic flair in comparison to other Italian cities, merge with an imaginary world of far-away adventures, conquests and magic tricks inspired by the reading of Verne and of the *Thousand and One Nights*. And as a consequence young Saba's activities in the city are inextricable from their imaginary

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<sup>52</sup> Saba, *Scorciatoie e raccontini*, 10.

amplification, the closeness between real and imaginary being often represented by a twilight state of consciousness hovering between waking and sleep ('Insonnia di una notte d'estate', 'I risvegli').

All these activities manifest the puer's *penchant* for the fabulous, the extraordinary, for everything that has to do with faraway places, situations and adventures, in other words they stand for his *pothos*. In Greek thought *Pothos* is one of the three aspects of Eros after *Anteros* (reciprocated love) and *Himeros* (physical desire). *Pothos* is a concept akin to Romantic *Sehnsucht*, a sense of nostalgia and erotic wandering constantly pulled beyond itself in search of new spaces and dimensions. Hillman describes it as 'the emotion equivalent to the experience of space as a spiritual phenomenon'<sup>53</sup>, and it is in fact the boys' 'spiritedness', their inner belonging to vast airy territories rather than to the enclosed spaces of man-on-earth, that allows them to bring such a transforming impetus to the 'fixedness' of the world around them. Saba portrays this dynamism through the constant movement propelling and animating his boys and in fact a part of the male body which clearly fascinates him are the legs. They are mentioned in 'A mamma' ('fanciulli con nudi i ginocchi/ forti', 33), 'Il giovanetto' ('la bora... le tue nude gambe sferza', 104), 'Il fanciullo' ('I suoi nudi polpacci', 106), 'Guido' ('Chi lo giunge lo mette a rovescioni,/ e se lo serra fra i duri ginocchi', 156), and in 'Frutta erbaggi', where a humble grocery shop is enlivened and then left again in solitary darkness by the brisk arrival and departure of a 'fanciullo colle gambe nude' (457).

This interest in the image of legs is peculiar to Saba and stands out among the mentions of the boys' eyes or luminous faces, which are otherwise emblems easily traceable throughout the Italian poetic tradition (and not only Italian). Beautiful and powerful legs are an image with sexual implications, particularly since they shift our attention from the upper part of the body (and particularly the head where most descriptive details seem to be traditionally concentrated) to the lower. They also allow Saba to explore the idea of nudity in an urban context, since it was common at the time for young boys who had not yet reached adulthood to wear short trousers. But they are also the vectors of the dynamism and volatility of the puer, since these are not legs that stand firmly, or that parade themselves to be admired, but legs that touch the ground swiftly and lightly, poising the boy in a precarious position between earth and air, in the same way that he hovers between reality and imagination. They are in fact winged legs,

which embody the boy's mercurial qualities and mark 'his position... in such a way that his connection with the *rex estensa* is hindered, heroic, and magical.'<sup>54</sup>

The second semantic nucleus articulated by images of *ragazzi pugnaci* is specifically homoerotic. The centrality of martial images in the Western canon as a metaphor for sexual contact between males has been the object of a thorough analysis by Woods.<sup>55</sup> Images of men fighting and clashing allow a poet to focus on the beauty, energy and vulnerability of male bodies while ostensibly portraying an activity not tainted by the stigma attached to same-sex desire. The fights of Saba's boys are indeed a kind of sexual wrestling where adolescents test the growing strength and suppleness of their bodies against that of their peers. Let us take for instance the following lines from 'A mamma', where each word conspires to render an atmosphere which is playful as much as sexual:

Guardi fanciulli con nudi i ginocchi  
forti, con nuove in attoniti occhi  
voglie, che tra i sudati  
giochi nacquero a un tratto in cuore ai più. (33)

The mention of the 'nuove... *voglie*' pushes the depiction of the adolescents' general physical eagerness toward the specifically sexual. Also revealing are the direct mention of sweat in 'sudati giochi' and the representation of knees with the stress falling on their nudity and strength ('nudi' and 'forti'). Indeed it is worth pointing out that, if Saba refrains from lavishing attention on the boy's body when the boy appears on his own, he seems to break this rule when boys are together at fight. It is in these situations that his attention is awoken by parts of the body away from the head, where the idea of physicality, of the clash of one body against the other, is central. 'In cortile' shows two recruits chasing each other, with a poetically unusual emphasis on their chests and backs ('Segui una lotta ad una corsa pazza./ colle schiene cozzarono e coi petti', 59).

These images owe their more pronounced eroticism to the emphasis on young men's natural aggression and to a more 'solid' description of their bodily strength. Boys however do not possess nor desire the hardened aggressiveness of adults; the sexual nature of their games allows them to turn aggression into something uniting rather than dividing, as this scene from 'Guido' shows:

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<sup>53</sup> James Hillman, 'Pothos: The Nostalgia of the Puer Eternus', in *Loose Ends*, 49-62, 53-54.

<sup>54</sup> James Hillman, 'Puer's Wounds and Ulysses' Scar', in *Puer Papers*, 101-151, 102.

<sup>55</sup> See the chapter 'Men at war', in Gregory Woods, *Articulate Flesh: Male Homo-eroticism and Modern Poetry*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987, 51-78.

Là un po' s'annoia, un po' ride schiamazza;  
che il mastro, o un più di lui grosso monello  
lo insegue in una lunga corsa pazza.

Chi lo giunge lo mette rovescioni,  
e se lo serra fra i duri ginocchi.  
Ride il vinto, trattato a sculaccioni,

e ridendo si sente punger gli occhi. (156)

As Woods perceptively remarks on this subject, 'sexual wrestling must not, nor does it aspire to, ascend to seriousness of decisive victory, which divides. Its essential power is in fun.'<sup>56</sup> Saba maintains something similar in this *scorciatoia*: 'I RAGAZZI si dànno pugni per non accarezzarsi. E qualche volta, si accarezzano per non darsi pugni.'<sup>57</sup> The eroticism emanating from young males fighting is also at the centre of a comment of Saba's on Quarantotti Gambini's novel *L'onda dell'incrociatore*, in which he praises the representation of 'le sensazioni mescolate di erotismo dei due giovani che lottano nella barca e che, mentre sembrano – e sono – animati d'odio, si stupiscono e godono l'uno della forza dell'altro.'<sup>58</sup>

The mytheme of the *fanciullo pugnace* thus addresses through its constituent images of games and fights two nuclei. The first has to do with the idea of playing as a state of superior inner command and freedom and on its cognitive and liberating implications for the player. The idea of playfulness is in this sense contiguous with that of festivity and with images pertaining to the *fanciullo chiassoso*. Saba imbues both with ideological implications, in that his celebration of the spirit of lightness and playfulness closely follows the terms of Nietzsche's polemic against traditional values embodied by the 'spirit of gravity'.<sup>59</sup>

Homoeroticism is the second concern which these images articulate. In contrast with the mytheme of the *fanciullo chiassoso*, where the sphere of the body is alluded to through the description of frenzied acts and situations, images of *fanciulli pugnaci* reveal a higher density of vocabulary about body parts, in particular about lower extremities and backs. As I will note at various points in the course of this study, for Saba the catalyst for a more direct poetic depiction of the body is always the body of a boy, and never the body of a woman. In his mature poetry (in the poem 'La brama'), he

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<sup>56</sup> Woods, *Articulate Flesh*, 73.

<sup>57</sup> Saba, *Scorciatoie e raccontini*, 68.

<sup>58</sup> Saba/Quarantotti Gambini, 101.

will depict sexual desire as a potent and somehow dark agent in the destiny of the individual, but this darkness, as the reading of *Ernesto* also confirms, mainly springs from the guilt-culture in which awareness of sexuality is developed. But the *Canzoniere*'s mythopoeia also includes an erotic order *before* the state of guilt which, as in the poetry of Sandro Penna, stops on the threshold of puberty when boys have not yet become full-grown men. In Saba's imagination the god of love shows the same propensity for *chiasso* and *baccano* which characterises boys' activities throughout the *Canzoniere*: 'EROS è chiassoso; fa molto baccano sulla superficie della terra.'<sup>60</sup>

### Puer 3: the Sea

A marine element is often inscribed in the very appearance of the *fanciullo sabiano*. This happens when the boy is dressed up in a sailor costume (in 'Glauco' the protagonist boasts a 'bel vestito di marinaretto', 25), when he actually is a sailor ('Canto di un mattino', *Un marinaio di noi mi parlava*), or when the colour blue stands out among descriptive details of his look, as in the 'cupo turchino dei berretti' (59) of the two recruits of 'In cortile' or the 'vestito blu' (147) of 'Il garzone con la carriola'. If to this we add the numerous situations in which boys are directly represented in a maritime environment, it is easy to understand how the appearance of the colour blue often functions throughout the *Canzoniere* as a metonym, recalling the colour of the sea or, less frequently, that of the sky ('Vecchio e giovane': 'Giovinetto tiranno, occhi di cielo', 560), in any case the idea of infinite spaces where the puer's *pothos* can freely roam.

This proximity between boy and sea is a recurrent *topos* of twentieth-century Italian poetry which, beside Saba, plays a crucial role also in the work of Penna and of Giuseppe Conte (*L'oceano e il ragazzo* is the title of a 1983 collection by the latter). It foregrounds the metamorphic nature of the puer figure, its being symbolic of flux and crossing between and over different dimensions, and indeed all the poems we shall look at in this section share the idea of change of state, metamorphosis and transition. In 'Fanciulli al bagno' the description of boys' activities does not constitute a self-

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<sup>59</sup> See the section 'Vom Geist der Schwere' in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, VI.1, 237-41.

<sup>60</sup> Saba, *Scorciatoie e raccontini*, 70.

sufficient *tableau* as in the city poems, where the puer appears, gives his festive show and then leaves the stage again. The poem instead focuses on a double transition: from city to shore and from a state of activity to one of abandonment, with the boy turning from a silhouette in constant movement to an abandoned body caught in its iconic and statue-like appearance. The same transition from urban to maritime setting is also to be found in ‘Il fanciullo appassionato’, where the mood switch is one from extroverted activity to melancholic introspection, while in ‘Il canto di un mattino’ the ideas of transaction and change are expressed in the image of the sailor abandoning the solidity of the earth for the liquid expanse of the sea.

Let us start with ‘Fanciulli al bagno’, where the boy appears under a light unusual for Saba but important in relation to the figure’s wider configuration:

Dodicenne fanciullo, io la tua vita  
giorno per giorno posso dirti, ed ora  
per ora. E adesso più di prima, adesso  
che l’estate è al suo colmo, ed offre tanti  
vari piaceri a te e all’amico tuo.  
Uno fra gli altri, a me il più caro un tempo.  
Di buon mattino la città attraversi,  
variopinta città dove sei nato;  
e ti rechi alla spiaggia. Lì dall’alta  
trave nell’onda capofitto caschi,  
o a gara con le palme il mar battendo  
immensa fra voi due fate una schiuma;  
e chi in mezzo ci passa? (192)

This is one of the few poems by Saba about high Summer and a carefree abandonment to sensuous torpor. The boy leaves the urban landscape behind him, his most pressing thought being just to dive in the sea. In the absence of any civilised presence his games take on an air of perfect naturalness and fluidity, losing the somehow shrill and paroxysmic tone of urban scenes. This crossing into another realm of experience, away from civilisation and closer to the undifferentiated flow of primordial life, is made manifest by the fact that in ‘Fanciulli al bagno’ familiar images of movement and games are followed by one of stillness and repose which closes the poem:

Di marini  
giochi sazio alla fine, o stanco almeno,  
lungo e dorato ti distendi al sole. (192)

It is the alcyonic state also celebrated by D’Annunzio in ‘Meriggio’ (*Alcyone*), where the final and central image is likewise that of a semi-dormant naked body that in the course of the metamorphoses loses in individual awareness but gains a sense of

participation into a wider vitalistic dimension. This kind of alcyonic image is not numerous in the *Canzoniere*, but they are by far the most recurrent ones characterising the boy in modern Italian poetry, from D'Annunzio to Penna and Conte. The great economy with which Saba uses them is explained in part by his propensity to show the boy as a potentially transcendental presence *within* the real world rather than to idealistically insist on his glorification and idolization. It is nevertheless an important component of the figure's general configuration to the extent that it lets its more explicitly Apollonian component surface.

We now turn to the other maritime poems, 'Il fanciullo appassionato', 'In riva al mare' and 'Il canto di un mattino', where the boy appears under a different light, revealing an introspective and meditative aspect which we have not hitherto encountered. In 'In riva al mare' the poet wanders along the shore in the late afternoon

in quelle  
 parti ove s'ode beatamente il suono  
 d'una squilla, la voce d'un fanciullo  
 che gioca in pace intorno alle carcasse  
 di vecchie navi, presso all'ampio mare  
 solo seduto.... (220)

The boy is at play but significantly he can carry on his undertakings 'in pace', undisturbed by external observers. His voice does not stand out but is taken in by the poet 'beatamente' together with the sound of a small bell. The scene shows a boy familiar to us in his activities and yet different in that his self-engrossment does not betray any sense of disdainfulness but acquires a very delicate introspective quality.

The boy of 'Il fanciullo appassionato' also displays these features. He is described fleeing the crowds in the streets ('la folla schiva entro le anguste vie') and exploring the harbour area. His demeanour is one of silent intentness:

Perché mai così intento? E che può dire  
 solo a se stesso, un chiaro giorno, all'ombra  
 d'una vela, ove già la riva è sgombra,  
 questo indimenticabile monello? (115)

Similarly in 'Il canto di un mattino' the sailor protagonist is isolated from the surrounding world by the exclusive concentration he devotes to his chores and his singing:

La gomina toglieva alla colonna

dell'approdo, e oscillava in mar la conscia  
nave, pronta a salpare.  
E l'udivo cantare,  
per se stesso, ma sì che la città  
n'era intenta, ed i colli e la marina,  
e sopra tutte le cose il mio cuore.... (225)

In these sea scenes the boys' *dynamos* stops spilling out onto the external world and is interiorised, giving rise to images which compose the mytheme of the *fanciullo pensoso*. The dreams which in other poems are extroverted in aggressive games are here interiorised in a kind of fluid reverie. This state is on the one hand characterised by an *abaissement du niveau mental* in terms of attention and concern for the external world, while on the other it generates a mood where fantasies and dreams and the burning desire for their actualisation are virtually inseparable. Both dynamics, the introverted and the extroverted, can appear together, as in 'Il fanciullo appassionato', whose young protagonist introvertedly ponders a real dream of adventure and escape:

Meglio in un lungo avventuroso sogno  
il suo ben corruciato occhio s'interna.  
Anche gli è a noia la casa paterna,  
un carcere la scuola; e forse è nulla  
di tutto questo; è appena un'ombra vana  
che insegue, un indistinto ancor bisogno  
di esplorare più addentro che la brulla  
collina, e il porto, e le lunghe vie remote; (115)

The verb 'internarsi' wonderfully renders the experience of interiorised imagining, the boy's look moving from without to within and from an outer to an inner vision. His as yet unformed longing to see beyond the familiar geographical boundaries of his world ('la... collina, e il porto, e le lunghe vie remote'), is expressed in a way ('esplorare *più addentro*') which suggests that any widening of one's horizon is both a spatial *and* an inner conquest.

'Il canto di un mattino' (225) also portrays a similar transition from fantasy to action. From the start we are brought into an atmosphere of blurred borders, to a 'riva solatia' from which the poet observes the scene in a twilight state, 'non so se in sogno o vegliando'. The boy appears to be poised between puberty and youth, being a sailor but 'quasi ancor giovanetto' in appearance. The idea of crossing is reinforced also by the sailor's toiling around 'la sua piccola barca'. The ship is an important symbol in Saba and we shall see in a later part of this study that it implies the notion of crossing over from the conscious into the unconscious and vice versa. The boy fills the landscape with

the sound of his song which propagates a sense of stillness suddenly broken when he turns to action and sets sail for the open sea:

Sempre cantando, si affrettava il mozzo  
alla partenza; ed io pensavo: È un rozzo  
uomo di mare? O è forse un semidio?

Si tacque a un tratto, balzò nella nave;  
chiara soave rimembranza in me.

The transition from earth to sea is sudden, but so natural and smooth that the boy really appears to be more at home at sea than on solid ground. In this respect both maritime and city poems share an emphasis on the boy's fragile and discontinuous relationship with anything that is solid and enclosed. Even the vastness and calmness of the beach are in the end insufficient to keep him on solid ground, as the longing that he embodies is always driven toward fluidity, vagrancy and the adventure of multiplicity.

These transitions or crossings do not however embody an exclusively *à rebours* dynamic centred on the embracing of the fluid, the uncanny, the primordial. Like everything connected with the boy they also reveal an aspect of *futurism*, in that they represent a psychological state where borders between fact and fiction, actualisation and projection, real and hypothetical life, are constantly being negotiated. As we have seen in the case of games and the idea of playing, reverie-like states are of interest to Saba from a cognitive and epistemological viewpoint. They manifest our capacity to expand our knowledge about ourselves through meaningful self-representations which, whether actualised or not, detach us from the fixity of received notions and encourage an exploration of the self in terms of a multiplicity of experience.

Within the book's general economy, these states are consistently represented as cognitive therapeutic acts, and this amounts to another aspect which puts Saba's psychology well beyond the Freudian orthodoxy of his times. As part of his continuous critique of what he considers to be the unilateral and repressive features of traditional psychoanalysis, Hillman has pointed out that

I am always somehow a stranger to myself and can never know myself except through discovering the other which I fantasise to be somewhere else – so I wander in search of him or her. In my life this is felt as ambivalence, dissatisfaction, restlessness. Self-division, or the divided self of modern psychiatry is the *primary condition* and not a result, mistake or accident.<sup>61</sup>

Bachelard had reached similar conclusions thanks to his granting the imagination, and more specifically states of creative reverie, a fundamental cognitive and psychological potential:

L'imagination tente un avenir. Elle est d'abord un facteur d'imprudence qui nous détache des lourdes stabilités. Nous verrons que certaines rêveries poétiques sont des hypothèses de vies qui élargissent notre vie en nous mettant en confiance dans l'univers.

(...)

Un monde se forme dans notre rêverie, un monde qui est notre monde. Et ce monde rêvé nous enseigne des possibilités d'agrandissement de notre être dans cet univers qui est le nôtre. Il y a du *futurisme* dans tout univers rêvé.<sup>62</sup>

The sea acts throughout the *Canzoniere* as the main symbol for the metaphorical multiplicity with which both Hillman and Bachelard are concerned. It stands for the totality and atemporality of what Saba calls 'la calda vita', in its constant metamorphoses and union of male and female, conscious and unconscious, present and future, reality and possibility, actualisation and longing.

The sea is not celebrated *per se* as a dimension in which individual subjectivity can be lost, and thus redeemed, in a state of abandonment to primordial instincts. What matters to Saba is the heroic act through which the individual consciously chooses to leave certainties behind and embark upon an exploration which, in the twentieth century, can have no reassuringly clear and definitive goal. The trajectory springing from the *pothos* which so strongly characterises the boy gradually leads to the multifarious personality of Ulysses, Saba's last and greatest alter-ego. It is a typically twentieth-century Ulysses, for whom Ithaca is lost rather than gained and life itself revealed as a condition of perpetual heroic vagrancy:

Il porto  
accende ad altri i suoi lumi; me al largo  
sospinge ancora il non domato spirito  
e della vita il doloroso amore. (556)

Saba's stance is clearly indebted to Nietzsche, and in particular to the section 'Im Horizont des Unendlichen' ('In the Horizon of the Infinite') from *Die fröhliche*

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<sup>61</sup> Hillman, 'Pothos: The Nostalgia of the Puer Aeternus', 59-60.

<sup>62</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *La poétique de la rêverie*, Paris: PUF, 1960, 7-8. Engl. Transl: 'Imagination attempts to have a future. At first it is an element of imprudence which detaches us from heavy stabilities. We shall see that certain poetic reveries are hypothetical lives which enlarge our lives by letting us in on the secrets of the universe. A world takes form in our reverie, and this world is ours. This dreamed world

*Wissenschaft* which, among other things, amounts to a compressed definition of the difference between ancient and modern epic precisely in terms of the latter's necessary unfolding against a post-metaphysical backdrop:

Nun, Schifflein! Sieh' dich vor! Neben dir liegt der Ozean, es ist wahr, er brüllt nicht immer, und mitunter liegt er da, wie Seide und Gold und Träumerei der Güte. Aber es kommen Stunden, wo du erkennen wirst, dass er unendlich ist und dass es nichts Furchtbareres giebt, als Unendlichkeit... und es giebt kein Land' mehr!<sup>63</sup>

Much of the *Canzoniere* is about the courage, the determination and the self-discipline necessary to leap into this fluid and metaphorical multiplicity. In terms of the book's plot the agent of this leap into the unknown is the boy. But the boy is also the symbol of a hermetic and ex-centric consciousness in which, according to Kerényi, 'der Reisende ist unterwegs heimisch, heimisch auf dem Wege selbst, dieser nicht als Verbindung zwischen zwei bestimmten Punkten der Erde entstanden, sondern als eine besondere Welt.'<sup>64</sup> This is, in the end, the central aspect of the *Canzoniere*'s epistemology. Saba's book is a study on the relational, shifting and phantasmatic patterns of self-understanding which an individual explores, moulds and by which he/she is in turn shaped in the course of his/her journey. But it is also, more subtly, a book about the mythopoietic space and perspective within which these precarious and unstable patterns of meaning can find grounding and cohesion.

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teaches us the possibilities for expanding our being within our universe. There is *futurism* in any dreamed universe.' (*The Poetics of Reverie*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1969, 8.)

<sup>63</sup> Nietzsche, V.2, 158. Engl.: 'Well, little ship! look out! Beside thee is the ocean; it is true it does not always roar, and sometimes it spreads out like silk and gold and gentle reverie. But times will come when thou wilt feel that it is infinite, and that there is nothing more frightful than infinity... and there is no 'land' any longer!' (X, 167).

<sup>64</sup> Karol Kerényi, *Hermes der Seeelenführer*, Zürich: Rhein-Verlag, 1944, 22. Engl.: 'the journeyer is at home while underway, at home on the road itself, the road being understood not as a connection between two definitive points but as a particular world'. (*Hermes: Guide of Souls*, Woodstock: Spring Publications, 1996, 46).

## CHAPTER 2

### **‘Tu non sai come sia dolce la vita’: *Canzoniere* Volume primo (1900-1920)**

#### The Cauldron of Youth

The *Poesie dell'adolescenza e giovanili* are the *Canzoniere's* opening collection, spanning the years between 1900 and 1907. It is the only section of the book which owes its definitive shape to a series of often substantial retrospective re-arrangements which took place in 1911, 1918, 1921, 1932, 1945, 1948 and 1953. At the root of this protracted and arduous concern lies the multifarious but slippery role that the poet's earliest production plays as the first chapter of the *Canzoniere's* wider narrative. Lavagetto rightly observes that

le *Poesie dell'adolescenza* vengono chiamate ad alte responsabilità: attraversate da linee molteplici, sono, nel loro insieme, il primo capitolo di una storia, promuovono immagini e temi destinati a svilupparsi, a fruttificare, a ripercuotersi in echi che si intrecciano e si fondono, acquistano, insieme ad una precisa tonalità simbolica, funzioni narrative.<sup>1</sup>

The two most important reworkings are those of 1921 and of 1932. The 1921 intervention coincides with the first edition of the *Canzoniere*: Saba understands that his early poetry can act as a horoscope or a prelude for his whole work and accordingly includes most of it in the effort to give the most accurate, or ‘archaeological’, view of himself as a young poet. There are 44 poems (only 16 will be included in the canon) divided into three sections: ‘Poesie dell'adolescenza’ (1900-1903), ‘Voci dai luoghi e dalle cose’ (1904-1905) and ‘Poesie fiorentine’ (1905-1907).

The 1932 edition moves on to a more delicate task. Rather than being indiscriminate, Saba concentrates only on those traits of his young poetic self which anticipate the most important problems and concerns of his future poetic biography. The collection is slimmed down to its almost definitive shape: twenty poems grouped under the single title of *Poesie dell'adolescenza e giovanili*. This late and almost definitive reworking falls in a crucial phase of Saba's life, between the psychoanalytical collection *Il piccolo Berto* (1929-1931) and the first of his late works, *Parole* (1933-34). The sense of inner resolution derived from psychoanalytical treatment spurred him to look back with greater insight into his often opaque youthful production, excluding from the canon most of the adolescent posturing which had led him to adopt such Decadent pseudonyms as Chopin and Umberto da Montereale prior to the publication of the volume *Poesie* in 1909.

The selective principle shaping the definitive canon of the *Poesie dell'adolescenza* ensures that most of the remaining sixteen poems have a paradigmatic character, adumbrating existential nuclei which the later parts of the *Canzoniere* will unravel. Long before the psychoanalytical move of 1929-30 the Eden-like universe over which Saba's wet-nurse presided is sketched in 'La casa della mia nutrice', which clearly anticipates 'Sonetto di Paradiso' in *Il piccolo Berto*. Many of the elements characterising his relationship with his mother are foreshadowed in 'A mamma', while the first poem on his wife, 'A Lina', displays already that mixture of longing, aggression and guilt much familiar to his readers from *Trieste e una donna*.

In relation to the figure of the puer a similar role is performed by 'Glauco', a sonnet whose archetypal position in the *Canzoniere* is stressed by Saba in *Storia e cronistoria*: 'Glauco è il primo, in ordine di tempo, dei "ragazzi di Saba" e il modello di tutti gli altri.'<sup>2</sup> The poem is about a blond and serene boy who warns and questions young Umberto Poli about his solitary character, contrasting the poet's secluded life with his own instinctual and free-spirited nature:

Glauco, un fanciullo dalla chioma bionda,  
dal bel vestito di marinaretto,  
e dall'occhio sereno, con gioconda  
voce mi disse, nel natio dialetto:

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<sup>1</sup> Lavagetto, *La gallina di Saba*, 44.

<sup>2</sup> Saba, *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, 124.

Umberto, ma perché senza un diletto  
tu consumi la vita, e par nasconda  
un dolore o un mistero ogni tuo detto?  
Perché non vieni con me sulla sponda

del mare, che in sue azzurre onde c'invita?  
Qual è il pensiero che non dici, ascoso,  
e che da noi, così a un tratto, t'invola?

Tu non sai come sia dolce la vita  
agli amici che fuggi, e come vola  
a me il mio tempo, allegro e immaginoso. (25)

There are a number of features contributing to 'Glauco's' eminent position within the *Canzoniere*. First and foremost the iconography, simpler than in later boy poems but already articulated in its salient traits. 'Vestito di marinaretto', 'occhio sereno' and 'gioconda voce', are all items whose repetition throughout the *Canzoniere* will, as we have seen in the previous chapter, gradually endow them with iconic status and with a metonymic function in relation to the universe they represent. Also crucial is the presence of the sea not only as a backdrop to the action, but as a living presence whose call ('mare, che in sue azzurre onde c'invita?') amounts to a challenge to which Glauco and Umberto respond in opposite ways.

In relation to this challenge 'Glauco' is a paradigmatic text in another, more subtle way, in as much as it lays bare the paradoxical relationship between Saba-protagonist and the figure of the boy which characterises a good part of the first volume of the *Canzoniere*. On the one hand the leading presence of the puer and the symbolic universe to which this figure will remain associated are concisely and successfully foregrounded, while on the other Saba *qua* protagonist suffers from a condition of harsh and mysterious estrangement from the very world he is celebrating as a poet. As a biographical snapshot, 'Glauco' crystallises the image of Saba-protagonist's isolation from his male peers and from their world of carefree and instinctive physicality, an experience which resurfaces insistently during the rest of the *Canzoniere*, and which plays a crucial role in terms of Saba's shaky sense of his own masculinity and of his fear of desire for other men.

This estrangement is precipitated in the image of the unwillingness and/or incapacity to join Glauco and dive into the liquid expanse of the sea with him. The *Canzoniere* therefore opens with a psychological situation marking the greatest point of distance between the poetic protagonist and the homoerotic, transgressive and self-

overcoming journey which he will start to consciously embrace from *Autobiografia* (1924) onwards. But even at this very early stage there are signs in the text hinting at the possibility of a reconciliation of opposites. A closer inspection reveals that ‘Glauco’ is built as a tight dialogue and that the two protagonists stand in a less mutually exclusive relationship than might first appear. The names ‘Glauco’ and ‘Umberto’ are symmetrically placed at the beginning of the first and second quatrain respectively. The dramatic arrangement of the two quatrains amounts to a form of chiasmus, since in each of them the boy who is being named is actually being described by the other. It is a mutual double portrait: Umberto describes Glauco, and then Glauco through his questions provides the reader with an image of Umberto.

Beside this rhetorical construction the two boys’ underlying relationship of reciprocity is also conveyed through the use of rhyme. Let us take the pair ‘t’invola-vola’. The two words semantically express the dichotomy on which the scene rests: Glauco’s light carelessness vs Umberto’s ‘pensiero... ascoso’. However these two opposed states are expressed with an identical sound and also through a shared image of flight. In other words, sound and image tend to put in question the harshness of the literal meaning, suggesting a deep common terrain between the two protagonists behind, or beneath, their apparent separation. An identical pattern can be observed also in the rhyme ‘ascoso-immaginoso’. Again the state of psychological closure and dimness implied by ‘ascoso’ semantically clashes with the open-ended vastity of ‘immaginoso’, but even in this case the two states are not as polarised as they appear to be, since Saba uses the adjective ‘immaginoso’ to signal an opening up of the mind toward images of vastness and the unknown, a surge of unconscious urges, a typically puer reverie of infinity and adventure.

As I have pointed out in the previous chapter, this state is very close to how he will later come to understand poetic inspiration. The idea of being ‘ascoso’ is in fact akin to images, mainly present in the later city poems from *Trieste e una donna*, of Saba wandering through the animated town to end up on the summit of a hill in a ‘cantuccio in cui solo/ siedo’ (89). This ‘cantuccio’ perfectly matches the introverted side of his temperament (‘il cantuccio a me fatto, alla mia vita/ pensosa e schiva’, 89) and is a sort of elevated *temenos* (sacred precinct) where his poetic inspiration can gather momentum, in sight of but at the same time undisturbed by the bustling down in the town. In ‘Glauco’ both structure and rhyme therefore point to a nexus between Glauco’s

sensual and carefree reverie and Umberto's brooding introspection which only subsequent developments in the *Canzoniere* will uncover.

I am insisting on these two layers of meaning interacting in 'Glauco' because I think that they are an early example of the complex interplay in the *Canzoniere* between the different perspectives of Saba-poet and Saba-protagonist. In terms of Saba-protagonist's journey, the poem is paradigmatic of his estrangement from the world of boys. Yet it is Saba-poet who structures this text about a particular phase of his life in a way which suggests deep underlying ties underneath the visible fractures. Saba-poet in 'Glauco' looks beyond his biographical predicament and foreshadows a fundamental connection for the *Canzoniere's* development between the ideological and existential sphere symbolised by the boy and his own poetic gift.

At any rate, from the biographical, rather than poetological, perspective, Umberto's 'pensiero' remains 'ascoso' and no clues are provided about its nature and origins. If however we glance beyond the sonnet to the rest of the collection, we can start finding a number of elements to add to the picture. The *Poesie dell'adolescenza* in fact inaugurate in the *Canzoniere* a repertoire of scenes of outdoor agonistic activities and games which are explicitly associated with the idea of maleness, or at any rate with the idea of growing up as a proper male. We find an example of this in 'La cappella chiusa' where the poet observes an old chapel and the surrounding graveyard:

Chi gli si appressa ode fanciulli guerra  
fingere e paci rotte da improvvisi  
inseguimenti; fra le sue compagne  
e le tombe ripete i nuziali  
riti d'un tempo la bambina ignara. (30)

A passage like this emphasizes the fact that boys in the *Canzoniere* are almost always represented 'in action', by setting their movement in explicit contrast with what girls do. Boys' activities are intrinsically outdoor ones, while girls' ones, even when as in this case they take place in the open air, are linked to the idea of domesticity, enclosed spaces and dependency. Similar associations return in the later 'Sul prato' (from *La serena disperazione*, 1913-1915) in the closing lines 'dove quei maschi giocano alla guerra,/ e le bambine come te alla casa' (151).

Lines like these do not allow us to draw any conclusion about how far Saba was aware, in representing such scenes, of the culturally-based stereotypes which he was

handling. What is important is that he seems to draw a connection between the activities in which boys and girls socially engage and the sense of gender identity they develop. There is a sense of identity as performance or acting out: in order to become a man a boy acts like one, and does things that other men do, while girls rehearse in their games their future role of wives and mothers. In light of this, we can tentatively add an important element to the relationship between Saba and the puer which we have been sketching up to now, and that is the issue of masculinity. Beside their mythical and ideological resonances, puer activities are already in the *Poesie dell'adolescenza* characterised as typically male. Saba-protagonist's sense of exile from this world reflects an uncertain sense of male identity which he will problematize up to his mature years.

We now turn to 'A mamma', a poem where Saba introduces the figure of his mother and which further widens the background of the psychological situation presented in 'Glaucò'. This long *canzone* (149 lines) is, together with 'La cappella chiusa', the one of his youthful output which caused Saba the most problems. It is present in all editions of the *Poesie dell'adolescenza* (*Canzoniere* 1919 included) with numerous and often substantial changes testifying to Saba's grappling with a content for which he was not finding appropriate means of expression, as he admits in *Storia e cronistoria*: 'Infinite sono le varianti che di questa poesia egli ci offerse. Per venti, per trenta, per più anni, essa fu come una sua fissazione. Saba sentiva di aver detto qualcosa di fondamentale, qualcosa che, da lui, non poteva non essere detta, ma di averla detta, almeno in parte, male.'<sup>3</sup> We are about to see that the poem does lack discursive focus, and that it also presents us with two particularly confusing passages, beside being an early example of an emotionally effusive penchant which usually does not serve Saba well in terms of intelligibility of results. In this respect 'A mamma' could not be more removed from 'Glaucò's succinct clarity, and yet some of the insights it affords are truly fundamental for the subsequent stages of Saba's poetic autobiography.

After two introductory stanzas, which clarify that Saba is for the first time away from his mother while in Pisa, the third one introduces the central theme, the separation and opposition between mother and son:

E tu pur, mamma, la domenicale

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<sup>3</sup> Saba, *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, 129.

passeggiata riguardi dall'aperta  
finestra, nella tua casa deserta  
di me, deserta per te d'ogni bene.  
Guardi le donne, gli operai (quel bene,  
mamma, non scordi) gli operai che i panni  
d'ogni giorno, pur tanto umili e belli,  
oggi a gara lasciati hanno per quelli  
delle feste, sì nuovi in vista e falsi.  
Ma tu mamma, non sai che sono falsi.

Tu non vedi la luce che io vedo.  
Altra fede ti regge, che non credo  
più, che credevo nella puerizia,  
mamma, nella remota puerizia. (32-33)

The 'fede' mentioned can be read as the mother's Jewishness from which the poet, by the time of *Versi militari* (1908), will explicitly distance himself. But the target is clearly broader, since Rachele Coen's implicit approval of the fact that people from the lower classes should abandon their undignified normal clothes on a Sunday is very much reminiscent of her more extensive portrayal in *Ernesto*, where she consistently appears as a stern and narrow-minded guardian of *petit bourgeois* anxieties and conventions. The dissention with her son is radical, and invests the very notions of truth and falseness, spontaneity and decorum, as well as opposite views on class divisions.

The discursive flow is abruptly interrupted half way through the fourth stanza, and the attention switched toward the outside, with boys at play filling the visual field:

Guardi fanciulli con i nudi ginocchi  
forti, con nuove in attoniti occhi  
voglie, che tra i sudati  
giochi nacquero a un tratto in cuore ai più.  
Escono a stormi, vociano, ed il più  
alto con gesta tra di bimbo e d'uomo.

The relation between this passage and the preceding aggressive lines is not fully clear, it seems at any rate that Saba is presenting a second image, after the one of workers in leisurely clothes, toward which his feelings are likely to be in contrast with those of his stern mother. More importantly, the mention of the world of adolescents allows him to momentarily put aside his mother's presence to focus on his own predicament, and to restate the motif of his painful isolation from male peers: 'Mamma, non io così, mai. La mia culla/ io la penso tagliata in strano legno.'

In the sixth stanza the focus is back on Rachele Coen. The passage strikes one as a powerful confession of the very close identification with her that Saba had

experienced in his childhood, and of his subsequent dramatic awakening to her shortcomings and errors:

Mamma, un tempo fu ancora – il tuo – che in ogni  
dottrina la più saggia eri tenuta  
da me, da me che la tua bocca muta  
feci poi con l'audacia dei miei sogni.  
Tu pel fanciullo eri l'infalibile,  
eri colei che non conosce errore.  
L'umile tua parola nel suo cuore  
si scolpiva così ch'ebbe indicibile  
angoscia quando, per la prima volta,  
pur come ogni altra, la tua mente folta  
d'errori, avvolta nel dubbio scoperse.

The poem is then closed by a very short stanza in which the blood relation between mother and son is elevated to an indissoluble and almost metaphysical bond:

Mamma, il tempo che fugge  
cure con cure alterna; ma in chi sugge  
il latte e in chi denuda la mammella  
c'è un sangue solo per la vita bella.

'A mamma' therefore provides us with a characterisation of Saba's mother which makes her the presiding figure over a realm of heaviness, convention and repression. She is represented alone indoors weighted down by depressive feelings ('Mamma, il tempo che fugge/ t'ansia...', 'il male che ti strugge'), in a day when everybody fills the streets sharing in an atmosphere of festivity. This sense of heaviness and dissatisfaction with life, for which Saba will later often use the verb 'querelarsi', contributes to place her, within the *Canzoniere's* mythical microcosm, at the opposite pole of the triad lightness-sensuality-vagrancy embodied by Glauco. Still, behind this problematic, if not pejorative, characterisation, Saba also hints at a remote time when the bond with his mother was of the most intense nature, thus laying a psychologically plausible background for the subsequent level of aggression that his attempts to separate himself from her world will necessitate.

If this much is clear, the poem remains however opaque when it tries to address the precise emotional impact of Rachele Coen's ethos on young Saba. The following lines suggest that Saba's feelings of heaviness have been transmitted to him by his mother's presence, and therefore that she can be seen as their origin:

Mamma, il tempo che fugge  
t'ansia; e l'ansia che impera  
nel tuo cuore c'è, forse, anche nel mio;  
c'è, pur latente, il male che ti strugge;  
son le tue cure in me domenicali  
malinconie.

But as we have seen, in the passage about boys Saba resolves his isolation from their light and sensual world in an curious image from which he later on distanced himself<sup>4</sup> ('Mamma, non io così, mai. La mia culla/ io la penso tagliata in strano legno'), but which smacks of a last-ditch recourse to the unfathomable depths of predestination rather than an attempt to clarify his situation in line with his self-professed *onestà*<sup>5</sup>. Overall, we can say that her beliefs and attitudes are brought in relation with Saba's sense of isolation from his peers, but that the precise nature of this proximity is not addressed. The poem remains notable because of the sense of guilt torturing Saba vis-à-vis his mother, rather than for the polemical and aggressive tones which will be the hallmark of his dealings with her in the rest of the *Canzoniere* and also in *Ernesto*.

Even more perplexing is the short and abrupt last stanza, which sets the blood bond above any consideration that the text might have developed. The 'ma', prominently placed at the caesura after a semicolon in a *maiore* hendecasyllable, ('ma in chi sugge....') appears to negate not only the previous sentence, but the whole poem, as if Saba were implying that whatever he might have said or felt above is overruled, or made irrelevant, by the ancestral bond between mother and son. The mention of a 'vita bella' in the last line, and its proximity to the idea of mother and son indissolubly linked, seems to sketch an image of happiness perilously contingent upon, or contiguous to, the maintenance of a bond where the son has not managed to detach himself from his parent. Significantly Saba wants to talk about a blood bond, but the image he chooses is that of suckling, so that one tends to think of a mother and an infant rather than a mother and her adult son.

In the face of such a textual predicament it would be very handy, jumping forward to the poem 'Bersaglio' (*Versi militari*) and to *Il piccolo Berto*, to analyse 'A

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<sup>4</sup> In *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere* Saba glosses the line in question, admitting that 'oltre la falsità dell'immagine di una culla tagliata in uno strano legno, si capisce appena, o non si capisce affatto, che cosa il poeta abbia voluto dire: se esaltare cioè o deprecare la solitudine della sua infanzia' (131).

<sup>5</sup> The concept of *poesia onesta* was coined by Saba in his early anti-Dannunzian essay *Quel che resta da fare ai poeti* (1911, but published posthumously in 1959), in Saba, *Tutte le prose*, 674-87.

mamma' retrospectively, and explain its haziness and reticence in terms of Saba's incapability at this early stage to express his mother's destructive influence on his early childhood development. Readers of the *Canzoniere* are familiar with the fact that in his maturity Saba splits the archetypal figure of the mother in two aspects, the destructive mother (Rachele Coen) and the nourishing mother (his wet-nurse Peppa). If the fission of these two poles out of a previously impregnable mother figure is explicitly and psychoanalytically charted in *Il piccolo Berto*, 'A mamma' even as it stands contains an important hint (which to my knowledge no scholar has spotted), that the process is already under way, albeit at an embryonic stage. The celebration of the mother/son blood bond is in fact expressed by the image of suckling. To the reader of the *Poesie dell'adolescenza*, even if he/she never reads the later poems where the puzzle of Saba's mother is completed, the choice is startling because from 'La casa della mia nutrice' (the second poem of the collection) he/she would already be familiar with the notion that Saba had a wet-nurse and was therefore milk-fed by her. Why therefore choose precisely the image of suckling in lines called to represent the indissoluble bond between him and his biological mother?

This confusion derives from the fact that Saba was juggling with two sets of emotions that were unconsciously associated with two different women. The 'vita bella' linked to the image of suckling springs from the Edenic universe he experienced with Peppa in the first three years of his life, while the psychological knottiness of the bulk of the poem relates to later and more fraught feelings linked to his biological mother and their family situation – only that at this stage the emotions experienced in early childhood have not been unearthed and therefore do not find their appropriate referent. The Mother is as a consequence charged with contrastive sets of emotions which turn her into an intractable and ambiguous figure. Saba starts spinning around her a number of negative connotations, which he however leaves floating, without pursuing their implications. This notwithstanding, 'A mamma' starts to lay bare the remote reasons which will lead, as we will shortly see, to the explosive and pitiless attack on Rachele Coen featured in 'Bersaglio' (*Versi militari*).

The last poem from the *Poesie dell'adolescenza* bearing upon our discussion is 'Lettera ad un amico pianista...'. This text consists of fifteen rhyming quatrains and is the most thematically and formally conventional of the whole collection. It deals with themes such as the passing of time, the inevitability of death, and the fleeting power of

music and *canto* to assuage the shock of such fatalities. The presence of Leopardi is predominant (and Saba does nothing to hide this) both on a level of content and on that of the vocabulary and imagery used. More precisely, the source-text is 'A Silvia' as the first line makes sufficiently clear: 'Elio, ricordi il bel tempo gentile' (19). Further parallels invest the role of *canto* within an innocent past not yet shattered by 'l'apparir del vero':

Ma spesso tu sedevi pensieroso  
al cembalo sonoro;  
ed io in un canto udivo il diletto  
angelico lavoro.

Le tue dita rendevan la canzone  
dell'amor, della vita;  
e s'accendeva in me la visione  
d'una pace infinita

and the abandonment of illusions in the face of the inevitability of a mortal fate:

Come tutto mutò! Come la vita  
diversa oggi m'appare!  
Quante immagini care  
m'han, via fuggendo, l'anima impaurita.

For our argument the interest and originality of this text do not lie in its conventional themes and diction. 'Lettera ad un amico...' however stands out precisely in view of the very insistent parallel with such a famous poem like 'A Silvia', with the notable difference that in our case the addressee is an adolescent boy and not a girl.

Can we see this clumsy, rhetorical and derivative piece as the first trace in the *Canzoniere* of Saba's homoerotic passions? Evidently the poem cannot be read as an explicit and articulated expression of same-sex love of the kind that Saba will produce in his late years for Federico Almansì, and indeed his linguistic choices are very guarded, never going beyond the use of syntagms like 'amicizia fraterna'. Still, I think the point is precisely that we would be at pains to detect any explicit expressions of love in 'A Silvia' either. Within the conventions in which both 'Lettera ad un amico...' and 'A Silvia' move, one does not need explicit statements of love or desire to grasp the unique role of the figures which elicit the kind of poetic discourse in question. In this traditional poetics the love-inspiring qualities of the beloved are indirectly borne out by the intensity and loftiness of the kind of discourse he/she is able to inspire. And indeed

the insistence in Saba's text on the idea of *canto* incontrovertibly links the meekly titled 'Lettera ad un amico...' to the whole set of conventions of love's traditional poetic rendering.

Seen in this way, 'Lettera ad un amico...' becomes a very significant snapshot of Saba as a young poet. By including it despite its obvious clumsiness Saba preserved the image of himself as a young man who writes love poetry in a Leopardian manner at the beginning of the century, *but* with a male friend as addressee<sup>6</sup>. It is thanks to the inclusion of this poem that the presence of intense emotional stirrings caused by male friends is established as an important aspect of his adolescent self to which he will return with ever increasing degrees of frankness. In 'Un ricordo' for instance (*La serena disperazione*) he corrects his previous elusiveness when, remembering a remote friendship with 'un altro ragazzino', he affirms that 'un'amicizia (seppi poi) non era,/ era quello un amore' (152). Also, the character of Elio will become in the last section of *Ernesto Ilio*, the boy with whom young Umberto falls in love and who is likewise a musician. Both Elio and Ilio are patterned on Saba's violinist friend Ugo Chiesa, and Saba's homosexual passion for him is also dramatised in a poem never included in the canon of the *Canzoniere*, 'A una stella', but on which we will dwell in detail in the next chapter.

## A Male Muse

In contrast to the multifarious and unevenly developed aspects of the *Poesie dell'adolescenza*, *Versi militari* is a collection presenting a far more uniform character, both stylistically and thematically. It consists of twenty-seven sonnets portraying Saba's period of military service in Salerno in 1908. Despite Saba's remaining faithful to the traditional sonnet form, scholars stress the otherwise very innovative character of this collection.<sup>7</sup> Within the wider structure of the *Canzoniere* it is the episode marking the demise of Saba's adolescent ego, which indulged in Dannunzian pseudonyms such as

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<sup>6</sup> Italian poetic tradition also allows for a male addressee, but in this case the poem is usually about civic and political issues. Notable examples are Foscolo's 'Dei sepolcri' and Leopardi's 'Ad Angelo Mai'.

<sup>7</sup> Lavagetto, *La gallina di Saba*, 153-164; Cary, 58-62, Elvio Guagnini, *Il punto su Saba*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1987, 70.

Umberto da Monreale, and also of his most overtly derivative stylistic choices. The sonnet form functions as a restraining factor, forcing him to lower the intensity of his inner distress and to tap his narrative vein. This is apparent in each individual poem, where an ‘increased confidence in immediate personal material’<sup>8</sup> comes to the fore, as well as in the overall structure since, similarly to the sequential arrangement later deployed in *Autobiografia*, all sonnets are linked in such a way as to form a kind of diary of the poet’s military experience. The very words appended to the title (Salerno, 12° Fanteria, 1908), anchor the poetic novelties of the *Versi militari* to a circumstantial present which marks a clear departure from the predominantly retrospective and elegiac thrust of the *Poesie dell’adolescenza*.

The fresh and uninhibited look of the poetic self recording the events of military life is poignantly summed up in a tercet from the opening sonnet ‘Durante una marcia’:

Son brutte facce intorno a me, e sudori.  
 Guardo il compagno: mezza lingua fuori  
 gli pende, come a macellato bue. (43)

These lines are striking compared to contemporary Italian poetic practice. The fact that they were composed two years after the publication of D’Annunzio’s *Alcyone* (1906) makes clear how Saba, despite his fraught relationship with traditional forms, moves from very early on on a plane much removed from *fin de siècle* poetry. At the same time he does not develop a mode similar to the *Crepuscolari*, who undermine the traditional poetic self by immersing it in a residual reality corroded by irony and a sense of exhaustion. He champions instead a poetics *d’en bas*, where the poetic look abandons isolation and hovers down on the level of the most prosaic acts and situations, describing them in a language which, even when it betrays some bowings to traditional poetic register in terms of sentence structure (as the strong but expressive inversion ‘macellato bue’) is, as Lorenzini has rightly seen, ‘contenutisticamente non mediato’ and strongly innovative in the Italian situation of those years.<sup>9</sup>

This poetics is appropriately embodied in images of looking from down upwards, either when soldiers are weighted down by their marches as in ‘Durante una marcia’, or when they squat in the fields during exercise. The last tercet of ‘Ordine

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<sup>8</sup> Cary, 59.

sparso' describes one such moment, with the poet squatting in the fields and observing the terrain from this lowered perspective. It amounts to a programmatic statement of what the *Versi militari* are about:

E vedono il terreno oggi i miei occhi  
come artista non mai, credo, lo scorso.  
Così le bestie lo vedono forse. (51)

This is indeed the moment in the *Canzoniere* when the 'natura sostanzialmente erotica'<sup>10</sup> of Saba's relationship with the phenomenological world expresses itself for the first time with clarity and self-assurance. The lines quoted represent the fulfilment of a need for closer contact with instinctual life of which 'Glaucò' had given us a dramatisation in terms of opposition and distance. Saba momentarily accesses the dimension of the 'calda vita' which had often eluded his adolescent self.

The reasons for the unblocking of the condition of exclusion represented in the *Poesie dell'adolescenza* are related to the nature of the new situation in which Saba-protagonist finds himself. The various dynamics of isolation and distance, blocked desire and sense of guilt, that had contributed to his sense of not belonging, of being made of a 'strano legno', are obliterated by the rules of military life, which make belonging compulsory and personality differences irrelevant. Lavagetto has charted the variable distance in *Versi militari* between protagonist and peer group in relation to the use of pronouns which – ranging from the all-inclusive and levelling plural to a singular which both re-claims and suffers the poetic subject's separate individuality – 'rivela di volta in volta, e con assoluta sicurezza, i livelli di integrazione, la variabile distanza dalla comunità che raggiunge il protagonista dei *Versi militari*.'<sup>11</sup>

Lavagetto however does not dwell on the specifically gendered aspects of this episode of liberation and belonging. We have seen that already in the *Poesie dell'adolescenza* the sense of exclusion suffered by Saba in relation to the world of boys has many implications, of which the one related to the sense of male identity is crucial. In this respect the theme of liberation in *Versi militari* must be seen both generally, as an episode of integration into a community, and specifically as a moment of intimate contact and camaraderie with male peers absent in Saba's childhood and adolescence.

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<sup>9</sup> Niva Lorenzini, *La poesia italiana del Novecento*, Bologna: il Mulino, 1999, 90.

<sup>10</sup> Mengaldo, 192.

<sup>11</sup> Lavagetto, *La gallina di Saba*, 160.

Interestingly Saba's poetic innovations are particularly striking in the numerous descriptions of the male bodies with which he is constantly in close contact. The male body acquires a centrality which it did not have in the more thought- and emotion-based poetry of the *Poesie dell'adolescenza*, where the bodily and instinctive sphere was mainly referred to symbolically. Above all it appears as a solid and irreducible entity: marching, strained under strong weights, heavy with fatigue once the day is over. The close contact with the physicality of other beings is reflected by a widening of the vocabulary on the body and its lower functions, of which Italian poetry is traditionally particularly poor. Examples include 'mezza lingua' (44), 'spalle' (47), 'l'aperta bocca' (49), 'umor che suda' (50), 'fianchi' and 'natiche' (60). The tendency is also crucially reflected in Saba's renewed awareness of his own body, and particularly of its lower part. Lines from 'A un ufficiale' come to mind, where the poetic protagonist is struck by the sheer animal strength of his own legs: 'Equine gambe, coscie di possente/ mulo io scopro'(50).

Under the strain of military discipline male bodies can thus be reduced to their animal common denominators, like strength, fitness and stamina, hence also the recurrent comparisons with beasts of burden like oxen, donkeys and goats ('la pecora... che i ginocchi/ piega' in 'Ordine sparso', 51). In these circumstances actual contact between the individual bodies is kept to a minimum by military discipline and by one's focusing on the target of the day. But even in these regimented circumstances the figure which clearly hovers behind Saba's fellow recruits is the puer:

Da quel volto, da quelli atti spirava,  
giungendo con freschezze a me d'aurora,  
un non so che di fanciullesco ancora. (62)

This is particularly the case in moments of rest, when recruits' bodies come into closer contact through the kind of playful sexual wrestling we have analysed in the previous chapter. The most notable example is 'In cortile', where the mention of 'schiene' and 'petti' which 'cozzarono' contributes decisively to the balance that the poem strikes between a sense of airy lightness and the solidity of the soldiers' bodies:

In cortile quei due stavan soletti.  
Era l'alba con venti umidi e freschi.  
Mi piaceva guardar sui fanciulleschi  
volti il cupo turchino dei berretti;

quando l'un l'altro, dopo due sgambetti,  
fecero presentat'arm colla ramazza.  
Seguì una lotta ad una corsa pazza,  
colle schiene cozzarono e coi petti. (59)

Saba has a very keen eye for these moments when the lifting of discipline allows for a spontaneity revealing the more childish aspects of young men's personalities. A curious and tender episode is portrayed in 'Scherzo', with two soldiers dancing together during rest time:

Uno che col compagno ansante balla  
in mezzo al campo, in tenuta di tela,  
e pur anche ballando si querela  
che tutto di gli fan far zaino in spalla.... (66)

We find a similar scene in 'La fanfara', with the presence of music, of men dancing together, and the mention of 'la borraccia che sbatte sulle natiche' of the soldiers while they move:

Stuonano, questo sì, con abbastanza  
grazia, e con grazia dimenano i fianchi,  
gonfian le gote, soffiano in già stanchi  
corpi voglie, a cui cedono, di danza.

Ecco: alle coppie la borraccia sbatte  
sulle natiche, e il suol così è calpesto  
che nulla di più duro mai lo batte. (60)

Throughout the collection the grounding of experience at an elemental level – a downwards movement which pushes bodies to the ground – produces as a result a surging of puer moments dominated by levity, playfulness and states where reality and imagination merge.

This possibility stems from the fact that *Versi militari*, despite the martial title, is a collection about times of peace, and not times of war. The barracks routine on the one hand determines a constant emphasis on stereotypically male virtues and on the possible use of weapons and strength in the event of a war. But on the other hand, in times of peace the recruit is as removed from the reality of war as anybody else, with the difference that he constantly seems to be playing at it. Military routine and chores are represented as being so useless and repetitive that young recruits often indulge in larger-

than-life dreams in order to compensate for the dreariness of their day. In Sonnet 2 the discussion between Saba and his 'vicino armato' revolves around the dream of the 'Americhe lontane;/ dove c'è tanto vino e tanto pane,/ tanto oro per chi sa lavorare' (44). In 'Di sentinella alla bandiera' the interminable hours of night watch produce an *anamnesis* of childhood fantasies:

E mi par di seder proprio il quel canto  
di mia casa, fanciullo, in quelle ore,  
lunghe, a sognare in me un conquistatore. (67)

In Sonnet 7 Saba speculates what will stay with him of this experience in years to come, and the image he comes up with ('Io nel delirio qualche nome ancora/ ricorderò, qualche guerresco gioco', 49) is representative of his imbuing the world of *Versi militari* with the images of games and adventures which we have analysed in the last chapter, and of which he also makes abundant use in *Trieste e una donna*.

Despite *Versi militari's* particularly homogeneous physiognomy, some threads link its self-enclosed and all-male world to the other poetic nuclei of the *Canzoniere*. Lina, who had already fleetingly appeared in 'A Lina' in the *Poesie dell'adolescenza*, features in *Versi militari* as the distant female presence waiting in Trieste for the poet's return. Her character is at this stage very opaque. However the mentions of her at the beginning and toward the end of the series (in 'Durante una marcia' and 'Consolazione') link *Versi militari* to the following collections (*Casa e campagna* and *Trieste e una donna*), where Saba's marriage to her takes centre stage. But by far the most powerful reference to the lacerated inner situation from which military service offered Saba a momentary respite is contained in the poem 'Bersaglio':

Del mare sulle iridescenti arene,  
dove in trincee si ammucchiano, mi getto;  
e con una repressa ansia il grilletto  
premo. Va la terribile frustata

e una sagoma cade. Immaginata  
non ho in essa una più bella che buona,  
non una testa che porti corona,  
non il nemico che più mai non viene.

Se qui l'occhio non falla e il colpo è certo,  
egli è che nel bersaglio ognor figuro  
l'orrore che i miei occhi hanno sofferto.

Tutto quello che di deforme hanno veduto,  
di troppo ebraico, di troppo panciuto,  
di troppo lamentosamente impuro. (53)

The poem's target, and the words 'troppo ebraico' are in this respect unequivocal, is Saba's mother and the world she represented for him. In contrast to the emotionally opaque distancing from Rachele Coen's beliefs that we have witnessed in 'A mamma', here the condemnation explodes in the most aggressive tones.

The theme of separation from a destructive mother is expressed with a violence of imagery which makes the poem appear the transcription of the deepest, and largely unconscious, emotions informing these dynamics, rather than a more conventional rendering of the thought process accompanying them. And this will not be the last killing that Saba dramatises in his poetry. His next victim will be Lina, who in 'Carmen' (*Trieste e una donna*) elicits the confession: 'ho sognato pur io d'averti uccisa,/ per l'ebbrezza di piangere su di te' (96). In both cases Saba uses traditional poetic forms, but he pours in them an interest in psychological dynamics which make his poetic situations appear closer to the work of contemporary Austrian writers like Schnitzler or Roth than to that of any of his Italian counterparts. A closer look at 'Bersaglio' confirms that he was already, in 1908, a keen psychologist at a time when any notion of psychological realism and insight was absent, out of a mixture of ignorance and idealistic scorn, from the Italian cultural horizon<sup>12</sup>.

The poem speaks in fact from the outset of a 'repressa ansia', setting the scene for what is in reality the surfacing of unconscious material to the conscious mind through objectivation of an internal dynamic in an external symbolic situation. This 'repressa ansia' is particularly linked to the action of pulling the trigger, which can be seen as an image of phallic attack by the son against his mother's enduring presence. Let us not forget that the poetic subject acting in 'Bersaglio' is dressed up in the most stereotyped apparel of masculinity, guns and uniform included. The compulsive character of the action, or better of the desire which the substitutive action sublimates, is also stressed ('nel bersaglio *ognor* figuro'), as well as the profound disturbance which the existential nucleus in question caused Saba ('l'orrore che i miei occhi hanno sofferto').

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<sup>12</sup> For an account of the relationship between Italian intellectuals and psychoanalysis I refer to David, 25-73 in particular.

If there is psychological realism in terms of the description of the internal dynamic informing the poem, the action represented is in itself psychological, in that Saba presents it as a therapeutic and apotropaic act. The self-assuredness he experiences ('Se qui l'occhio non falla e il colpo è certo') derives from the symbolic character of the action performed, which *represents* the instinct of matricide, by representing it de-literalizes it, and thereby lifts the anxiety blocking its expression. The same happens in the episode of Saba killing Lina, with the element of dream translating an action which would be unbearable if expressed literally to a moment of liberation where the repressed desire is allowed to find a symbolic channel of expression. The key-word in the poem is the verb 'figurare', which implies the ability and need to visualise *figures* in one's imagination. It is this instinctive figurative and metaphorical capacity of the mind that Saba represents here, also implying a therapeutic and cognitive benefit in symbolic situations where the unconscious finds a way of expressing its ambiguous and destabilising contents.

## Between Two Worlds

The years between 1909 and 1912 are dominated in the *Canzoniere* by Saba's marriage to Lina, whose previously tenuous presence becomes the main focal point of *Casa e campagna* (1909-1910) and *Trieste e una donna* (1910-1912). *Casa e campagna* grows out of the brief rural idyll that the Sabas spent in their house in Montebello on the outskirts of Trieste (hence the title) and is the least tormented collection that the poet ever wrote. Within the *Canzoniere*'s rocky and meandering development it represents a moment of gratitude towards life which relegates Saba's personal anxieties to the background. This atmosphere of inner reconciliation is reflected in the poet's superior handling of metrically looser and longer poetic forms (the most renowned examples of which are respectively 'La capra' and 'A mia moglie'), which as we have seen had not been congenial to him in the lacerated setting of his youth.

The change is apparent in 'A mia moglie', one of Saba's most famous poems, where he celebrates his wife as an icon of primordial femininity, comparing her to a 'bianca pollastra', a 'gravida giovenca', a 'lunga cagna' and a 'pavida coniglia' and

seeing her embodied in 'tutti i sereni animali/ che avvicinano a Dio' (74). 'A mia moglie' continues the aesthetic *d'en bas* which Saba had inaugurated in *Versi militari*, but with a very remarkable difference. Whereas the circumstances of *Versi militari* had led to the discovery of the male body, and of an accompanying repertoire of vocabulary and images, in 'A mia moglie' Lina is exalted as a symbol of maternal fertility and not as an object of desire, with a corresponding low emphasis on her body.

Cary rightly observes that 'what is being celebrated here above all is Lina the mother, the carrier of Linuccia, the mothering spouse of Saba himself. Nothing could be further from the erotic and sensual than "A mia moglie". There is no real reason within the poem itself why it could not just as well be called "A mamma".'<sup>13</sup> Saba shows in *Storia e cronistoria* an awareness of the peculiar psychological tone of the poem: 'se un bambino potesse sposare e scrivere una poesia per sua moglie, scriverebbe questa'.<sup>14</sup> The image of Lina therefore becomes an icon of femininity primarily as a positive embodiment of motherhood which acts in Saba's mythobiography as a counter-pole to his mother's disruptive presence. Despite the centrality of 'A mia moglie' in the Sabian canon, for the sake of our argument it is important to stress that the centre of the poet's erotic attention remains anchored in male-male relationships but it does not appear to become integrated in his marriage.

The short idyllic narrative sketched in *Casa e campagna* flows directly into *Trieste e una donna*, whose backbone consists of the chronicle of Saba's marriage crisis culminating in the closing adultery sequence of 'Nuovi versi alla Lina'. *Trieste e una donna* is a far more multifarious collection in that Saba weaves together new developments of his poetic horizon with the main autobiographical narrative of his marriage. As the title of the collection makes clear, there is a constant double focus, a diastole and systole, shifting from the enclosed space of family drama to the openness of the landscape of Trieste. Trieste comes fully into its own as a protagonist of Saba's poetic world only in this collection, since the more fabulous and orientalisng town of his adolescent years failed to achieve such prominence in view of the drastic selective criteria shaping the canonical version of the *Poesie dell'adolescenza*.

To tackle the meaning of this oscillation we must for a start clarify some aspects of the nature and implications of marriage for Saba. His marriage crisis is in fact

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<sup>13</sup> Cary, 68.

<sup>14</sup> Saba, *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, 142.

compounded by a number of factors which go beyond the issues of jealousy and betrayal, though the treatment of such feelings is indeed prominent in many poems in the collection. The crisis affects Saba's attempt at and hope of reaching through marriage and the creation of a family an integration of the destructive and centripetal aspects of his personality. In this perspective the potential role of marriage shows similarities with his military experience, since in both cases the container of an institution was supposed to redeem the poet of his chronic feeling of estrangement vis-à-vis any sort of community. The two experiences also parallel each other in their awakening aspects of Saba's male personality which remain somehow problematic for him: in *Versi militari* the capacity to mingle and feel comfortable with other young men his age, in *Trieste e una donna* the roles of husband and father being equally problematic in view of his dysfunctional family background.

The outcome of *Versi militari* was partially positive because in the context of military life a deprivation of freedom resulted in a prohibition *not* to belong and participate, the diametrically opposite situation to that which had plagued Saba in his youth. In *Trieste e una donna* instead the poetic protagonist soon comes to associate marriage and its responsibilities with a sense of despair about the inevitable contracting of his life-horizon. He describes this situation in 'Dopo una passeggiata', where the Sabas appear as 'Un marito che già ostenta un rimpianto/ di libertà, la sua moglie gelosa' (118). If the climate of psychological breakthrough in *Versi militari* had also led to the discovery of a male muse, the experience of marriage is on the contrary felt by Saba as detrimental to his creativity. The final lines of 'Dopo una passeggiata' unequivocally express this conclusion:

non v'ha, dico, una cosa  
che dai molti distingua, amica, noi,

noi che rechiamo in cuore  
i nostri due avversi destini  
d'arte e d'amore.

The traditional tie between love and poetry is put in question. A similar situation also appears in 'La moglie' (a more emotionally cold title in comparison to the 'A mia moglie' of *Casa e campagna*), where Lina is represented complaining to her husband about his dark and silent moods:

'Quanto, quanto m'annoï',

io le rispondo fra me stesso. E penso:  
Come farà il mio angelo a capire  
che non v'ha cosa al mondo che partire  
con essa io non vorrei, tranne quest'una,  
questa muta tristezza; e che i miei mali  
sono miei, sono all'anima mia sola;  
non li cedo per moglie e per figliola,  
non ne faccio ai miei cari parti uguali. (109)

A growing sense of incompatibility between love and art traverses the whole collection as one of its main themes, with Saba-protagonist ever more ready to carry the burden of his poetic gift, and turn upside down the pattern described in 'Glauco', where desire for isolation had appeared under a psychologically unfavourable light.

The progressive and polemical strengthening of a sense of individual destiny, through which Saba starts freeing himself from the burdens of his upbringing, is a phenomenon which continues well beyond the phase of his poetry which we are addressing. But in cultural terms the beginning of this revolt can be given a date, and bears witness to Saba's enthusiastic discovery and assimilation of Nietzsche. Saba probably read Nietzsche extensively only in 1916-17, but he was already familiar with various aspects of the philosopher's work from the time of his Florentine sojourn of 1905-6, when the debate on Nietzsche was flaring up in Italy, particularly in the journal *Leonardo*. This is borne out by the relevance of Nietzschean themes and images in his work in the period between 1905 and 1912.<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche works for Saba as the most important 'cure' or antidote against the stifling and conservative upbringing he suffered at his mother's hands and becomes, in Luperini's words, his 'maestro di gioia'.<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche also plays a more specific role in *Trieste e una donna* in view of his anti-woman polemic, which is particularly prominent in *Also sprach Zarathustra*, where it appears together with a corresponding praise of the figure of the (male) friend clearly tinged with homoerotic undertones<sup>17</sup>.

The second cultural influence characterising this stage of Saba's output is that of Otto Weininger, and particularly of his notorious text *Geschlecht und Charakter* (1903). The book only appeared in Italian in 1912, but Saba had also in this case had occasion to become familiar with the debate surrounding its publication in German

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<sup>15</sup> For a reconstruction of the Saba/Nietzsche relationship in this period see Tordi, "Le gocce d'oro" di Saba e Nietzsche', 315-25.

<sup>16</sup> Luperini, 174.

<sup>17</sup> See the sections 'Vom Freunde' and 'Von alten und jungen Weiblein', in F. Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, VI.1, 67-69 and 80-82 respectively.

while in Florence.<sup>18</sup> The reception of Weininger in Italy was mainly concerned with the text's overtly misogynistic polemic and Saba, who was in the same years having problems in his marriage, echoed the acrimonious tones of the debate in *Trieste e una donna* and even more aggressively in *Sette novelle* (1912-13). Cavagnon however suggests that it is misleading to assess Weininger's impact on Saba only in terms of the former's discourse on women, and wonders what Saba made of Weininger's theory of bisexuality, according to which all individuals are placed along a continuum of desire.<sup>19</sup>

Cavagnon is the only scholar who dwells on this point, trying to rescue Saba's reception of Weininger from the exclusively heterosexual perspective from which it has been analysed, such as that of Rella, who also speculates about Saba's reception of *Geschlecht und Charakter*, but reaches the incomprehensible conclusion that 'di Weininger.... nel testo [di Saba] sembra essere filtrata soltanto una generica misoginia, senza alcun rapporto con la complessa teoria bisessuale weiningeriana.'<sup>20</sup> Such a statement relies of course on an interpretation of *Trieste e una donna* in exclusively heterosexual terms, as well as on the excision of the *Canzoniere's* previous and subsequent homoerotic narrative. It seems very unlikely that somebody who, like Saba, was pursuing in his poetry a growing understanding of his desire for other men, would not have been profoundly struck by Weininger's approach to male same-sex desire.

Not only is *Geschlecht und Charakter* barely comprehensible unless we grasp the (rather straightforward) theory of universal bisexuality underpinning it; it also devotes a chapter to a specific analysis of both homosexuality and pederasty.<sup>21</sup> As Sengoopta has demonstrated, Weininger's approach to bisexuality and homosexuality is influenced not only by medical discourse of the time, but also by the theories of the pioneers of homosexual liberation, such as Karl Ulrichs and Magnus Hirschfeld.<sup>22</sup> Indeed his treatment of same-sex desire reaches, on a number of substantial points, well beyond their emancipatory but still pathologizing discourse, and probably constitutes the

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<sup>18</sup> The debate on Weininger's text was opened in the magazine *Leonardo* by Prezzolini with the article 'Il nemico della donna' in 1906, while Saba was in Florence. See: Alberto Cavaglioni, 'Saba e Weininger', in *Umberto Saba, Trieste e la cultura mitteleuropea*, 269-278, in part. 270-71, and Cavaglioni, 'Alta femminilità e virilità abietta', in *Atti del convegno internazionale 'Il punto su Saba'* (Trieste, 25-27 marzo 1984), Trieste: Lint, 1985, 231-38, in part. 234-35.

<sup>19</sup> Cavagnon, 'Saba e Weininger', 275.

<sup>20</sup> Rella, 292.

<sup>21</sup> See the chapter 'Homosexualität und Pederastie', in Otto Weininger, *Geschlecht und Charakter: Eine prinzipielle Untersuchung*, Wien und Leipzig: Braumüller, 1912, 53-62.

<sup>22</sup> Chandak Sengoopta, *Otto Weininger: Sex, Science and Self in Imperial Vienna*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000, 87-103.

one strand of Weininger's thought which can be rescued and taken seriously by the modern reader:

There is no better evidence for this assertion [that Weininger's response to scientific literature was often critical and well reasoned] than his analysis of homosexuality, which used biomedical discourse to affirm a distinct homosexual identity while rejecting the narrow pathological perspective of contemporary physicians and medically-trained emancipationists like Magnus Hirschfeld.<sup>23</sup>

For a homosexual Italian reader at the beginning of the century, as Saba found himself to be, the reading of Weininger would have therefore acted as a compendium of the most advanced and politically aware body of literature on homosexuality at the time. It is impossible to say how much he specifically accepted of Weininger's theory of sexuality, but we are about to see that in his output from *Trieste e una donna* onwards recurrent bursts of misogyny cannot be seen as exclusively related to Saba's fraught relationship with women, but must be analysed with an awareness of their dependency and interconnection with other strands of his poetic autobiography, and principally with an increasing visibility of same-sex desires.

With this in mind, let us now move to the second focus of the collection, the one revolving around the figure of Trieste. The inclusion of numerous city poems endows the collection with a second spatial dimension outside the confinement of the home and family life and the crisis unfolding there. Only in two cases ('Dopo una passeggiata' and 'Più soli') do Lina and Saba appear together in the urban landscape; otherwise the poet experiences the city on his own, projecting onto it urges that remain unfulfilled within the family context. The opposition is made denser by Saba's tendency to give it also a gendered aspect, since Trieste is associated with the male pole and more specifically with the puer. It is hailed as 'un ragazzaccio aspro e vorace' ('Trieste', 89), or as a 'nova città,/ che tiene d'una maschia adolescenza' ('Verso casa', 90). The association of Trieste with male adolescents is not limited to the epithets describing the city, but involves a separate set of inner experiences alternative to family life of which the figure of the boy is the main symbolic referent.

In fact *Trieste e una donna* is a particularly complex collection to the extent that it shows a poetic subject who is tackling at once the unravelling of his marriage crisis and the growing confrontation with his homoerotic sensibility. Scholars have not

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<sup>23</sup> Sengoopta, 101.

been sensitive to how these two dimensions interact throughout the collection and have concentrated exclusively on the marriage crisis, seen as a product of Saba's allegedly disturbed sensibility toward women.<sup>24</sup> But *Trieste e una donna* also features three poems centred on boys where Saba, by developing new aspects of this figure, also brings to the fore urges of his inner world which he had not, up to this point, fully manifested. We shall start from the first of these three major *canzoni*, 'Il giovanetto':

A mezza estate su noi si riversa  
la bora, e soffia nell'aperto prato  
dove giochi, ed il florido incarnato  
del viso e le tue nude gambe sferza.

Tu stai sul prato come un dio in esiglio  
sta sulla terra. E, chi ti ammira, l'occhio  
non abbassi, lo guardi con fierezza,  
come un nemico, in volto;  
mentre al compagno nella finta guerra  
parli sommesso e ridere t'ascolto.  
La guerra è intorno ad una palla enorme,  
che si lancia col piede;  
ed il rado passante, ecco, ti vede  
svolgere in essa le tue snelle forme.  
Scende intanto la sera, e tinge in rosa  
le nubi, e a quanto del tuo corpo è ignudo  
fugacemente intona il suo colore.

La sua bellezza con la tua si sposa;  
e una malinconia quasi amorosa  
mi distilla nel cuore. (104)

This poem represents the first instance of a way of dealing with boy figures to which Saba will recur very often, and which remains fairly unvaried throughout the first part of the *Canzoniere*, not only in *Trieste e una donna* but also in *La serena disperazione*, *Cose leggere e vaganti* and *L'amorosa spina*. Abandoning the dialogical structure of 'Glauco', he turns to a poetic mode which lays greater emphasis on narrativity and description, a feature which runs throughout *Trieste e una donna* and contributes to the firmer anchoring of all poetic figures of the collection to a recognisable and localized phenomenological reality. In poems on boys the poetic protagonist's voice is silenced, and his emotions are not expressed in the first person, but rather encapsulated in the

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<sup>24</sup> For this interpretation see: Guido Morpurgo-Tagliabue, 'Saba, e i vizi della natura', 295-315 and Anna Maria Pavanello Accerboni, 'Il "mito personale" di Umberto Saba tra poesia e psicanalisi', 317-341, both in *Atti del convegno internazionale 'Il punto su Saba'*.

images used. The emergence of a new set or cluster of images becomes therefore symptomatic of his exploring the various psychological aspects which are projected onto boy figures, without having to use the more talkative first person mode dominant in poems about his marriage crisis.

Thematically 'Il giovanetto' inaugurates in the *Canzoniere* the celebration of the pneumatic aspect of puer psychology, which I have already discussed in the previous chapter and which develops its lineage in later poems like 'Il garzone con la carriola' (*La serena disperazione*) and 'Dall'erta' (*Ultime cose*) where the boys' light-footed movement develops into an ascensional flight. The central image here is that of wind, with boys appearing to move *with* the wind and *into* the wind, as if their bodies were animated by the same energy of the natural element. Let us notice however that what Saba learnt in writing the *Versi militari* has not been lost, since these bodies maintain a sense of solidity no matter how they also seem effortlessly to harmonise with the wind and the golden colour of sunset. Nudity is mentioned twice ('le tue gambe nude', 'quanto del tuo corpo è ignudo'), a courageous choice when we consider that Saba's contemporary vocabulary about Lina is of an altogether different kind, with no emphasis on the body at all.

More crucially in relation to Saba's expression of his homoeroticism, the sense of exhilaration produced by the vision of the puer is unequivocally stated when he is likened to a 'dio in esiglio' and when the image of his 'bellezza' is chosen to close the poem. In comparison to 'Glauco' this text reveals its homoerotic source of inspiration in a more direct way. Saba however is still treading a very fine line. We are faced with verses in which any direct expression of homoerotic desire is eschewed, while at the same time being embedded in the growing god-like qualities which the boy displays. Also, the expression of Saba's homoeroticism must be seen not only in relation to a single poem but also picking up clues which gain in significance only when they are brought into relation to other texts. In this case the central expression is the feeling of 'malinconia quasi amorosa' on which the poem closes.

The expression is in itself rather harmless and apparently only reflects a traditionally expressed feeling of *Sehnsucht* in the face of the fleeting glory of youth. But the use that Saba makes of it is highly idiosyncratic, as if he were pouring into a traditionally recognisable mould a complex of emotions for which he will later find more precise means of expression. In *Storia e cronistoria* he dwells on this concept

(which also appears in the later poem ‘La malinconia amorosa’): “‘La malinconia amorosa’ propone un tema che più tardi Saba allargherà a significati universali. È la stesura giovanile della “Brama” (160). It is a very revealing statement, since ‘brama’ is a term that Saba starts using in his psychoanalytical phase, and particularly in *Cuor morituro* (1925-30) to name poetically an instinct akin to the Freudian concept of libido. If we took ‘Il giovanetto’ on its own we would be at pains trying to elicit an explicitly erotic component in the ‘malinconia amorosa’, yet it is fundamental for our argument that, although still groping for the right vocabulary to express his urges, Saba introduces this concept in a poem about a boy.

The second puer poem we need to turn our attention to is ‘Il fanciullo’:

Con i miei occhi non mai sazi di luce,  
tutto, nel letto, il lungo estivo giorno  
rivivo; e d’un fanciullo oggi è il ricordo  
che a non chiuderli ancora mi seduce.

Come d’un balzo arrovesciata preda,  
nell’ora che più l’uomo affretta il passo,  
di sé ingombrava un angolo di via.  
Non cercava il suo gioco compagnia;  
ed il suo gioco era trarre dal sasso  
schegge e scintille a colpi di scalpello.  
Io pensavo Alcibiade monello,  
che in altro tempo e più gentil contrada,  
non guarda se di lì altri lo scacci,  
non teme il carrettiere con la frusta  
alzata contro i suoi nudi polpacci;  
ma si getta bocconi nella strada,  
e ride, ed i cavalli fa impennare.  
Senza un grido la folla il suo daffare  
lascia, e par solo quel periglio veda.  
Il bel fanciullo la sua gloria gusta.

Nel chiaro giorno, se ho vagato assai,  
poco rinvenni di più fraterno e grato  
d’un fanciullo, nei cui gesti ho ascoltato  
i miei pensieri reconditi e gai. (106)

This is the first poem in which Saba describes what I have called in the previous chapter the mytheme of the *fanciullo chiassoso*, where the tricksterish and subversive component of the puer’s psychology comes to the fore. There is no need to dwell further on dynamics we have already explored, such as the tendency of boys to take possession of public spaces and disrupt their normal use. But let us notice that the reminiscence of

the scene in question happens while Saba is in bed, thereby turning it in a kind of masturbatory fantasy. At the level of the images used, the emphasis is on the lower part of the body ('i suoi nudi polpacci') and on intensive body movement ('si getta bocconi nella strada'), the boy's image seducing the poet in a light of erotic reminiscence.

The tone of erotic abandonment signals a much improved psychological relationship between Saba and the puer. The last lines make clear that the poet is not only seduced by the glowing image of the boy but also identifies with him. He moreover chooses as the first instance in which his identification with the puer is made clear an episode where the boy is celebrated in his most subversive and anti-social traits, thus reinforcing the sense of his growing impatience toward socially dominant institutions and behaviours. The lines 'Io pensavo Alcibiade monello,/ che in altro tempo e più gentil contrada' unobtrusively weave into the text an element of cultural criticism toward the conventionality and stiffness of the historical present, while also stressing the level of community-based aggression that puer behaviours can unleash ('non teme il carrettiere con la frusta').

Such new-found identification with the figure of the boy is carried by two interwoven elements: a franker exploration by the poet of his homoerotic sensibility and also a growing distance towards institutions and mental habits whose main cultural role is to stifle the puer's lightness and overflowing 'brama'. The sense of fraternity which closes the poem ('poco rinvenni più fraterno e grato/ d'un fanciullo') is a new and strong bond because it is not forced from above downwards as in military life. It is a spiritual affinity with the puer world which Saba, now less in need of an institution to guarantee him a sense of belonging, starts to recognise and accept.

The third poem we are concerned with is 'Il fanciullo appassionato'. Saba glosses it in *Storia e cronistoria*, asserting that in the boy in question 'il poeta non vede, come in Glauco, un'immagine di quello che egli avrebbe voluto essere nella sua adolescenza, ma un riflesso di quello che veramente fu'.<sup>25</sup> The boy shows indeed a number of traits which characterise him as a *fanciullo pensoso* rather than as a *fanciullo chiassoso*. Still, as I have pointed out in the previous chapter, the two manifestations should be seen as the introverted and extroverted aspect of the same figure rather than as two mutually exclusive types.

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<sup>25</sup> Saba, *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, 160-61.

Many details in the texture of the poem confirm this. The boy is lonely but does not suffer from loneliness, being free to wander around like a ‘bestia troppo in libertà lasciata’. His main traits are eager curiosity (‘tutto esplora, il nuovo/ porto, la diga’) and the intentness with which he carries on his activities. This lonely but rich and exciting universe is represented as a fluid and carefree dimension opposed to the enclosed and controlled spaces of social institutions: ‘Anche gli è a noia la casa paterna,/ un carcere la scuola’. In the closing third stanza we then find Saba’s first description of the sentiment of *pothos* which is associated with the puer both in his introverted and his extroverted manifestations:

Meglio in un lungo avventuroso sogno  
il suo ben corrucciato occhio s’interna.

.....

è appena un’ombra vana  
che insegue, un indistinto ancor bisogno  
di esplorare più addentro che la brulla  
collina, e il porto, e le lunghe vie remote. (115)

As I have already pointed out, this ending, particularly through the use of the verb ‘internarsi’ and of the adverb ‘addentro’, perfectly renders the double implication of the idea of travelling and exploration, which apply both to external geographical expansion and to its inner cognitive experience. The fact that Saba identifies traits of his adolescent self with this boy (‘Ha qualcosa di me, di me lontano/ nel tempo’), is the most explicit reassessment of the emotional predicament he had described in the *Poesie dell’adolescenza*. Retrospectively his youthful isolation is seen not only in terms of his complexes and family history but also as a private space free from the constraints of authority and cultural conditioning. The rediscovery of the positive components of the mytheme of the *fanciullo pensoso* leads in fact to the election of the ‘cantuccio a me fatto’ (‘Trieste’, 89), which becomes an important image of his poetic biography from this time onwards.

These three poems on boys can be grouped together not only in relation to their content and image repertoire but also in terms of their metrics. They all are *canzoni* made up of three stanzas, a form much shorter than the one previously used by Saba with mixed results in ‘A mamma’ and ‘La cappella chiusa’. It is undeniable that the *canzoni* from *Trieste e una donna* belong to a different group than their predecessors. In

particular, whereas the earlier ones were rather effusive and loosely organised, these later ones show a very tight internal organisation: the first stanza introduces the situation, the second (and longest) constitutes the narrative core, while the third (the shortest, between one and three lines) closes with a usually speculative comment.

The final section of *Trieste e una donna* stands out from the rest of the collection in a number of respects. It consists of fifteen poems grouped under the heading 'Nuovi versi alla Lina' charting the final and most painful part of Saba's marriage crisis. Though most of the feelings described are anticipated in the rest of the collection, in 'Nuovi versi alla Lina' Trieste recedes into the background, and with it most of the narrative and realistic vein that Saba had experimented with so successfully. The final sequence looks back to a poetic mode reminiscent of the *Poesie dell'adolescenza* to the extent that it focuses almost exclusively on the poet's feelings in a much more effusive manner in comparison to the mix between external observations and laconically expressed inner resonance which characterise the *canzoni* on boys. Saba, who at this stage must have been aware of the risks of letting his talkative ego take the upper hand, opts in eight poems out of fifteen for a shorter form consisting of three regularly rhyming quatrains. This links the collection with the following one, *La serena disperazione*, in which the loose *canzone* dominant in *Trieste e una donna* is abandoned in favour of regular and short strophic forms (rhyming tercets and couplets). The sequence therefore acts as a junction recapitulating the general predicament of *Trieste e una donna* while also anticipating future developments.

'Nuovi versi alla Lina' is the apex of Saba's marriage crisis, but also takes into its stride the counter dynamics related to the city and same-sex desire, bringing the two strands together in the last text of the series. This poem introduces the homoerotic theme within the dominant context of married life in a way specular to how 'Bersaglio' had brought back the presence of the mother in the otherwise all-male context of *Versi militari*. It is an organisational device that Saba uses often in order to always preserve the element of dialectic and interrelation between the various worlds making up the totality of his experience. This final poem reads:

Un marinaio di noi mi parlava,  
di noi fra un ritornello di taverna.  
Sotto l'azzurra blusa una fraterna  
pena a me l'uguagliava.

La sua storia d'amore a me narrando,  
sparger lo vidi una lacrima sola.  
Ma una lacrima d'uomo, una, una sola,  
val tutto il vostro pianto.

'Quell'uomo ed uno come te, ma come  
posson sedere assieme all'osteria?'  
Ed anche per dir male, Lina mia,  
delle povere donne. (137)

On a first reading the poem stands out because of Saba's expressions of misogyny, both in the assertion that a man's tear is much worthier than women's allegedly more copious outbursts and in the startling final couplet with its mixture of resignation, irony and biting complacency, but it is equally important to stress that not all the negative feelings described here are reducible to a misogynistic mind-set.

The poem in my view revolves around the fact that Lina shows surprise and disapproval at the fact that her husband might find a common sailor a suitable companion to share his feelings. Her question reveals a sense of class-consciousness and decorum which Saba abhors. The detail is striking also because a main theme of *Trieste e una donna* is the celebration of humble characters, normal people of all classes and professions with whose destiny Saba-protagonist closely identifies. This ethos is stated in an almost programmatic way in 'Città vecchia':

Qui prostituta e marinaio, il vecchio  
che bestemmia, la femmina che bega,  
il dragone che siede alla bottega  
del friggitore,  
la tumultuante giovane impazzita  
d'amore,  
sono tutte creature della vita  
e del dolore;  
s'agita in esse, come in me, il Signore.

Qui degli umili sento in compagnia  
il mio pensiero farsi  
più puro dove più turpe è la vita. (91)

In *Un marinaio di noi mi parlava* therefore Lina is the guardian not only of the domestic dimension but also of a set of cultural conventions that run counter to Saba's beliefs. Her role seems to become conflated with the figure of the poet's mother, who likewise in *Ernesto* will act as the stern guardian of bourgeois decorum, particularly in relation to her son's propensity to seek intercourse with men of the lower classes.

The very place in which the poem is set is symbolic of the breaking down of barriers and conventions which has become at this stage a crucial concern of Saba's. *Taverne*, *osterie* and *caffè* become in fact recurrent in his poetry from *Trieste e una donna* onward, as symbolic places where individuals otherwise separated by social differences come together on the same level. This happens in 'L'osteria "All'isoletta"', where people from the Balkans and Trieste, Christians and Jews, meet creating a humble 'paradiso' of joy and festivity (153). The same threshold and barrier-breaking quality is celebrated in 'Caffè Tergeste', with a particular emphasis on the political, cultural and social divisions between Italians and Slav peoples:

Caffè di ladri, di baldracche covo,  
 io soffermi ai tuoi tavoli il martirio,  
 lo soffermi a formarmi un cuore nuovo.

.....

Caffè di plebe, dove un dì celavo  
 la mia faccia, con gioia oggi ti guardo.  
 E tu concili l'italo e lo slavo,

a tarda notte, lungo il tuo bigliardo. (163)

By transporting Lina into a similar setting in *Un marinaio di noi mi parlava*, Saba is therefore staging a confrontation between what she stands for and asks of him and the promiscuous dimension that he has solitarily explored in parallel to their crisis throughout *Trieste e una donna*. Such a face-to-face encounter between the two worlds is the only one in the collection, since otherwise the pole revolving around Lina and the one about Trieste are kept quite separate. But the move is ingenious, particularly because it both clinches the *dénouement* of the marriage crisis and anticipates the settings of 'L'osteria "All'isoletta"' and 'Caffè Tergeste', where the domestic dimension has totally disappeared and Saba looks for other means and places to fulfil his need for integration and participation.

Crucially, *Un marinaio di noi mi parlava* also testifies to the sexual and gendered aspect which these dynamics exude for Saba. Despite the fact that the poet and the sailor are brought together by their disappointed love for a woman, the poem also functions as a triangulation between Saba, Lina as an object of heterosexual desire, and the sailor as a focus of homoerotic attention. Sailors, or a sailor-like appearance, are in the *Canzoniere* an icon of homoerotic longing, starting with this poem down to the

'marinaio... quasi ancor giovanetto' of 'Il canto di un mattino' (225), to the 'bel marinaretto' and the 'divino mozzo' of 'La casa della mia nutrice' (315, 316).<sup>26</sup> The aggression toward Lina is therefore in part a refusal of the responsibilities and conventionality of family life, but also a distancing from heterosexual desire. At the end of *Trieste e una donna* we are left with a poetic subject whose attempt to integrate himself sexually, socially and existentially into a conventional world has partially failed. The distress and torment accompanying this failure cannot however hide the fact that a parallel exploration of a different set of needs has also taken place. This second thread gives rise to a number of poems significant both in terms of their articulate portrayal of various aspects of the boy figure, and in their establishing a homoerotic poetic self all the more poignant since Saba's attempt at heterosexual marriage appears to put him into a *cul de sac*.

In *Trieste e una donna* we also witness for the first time a phenomenon which will constitute a leitmotif of this study, and that is the specifically homoerotic perspective through which Saba assimilates cultural materials of various kinds. Already veiled in Nietzsche, and fully blown in Weininger, Saba finds a two-edge polemic which includes an idealisation of male bonds to the detriment of heterosexual attachments. This pattern is used by him to articulate his deep-seated fear of being emasculated by women (which springs from his traumatic relationship with his mother, but also significantly overshadows his marriage with Lina), and his frustrated longing for male bonds. In this phase Nietzsche and Weininger are also crucial in that they conceptualise love for women and love for men in terms of harsh opposition and incompatibility, with correspondingly different value judgements. But whereas in their writings such propositions are placed in the context of a theoretical discussion of relationships between the sexes, Saba as a poet is affected by them to the extent that they allow him to articulate the *emotions* that, because of his past, he attaches to the two kinds of love. In other words, they are consistent with the psychological background of this particular phase of his poetry.

Once the intensity of the marriage crisis abates, Lina recedes in the background and Saba's poetry abandons its most virulently misogynist tones. In his late work (for

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<sup>26</sup> This applies to poems included in the canon. The fascination with sailors however dates back to Saba's earliest poetic attempts; see for instance 'Addio alla spiaggia', a youthful poem present in the *Canzoniere* 1921 and later excluded, where 'I sogni di lasciva/ adolescenza' are awakened by the bustling and colour of Trieste's port and in particular by 'i forti figli, /scalzi sugli ardui ponti dei navigli' (736).

instance in ‘Donna’ from *Parole*) he will come to an explicit reconciliation with Lina and with the feminine in general, also confessing the level of anxiety which had previously characterised his dealings with women. But in this earlier phase love for women and love for men appear as antagonistic, partly through the conceptual mediation of Nietzsche and Weininger, but principally by their being embedded in the more general climate of *ambivalenza affettiva* which becomes a hallmark of the protagonist’s way of relating to the world. The term *ambivalenza affettiva* is used by Saba to signal the divided and oppositional psychological state which is hinted at since the earliest stage of his poetry, and which he articulates in the dichotomic structure with which we are by now familiar. In *Trieste e una donna* this state of dissension between two worlds, which is a dissension of the poetic protagonist with himself, a state of psychological splitting, explodes and leads to the acrimonious confrontation culminating in *Un marinaio di noi mi parlava*. Despite Saba’s reaching by the end of the collection a greater articulation of and identification with same-sex desire, this underlying state of dissension is not overcome, and creates a deadlock situation which permeates the concluding section of the *Canzoniere*’s first volume.

## The Broken Vessel

The final part of the *Canzoniere*’s first volume centres on the three collections *La serena disperazione* (1913-1915), *Cose leggere e vaganti* (1920) and *L’amorosa spina* (1920). Lavagetto speaks in relation to this section of the book of an ‘abbassamento di temperatura’,<sup>27</sup> in that Saba’s life appears to have lost an emotional centre and the poet delves into affects and situations he had previously explored, albeit transposing them into an ostensibly much lighter atmosphere. This is paralleled by a return, anticipated in ‘Nuovi versi alla Lina’, to very tight strophic forms, particularly the *canzonetta*, whose insistent and polished musicality defines this phase of Saba’s poetry up to *Preludio e canzonette* (1922-1923). Such closed metric forms are seen by Lavagetto as ‘una serie di scelte formali scopertamente apotropaiche’<sup>28</sup> through which Saba transposes to a world of levity and musicality a set of inner tensions accumulated through the years and left

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<sup>27</sup> Lavagetto, ‘Introduzione’, xxxvi.

pending after the crisis of *Trieste e una donna*. Cary concurs in speaking of the use of the *canzonetta* as an ‘artificially induced perspective’ and a ‘cooling device’<sup>29</sup> which allows the poet to fit within an impersonal set of rules a very fluid and opaque emotional state.

The emotional ambivalence springing from the two dimensions confronted in *Trieste e una donna* remains an underlying element of disturbance, whose potential downward pull is exorcised through a repeated evocation of light elements like clouds, balls, birds and young girls. These come to constitute an external universe of ‘cose leggere e vaganti’ which cover the abyss of a state of inner dissension manifested by the numerous oxymoronic expressions favoured by Saba in this phase right from the very titles of the collections (*La gioiosa disperazione*, *L’amorosa spina*).

The overall opacity of this phase does not preclude the presence of a number of individually stunning poems. In *La serena disperazione*, which remains closer to the mode of *Trieste e una donna*, Saba produces a number of masterpieces about his favourite city spaces, such as ‘L’osteria “All’Isoletta”’, ‘Al Panopticum’, ‘La ritirata in piazza Aldrovandi a Bologna’ and ‘Caffè Tergeste’. There are also memorable poems on boys (‘Il garzone con la carriola’, ‘Guido’ and ‘Fanciulli al bagno’ in *Cose leggere e vaganti*) and a significant retrospective admission of the importance of a homoerotic attachment to ‘un altro ragazzino’ in his adolescence (‘Un ricordo’: ‘che un’amizizia (seppi poi) non era,/ era quello un amore’, 152). However these poems appear in a static emotional climate where Saba seems to be recapitulating and refining rather than entering new territory. The novelty of these years could be represented by his *innamoramento* for the young girls Paola and Chiaretta, who are important presences in his poetry in the early 1920s. However these relationships appear to act primarily as an occasion for Saba to vent his sadistic tendencies, although these are veiled by the light musicality, as when he imagines himself as a ‘falchetto’ and the girl as a ‘colomba’ (200), or in the ninth poem of *L’amorosa spina* where he turns himself into a satyr-figure biting his beloved. The world of Paola and Chiaretta marks a parenthesis in the *Canzoniere* which will be opened and closed without significant future developments.<sup>30</sup>

There is a poem which however stands out amongst all others for its being outside the universe of lightness which Saba shaped for himself in these years, and

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<sup>28</sup> Lavagetto, *La gallina di Saba*, 37.

<sup>29</sup> Cary, 97.

which dramatically clinches the emotional and psychological situation on which the whole first volume of the *Canzoniere* closes. The text in question is ‘In riva al mare’, the last of *L’amorosa spina* but placed prominently outside the sequence of the preceding twelve untitled rhyming poems, a position which also made it the closing poem of the 1921 *Canzoniere*:

Eran le sei del pomeriggio, un giorno  
chiaro festivo. Dietro al Faro, in quelle  
parti ove s’ode beatamente il suono  
d’una squilla, la voce d’un fanciullo  
che gioca in pace intorno alle carcasse  
di vecchie navi, presso all’ampio mare  
solo seduto; io giunsi, se non erro,  
a un culmine del mio dolore umano.

Tra i sassi che prendevo per lanciare  
nell’onda (ed una galleggiante trave  
era il bersaglio), un cocchio ho rinvenuto,  
un bel cocchio marrone, un tempo gaia  
utile forma nella cucinetta,  
con le finestre aperte al sole e al verde  
della collina. E fino a questo un uomo  
può assomigliarsi, angosciosamente.

Passò una barca con la vela gialla,  
che di giallo tingeva il mare sotto;  
e il silenzio era estremo. Io della morte  
non desiderio provai, ma vergogna  
di non averla ancora unica eletta,  
d’amare più di lei io qualche cosa  
che sulla superficie della terra  
si muove, e illude col soave riso. (220)

Saba chooses the figure of a boy to close the first volume of his book, and in so doing he connects circularly with the opening poem ‘Ammonizione’, which had a ‘baldo giovane’ (17) as its protagonist. He thereby establishes a structurally crucial role for puer poems to which he will remain faithful in the rest of his work. From now on we will notice how poems about the boy are placed by him in strategic positions with the aim of recapitulating the general situation in which the poetic protagonist finds himself at a given point of the *Canzoniere*’s plot. The second part of the *Canzoniere* also opens with a poem about a boy, ‘Il canto di un mattino’ (which likewise stands apart from the numbered fifteen poems making up the collection *Preludio e canzonette* ), and closes

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<sup>30</sup> Lavagetto, *La gallina di Saba*, 90.

with a 'Congedo' dedicated to the 'piccolo Berto', Saba's reincarnation as a young boy. In the third volume this strategy will become a direct invocation to the puer as the figure under whose aegis poetry is created, as in the opening of *Mediterranee*, where the poet says that he is writing for his distant wife and for 'un ragazzo/ che mi ascolta' (529), and in that of *Epigrafe* ('Poi le avrò scritte come l'altre invano,/ per gli uccelli e un amico', 559).

'In riva al mare' is like the tip of an iceberg revealing the disturbed emotional state underneath the world of 'cose leggere e vaganti' in which Saba's increasingly stylised and frozen poetic self had moved since the end of *Trieste e una donna*. It testifies to a state of inner defeat and anguish which puts in discussion the benefits of the poet's various therapeutic moves from his adolescence onwards. Lavagetto sees the centre of the poem in the image of the 'galleggiante trave' which acts as a 'bersaglio' while Saba throws stones into the sea. He rightly connects this image with Saba's subsequent representation of himself as a 'legno in mare caduto che sull'onda/ galleggia' in 'Tre poesie alla mia balia' (405), to which we can add the 'strano legno' from 'A mamma', and concludes that the target this time is the poet's own self. True as this is, such masochistic and self-destructive impulses (which complement the more sadistic ones displayed toward girls), only represent the symptoms of a personality which, not managing to reach a cohesive inner vision, can only turn against itself.

For me the poem's truly central and astonishing image, on which no scholar has dwelt, is the one of the broken vessel, the 'coccio' found by the poet on the beach and to which he compares himself 'angosciosamente'. In analytical psychology the vessel or vase is considered to be a fundamental symbol of the archetype of the Self. Jung highlighted the spontaneous production of this symbol among analysands and also traced its recurrence in various cultural contexts.<sup>31</sup> Its fundamental meaning lies in the representation of the psyche as a self-contained vessel into which things can be freely poured, but which also gives a definite shape to the contents it receives. Hillman therefore interprets images of a leaking or shattered vessel as symbolic of the condition of the uninitiated personality which has not yet managed to forge a cohesive and self-contained view of itself.<sup>32</sup> Saba's use of it testifies to the realisation of an inner self which has not yet found internal boundaries strong enough to contain and make sense of

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<sup>31</sup> Jung, 'Über Grundlagen der analytischen Psychologie', in *Gesammelte Werke*, XVIII.1: *Das symbolische Leben*, 193-97, 'The Tavistock Lectures', XVIII: *The Symbolic Life*, 176-182.

his experience. The vessel is leaking like a personality unable to find a common container or denominator to sets of experiences which as a consequence remain unbridgeable and opposed. This is the underlying lacerated inner situation which gives rise to the *ambivalenza affettiva* characterising Saba's poetry up to this stage and which will only be understood and resolved in the course of the curative journey of self-discovery to which the *Canzoniere*'s second volume is dedicated.

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<sup>32</sup> Hillman, 'Puer Wounds and Ulysses' Scar', 112-13.

## CHAPTER 3

### **‘Il dono ch’io ho da lui l’ho avuto’: *Canzoniere* Volume secondo (1921-1932)**

#### The Way of the Puer

The second volume of the *Canzoniere* opens in a seemingly low key which provides a sense of continuity with the immediately preceding collections. *Preludio e canzonette* (1922-1923) is in fact made up of twelve *canzonette* inspired by Chiaretta and continues both stylistically and thematically the airy and melodic world of *Cose leggere e vaganti* and *L'amorosa spina*. As was the case with those collections, these twelve polished and self-enclosed texts would tell us little of the long term dynamics of the *Canzoniere*'s protagonist had Saba not also included in the collection a 'Preludio' and a 'Finale'. These two poems stand out from the central bulk of *canzonette*, both in their much looser metres, from which overtly melodic intents are conspicuously absent, and because of their contents. The 'Preludio' is a puer poem which acquires a clearer role when read back-to-back with the other puer poem closing the first volume, 'In riva al mare'. Both are middle-length *canzoni*, faithful to the model developed by Saba in *Trieste e una donna*, and they clearly belong to a different narrative strand than the one of the contemporary *canzonette*.

As we have seen 'In riva al mare' closes Volume One on a note of anguish and fragmentation, the poetic subject being embodied in the image of a shattered vessel. 'Il canto di un mattino' is likewise set along a beach with the dominating presence of a young sailor, but the psychological tone it strikes is utterly different. The poem's narrative core is centred upon the 'mozzo' who is toiling around his ship getting it ready to sail. We are therefore faced another time in the *Canzoniere* with an image that speaks symbolically of leaving the shore and venturing into new, uncharted territory. As we have seen, the crucial point each time that this familiar situation appears is the poetic

protagonist's attitude toward it. In this case the relation can best be described as one of suspension. This is due to the particularly mysterious presence of the boy, who is at once prosaic and semi-divine ('È un rozzo/ uomo di mare? O è forse un semidio?', 226), and is underscored in the final icastic couplet ('Si tacque a un tratto, balzò nella nave;/ chiara soave rimembranza in me') where the poet, rather than simply remaining on shore because of his fears (as in 'Glauco'), is left awed and suspended by the swiftness and fluidity of the boy's action.

The beauty and energy of this last image are left dangling, as if they spoke by themselves. They act like a beacon which the poet does not follow, but which provides him with an image of heroic resolve towards which he feels awe rather than separation. The very time setting of 'Il canto di un mattino' – early morning of a sunny day in contrast with the twilight atmosphere of 'In riva al mare' – speaks of a time of beginning and future, and the whole poem looks forward to something yet to happen but of which the image of setting sail into the wide sea is a powerful equivalent. The whole of 'Il canto di un mattino' can be read as a symbolic rendering of Saba's precise inner situation at this stage of the *Canzoniere*: in the same way as the sailor toils around the ship before putting it to sea, Saba picks up the pieces he left scattered at the end of Volume One, trying to get his vessel ready to sail again. The facility with which the sailor does this strikes him. But nowhere in the poem do we get the impression that such a task dwarfs him or discourages him. On the contrary much of it functions as a sort of 'invitation au voyage', and in this connection 'Il canto di un mattino' anticipates Saba's identification with the figure of Ulysses, which will appear first briefly in 'Partenza e ritorno' (*Il piccolo Berto*, 1929-1931) to then become dominant in the *Canzoniere*'s third volume.

I have stressed the atmosphere of foreboding suspension represented in 'Il canto di un mattino'. The poem does indeed leave us waiting. After it we read the fifteen *canzonette* centred on the figure of Chiara where Saba hardly seems to be navigating into uncharted waters. But the thread is picked up again in the 'Finale' where the metre's similarity with 'Il canto di un mattino' signals the reprise of a discourse which had been put aside during the collection proper. The 'Finale' interests us because it starts delineating the kind of project taking shape in Saba's mind. The crucial lines relate to his attempt to overcome the sense of despair expressed at the beginning of the poem through an integration of the centripetal aspects of his experience: 'fare in me di molte e sparse/ cose una sola e bella' (251). These lines anticipate the vast program of

assimilation and integration which Saba-protagonist will pursue on different levels and through different discourses in the following collections.

The theme of the integration of centripetal aspects into a unified self has in fact been highlighted in the collections *Cuor morituro* (1925-1930) and *Il piccolo Berto* (1929-1931), where the Nietzschean theme of the Eternal Return presides over the assimilation of contrastive experiences linked to the mother and the wet-nurse<sup>1</sup>, and also in *Preludio e fughe* (1928-1929), where parallels with Jung's symbolic and psychological interpretation of alchemical processes abound.<sup>2</sup> This broad theme acts as the focus of the whole second volume as its major narrative thread, being present also in the dramatisation of the contrastive heritages from mother and father in *Autobiografia* (1924) and in the staging of opposite but complementary psychological types in *I prigionieri* (1924) and *Fanciulle* (1925).

These peculiarities of *Preludio e canzonette* allow us to foreground a number of more specific insights into how Saba's poetry works. I have emphasized the fact that his poems cannot only be looked at as individual lyrical examples, but should be always related to the wider framework and pool of motifs from which they derive further sets of meanings. This *démarche* can at this stage be further articulated, since from a look at *Preludio e canzonette* it clearly surfaces that not all poems relate to an equal degree both to the collection in which they appear and to the *Canzoniere* as a whole. What we can call their macro- and micro-potentials for meaning are not present in constant and equal doses. In *Preludio e canzonette* the central core made up by the *canzonette* is more self-sufficient than the opening and closing poems. The central sequence does relate to the other *fanciulle* collections, but these constitute a rather enclosed poetic nucleus, which disappears from Saba's universe from the mid-20s onwards. In this sense the fifteen *canzonette* possess a higher potential for a reading *within* the collection itself, and hence also represent concerns which are more literally bound to the period in which they were composed.

Conversely, 'Il canto di un mattino' and 'Finale' appear almost out of place within the kind of poetry that Saba was writing in the early 1920s, though they are clearly related to a wider and more subterranean discourse that he is carrying on albeit in a not yet full-blown manner. This complexity and interrelation of structural levels is

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<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of the impact of the Nietzschean theme of the Eternal Return in relation to these collections see Polato, 279-90.

<sup>2</sup> I refer to Lavagetto's analysis of *Preludio e fughe* in relation to Jung's theory of alchemy, in Lavagetto, *La gallina di Saba*, 122-31.

deployed not only to make the *Canzoniere* a coherent and yet meandering narrative, but above all to give it psychological depth and realism. In fact in *Preludio e canzonette* the fifteen central poems and the two extreme ones also represent two different levels of psychological awareness. The *canzonette* centre more on the present, on the world that the poetic subject has been presenting since the crisis of *Trieste e una donna*, and as such they show a rather self-conscious and constructed attempt by Saba to set aside his abiding deeper preoccupations. Hence also the tone of artificiality detectable in this collection and in the others centred upon Paola and Chiaretta. 'Il canto di un mattino' and 'Finale' pick up an as yet more unconscious theme, and in fact they relate to a wider temporal section of the protagonist's life, going back to the similar *canzoni* of *Trieste e una donna* and also prefiguring important future developments.

We can therefore see the Twenties as the most opaque phase in the story of the *Canzoniere*'s protagonist. About three-quarters of the way through the first volume he runs into an existential cul-de-sac. The shipwreck is dramatised in *Trieste e una donna* but there follows a rather long period of latency, where the poetic protagonist is mainly concerned with conjuring up the poetic world of *cose leggere e vaganti* which in the end functions as a protracted exorcism of his real predicament. It is only between the cracks of the *canzonette*'s polished surface that we can keep apace with the deeper dynamics which the poetic protagonist is going through. This more intimate narrative starts at the very end of Volume One with Saba's admission of the full extent of his sense of anguish and defeat ('In riva al mare'), proceeds through an episode of openness and renewed hope in 'Il canto di un mattino', and culminates in the 'Finale' where the general sense of the journey upon which the protagonist is embarking is sketched. All three poems are metrically similar, different from the poetry that Saba was writing at the time, and have boys as protagonists. It is thus around the figure of the boy and his relationship with it that Saba builds up the momentum of this short but crucial sequence, giving a sense of direction in an otherwise rather stifled poetic world, and hinting at the great programme of synthesis and integration which he will pursue vigorously in the rest of the second volume.

For the second time in the *Canzoniere*, we find that the figure of the boy is the crucial disturbing presence active beneath the world to which Saba is consciously trying to anchor himself. This was already the case in *Trieste una donna*, where the centrality of heterosexual marriage in the collection is progressively undermined by the irregular experiences described in the city poems, an erosion eventually leading to the election of

male bonds above marriage in *Un marinaio di noi mi parlava*. In the 1920s Saba is again outwardly mainly concerned with heterosexual love, but once more these relationships lead him into a dead end situation. The internal dynamism which is stifled in this period, and which will erupt in *Autobiografia*, is kept live and articulated through figures of boys. Certainly, it is still Saba's own way of dealing with homoerotic desire. This means that throughout this phase of the *Canzoniere* it is impossible to determine if the protagonist ever has actual encounters or relationships with boys or men. This simply nowhere appears in the poetry, and whether it is due to self censorship or is an accurate representation of this aspect of his life is impossible to ascertain.

But despite this, it is also clear that for the *Canzoniere*'s protagonist same-sex desire, whether 'practised' or not, becomes the most important drive of his inner and symbolic world. It might be sublimated, but it is no less powerful because of it. In a sense, the inner tension which runs from *Trieste e una donna* to *Preludio e canzonette* can be seen as a confrontation between acted-out heterosexuality and sublimated homosexuality where the latter, notwithstanding a number of issues still making it highly problematic, more and more takes a leading role in the protagonist's journey. Psychologically the boy acts as the disruptive presence underneath Saba's attempts at sexual, social and poetic normativity and closure in the same way as, in the city poems of *Trieste e una donna*, he throws into disarray socially dominant rituals and habits. But each time he also acts as a saviour, revealing unexpected openings and fractures through which Saba-protagonist is rescued from his fixedness and glimpses the possibility of a different order.

## The Epiphany of the Father

The thread spun by Saba in between the gaps of his most melodic and seemingly conflict-free phase, culminating in the programmatic statement of 'Finale' (*Preludio e canzonette*), in no way prepares the reader for the striking novelty of *Autobiografia* (1924). This collection suddenly causes a change of pace in the *Canzoniere* not seen since the sequence *Versi militari-Casa e campagna-Trieste e una donna*. The acceleration is indeed sharper than anything seen in Volume One, the poet's life up to 1919 being retrospectively compressed to a series of fifteen regular sonnets where,

under the restored presence of a previously absent father figure, ‘vengono ricapitolati per la prima volta i motivi della “diversità-maledizione” haunting Saba’s destiny.’<sup>3</sup> To start with, let us consider the biographical snapshot with which each sonnet deals (I have included the titles of Saba’s collections when they are mentioned in the sonnets themselves):

- Sonnet 1 - Introductory.
- Sonnet 2 - His mother.
- Sonnet 3 - His father.
- Sonnet 4 - Serene childhood solitude, isolation among his peers, awakening of poetic vocation.
- Sonnet 5 - Awakening of *la brama* and passage from adolescence to early youth.
- Sonnet 6 - First love for a male friend.
- Sonnet 7 - Positive effects of love.
- Sonnet 8 - Leaves Trieste for Pisa (1903, aged 19).
- Sonnet 9 - Pisa: first severe attack of depression (1903).
- Sonnet 10 - Florence: meeting with D’Annunzio and contact with the intellectuals of *La Voce* (1905/6).
- Sonnet 11 - Military experience and *Versi militari* (1907/8).
- Sonnet 12 - Love for Lina and Trieste (1909, aged 26).
- Sonnet 13 - First volume publication and enduring presence of Lina up to the publication of *La serena disperazione* (1911/15).
- Sonnet 14 - Service in First World War (1915/18).
- Sonnet 15 - Purchase of the ‘Libreria antiquaria’ in Trieste after the war (1919, aged 32).

It is a small novel within the *Canzoniere*’s wider plot, a sort of retrospective *mise en abime* of the protagonist’s journey. Each sonnet is on the one hand a self-sufficient *tableau* or mini-chapter whose core is lapidarily expressed in the first two lines. On the other hand the sonnets are also grouped in larger thematic subdivisions, as for instance 2 and 3 concerning the family background, 4 and 5 with their common emphasis on the

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<sup>3</sup> Lavagetto, *La gallina di Saba*, 117.

awakening of sexuality and its accompanying loss of innocence, 6 and 7 dealing with the first adolescent love and its exhilarating effects, and 12 and 13 with their focus on Lina as the fundamental presence accompanying Saba at the beginning of his poetic career.

These links are made more precise, and the narrative therefore tighter, by the fact that Saba causes the reader, through anticipations usually concentrated in a final couplet, to read on from the end of one sonnet to the beginning of the following one. This happens when the father figure is anticipated in the last lines of Sonnet 2 dedicated to the mother ('Ma io di malinconia fui tosto esperto,/ unico figlio che ha lontano il padre', 256), or between Sonnet 8 and 9, when Saba first mentions at the end of the eighth 'il pensiero/ di mostri' (262) which is then revealed as his first attack of depression in the ninth sonnet ('Notte e giorno un pensiero aver coatto,/ estraneo a me, non mai da me diviso', 263).

If *Autobiografia* is in part a recapitulation of Saba's life up to 1919, a quick look at the index I have drawn also shows that it goes far beyond the scope of a summary. Saba includes a number of items which did not get any mention in his previous poetry or reshapes more or less familiar poetic situations in a novel way. This is the case in particular with Sonnets 4 to 10 which cover the same years as the *Poesie dell'adolescenza e giovanili*. We know already that in his subsequent attempts to give a definitive shape to his youthful self Saba will act according to a very selective strategy. Here, in the different context of a representation that can be freshly created rather than assembled from pre-existing material, he opts for the opposite direction, consecrating seven poems out of fifteen to his adolescence and youth. The move shows how, of all sections of the *Canzoniere*, the *Poesie dell'adolescenza* remain the most elusive and unfocused, with a constant need for subsequent adult interventions to make it more legible and woven into the rest of the *Canzoniere's* fabric. The more striking novelty however relates to the fact that here Saba picks up the story in his early childhood, a time which was left out in his earlier poetry. This posits the reshaping of his adolescent self within a wider *à rebours* program which starts here to then unfold in *Cuor morituro* and *Il piccolo Berto*.

For the moment we shall leave aside Saba's first foray into his childhood world and the figures of his mother and father, and concentrate on the sonnets covering the years of the *Poesie dell'adolescenza*. The self that emerges from this second representation of Saba's adolescence and youth is far more defined and readable than

his original counterpart. More specifically, what we get here which is absent from *Poesie dell'adolescenza* is a sense of tight narrative, of events unfolding and producing clear consequences in the protagonist's development. As much as the *Poesie dell'adolescenza* are a centrifugal collection, in which the real core of the protagonist's self is touched upon and then obscured through conventional expressions of *mal de vivre*, anxiety and melancholia, the corresponding sequence from *Autobiografia* possesses a centripetal and relentless focus on key facts and situations. Let us now concentrate on those bearing upon our discourse.

Sonnet 4 focuses on Saba's childhood, which appears in the first quatrain to be solitary but at the same time idyllic, presided over by the protective figures of his aunt Regina, his mother and 'in cielo Iddio immortale' (258). The rest of the sonnet represents Saba's isolation from his peers at school. He is the object of their laughter while he reads his poetry in class, but this does not prevent him from discovering an inner voice guiding him and supporting him in his role as outsider: 'ancor mi vedo in quella bolgia, e sento/ solo un'intima voce dirmi bravo' (258). The material throws some light on issues dramatised but left unclear in 'Glauco'. The theme of isolation from male peers is present in both poems, but in the later case Saba's exclusion is not only suffered, but also recognised and linked to the discovery of poetic gifts and of an inner resolve that he will strengthen in years to come. The intractable sense of exclusion on which 'Glauco' ended is therefore split into two aspects, one positive and one negative, the pain of being an outsider being compensated by the gift of poetry and introspection. We can see how, starting with the micro-episodes of his story, Saba proceeds to a 'fission' of previously opaque emotional states, separating, and thus clarifying, the positive and negative emotions associated with them.

After describing the awakening to sexuality in Sonnet 5, Sonnet 6 is devoted to the first love experience. Saba candidly admits, superseding the more closeted discourse of 'Lettera ad un amico...', that he first experienced love through a passion for a male friend: 'Ebbi allora un amico; a lui scrivevo/ lunghe lettere come ad una sposa' (260). The exalted tone on which the poem closes ('Egli era bello e lieto come un dio', 260), leaves no doubt as to the importance of male passions in his emotional development. The centrality of homosexuality in his poetic biography is also amplified through the next sonnet, which represents a bright and serene pause half-way through the sequence and celebrates the new sense of exhilaration and self-reliance that the experience of love brought him: 'Così cammina per le vie del mondo/ chi veramente del mondo è signore';

‘È possibile, oh ciel, che questo sia?’ (261). The adolescence material is therefore the object of a tighter arrangement in which the three nuclei of Saba’s painful but also fruitful isolation, his awakening to sexuality and his first (homosexual) love are isolated. In themselves the elements are not totally new, but rather than effusively express the pain and confusion they caused him, Saba focuses with great incisiveness and economy on their concatenation.

In other cases elements are added which create new pools of darkness and doubts not clarified at this stage. This is the case with Sonnets 8 and 9 in which we find the first mention in the *Canzoniere* of the severe attack of depression that Saba suffered in Pisa in 1903 and which finds ample space for discussion in his correspondence. Coming as it does after the two serene sonnets on adolescent love, this surfacing of a ‘pensiero... coatto’, of a ‘spaventoso fatto’ (263) for which no explanation is given, represents a glaring black spot on the otherwise very lucid progression of *Autobiografia*. Saba tackles it, albeit in a heavily self-censoring way, in the poem ‘A una stella’ and in two poems on the myth of Orestes, all of which we shall analyse in detail when we come to the collection *I prigionieri*.

The true revolution of *Autobiografia* takes place however at the beginning, in the two sonnets dedicated to his mother and father. In particular Sonnet 3 is the centre around which the collection revolves:

Mio padre è stato per me ‘l’assassino’,  
fino ai vent’anni che l’ho conosciuto.  
Allora ho visto ch’egli era un bambino,  
e che il dono ch’io ho da lui l’ho avuto.

Aveva in volto il mio sguardo azzurrino,  
un sorriso, in miseria, dolce e astuto.  
Andò sempre pel mondo pellegrino;  
più d’una donna l’ha amato e pasciuto.

Egli era gaio e leggero; mia madre  
tutti sentiva della vita i pesi.  
Di mano ei gli sfuggì come un pallone.

‘Non somigliare – ammoniva – a tuo padre.’  
Ed io più tardi in me stesso lo intesi:  
Eran due razze in antica tenzone. (257)

The sonnet represents the epiphany of Saba’s runaway father in his son’s mythobiography. This re-appropriation of the father figure is, for its modalities and impact, unique among the destiny of all poetic figures of the *Canzoniere*. We have in

fact seen how the *Poesie dell'adolescenza* contain all the poetic presences of Saba's future output: his mother ('A mamma'), his wife ('Lina'), the *balia* ('La casa della mia nutrice'), Trieste as a background and his beloved *fanciulli*. We have also explored how in the following collections this poetic cauldron becomes somehow more linear through the impact with time, so that the various figures emerge with more or less prominence at different points of the *Canzoniere*. However, and despite Saba's striving toward *onestà*, before *Autobiografia* his father had remained the only *innominato* in such a closely-knit and to a great extent family-based poetic landscape.

Of course this absence partially overlaps with Ugo Poli's real absence, since he left Trieste before his son Umberto was born. The sonnet however specifically focuses not on his flight, but on how this objective absence was turned by Saba's mother into a symbolic and affective void, an erasure of the role of the father figure. Rachele Coen's drilling into her son's head that his father was an 'assassino', and that young Umberto should in no way try to be like him, brings to the surface a profoundly disturbed family scenario, in which Saba was aggressively prevented from having any positive relationship with his father, even on a merely symbolic plane. It is almost a truism to note that every boy longs at some stage to be like his father, and that this identification and admiration are pivotal, among others, for a boy's sense of sexual identity. In light of this, both young Saba's sense of guilt toward his mother, and his uneasiness with his male self, which remained hazy negative feelings in 'A mamma', are here led back to their origin. Whereas Saba had already often used dialogic forms to dramatise his relationships with boys and Lina, his mother had remained a silent presence, an intractable idol. Here, for the first and only time in the *Canzoniere*, we hear the echo of her own voice, and her very words, 'assassino' and 'non somigliare... a tuo padre', chillingly sum up the damage she inflicted upon her son.

The poem represents the final liberation from the admonitions which haunted Saba throughout his youth. From the ashes of his mother's words and their destructive power rises the unexpected and luminous figure of the father. I have spoken on purpose of an epiphany in that the rediscovery of the father represents a sudden, powerful and enlightening event which finds no equivalent in the rest of the *Canzoniere*, but also because the father figure appears with an aura of fabulous luminosity which brings it close to the various puer epiphanies with which we are familiar. He is a father notable for his childish traits ('Allora ho visto ch'egli era un bambino'), his mixture of delicacy and mischievousness ('un sorriso, in miseria, dolce e astuto'), his affinity with airy and

volatile spheres ('Egli era gaio e leggero', 'Di mano ei gli sfuggì come un pallone') and hence with the great Sabian theme of travelling and vagrancy ('Andò sempre pel mondo pellegrino'). The figure of Ulysses, and its accompanying celebration of lonely wandering which will constitute a major thread in the *Canzoniere's* third volume, is unthinkable without this psychological and mythical re-appropriation of the father figure. Milanini rightly observes that

l'identificazione si fa più compiuta attraverso il recupero appena dissimulato di un vero e proprio *topos*: 'pellegrino' il padre, partecipe di una condizione di pellegrinaggio e d'esilio il figlio in quanto artista. È il tema canonico della diversità, la variazione su un eterno 'ulissismo', a costruire il filo cui Saba si affida per ripercorrere a ritroso il proprio cammino, per addentrarsi nel labirinto del proprio passato.<sup>4</sup>

Saba's recourse to a *topos* in order to get to a fuller and multifarious identification with his father also sheds light on why *Autobiografia* is such a remarkable collection, both in itself and because of the new mode it inaugurates in the *Canzoniere*. In fact, though Saba's focus on his family life has never been so intense since *Trieste e una donna*, in *Autobiografia* this material is arranged and amplified in a way which we cannot but call mythical. Each sonnet has a paradigmatic character which leads Milanini to speak of the 'stampo archetipico in cui [Saba] calò i dati grezzi della sua esistenza' and to the conclusion that the collection is arranged as a series of 'esempi, non episodi.'<sup>5</sup>

It is in particular in Sonnet 3 that Saba gives us for the first time an explicitly mythical rendering of his story, transposing the rather more vague *ambivalenza affettiva* which had plagued him up until then into a titanic contest between the father- and mother-lineages ('Eran due razze in antica tenzone'). His father is elevated to the role of presiding figure, or *numen*, of the inner universe toward which the poetic protagonist had tried to move with discontinuous success throughout Volume One. *Autobiografia* therefore breaks the mother's curse, strengthens the male principle within Saba's poetic universe, and brings forth an identification with it for which he had long yearned.

While managing to write down for the first time the echo of his mother's terrifying injunctions, the protagonist at the same time proclaims that he has not followed them, that he is, indeed, like his father. The fundamental line of the sonnet in this respect is 'il dono ch'io ho da lui l'ho avuto', where Saba identifies everything that he was taught to feel guilty about with a hereditary/symbolic gift by his father. The

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<sup>4</sup> Milanini, 'Umberto Saba, il bene e il male', in *Atti del convegno internazionale 'Il punto su Saba'*, 291.

word 'dono' makes one think, as Milanini's words suggest, of a 'dono poetico'. Though Saba did not learn to write poetry from Ugo Poli, the descriptive elements relating to the father figure coalesce in a symbolic universe in which the poetic gift is anchored to the motifs of the outsider, rejection of convention, vagrancy and eroticism. The puer's universe finally comes of age with *Autobiografia*, and thanks to the protecting presence of the father figure, it will from now on cease to be a disturbing and guilt-laden factor in the poetic protagonist's world.

The rhetorical vehicle used by Saba for these various operations is the sonnet. Critics who have concentrated on the macro-functionality of the sonnet form within the larger scope of *Autobiografia*, like Cary, stress that it is a 'major accessory to its success'<sup>6</sup>, mainly by virtue of the compression and succinctness with which Saba uses it. Lavagetto broadly concurs with this emphasis, though he also notices that, looked at individually, the sonnets show a number of 'pedaggi da pagare'<sup>7</sup> in terms of lexical choices for the sake of metrical regularity. Saba's own observations on *Autobiografia* in *Storia e cronistoria* show an awareness of this, for instance when he points out that in Sonnet 3 he had to use the archaic 'ei' instead of 'egli' to maintain a regular hendecasyllable<sup>8</sup>.

I would however stress that these examples are rare, and that at this stage in the *Canzoniere* the use of archaisms is so consolidated that their presence positively contributes to that sense of a 'raccontare antico'<sup>9</sup> of which Saba progressively becomes such a master. Moreover, if archaicising tendencies linger on at the lexical level, the syntax of *Autobiografia* is very radical, and clearly serves goals which are narrative rather than poetic in a traditional sense. Saba uses short and lapidary sentences, usually running two lines and then coming to a full stop. Each sentence contains an image, and the various images are accumulated in a paratactic way, heightening the sense of progression and tightness of the narration. With this in mind let us have a look at the following passages:

Quando nacqui mia madre ne piangeva,  
sola, la notte, nel deserto letto. (Sonnet 2)

Ma di malinconia fui tosto esperto;  
unico figlio che ha lontano il padre. (Sonnet 2)

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<sup>5</sup> Milanini, 290 e 291.

<sup>6</sup> Cary, 87.

<sup>7</sup> Lavagetto, 'Introduzione', xli.

<sup>8</sup> Saba, *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, 210.

<sup>9</sup> Beccaria, 34.

Mio padre è stato per me 'l'assassino',  
fino ai vent'anni che l'ho conosciuto. (Sonnet 3)

Ed io più tardi in me stesso lo intesi:  
Eran due razze in antica tenzone. (Sonnet 3)

Ebbi allora un amico; a lui scrivevo  
lunghe lettera come ad una sposa. (Sonnet 6)

Ed amai nuovamente; e fu di Lina  
dal rosso scialle il più della mia vita. (Sonnet 12)

Una strana bottega d'antiquario  
s'apre, a Trieste, in una via secreta. (Sonnet 15)

These lines are memorable in their simplicity and icastic quality. Their compactness shows Saba at the height of his skill, managing simultaneously to narrate an event and communicate, without need for sentimental or rhetorical expansion, the inner resonance that it had for him. Though he takes great care to maintain the regularity of the hendecasyllable even when this costs him in terms of lexicon, the lines quoted also show that the underlying syntactic unit on which the collection rests is the couplet and not the isolated verse. In other words the unit is a sentence, or the image/episode which the two-line sentence encapsulates. These blocks are self-contained and juxtaposed in a progression, and it is this streamlined arrangement that endows *Autobiografia* with its powerfully compressed and icastic character.

This leads us to conclude that *Autobiografia* is a long poem rather than a series of sonnets (in *Storia e cronistoria* Saba significantly speaks of the various sonnets as 'strofe')<sup>10</sup>. It also in my view shows how the fixation of critics with Saba's ostensible traditionalism has in most cases given rise to very schematic enquiries into the nature of his relationship with the Italian poetic tradition. Given Saba's narrative propensities, it is not a total surprise that the long poem should be the point at which he arrives in his maturity. It is in *Autobiografia* that this epic sweep is for the first time concretised, while up to this point it had been a background feature of Saba's way of giving shape to his poetic autobiography discernible through an extensive reading of his collections but difficult to pin down in specific examples. But this heroic plan becomes now more clearly articulated and, also *thanks* to the lexical archaisms noted by Lavagetto, finds its foremost expression in what Lorenzini has rightly called the 'versi epicamente impostati' of *Autobiografia*. The experiment will be repeated in the long poem *L'uomo*

(1928), whose even grander and more objectified epic thrust would not be understandable without *Autobiografia*'s ground-breaking precedent.

*Autobiografia* is therefore a watershed in the *Canzoniere*. The collection brings incandescent new contents under the scrutiny of awareness, while also unflinchingly exploring the reasons for their repression. Once the father is liberated, he can take a place in Saba's pre-existing universe, and reveal links which would have been previously undetectable. In particular we will see in a later part of this chapter that the identity complexes arising from a distant and dishonourable father are further complicated by the anxiety about homosexuality that the father-identification implied for the poet. Behind the father there is always the taboo of a desire which Saba subjects in the course of his life to different degrees of self-censorship.

Ugo Poli's belated epiphany in his son's poetic world is a macro-instance of a self-censorship which comprises the repression both of a father who had been the target of a terrifying motherly curse and of a male figure with which the poet had identified his desire for other men. This nexus between the father-identification and homosexuality appears to have been extremely painful for Saba to unravel. In *Autobiografia* it is primarily constructed through the coagulating together of the symbolic universe pertaining to the father, his son, and his son's *fanciulli* under the common aegis of the puer's phenomenology. This male axis of the *Canzoniere* is first clearly individuated in this collection, and further articulated in *I prigionieri* and *L'uomo*, all three constituting a kind of internal trilogy devoted to the poetic individuation of Saba's male self.

The arrival on the scene of the father and its accompanying strengthening of the male polarity within Saba's more and more articulated mythical rendering of his story is an event whose profound impact has not been sufficiently stressed by Sabian scholars. Because of its uniqueness the father epiphany creates an earthquake and sets in motion a deeper process of self-discovery leading through *L'uomo* and *Preludio e fughe* to the so called 'raccolte psicanalitiche' (*Cuor morituro* and *Il piccolo Berto*), whose time span overlaps with Saba's period of analysis with Freud's Triestine pupil Ernesto Weiss. As I have mentioned in the Introduction and Chapter One, too much emphasis is placed on these two collections and on their Freudian background (particularly in the case of *Il piccolo Berto*, which came out after Saba prematurely had to interrupt treatment and is dedicated to Weiss). In reality, as must at this stage be sufficiently clear, Saba is spontaneously led to a psychological, rather than strictly psychoanalytical,

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<sup>10</sup> Saba, *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, 209.

understanding of events well before he comes into contact with Freud's work. 'Bersaglio' and the treatment of his marriage crisis are clear examples of this, though they are almost dwarfed in scope and lucidity by the archetypal reworking taking place in *Autobiografia*, where Saba at the same time re-equilibrates his personal universe and starts deploying the self-conscious mythopoeic perspective around which the rest of the *Canzoniere* will coagulate.

### The Myth of Orestes

The fission and possible integration of opposite elements and the renewed emphasis on the male polarity which we have witnessed in *Autobiografia* also informs *I prigionieri*. Both collections date back to the same year (1924) and are made up of fifteen regular sonnets, thus forming a sort of diptych. The *prigionieri* are none other than abstract figures ('Il lussurioso', 'Il violento', 'Il melanconico', 'Il silenzioso' etc...) representing different psychological types, their inspiration coming from Michelangelo's sculptures. Whereas *Autobiografia* stands out because of its relentless and accelerated focus on very intimate family entanglements, *I prigionieri* represents an attempt to deal with similar nuclei of concern on a more extroverted and objectified plane. As Saba put it in *Storia e cronistoria*, 'rimanere a lungo in compagnia di noi stessi, genera il bisogno di uscirne. L'idea dei *Prigionieri* è nata in Saba anche da questo bisogno.'<sup>11</sup>

*I prigionieri* is in many respects one of the least successful collections of the *Canzoniere*. Criticism usually focuses on its abstraction and stiffness.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in comparison to the incandescent material revealed in *Autobiografia*, its world appears to be frozen, and this applies not only to the psychological types in themselves, who show little dynamism, but also to the rhetorical apparatus used to create them. The collection lacks the lapidary and self-contained verses of *Autobiografia*, displaying instead a high-handed syntax particularly rich in inversions and hyperbatons and whose tone is sustained by literary and often archaic lexical choices. Such stylistic features do also appear in parts of *Autobiografia* when the poet was in search of a new epic tone to dramatise his life, but were there interspersed with dialogic elements, realistic

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<sup>11</sup> Saba, *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, 211.

<sup>12</sup> Lavagetto, *La gallina di Saba*, 117, 142-43.

descriptions and elegiac moments which contributed to the rich variety of tone of the collection. In *I prigionieri* instead the lack of internal progression and of centripetal biographical material forces Saba to adopt a more monostylistic approach, through which he tries to echo the sense of epic struggle and *terribilità* embodied by Michelangelo's statuary.

This said, and despite its obvious shortcomings, *I prigionieri* is intrinsically linked to the process of self-searching set in motion by *Autobiografia*. The two collections form a diptych and articulate in their succession one of the most fundamental pairs of opposites for Saba, that is introversion (*Autobiografia*) and extroversion (*I prigionieri*). The pattern is furthermore repeated on a micro-level, since the various sonnets, though lacking the tight narrative arrangement of *Autobiografia*, are not isolated and can be arranged in binary series as the titles suggest ('Il violento'/'L'accidioso', 'L'ispirato'/'L'empio', 'Il tiranno'/'La vittima', 'L'ossesso'/'Il beato'). As Muzzioli has seen, these figures are either pushed to totalising action (both on the material plane: 'Il violento', and on a spiritual one: 'L'ispirato') or weighed down by a movement of sorrow and introversion ('Il melanconico', 'L'accidioso')<sup>13</sup>. Tenuous rhetorical links are also provided in a manner reminiscent of *Autobiografia*, as in the sonnet 'L'empio', in whose last line 'L'appassionato' of the following sonnet is mentioned, or in 'L'eroe', where Orestes introduces in the last line his friend Pylades, the protagonist of the following poem 'L'amico'.

This bipolar construction is particularly resonant with the Michelangelesque mould informing *I prigionieri*. Michelangelo's famous *prigionieri* (four of which are in the Accademia in Florence, while two later ones are in the Louvre in Paris) embody a similar articulation of dichotomic patterns. In the Florence *prigionieri* this is expressed through the pairing of bearded (mature) and non-bearded (youthful) men, while in the Louvre statues it takes the shape of an opposition between activity and passivity, one slave being traditionally called *Prigione morente*, and the other *Prigione ribelle*. This contrast also recurs in the figures of the *ignudi* of the Sistine Chapel which, notwithstanding the ingenious variety of their postures, represent two fundamental types, one alarmed and combative, the other torpid and overwhelmed. The striking feature of both the *prigionieri* and the *ignudi* is that the theme of the union of opposites is

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<sup>13</sup> Fabio Muzzioli, 'Il tema della prigione nell'opera di Saba', in *Umberto Saba, Trieste e la cultura mitteleuropea*, 83-92, 86.

represented through exclusively male figures, a pattern adhered to by Saba in his pairs of sonnets.

Michelangelo does resort to the symbolic potential of the male/female dichotomy to give shape to the same concept, for instance in the statues of the New Sacristy in San Lorenzo in Florence, where the pairs are (female) Night and (male) Day and (female) Dawn and (male) Dusk, though his homoerotic sensibility more often led him to explore the symbolic power of figures made up of two male halves. Saba displays a similar versatility. In *Poesie dell'adolescenza*, *Trieste e una donna* and *Autobiografia* the symbolic potential of the male/female dichotomy dominates. But from this period onwards, in parallel with a more self-conscious preoccupation with desire for other men, Saba tends to use two male figures to symbolically hint at the idea of wholeness and completeness. Michelangelo's presence therefore concerns us not only as an attempt by Saba at plastic extroversion, but mainly as an example of his homoerotic reading of canonical works from the past. It is precisely in this phase of his work that Saba, as we are about to see, starts turning to classical examples and *topoi* with an overwhelmingly homoerotic purpose, to articulate in the same sweep his desire for his father and for other men.

The centre of *I prigionieri* is to be found in Sonnets 8 and 9 ('L'eroe' and 'L'amico'), in which Saba reworks these issues through a personal appropriation of the myth of Orestes. These two sonnets must be analysed together with the poem 'Oreste', originally published in a magazine and not included by Saba in the *Canzoniere*. This less known text originally appeared in 1931 without a composition date together with 'Sonetto di paradiso', which bears the date 'Trieste 1924'. On the basis of this correspondence, together with the Oresteian images and echoes running through *Autobiografia*, Ramat persuasively argues that 'Oreste', 'se non in stesura almeno in ideazione'<sup>14</sup>, must also date from the same year. All the Oresteian material in Saba's output therefore goes back to the defining year where the father figure abruptly arrives on the scene of the *Canzoniere*. This synchronicity begs attention, and will be at the centre of my analysis of the myth in the following pages.

Despite the novelty aspect of choosing myth to rework aspects of his life, Saba makes clear that the psychological content expressed through the mythical tale is not, in itself, new. Orestes' resurfacing in his mind is likened in both poems to the inevitability and regularity of the reawakening of spring:

Il mandorlo  
è rifiorito, il merlo canta, l'aria  
si rasserena, e tu ritorni, come  
il cielo azzurro, all'improvviso.  
(‘Oreste’, 966)

Sempre, come ritorni primavera,  
di me tu devi ricordarti. Io sono  
il matricida Oreste....  
(‘L'eroe’, 280)

In ‘Oreste’ the Greek hero is represented as the poet’s companion, their friendship fading into a very distant past: ‘Oh a me dagli anni più remoti amico/ oh stranamente a me diletto Oreste’. Ramat, who gives a very sensitive reading of these poems, has rightly pointed out that the remoteness of this affinity

non soggiace a una norma di ordinaria cronologia mentre piuttosto appartiene alla regione dell'inconscio prenatale; e anche nel rilevato avverbio *stranamente*, che designa forse una ‘estraneità’, ma sempre relativa all'ordinaria norma temporale; però una piena naturalezza, si direbbe, in rapporto al regno dell'inconscio sopraccennato.<sup>15</sup>

The seasonal background therefore not only signals a sphere of ‘autenticità primitiva’,<sup>16</sup> but more poignantly the end of a period of latency. Indeed the effort of giving a shape, a name, a ‘figure’ to shadowy psychological complexes is the over-arching feature of all of Saba’s Oresteian poems. Saba turns to Orestes as the *foundation myth* of his poetic autobiography, in the same sense that Kerényi understood the German verb ‘begründen’ in relation to the deepest function of myth-making: ‘Going back into ourselves in this way and rendering an account of it, we experience and proclaim the very foundations of our being; that is to say, we are “grounding” ourselves.’<sup>17</sup>

This journey back from a nether-region is metaphorically condensed in the image of Orestes’ ship reaching the poet from the immemorial world of Argo:

Non una  
nave è sul mare più dolce, non una  
più cose accoglie sinistre di quella  
che d'Argo a noi ti conduce. (‘Oreste’)

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<sup>14</sup> Silvio Ramat, ‘L’ “Oreste” di Saba’, in *La pianta della poesia*, Firenze: Vallecchi, 1972, 345-48.

<sup>15</sup> Ramat, 346.

<sup>16</sup> Ramat, 347.

<sup>17</sup> C.G. Jung/Karol Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology* (transl. by R.F.C. Hull), Princeton: Princeton University Press (Bollingen Series XXII), 1969, 9.

Again, Ramat has rightly seen that what carries Orestes back from Argo is ‘l’onda resistente dell’inconscio’.<sup>18</sup> The hero’s regular return to Saba is both ‘dolce’ and ‘sinistro’ precisely because it originates from beyond the shore of ego-rationality and non-contradictory logic. Orestes is a hero, but he carries his Shadow with him. The image of Orestes as a traveller crossing an unknown sea is a particularly resonant one. From the poetic protagonist’s external perspective it is a symbol of the crossing of unconscious material from latency to awareness. But from within the story of Orestes his restless wandering represents a search whose goal seems to be constantly escaping.

In the mythical tale Orestes is in fact always *away* and exiled from an inner image which keeps eluding him. In Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* he is first absent from the scene throughout the first part of the trilogy (*Agamemnon*) because his mother Clytemnestra has kept him away from his father’s palace since he was small. Even after he has avenged Agamemnon’s murder in the *Choephoroi*, the hero is then forced in the *Eumenides* to flee and wander throughout Greece, reaching first Delphi and then Athens where he is finally absolved of his matricide. But what sets this journey in motion and what are for Saba the psychic energies fuelling it? In ‘L’eroe’ it is Orestes himself who, speaking in the first person, sketches the *logos* of his *muthos*:

Figlio di re, nella reggia straniera  
vissi a un pensiero, e non parvi ancor buono  
a cinger l’arme, che per tutto il suono  
si udì di mia vittoria orrenda e fiera.

Come anelavo alla vendetta, e come  
poi ti giunsi a baciare, terra paterna,  
ahi, troppo presto!

This is the dream of a *nostos*. From a fatherless condition of exile (‘Figlio di re, nella reggia straniera’), Orestes longs to re-attain an almost transcendental communion with the father figure and his legacy (‘poi ti giunsi a baciare, terra paterna’). The desire for reunion with the father(land) is also the tale of a *pensiero dominante* (‘vissi a un pensiero’) which enslaves the hero and simultaneously propels him forward toward his destiny.

Saba’s poetic persona and Orestes share the fact that they want to kill their mother for a reason, in contrast for instance to Oedipus who kills his father without knowledge of his real identity. In Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* Orestes’ rage against

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<sup>18</sup> Ramat, 348.

Clytemnestra springs from her having killed Agamemnon on his return from Troy. In her son's eyes she is further guilty of having debased her husband's memory by not providing him with proper funeral rites and marrying his old foe Egistus. Her acts amount not only to murder and betrayal but also to a devastating profanation of the father image and his attributes. After reading *Autobiografia*, we know that Saba's mother is represented in his poetry with very similar destructive attitudes. Hence Saba speaks in 'L'eroe' of 'vendetta', a word choice stressing not only the bloody deed but also its remote reasons and justifications. Orestes kills his mother not because he blindly wants to eliminate her, but because he needs to re-affirm a necessary bond with his father. His matricide is hailed as a 'vittoria' (the only word that appears both in 'L'eroe' and in 'Oreste'), as something serving a purpose, fitting within a scheme of self-searching and self-affirmation and fundamental toward the preservation of the father's memory.

If in both poems the mother still awakens a considerable amount of aggression, the precise psychological moment described is *after* the deed has been accomplished. Both 'L'eroe' and 'Oreste' are in fact compressed between a very distant ghostly past and a present in which the most dark and tragic tones of the story have mellowed prefiguring a different psychological phase. In 'Oreste' the latest arrival of the hero's ship prompts the poet to observe:

Ma in volto  
meno feroce oggi a me giungi; fatta  
quasi un mesto ricordo la tua colpa,  
che tanta gloria anche ti dava. Traccia  
degli antichi spaventati in te ben trovo,  
ma più non fuggi, ma guardare immobile  
ami la testa di Medusa in faccia.

Similarly in 'L'eroe' we witness in the end a switch from a condition of restless wandering to one of fixed looking which represents, after the raging of compulsive action, a new capacity to face what one's destiny carries ('Nel terrore fiso,/ immobile è il mio sguardo'). Matricide still awakens guilt and fear but the haemorrhage has apparently stopped. Orestes is able to look at Medusa's dead face with the calm of a terrible but necessary achievement.

Incidentally, in representing Orestes staring at Medusa's severed head Saba seems to run into two inaccuracies. First, in Greek myth Orestes is persecuted by the Furies, goddesses of primordial revenge, and not by Medusa. Secondly, Medusa's face

could not be looked at even when dead: Perseus had to carry it in a bag to avoid the monster's still petrifying look. But psychologically such inaccuracies are marginal, since the broader mythological motif informing the scene is that of the young hero slaying a frightful beast or monster, which Jung interprets as the strenuous effort of individual consciousness to separate itself from union with the mother and triumph on primeval destructive forces<sup>19</sup>. The fact that Orestes is able to look at Medusa psychologically signals that he is now able to face a complex which before had the power to petrify him and arrest his journey.

The nature of this new state is left in darkness in 'Oreste', while in 'L'eroe' Saba continues his re-appropriation of the myth. In the last lines he has Orestes directly introduce an unnamed character:

Nel terrore fiso,

immobile è il mio sguardo, erte le chiome  
stanno sulla mia fronte. Ha gloria eterna  
con me costui, non mai da me diviso.

'Costui' is Pylades, a figure whose homoerotic friendship with Orestes was proverbial in Classical times, as his fundamental psychological role in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* shows. He appears by his friend's side in the *Choephoroi*, the second part of the trilogy where Orestes comes back to Argo from his exile to kill Egisthus and his mother Clytemnestra. Pylades' often silent presence acts as Orestes' shadow, offering him total support and abnegation in his darkest hour. In the highly symbolic opening scene of the *Choephoroi* we see Orestes besides Agamemnon's grave. While he invokes the protection of Hermes and of his dead father, Pylades stands silently behind him. Similarly at the highpoint of the tragedy Orestes walks out of the palace after killing Egisthus with Pylades at his side. Their friendship eventually grew into a second strand of the Orestian saga, which takes place after the matricide events and is dramatized by Euripides in the tragedies *Orestes* and *Iphigenia in Taurica*.

For Saba, it would have been sufficient to use this couple in order to hint at a particularly intense and possibly homoerotic kind of friendship. However, he goes to particular pains to highlight the strength and intimacy of the bond between the two young men by linking the two sonnets in the way we have seen (it is the only case in the collection). And focusing precisely on Orestes' introduction of Pylades, 'ha gloria

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<sup>19</sup> Jung, 'Über Grundlagen der Analytischen Psychologie', XVIII.1, 107-09. (Engl: 'The Tavistock

eterna/ con me costui, non mai da me diviso', we can further notice that the lines quote, almost *verbatim*, Francesca's words to Dante in *Inferno* V:

Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona,  
mi prese del costui piacer sì forte,  
che, come vedi, ancor non m'abbandona. (103-105)

.....

Quando leggemmo il disiato riso  
Esser baciato da cotanto amante,  
questi, che mai da me non fia diviso,

la bocca mi baciò tutto tremante. (133-136)

In both cases the speaker (Francesca/Oreste) addresses her/his half with the pronoun 'costui' and describes the indissolubility of their bond with almost identical words (Francesca: 'che mai da me non fia diviso'; Oreste: 'non mai da me diviso'). The device recalls Saba's intertextual use of 'A Silvia' as the template for 'Lettera ad un amico pianista...' (in *Poesie dell'adolescenza*) and is further proof of his use of sexually canonical texts from a specifically homoerotic perspective.

The kind of relationship sketched in the two sonnets also activates a number of traits and patterns which Saba will continue to elaborate in his late poetry. Pylades is experienced by Orestes both as specular to him and at the same time as more adult and more innerly resolved. Patterns of sameness and difference co-exist and appear crucial to Saba's way of thinking about relationships between two men. We will see in the next chapter that this dialectic of sameness and difference also informs the representation of his late relationship with Federico Almansì, which dominates the *Canzoniere's* third volume. Starting with the asymmetrical elements, what Orestes lacks and his friend already has is condensed in the first quatrain of 'L'amico':

Nella sua reggia l'ospitò capace  
il padre mio, di mano al suo nemico  
lo trafugò, con me lo crebbe, antico  
più di lui di due anni. Cauto e audace,

io son Pilade.... (281)

It is 'il padre mio', placed in a prominent position at the beginning of the verse. The mention of the 'reggia' (which for Orestes was a 'reggia straniera') amplifies the sense

of power and protection associated with the father figure. The adjective ‘capace’ is strategically placed in an ambiguous enough position at the end of verse for it to agree both with ‘reggia’ and with ‘padre mio’. In the first case the palace is ‘capace’ (capacious) because of its vastness, in the second the father is ‘capace’ in the sense of accomplished, masterful and able to provide not only for his son but for Orestes as well. Pylades already projects a different aura than Orestes because of the sense of solidity sustaining him: the calm certitude of his belonging with his father versus Orestes’ condition of exile. This greater maturity and sense of self are hinted at with the mention of his slightly older age (‘antico/ più di lui di due anni’), but they are also apparent in Pylades’ own words. He self-consciously states his role within the relationship with Orestes: ‘tempra[re] il suo furor con la mia pace.’

The word ‘furor’ deserves a pause since its use is a further example of how the complexity of the nature of Saba’s poetic choices can easily lead to misunderstanding in relation to their alleged traditionalism. ‘Furor’ is an archaising and highly literary lexical choice made even more stylised by the use of the truncated form. It is particularly resonant with the Renaissance and with Michelangelo’s tormented creativity, the world which informs *I prigionieri* from its very title. On the surface, therefore, this could simply seem a typical example of Saba’s stylistic conservatism and of his high regard for Italian poetic tradition.

But the ostensibly poetic ‘furor’ is also, in cruder psychological terms, the sense of rage and impotence burning within Orestes. It is the same aggression which surfaced in ‘Bersaglio’ – rage at feeling unresolved, which unleashes aggression as a way out and colours all actions that Orestes/Saba performs in order to free himself from his sense of incompleteness. The word signals a compulsive pattern of behaviour also noticeable in the prominence of aggression- and rage-loaded words throughout the Oresteian poems (‘Oreste’: ‘mani di sangue’, ‘infelice giovinezza, un pasto/ dato alle Furie’, ‘vittoria... e castigo’; ‘L’eroe’: ‘vittoria orrenda e fiera’).

These differences notwithstanding, the two friends are also represented as a pair which in its perfect union of love and devotion appears strongly symmetrical. They attract each other because they are basically similar, though at different stages of their development. Pylades’ being ‘cauto e audace’ corresponds, on a less psychologically disturbed level, to Orestes’ appearing as both ‘dolce e sinistro’. Pylades himself moves on to summarise the symmetry and reciprocity aspect of their relationship in the first tercet of his sonnet:

Due compagni sembrammo, due nel mondo  
giovani, in cerca d'avventure. Allato  
gli stavo io sempre, in lieti casi e avversi.

The lines stress the aspects of mutual support and common youthful desire for adventure. It is the world of games, open spaces and discovery which we have followed throughout Saba's poetry, and which climaxes in the evocation of his vagrant and irresponsible father in Sonnet 3 of *Autobiografia*. Pylades acts for Orestes as the friend with whom he can freely live his male side, consolidating a form of mirroring lacking in childhood because of the absence of the father. 'L'amico' in this sense is also a phantasmatic rewriting of 'Glauco', the overtly homoerotic creation of the faithful and inspiring friend whom Saba never had.

The Oresteian material is for these reasons the pulsating heart of the otherwise frozen *prigioni*. It is the only part of the collection which does not deal with patterns and dichotomies in an abstracted way, but picking up the most subterranean elements surfaced in *Autobiografia*. The part of the saga dramatised in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is used as a mythical parallel to the psychological situation revealed in *Autobiografia*: it is a sort of anti-Oedipus complex, in which the son has been deprived by a destructive mother of an identification with his father, and as a consequence wishes to eliminate her. In *Autobiografia* the whole dynamic is treated in a more dispassionate and lapidary manner, while the Orestian poems once more address the rage lingering in Saba's relationship with Rachele Coen. But Saba moves beyond *Autobiografia* when he also pursues the second strand of the Orestian saga which centres on the hero's friendship with Pylades. In so doing he brings the nostalgia for his father and for an ideal friend/lover more explicitly into contact, creating a microcosm of male bonds and desires at whose centre he stands.

## Fathers, Sons and Lovers

The myth of Orestes is, as we have seen, the *Canzoniere*'s foundation myth, in that it allows Saba to articulate both his parental constellation and the link between his desire for his father and for other men. By virtue of this compression the concept of fatherhood is eroticised, while that of erotic companionship is tinged with paternal concern and

protection. Saba, as protagonist, occupies the central term of the sequence father-son-friend, and is linked to the preceding element (the father) by a rapport of absence and longing, and to the next one (the friend) by one of homoerotic intimacy. The three male figures are also connected through a dialectic of similarity and/or sameness which contributes to make the borders between one and the other blurred. Following *Autobiografia*, it is clear that the son claims to be similar to his father, while in 'L'eroe' and 'L'amico' he is both similar to and dissimilar from his friend Pylades, who in turn by virtue of his more mature traits can be seen to stand in for the absent father.

Rather than three figures we should therefore properly speak of a tripartite figure, through which Saba articulates different but related aspects of his male persona. Since this tendency first appears in his poetry through the use of a classical motif, it is worth pointing out that tripartite cultic figures are a recurrent feature of the most archaic level of myth. Kerényi draws attention to the archaic female deity embodied by the triad Demeter-Kore (Persephone)-Hecate, which he sees as a single female archetype articulating the roles of mother, daughter and old woman.<sup>20</sup> The Christian dogma of the Trinity emerges from a similar very ancient mythological substratum, representing a male parallel structured along a father-son axis in which the mother is excluded.<sup>21</sup> What Saba knew of the work of contemporary mythologists is impossible to ascertain, but his further treatment of the myth of Orestes that we are about to analyse offers further evidence of the tendency to compress the figures of father, son and friend, embedding them in a common substratum of correspondences and mutual reflections.

The sequence Agamemnon-Orestes-Pylades recurs in Saba's work beyond the context of *I prigionieri*, and even outside of the *Canzoniere* itself. In the late short story 'Tommaso Salvini e il mio terribile zio' (included in *Ricordi-racconti*, 1946-1947), Saba speaks of having been brought as a child to the theatre by his uncle to attend a performance of Alfieri's *Oreste* with the famous actor Tommaso Salvini in the role of Pylades: 'Il grande Salvini s'era riservata, forse perché meno faticosa, la parte di Pilade; lasciando, con paterna generosità, al figlio Gustavo quella di primo eroe.'<sup>22</sup> This detail endows the action that Saba saw unfolding in front of his eyes as a boy with a unique personal archetypal resonance: on stage the pair of friends is also the pair father/son, so that a unique synergy is activated between the three male figures. Agamemnon might be

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<sup>20</sup> Jung/Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology*, 109-113.

<sup>21</sup> Jung, 'Zur Phänomenologie des Geistes im Märchen', IX.1, 250. (Engl.: 'The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairytales', IX.1, 234).

<sup>22</sup> Umberto Saba, 'Tommaso Salvini e il mio terribile zio', in *Tutte le prose*, 498.

dead and absent from the stage, but Salvini keeps alive his memory *qua* father, while also playing friend to his son. The only scene of the play that Saba describes is for our discussion the psychologically most significant one of the tragedy, when Pylades runs to Orestes' side immediately after the killings of Clytemnestra and Egistus:

Ricordo poco della rappresentazione. Solo una scena dell'ultimo atto m'è rimasta impressa nella memoria. Vedo, come fossi ancora seduto accanto allo zio Giuseppe sulle gradinate del Teatro la Fenice, Tommaso Salvini fare la sua grande entrata del quinto atto, mentre Oreste, con in mano il brando insanguinato, esalta il suo recente trionfo.<sup>23</sup>

The interest of this childhood memory does not end with the representation of Alfieri's *Oreste* and the sequence father-son-friend resurfaces in the *racconto* in an unexpected form.

Saba moves on to describe his relationship with Salvini, whom he personally met many years later:

Conobbi di persona Tommaso Salvini, a Firenze, nelle sale del Circolo Artistico, del quale era socio d'onore. Era vicino, se già non li aveva superati, agli ottanta; e, da molti anni, non recitava più. Divenimmo, per quanto lo consentissero l'enorme differenza di età e i riguardi che egli doveva alla sua fama, amici. E fu lui a raccontarmi che spesso, quando dava, di domenica dopopranzo l'*Amleto* in qualche cittadina della provincia toscana, dov'era più acceso l'odio per il tiranno, doveva, a spettacolo finito, far rialzare il sipario. Ricompariva lo spettro del padre, e risuscitava (non mi disse se a gesti o parole) il giovane principe. Senza questa 'felice' variante il pubblico del loggione non si sarebbe calmato, e non sarebbe andato via contento.<sup>24</sup>

In this curious episode a patriotic public, raised in the cult of Alfieri's tragedies as examples of individual titanic struggle against *la tirannide*, cannot bear to see the usurpers Claudius and Gertrude win in the end against the legitimate incumbents of the throne of Denmark. Let us remember that when these episodes must have taken place (Saba's Florentine sojourn dates from 1905-06), the independence of Italy was relatively recent and Trieste still under Habsburg rule.

The personal resonance of the scene is however unmistakable. The poignancy of the anecdote lies in the fact that after the second drawing of the curtain father and son are reunited, and most importantly they must have appeared on stage together with Horatio, who is the only main character of the tragedy not to die in the last bloody scene of Act V. The King, Hamlet and Horatio thus phantasmatically appear on stage in a line

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<sup>23</sup> Saba, 'Tommaso Salvini e il mio terribile zio', 498.

<sup>24</sup> Saba, 'Tommaso Salvini e il mio terribile zio', 500.

up paralleling the one made up by Agamemnon, Orestes and Pylades. The underlying similarities between *Hamlet* and the *Oresteia* are obvious, both being revenge tragedies in which a young hero must avenge his father through the killing of his mother and her new lover, who represents a debased version of the father image. In both cases this central dynamic is accompanied by one centred on the figure of the male protagonist's friend.

Horatio, like Pylades with Orestes, appears from the beginning at climatic moments always at Hamlet's side. In I.ii Hamlet, after a scene in which his estrangement vis-à-vis his family is revealed, is joined by Horatio who is the first to bring him news of the supernatural appearance of the dead king. Shortly thereafter, in I.iv, the friends go together to meet the ghost again, in a scene paralleling Orestes' evocation of his father with Pylades standing behind him in the opening of the *Choephoroi*. Later on, in Acts III and IV, Horatio is the only character with whom Hamlet shares his real thoughts. The prince's growing isolation and paranoia are only broken by Horatio's presence and by their total trust in each other. If love is defined by trust, Horatio is certainly the only character in the play that Hamlet trusts. And it is therefore Horatio who, in the end, is given the moving role of praising Hamlet's memory while he is dying in his arms: 'Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet Prince' (V.ii.337)<sup>25</sup>.

In Saba's late poetry the figures of father, son and lover will again be dealt with through a thick mythical dough and this time, as we shall see in more detail in the following chapter, the three functions of father, son and lover are collapsed in two figures. This happens in the use made by Saba of the figures of Ulysses and Telemachus in the collection *Mediterranee* (1945-1946), where the poet represents himself as Ulysses and his young lover Federico Almansì as Telemachus. But as a fatherless son Saba was also a Telemachus throughout his youth, so that the mythical pair also allows him to encapsulate in his present relationship the story of his relationship with his father. The very proliferation of the father-son-lover sequence beyond the *Canzoniere's* shores and up to Saba's old age attests to the importance of a multiple figure in which a number of tightly related elements of his story can be revealed and recapitulated.

If this kind of self-analytical praxis emerges in *Autobiografia* and *I prigionieri*, and also informs much of Saba's late poetry, we can only get a full picture of the nature

of these processes also highlighting the difficulties and false starts accompanying this journey, which maintains pools of darkness all the while the protagonist appears to be freeing himself from the burden of his past. The fear and self-censorship which affect Saba's desire for his father and other men is dramatised in the little known poem 'A una stella', which Rosita Tordi has very insightfully investigated, reaching conclusions which fit with my interpretation of the myth of Orestes.<sup>26</sup> I shall summarise her findings because 'A una stella' is an astounding instance of self-censorship by Saba in a poem ostensibly dealing with love for a girl but in reality hiding the impossibility of dealing with desire for men and for his father. Moreover, Tordi's detailed analysis and background research also reveal surprising textual links between 'A una stella' and the Orestian themes of 'L'eroe' and 'Tommaso Salvini e il mio terribile zio', thus throwing light on the severe attack of depression which Saba suffered in Pisa and which is mentioned for the first time without any explanation in *Autobiografia* (Sonnet 9).

'A una stella' was first published in magazine form in 1917 and was never included in the *Canzoniere*. The poem was written during Saba's sojourn in Pisa in 1903 when he suffered his first severe attack of depression, and is ostensibly a traditional love poem with heavy Leopardian borrowings. However Saba himself felt the need to clarify the 'misteriosa idea pisana' from which 'A una stella' arises, both in a letter of 1903 to Amedeo Tedeschi and over forty years later in a letter to Tullio Mogno dated 14 March 1949.<sup>27</sup> Up to a point the later letter confirms the original 1903 version of the events. The poem is about Lucia Pitteri, a friend from Trieste with whom Saba had fallen in love and was corresponding with while in Pisa. The poet's anxiety was due to the fact that Lucia was in love with Ugo Chiesa, one of Saba's best friends, who had apparently threatened the poet to break their friendship once he had discovered that Saba was corresponding with his girlfriend.

The explanation raises doubts on a number of accounts. Primarily the rift between Chiesa and Saba cannot have been so strong as to cause a major depressive crisis since the two friends quickly reconciled in Summer of the same year when Saba was back in Trieste. Moreover Ugo Chiesa was more than a friend for Saba, since he was the model for Ilio, the boy with whom Ernesto/Umberto Poli falls in love at the end of *Ernesto*. Also, in his letter to Mogno Saba describes his meetings with Lucia in

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<sup>25</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (ed. by Cyrus Hoy), New York/London: Norton, 1992, 100.

<sup>26</sup> Tordi, 'Intorno "A una stella"', in *Atti del convegno internazionale 'Il punto su Saba'*, 367-74.

<sup>27</sup> The two letters in question are published in Saba, *La spada d'amore*, 63-64 and 205-209.

Trieste admitting that 'si parlava quasi sempre del mio amico', whereby he and Lucia seem to be brought together by their common passion for Chiesa.

The dreadful crisis that Saba experienced in Pisa is then 'forgotten' and reappears only after many years in Sonnets 8 and 9 of *Autobiografia*:

Ma che sia soffrire  
lo seppi poi, quando un'idea improvvisa

mi strinse il cuore, m'occupò il pensiero  
di mostri, insonne credevo impazzire.  
E questo fu verso i vent'anni, a Pisa.  
(Sonnet 8, 262)

Notte e giorno un pensiero aver coatto,  
estraneo a me, non mai da me diviso;  
questo m'accadde; nei terrori a un tratto  
dell'inferno cader dal paradiso.  
(Sonnet 9, 263)

In the second part of the letter to Mogno, Saba, without any apparent reason, comes back to the nature of his 'pensiero coatto' (the 'misteriosa idea pisana'), but the explanation is at variance with the one just offered. This time Saba remembers having left Chiesa a youthful poem against the House of Habsburg. The 'pensiero coatto' sprang from the fear that

il giovinetto al quale avevo voluto molto bene, mandasse, per vendicarsi di un'offesa, in pratica quasi inesistente, la poesia (della quale gli avevo regalato una copia) alla Polizia e mi facesse, al mio ritorno a Trieste, arrestare per lesa maestà....  
(Devi anche sapere che mio padre era stato condannato e bandito per lesa Maestà – per qualcosa che si riferiva all'attentato di Oberdan – su denuncia di un amico.)

This explanation, in its very being so contorted, is a lot more revealing than the plainer one about an unrequited love for Lucia Pitteri. Let us remember that Saba speaks of a 'pensiero coatto', a technical expression (particularly when encountered in a sonnet) that makes one think of a deep unresolved complex rather than of an unhappy infatuation. Indeed the 'idea pisana' was to prove the first of a series of attacks which were to recur with different intensities throughout Saba's life. The Pisa crisis therefore points to a vaster web of personal entanglements on which Saba does not manage to shed any light until he has reached maturity.

As Tordi perceptively concludes:

Nell'arduo gioco di progetto e destino, emerge allora una insospettabile rete associativa nella quale 'posizioni' che parevano acquisite risultano singolarmente contraddette: affiora una nuova, imprevedibile immagine paterna e gli stessi legami adolescenziali finiscono per imporre una diversa lettura: Lucia Pitteri donna 'schermo' di un amore 'altro' non 'raccontabile', e quindi 'coatto'?<sup>28</sup>

Let us remember that the composition of 'A una stella' coincides with the first writing of 'A mamma' (*Poesie dell'adolescenza*), where Saba's separation from his mother while in Pisa is mentioned in the very first stanza. As was the case with 'A mamma', the first separation from Trieste and his family appears to have let surface a number of complexes which, at the time, overwhelmed him. Both 'A mamma' and 'A una stella' are chiefly important in view of what they do not manage yet to articulate, in relation to the figure of the wet-nurse ('A mamma') and to that of the father and other men ('A una stella').

It is only twenty years after the likely composition of 'A una stella', in *Autobiografia* but even more in *I prigionieri*, that Saba manages to drop the 'schermo' and reveal the links between the figure of his father and his desire for other men. The process, as we have seen, continues up to his old age, when the sequence father-son-friend resurfaces in a more phantasmatic way through the anecdotes about Alfieri's *Oreste* and *Hamlet*. It is also however symptomatic that in his 1949 letter to Mogno Saba still appears in two minds as regards which version he should give as the truthful one.

I would add to Tordi's conclusions only the mention of two specific textual links, which offer further proof that the constellation behind 'A una stella' is the same that will later emerge clearly in Saba's Oresteian material. Primarily, the 'pensiero coatto' linked to the ghost of the father and to love for other men and unspoken of in 'A una stella', is also the same dominant thought that haunts Orestes ('L'eroe': 'vissi a un pensiero'). The second instance relates specifically to the anti-Hapsburg poem mentioned in the letter to Mogno, which Saba remembers after many years with some embarrassment because it rhymed 'Absburgo' with 'spurgo'. If we go back to the story 'Tommaso Salvini e il mio terribile zio' we find a passage where Saba tells of having read some of his poetry to the old actor:

Delle poesie gli era piaciuta soprattutto una, diretta contro l'Austria e la Casa d'Absburgo. Vecchio patriota, apparentato, attraverso il palcoscenico, ai versi dell'Alfieri e al nostro Risorgimento, e molto amante della mia città, che gli aveva

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<sup>28</sup> Tordi, 'Intorno a "Una stella"', 374.

sempre riservate accoglienze trionfali, egli si era perfino degnato di interrompere la dizione ad un punto culminante (una rima – Iddio me la perdoni – tra Absburgo e spurgo), battendo una contro l'altra le gloriose mani, e dando così il segnale dell'applauso a tutta la sala.<sup>29</sup>

The youthful anti-Hapsburg poem can be seen as an attempt by Saba to emulate his father in the sphere of patriotic activism. The question of the reasons for Ugo Poli's flight from Trieste is in fact a fascinating and contentious one. Scholars, to a certain extent influenced by the fact that in the *Canzoniere* the question is retrospectively addressed mainly through the eyes and injunctions of Saba's mother, seem to take for granted that Ugo Poli left Trieste exclusively out of lack of interest for his wife and son. In reality Saba's version differs, or is at least more nuanced, in that in the letter to Mogno quoted above he maintains that his father's political activities were also determinant in his leaving Trieste.

Archival research in this area has conclusively shown that Saba's version is not just coloured by his desire to see his father in an ennobling light.<sup>30</sup> Ugo Poli was in fact under surveillance by the Austrian police in relation to the Oberdan affair. Oberdan was tried and eventually hanged on December 20 1882. Shortly afterwards Poli was arrested for, amongst other things, possession of portraits of Oberdan and of the King of Italy. He spent about five months in prison and was eventually banned from Trieste and accompanied to the border. He thus left without seeing again Rachele Coen and young Umberto, who was born on 8 March 1883. But, from prison, he insisted that his son be named after the King of Italy. These facts clearly meant that there was for Saba a part of Ugo Poli which was not so dishonourable as his mother had led him to believe. In the context of his use of mythical *topoi* to flesh out his father's poetic persona, this background further endows his father with an aura of heroism and patriotism, ideals toward which a young Triestine writer of the time was bound to feel more intensely than other Italians already living under the newly born national state. The patriotic example of Alfieri, and his favourite theme of the young hero rebelling against tyrannical regimes, resonates throughout Saba's Oresteian material whether in prose or verse.

Thanks to Tordi's interpretation of 'A una stella', we are therefore able to locate the earliest aborted attempt by Saba to approach a nexus which will haunt him for years to come. In the period when the poem is likely to have been written (around 1903) Saba was away from Trieste for the first time, and experienced a surfacing of his

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<sup>29</sup> Saba, 'Tommaso Salvini e il mio terribile zio', 501.

childhood traumas which he was not in a position to unravel and express. This is confirmed by the contemporary reticence of 'A mamma' (which refers to the same stay in Pisa), while in 'A una stella' takes the shape of the use of a heterosexual relationship as a screen to hide the proximity of the protagonist's desire for his father and for his friend Chiesa.

Over twenty years later, Saba liberates in *Autobiografia* the figure of his father from the motherly curse to which it had been subjected. As I have pointed out, it is this first step which allows for the second nexus, the one related to desire for other men, to clearly surface in *I prigionieri* and in the rest of Saba's output. Various elements of this journey are explicitly recapitulated in 'Tommaso Salvini e il mio terribile zio'. In the first part of the story it is Saba who sees projected onto Salvini both the father and the friend, and also the man who is capable of political action. In the later episode Saba takes the stage, and it is Salvini who gives him a belated fatherly and patriotic recognition. If at the time of 'A una stella' the Hapsburg poem remained a disturbing element, in that it brought the presence of the father back into a context from which Saba was trying to excise it, in old age it is reclaimed, despite its clumsiness, as possibly the earliest, and still oblique, attempt by Saba to affirm his identification with Ugo Poli.

## Saba and Berto

*Cuor morituro* (1925-1930) and *Il piccolo Berto* (1929-1931) are the two collections of the *Canzoniere*'s second volume which have most intrigued scholars. It is easy to see why this has been the case. Both works bring to its extreme consequences the poetic subject's journey, representing the dramatic events that occurred during Saba's early infancy. *Cuor morituro* revisits the figure of the wet-nurse and the universe that Saba shared with her and her husband in the earliest years of his life. The reappropriation of this remote edenic dimension opens the last and definitive confrontation with the mother figure in *Il piccolo Berto*. In this collection Saba evokes his infant self in the figure of *il piccolo Berto* and splits the image of the Mother into a nourishing mother (the wet-nurse) and a destructive one (Rachele Coen), individuating the first trauma that

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<sup>30</sup> Odoacre Spoglianti, 'Indagini e congetture su Ugo Poli padre di Umberto Saba', in *Metodi e ricerche*, nuova serie, anno VI, n° 2, luglio-settembre 1987, 77-82.

marked his life in the forced removal from Eden of the wet-nurse's home when he was three, and the subsequent repression that he had to suffer at his mother's hands.

Both collections are mainly concerned with the female presences of the *Canzoniere* and as such they form a pair corresponding to the series *Autobiografia-I prigionieri-L'uomo* where male figures dominate. And yet female figures do not acquire the range of symbolic meanings bestowed on their male counterparts, since Berto's dialogue with his two mothers is framed by the adult Saba's revisitation of his infant self, whereby the wider framework of the *à rebours* journey runs along a senex-*puer* axis. Saba himself insists in *Storia e cronistoria* that 'Il piccolo Berto è una specie di "amoroso colloquio", non solo fra il poeta e la sua nutrice, ma, e più ancora, fra il poeta prossimo alla cinquantina e il bambino – quel particolare bambino – ch'era stato (o immaginava di essere stato) tanti anni prima.'<sup>31</sup>

From *Cuor morituro* onwards senex references proliferate in Saba's work, both in the *Canzoniere* and in the prose of the *Scorciatoie*, and more and more the poetic subject is explicitly and self-confidently given as a *puer-cum-senex* voice. The poem where this new *puer-cum-senex* persona finds its most strikingly plastic representation is aptly called 'Trasformazione' (*Cuor morituro*):

Io so d'un uomo che quando nel fiore  
era degli anni, un animo pesante,  
un animo mostrava assomigliante  
nel suo dolore,

al vecchio che nel chiaro di s'aggira,  
affaticato in tutte sue membra,  
che triste in sé, più triste ancora sembra  
a chi lo mira.

Ma come gli anni passarono, e affetto  
al suo fermo dolore lo sostenne,  
l'animo suo mutò, quello divenne  
del fanciulletto

che se per un toscano il padre crede  
mandarlo, per un fiasco di vin nero,  
ci va di corsa, saltando leggero,  
anche su un piede. (336)

In this first of a series of 'Tre apologhi' Saba sees himself in the past as *puer* in terms of anagraphic age, but inwardly *senex*, whereas old age is characterised by a resurgence of *puer* spirit. As such, it is a sketch of the main axis of development of the *Canzoniere* as

*Storia e cronistoria* makes clear: 'È molto la storia di Saba.'<sup>32</sup> If the broad meaning of the transformative event is clear, the image used by Saba to represent his metamorphosis begs particular attention.

The poet maintains that the scene closing the poem, the 'fanciulletto' hopping on one leg to fetch his father some cigars, derives from a thought of Nietzsche 'sabianizzato e italianizzato al massimo'.<sup>33</sup> The one-legged race or dance is however by no means a symbol first and only used by Nietzsche. Jung has traced the recurrence of this image in myths and fairy tales, where it appears as a symbol of the unorthodox powers of the spirit, and of the transformative and festive potential of irregular and 'unnatural' events within the allegedly natural and orthodox flowing of things.<sup>34</sup> Hillman expands on these notions, linking them specifically with the puer archetype. Images of laming and symbolical one-sidedness which insistently recur in ancient Greek puer mythologems at once embody the boy's awkwardness in relation to the world of matter and his powerful links to the ex-centricity of spiritual and creative activities:

His stance, his position is marked in such a way that his connection with the *rex extensa* is hindered, heroic and magical. The spirit does not fully reach downwards into this world, since at that place of contact with the world, the puer figure is deathly weak....

If the deeper implication of laming is the verticality of the spirit, we may expect to find images of laming as an advantage or achievement. The one-legged dance of the Shaman is such an example of unnatural distortion representing supernatural power.<sup>35</sup>

'Trasformazione' is the first poem of the *Canzoniere* in which Saba manages to portray himself as a unified subject who has integrated the inner dichotomies on which his journey is built. It not only brings together senex and puer, but it does so from a specific angle where the transgressive potential of the puer is highlighted.

The figure of the one-legged *fanciullo* and its accompanying disruption of normality lead us back to the image repertoire characterising the trickster/saviour aspect of the puer which we have analysed in the section on the trickster and festivity in the first chapter. As in other trickster/puer poems like 'Il garzone con la carriola',

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<sup>31</sup> Saba, *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, 260.

<sup>32</sup> Saba, *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, 232.

<sup>33</sup> Saba, *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, 232.

<sup>34</sup> Jung, 'Zur Phänomenologie des Geistes im Märchen', IX.1, 242-43. (Engl.: 'The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairytales', IX.1, 226-27).

<sup>35</sup> Hillman, 'Puer Wound and Ulysses' Scar', 102.

‘Dall’erta’, ‘Fiera di San Niccolò’ and ‘Finestra’, Saba symbolises the puer’s ex-centricity through an irregular and somehow frenzied body stance, reminiscent of Dionysian rituals, as if the puer’s aura were primarily found in the irregular way in which he uses his body, particularly the lower parts. Significantly, the figure presiding in the background over this transformation is the father. It is a father who does not appear as an authority figure but as a man who wants some wine and cigars, simple but symbolic instruments of pleasure and intoxication, a liberating opposite from the terrifying and moralistic injunctions which Saba was used to from his mother. And indeed the poem, beside its *senex-cum-puer* meaning, is also a powerful rewriting by Saba of his early childhood. Not only is the father present when he was in reality absent, but through the nature of his very needs he transmits to his son the gift of pleasure and liberation, encouraging him out into the world rather than forcing him within the enclosed walls of the home.

Let us remember that ‘Trasformazione’ predates the analytic treatment and *Il piccolo Berto*, and is thus another momentous step along a process of inner integration in which Freudian psychoanalysis proper only appears as the final and clinching phase of an already advanced process. The Nietzschean presence in the poem also confirms that, as Rosita Tordi has pointed out, Saba’s psychological outlook is rooted in Nietzsche’s ethics of liberation and transgression, and that his very reading of Freud is substantially influenced by his prior personal appropriation of the German philosopher.<sup>36</sup>

Saba’s crucial psychological liberation/transformation goes hand in hand with a resurfacing of Nietzschean heroic individualism of which we have noticed the first hints at the time of *Trieste e una donna*. These elements of the poet’s sensibility do not lead back only to his reception of Nietzsche but also, to a lesser extent, to that of Max Stirner. Stirner’s impact on Saba is still the subject of debate, since we do not even know when he first read the author of *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*. At any rate Nietzsche’s and Stirner’s form of anarchic and heroic individualism first surfaces in *Trieste e una donna*, and is then arrested and made to lie dormant for the numerous reasons we have explored in this chapter and the one before. It reaches fulfilment only twenty years after its original coagulation in *Cuor morituro* in the most explicit, and almost programmatic, way.

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<sup>36</sup> Tordi, ‘Le “gocce d’oro” di Saba e Nietzsche’, 317-318.

After the Nietzschean background of ‘Trasformazione’, Stirner’s *Der Einzige* is in fact Saba’s avowed source for the third ‘Apologo’, called ‘Il fanciullo e la verga’<sup>37</sup>. The poem is a curious dialogue between a boy and a rod which has caused him in the past ‘un dolore... cocente’ and ‘ira e vergogna’ (338). The boy is tempted to break the rod, whereupon the rod insinuates that this is a sign that it is still feared. The boy backtracks, but then sarcastically retorts that his fear has gone. The rod concludes:

‘Ma tu m’hai,  
senza toccarmi, spezzata, se sai  
già ridere di me, delle mie pene.’ (338)

The source passage is right at the beginning of *Der Einzige*, where Stirner uses the metaphor of the rod to address the theme of the struggle between the rights and needs of the individual and the oppressive and exploitative nature of social relations:

Der Stock überwindet entweder den Menschen oder der Mensch überwindet den Stock.  
Im Kindheitsalter nimmt die Befreiung den Verlauf, daß Wir auf den Grund der Dinge oder ‘hinter die Dinge’ zu kommen suchen: daher lauschen Wir Allen ihre Schwächen ab, wofür bekanntlich Kinder einen sicheren Instinkt haben....  
Sind Wir erst dahinter gekommen, so wissen Wir Uns sicher; sind Wir z. B dahinter gekommen, daß die Ruthe zu schwach ist gegen Unsern Trotz, so fürchten Wir sie nicht mehr, ‘sind ihr entwachsen’.<sup>38</sup>

Stirner equates the setting-one-free from the power of authority with a child-like perspective which gets at the back of the hypocrisy and violence inherent in social relationships from the family outwards. Saba is at this stage able to confidently cast himself as a *fanciullo* protagonist, who breaks his chains with the same subversive and cheeky laughter which is such a prominent trait of the countless puer epiphanies dotting the *Canzoniere*. In Stirner he finds anticipated those aspects of Nietzsche’s *joyful wisdom* which stress the need to overcome the self-importance of any form of oppressive discourse through a subversive lightness. It is an ethos which prominently

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<sup>37</sup> ‘[Il fanciullo e la verga] fu suggerito a Saba da un pensiero di Stirner (nell’*Unico*) che, per dire che le cose cessano di essere paurose appena abbiamo cessato di temerle, ricorre alla stessa immagine.’ (U. Saba, *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, 233.)

<sup>38</sup> Max Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (ed. by J.H. Mackay), Berlin: private edition, 1911, 17. Engl.: ‘Either the stick conquers the man, or the man conquers the stick. In childhood liberation takes the direction of trying to get to the bottom of things, to get at what is “back of” things; therefore we spy out the weak points of everybody, for which, it is well known, children have a sure instinct.... When we once get at what is back of the things, we know we are safe; when, e.g., we have got at the fact that the rod is too weak against our obduracy, then we no longer fear it, “have outgrown it.”’ (Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own* (transl. by S.T. Byington), London: Fiffeld, 1912, 10-11.)

comes to the fore in this period of Saba's output, and in which he will recognise himself up to his late years: 'Non si guarisce che ridendo.'<sup>39</sup>

In 'Trasformazione' and 'Il fanciullo e la verga' Nietzsche's and Stirner's influence can also be felt in the poetic mode peculiar to both texts. They are in fact included within a series of 'Tre apologhi', all displaying a tone of wisdom which becomes prominent in this period of Saba's output, and is akin to the aphoristic and parable-like style favoured by Nietzsche and Stirner. This style of expression will come to even greater visibility in the *Canzoniere's* third volume, where a lot of Saba's poetry is imbued with a tone of resilient wisdom expressed in short and paradoxical fable-like forms, like the 'Tre poesie a Telemaco' and 'Tre poesie a Linuccia' from *Mediterranee* (1945-1946). The development is not only poetic but also signals the emergence of a different poetic protagonist. Up to this point in the *Canzoniere* we have in fact followed a poetic subject in search of himself, but so often innerly dissociated that he could not find any stable meaning to cling to, apart from an intractable sense of pain and estrangement expressed in the concept of *ambivalenza affettiva*. The narrative sweep of the young and mature Saba is in this sense representative of his restless wandering in search of what is amiss. The apologues and fables favoured by the old poet give instead voice to a man who has found a centre from which he starts to articulate the wisdom that his personal odyssey has brought him.

The *senex-cum-puer* configuration at which Saba arrives at the end of Volume Two must be understood as a dual and composite figure, and in no way as a regression of the adult person to the state of infancy. At the core of *Il piccolo Berto* we certainly find the depiction of an episode of regression, but as I have stressed at the beginning of this section this *anamnesis* is framed by the confrontation between the adult poetic self and his childhood's shadow. Almost all poems are very careful in stressing the duality of the experiences they portray. In the second part of 'La casa della mia nutrice' (*Cuor morituro*) Saba-protagonist encounters again Glauco, stressing the 'venti/ quattr'anni' (315) separating their previous dialogue from the present one. In the first of 'Tre poesie alla mia balia' (*Il piccolo Berto*), Saba appears in the first line as a father nursing his daughter, the image being then reversed when he daydreams about being nursed by his wet-nurse in a similar way.

In the third poem of the same series Saba relives the moment when he was 'abducted' by his mother from the *balia's* home. The distance of forty years separating

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<sup>39</sup> Letter to Giovanni Bollea (dated Trieste, 5 Aprile 1951), in Saba, *La spada d'amore*, 223.

the poetic protagonist from that remote expulsion from Eden is explicitly mentioned ('Adesso/ sono passati quarant'anni', 407), as well as the consequent mix of proximity and divarication between the old and the present self:

Il bimbo  
è un uomo adesso, quasi un vecchio, esperto  
di molti beni e molti mali. È Umberto  
Saba quel bimbo. (407)

In another poem called 'Appunti' (*Il piccolo Berto*) Saba is irritated by the middle-class superciliousness of a man setting next to him:

Ad un vicino  
tavolo un uomo con cura gelosa  
regola al polso l'orologio; a leggere  
riprende, grave, il suo giornale. Io l'odio;  
l'odia in me il piccolo Berto. (425)

In the last two lines he states his reaction somehow redundantly, as if two distinct subjects were reacting at the same time: 'Io l'odio:/ l'odia in me *il piccolo Berto*.' Though the spirit of revolt against convention originates from his puer aspect, Saba as Berto and Saba as the adult poetic subject writing about Berto remain two distinct personalities, mutually linked but not totally overlapping.

The dialogue between Umberto Saba and Berto is indeed fraught with difficulties, and there is only so much that the adult self can extract from his infant alter ego, who as a poetic persona maintains a degree of independence, not easily giving in to adult manipulation. The point is brought home in the poem 'Berto' which finishes with Berto's injunction 'Non toccarmi più' (410). Similarly, the last lines of the 'Congedo' of *Il piccolo Berto*

Ma da me diviso,  
come una cosa a riguardarsi bella,  
che tardi a stringersi al cuore non giova (426)

testify to the necessary abandonment of the literal child that the poet was, once the child's experience has been symbolically integrated into the self-awareness of the adult. The puer-senex pair can therefore in Saba's vision embody an ideal of wholeness and completeness only when each of its components is united with but distinct from the other.

The sort of initiation that Saba undergoes into the dual consciousness of the senex/puer pair amounts to the determining event of his mythobiography. The archetype's magnetism is such that senex and puer spill over from the poetic representation and become the core idea or symbol informing Saba's mature and late theoretical forays into poetry making. As we have briefly seen in the first chapter, a fundamental *scorciatoia* (1945) posits the dual and composite consciousness bestowed by the *senex-cum-puer* as the prerequisite for understanding and creating art:

PER FARE, come per comprendere, l'arte, una cosa è, prima di ogni altra, necessaria: avere conservata in noi la nostra infanzia; che tutto il processo della vita tende, d'altra parte, a distruggere. Il poeta è un bambino che si meraviglia delle cose che accadono a lui stesso, diventato adulto. *Ma fino a che punto adulto?*

Tocchiamo qui una delle differenze che corrono fra la piccola e la grande poesia. Solo là dove *il bambino e l'uomo coesistono, in forme il più possibile estreme, nella stessa persona*<sup>40</sup>, nasce molte altre circostanze aiutando – il miracolo: nasce Dante.

(...)

Se l'uomo prevale troppo sul bambino (Montale ci suggerì, per questo caso, il venerato nome di Goethe), il poeta (in quanto poeta) ci lascia freddi. Se quasi solo il bambino esiste, se sul suo stelo si è formato appena un embrione d'uomo, abbiamo il 'poeta puer' (Pascoli); ne proviamo insoddisfazione e un po' vergogna.<sup>41</sup>

Exactly the same kind of analysis is repeated in a letter to Alfredo Rizzardi (8 May 1950) and applied this time to French nineteenth-century poets: 'Rimbaud era un uomo; Verlaine (non faccio dicendo questo nessun riferimento a questioni sessuali) no. E, se hai letto *Scorciatoie*, sai che un poeta è – per me – tanto più poeta quanto più riunisce nella sua persona gli estremi dell'uomo (adulto) e del bambino.'<sup>42</sup>

Saba specifically posits this ideal of psychic wholeness as particularly necessary for the artist. His affirmation that 'l'arte si volge SEMPRE al proibito: e... si fonda, nella sua ultima essenza, sulla magia',<sup>43</sup> posits the need within the artist of a more than averagely developed puer component, since it is the puer aspect of the psyche which, as we have noted in the first chapter, embodies the link with the primordial, the fluid, the uncanny, the potentially transgressive, nocturnal and lower universe which analytical reason forbids itself to enter. But the boy's very proximity to the sphere of the primordial and the repressed is also his soft spot, a blessing and a curse, since the puer personality can easily be swallowed back to whence it just sprang, and regress through infantility to dissolution.

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<sup>40</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>41</sup> Saba, *Scorciatoie e raccontini*, 13-14.

<sup>42</sup> Saba, *La spada d'amore*, 220.

It is a danger which Saba dramatises in 'Preghiera alla madre' (*Cuor morituro*), the last great poem on his mother, which is however notable for the fact that the threat to the protagonist is not represented as springing from the autobiographical events on which so much of the *Canzoniere* dwells, but from the temptation to regress to a uroboric state where the subject is reabsorbed in the bosom of the earth:

farmi, o madre,  
come una macchia dalla terra nata,  
che in sé la terra riassorbe ed annulla. (345)

Only the presence of the senex can avert this kind of outcome. The senex in the *Canzoniere* is the voice which in 'Infanzia' (*Il piccolo Berto*) claims to be 'uno che reggere/ ben sa gli umani pesi' (408), the part of the poetic protagonist characterised by a cold, stoic and almost fatalistic acceptance of events of life, and which explains Saba's dislike for Pascoli's 'poetica del fanciullino'. The dual nature of the archetype signals the harmonisation of nuclei which had been previously pulled apart by the *ambivalenza affettiva* characterising the *Canzoniere* up to *Autobiografia*, while the mythical nature of the figure is also the climax of the mythopoietic hermeneutic which Saba progressively deploys in the central part of his book.

## Roses over the Abyss

We have entered the *Canzoniere*'s second volume through two poems of *Preludio e canzonette*: in 'Il canto di un mattino' the protagonist appeared waiting for some new development, while in 'Finale' he had come to sketch the contours of the journey upon which he was about to embark. It is the journey that we have followed through the liberation of the father figure in *Autobiografia*, the phantasmatic individuation of the figures of father, son and lover in *I prigionieri* and *L'uomo*, and the final unveiling of the earliest trauma suffered by the *Canzoniere*'s protagonist in *Cuor morituro* and *Il piccolo Berto*.

On the one hand these various operations correspond to the therapeutic moves which we have observed in the first volume. Previously, though, Saba-protagonist's attempts at solving his predicament had mainly been literal actions, like being in the

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<sup>43</sup> Lettera to Joachim Flescher (1 March 1949), in Saba, *La spada d'amore*, 203.

army, getting married, or frequenting a given social milieu, whereas the overarching feature of the second volume's journey is that it is primarily symbolic. With *Autobiografia* the emphasis is shifted toward the intrapsychic, since in the collection Saba, besides revealing his unconfessed father nostalgia, also compensates for it by creating, poetically, the figure of the father he never had. Likewise, by killing Clytemnestra Orestes cannot bring Agamemnon back to life, but removes the obstacle to his symbolic identification with him.

The figure of Pylades is created out of a similar void, and fills an absence of which we have already encountered various testimonies starting with 'Glauco'. The male protagonist of *L'uomo* can also be seen as a compensatory creation both in relation to the father figure and to Saba's self-perception. Although throughout this study I emphasize the poetically productive role of these personae, and the way in which they positively affect the development of the book's protagonist, it is equally important to stress that Saba is all too aware of their compensatory and fragile nature. In 'Secondo congedo' from *Preludio e fughe* (1928-1929) he self-consciously looks back at the inventions on which his program is reliant:

O mio cuore dal nascere in due scisso,  
quante pene durai per farne uno!  
Quante rose a nascondere un abisso! (401)

But these beautiful inventions do not *fill* the abyss, they only *cover* it, i.e. they never erase its presence. As I have stressed in Chapter One, Saba is firmly, and from the start, a post-metaphysical, or to be more precise an anti-metaphysical poet. If at times he appears to see poetry as a compensatory dimension in which the irreducible dissensions and opacities of life can, to an extent, be accommodated,<sup>44</sup> this in no way can be compared to the belief in the metaphysical power of poetry, or art, which symbolist and post-symbolist poetics often espouses. The point for Saba is not the abyss, whose irreducibility he takes for granted from the *Poesie dell'adolescenza* onward, but the kind of very personal petals that we strew over it. The roses are the stories which we tell ourselves about ourselves in order to articulate some meaning over (but not beyond) the post-metaphysical void in which the twentieth-century individual lives.

If in fact on the one hand Saba shows an awareness of the limitations of his figures, he is nonetheless affirmative of their meaningfulness in terms of self-fashioning

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<sup>44</sup> This line of interpretation is pursued by Debenedetti in *Intermezzo*, 37.

and self-understanding. In a letter to his friend Giordana, he made the fundamental statement that in *Autobiografia* he had ‘incomincia[to] e termina[to] il racconto e redenzione della mia vita.’<sup>45</sup> How are we to understand the word ‘redenzione’ in connection with ‘racconto’? Of course we can lay the stress on the fact that from *Autobiografia* Saba more and more sheds the weight of the complexes that had dominated his youth, and as a consequence psychologically redeems himself from their thwarting impact. But the first volume is also full of gradual revelations of obscure nuclei, which however do not appear to have the same redeeming effects which Saba ascribes to his output after *Autobiografia*. Hence we should look at the ‘racconto’ not in terms of the individual, however crucial, contents that the *Canzoniere*’s tale slowly lets emerge, but in terms of the narrative and mythopoietic perspective within which all separate episodes are placed. In this sense ‘racconto’ is ‘redenzione’, to the extent that it implies a meaningful tale, a tale which helps give meaning, rather than a necessarily ‘true’ one.

Rosita Tordi has very keenly stressed this aspect pointing out that ‘Saba sa bene che l’anima ha bisogno di qualcosa di più che di giochi linguistici: vivere in una fantasia, in una storia, specchiarsi in uno stile di riflessione capace di rendere nello stesso tempo più ampio e differenziato il nostro discernimento.’<sup>46</sup> For Saba this ‘stile di riflessione’, the fulfilment of the program adumbrated in ‘Finale’ (*Preludio e canzonette*), is the mythical reworking of his life which we have followed up to now. From *Autobiografia* to *L’uomo*, passing through *I prigionieri*, we witness such a structured proliferation of mythical and phantasmatic material that the very story narrated undergoes a change of substance. It is not any longer a personal narration structured around mythical resonances, but becomes like a myth. The result is a poetic protagonist who, from a very fragile initial position, and facing formidable internal resistances, approximates more and more to the figure of a hero, and a life story which, after skirting perilously close to a Freudian family drama, eventually spreads its wings and becomes a sort of modern odyssey.

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<sup>45</sup> Saba, *La spada d’amore*, 83.

<sup>46</sup> Tordi, ‘Le “gocce d’oro” di Saba e di Nietzsche’, 324.

## CHAPTER 4

### **‘Un vecchio amava un ragazzo’: *Canzoniere* Volume terzo (1933-1954)**

#### A New Constellation

The collection *Parole* (1933-1934) sets a very definite tone to the opening of the third volume in contrast with the more gradual transition we have witnessed from the first to the second. The new atmosphere, as in the poem ‘Felicità’, is one of gratitude and joy:

La giovinezza cupida di pesi  
porge spontanea al carico le spalle.  
Non regge. Piange di malinconia.

Vagabondaggio, evasione, poesia,  
cari prodigi sul tardi! Sul tardi  
l’aria si affina ed i passi si fanno  
leggeri.  
Oggi è il meglio di ieri,  
se non è ancora la felicità. (450)

The poetic protagonist’s trajectory is summed up in its point of departure and point of arrival: a burdened and somehow masochistic youth crushed under his own pain in the first stanza, followed in the second by a blossoming in old age of the spirit of vagrancy, transgression and lightness. The exhilaration brought about by the reaching of such a long yearned for goal is for Saba a happiness which self-awarely remains all-too-human: ‘Oggi è il meglio di ieri,/ se non è ancora la felicità’ (450). It is however a clear break with the past and the signpost of a far more resolved inner self which is now projected onto the future and facing a new dawn: ‘Nasce/ – altra costellazione – un’altra età’ (453).

Saba explicitly links the state described in 'Felicità' to the apologue 'Trasformazione' which we discussed in the last chapter:

In 'Felicità' Saba riprende l'argomento del primo dei suoi 'Tre apologhi'; quello che rifà la storia del (suo) dolore, e gli era stato – come abbiamo detto – suggerito da Nietzsche. Ma, mentre nell'apologo 'Trasformazione' si avverte, in contrasto a quell'asserita vittoria sul dolore, come un resto di pesantezza, in 'Felicità' la parola testimonia, colla sua lievità, della meta raggiunta, o quasi raggiunta:

Vagabondaggio, evasione, poesia,  
cari prodigi sul tardi! Sul tardi  
l'aria si affina ed i passi si fanno  
leggeri.

È l'emblema di *Parole*, di *Ultime cose*, di tutta l'ultima o penultima poesia di Saba.<sup>1</sup>

The all-too-human exhilaration of 'Felicità' is thus presented as a consequence of the dual *senex-cum-puer* awareness which 'Trasformazione' had heralded. The 'cari prodigi' blossom in old age, but they are nonetheless anchored in a puer phenomenology of 'vagabondaggio, evasione, poesia' present in the *Canzoniere* from its very beginning, and which *Autobiografia* had freed from the maternal curse. The liberation and celebration of this sphere constitutes the background to the whole of Volume Three, not only as a theme, but as the very perspective from which things are experienced, the 'emblema' in which they are recapitulated.

As such, and despite the very visible differences between Saba's *terza stagione* and his output before *Parole*, there exists a strong narrative and psychological link between the novelty of the third volume and what precedes it. The programme which stood at the beginning of Volume Two, 'fare in me di molte e sparse/ cose una sola e bella' (251), is now realized and, even if in an imperfect and all-too-human form, it is the radically new position from which the poetic protagonist speaks:

Ma il lettore del *Canzoniere* avverte, arrivato a questo punto, qualcosa di nuovo, come una nuova strana primavera. È la primavera che segue, per Saba, alla crisi del *Piccolo Berto*; una grande chiarificazione interna, alla quale risponde un uguale illimpidimento della forma....

La novità di *Parole* (novità rispetto alla precedente poesia di Saba) è data, prima di ogni altra cosa, dall'assenza quasi completa di ogni elemento narrativo e discorsivo; egli non è mai stato così 'lirico' come in questo periodo.

L'altra, e più profonda, novità è – come abbiamo detto – di carattere, prima che formale, psicologico. Essa forma la ragione intima di *Parole*. Il poeta ne aveva – s'intende – perfetta coscienza....

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<sup>1</sup> Saba, *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, 296.

Il poeta di *Parole e Ultime cose* ha separato nell'anima sua l'odio dall'amore... ha vinta cioè l'ambivalenza affettiva, che lo aveva fatto tanto soffrire e dalla quale pure tante sue poesie erano nate. Egli non potrebbe più, oggi, scrivere le *Fughe*. Le voci sono diventate *una voce*....

Saba sente con gioia che qualcosa di nuovo e di propizio è nato nella sua anima; è questa gioia che lo fa adesso, anche nel dolore, poetare. La sua Musa è diventata, oltre che più limpida, più lieta.<sup>2</sup>

This transformation at the core of the poetic voice is given further solidity and plausibility by the repercussions it has on the way in which familiar but previously explosive poetic nuclei are revisited. The poem 'Donna' for instance articulates a much changed position toward the feminine:

Quand'eri  
giovinetta pungevi  
come una mora di macchia. Anche il piede  
t'era un'arma, o selvaggia.

Eri difficile a prendere.

Ancora

giovane, ancora  
sei bella. I segni  
degli anni, quelli del dolore, legano  
l'anime nostre, una ne fanno. E dietro  
i capelli nerissimi che avvolgo  
alle mie dita, più non temo il piccolo  
bianco puntuto orecchio demoniaco. (458)

The poem amounts to a stunning reconciliation with Lina and with the Feminine in general. The removal of fear ('più non temo...') is given as the primary cause of this late re-encounter, and also produces a specific stylistic choice. The tone is, from the initial diminutive 'fanciuletta', light-hearted, and reminds one of Saba's treatment of his *fanciulle* rather than that of his wife. Particularly in the last line an unusual irony is detectable in the juxtaposition of 'demoniaco' with the funny sounding 'puntuto'. The protagonist's mocking of his past fears opens to the recognition of the unique role that Lina has played in his life, and is also a further fruit of the assimilation of the Nietzschean and Stirnerian wisdom which admonishes one to kill fear through lightness and laughter.

Saba's comments on this poem revolve precisely around the overcoming of the presence of fear:

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<sup>2</sup> Saba, *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, 279- 82.

‘Donna’ – la penultima poesia di *Parole* – canta la vittoria del poeta su alcuni suoi interni conflitti, ai quali sono dovuti gli accenti misogini sparsi qua e là per il *Canzoniere*. Egli non teme più adesso la donna, la ‘pallida sognatrice di naufragi’, di cui avvolge alle sue dita i capelli nerissimi; né dietro a quei capelli il ‘piccolo – bianco puntuto orecchio demoniaco’. È una donna precisa, ma è anche la donna. L’una e l’altra avevano molto fatto soffrire il poeta; da quella sofferenza e da quella paura egli afferma di essersi liberato appena alle soglie della vecchiaia.<sup>3</sup>

Such an admission that misogyny is related to fear of women is in itself a very radical statement for the time. It is also an important retrospective reassessment of the underlying factors informing the debate on womanhood raging after the publication of Weininger’s *Geschlecht und Charakter*. For Saba to state that a loathing of women, which was almost *à la page* at the beginning of the century, was due to a male projection of fear, suggests that this kind of interpretation might be applied to the broader social phenomenon in general and not only to his personal case. Indirect confirmation of this comes from a number of *Scorciatoie*, where Saba repeatedly shows his fondness for a psychological interpretation of broad cultural and historical processes.<sup>4</sup>

Let me also stress that Saba claims that he is speaking in the poem of a woman (Lina), but also of the Woman, and that this overlapping between an individual woman and the general concept of femininity affected his poetry and his relationship with Lina (‘L’una e l’altra avevano fatto soffrire il poeta’). The point at which we have arrived in the *Canzoniere* has already given us ample evidence of this constant interplaying and overlapping of the literally biographical with the mythical and the archetypal. Saba’s statement in *Storia e cronistoria* is however further proof that his general *démarche* in the *Canzoniere* is more akin to Jung’s symbolic and archetypal reading of psychological events than to Freud’s more literal understanding of them.

Lina appears also in another poem, ‘Confine’, in a more intimate and familiar situation than in ‘Donna’:

Parla a lungo con me la mia compagna  
di cose tristi, gravi, che sul cuore  
pesano come una pietra; viluppo  
di mali inestricabile, che alcuna  
mano, e la mia, non può sciogliere.

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<sup>3</sup> Saba, *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, 303.

<sup>4</sup> See in particular the *scorciatoie* number 4, 6, 7, 10, 12, 13, 22, 23, 32, 33, 34, 36, 43, 72, 101, 116, 123, 125, 128, 135, 141, 150 in Saba, *Tutte le prose*.

Un passero

della casa di faccia sulla gronda  
posa un attimo, al sol brilla, ritorna  
al cielo azzurro che gli è sopra.

O lui

tra i beati beato! Ha l'ali, ignora  
la mia pena secreta, il mio dolore  
d'uomo giunto a un confine: alla certezza  
di non poter soccorrere chi s'ama. (438)

After reading the first stanza we might think we are witnessing a situation already familiar from *Trieste e una donna*. Lina occupies a polarity of heaviness and sorrow and is shown in the typical act of *querelarsi* which Saba associates with her and with his mother. The second stanza breaks free of the enclosed family scene, evoking the lightness of a 'passero' with which Saba identifies his longing for lightness and freedom<sup>5</sup>. But the identification, as in Leopardi's 'Il passero solitario', is only partial, since the old poet is brought down in the third stanza by his 'pena secreta', towards a *locus* of heaviness and suffering which corresponds to Lina's 'viluppo di mali inestricabile'. In the final stanza the initial situation of potential contrast is therefore given a novel outcome; Lina's heavy element does not alienate her husband from her, but represents a point of meeting once he recognises her existential suffering as his own as well. The poem works as a mirror, in which both characters reflect the personal sorrow that a lifetime has accumulated within them.

'Donna' is therefore concerned not only with Lina but also with the poetic protagonist's integration of senex virtues such as endurance of pain, resignation and awareness of limits. These are elements that he found no less formidable to assimilate in Volume One and Two than the puer virtues he was so eagerly after. The weakness of the male polarity resulted in fact in the fear of being imprisoned and stifled by attitudes he associated with the dominating female presences in his life. In particular, as the poem's title makes clear, the crucial psychological aspect is the assimilation of the senex awareness of borders and limits, which runs counter to but complements the puer's volatility and open-endedness. Saba's final admission of the impossibility of 'soccorrere chi s'ama' states his own human shortcomings toward Lina, and is also the recognition of the irreducibility and separateness of each personal destiny, a hard lesson in individual responsibility.

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<sup>5</sup> Saba, *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, 287.

Apart from the two poems on Lina and one composed after the death of the wet-nurse, boys constitute the collection's dominating poetic presence. In this respect the fairly large number of puer poems in both *Parole* and *Ultime cose* reconnects with Volume One and in particular with the corpus of situations developed from *Trieste e una donna* to *Cose leggere e vaganti*. In Volume Two puer poems had almost totally disappeared, mainly because of an emphasis on internal symbolic events to the detriment of external representations. Here instead Saba resumes his more extroverted poetic mode: his *fanciulli* come back in common Triestine surroundings with their familiar phenomenology of lightness, mischievousness and sensuality.

In *Parole* the main nucleus celebrating them are the 'Cinque poesie per il gioco del calcio' which, unusually for Saba, immediately elicited enthusiastic critical reactions upon their publication.<sup>6</sup> These five poems are outwardly concerned with football, but inwardly they focus on the moments of euphoria and expectation shared by the spectators attending a match:

Sui gradini un manipolo sparuto  
 si riscaldava di se stesso.  
 .....

Piaceva  
 essere così pochi intirizziti  
 uniti,  
 come ultimi uomini su un monte,  
 a guardare di là l'ultima gara. (442)

These lines from 'Tredicesima partita' testify to a feeling of shared festivity central to Saba's longings, and on which he dwells in *Storia e cronistoria*: 'Le sue poesie sportive ripetono, in forma arrovesciata, il motivo del "Borgo": invece del dolore di non poter mai assomigliare alla maggioranza degli uomini, cantano la gioia di assomigliarle.'<sup>7</sup>

The statement is in itself broadly pertinent and in tune with the third volume's more resolved psychological state, but it does warrant two qualifications. First, Saba's desire to overcome his isolation often tends to be resolved in a partial merging within an all-male group engaged in activities which are culturally seen as typically male, like being a soldier or, to a lesser extent but still prominently in the 1930s, going to the stadium. This desire can be expressed in more comprehensive terms (in 'Il borgo') as the need to overcome individual isolation from other human beings in general, but this

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<sup>6</sup> Saba, *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, 288.

<sup>7</sup> Saba, *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, 290.

notwithstanding the gendered aspect related to familiarity with other males is particularly prominent and poetically productive throughout the *Canzoniere*.

Second, as with the *Versi militari*, the identification is present but nonetheless partial. The poet looking at the young players in the first poem ‘Squadra paesana’ declares himself to be ‘dagli altri/ diversamente – ugualmente commosso.’ The ‘diversamente’ can refer to the fact that Saba is a poet, or any rate a man with a particular sensibility which sets him apart from the crowd. Another explanation however resides in the homoerotic glance that the poet casts toward the players. ‘Squadra paesana’ is in fact a hymn to the beauty and energy of young male bodies at play:

Anch’io tra i molti vi saluto, rosso  
alabardati,

sputati  
dalla terra natia, da tutto un popolo  
amati.

Trepido seguo il vostro gioco.

Ignari

esprimete con quello antiche cose  
meravigliose  
sopra il verde tappeto, all’aria, ai chiari  
soli d’inverno.

Le angosce,  
che imbiancano i capelli all’improvviso,  
sono da voi sì lontane! La gloria  
vi dà un sorriso  
fugace: il meglio onde disponga. Abbracci  
corrono tra di voi, gesti giulivi.

Giovani siete, per la madre vivi;  
vi porta il vento a sua difesa. V’ama  
anche per questo il poeta, dagli altri  
diversamente – ugualmente commosso. (440)

There is something extremely uninhibited and elemental in the opening image of the players appearing in the spectators’ field of view as if they had just been spat out from the earth. They are thereby imbued with an archaic and atemporal quality, a sensual energy, their very movements generating a mythical aura of ‘antiche cose meravigliose’ crowned by the final apotheosis (‘la gloria...’). Poems in praise of male athletes make one of course think of ancient Greece, and indeed ‘Squadra paesana’ amounts to a modern recreation of that ethos and its underlying homoeroticism.

Hence the 'diversamente' must be seen also to include Saba's homoerotic look as a determinant facet of his outsider's sensibility. The fracture is described more explicitly in the fourth poem, 'Fanciulli allo stadio'. In the first two stanzas Saba describes the rowdy but endearing exhilaration of a group of boys attending a match, while in the last the focus moves to the players who are passing by the wall where the youths are sitting:

Odiosi di tanto eran superbi  
passavano là sotto i giocatori.  
Tutto vedevano, e non quegli acerbi. (443)

The beauty and glow of the 'acerbi', which is so apparent to the poet, goes totally unnoticed. The lines dramatise the hiatus between the surrounding heterosexual glance and the protagonist's homoerotic sensibility, which sets the ignored beauty of the *fanciulli* at the centre of his private visual perspective.

The theme of 'Confine' i.e. the acceptance of borders and of psychological separation between subject and object, also pertains to puer representations of this phase. Throughout Volume One and Two figures of boys remind Saba too closely of his own painful youth and adolescence not to be invested with his psychological needs. The very rhetorical framework deployed revealed this tendency: in 'Glauco' and 'Guido' the boys were engaged in a dialogue with the poet as if they were his *alter ego*, in 'Fanciullo' the demeanour of the boy in question was directly compared with an aspect of the poet's sensibility, while Glauco's revisitation in 'La casa della mia nutrice' (*Cuor morituro*) aimed at establishing the greater psychological proximity between poet and puer in the period of maturity.

Such a framework is abandoned from *Parole* onwards in favour of more objectified representations of puer epiphanies, which Saba had developed from *Trieste e una donna* to *Cose leggere e vaganti*. These mainly revolve around the contrast between the dullness and lethargy of the surrounding environment and the luminosity the boy brings into the picture, as in 'Sobborgo':

Vecchio sobborgo improvvisato e squallido,  
già campagna sassosa, poi conquista.

Sul tetto di una casa cresce l'erba,  
come sui resti di un incendio. Pochi  
passi più in là c'è il Pastificio, il rosso  
suo fumaiolo. Ma la giostra suona  
all'ultima miseria delle cose,

alle merci che sembrano rifiuti,  
alle facciate delle case invase  
di una lebbra che ieri era colore,  
e rallegrava lontano la vista.

Come diverso il giovane barista,  
pure nato di te, da te si sente!  
Mi fa un caffè come un trionfo, e i buoni  
occhi in volto gli ridono sportivi. (455)

This poem is characteristic of Saba's late manner in that personal observations and projections are absent, the three blocks (introduction of the 'sobborgo', its description, and the apparition of the puer) being paratactically juxtaposed in a manner mastered by Saba from *Autobiografia* onwards. The poetry proceeds through images rather than through discursive means without losing readability.

The first two stanzas consist of a bird's eye view of the suburban setting and are concerned with the realm of time where things grow, decay and eventually die. The final apparition of the 'barista' introduces the redeeming moment of festivity into this background, suspending for an instant the flow of time. His eyes are 'sportivi', an adjective Saba admits to have sprung from the world of 'Cinque poesie'<sup>8</sup>, and which thus indirectly confirms that the epiphanic moment is always linked in the *Canzoniere* to the corporeal presence of the boy and to its latent energy. The epiphany is little more than the making of a coffee, and yet at the same time a 'trionfo', something possessing the beauty and allure of an athletic gesture.

An identical pattern appears in 'Frutta erbaggi' where the even more compressed images guarantee a sharper *chiaroscuro* effect between the dimness of an old shop and the sudden and mysterious entrance of a 'fanciullo... imperioso':

Erbe, frutta, colori delle bella  
stagione. Poche ceste ove alla sete  
si rivelano dolci polpe crude.

Entra un fanciullo colle gambe nude,  
imperioso, fugge via.

S'oscura  
l'umile botteguccia, invecchia  
come una madre.

Di fuori egli nel sole  
si allontana, con l'ombra sua, leggero. (457)

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<sup>8</sup> Saba, *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, 301.

A poem like this shows how far Saba has progressed and yet remained himself. The same poetic instruments deployed in 'Sobborgo' are also present here, in particular a paratactic construction which is made particularly lapidary by the complete lack of conjunctions. Such an intensification of the individual word or image could easily give rise to a rarefied and allusive poetry, where images follow each other in blocks, the lack of a clear link between them heightening the intensity and mystery of each individual item. Not so with Saba, who always manages to provide his scenes with very clear spatial and descriptive coordinates. Also his lexical choices, in contrast with Ungaretti's and Montale's contemporary output, are sober and essential, geared toward the use of words which are barely lifted from the level of common usage. There is not a single word in 'Sobborgo' and 'Frutta Erbaggi' of literary/formal register, and this makes Saba's late poetry, despite the lower level of narrativity, linguistically the most accessible of his whole output. In this connection his late poetics shows stronger points of contacts with Penna's, rather than with either Ungaretti's or Montale's.

## Late Prodigies

The collection *Ultime cose* (1935-1943) occupies a defining position in the thread we have been following so far. For the first time in the *Canzoniere* the emphasis does not lie with the psychological and archetypal confrontation with same-sex desire, nor with the retrospective admission of adolescent attachments steeped in homoeroticism, nor with the projection on anonymous figures of boys of a personal longing for a relationship with another man. The book's plot witnesses one of its most compelling episodes, in that Saba dramatises a long lasting relationship with a real person, a young man whose name was Federico Almansì and whom he met in Padua in the early 1930s (born in 1924, Federico was only a boy when Saba first met him). From within the *Canzoniere's* homoerotic subplot, the momentousness of this episode can hardly be overestimated. And yet I must also stress that the centrality of this late homoerotic passion lies in the fact that, without it, the whole of the *Canzoniere's* third volume simply loses its vital centre. As we shall see in the rest of this chapter, Federico gradually becomes the most important poetic referent of Saba's late poetry, since after *Ultime cose* he also dominates the collections *Mediterranee* (1945-1946) and *Epigrafe*

(1947-1948). His presence thus comes to define the third volume in a way that can only be compared to Lina's (admittedly more intermittent) role in the first. He indeed looms larger than her, to the extent that in these years the other figures that had populated the *Canzoniere* up to now recede in the background, making only sporadic appearances. Yet this is a relationship which scholars have found no better word to describe than 'sconcertante',<sup>9</sup> and whose excision has prevented an understanding of the *Canzoniere*'s third volume more comprehensively than it is the case for the previous two.

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

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

Simile a me e dissimile, ribelle  
 e docile. Lo guardo  
 a me vicino respirare come  
 un figlio fuor d'ogni speranza nato  
 tenera madre. (470)

Federico's appearance is represented as the fulfilment of a history of longing and desire which reaches back to the poetic subject's adolescence: 'il raggio che primo la beò: un amico.' The links between the poem and the *Canzoniere*'s wider homoerotic text are precise, and they lead us back specifically to the year 1924, a crucial one in connection with Saba's confrontation of his homoerotic feelings. The title 'Amico' is in fact the same as that of the ninth sonnet ('L'amico') from *I prigionieri*, dedicated to Pylades, which forms a pair with the immediately preceding one ('L'eroe') about Orestes. Much of the second stanza of 'Amico' looks back at this previous period of homoerotic breakthrough: Almansi and Saba form a pair in which each partner is both similar and

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<sup>9</sup> Stelio Mattioni, 'Problemi aperti per una biografia di Saba', in *Atti del convegno internazionale 'Il punto su Saba'*, 11-18, 15.

dissimilar like Orestes and Pylades, and the oxymoronic characterisation of Federico as 'ribelle e docile' echoes that of Pylades as 'cauto e audace' (281).

We might pause to wonder if Saba's prolonged sublimation of his desire for young men, and its sudden and unexpected release, is leading him to identify Federico straightforwardly with the imaginary companion he had dreamt of for years, in other words, if the poetic figure of Federico gets crushed under the weight of the homoerotic longings and fantasies which Saba-protagonist has more or less secretly harboured for most of the *Canzoniere*. The answer to these questions must be no, and is already contained in the lines I have quoted. If the first two stanzas serve the purpose of linking Saba's late passion with the book's previous homoerotic plot, Federico also appears in them as a figure irreducible to any of Saba's previous imaginary lovers. The familiar constellation of 1924 is recalled but also inherently shattered by a necessary element of novelty not present in the original Oresteian pattern, and that is the considerable age gap between the partners. In the present circumstances, the relationship between the two friends inherently possesses a stronger element of asymmetry which the poetic protagonist is called to define and, as a consequence, to position himself in relation to. For Saba the cultural pattern filling the unknown of the age gap is the relationship between parent and son. Almansi is referred to as 'figlio' both in 'Amico' and in the slightly later 'Avevo' (from the collection 1944), while Saba expresses his role as that of a 'tenera madre'.

This maternal identification is of great significance. It shows that, by the end of the *à rebours* journey of the second volume, Saba has managed to shed his sense of anxiety about 'the feminine' both in others and in himself. In his late poetry the re-fashioning of his poetic figure draws with equal strength from both female and male *topoi*. As we shall see, in *Mediterranee* the relationship with Federico is explored through the prism of the Ulysses/Telemachus pair, so that Saba dramatizes his role as that of father. This depiction of himself as able to occupy both gender polarities, or rather to contain them both within himself, is an extremely self-aware and liberating statement in terms of the accepted gender discourse of the mid-1930s. It is moreover neither isolated nor occasional, since Saba's late poetic self-representations (as we have seen with the *puer-cum-senex* configuration) are all of a dual nature and embody the integration of previously conflicting aspects of his personality.

Thus the poems for Almansi are radically different from all of Saba's previous love poetry also because they fall after a major episode of discovery and self-

understanding. They represent not only the first real homoerotic relationship that we witness in the *Canzoniere*, but also a new image of Saba-protagonist in the role of lover. Saba's relationship with Federico is devoid of the elements of projection and compensation which marred the poet's marriage to Lina and gave it its typical mixture of unappeasable need, self-guilt and aggressive rejection. After having acknowledged the link with the past, and with the dreams forged in the past, the self which speaks in the third and fourth stanzas of 'Amico' acknowledges and accepts more defined personality boundaries than he previously had been able to do. The object of love is a fully separate person with an inscrutable destiny ahead of himself:

In breve partirà, per la sua via  
andrà, dubbia e difficile. Alle angosce  
dei miei anni in discesa lascerà  
egli la casta dolcezza di un bacio.

Ma, se il tempo gli orrori suoi precipita,  
a serena letizia oggi si è volta  
per lui la mente mia.

To this maturity corresponds the awareness of the necessarily limited role which the poet foresees for himself in Federico's young life: 'Alle angosce/ dei miei anni in discesa lascerà/ egli la casta dolcezza di un bacio.' This limited role is, of course, similar to the function of a parent, who watches over his/her child until he/she will be ready to leave and face the world. It is a specific emotional constellation which from the start gives a parental tone to Saba's rapport with Federico, recurring also in 'In treno' ('Ma tu muti conforme alla tua legge,/ e il mio rimpianto è vano', 499).

These multifarious aspects are all skilfully condensed in 'Amico'. In four brief stanzas Saba manages first to place Federico's arrival in his world within the story of homoerotic longing which is one of the *Canzoniere*'s main leitmotifs. The episode thus acquires something of an *anamnesis*, and yet Saba's parental role cannot leave any doubt as to the fact that the relationship in question presents elements ranging beyond the patterns into which he had previously shaped his desires. In the last two stanzas the novelty of the situation is matched by a renewed maturity of the poetic protagonist, who while praising the miraculous effects of this belated passion remains all too aware of the pragmatic limitations to which it is and will be subjected.

When we turn to the rest of the collection, we notice that Federico's first characterisation in terms of light imagery ('il raggio/ che primo la beò') gains in strength thanks to the general sense of darkness and exhaustion surrounding his

appearance. Throughout *Ultime cose* Saba exploits the contrast between the desolate background of his life in these years and Federico's growing luminosity to create powerful *chiaroscuro* effects:

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

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

In other cases, the balance between light and darkness, and life and sterility, is tipped in favour of the former. Federico manages to shatter the barren immobility of Saba's life, performing a number of 'prodigi' which in the old poet's eyes are first and foremost the miracles of youth. This theme appears for instance in 'I morti amici' which opens with the following quatrain:

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

Here too Federico is associated with light as that which gives life; he is a luminous 'prodigio' enlivening and resurrecting what the poet thought dead. The boy acts as the silent referent through which Saba can renew a connection with his inner world, at a time when the onset of old age lies as a patina of exhaustion and ending on all the presences and situations which had characterised the *Canzoniere*.

In 'Dall'erta' he goes to the point of staging a re-visitation in the company of Federico of typical corners of Trieste. These spaces are at once real and seen by Federico for the first time, and also poetic and hence already known to him through his mentor's poetry. Thanks to the intensity and intimacy of their connection, Saba finds it worth sharing a world which otherwise would appear residual to him: 'Tutto un mondo che amavo, al quale m'ero/ dato, che per te solo oggi rivive' (473). In these lines Federico is elevated to the role of exclusive interlocutor of the poet's late reawakening. He starts being represented as the referent of an intimate amorous discourse which, as

we shall see, extends beyond *Ultime cose* to *Mediterranee* and *Epigrafe*, and constitutes the central dramatic episode of the third volume.

In the poems on Federico Saba moreover reaches a vehemence and explicitness in the expression of same-sex passion which do not find any match in the *Canzoniere*'s preceding poetry. In contrast with the epic and more narrative tone of the second volume, the third possesses, mainly thanks to Federico's presence, a far more extroverted lyrical quality. The most striking lines are those where Saba's feelings are directly expressed, from 'se il tempo gli orrori suoi precipita,/ a serena letizia oggi si è volta/ per lui la mente mia' (470) to the exhilarated admission of a 'tenerezza/ immensa, quasi disumana!' (490). This tone of lyrical elation climaxes in the poem 'Treno' where, referring to a period of separation from Federico, the poet laments: 'Straziato è il mio cuore come sente/ che più non vive nel tuo petto. Tace/ ogni altra angoscia per questa' (499). It is worth reminding ourselves that such direct expressions of homosexual passion were extremely rare in the 1930s. If we look beyond Italy at contemporary European experiences, they can be only compared in their scope and quality to Cavafis' poems and to Lorca's *Sonetos del amor oscuro*. Significantly though Cavafis' poetry could only be circulated privately during his lifetime, while Lorca's homoerotic masterpiece, though written in 1935, had to wait until 1983 for publication.

Within *Ultime cose* the poems on Federico perform the function of a mini love *canzoniere*, which narrates the experience of a passion whose importance rests on two factors. It is the fulfilment of a forbidden desire with which Saba had struggled until he had reached maturity, and as such it functions as an element of continuity with his past experiences. But in view of the specific circumstances onto which it bursts, this love is also represented as a shock tearing apart the fabric of a life which was beginning to close on itself. In this last respect, we must further investigate the boy's role in the wider context that the collection depicts.

*Ultime cose* is in fact distinguished by a pendular movement between the love object and surrounding factors which is reminiscent of *Trieste e una donna*'s double focus on marriage and the city. In *Ultime cose* the background is more abstracted and symbolic, its barrenness and inhospitability symbolising the onset of old age. This general climate is announced in the opening poem 'Lavoro':

Un tempo  
la mia vita era facile. La terra  
mi dava fiori frutta in abbondanza.



cataclysm ('Amico': 'se il tempo gli orrori suoi precipita', 470) and dark foreboding ('Anche un fiato di vento': 'Sotto il cielo coperto è volta l'ansia/ di tutti ad una raffica', 478), coalesces into a grim and desolate background which, particularly in imagery and lexicon, appears close to Montale's contemporary wasteland in *Le occasioni* (1939) and *Finisterre* (1943). The culminating example of this climate is the poem 'Il vetro rotto' where images of a dark storm, an abandoned wind-swept house and shattering glass express the desolation and anxiety pressing upon the poet from the outside:

Tutto si muove contro te. Il maltempo,  
le luci che si spengono, la vecchia  
casa scossa a una raffica e a te cara  
per il male sofferto, le speranze  
deluse, qualche bene in lei goduto.  
Ti pare il sopravvivere un rifiuto  
d'obbedienza alle cose.

E nello schianto  
del vetro alla finestra è la condanna. (493)

The similarly allusive images we find in Saba and Montale are a poetic response to the impossibility of speaking openly about Fascism and war before the liberation of Italy.<sup>10</sup> The apocalyptic and annihilating imagery creates a sense of progressive and unstoppable sinking into darkness and violence which however could not be translated into an explicitly political statement. The appearance of *engagé* poetry in Italy dates from the post-war years (Quasimodo being the most renowned example), though Saba pioneered the genre after *Ultime cose* in the collection *1944*, written in Florence in the same year *after* the city had been liberated from the Germans.

But there is a further element which links *Ultime cose* to Montale's contemporary production. As the figure of Clizia punctuates with her epiphanies a landscape of anguish, war and destruction in *Mottetti* and *Finisterre*, *Ultime cose* has at its centre the love *canzoniere* about Federico. But the way in which Saba brings together a very private event with the storm of history shows the firmly anti-idealistic outlook which places him outside Italian poetic practice in so many fundamental respects. Federico is in fact never charged with messianic responsibilities, nor is his figure amplified and elevated through the *Stil Novo* references surrounding Clizia. Federico's *prodigi* are all played within Saba's personal sphere, without any connection or effect being drawn between them and the external historical reality. The boy is the

bringer of a renewed sense of life when the poet, under the double pressure of age and external events, saw the world and his energies crumble, but he is in no way a saviour beyond Saba's emotional sphere.

Clizia's redemptive role makes a more and more fragile and intermittent presence in the context of the collections in which she appears, so that eventually she must bid farewell 'per entrar nel buio'<sup>11</sup> of the apocalypse of history. Conversely in *Ultime cose* we can trace a progressive hiatus between the wasteland in the background and the exhilaration brought about by Federico. The final exclamation of 'Quando un pensiero',

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

testifies to Saba's enduring attachment to life, and to the *prodigi* springing in the darkest hour of his life from the encounter with the friend and lover he had longed for since his adolescence. Saba's distance from the dominating idealism of Italian culture is translated into the refusal to turn the object of his love into the messianic lover who continues to haunt the Italian lyric tradition well into the twentieth century.

## A Homoerotic Tradition

The passion for Federico Almansì continues to hold sway in Saba's poetic world in *Mediterranee* (1945-1946). However the context and poetic texture of the collection differ considerably from *Ultime cose*, and Federico is accordingly the object of a different kind of poetic reworking. *Mediterranee*'s general climate derives from Saba's stay in Rome for most of 1945. It was a period of great happiness testified both by his letters and the poem 'Gratitudine', written in 1946 when he had moved back to the Almansì family home in Milan: 'Un anno, e in questa stagione ero a Roma./ Avevo Roma e la felicità' (546).

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<sup>10</sup> *Ultime cose* was published in 1944 in a semiclandestine edition in Lugano by Gianfranco Contini. Montale's *Finisterre* could only likewise appear in Lugano in 1943.

<sup>11</sup> Eugenio Montale, 'La bufera', in *Tutte le poesie* (ed. by Giorgio Zampa), Milano: Mondadori, 1994, 197.

Besides the sense of relief after having escaped turmoil and prosecution, Saba's stay in Rome seems to have had a decisive impact on his imagination and cultural awareness. *Mediterranee* is in fact a celebration of classical *topoi* and of the cultural space of the Mediterranean, which Saba sees in the poem 'Ebbri canti' as the crucible from which the classical, Christian and Jewish heritage have sprung:

Ebbri canti si levano e bestemmie  
nell'osteria suburbana. Qui pure  
– penso – è Mediterraneo. E il mio pensiero  
all'azzurro s'inebbria di quel nome.

Materna calma imprevedibile è Roma.  
S'innamora la Grecia alle sue sponde  
come un'adolescenza. Oscura il mondo  
e lo rinnova Giudea. Non altro  
a me vecchio sorride sotto il sole. (543)

The role of Rome as catalyst for the rediscovery of the ancient heritage is something that Ungaretti experienced as well and which forms one of the sources of inspiration of his collection *Sentimento del tempo* (1919-1935). In Ungaretti's case the episode amounts to the delayed encounter of an Italian who had grown up in Egypt and spent his formative years in Paris with the roots of his national culture. Considering Saba's outsider position as a Triestine poet born and raised when Trieste was not yet part of Italy, a similar background feeling also informs his case.

However the re-appropriation of classical heritage serves for Saba also a specifically homoerotic purpose, providing him in particular with material from Greek mythology which he could use to represent his relationship with Almansi. The first poem of the collection concerning Federico ('Il ratto di Ganimede') is a reworking of a well established classical homoerotic *topos*, indeed of one of the most enduring ones in Western culture. It is also not secondary to point out that, according to Saba's own account, Federico was somehow instrumental in the writing of the poem.<sup>12</sup> This said, my reading of it will also focus on the way in which the Zeus-Ganymede relationship is a means for Saba to articulate the relationship between father and son, both in the shape of his parental role vis-à-vis Federico and in connection to his relationship with his own

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<sup>12</sup> 'Federico ha trovato fra le sue vecchie carte, l'abbozzo di una poesia che gli avevo spedita da Trieste. Era proprio un abbozzo. Ma mi sono accorto che in quell'abbozzo si poteva cavare qualcosa; ne ho cavata infatti una delle mie poesie più "belle". L'immagine dell'ultimo verso è presa da un quadro non ricordo più se di Rembrandt o di Rubens, o forse di un altro, nel quale si vede Ganimede rapito dall'aquila che, dallo spavento provato, fa pipì.' (Saba, *Atroce paese che amo*, 53.)

father. By doing so Saba manages to encapsulate in the same myth two sets of concerns, his longing for his father and his desire for other men, in an even more compressed way than with his handling of the story of Orestes.

By using the myth in such a way Saba is brilliantly exploiting for the purpose of his own mythobiography an enduring ambiguity in the traditional interpretation of it. As Saslow has demonstrated, the story of Ganymede was already the object of contrasting interpretations in the Greek world starting with Plato. The *Phaedrus* acknowledges Xenophon's interpretation of the myth as an allegory of the rapturous ascent of the soul toward the divine. Dante's reworking of the rape of Ganymede (*Purgatorio*, IX. 19-24) derives from this exegetic line. But in the *Laws* Plato warns that the episode was conceived by the Cretans to justify their cult of pederasty. This interpretation reveals the level of unease already surrounding the myth's blatant homoerotic meaning in high classical times and which often resulted in attempts to neutralise it through a spiritual interpretation.<sup>13</sup>

The use of the myth as an episode of spiritual rapture often subsequently depended on a conflation of Zeus's role as Father of the gods and mankind with the Christian godhead. The axis Ganymede/Zeus is comparable to Jesus/the Father, the very verticality (iconographic but also symbolic) of their mutual position signalling a reclaiming of the son by the father into a sky-bound dimension where the relationship with the mother and the earthly element is marginalised. Images of Ganymede's rape and of Christ's ascent were often interchangeable in early modern England.<sup>14</sup>

Saba, who was in his youth an avid reader of Goethe's poetry, might have been familiar with his 'Ganymed':

Mir! Mir!  
In euerm Schoße  
Aufwärts!  
Umfangend umfangend!  
Aufwärts an deinen Busen,  
Alliebender Vater!<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See J. M. Saslow, *Ganymede in the Renaissance: Homosexuality in Art and Society*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986, 1-5.

<sup>14</sup> Woods, *Articulate Flesh*, 28.

<sup>15</sup> J. W. von Goethe, *Werke: Hamburger Ausgabe*, München: dtv, 1982, I: *Gedichte und Epen*, 46. Engl.: 'I am coming, coming./ Where, ah where?/ Up, a striving upward./ The clouds are floating/ Down. the clouds/ Bow to love that is yearning./ Take me, take me./ Clouds, in your lap./ Upward./ Embraced embracing!/ Upward to your breast./ All-loving father!' in J. W. von Goethe, *The Collected Works* (ed. by Christopher Middleton), Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983, I, 31-33.

Goethe's handling of Ganymede differs from most representations in that no element of coercion is present and the boy is swept upwards by a flight of clouds, his ascent toward the Father being described in the most yearning and rapturous tones. While ostensibly avoiding the myth's homoerotic connotations by re-working it in a father/son relationship, Goethe lets them back in through the ecstatic language in which the scene is presented.

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

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

Sul volto del fanciullo ombre passavano.  
Forse troppo severo il re suo padre.  
Forse anelava ai compagni

– sull'Ida  
erano molti della stessa età,

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

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

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

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

Let us concentrate first on the homoerotic significance of the myth. The iconography of the myth of Ganymede has been remarkably constant in the Western world. This stability of motifs makes every variation relatively easy to spot and helps us determine the extent to which the author either deals with homoerotic desire by implication or draws our attention to it in a more explicit fashion.

The source mentioned by Saba in relation to this poem is Rembrandt's painting 'The Rape of Ganymede' (1635, now in Dresden) from which he takes the closing image of the boy wetting himself while he is being carried upwards, a detail absent from

classical literary accounts and which to my knowledge only appears in this work. Rembrandt's painting is a point of arrival of the process of infantilization and de-(homo)sexualisation to which representations of Ganymede were subjected in the post-Renaissance period, particularly in Northern Europe.<sup>16</sup> The most beautiful young man on earth is reduced to a fat and screaming child whose pissing is an appropriate reaction in the face of a majestic and aggressive display of authority. The rape therefore appears as an episode of punishment rather than of erotic abduction. Clearly this is not the context in which Saba is operating. The reader of the *Canzoniere* is at this stage familiar with his relationship with Federico and with the ecstatic pronouncements with which *Ultime cose* abounds. Saba's Ganymede is not a little boy, but a 'pastore adolescente' who relishes aggressive fights and games with his friends. The image of pissing therefore loses the infantile connotations it has in Rembrandt and is rather suggested as being analogous to orgasm and to the rapture of homoerotic desire.

In its connotation of orgasmic rapture the image tends to make one think of Saba as Ganymede. Love poetry is in fact not usually concerned with the consequences that the poet causes on the beloved, but on how the beloved affects the poetic subject which speaks. It is therefore unlikely that Saba is describing the ecstasy that he caused Federico. Ganymede's orgasm rather recalls the general situation of *Ultime cose*, where the poet appears passive to the extent that his barrenness is being re-enlivened by the fiery passion that Federico arouses in him. However we also know that, particularly in its early years, the relationship also included a powerful master/pupil component, in which Saba had a senior role vis-à-vis the young boy. A letter to Linuccia written from the Almansis' home in Milan in 1946 gives us an intimate picture of the growing frictions caused by Federico's attempts to assert his independence from Saba's initially undisputed guiding role:

[Federico], vedendo che ho sempre ragione, mi sta odiando. Da qualche tempo (anche questo è storia naturale dell'uomo) egli è preso da un frenetico desiderio di indipendenza. Ho cercato di fargli capire che non c'era nulla di male nel fatto che, quando aveva sedici anni, abbia seguite le orme di un maestro.<sup>17</sup>

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

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<sup>16</sup> Saslow, 161-96.

<sup>17</sup> Saba, *La spada d'amore*, 162-63.

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

The myth can therefore be seen to work as a power fantasy in which Saba symbolically reverses his fear of not being powerful enough to abduct Federico and keep him as his boy. It is not possible to decide which interpretation (Saba as Ganymede or Saba as Zeus) should be accorded precedence nor is it, in my view, desirable. The use that Saba makes of this myth is particularly interesting precisely because of its flexibility, as a result of which he (as well as Federico) can assume multiple positions within the basic paradigm.

But 'Il ratto di Ganimede' also contains a powerful direct reference to the figure of Saba's father. In the poem the verb used to denote the action of rape is 'fulminare', which plays both with the suddenness and violence of the action and with the thunderbolt ('fulmine') as the prime symbol of Jupiter's paternal majesty. While writing to his friend Giordana about his own father's epiphany in the period of the composition of *Autobiografia* Saba says:

Ma *Preludio e canzonette*, e tutto quello che ho scritto prima, non è che un pallido riflesso vicino ai quindici sonetti di *Autobiografia*. Un fulgore mi sopravvenne dall'alto (non saprei esprimere quello che mi accadde altrimenti) e in uno stato d'animo che mi ha lasciato ammalatissimo, incominciai e terminai il racconto e redenzione della mia vita.<sup>18</sup>

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

J. M. Saslow, in his excellent study on the myth of Ganymede in the Renaissance, detects in Michelangelo's reworking of it a number of features which I think can be fruitfully related to Saba's version. Saslow's analysis centres on two famous drawings that the artist gave as a present to his beloved Tommaso Cavalieri.

Incidentally these drawings provided for centuries the template for endless visual reproductions of the myth of Ganymede, and as such might very well have been known to Saba. Saslow concludes that, besides representing Michelangelo's repressed sexual desire for Cavalieri, the drawings also reflect his yearning for union with a father figure, a preoccupation identifiable throughout the artist's work and biography.

In Michelangelo's identification both with Zeus and Ganymede we can follow his evolution from a son who desires the embrace of an all-powerful father figure, to an adult expressing the desire to fulfil a comparable role for a younger man:

Ganymede represented for [Michelangelo] both unconflicted desire and compensation, both the ecstatic fulfilment of his present passion and a reversal of his earlier ill-treatment by others. With his own father gone, Michelangelo the adult was now free to identify with the very role of benevolent, paternal 'Jupiter' that he had, as a younger Ganymede, so often sought in others. Beginning life as an unloved son, Michelangelo later found in his love for Cavalieri an opportunity to invert that role, and hence to resolve his frustration and redeem his own misfortune by acting toward another young man as a loving father.<sup>19</sup>

I am dwelling on this connection because the power of Michelangelo's figures looms large in Saba's imagination, particularly in view of the homoeroticism that emanates from them. Michelangelo appears to have been a source of inspiration to Saba because he had experimented with a vast repertoire of images characterised by a profound emotional bond between two males. In his work Michelangelo exhausts the symbolic implications a male same-sex couple calls for in terms of dichotomies of young/old, like/same etc... but also in terms of the overlapping of the homoerotic sphere with feelings related to the parental role.

In Saba's case we have at this stage gathered enough material to flesh out such a development with more detail. Saba starts his journey as a fatherless son, a condition which is biographical as well as symbolic. This lack in fact also affects the poetic subject's ability to feel mature and resolved enough to fulfil a role of responsibility and guidance for somebody else. Let us remember for instance that Saba's poetry in the phase of *Casa e campagna* and *Trieste e una donna* is characterised not only by its renowned bursts of misogyny, but also by an estranged relationship toward the responsibilities of fatherhood (see for instance the poem 'A mia figlia' from *Casa e campagna*). The development of the *Canzoniere* up to 1924 can therefore be seen as a

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<sup>18</sup> Saba, *La spada d'amore*, 83.

<sup>19</sup> Saslow, 53.

sort of *Telemachy* complicated by the fact that Saba experienced marriage and fatherhood without having yet met his own father.

After Saba's encounter with his father in *Autobiografia*, the poet is able to explore his homosexual dimension but also to embed into it his desire to be a father. In relation to Federico Saba plays a role which unifies his father's transgression, curiosity and lightness with a function of guidance, inspiration and care. This refashioning of himself as a father figure in old age thus surpasses the assimilation of his father's gift in *Autobiografia*, since it comes to include puer as well as senex features. The idea of fatherhood is indeed central beyond Saba's relationship with Federico, investing the broader sense of self reached by the poetic protagonist. 'Tre poesie a Telemaco', where Saba plays Ulysses to Federico/Telemachus, are immediately followed by 'Tre poesie a Linuccia' which, in view of the previous accents of *Casa e campagna*, represent a late reconciliation with his daughter. Saba thus plays father both to her and to his young lover. The 'Tre poesie a Linuccia' are in turn followed by 'Tre variazioni sulla rosa' behind which Lina's presence is dimly discernible. If the poems on Linuccia centre upon parental affection and those on Lina upon passionate love, it is only in the poems for Federico that the two emotions appear together.

A poem which can be related to 'Il ratto di Ganimede' is 'Angelo', where Saba draws this time on Christian imagery to powerfully explore the combination of elation and danger brought by Federico:

O tu che contro me vecchio nel fiore  
dei tuoi anni ti levi, occhi che all'ira  
fiammeggiano più nostra come stelle,  
bocca che ai baci dati e ricevuti  
armonizzi parole, è forse il mio  
incauto amarti un sacrilegio? Or questo  
è fra me e Dio.

Alto cielo! Mio bel splendente amore! (540)

The representation of Federico as an angel begs a comparison with the Ganymede situation since both display a movement downwards from celestial spheres and a sense of momentous and energetic apparition. In this case rather than an abduction the situation recalls an annunciation, the terrestrial lover being left in awe by the descent of his angelic beloved. Federico's youth and beauty are felt to be an element of power and allure: the verb 'levarsi' signals a surging motion like that of a tide, as if Federico's

youth made him bigger, more luminous and larger than life, the poet's old age appearing a feeble defence against such arresting luminosity.

From the very beginning Federico's movement is not only toward the poet, but also against him ('*contro* me vecchio nel fiore/ dei tuoi anni ti levi'). In the following lines this mixed characterisation continues, Federico appearing as both a fierce and fearful being ('occhi che all'ira/ fiammeggiano più nostra come stelle') and as a loving and willing partner ('bocca che ai baci dati e ricevuti/ armonizzi parole'). Let us also notice that this is the first example in the *Canzoniere* where Saba admits to 'baci dati e ricevuti'. Though it is not fully clear what kind of kissing we are here dealing with (kisses between lovers or more neutralised kissing between father and son or master and disciple?), the implication is clearly one of intimate physical reciprocity. As such it is a further development for Saba, who in his poems about boys always avoids the issue of whether he might have had real contact with them.

This ending is similar, both in its function within the whole poem and in its elated tone, to the final lines of 'Quando un pensiero' (*Ultime cose*), which read 'Oh tenerezza/ immensa, quasi disumana!' (490). In both cases a short and compact description of the relationship with Federico is closed by an exclamation by the poet which amounts to a celebration of his love. This structure differs from the tripartite one that Saba had developed during *Trieste e una donna* for his puer poems and continues to use with variations throughout his old age. When the subject is Federico the poems are usually compressed in one single block closed by one or two exclamative lines. Though this pattern is not uncommon in the late Saba and appears also in poems unrelated to Federico, such as 'Sera di febbraio', 'Prospettiva' and 'Il vetro rotto', in the homoerotic ones the closing lines become absolutely crucial. They represent an abandonment to the traditional *canto*, made personal and poignant rather than merely rhetorical by its celebration of homosexual desire, something that Saba had probably longed to cry out for a good part of the *Canzoniere* but which he only really comes to voice in his old age thanks to his relationship with Federico.

Despite the mythical resonance of their title, 'Tre poesie a Telemaco' differ both from 'Il ratto di Ganimede' and 'Angelo' in that they reflect more directly on very intimate moments of the Saba/Almansi relationship. In more than one way one gets the impression that they were meant primarily to be read by Federico and, given the fact that he and Saba were living under the same roof at the time, he might have been the first person to see them. Federico's role as their primary addressee makes of the poetic

intercourse between the old poet and the young man a crucial feature of their relationship. In a poem from *Epigrafe* (1947-1948) Saba will remind Federico of the gift of the 'Tre poesie a Telemaco', thereby also pleading for a benevolent acceptance of his latest 'dono' (563). The poem's very title, 'Lettera', brings home the point that poems on Federico not only speak about the relationship Saba enjoyed with him, but are themselves part of their dialogue.

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

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

The image of the poet staying awake will return in the later poem 'Vecchio e giovane' (*Epigrafe*), with an identical association with Federico's restless sleep. We do not know what Saba is exactly alluding to here, and whether these episodes of nocturnal anxiety are meant to be more than circumstantial. We do however know that from 1949 onwards Federico fell prey to an 'irreversibile malattia mentale che lo cancellò progressivamente dalla vita'.<sup>20</sup> 'Quasi una favola' and 'Vecchio e giovane' could therefore represent Saba's first inklings of Federico's mentally disturbed state.

In the second poem 'Metamorfosi' the element of crisis is clear and originates from within the relationship proper. It involves Federico's need for independence and a sense of adulthood, a topic that Saba addresses also in the letter to Linuccia which I have already quoted:

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

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<sup>20</sup> Saba, *La spada d'amore*, 308.

The poem's title 'Metamorfosi' makes clear how this transition toward a relationship in which Federico could accommodate his sense of adulthood was certainly very fraught and caused a sense of estrangement to both partners. There are clearly biographical elements contributing to create this new picture. The earlier poems of *Mediterranee* were written while Saba was in Rome, probably without having seen Federico since 1943 when the poet had been forced to go into hiding. They therefore still reflect their pre-war arrangement, when Federico was only a curious and eager boy. But when Saba meets Federico again in Milan in 1946 the boy has grown into a young man, whose sense of self must have also been changed by his participation in the Resistance. It is this temporal gap, in which Federico grew without the presence of his *maestro*, which very likely accounts for the clashing tones perceptible in this case.

The third poem presents us with a far more intriguing situation than the previous two. It is called 'Appena una citazione' because it includes lines from a poem by Federico followed by Saba's comments on the issue that the quotation addresses:

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

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

Un dolce corpo ti consolerà. (549)

The content of the poem is a further example of crisis of the pederastic model in that Saba forces himself to address the question of Federico's adult (hetero)sexual orientation. We know so little about Almansi that it is impossible to say if at any stage he reciprocated Saba's feelings fully. Their post-war published correspondence is scarce and was written when Federico was already mentally ill, while the pre-war letters have been lost or destroyed.<sup>21</sup> 'Appena una citazione' and letters by Saba make mention of Federico's heterosexual affairs and this element of disruption appears to have been accepted by the poet as a possible outcome of a pederastic relationship since its very beginning. I am thinking in particular of lines from *Ultime cose* which we have already discussed: 'Ma tu muti conforme alla tua legge, e il mio rimpianto è vano' (499).

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<sup>21</sup> Saba, *La spada d'amore*, 308.

The poem's most interesting feature is however the quotation of Federico's lines in italics (Federico published a collection of poetry, which Saba prefaced, in 1947). This makes of 'Appena una citazione' the *locus* where the intercourse between Saba and Federico is not only described on the page, but embedded in the very texture of the poem. It is a unique episode in the *Canzoniere* and a proof of love and of the strength of this intimate dialogue, which does not abate despite the elements of crisis revealed by individual poems. In fact the general framework of both *Mediterranee* and the following collection *Epigrafe* is the continuing dialogue between the poet and his male muse. *Mediterranee*'s first poem opens with the lines

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

while in *Epigrafe* the poet asserts that he is writing 'per gli uccelli e un amico' (559). Though Saba's muse is never exclusive, Federico is the only stable presence of these years. His characterisation as a celestial listener establishes him as the only presence in the *Canzoniere* who is not only a subject of poetry, but the interlocutor of a dialogue based on reciprocity.

Federico's characterisation as a listener allows us some further observations on the implications for Saba of a pederastic relationship. Woods remarks that in ancient Greece 'a Spartan man and his boyfriend were referred to as inspirer (*eispenēlas*) and hearer (*aītas*) respectively'<sup>22</sup> because the function of the older man was to inspire the junior partner through his example and accomplishments. This is a role that Saba certainly played and whose implications could be for instance elucidated through a detailed study of Federico's poetry. But this should not warrant our adhering to a polarised image of pederastic relationships. Indeed Woods also observes that a love of this kind

involves a verbal and sexual dialogue, by which the elder educates (draws out) the younger, less as a teacher, in the modern sense, than as a kind of muse. The man's implications become the boy's inferences, so that it often seems as if the boy comes up with the wiser speeches. This is the form taken by most of Plato's dialogues. So, as well as representing one man's silent discussion with himself, the dialogue is also an enactment of love's creative process and preaches what it practises.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Woods, *Articulate Flesh*, 118.

In other words the older man, who starts out being an inspirer, a muse, can find himself in the situation of becoming the inspired, with the younger partner performing the muse function. This aspect of reciprocity is crucial to our understanding of Saba's relationship with Almansi. A letter from Saba to Linuccia sketches the same dialogic reciprocity that Woods highlights in the Spartan pederastic model:

Quanto di questi 'piccoli spunti' che avevo dato a voce ed in iscritto al buon Federico, sono andati – temo – perduti... Ed egli – allora, e per dieci anni – vi si buttava sopra avidamente e li faceva suoi: sangue del suo sangue. E me li rendeva anche, con aggiunte osservazioni sue, che erano quasi sempre giuste.<sup>24</sup>

The poetry offers ample backing to this situation. If in fact Federico's characterisation as listener and the instances in which Saba plays on his mentorial role posit Saba in the role of the inspirer, it is also undeniable that Federico from *Ultime cose* onwards is also the presence that re-enlivens Saba's poetic world, his late muse.

It is worth insisting on the concept of a male muse because in the mythical context of *Mediterranee* Saba refers to the classical muse (in 'Ebbri canti'), while at the same time re-appropriating it from a clearly homoerotic perspective. In this connection, Lavagetto has noticed that the dialogic arrangement of this phase of Saba's poetry shows reminiscences of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*,<sup>25</sup> something very likely considering that Saba had certainly read them, and that he shows in a *scorciatoia* a specific interest for the love triangulation they articulate.<sup>26</sup> With this in mind let us consider the following lines from Sonnet 38:

For who's so dumb that cannot write to thee  
When thou thyself dost give invention light?  
Be thou the tenth Muse, ten times more in worth  
Than those old nine which rhymers invoke [.]<sup>27</sup>

Even if Saba does not come near to Shakespeare's explicitness, the elements that he scatters around this poetic phase all point to Federico as the presence which gives his invention light, the light with which Federico bursts into his residual world in *Ultime cose* and continues to shine in *Mediterranee*. This element of elation and rapture is present throughout this phase and yet, in accordance with his anti-idealistic ethos, the

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<sup>23</sup> Woods, *Articulate Flesh*, 118.

<sup>24</sup> Saba, *La spada d'amore*, 225.

<sup>25</sup> Mario Lavagetto, 'La terza stagione di Umberto Saba', in Umberto Saba, *La terza stagione. Poesie e prose dal 1933 al 1946* (ed. by Mario Lavagetto), Milano: il Polifilo, 1997, 9-23, 20.

<sup>26</sup> Saba, *Scorciatoie e raccontini*, 64.

discovery of this male muse never blinds Saba toward the painfully shifting nature of their relationship and its possible implosion.

'Tre poesie a Telemaco' are followed by 'Tre poesie a Linuccia', which in turn precede three 'Variazioni sulla rosa', whose unnamed addressee is clearly Lina. In this tripartite sequence Saba reviews the most important presences of his late years, and all nine poems taken together prepare the ground for the last one ('Ulisse'), which is also the closing one of the collection. In this poem Saba takes centre stage alone, representing his life under the sign of a perennial wandering fuelled by an erotic embracing of Life, rather than by any hope of reaching Ithaca:

Il porto  
accende ad altri i suoi lumi; me al largo  
sospinge ancora il non domato spirito,  
e della vita il doloroso amore. (556)

The reader of *Mediterranee* (and of the *Canzoniere* as a whole) is at this stage aware that this late identification with Ulysses possesses a very high homoerotic component. To the conventional connotations of Ulysses as wanderer and as husband of Penelope (Lina), Saba has added in *Mediterranee* the idea of Ulysses as father/lover of Telemachus (Federico), as well as the memory of his much desired father. A number of disparate elements thus branch out from the figure of Ulysses, and their co-presence revisits the hero's proverbial multifarious character. Yet Saba also significantly expands on Ulysses' multiplicity by including an important homoerotic element in the story. In this connection it is worth pointing out that the *Odyssey* (contrary for instance to the *Iliad*), is not a narrative usually associated with same-sex desire: one does not tend to think of Ulysses as a gay, or bisexual, hero.

Something similar had already happened, to a lesser extent, in Saba's re-working of the myth of Orestes. If in fact the homoerotic friendship between Orestes and Pylades was proverbial in classical times, the *Oresteia* as a whole, particularly as far as the psychological dynamic of Orestes vis-à-vis the figure of Agamemnon is concerned, has not traditionally been seen as a homoerotic narrative. In his re-working of the *Oresteia* and the *Odyssey* Saba therefore gives an *ante litteram* gay reading of them which manifests a greater degree of originality than the recourse to a well-established homoerotic *topos* like that of Ganymede.

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<sup>27</sup> William Shakespeare, *Sonnets and Narrative Poems*, London: David Campbell, 1992, 21.

However beyond the level of poetic originality, the feature shared by all of Saba's mythical re-workings, and which becomes apparent the more they accumulate along the *Canzoniere*'s temporal axis, is that they function as deconstructions, or better reconstructions, of the classical tradition from the viewpoint of a homosexual subject. Literally *all* instances of mythical re-appropriation in the *Canzoniere* have to do to varying degrees with homoerotic desire. For a Triestine poet who so much needed to feel a part of the 'filo d'oro' of Italian classical tradition, Saba's cultural appropriations are always inflected by his homosexuality and it is this aspect which gives them their unique power and originality. They come to constitute a personal homoerotic canon through which the poet constantly rewrites the story of his life.

## Last Dialogue

*Epigrafe* (1947-1948) is the only collection of the *Canzoniere* which Saba chose not to publish during his lifetime (it appeared posthumously in 1959). The only other case of self-censorship on this scale in his career concerns *Ernesto* which, though written in 1953-55, had to wait until 1975 to be published. In *Epigrafe* the 'scandal', rather than concerning the sexual explicitness we find in the novel, focuses on the particularly intimate nature of the poem 'Vecchio e giovane', which represents the last episode of the ongoing dialogue between Saba and Federico. In view of the extensive portrayal of Federico in *Ultime cose* and *Mediterranee*, it is not immediately clear why Saba felt that this text had to remain in a drawer until after his death. To an extent, the fact that it opens with a disarmingly sincere declaration of love ('Un vecchio amava un ragazzo'), and that the verb 'amare' is also used by the character of Federico in relation to Saba, might have contributed to the poet's concerns. At any rate, 'Vecchio e giovane' has become the most often quoted poem of the *Canzoniere*'s third volume, and indeed one of the most critically praised of all of Saba's output. In his widely influential *Poeti del Novecento* Mengaldo closes his selection from the *Canzoniere* with it, singling it out as 'uno dei più alti che Saba, e non lui soltanto nel Novecento, abbia scritto'.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Mengaldo, 197.

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

This tendency was initiated by Debenedetti, who in 1960 (one year after the poems were made public) argued that ‘la poesia “Vecchio e giovane” confessa, e teme di non essere riuscita a espiare, un pericoloso, crudele tentativo di esorcismo, per il quale Saba si valse di una persona che gli era cara. Quel tentativo fallito, come non riuscì a scaricarlo dei suoi mali, così nemmeno lo liberò dai rimorsi di averlo intrapreso.’<sup>29</sup> This ‘tentativo di esorcismo’ is brought in relation to Saba’s handling of the figure of Berto, in which Debenedetti likewise sees the poet’s doomed attempt to create an external poetic scapegoat onto which he could project his unresolved complexes. The poem is thus only incidentally concerned with Saba’s relationship with Federico<sup>30</sup>, its main stress lying on Saba’s repeated failure to face up in a fully adult way to his inner conflicts.

This interpretation enjoys to this day an unquestioned critical approval. Lavagetto concurs with Debenedetti’s use of the concept of exorcism and also states, in relation to the addressee of Saba’s poetry from *Ultime cose* to *Epigrafe*, that ‘erede di tutte le figure che popolano il *Canzoniere*, il *tu* è soprattutto la reincarnazione degli adolescenti di Saba e del loro archetipo, il piccolo Berto.’<sup>31</sup> An identical emphasis informs the essay on Saba in the Einaudi *Letteratura italiana: Le opere* (1995), where Brugnolo argues that

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<sup>29</sup> Debenedetti, 84.

<sup>30</sup> See for instance Debenedetti’s assertion that “‘Vecchio e giovane” non attinge [il suo] segreto da fatti di biografia empirica, aneddotica e, per così dire, immanente di Saba’ (*Intermezzo*, 83).

<sup>31</sup> Lavagetto, *La gallina di Saba*, 190 (the concept of exorcism) and 189 (quote).

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

'Vecchio e giovane' è dunque l'ultimo colloquio di Saba con se stesso, con il proprio 'cuor morituro', e insieme il congedo da un'opera che il poeta sente ormai staccata da sé.<sup>32</sup>

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

I also take issue with this line of interpretation because it seems to imply that the very sense of self of the *Canzoniere's* poetic protagonist is fundamentally the same at the time of *Epigrafe* as it was almost twenty years earlier when *Il piccolo Berto* was composed. This is a serious error, which seems to bypass the whole thrust of the second volume as well as the more resolved sense of self that Saba displays in the third, and which I have discussed with particular reference to the poem 'Confine' from *Parole*. There, in the final admission of 'non poter soccorrere chi s'ama' (438), Saba lucidly expressed his awareness of the separateness and irreducibility of each individual destiny, and the refusal to use others as vehicles for the appeasement of his personal traumas. I have also pointed out how a similar attitude informs from the start his poetry on Federico, for instances in the lines 'tu muti conformi conforme alla tua legge,/ e il mio rimpianto è vano' (499) from 'In treno' (*Ultime cose*). Thus the currently established critical standing on 'Vecchio e giovane' not only perpetuates a blatant form of homophobia, but is moreover led by it to overlook the significant changes in the protagonist's sense of self and in his way of interacting with others which manifest themselves in the almost twenty years separating *Il piccolo Berto* from *Epigrafe*.

This is not to deny that 'Vecchio e giovane', from its very title, is inscribed within the dialogue between senex and puer which is one of the *Canzoniere's* overarching themes. But a recognition that the senex-puer pair is used by Saba, from his poems on Orestes onwards, to articulate in the same breath intrapsychic and

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<sup>32</sup> Brugnolo, 518.

extrapsychic dynamics, cannot be used to argue that this poem has only an abstracted relevance, which can afford to leave out of the picture the homoerotic element informing it. My reading will thus assume the irreducibility of Federico's poetic persona, and will relate the issues raised in the poem to the dialogue between Saba and him which we have followed through *Ultime cose* and *Mediterranee*.

The poem in full reads:

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

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

Oblioso, insensibile, parvenza  
d'angelo ancora. Nella tua impazienza,  
cuore, non accusarlo. Pensa: È solo;  
ha un compito difficile; ha la vita  
non dietro, ma dinanzi a sé. Tu affretta,  
se puoi, tua morte. O non pensarci più. (560)

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

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

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

This is very different from claiming, as Debenedetti does and as Lavagetto and Brugnolo do after him, that Saba was uncomfortable with the poem because it showed that he had demanded that Federico fulfil an improper *psychological* function, which somehow we are asked to conceive of as having no rapport with what was actually happening between the two of them. My point is that the poem does reveal a truth more disturbing for Saba than any aspect about their story which he had previously tackled, but that this element pertains to his need to have in Federico a lover, and not only a son or disciple. Though in *Ultime cose* and *Mediterranee* Federico appears to concentrate on

himself all three functions, 'Vecchio e giovane' leaves one with the suspicion that, at the very bottom, Saba's passion for him was ultimately driven by the desire to have a male lover, something which Federico was only partially willing to fulfil.

On the other hand it is equally possible to explain this falling apart by taking external factors into account. We must remind ourselves that in 1949 Federico was committed to a mental institution where he eventually died in 1979. I have already suggested that the first of the 'Tre poesie a Telemaco' might express Saba's inklings of his deteriorating mental state (they are unambiguously voiced in his letters from 1947 onward)<sup>33</sup>. There, Saba had written

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

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

Whatever the exact reasons why Federico left Saba's world, his departure represented a blow from which Saba never recovered, what he himself called 'a colpo mortale'.<sup>34</sup> The last poem of the collection (originally meant by Saba to be the last of the *Canzoniere*) is a couplet which testifies to a mood of hopelessness and isolation and also, for the first time in his career, to a diminished sense of the worth of poetic activity: 'Parlavo vivo a un popolo di morti./ Morto alloro rifiuto e chiedo oblio' (564). If we go back to how Federico had originally burst onto Saba's world in *Ultime cose*, we will remember that his arrival was specifically charged with the re-enlivening of an inner world that Saba would have otherwise felt as residual. Now that the boy's prodigies have come to an end, the desire to sink into self-oblivion surfaces again and takes hold of Saba's last years.

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<sup>33</sup> See the letters to Lina (Milano, 13.6.46) and Linuccia (Trieste, 14.5.47 and 20.5.47) in Saba, *Atroce paese che amo*, 65, 98 and 100 respectively.

<sup>34</sup> Saba, *La spada d'amore*, 308.

After *Epigrafe* he would write three more collections, *Uccelli* (1948), *Quasi un racconto* (1951) and *Sei poesie della vecchiaia* (1953-54), which however stand in relation to the overall narrative in a less cohesive way than the previous ones. If we look at their dates, we will notice that for the first time in the *Canzoniere* the chronology is not continuous, i.e. there are temporal gaps in Saba's life that his poetry does not attempt to cover. In this period, as well as Federico's disappearance, Saba experienced Lina's prolonged sickness and eventual death, continuous poverty and extremely bad health. His letters reveal a profound sense of despair, and give further testimony of the sense of detachment from poetry-making hinted at in *Epigrafe*'s last lines<sup>35</sup>. All human relationships recede into the background, and the poet's attention is concentrated, in *Uccelli* and *Quasi un racconto*, on the birds he keeps in a cage, which become the almost exclusive referent of his last years.

This is why I am closing my analysis with *Epigrafe*, the last collection which is still an integral part of the *Canzoniere*'s narrative and of the homoerotic thread we have been following. With *Epigrafe* Saba says the last word on a passion which, from an initially unexpected miracle, establishes itself in the course of fifteen years into the driving force of his late poetry. It is indeed impossible to imagine what shape the *Canzoniere*'s third volume might have taken if this episode had not intervened to give new life to an exhausted plot. Such a close identification of a volume with a single character cannot even be claimed of Lina's presence in Volume One.

Saba's poetry for Federico also represents a very striking expansion of the *Canzoniere*'s already diverse homoerotic dimension. It adds to his mythobiography the experience of a long-standing relationship with another man, something that apart from his adolescent experiences had only surfaced in a sublimated and phantasmatic way in the rest of his life. It is for Federico that Saba writes his most honest, intimate and compelling body of homoerotic poetry, which ranges from *Ultime cose*'s elated exclamations of love, to the richness of *Mediterranee*'s mythical reworkings, to the final and sober solemnity of 'Vecchio e giovane'. His greatest skill however resides in the capacity to make his passion with Federico resonate with the key elements of the *Canzoniere*'s homoerotic plot, in a way which makes poems like 'Amico' (*Ultime cose*), 'Il ratto di Ganimede' e 'Tre poesie a Telemaco' (*Mediterranee*) and 'Vecchio e giovane' (*Epigrafe*) outstanding examples of his creatively fruitful preoccupation with the male personae through which he reads the story of his life. In this sense these and

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<sup>35</sup> See the letter to Nora Baldi (Gorizia, 30.1.1957) in Saba, *Atroce paese che amo*, 283.

other poems, together with the use of a homoeroticised Ulysses as his last alter-ego, represent the most advanced examples of his modern mythopoeia and his most self-conscious attempts to retrace or reinvent a homoerotic dimension in the tradition that was so important to him.

## Conclusions

At the beginning of this study I claimed that same-sex desire is both pervasive in the *Canzoniere* and central to the development of its plot, in other words, that it has quantitative as well as qualitative importance. Its *a priori* excision not only deprives the book of one of its most substantial thematic and psychological strands, but also seriously jeopardises its overall legibility and narrative cohesiveness. As a driving element of Saba's journey through various configurations of consciousness, same-sex desire is also intimately linked to the mythopoeic approach which comes to inform the *Canzoniere* as a whole. This in turn raises a number of questions concerning the ideological use that Saba makes of traditional materials and of how these are specifically deployed by him to construct a homoerotic awareness.

All these threads have been pursued through the last three chapters, which together offer the kind of 'reconstruction' of the *Canzoniere*'s plot that I promised in the Introduction. It has been a reconstruction centred on the characters, events, and circumstances which come to characterise the book in an unforgettable way, as well as on the psychological resonance of this varied external world on Saba's psyche, and on his ethical urge to rescue himself from a state of self-division in the attempt to gain a fuller sense of awareness. As the material has been vast, and I have often had to go into individual poems in great detail, I propose to now look back in an abbreviated form at the findings of the last three chapters. This appears to me the best way to gain an overview of the narrative's key developments from beginning to end foregrounding its organic intertwinement with the main issues I have raised at the start of this study.

The baseline of the whole of Volume One is the state of (self)-estrangement suffered by Saba-protagonist and which first clearly surfaces in 'Glauco'. The 'pensiero ascoso' mentioned in the poem will prove of enormous importance for the *Canzoniere*'s

following development, since it is the first hint at the more comprehensive state of *ambivalenza affettiva* from which Saba, by his own admission, will only free himself after *Il piccolo Berto*. On one level this split psychological attitude appears to inform at the root the way in which the protagonist filters his experience of the world throughout his youth, though it is important to note also that from the start it is specifically linked to his ambivalent relationship with male peers and the world they represent.

This situation is symbolically rendered in 'Glauco', but is also discernible in a more diffused way throughout the *Poesie dell'adolescenza* in all the instances in which Saba questions his sense of self in an anti-idealistic way, for instance by laying particular emphasis on the gendered dimension of identity. In poems like 'La cappella chiusa' and 'A mamma', boys' activities are explicitly depicted in contrast with what girls do, in a way which is also indirectly suggestive of the role they play in the development of children's sense of gender identity.

That Saba's overall psychological situation is linked to his fraught interaction with other men and to an ambivalent sense of his own male identity is confirmed by the second collection, *Versi militari*, where a more resolved sense of self is presented as the direct consequence of a partial identification with an all-male group engaged in stereotypically male activities. The temporary resolution of the previous condition of inner ambivalence produces a number of substantial poetic innovations, amongst which I have highlighted those pertaining to Saba's poetically unorthodox representation of the male body. This connection between a breakthrough in poetic activity and the celebration of male presences is striking, and Saba retrospectively chose to highlight it in Sonnet 11 of *Autobiografia* as one of the crucial episodes of his development both as a man and as a poet: 'Me stesso ritrovai tra i miei soldati./ Nacque tra essi la mia Musa schietta' (265).

Though the whole of *Versi militari* should be seen as an episode of psychological breakthrough, it is only in 'Bersaglio' that Saba gives us the first incontrovertible proof of the complexity of his psychological outlook before the Freudian psychoanalytical phase of 1929-1931. In contrast with the diffused sentimentality and sense of guilt exuding from 'A mamma' (*Poesie dell'adolescenza*), the focus on the relationship with his mother is this time pitiless and brings to light both the amount of aggression that Saba had accumulated toward her and his explicit refusal of the repressive and guilt-ridden Jewish upbringing she had given him. Moreover, the very dynamic described in the poem, beyond the information it conveys, is in itself

psychological to the extent that it represents a symbolic therapeutic act meant to compensate for the 'orrore' which Saba literally experienced in his infancy. The poem is of chief interest not as a confession, but as the de-literalised, sublimated representation of an instinct (matricide) which, if contemplated literally, would be unbearable.

The undercurrent of homoeroticism awoken by *Versi militari* and the poetic novelties that the partial release of desire for other men stimulates continue to make their presence felt even when Lina takes centre stage in Saba's world. For a start we have noticed that in 'A mia moglie' (*Casa e campagna*, 1909-1910) her femininity is celebrated in maternal and generative terms rather than in erotic ones, and that Saba does not display a poetic interest in the female body comparable with the one he displays toward male physiques. More decisively, the crisis of their marriage in *Trieste e una donna* (1910-1912) is accompanied by a second strand, which revolves around Saba's solitary explorations of Trieste and of the alternative set of existential concerns that the city, its public spaces and the lower strata of its population awaken in him. In this phase, in very accomplished *canzoni* like 'Il giovanetto', 'Il fanciullo' and 'Il fanciullo appassionato', he establishes boys as a fundamental presence in his world, spinning around them the poetic phenomenology and the ideological and mythical implications which we have analysed at the end of Chapter 1.

The unconventional, sensual and care-free dimension embodied by boys develops as the opposite pole to married life and this opposition is also eminently erotic. In the closing text, *Un marinaio di noi parlava*, a direct confrontation is staged between Lina as representative of heterosexual domesticity and convention and a sailor as an icon of same-sex desire and vagrancy. After this dramatic episode Lina and the concerns she represents recede into the background and the narrative appears to lose a central focus. In the following phase (which includes *La serena disperazione*, 1913-1915; *Cose leggere e vaganti*, 1920; *L'amorosa spina*, 1920, as well as the third volume's opening collection, *Preludio e canzonette*, 1922-1923) the explosive dynamics that surfaced in *Trieste e una donna* are driven underground, and Saba-protagonist is ostensibly mainly concerned with the world of light and volatile things to which the title of one of the collections refers.

Yet two titles (*La serena disperazione* and *L'amorosa spina*) also bear witness to the continuing presence of the divided consciousness hinted at in 'Glaucò' and laid bare by the crisis of *Trieste e una donna*. The consequences of this underlying psychological state are finally addressed face-to-face in 'In riva al mare' (*L'amorosa*

*spina*), which clinches the end of the first volume on a note of fragmentation and despair. The discourse is then resumed in 'Il canto di un mattino' (*Preludio e canzonette*) which brings to the beginning of Volume Two a new sense of resolve and positive expectation. What is crucial for our discourse is that in both cases boys are protagonists and that the poems are placed strategically by Saba in key positions to give insight into the deeper personal dynamics left unsolved after *Trieste e una donna* and which the rest of his poetry from the 1920s largely forbids itself to approach.

From the 1920s onwards the figure of the boy is thus endowed with a symbolic function that sets him apart from all other figures in the *Canzoniere*. It becomes the poetic persona through which Saba reads his destiny, the embodiment of a set of concerns, aspirations, ideals and longings of which a sublimated form of same-sex desire is an inseparable component. Psychologically the figure of the boy acts as the shadow which Saba constantly evokes, but whose implications (particularly in terms of attraction for other men) he does not manage to fully integrate. The world that the puer embodies performs a destructive function in relation to the protagonist's attempts at sexual and social integration, but also keeps alive the presence of an alternative dimension into which Saba will fully delve only in the course of the *Canzoniere*'s second volume.

We then come to the watershed of *Autobiografia* (1924). Saba elects his father as the presiding *numen* over the same universe that the puer had embodied up to now in a more ambivalent and fraught way. Sonnet 3 in particular is, after 'Bersaglio', another of Saba's main psychological (but pre-psychoanalytical) texts in which, by freeing the figure of his father from his mother's terrifying curse, he also frees himself and strengthens the male polarity in his universe. The result is that the world of the puer, which had previously (in particular in the phase from *Trieste e una donna* to *L'amorosa spina*) aroused self-guilt by virtue of the mother's curse, is now recognised as the 'dono' propelling the son onto his own world.

This crucial psychological and self-assertive step cannot be separated from the mythic perspective under which tendencies discernible already in the first volume are subsumed and more self-consciously elaborated. Father and Mother do not resemble the characters of a Freudian family drama, they are elevated to the semi-divine figures at the helm of 'due razze in antica tenzone' (257), whose symbolic lineages fight for control of the protagonist's psyche. This change of gear is enacted in the very texture of the poetry by the 'epic' style which Saba will also adopt in *I prigionieri* and *L'uomo*. It is

thus with the genial *mis-en-abime* of *Autobiografia* that the *Canzoniere* as a whole starts taking the shape of a mythobiography rather than of a poetic autobiography in a more general sense.

Similarly to the more circumscribed episode of liberation of *Versi militari*, in *Autobiografia* we find the narration of an episode of psychological breakthrough with a leading homoerotic component, accompanied by considerable stylistic developments and by a more resolved sense of awareness. As I remarked in relation to 'Bersaglio', the crucial point is not the confession per se of a disturbing and long-repressed nucleus, but the symbolically liberating use that the protagonist makes of this content. In *Autobiografia* Saba is partially saved by his belated identification with Ugo Poli, but in a more long-term and wide-ranging way his liberation from his previous estrangement is a question of method as much as of specific contents. In a fundamental letter on which we have dwelt, Saba equates the 'racconto' of *Autobiografia* with the concept of 'redenzione', thus foregrounding the *perspective* from which he came to tell his story as the key to understanding the process of self-fashioning that the book charts.

From a strictly homoerotic viewpoint, *Autobiografia* is also the first collection in which the multifariousness of Saba's homoerotic interests comes to the fore. Boys and the father share the same phenomenology and ideological implications, and position themselves at the opposite pole represented by Saba's mother and, to a lesser extent, by Lina. As a consequence the concept of fatherhood is eroticised and brought in close proximity to the son's homoerotic desires. The collection focuses with new-found clarity on Saba's adolescent years, stating more directly than had been the case with 'Lettera ad un amico...' from the *Poesie dell'adolescenza* that he first (and happily) experienced love as an adolescent through a passion for a male friend (Sonnets 6 and 7). Hence Saba's homoerotic universe comes to encompass his relationship with his father, his actual first experience of love, and the more symbolic and ideological concerns which he projects onto the figures of anonymous boys who throughout the narrative also remain the principle icons of his sublimated desire.

The intense homoeroticism and the self-conscious mythopoetic approach intertwined in *Autobiografia* also inform *I prigionieri* (1924) and *L'uomo* (1928), so that the three collections (which roughly occupy the second volume's central part) together represent a single episode of confrontation with the homoerotic universe brought to light by the arrival on the scene of the figure of the father. In the sonnets 'L'eroe' and 'L'amico' (*I prigionieri*) Saba makes for the first time in the *Canzoniere* use of myth in a

literal way, resorting to the story of Orestes as a template to address material similar to the one surfaced in *Autobiografia*. This time however the figures of father, son and lover are more resolutely detached from their recognisable autobiographical substratum and made the objects of a phantasmatic reworking. They are brought so close together that, particularly in the later use of the myth in the prose text ‘Tommaso Salvini e il mio terribile zio’ (1946-47), they appear as related manifestations of a single male persona. This tendency is also to the fore in the long poem *L'uomo*, where Saba deploys his heroic style in a full-blown fashion to create a male Anybody who is in part his father, in part himself, in part the man he never was and the lover he never had.

Toward the end of the volume in *Cuor morituro* (1925-1930) and *Il piccolo Berto* (1929-1931) Saba returns to his mother complex, and much of the poetry revolves around the antithetical figures of Rachele Coen and his wet-nurse Peppa (who embody the destructive and the nourishing mother respectively). The further disclosures arising from this last re-visitation, however significant in their own right, are conceptually framed by the theme of the dialogue between Saba as a mature man and Berto, i.e. between senex and puer. The programme that Saba had given himself in the ‘Finale’ of *Preludio e canzonette* (‘fare in me di molte e sparse/ cose una sola e bella’, 251) thus comes to a close with the forging of a composite and yet unitary *senex-cum-puer* awareness. The apologue ‘Trasformazione’ focuses on this new state, and promotes a kind of archetypal dual self-representation (marked by transgressive/Nietzschean overtones) to which Saba will repeatedly return throughout his late age. Indeed we have seen that the puer/senex pair becomes so rich in implications for him that we find it also outside the *Canzoniere* (in *Storia e cronistoria* and in his letters) used as the symbolic emblem of Saba’s own poetics.

The third volume must be seen in the aftermath of this catharsis. The relentless self-search and self-analysis which characterise the first two thirds of the *Canzoniere* are abandoned in favour of the more resolved and balanced emotional situation described by ‘Felicità’ (*Parole*, 1933-1934). In other poems from the same collection the consequences of this new equilibrium are brought to bear upon nuclei which had previously proved extremely unsettling, for instance Saba’s relationship with the feminine in general and with Lina more specifically (we have noted this in ‘Donna’ and ‘Confine’). Then, with *Ultime cose* (1935-1943) the *Canzoniere* witnesses one of its most momentous episodes, the bursting onto the scene of Federico Almansì. As we have noted Saba appears (in ‘Amico’ and ‘In treno’) painfully aware of the limitations of

their relationship, while at the same time he does not refrain from a lyrical and often exalted tone which marks a clear break from his more circumspect treatment of the figures of anonymous Triestine boys.

With *Mediterranee* (1945-1946) Federico is the object of a more far reaching approach. On the one hand, in the 'Tre poesie a Telemaco', Saba unflinchingly explores the growing frictions between them, scattering around elements of crisis that will eventually lead to the implosion of their relationship in the later *Epigrafe* (1947-1948). Yet the 'Tre poesie a Telemaco' themselves, as well as 'Il ratto di Ganimede' (*Mediterranee*) and 'Vecchio e giovane' (*Epigrafe*) also embed his passion for Federico within the *Canzoniere*'s preceding homoerotic plot. The story is always filtered through the template of mythical pairs like Ulysses/Telemachus, Zeus/Ganymede, Senex/Puer, so that it also functions as a recapitulation of the homoerotic presences around which Saba had come to recognise his destiny in the course of the second volume.

As I have pointed out, the way in which Saba makes use of these mythical templates is characterised by a compression of various figures (himself as an adult, Federico, his father, himself as a fatherless son etc...) into a dual pattern, which in turn generates a great level of flexibility in terms of the position occupied by a given subject within the senex/puer configuration. This means for instance that in 'Il ratto di Ganimede' we cannot claim that Saba saw himself as occupying *either* the position of Zeus *or* that of Ganymede. He can be seen as Zeus to the extent that he embodied in the early years of his passion for Federico a mentorial/senior role, though he can equally be seen as Ganymede because in much of the poetry of this phase he is lifted and re-enlivened by Federico's rapturous presence. If we isolate the theme of fatherhood the situation appears equally fluid. In relation to Federico Saba can certainly claim a parental role, but the poem also reflects on his own previous desire, *qua* son, to be 'elevated' by a powerful father. Similarly, his use of the Ulysses/Telemachus template throughout the collection both accounts for his senior role within the relationship with Federico, and also contains the memory of himself as Telemachus, the fatherless son whose very development is dependent upon a much delayed encounter with the father figure.

If all these features give to the poetry of this period a polysemantic density which recalls the phase of the second volume running from *Autobiografia* to *L'uomo*, the main difference is that Saba is not any longer searching for the male personae with which he longs to identify, but is celebrating them. Hence the defining characteristic of

the third volume in relation to the previous two is an overt lyrical tone, which first surfaces in *Ultime cose* in relation to Federico's prodigies and runs all the way to 'Vecchio e giovane's simple opening statement that 'Un vecchio amava un ragazzo' (560). That this passionate lyricism should coincide with the first real relationship that Saba had with another man since his adolescence is a further proof of the centrality of desire for other men in his psyche. This centrality is fought against in the first volume, realised and explored in the second, and celebrated in the third up to the point when, after almost fifteen years, Federico exits Saba's world in *Epigrafe*. From this point onwards the *Canzoniere's* narrative becomes fragmented and Saba appears to lose faith in the mythobiographic project to which he had devoted fifty years of his life.

I would now like to step back from the details of this narrative and from the issues that have surfaced along it. I wish to go back to what I stated in the Introduction as my original interest in Saba, which had sprung from the fact that I had discovered a homoerotic voice where I had been taught to expect a more (not only sexually) conventional kind of poetry. At the end of this study, the *Canzoniere* appears to me as one of the most original and ground-breaking works dealing with male same-sex desire in the twentieth century, and not only in an Italian context. If it does not attain the sexual explicitness of the almost contemporary poetry of Cavafis or Penna, and their more radical disregard for heterosexual normativity, it ranges beyond their scope precisely in that it traces the *emergence*, rather than the already structured presence, of a homoerotic awareness against all the odds scattered along its paths. In this sense it is truly unique, and to my knowledge no work of poetry dealing with male same-sex desire in Italian or other major languages approaches the issue of identity from such a multifaceted and long-term perspective as Saba's does.

To this I would add that the *Canzoniere* should be seen as the fundamental document with which any enquiry on homoerotic identity in twentieth-century Italian literature must concern itself. Assessments of homosexuality in Italian literature of the *Novecento*, for instance Derek Duncan's in the *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage*, tend in fact to give the impression that until the 1980s, with the novels of Aldo Busi and Pier Vittorio Tondelli, there exists no work in Italy conceptualising a homosexual subject.<sup>1</sup> Certainly Italy has neither produced early twentieth-century homoerotic masterpieces like Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig* or the volume *Sodome et Gomorre* from Proust's *Recherche*, nor the pioneering novels written in a pre-political

age by authors like Jean Genet, Hubert Fichte, Gore Vidal and James Baldwin in other countries. But neither is it correct to claim that, before Busi and Tondelli, 'Italian literature has produced few attempts at homosexual self-inscription, and the bulk of literature on the topic has come from men and women not themselves homosexual'<sup>2</sup>, because such a statement relies on a definition of literature which includes only the novel.

Though I do not wish to diminish the significance of the fact that Italy has indeed had such a delay in relation to the narrative traditions of other countries, I also think that Saba, in his attempt to write poetry which works like a novel, must be seen as a precursor of more recent and politically aware prose works which have likewise sought to conceptualise and express desire for other men through literary means. Indeed it is possible to claim that the role played in other literatures by the novel in negotiating a sense of same-sex identity has been fulfilled in Italy for most of the twentieth century by poetry. Saba was the first writer to turn to this endeavour, but let us remember that he was followed by Sandro Penna (1906-76), Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-75) and Dario Bellezza (1944-96). The work of these four poets amounts to a continuous homoerotic tradition of poetry which can only be compared in scope and chronological amplitude to poetry written in English both in Britain and in America (including W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Hart Crane, Allen Ginsberg and Thom Gunn). I hope therefore that my work will contribute, beyond the field of Sabian studies, to pave the way for a wider recognition of Italian poetry as one of the fields where the expression of love and desire between men has flourished in the twentieth century.

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Derek Duncan, 'Italian Literature', in *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage*, 391-97.

<sup>2</sup> Duncan, 392.

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