

## Giuseppe Ungaretti Reading of the Correspondence with Pea, Prezzolini, Soffici and Papini from a New Perspective

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*Giuseppe Ungaretti is one of the major representatives of 20th century Italian poetry. He was born in Alexandria, Egypt in 1888, where he also pursued his first studies. Our claim, which is in contrast with what has been argued so far by literary critics, is that the Egyptian environment in which he grew up and formed his personality played a role in shaping the author's 'colonialist' attitude. This emerges in a more detailed reading of his correspondence from the decade between 1909 and 1919. The main goal of this study is therefore to analyse a selection of these letters in order to highlight how the period in Egypt deeply influenced the author, leading him to internalize French and English colonial culture. We argue that this later induced the poet to make particular political choices such as backing Italian participation in the First World War and supporting Fascism.*

### Introduction

Ungaretti is mostly known as a poet of the Great War. He gained fame through his poetry collection entitled *Il porto sepolto*, dedicated to his experience as a soldier. The work is described by his friend and editor of the first edition Ettore Serra as: 'Such great evidence of humanity' and 'the most novel and powerful work of our contemporary literature'.<sup>1</sup> There are many studies dedicated to him that offer to the reader a plethora of points of view and interpretations of his work. Leone Piccioni may be the most distinguished of his critics, alongside the valuable studies by Carlo Ossola and Luciano Rebay. The studies by these critics have substantially contributed to advancing the idea, as described by the critic Romano Luperini, 'of the pure poet, which this author has taken on in our literary consciousness'.<sup>2</sup> In this way the image was created of a 'pure' poet, who through his existential anguish immerses himself in his 'buried harbour' and emerges with 'his poetry | and disperses it'.<sup>3</sup>

However, as we can see in the chapter 'Ungaretti and politics' in the

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1. Renato Serra, *Il tascapane di Ungaretti, Il mio vero Saba* (Rome: Edizione di storia e letteratura, 1983), 29.

2. Renato Luperini, *Letteratura e identità nazionale nel Novecento* (San Cesario di Lecce: Manni, 2015), 10.

3. Leone Piccioni, *Ungarettiana. Lettura della poesia, aneddoti, epistolari inediti* (Florence: Vallecchi editore, 1980), 23.

monograph 'Ungarettiana' Piccioni tried to minimize Ungaretti's involvement with Fascism, and quotes the poems 'Pietà romana' and 'Epigrafe per un caduto della rivoluzione' included in the *Antologia di poeti fascisti*. At the end of the analysis of the two poems Piccioni claims: "These are, therefore, the "Fascist" texts by Ungaretti: to be judged as you wish. Nothing else."<sup>4</sup>

However, in the anthology four poems by Ungaretti were published: alongside the already quoted two, there are also '1914-1915' and 'Popolo'. '1914-1915' is the introductory poem to the anthology and concludes with the following verses: 'With the fatal grace of millennia | I resume to speak in every direction, | Fruitful homeland, you are reborn valiant, | Worthy of one dying for your love.'<sup>5</sup> Rebay's study of the origins of Ungaretti's poetry states the following about the poem 'Popolo':

'Popolo' is the only poem by Ungaretti which could be associated with his 'engagement' in the political sense, but also with commemorative intentions. After leaving France [...] Ungaretti became a fervent supporter of Italian participation in the conflict [...], he was an admirer of Mussolini. 'Popolo', in fact, when it was republished in *Allegria di naufragi* (Vallecchi, Firenze, 1919), was dedicated to Benito Mussolini. In the preface to the later edition of the *Allegria*, Ungaretti confirms that 'Popolo' was suggested to him by 'the Man, who then for the first time knocked on his heart', adding that it was 'of all the poems the dearest', because it represented to him the image of loyalty'.<sup>6</sup>

This loyalty was also affirmed in the anthology *Antologia di poeti fascisti* published in 1935. The following extract from Ungaretti's biography in the anthology further undermines Piccioni's and Rebay's minimization of Ungaretti's adherence to Fascism:

In 1924 during the Aventinian riot and the world's agitation against Italy, [Ungaretti] goes abroad to exalt Fascism at numerous conferences, which reverberated in the major cities of Belgium and Holland. In the same year he takes part in Bologna in the first congress of Italian Fascist intellectuals, where he presents three agendas, which were the first organic Fascist programme to diffuse our spirit and our culture abroad, and he signs the manifest as an answer to that of the Aventinian intellectuals.<sup>7</sup>

On the occasion of the centenary of the First World War, there was renewed

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4. Piccioni, *Ungarettiana*, 241-242.

5. Mariani Dell'Anguillara and Olindo Giacobbe, *Antologia di poeti fascisti* (Roma: Istituto Grafico Tiberino, 1935), 15.

6. Luciano Rebay, *Le origini della poesia di Giuseppe Ungaretti* (Roma: Storia e letteratura, 1962) 50.

7. Dell'Anguillara and Giacobbe, *Antologia di poeti fascisti* 258-259.

interest in the poet, and many new studies dedicated to him were published. Among the voices that substantially conformed to the already established interpretations, as presented by Luperini<sup>8</sup>, were some works that direct their attention to the emerging discrepancy between the historical facts and what was later said and written by Ungaretti. The paper by Desmond O'Connor is significant: the author, based on a precise analysis of the historical facts, poems included in the collection *Il porto sepolto*, and some letters sent to the editor of the literary magazine *Diana* Gherardo Marone, claims that:

In the bulk of his poetry the war, when it is present<sup>9</sup>, seems little more than a pretext for exploring his own existential condition in his search for a rapport between the finite and the infinite, between past and present, between life and death.<sup>10</sup>

He therefore concludes that:

The vivid realism of the verses of Sassoon and Owen, soldier-poets in close communion with their comrades' plight, is replaced in Ungaretti by the laconically-expressed solipsism of an 'esplorazione d'un personale continente d'inferno', where poetry becomes his only solace, his own individual 'modo di progredire umanamente'.<sup>11</sup>

Another revealing contribution to the debate was provided upon the publication of some previously unpublished letters from the poet addressed to Mussolini.<sup>12</sup> From these studies emerge documents that testify to the extent of Ungaretti's activity as an adherent of Fascist ideology. For our study it suffices to know that it was Ungaretti himself, in a personal letter to the Duce, who asked Mussolini to write the preface to his poetry collection *Allegria di naufragi* published in 1923, and not, as had been claimed, Piccioni through his friend Serra<sup>13</sup>, or through Soffici as claimed by Serra.<sup>14</sup>

For the purposes of this article, it is important to emphasize how some critics

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8. Luperini, *Letteratura e identità nazionale nel Novecento*, 10.

9. The collection *Il porto sepolto* included 32 poems, but only eight are directly connected to the war. A.N.

10. Desmond O'Connor, "The poetry of a patriot: Ungaretti and the First World War", *Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association* 56, no. 1 (2014): 201-218.

11. O'Connor, "The poetry of a patriot," 214.

12. See: Francesca Petrocchi, *Scrittori italiani e fascismo. Tra sindacalismo e letteratura* (Roma: Archivio Guido Izzi, 1997) and Giovanni Sedita, *Gli intellettuali di Mussolini. La cultura finanziata dal fascismo* (Firenze: Casa Editrice Le lettere, 2010).

13. Leone Piccioni, *Vita di Ungaretti* (Milano: Rizzoli editore, 1979), 141.

14. Serra, *Il tascapane di Ungaretti*, 38.

still find it difficult to reconcile the poetry and the politics of the poet, particularly in regard to his engagement in the interventionist movement, his voluntary enlistment in the First World War and his active support for Fascism. By way of example, Luciano Rebay's introduction to the previously quoted essay dedicated to a brief chronology of the poet's life in the period between 1922 and 1930 omits anything in regards to the foreword by Benito Mussolini to the poetry collection *Allegria di naufragi* of 1923.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Leone Piccioni, bound to Ungaretti by a deep friendship, but also a thorough connoisseur and editor of many essays and collections dedicated to the poet, has omitted any such detail in his detailed biography dedicated to the poet's life, emphasizing the human and humanizing aspect of Ungaretti's poetry<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, this blind spot persists even among present-day authors. One such example is Emilio Filieri, who in his commentary on Ungaretti's poem 'San Martino Del Carso', composed on 27<sup>th</sup> August 1916, not only claims that: 'There remained only a memory of the interventionist and prewar intellectual Ungaretti, with nationalistic dreams [...]'<sup>17</sup>, but also that: 'The "Great War" was in conclusion the last war of the Italian Risorgimento to assert the continuity with the battles for independence.'<sup>18</sup>

Less omitting of such details are some other contemporary studies, which investigate the most conspicuous discrepancies. R. Gennaro in his study *I discorsi della patria*<sup>19</sup> outlines an image of a poet more prone to metamorphosis rather than the more commonly widespread image of the 'pure' poet. However, even Gennaro in one of his studies on Ungaretti's nationalism concludes: 'It is not appropriate to talk about opportunism, but of compliance of the speech to the social conditions of his work.'<sup>20</sup> It seems that the long tradition of the pure and innocent poet cannot be easily marred.

### An "Eradicated", Nomad Ungaretti without a Homeland

Ungaretti was born in Alexandria in Egypt in 1888 to parents who had emigrated from Lucca. Rebay writes the following about his education:

Ungaretti grew up and was educated in a fundamentally French cultural

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15. Rebay, *Le origini della poesia di Giuseppe Ungaretti*, 14.

16. Leone Piccioni, "Chapter One," in *Vita di un poeta: Giuseppe Ungaretti* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1970): 10-45.

17. Emilio Filieri, "Sulla Grande Guerra. Due salentini fra Ungaretti e D'Annunzio," *L'Idomeneo* 18 (2015): 177.

18. Filieri, "Sulla Grande Guerra," 177.

19. Gennaro Rosario, "I discorsi sulla patria," in *Giuseppe Ungaretti identità e metamorfosi, Colloquio internazionale, Lucca 4-6 aprile 2002*, ed. Lia Fava Guzzetta et al., (Lucca: Maria Pacini Fazzi editore, 2005), 161-179.

20. Gennaro Rosario, "La Grande Guerra e l'italianità: Il discorso nazionale di Giuseppe Ungaretti," *Forum Italicum* 50, n. 1 (2016): 79.

climate. The school “Ecole Suisse Jacob” where he studied was taught in French. His closest companions in his adolescence and youth were French and Arab, but with a French cultural and language background, with the exception of Enrico Pea from Lucca. The author studied at school or during visits to the library, rich with works of modern and contemporary literature, also mostly French, [...] and finally, French was the language in which he first tried to compose poetry.<sup>21</sup>

According to Piccioni, ‘Ungaretti during those years spoke French, Italian at home and with Pea, and also knew some Arabic [...]’<sup>22</sup> Moreover, as Ungaretti recalls those years in Egypt: ‘[...] according to the Capitulation laws, European citizens were domiciled on the territory of their homeland, and were liable only to their national laws.’<sup>23</sup> This is important information in order to comprehend how privileged was the situation of the European population. The quote from Edward W. Said’s work *Orientalism* is illuminating for our discourse:

For Barros the French presence is best seen in French schools where, as he says of a school in Alexandria, ‘It is ravishing to see those little Oriental girls welcoming and so wonderfully reproducing the fantaisie and the melody [in their spoken French] of the Ile-de-France.’ If France does not actually have any colonies there, she is not entirely without possessions [...] to occidentalize the Orientals, to bring them into salubrious contact with France. [...] Yet the bond (or leash) between East and West that he advocates is designed to permit a constant variety of intellectual pressure going from West to East. Barres sees things, not in terms of waves, battles, spiritual adventures, but in terms of the cultivation of intellectual imperialism, as ineradicable as it is subtle.<sup>24</sup>

Naturally, when Ungaretti decides to leave Egypt his choice falls on Paris. The opinion of the critics that Ungaretti’s fundamental education was Francophone is unanimous. The poet himself stated that he indeed considers himself bilingual<sup>25</sup>. And also: ‘[...] if there were no Paris, I would have not had the speech.’<sup>26</sup>

When the war broke out in 1914, Ungaretti left France and went to Versilia, where:

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21. Rebay, *Le origini della poesia di Giuseppe Ungaretti*, 35.

22. Piccioni, *Vita di Ungaretti*, 38.

23. Piccioni, *Vita di Ungaretti*, 41.

24. Edward Wadie Said, *Orientalism*. (London: Penguin, 1977), 245-246.

25. Giuseppe Ungaretti, *Lettere a Soffici 1917-1930* (Firenze: Sansoni editore, 1981), 40.

26. Gennaro Rosario, “Ungaretti, la guerra, l’identità e la storia. L’io e il noi nel Porto sepolto,” in *Dal nemico alla coralità Saggi critici*, ed. A. Baldacci (Firenze: LoGisma, 2017), 71-72

[...] the interventionist campaign was raging, led on the national scale toward a rapid, yet unpredictable future by Mussolini, who has left *Avanti!* to found *Il popolo d'Italia* (and that is how he was introduced to Ungaretti).<sup>27</sup>

To justify Ungaretti, Piccioni asserts:

To what he said, ought to be added, he might have had been touched, albeit subconsciously (he citizen, immediate, of the world) by the nationalistic wave, the psychological situation of a "foreign resident", the constantly disappointed "love towards the homeland" cultivated from distant places, and the naturally powered desire to see his own land become part of the powerful and respected.<sup>28</sup>

Piccioni thus attributes Ungaretti's interventionism to the poet's desire to affirm his being Italian, to define his identity, on one side, but he also admits that Ungaretti aspired for Italy to become a member of the colonial powers, like France. After the Second World War, however, Ungaretti explained his support for interventionism and his voluntary enlistment in the Great War as: 'It was humbug, but men sometimes deceive themselves and follow such humbug.'<sup>29</sup>

This contextualization was presented with the aim of clarifying two aspects of the discourse on Ungaretti: first, the fact that he grew up and spent his formative years abroad is used as a justification for his greater need to be identified as a national poet—a need that at the time the poet believed he could satisfy in his personal and active involvement in the war, considered as the fourth war of the Italian Risorgimento<sup>30</sup>. The second aspect is the re-dimensioning and denying of his own ideological choices made before and during the war and later during the Fascist period after the Second World War.

The principal aim, however, of this article is to refute the thesis so far supported by literary critics that Ungaretti was profoundly humane and foreign to any racial hatred, but also to refute the poet's own claims, when he later attempted, after the Second World War, to diminish and hide the importance of his ideological choices. Sedita, for example, documents the following:

From July 1944 on, the lists were made available to the High Commissioner for the sanctions against Fascism, employed in the purge of the public administration (under the set of laws published on 27<sup>th</sup> July 1944, the "Magna Carta" of the political purge). During the process of purging the Fascists in Italy, the names of those receiving steady subsidies [...] were used to identify

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27. Piccioni, *Vita di un poeta*, 59.

28. Piccioni, *Vita di un poeta*, 59.

29. Piccioni, *Vita di un poeta*, 60.

30. Emilio Filieri, *Sulla Grande Guerra*, 177.

the intellectuals ‘protected by the former regime as particularly loyal “servants”’. It must have been clear during the readings of hundreds of pink files that those selected personalities that were granted a fixed grant did repay the regime according to the terms of agreement. [...]

Giuseppe Ungaretti, who was submitted to the purge procedure on 31<sup>th</sup> July 1944, justified [...] the fixed grant which he has been receiving for years: It was a grant that was customary to give [...] I accepted it, since to me it was the same as any other grant by the State to the farmer to finish his improvement work [...].<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, in the continuation we will try to document how it was the Francophone colonial education he received that directed him to adopt an attitude of cultural superiority and, as we will highlight, of racial hatred toward populations he considered inferior, and finally, how this background was the push that led him to adhere to interventionism and as a natural consequence to Fascism, to ensure that Italy would become a full-fledged member of the colonialist powers. The analysis of the documents will focus on finding elements that will support these two hypotheses: a) racial superiority, expressed through the denigration of other races, and b) the drive to create an Italian identity essentially on a par with the French one, or of other colonial powers. We shall conclude this brief chapter with a quotation from Piccioni:

[...] with an Arab workforce in a yard where pigs<sup>32</sup> were bred, [...] close by were sleeping Arab workers that also worked in a bakery/furnace, naturally they had night shifts and fell asleep, and would oversleep, turning lazy. The already mentioned Battista [...] among other things also had the task to wake the lazy Arabs up, he came up with a simple method: he would wake up the pig, “because the sleep of those Arabs” said Ungaretti “was deep, and when the pig came they would jump up, and flee screaming like mad.”<sup>33</sup>

The same scene is also quoted by Rebay, although he attributed the deed to Ungaretti’s mother.<sup>34</sup>

We will observe how this disrespectful and irreverent attitude towards the Arabs and their religion did not annoy Ungaretti. It is also necessary to highlight, however, how this action, regardless of the perpetrator, did not seem profoundly disrespectful to the editors, who quoted it as a funny anecdote. However, in 1969 in the “Note a cura dell’autore [Ungaretti n.d.a.] e di Ariodante Marianni” in his collection *Vita di un uomo - Tutte le poesie*, when he remembers the afore-mentioned anecdote, he comments: “I was offended by such behaviour, I found – and I was

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31. Sedita, *Gli intellettuali di Mussolini*, 33

32. Piccioni, *Vita di un poeta*, 11.

33. Piccioni, *Vita di un poeta*, 22.

34. Rebay, *Le origini della poesia di Giuseppe Ungaretti*, 11.

nothing more than a child – that it was not such good conduct to violate sacred beliefs.<sup>35</sup>

### Unpublished Aspects of Ungaretti's Letters Corresponding to the Decade between 1909 – 1919

Starting from the premise presented above, we will look at some letters that Ungaretti sent to his friends Enrico Pea, Giuseppe Prezzolini, Giovanni Papini and Ardengo Soffici. The correspondence with Pea started in November – December of 1909<sup>36</sup>, with Prezzolini on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 1911<sup>37</sup>, with Papini at the end of 1914 or beginning of 1915<sup>38</sup>, and with Soffici on the 18<sup>th</sup> of December 1917<sup>39</sup>. The initial part of Ungaretti's correspondence with Pea and Prezzolini was exchanged while the poet was still in Egypt. After 1912 the correspondence comes from Paris, from 1914 from Italy and from 1918 again from France. An analysis of letters from the postwar Egyptian period is of particular interest for understanding the poet's ideological stance.

Some interesting elements emerge from the correspondence with Enrico Pea dating from the Egyptian period, mostly characterized by cordial and formal tones. In Letter 21<sup>40</sup>, dated 26<sup>th</sup> November 1910 from Cairo with the stamp 'Libreria – Cartoleria R. G. Lombardi. Cairo', sent to Ungaretti, with an illegible signature, we can read: 'I will gladly make sure of a positive outcome for the sale of "Fole", but considering the narrow-minded and disheartening intellectual environment here in our colony the 20 copies you sent me are too many.<sup>41</sup>'

Two points in this letter are significant for our discourse: first, the allusion to the 'disheartening' local Italian intellectual environment, therefore the 20 copies of Pea's work are too many, and second, the allusion to the colony, which allows us to frame the interpretative political and cultural context of this discourse. If we connect the letter's content to what was previously extracted from Rebay and to the privileges legally granted to Europeans in the colonies, a context emerges that shows the disparities between the Europeans and the local population, enforced by the colonial powers. It is therefore easier to comprehend Letter 25, dated December 1912 and addressed to Pea, in which Ungaretti states: 'Yesterday was

35. Giuseppe Ungaretti, *Vita d'un uomo. Tutte le poesie* (Milano: Mondadori editore, 1969), 498.

36. Giuseppe Ungaretti, *Lettere a Enrico Pea* (Milano: Libri Scheiwiller, 1983), 23.

37. Giuseppe Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giuseppe Prezzolini 1911-1969* (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2000), 3.

38. Giuseppe Ungaretti *Lettere a Giovanni Papini* (Milano: Mondadori editore, 1988), 3.

39. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Soffici 1917-1930*, 3.

40. Since Ungaretti wrote more letters on the same day to the same addressee, we must refer to both the date and sequential numbering of said letters. A/N

41. Ungaretti, *Lettere ad Enrico Pea*, 37.



spent with Piroddi. The mameluke was sobbing while listening to “Montignoso”<sup>42</sup>. The expression ‘mameluke’ derives from the Arabic ‘mamluk’, meaning slave, and is used in Italian as a derogatory term; it also indicates a person lacking in judgment, stupid. In this case Ungaretti uses it to smear Mr. Piroddi.

From the details of Ungaretti’s biography previously mentioned, we know that in Egypt he attended ‘[the] major school of Alexandria of the moment: l’Ecole Suisse Jacob’<sup>43</sup>. Edward W. Said’s famous work *Orientalism* shows how widespread and deeply rooted in the national culture was the French and British colonial attitude toward the Middle East. Every level of the cultural discourse of both nations (to which Said adds Italy as well<sup>44</sup>) is implicitly permeated with an attitude of superiority, which manifests itself in forms that range from a condescending benevolence with which they study the local population to extreme scorn in the form of racism. But as Said sharply notes, even the study of these populations hid the intent to rule them better with the acquired knowledge. Such study implied the stereotyped preconception that their culture was inferior and considered as primitive. This colonial point of view, an unavoidable trait of their culture, was naturally inculcated and spread through schooling and implied a more or less conscious attitude of cultural superiority of the colonial powers in the occupied territories<sup>45</sup>. Or as Said puts it:

[...] Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it [...] Moreover, so authoritative a position did Orientalism have that I believe no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism.<sup>46</sup>

We can therefore hypothesize that Ungaretti, who lived in such an environment, not only absorbed the influence but was also moulded by it. French takes on a paramount role, so much so that he decided to continue his studies in France at the Sorbonne and not, for example, Italy.

In Letter 38, dated March 1913, also addressed to Pea, Ungaretti after a long critique of Pea’s work starts the last paragraph with: ‘The Jew Bergson returns in a few days.’<sup>47</sup> The sentence abruptly interrupts the previous discourse and puzzles the reader as to why it is necessary to specify that Bergson is Jewish, which is

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42. Ungaretti, *Lettere ad Enrico Pea*, 39. (“Montignoso” is a work by Pea. A/N)

43. Piccioni, *Vita di un poeta*, 34.

44. Said, *Orientalism*, 18.

45. Said, *Orientalism*, chapter 1.

46. Said, *Orientalism*, 4.

47. Ungaretti, *Lettere ad Enrico Pea*, 54.

entirely irrelevant to the letter's context. This is one of many examples in which Ungaretti expressed his judgment hinting at the racial aspect. After the Second World War this aspect is not as pronounced; however, as we will describe later in the paper, the poet will make use of it again.

The content of Letter 14, sent to Prezzolini<sup>48</sup> on the 8<sup>th</sup> of November 1914, two years after the poet moved to Paris, is especially enlightening for the aim of our discourse. In this letter Ungaretti describes the Egyptian environment in which he grew up as well as some aspects of what Ungaretti referred to as a friendship with the Arab poet Mohammed Sceab, and this in fact reveals a different position to that which was later expressed by the poet. Moreover, the letter in the long descriptions describes an environment and attitude on the part of the poet toward his friend and also the Arab world in which he was raised which was not yet highlighted by biographers. This letter gives rise to our opinion that there was a different motivation for the poet to voluntarily join the Great War and support Fascist ideology from the beginning. The editor Maria A. Terzoli agrees with L. Piccioni in the annotation 27 to this letter that since the letter is the closest in time to the described facts, the information contained should be considered as the most reliable.<sup>49</sup>

"There was Sceab in my life, I accompanied him year after year. We weren't able to disclose anything to one another, anything. We were at school together. [...] There was an English teacher, an invincible football player, Mister Pickles [...]. Pickles would admonish Sceab: "Read Nietzsche, smoke a cigarette, and afterwards prepare for suicide." We were lost there, unsettled in Paris, the Kurdish and the one from Lucca born abroad, we never told one another a thing. He was the descendant of emirs, princes of mountain nomads, of the Sceabs, who even today rule the Kurdish, my origins were those of farmers. Different civilizations, different educations. [...] He despised the natives of Egypt, gullible and hypocrites, obsequious and savage, he enjoyed hitting the heads of the shoeshiners of Mohammed Ali Square. [...] Nestled by the procession of grim baldaquins, for each passerby they'd hit the shoeshiner and then the brushes on the cases. [...] During the breaks the trees of acacia surrounded by tables of the Cafés of the Effendi's who were playing tricchetracche<sup>50</sup>, goitry boitry<sup>51</sup>, emitting, between clicking moves of the pawns,

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48. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giuseppe Prezzolini 1919-1969*, 23-29.

49. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giuseppe Prezzolini 1919-1969*, 27. 'As it was already observed in Piccioni Leone, *Ungaretti, la guerra, la poesia (Letter to Soffici*, p. V, footnote 1) this letter offers a third version of Ungaretti's arrival in Paris: together with his friend Sceab, not before (as Ungaretti claimed in his later accounts), nor later (as it was implied from an unpublished document by Pea in Rebay's possession). Unless other direct and contemporary testimonies surface, we must consider the statements in this letter as chronologically closest.'

50. Tric-trac, a popular game among Arabs of the time A/N.

blessed, clouds of smoke from the chichia, the hookah, whose water was gurgling, bon vivant, lying down, proper Muslims, pederasts. They will consider it a day well spent if they'd succeeded in corrupting some little Jew, tonight. – The damn money. – [...] on Saturday evenings the English military band plays and there come to listen to the “massica”<sup>52</sup> the Arab folk in tunics<sup>53</sup>, in their filthy shirts of a faded light blue, and wear on top – principle of civility – the jacket or paletot ala “franga”, in the European manner. Sceab was of a different race. He changed his name. Mohammed Sceab introduced himself as Marcel Sceab. In Paris. But his homeland was not France. [...] Observing, while departing [for Italy A/N], the little Negroes, agile Nubian boys [...] springing like fleas the little Nubians. [...] In Paris, together. And we never lived in common anxiety. Every night, hours hours, on the streets of Paris blazing in the illumination orgies, in the racket, our solitude, our darkness, which did not unite us. Sceab's desperation was not my desperation. [...] He killed himself. He set the cigarette on the nightstand. [...] He destroyed all his papers, manuscripts of short stories and poetry, in the purest French, of the most ingenuous invention. [...]

And if the war anointed me Italian? [...] for me, for my personal case, the generosity of the war. For all the Italians, finally a common passion, a common certainty, finally a united Italy.”<sup>54</sup>

It should be noted that Ungaretti sent this letter to Prezzolini with the hope that his friend would publish it in the Florentine literary magazine *La voce*<sup>55</sup>. A letter, as we can see, packed with information and interesting attitudes that shed light on the content of the letters quoted so far and those yet to be introduced. Firstly, Ungaretti presents a description of his relationship with Sceab that differs substantially from later ones. As suggested in the letter, according to Ungaretti, Sceab committed suicide in Paris because he did not have a homeland he could identify with. The indication of a pejorative attitude by the professor Pickles toward the Arab is not condemned by the poet and it contrasts with what was later stated in the biography edited by Piccioni: ‘I am made in such a way [...]

51. In original *guzzutti buzzutti*, a pejorative term to indicate the goitre and the prominent belly, but the editor M. A. Terzani in her note comments: “A comical grotesque paranomasia for [...]”.

52. Arabic term for music.

53. Expression used in the original text is “galabia”.

54. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giuseppe Prezzolini 1919-1969*, 23-29.

55. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giuseppe Prezzolini 1919-1969*, 30. See footnote 1: ‘With all probability Letter 14, sent as this one from Milan, which was perhaps sent with the hope of being published in “La Voce”.’ We must also consider that in 1914 Prezzolini was editor-in-chief of the magazine, to which he gave a militant tone, which turned into interventionism. A/N.

that I do not know what the aversion toward other races or people is.<sup>56</sup>

The memory of the English professor, as quoted in Piccioni's biography:

[...] and among the teacher there was a certain Mister Pickles, teacher of English language, whom Ungaretti does not forget for his enthusiasm and continuous talking about Nietzsche.<sup>57</sup>

It also offers an image of Ungaretti that is different from that of the letter, where a denigratory attitude toward Sceab emerges. Ungaretti's insistence that the two friends had nothing in common but were from different cultures and races seems to indicate a colonial attitude that makes a distinction between Us and Them, as noted by Said<sup>58</sup>. Particularly indicative is how strongly the colonial attitude affected the indigenous people, so much so that Sceab, in an attempt to integrate better into the Francophone population, hated the indigenous people, as displayed in how he 'enjoyed hitting the heads of the shoeshiners'<sup>59</sup>. Ungaretti does not comment on or condemn such belittling behaviour, since the shoeshiners are 'gullible and hypocrites, obsequious, and savage'<sup>60</sup>. Ungaretti therefore assigns to the indigenous people a string of pejorative stereotypes. As Said points out, for the formulation of a stereotype:

[...] it is frequently enough to use the simple copula is. Thus, Mohammed is an imposter, [...]. No background need be given; the evidence necessary to convict Mohammed is contained in the 'is'.<sup>61</sup>

Through the use of the verb 'to be', and for the sole use of the verb 'to be', the attribution is associated with the person/people, becoming its inherent referential element. Moreover, Sceab's hatred created a distance between him and the indigenous people even as it joined him to the Francophone culture, which showed him the same attitude. Therefore, Sceab's act is fully accepted, and Ungaretti's description of the Arabs clearly expresses a persistent attitude of contempt, as suggested by the allusions to their filthiness, obscene physique, and deplorable sexuality. Even the reference to 'ala franga' ridicules the Arabs, who are considered incapable of properly enunciating the language of the 'civilized' nation. This is how the Other was represented and related to us, something that is expressed repeatedly in Ungaretti's correspondence. The representation of the Arab world seems to correspond perfectly to what Said described in his work:

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56. Piccioni, *Vita di un poeta*, 16-17.

57. Piccioni, *Vita di un poeta*, 23.

58. Said, *Orientalism*, 7.

59. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giuseppe Prezzolini 1919-1969*, 26.

60. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giuseppe Prezzolini 1919-1969*, 26.

61. Said, *Orientalism*, 73.

In the films and television the Arab is associated either with lechery or bloodthirsty dishonesty. He appears as an oversexed degenerate, capable, it is true, of cleverly devious intrigues, but essentially sadistic, treacherous, low. Slave trader, camel driver, moneychanger, colourful scoundrel [...] <sup>62</sup>

Sure enough, the image of the Arabs depicted by Ungaretti is that of pederasts, who spend their days playing instead of working, or scheming to defraud even the 'little Jews' <sup>63</sup>, also stigmatized and referred to by the pejorative diminutive ('ebretti') and by the comment 'The damn money', which alludes to the image of the Jew attached to money. Not even the Nubian children can escape Ungaretti's slights, by being compared to fleas.

Even after many years Ungaretti could not shake off his attitude of superiority towards the people he grew up among. In the description of his nanny Bahita he says:

I know milk is not blood, but I believe it contributes to instill into blood stimuli for certain fantasies, certain magic, certain desperations, certain impetuosity. The Negro milk even imparts to the recipient some kind of innocence in relation to others – the Negro is pure for being a mix of meekness, of unstoppable effusiveness, of the return to the childhood of the world, which he almost succeeds to keep intact within himself. <sup>64</sup>

The unequal relationship between who gives and who takes becomes immediately clear, showcasing the colonial attitude. An array of stereotypes with which the poet depicts the Other follows, concluding with that of the 'world's childhood', which alludes to the presumed 'innocence' of primitive populations, who are therefore not yet civilized, like children who need to be educated. One could object that Ungaretti was in reality trying to express his gratitude to these people to whom he owed this primal innocence, expressed in his poetry. However, the objection does not take into account the unquestionable fact that this path is and remains a one-way path. Ungaretti is inspired by the innocence of the 'pure Negro' <sup>65</sup>. The West therefore draws from the Orient a renewed ingenuity, purity. It is an unequal relationship, where one side 'sucks' the milk from the other without offering anything in exchange apart from 'gratitude'.

Moreover, the description of Sceab's suicide is even more tragic, as it appears he followed Pickles' indications. If suicide is an extreme measure by means of which one chooses to pay back the living, it shows us the extent of the pressure under which Sceab was put, whether in the colonial environment in Egypt or in

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62. Said, *Orientalism*, 287-288.

63. In the original text "ebretti".

64. Piccioni, *Vita di un poeta*, 17.

65. Note the use of the equivocal terms such as "pure race" A/N.

Paris. The tragedy of this act lies not in the fact of not being able to find one's poetry, as Ungaretti continued to claim<sup>66</sup>, but in the realization that European civilization, which he studied and had identified with to the point of changing his own name, continued to consider him inferior. Ungaretti continued to emphasize repeatedly that he did not participate in Scab's anxiety, that their loneliness had not united them, but derived from different sources. Even though Ungaretti considered himself as 'uprooted', a nomad, since he grew up outside the borders of Italy, he had a clear understanding that he belonged to the Europeans, who enjoyed particular privileges in Egypt. Ungaretti's loneliness, therefore, might stem from his inability or unwillingness to decide which homeland to devote himself to. Ungaretti's patriotism is well understood by Said: 'Patriotism, extreme xenophobic nationalism, and downright unpleasant chauvinism are common responses to this fear. We all need some foundation on which to stand [...]'<sup>67</sup>. Ungaretti's interventionism is thus a logical consequence of the poet's decisions to consider himself Italian but is simultaneously also a political choice. The latter is induced by his initial colonial education, as can be seen from the article published in *Il Tempo* on the 4<sup>th</sup> January 1918:

Italy wants to be bigger, not so much territorially, which is of secondary importance, but in the soul, which it deserves; it does not want to be relegated to the fate of a tribe of Negroes; it wants to be elevated to the splendour that is traced in the two thousand years of its history of gentility.<sup>68</sup>

This can be linked to Letter 229, from November/December 1918, where he affirms:

If it weren't for the usual obtuseness of the Council, instead of spiting them, I wonder if we wouldn't have been considered by the Yugoslavs as liberators, even though we would have taken them under our tutelage. We must've had tact; have we not learned anything in contact with the French?<sup>69</sup>

This attitude is also expressed in Letter 229: 'They should not have tolerated [...] not even the Dalmatian question to be discussed?'<sup>70</sup>, and in Letter 264 as well: 'His act<sup>71</sup> is one that had to be done for the honour of our land.' Two aspects of Ungaretti's thought are made clear: first, territorial expansionism, and second, his desire to align Italy with France as a colonial but also civilizing power, made clear

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66. Giuseppe Ungaretti, *Il porto sepolto 1916-1996* (Udine: ristampa anastatica a cura di Mario Barenghi, 1996): 7.

67. Said, *Orientalism*, 334.

68. Ungaretti, *Vita d'un uomo*, 9.

69. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giovanni Papini*, 234.

70. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giovanni Papini*, 252.

71. The siege of Reka by D'Annunzio.

by his allusion to the possible 'tutelage' of Yugoslavia, reminiscent of France's position in Egypt.

One could argue that Sceab's loneliness and desperation stemmed from the realization that he would never integrate into French culture, for he was of a different race, considered inferior to the French, which had alienated him from his own nomad culture. Ungaretti ultimately claimed Sceab had had all his work destroyed. The act confirms the interpretation of the suicide as a refusal to be part of that cultural world which had rejected him. Moreover, later on Ungaretti claimed that he had wanted to recover his friend's work, but was too late as the governess had already handed it to the police. It is unclear why there was a need for a different version, if the later interpretation Ungaretti presented of his friend's suicide was that as someone without a homeland who was unable to unleash his poetry of pain. In reality he was unleashing it, but not in his mother tongue, therefore at the end it is obvious why he decided to destroy the work created in French, part of the culture which had alienated him as well as denigrated him.

For final confirmation of what has been claimed so far, we can quote a sentence from the letter dated 19<sup>th</sup> April 1918 sent from the war front to Prezzolini, in which he states: 'After four years I will see again my chosen homeland and the sacrifice will seem even more necessary, so the barbarians don't prevail.'<sup>72</sup> This is an obsessive repetition in Ungaretti's correspondence, be it to Prezzolini<sup>73</sup>, Soffici<sup>74</sup> or Papini<sup>75</sup>, that confirms a clear distinction between civilized populations (into which Ungaretti includes the Italian and French) and the barbarians. This attitude is constantly present in the letters to Soffici, Papini, Prezzolini and Pea, confirming that Ungaretti was formed in Egypt's cultural environment, but not only there, since Ungaretti continued to be exposed to such an influence in Paris as well, an integral part of French cultural discourse. Once internalized, a defined difference between an Us and a Them results in adherence to a totalitarian regime as a logical consequence. This attitude of distinction emerges repeatedly, as in Letter 256 dating from the beginning of September 1919 and addressed to Papini, which states:

I have not seen Mrs Ricou for a long time. I still cherish her, but there has been some gossip around about a Russian Jew with whom I had an adventure; I have withdrawn myself from that household to not encounter

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72. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giovanni Prezzolini 1911 - 1969*, 47.

73. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giovanni Prezzolini 1911 - 1969*, 47 '[...] so the barbarians will not prevail', 52 'I am sure the crudes will not prevail'

74. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Soffici 1917-1930*, 27 'they cannot prevail', 29 'The roughs will not prevail', 35 '[...] we will must continue until we crash the "roughs"'

75. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giovanni Papini*, 209 'nailed to the events, with such violent hope, that borders on desperation: "they will not prevail"', 211 'but the roughs must not prevail [...] we cannot leave our civilization to die like cowards', '[...] so it will not be insulted by the "roughs", who will not prevail'.

again that woman, who with her improbable jealousy, was annoying me at a time when I was most agitated.<sup>76</sup>

The following letter, dated 15<sup>th</sup> September 1919, continues: 'Yesterday the painter Modigliani, in a public establishment, was speaking loudly of you, in a deplorable manner. I myself have sent back down that Jewish dauber's throat his bestialities!<sup>77</sup>' The editor of the letters to Papini, Maria Antonietta Terzoli, comments on the poet's statements in a footnote:

The hostility expressed in this letter [...] is certainly an isolated episode, to be attributed maybe to a latent anti-Semitism [...].<sup>78</sup>

In light of the previous examples, unquestionably the episode is not an isolated one: if these three references are linked to those of the 'Jew Bergson' or of 'some little Jew', they highlight the poet's attitude of racial superiority.

A final proof is offered in Letter 252, from the summer of 1919, in which Ungaretti announces to Papini a project for 'an anthology of the mostly *Negro* poetry and prose<sup>79</sup>' At first glance it appears to undermine at least partially what was stated so far; however, besides the concise list of the content of the anthology, we can read: 'marvelous things taken from 8000 books by consulted travelers'<sup>80</sup>. The statement seems to perfectly fit what Said argues: 'It does not occur to Balfour, however, to let the Egyptian speak for himself, [...]'<sup>81</sup> Therefore the 'Negro' anthology will be voiced by the travelers and not by the people in question.

Similarly, in Letter 97, dated 18<sup>th</sup> February 1917, in commenting on Giosuè Carducci's poem *Alle fonti del Clitumno* he writes: 'We can look at him, highly Tuscan, in the depth of his heart, the anti-Semite of the "*Fountains of Clitumno*" lured by the nymphs, sharpening the tusks in the fetid mouth of Heine.'<sup>82</sup>

And in the same letter:

But not from today, [...], this Ungaretti, [...] named the sheepish and roguish instincts of the man; one waits for the Messiah acting like victims, the other claims to be its incarnation and wants to convert, the phony has hands of velvet and iron crosses, and is Jewish or German, [...].<sup>83</sup>

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76. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giovanni Papini*, 277.

77. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giovanni Papini*, 279.

78. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giovanni Papini*, 279.

79. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giovanni Papini*, 268. Italics in the original. A/N.

80. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giovanni Papini*, 269.

81. Said, *Orientalism*, 34.

82. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giovanni Papini*, 101.

83. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giovanni Papini*, 101-102.



In this case as well it does not appear that the author is annoyed by Carducci's anti-Semitism; on the contrary, it is reinforced, alleging deceit on the part of the Jewish and German. In this case the editor offers no remarks regarding the poet's statements. Similarly, there is no rebuke to Ungaretti's outburst in the postscript to Letter 149, dated 2<sup>th</sup> October 1917:

Have you read *Il Cancelliere*? Damn German; damn; must we withstand? We will resist, we will resist: there are still men capable of dying without ferocity, to save their gentility: all: if in the World there must remain beasts, they can remain alone; but oh, my God, help us with a grain of genius!<sup>84</sup>

Here the contrast is presented in the form of the bestiality of the enemy and the gentility of the Italians, and a belief in the superiority of one's own culture is thereby revealed. This concept is further affirmed in Letter 156, written between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> of November 1917, alluding to the Battle of Kobarid, where Ungaretti urges his friend Papini to:

Shout at the Italians to have fortitude, to resist: courage, Papini, shout with all your strength to our people to have courage; if gentility has to be whipped from the Earth, we will let go of it at a high price: we are ready until the very last man.<sup>85</sup>

In Letter 132, dated 7<sup>th</sup> August 1917, he relapsed into using stereotypes:

[...] after so much sacrifice; who would bear [...] to return for nothing; a thousand times better to die all. Maybe the Germans reason so too. But why have they stirred such carnage? But why are they so rough and treacherous? The attitude of a bear and the mind of a fox; but their hearts are bladders of beer; but they can stay herded like a machine; they have nerves of steel. I hate them, I hate them with a horror, foremost because they forced me to be patient [...].<sup>86</sup>

After two years at the front, with all the horrors he might have participated in, Ungaretti still proclaims complete martyrdom rather than succumbing to the enemy, who is called 'bestial', and additionally described using expressions such as 'roughness, treachery, slyness' and having 'a bladder instead of a heart'.

In Letter 173, dated 9<sup>th</sup> January 1918, after the Italian politician Giovanni Giolitti expressed an adverse position to the war, Ungaretti resumes his usual pattern to smear those who disagree with him:

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84. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giovanni Papini*, 152.

85. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giovanni Papini*, 159.

86. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giovanni Papini*, 138.

That politician is already obnoxious, giving us an impression of calamity; his return to the chamber, after plotting for three years behind the scenes, with a significant effect on the progress of things, nauseated us. He is a man without courage, with Jewish weapons; he is not Italian.<sup>87</sup>

It is implied in the context that Ungaretti still insisted on the need to continue sacrificing human lives, believing that those who were opposed were nothing but cowards operating behind the scenes, with Jewish weapons, Jews being naturally sly, for they plot behind the scenes.

Letter 272 is undated but presumably slightly precedes the letter of 21<sup>th</sup> May 1920, where Ungaretti criticizes Benjamin Crémieux, who expressed in the French literary magazine 'N.R.F.'<sup>88</sup> some doubts about Italian poetry, particularly the *vociana*, to which Ungaretti belonged. The poet expresses himself thusly:

It came to my knowledge that the Italian column at the Nouvelle R.F. was entrusted to a certain Benjamin Crémieux, that one Jewish professor, whom you must've met at the Institut Francais of Florence. To begin with, it seems he considers the whole Italian production (for him the futurist movement and movement voce), you, and Soffici included as a 'demi-reussites'. Naturally as a good Jew he's convinced that all good ideas come from England, since at the N.R.F. they are affected by the 'English discharge'.<sup>89</sup>

Alongside the scorn towards the Jews, the contempt is also extended here to the English, with the allusion to the 'discharge'.

In Letter 229, which is quite long and dates from approximately the end of November or beginning of December 1918, he expresses his political and ideological position in regards to the Slavic populations:

[...] that underneath us (in Italy A/N) palpitates the lymph, which could restore the splendour of the flowers grown only by us. I mean the remained people, after all, the most gifted on Earth, the purest, the most varied, the most sentimental, the most intelligent, the most skilful and clever, the most laborious. The constituent is needed. I closely follow Mussolini's movement, it is, believe me, the right way. We must turn that way. Order order order, harmony harmony harmony; but for now, I see nothing else but confusion confusion confusion. [...] The politics of nationalities, I was saying, was a gauntlet, through which one had to pass to win. In the meanwhile, the tripple dream of the archduke of Sarajevo is coming true. Serbia is being

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87. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giovanni Papini*, 174.

88. Nouvelle Revue Francaise.

89. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giovanni Papini*, 297. In Italian the word "scolo" hints to the discharge in a man caused by a venereal illness.

annexed by Yugoslavia, they will ally with Czecho-Slovakia and Poland, and afterwards, do not doubt, with Hungary. [...] Besides, I must confess, that the restlessness, the belligerent desire of those semi-barbaric hordes, which are those vile(?) Slavs, scares me. It is a furnace, which if let into Europe will ignite constant fires, if we are not careful. As with all those half primitives, half bandits, half schemers, there is a base of mysticism, there is a mine we cannot account for: it explodes without a purpose, or with such an unexpected purpose, just like the behaviour of all the people subject to hallucinations; and oh, the damage! The damage is paid by those on whom it is inflicted; but for the irresponsible, we expect like from children, to mature reasoning with age; in the meantime, we must do with what we do with children, put them in such a position that they cannot cause harm.<sup>90</sup>

It is without doubt an important passage, which clarifies and completes the frame delineated so far. Its inherent characteristics could be compared to the letter to Prezzolini in which he describes the Arabs and Sceab. The division between the virtuous Italian population, and the other one which is not even human, since the expression 'herds' alludes to beasts, is clear. It is supported by a list of denigratory stereotypes, different from those attributed to the Arabs, as they are attributed to different ethnicities. There is no doubt about the division of the world into 'civil, gentile' and 'hordes of semi-barbarians'. Thus it is not realistic to understand his poem "Soldato" (Soldier), composed in Mariano on 15th July 1916<sup>91</sup>, as an expression of all-embracing humanity that transcends the boundaries of nationalism. Consequently, the fraternity here is meant between him and other Italian soldiers. Similar is the poem S. Martino del Carso<sup>92</sup>, where he remembers all his fellow fighters who had died without trace and all of whom the poet carries in his heart. From the line "che mi corrispondevano" (with whom I was in contact, exchanging letters), it is obvious that it was not the Others who are meant, but again the Italian soldiers.

Such an understanding of this poetry is also confirmed by Italia, the last but one poem from the same collection<sup>93</sup>, in which the poet concludes that he rests in the Italian military uniform as he would rest in his father's cradle. This clearly shows his conclusion that his decision to voluntarily join the war yielded the desired effect: the poet finally recognized himself as an Italian.

Following is Letter 234 from mid-February 1919, where Ungaretti confirms his political and ideological position: 'Mussolini entrusted me with the correspondence of the *Popolo al Congresso della Pace*. I love Mussolini's newspaper,

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90. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giovanni Papini*, 233-234.

91. Ungaretti, *Il porto sepolto*, 1916-1996, 29

92. Ungaretti, *Il porto sepolto* 1916-1996, 40

93. Ungaretti, *Il porto sepolto* 1916-1996, 45

which matches, for a while now, as you know, my political beliefs.<sup>94</sup> And in Letter 239 from the beginning of April 1919 he concludes:

And us? If we make a move, we will have the Yugoslavs, Czechs, and Greeks on us, which give me the impression they have a *secret* function of police. Otherwise how would you explain the *wrongful* (italics in the original text A/N) protection of their demands, by nations that should not tolerate, after all we've done, not even the question of Dalmatia to be discussed? Ours is truly a Pyrrhic victory: we are the war's dummies!<sup>95</sup>

In this way the core of the 'vittoria mutilata' is outlined, which will lead to the expansionist policy of Mussolini's Fascism, which will show itself in the racial laws and the Special Court<sup>96</sup>, and the racist persecution of the populations in the occupied Provinces<sup>97</sup>, that is, those 'semi-barbarians, half primitives'. In Letter 264, dated November 1919, he indeed states:

I don't believe there is any money-driven machination behind D'Annunzio.

His act was of the kind needed to be done to save our Nation's honour. Remember, he went to Reka the same day as [...] the English gendarmerie was to disembark, and our troops – the *Italian troupes* – were considered to be unable to perform a civil action, and were replaced by an inter-allied garrison.

Remember, that no power with a smidge of self-esteem would bear such a slap in the face. [...]

If D'Annunzio and other fervent patriots (Ungaretti included, who in those days would telegraph news which was unknown to all with the exception of Tittoni and a few others) did not act...

The consequences?

At Reka, where French blood was spilled, a French legion came to the rescue, la crème de la crème of the youth to tell us 'solidarity'!<sup>98</sup>

Even here there is a presumption to want to be part of a colonial power, like the French, the implied conceit to have all the rights to occupy during a time of

94. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giovanni Papini*, 242.

95. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Giovanni Papini*, 252.

96. Lavo Čermelj, *Slovenci in hrvatje pod Italijo med obema vojnama* (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 1965), 299 – 302. The book was first published in 1936 in English with the title *Life and Death Struggle of a National Minority. The Yugoslavs in Italy*, with the intention of informing the wider public of the horrors of the Italian policy to deprive the minority of its national identity.

97. See Pietro Brignoli, *Santa messa per i miei fucilati* (Milano: Longanesi editore, 1973). Author's testimony of the atrocities by the Italian army in Slovenia.

98. Ungaretti Giuseppe, *Lettere a Giovanni Papini*, 285-286.

peace a land that was unilaterally considered Italian.

As already noted, Ungaretti's correspondence during the conflict was not limited to Papini. During this period the poet also regularly corresponded with Ardengo Soffici. It is possible to find elements that complete the image so far outlined in these letters as well. In Letter 49 of 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1919 Ungaretti turns to the friend admonishing him:

*Remember*

the French compete to prove that in "any circumstance" the *people*, the *soldiers* demonstrate the grandeur of the race. Do you want to make of the Italian *race*, a *race*<sup>99</sup> of Negroes?<sup>100</sup>

This example as well confirms his non-egalitarian attitude, which can be linked to the 'Nubians' who 'jump like fleas' and to the 'Negro' anthology. Some of these letters also confirm his claims about Jews. Thus, in Letter 64, dated 18<sup>th</sup> May 1920, he writes:

I had to deal – practical reports – with some Italians, and this experience made me question whether we have lost every gallantry, and were in a period of sly Jewish decadence, with the worst barbarian vulgarity.<sup>101</sup>

There is also the following one, dated 21<sup>th</sup> May 1920, probably written at the same time as the one to Papini, where he expresses his judgment on Benjamin Crémieux: 'A Jew-man was put in charge of the Italian column at the Nouvelle R.(evue) F.(rancaise).<sup>102</sup>' And to conclude with the letter to Soffici, dated 2<sup>th</sup> September 1919, where Ungaretti writes: 'I am not Jewish, but Catholic; *I am the Italian people.*'<sup>103</sup>

In conclusion to what has been quoted so far, we believe it might be useful to add to this examination some quotes which outline the logical development of what has been stated above, from the education in Egypt and the experience of war to what is reported below.

Below are comments in the letter dated 23<sup>th</sup> September 1922 addressed to Cecchi:

"The more I meet Prezzolinis and Crémieuxs (le couple parfait<sup>104</sup>) the more I

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99. Cursive in the original text A/N.

100. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Soffici 1917-1930*, 63.

101. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Soffici 1917-1930*, 86.

102. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Soffici 1917-1930*, 88.

103. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Soffici 1917-1930*, 64. Translation by the author of the paper, italics in the original text. A/N.

104. In French in the original text. A/N.

feel we ought to adhere to Fascism: this mob of democrats, faggots, Pharisees, ought to be hated!"<sup>105</sup>

Meanwhile, Ungaretti approaches Mussolini directly in a letter dated 5<sup>th</sup> November 1922, to request the Duce to write the introduction to his poetry collection *Allegria di naufragi*:

Excellency,

"[...] Would H.E., who is consecrating the renewed Italianity, raise my faith? I address H.E. as a Renaissance man: when Italy was grand in the world, the powerful would not disdain to crown her with beauty (which is only immortal). A few lines of preface from H.E., whenever the grave State affairs will allow you a moment of repose, would for me, in the eyes of all, be of great honour [...]."

In Letter 76 dated 8<sup>th</sup> November 1922 addressed to Soffici<sup>106</sup>: 'Dearest, perhaps there will be founded a great Fascist newspaper in Rome. [...] Shortly there will be published a volume of lyrics – ed.[ition] of great luxury – with an introduction by Mussolini.'<sup>107</sup>

In Letter 78 dated 29<sup>th</sup> November 1922, also to Soffici, he writes:

Beware of the democrats. Prezzolini - for example – surely, he is not a coward, but cowards surround him. All are so. I too had to suffer due to those atrocious people. And you know how liberal I am (I am not a little Arab for nothing).<sup>108</sup>

Also, in the letter dated 22<sup>th</sup> November 1930: 'Dear Soffici, a son was born: Antonio Benito'<sup>109</sup>

And finally, his beliefs are shown in this letter addressed to Giuseppe De Robertis from 23<sup>th</sup> August 1942:

"In this horrendous war everything is a game, and our own being Italians, if we don't win. [...] Brazil, which has trampled over the brain and sweat of millions of Italians, [...] to whom it owns its prosperity, just because it didn't seem appropriate to the leading caste to vindicate all those Italians called in to substitute the Negro slaves. [...] We will not return to the shame of emigration, as those bastards who wage war on us want, even if we were to

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105. Piccioni, *Ungarettiana*, 172.

106. Petrocchi, *Scrittori italiani e fascismo*, 170-171.

107. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Soffici 1917-1930*, 101-102.

108. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Soffici 1917-1930*, 104.

109. Ungaretti, *Lettere a Soffici 1917-1930*, 128.

die from the first to the last."<sup>110</sup>

The idea of sacrifice, which we have seen earlier, recurs here, but in this case for the sake of 'the actual being Italian'. In the poet's mind they must wash off the shame of the Italians who emigrated to Brazil being exploited like Negro slaves, because their position is among the powers of the 'gentiles'. The numerous public statements made by Ungaretti that he was against the war are undermined by this passage. He persists in calling for the massacre of human beings, so as not to witness his people fall into the disgrace of being regarded at the same level as black slaves.

At 80 years old, Ungaretti writes to Piccioni:

I will tell you one more thing; in New York, I have smoked marijuana with a beautiful Jew, one other "young" and another beautiful Jew, at the apartment of the first. It had no effect, absolutely none; I do not know why they smoke it.

But the girl was voluptuous [...] <sup>111</sup>

Considering that the focus is on him smoking marijuana, it is not clear to the why it is necessary to specify the woman's ethnicity and relegate the "young" to a simple adjective "other". Or in Letter 175 of 24<sup>th</sup> June 1963 addressed to Piccioni: "She's a Gypsy, but with a rare sharp insight."<sup>112</sup> Even in the letter 263, dated 30<sup>th</sup> May 1967:

We were [...] initiated to the Candomblé and I am now under the guidance of Oxalà [...]. I even have the collar [...] of the conversion. [...] Truly this is only a joke from the faith's point of view, but it lets us uncover the secrets of a population that date back to the beginning of mankind.<sup>113</sup>

This statement also displays all those colonial traits so far examined. The experimenting with 'primordial' rites, which cannot be but a joke compared to Ungaretti's 'true' faith, is the proof. The attitude is one of condescending superiority coupled with curiosity towards the Other, who is to be studied but not respected.

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110. Fabio Pierangeli, *Ombre e presenze. Ungaretti e il secondo mestiere (1919-1937)* (Napoli: Paolo Loffredo iniziative editorial, 2016), 47 (Footnote 53).

111. Piccioni, *Ungarettiana*, 14.

112. Leone Piccioni, *Giuseppe Ungaretti/L'allegria è il mio elemento. Trecento lettere con Leone Piccioni*. (Milano: Oscar Mondadori, 2013), 218.

113. Piccioni, *Giuseppe Ungaretti/ L'allegria è il mio elemento*, 305.

## Conclusions

This is therefore Ungaretti's position in regards to the racial question that emerges from his letters from 1909, and his support of Mussolini and Fascism to the point that he names his own child after the Duce. Through this analysis of the letters emerges an aspect of Ungaretti's thought which is rooted in the poet's childhood dominated by the cultural environment of Egypt. It is the attitude of the colonial powers, who authorized themselves to decide the fate of the indigenous populations, as they were considered cultureless and therefore incapable of governing themselves. Ungaretti, once the political-cultural environment had changed, tried with the help of some critics to minimize this behaviour if not deny it completely. This is therefore a characteristic of the poet, which is hardly in keeping with the definition of the pure and humane poet. We believe it necessary to insert a passage of the speech given by Ungaretti in Gorizia on 20<sup>th</sup> May 1966 on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of his collection *Il porto sepolto*:

The name of Gorizia after fifty years signifies again for me what it used to signify for us soldiers in a Karst of terror. It wasn't the name of a victory – there are no victories on earth, if not blasphemous illusions – but the name of a common suffering, ours and that of those who stood in front of us, and were called the enemy, but we, despite doing our duty without cowardice, called them in our hearts brothers. Yesterday I again walked those places in the Karst [...] It was then, [...] we heard sprouting, growing in our souls the true strength, [...] it was the sentiments that every man is, without limitations or distinctions, when he doesn't betray himself, brother to any other man, brother as if the other could not be less similar to him like another self.<sup>114</sup>

This is the poet's attitude in 1966, where he emphasizes his egalitarian thought, which would be fully comprehensible if not for the fact that he transposes it in time, bringing it back by fifty years.

From our point of view, however, the contradictions, the 'shadows and presences', and the metamorphosis which emerge from this reading of his correspondence indicate rather a: '[...] dramatic "duplicité" (in which) resides probably the deepest, most suggestive, dramatic, ironic and not yet entirely explored trait of Ungaretti.<sup>115</sup>

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114. Stefano Verdino, "Ungaretti ed il sentimento della guerra," *Cuadernos de Filología Italiana* 22, (2015): 192-193.

115. Gennaro Rosario, *Le patrie della poesia. Ungaretti, Bergson e altri saggi* (Firenze: Cadmo edizioni, 2004), 40.



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