

THE SCAFFOLD AND THE STAGE IN COUNTERCULTURAL ITALY: OF ARENAS AND ALTARS

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The public, central, ceremonial, sacrificial, emotionally-charged space, once held by the scaffold, has been replaced, in civilized society, by the stage. The stage holds many functions—political, civic, theatrical, musical, balletic—but the role of the musician, the rock or folk star, is arguably that which is most closely a substitution of the work performed by the scaffold. The concert represents a space for chaotic revelry, post-religious, irrational revelation, and communal celebration that overcomes the aggregate, atomistic, nature of modern society made up of discrete, often alienated, individuals. Already in 19th-century Bayreuth, Nietzsche recognized Richard Wagner as a sort of early composer/musician cum prophet. He compared the “world as exhibition” that historicism presented to its “blasé spectators,” with Wagner’s “suprahistorical power of an art consuming itself in actuality can bring salvation for the ‘true neediness and inner poverty of man.’”¹ Music, Nietzsche believed as a young man,² represents an opportunity to balance out the Dionysian and Apollonian again after the rationale of the Enlightenment, to not only reason about life, but revel in it. He muses on the fact that music should have become such an important part of the lives of modern man and says:

“Music could not have been born in our time. What then does its presence amongst us signify? An accident? A single great artist might certainly be an accident, but the appearance of a whole group of them, such as the history of modern music has to show ... a circumstance of this sort leads one to think that perhaps necessity rather than accident is at the root of the whole phenomenon.”³

Indeed, modern man needs music, needs the concert, for the two together give him the opportunity to communicate something that has been lost to civilization. For, wherever one finds civilization, according to the young Nietzsche, one finds an inability to communicate feelings due to the fact that “few are able to preserve their individuality in their fight against a culture which thinks to manifest its success ... by the fact that it involves the individual in the snare of ‘definite notions,’ and teaches him to think correctly.”⁴ The

1 F. NIETZSCHE. *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*. 1874. pp. 32, 64.

2 Nietzsche distances himself, eventually, from Wagner and his youthful belief in the power of his productions. He does so at the same time that he begins to distance himself from Romanticism and its search for a new mythology, beginning to believe that myths are for tearing down, not for reconstructing or reinventing.

3 *ibidem*, Chapter V. It is important to note the difference between music in the theatre, or opera, and a more strict oral tradition, especially in the Italian case. Written music, in Italy, according to Franco Fabbri and Goffredo Plastino, “identified with opera itself, played a crucial role, becoming the symbol of an artistic and cultural identity that aspired to consolidate into a political unity. ... Oral music, that very music that according to the Romantics expressed the *Volksgeist*, the quintessential ethnic and spiritual character of a people, never played this role in Italy and was therefore completely absent from the political discourse.” F. FABBRI AND G. PLASTINO. *Made in Italy: Studies in Popular Music*. N.p., 2013. P. 20. However, Romano Giuffrida and Bruno Bigoni argue of the 20th-century Italian case that, when theatre fails, when opera fails the middle class, popular music, *impegnata* and *leggera*, will insert itself onto the stage as the last space of oral tradition. R. GIUFFRIDA. *Fabrizio de André: accordi eretici*. Milano: Rizzoli, 2008. p. 9.

4 *ibidem*, Chapter V.

music and the concert represent a return to the ritualistic, to revelry and revelation, that has been lost to the rational man. It is revelation, sublimation, through submersion of the individual into a holistic sea of being and feeling, and, perhaps today more than in the Wagner's shows in Bayreuth, it is also a space where Benjamin's 'aura' is restored to the age of mechanical reproduction and where, more importantly to us here, Kantian sublimation occurs. In the first case, mechanical reproduction, which has torn artwork out of time and space, it removes it from the temple, from the church, and from the museum, it decays its aura, the "unique phenomenon of distance, however close the object may be,"⁵ by destroying its uniqueness through reproduction. While the musician's music is reproducible, he, himself, is not, and therefore, in his very person he is able to maintain the aura of art, both in its traditional religious cult value, and the secular dedication to the cult of Beauty. Perhaps this too is a reason that music, especially when composition and performance meet in a single person, has become so important to modern man.

This Kantian sublime, this Benjaminian 'aura,' are positive aspects of the modern singer-songwriter and his relationship with the stage and the crowd. However, in his relationship with the Dionysian revelation, the relationship between stage and crowd begins to reveal its dark underbelly, the crowd and the ritual's latent desire for the blood promised by ancient ritual. For this single composer and performer, the center of the crowd's emotional and intellectual energy, the one voice heard by silent thousands, maintains some of the essence of the man on the scaffold. It is as if the musician is the condemned man, to whom all lend their ear for his last words, and who, miraculously, is saved from death by the king's pardon at the last moment. While the stage claims to be the civilized scaffold, in a sense, allowing crowds to act out communal rituals without the traditional sacrificial denouement, it does not cleave itself from its premodern blood-thirst completely. Indeed, the musical stage maintains aspects, not only of the scaffold, but of the arena itself, where knights drew crowds to witness their fights to the death. This article will investigate, in two sections, the implications of the stage's residual associations with premodern platforms of (1) competition, valor, and death, and (2) punishment, death, and potential salvation through martyrdom. The musician's stage, indeed, returns to act as at times as an ancient or medieval arena, and at times as a potential altar.

The article also highlights Fabrizio De André's awareness and critique of these various latent roles played by the musician and performer, as seen in journalistic work he did during the 1968 Sanremo festival. His critique is particularly poignant when we consider his fixation with scaffold ballads in his early career—like "La ballata del Miché,"⁶ "Geordie,"⁷ "Ballata degli impiccati," and "Recitativo"⁸—a phase in his career that lines up with the years that he refused to perform for live audiences as a *cantautore*, though he had previously performed in Genoa as a guitar player.⁹ In those songs, the singer dually embodies the executed man and his last words on the scaffold, and the crowd's flash ballads, often associated with scaffold culture. British public scaffold ballads, or flash ballads as they were called due to their spontaneous nature, were, according to Vic Gatrell, spaces of "remembering and imagining, which wove a collective idea of the scaffold

⁵W. BENJAMIN. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1968. p. 222.

⁶F. DE ANDRÈ. *La ballata del Miché/La ballata dell'eroe*. Roma: Karim, 1961.

⁷F. DE ANDRÈ. *Geordie/Amore che vieni, amore che vai*. Roma: Karim, 1966.

⁸F. DE ANDRÈ. *Tutti morimmo a stento*. Roma: Bluebell Records, 1968.

⁹De André met Gino Paoli, Luigi Tenco, and Umberto Bindi in Genoa and began playing with them at La borsa di Arlecchino in the early 1960s.

in the space between print and orality.”¹⁰ The tone could be one of ridicule, it could be obscene, it could be historical, reporting the facts. The tone could also be elegiac or satirical, however, and therefore by the 19th century in England, they had been repressed, due to their potential for inciting violence and revolt. The popular singer-songwriter who brings the scaffold ballad back to the stage, then, becomes a highly charged public figure, and it seems from his critique that De André, in the early years of his career, when he sang sorts of scaffold ballads, but never took the stage, was aware of this possibility, which turned out to be particularly strong in Italy. More than other popular singer-songwriters, as he was literally standing in for the executed man, singing out his last words before a rapt audience, using the emotional musical form used by scaffold crowds and commenting on his own execution,¹¹ glossing his own death so it will be read by the audience from the correct point of view. When that gloss goes beyond a lament for his death, when it is politically or socially charged,¹² the singer-songwriter, the *cantautore* in the Italian case, specifically, risks translating himself into a potential martyr in the crowd’s communal imagination. De André is one of the most obvious cases, Georges Brassens in the French case is equally obvious. Yet, any singer-songwriter whose songs are politically, socially, or ethically charged, as we will see in the Italian case, could risk blending the roles of the rock/folk stage and the scaffold.

The Stage as Arena

The gallows represent judicial power to the feudal knight, a symbol of his omnipotence on his piece of land, as it returns to represent the local power of the strongest individual in the mythology of the North American West. But as power centralizes, partially through a monopoly on violence, the knight must transition into other roles. He is no longer autonomous and omnipotent, no longer able to gain land and wealth through the threat of violence and demonstrations of superior strength and force. The knight becomes a troubadour,¹³ he becomes a mercenary soldier, and in various other roles, secures membership in the court of a more powerful, landowning knight. His knightly valor and strength are no longer useful to him to gain wealth and land, but may still gain him prestige. For, as knights broadly lose their right to violence, they maintain some of it in sporting contests that outlive the medieval society that contrived them. As Norbert

¹⁰ V. GATRELL. *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People 1770-1868*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 119.

¹¹ Consider, for example, “Ballata degli impiccati,”: “Tutti morimmo a stento / ingoiando l'ultima voce / tirando calci al vento / vedemmo sfumare la luce / ... / Prima che fosse finita / ricordammo a chi vive ancora / che il prezzo fu la vita / per il male fatto in un'ora.” From F. DE ANDRÈ. *Tutti morimmo a stento* 1968.

¹² Consider, for example, “Recitativo (Due invocazioni e un atto d'accusa):” “Giudici eletti, uomini di legge / noi che danziam nei vostri sogni ancora / siamo l'umano desolato gregge / di chi morì con il nodo alla gola. / Quanti innocenti all'orrenda agonia / votaste decidendone la sorte.” From *Tutti morimmo a stento* 1968; as well as a case of modern condemnation in 1973’s “Sogno numero due”: “Imputato ascolta, / noi ti abbiamo ascoltato. /.../ ti emozionavi nel ruolo più eccitante della legge / quello che non protegge / la parte del boia. /.../ per quello che hai fatto, / per come lo hai rinnovato / il potere ti è grato.” From F. DE ANDRÈ. *Storia di un impiegato*. Roma: Produttori Associati, 1973.

¹³ When Fabrizio De André appeared on the music scene, he was labeled by the media “The Minstrel in Microgroove” and “The ‘Medieval’ Singer-Songwriter.” The young musician admitted to being taken with the time period and said he preferred the medieval title “troubadour” to the modern “*cantautore*,”- citing Provençal troubadours like Jaufré Rudel and Rambaldo di Vaqueiras as some of his influences. It is well known that François Villon was an early inspiration in De André’s work and that he borrowed from his own translations of Provençal ballads that he found in music shops in France for some of his early songs. While scholars have pointed out that, in reality, De André’s medieval period is quite long (“Sul piano melodico ed armonico questa partita di arcaicità che il cantautore e i *media* indicano come genericamente medievali arriva in realtà al Rinascimento, mentre sul piano del *sound* e dell’arrangiamento sconfinava addirittura nel Barocco.” Ivaldi, Federica “Il medioevo secondo De André,” in Guastella, Gianni, and Paolo Pirillo, eds. *Menestrelli e Giullari : Il medioevo di Fabrizio De André e l’immaginario medievale nel novecento italiano: atti del convegno*. (Bagno a Ripoli, 16 Ottobre 2010). Firenze: Edifir, 2012. Print. p. 120), his interest in the time period, as well as his interest specifically in scaffold ballad, allows him, as we shall see, a unique position from which to analyze modern rituals that are supposedly less-cruel, more humanizing.

Elias states in his fascinating work of historical psychology, the 1939 *The Civilizing Process*:

“Belligerence and aggression find socially permitted expression in sporting contests. And they are expressed especially throughout ‘spectating’ ... This living out of affects in spectating ... is a particularly characteristic feature of civilized society. It partly determines the development of books and theater, and decisively influences the role of cinema in our world.”¹⁴

The violence that was once part of everyday life, is allowed a circumscribed space. Only within the confines of the arena, may men battle each other, and may crowds of spectators return to a primordial and wild state that craves the spilled blood of communal sacrifice.

This violent medieval relic, which was in turn an ancient relic in medieval times, is a well-known, and often observed characteristic of modern sporting events, North American football being a classic example, of the slow, violent battle to gain the land of an opposing team (or army). However, the crowd’s blood-thirst is far less often recognized in spectators at other sorts of competitions, like, for example, in artistic competitions, and specifically here as considered in the annual Sanremo Music Festival held in Sanremo, Italy. Perhaps, because they are less often compared to ancient rituals to determine power and valor because they are less obviously violent, or perhaps because they take measures to hide their true natures, by calling themselves ‘festivals’, rather than ‘competitions,’ perhaps because Sanremo particularly was a supposedly frivolous space by design.¹⁵ They are competitions, however, and are arguably, more ruthlessly competitive than even the most violent modern sporting event. For, artists do not compete as a team against another team; they compete alone against tens, sometimes, hundreds of other individuals. Therefore, they are not judged as a single part of a larger mechanism, but individually, literally put under a spotlight to be scrutinized and either praised or discarded. It is not one against one, but one against many.

Another important difference is the way in which a winner is determined. In sporting events, the winner is simply the team that performs better, the team whose physical strength, speed, ability outmatches the other. Though fallible or even biased arbiters can affect the outcome of a match, there is certainly far less subjectivity in the outcome of a sporting match than in the outcome of, for example, a festival like Sanremo. Sanremo, and competitions like it, are highly modern and highly civilized in a Foucauldian sense. For Foucault, in a disciplinary society “the judges of normality are present everywhere ... We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the ‘social worker’-judge;” he says, “it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based.”¹⁶ Sanremo is an opportunity for each citizen to play his favorite role: that of arbiter, he decides good v. bad, not basing his judgment on morality, but on taste. This is not inherently problematic, for, theoretically, a competition based on the tastes of individuals would be a highly democratic competition, which would allow a society to choose the artists that gain the national spotlight and, in turn, influence future artists. However, the actual process, as is often the case, hardly resembles the ideal.

¹⁴ N. ELIAS. *The Civilizing Process*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994, p. 166.

¹⁵ Stefano Pivato argues that music, and Sanremo specifically, are Italian cultural spaces that after WWII are designed as spaces of historical forgetting, a forgetting: “Sanremo, beginning in 1951, is the viewing window onto the Italian pop song, and it confirms the ‘smemoratezza’ the music seeks,” which allows the competition to thoughtlessly release some of the postwar aggression that was not being dealt with directly, as music in France and the States dealt with it. He argues that the Genovese school, not coincidentally a border zone with France, drew from the French Brassens, Piaf, Montand, to make music a space of recuperation of memory. S. PIVATO. *La storia leggera: l’uso pubblico della storia nella canzone italiana*. Bologna: Il mulino, 2002. P. 80-81

¹⁶ M. FOUCAULT. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. 2nd Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1995, p. 304.

Firstly, broadly speaking, modern spectators have already been normalized and conditioned themselves, largely by the media, to prefer, if not a certain individual, at least a certain type of individual. Secondly, in the specific case of Sanremo, the false premise of the democracy of the competition reveals itself even more egregiously. As Marco Santoro explains in his *Effetto Tenco*, “participants were presented directly by record companies, and then selected based on a complex system of commissions, committees, and votes. Many times over the years the selection process has been altered due to pressure and protests on the part of both music companies and journalists, due to the general management of selections, which was seen as lacking transparency and too often maintaining open ties to interested parties.”¹⁷ Therefore, Sanremo not only represents a space in which individuals are encouraged to act as judges, to normalize culture, as it were; not only does it further the interests of the disciplinary society, but it is both latently and directly controlled by private interests that, when they cannot influence the democratic whole, obscure results and declare a winner that best suits a select few citizens’ morality or pocketbooks.

Fabrizio De André, for his part, condemned Sanremo, its authority and its effects, throughout his career. The festival, indeed, was highly influential in the world of popular music in Italy from its inception in 1951 until at least 1968-71, which Franco Fabbri and Goffredo Plastino mark as the end of its central role in shaping the Italian pop music scene.¹⁸ In the countercultural 1970s, musicians and fans began to see participation in Sanremo as a sort of betrayal, yet as the following list of successful participants demonstrates, it will continue to maintain an influence in the industry throughout, at least, the 1980s; winners and runners up have included Claudio Villa (1955, 57, 62, 67) Domenico Modugno (1958, 59, 60, 62, 64, 66, 76), Sergio Endrigo (1968, 69, 70), Adriano Celentano (1961, 68, 70), Wess and Dori Ghezzi (1976), Eros Ramazzotti (1986), Gianni Morandi (1987), Cristiano De André (1993), Gino Paoli (2002). Other contestants have included Giorgio Gaber (1961, 64, 66, 67), Mina (1960, 61), Ivano Fossati (1972), Rino Gaetano (1978), Patty Pravo (Critics Award 1984, 87, 97), Vasco Rossi (1981, 82), Raf (1988, 90, 91), Jovanotti (1989), and Enzo Jannacci (Critics Award 1991), and Francesco Guccini (1967), Francesco De Gregori (1980), and Gianna Nannini (2007) as authors,¹⁹ among many others.

Fabrizio De André recognized in the ritual, and in the public, precisely the remnants of ancient violence that civilized society claimed to have overcome. On February 1, 1968, on the first day of the Sanremo Festival, he wrote a review for the *Corriere Mercantile*, saying:

“In my view, Sanremo’s biggest defect consists ... in the traumatically competitive climate of the show, almost as if the Italian spectator cannot enjoy himself unless he is witnessing an agonizing event; demonstrating, as such, that he does not love the music generally or a song particularly, as much as he loves the fight, the tension of participants and their anxiety to survive duels that necessarily result in a winner and a loser; to put it concisely, the battle ... singing wars ... all of which brings little honor to the Italian public, which in certain occasions proves itself the most deserving heir of the ancient Roman who crunched peanuts at the gladiators’ spectacles.”²⁰

17 “i partecipanti erano presentati direttamente dalle case editrici e discografiche, e selezionati da un complesso sistema di commissioni, giurie e votazioni, più volte cambiato nel corso degli anni e seguito di pressioni e proteste, da parte sia delle aziende musicali sia dei giornalisti, a cause di una gestione ritenuta spesso poco trasparente e sin troppo apertamente legata a interessi di parte.” M. SANTORO. *Effetto Tenco: genealogia della canzone d’autore*. Bologna: Il mulino, 2010, p. 63.

18 F. FABBRI AND G. PLASTINO. *Made in Italy: Studies in Popular Music*. N.p., 2013.

19 Fabrizio De André wrote the song “Faccia di cane” with Roberto Ferri for i New Trolls. The song participated in the 1985 Sanremo but De André asked that his name not be included as a songwriter.

20 “A mio parere il maggior difetto di Sanremo consiste ... nel clima traumaticamente competitivo della manifestazione, quasi che lo spettatore italiano non riesca a divertirsi altrimenti che dinnanzi ad un avvenimento agonistico; dimostrando, in tal modo, di non

He recognizes the implicit roles artists play when they participate in contests; they are the gladiators, they are the knights, and they battle not just to win, but to survive, if only in the public imagination. He objects to the “competitive climate,” amongst the artists, as well as to the role played by the public. For, the artists face an audience that, he suspects, hope to witness, not something beautiful, but something painful, spectacular drama born out of actual trauma. His suspicion of the audience is related here to the death of his friend, Luigi Tenco, who had committed suicide a year earlier at the Sanremo Festival. Yet his refusal, not only to participate in festivals, but even to give concerts from the beginning of his solo career in 1961 until 1975, reveals a hesitation that precedes Tenco’s untimely death. His assessment of an audience that “wanted a violent emotion,” leads him to suspect an audience that, as he writes in 1968 in the *Corriere Mercantile*, “will be disappointed if nothing dramatic [like Tenco’s death the year before] were to happen.”²¹ His suspicion of an audience that revels in the pain and trauma of the performers anticipates the results of Sanremo that came two days later, when Sergio Endrigo won, the first *cantautore* to take the prize. In the competitions leading up to 1968, Sanremo was dominated by pop acts, performers who sang the music written by others. Luigi Tenco was not a performer, he was a singer-songwriter, a *cantautore*, a group of musicians as yet unsanctified and held at the margins of public interest. As Marco Santoro argues in his *Effetto Tenco*, Luigi Tenco was the sacrifice the Italian public needed to bring *cantautori* into the spotlight. More broadly, however, Tenco’s initial sacrifice, his suicide, as we shall see, made audiences see red with respect to many *cantautori* to come, as the public, particularly sectors of fans, challenged *cantautori* to authenticate their words with actions.

The Stage as Altar

As stated, a singer-songwriter’s performance has the capacity to inspire revelation through full-immersion in feeling and community, in its uniqueness, it promises a space for the return of the ‘aura’ of art, and as it retains aspects of ancient death games, as well as the scaffold crowd viewing the condemned man’s last words and terrific death, it allows the potential for a sort of sublimation that is often denied in modern culture. This capacity for deep emotional response and revelation is part of that which lends to the singer-songwriter such an influential role in the modern world, where other traditional religious and secular rituals with similar potential have been rationalized out of existence. Yet, in Italy, for a set of reasons particular to its local history, the relics of scaffold were stronger in the late 1960s and 1970s, than in other Western countries, where they appear nonetheless to maintain close, if subconscious ties, in the collective imagination.

The scaffold was a place for powerful last words, it was a place where a kingdom’s or State’s criminal could become the people’s martyr, where a death meant to secure the power of the king could ignite, instead, rebellion and revolution. The Western folk singer-songwriter, *chansonniere*, *cantautore*, figuratively occupies a place similar to the condemned man. He is regarded by various strata of society as a voice to be

amare la musica generale o la canzone in particolare, quanto piuttosto la lotta, la tensione dei partecipanti e la loro ansia di superarsi nel duello che deve necessariamente dare un vincitore ed un vinto; in poche parole, la battaglia ... guerra canora ... non fa neppure onore al pubblico italiano, che in certe occasioni si dimostra il più degno erede dell’antico romano che sgranocchiava le noccioline agli spettacoli dei gladiatori.” Translated by J. VanWagenen. in C. SASSI and W. PISTARINI, eds. *De André talk: le interviste e gli articoli della stampa d’epoca*. Roma: Coniglio Editore, 2008, p. 41.

²¹ “Ben, questo pubblico, l’anno scorso, l’emozione violenta che cercava l’ha avuta: un’emozione tanto violenta che se quest’anno—Dio non lo voglia — non dovesse succedere proprio nulla di drammatico, forse qualcuno ci rimarrebbe male.” C. SASSI and W. PISTARINI, *op cit.*, 41.

marginalized and/or silenced and as the voice of the people and subversion. His words carry the weight of authenticity, as he is not a singer performing another's poetry, but a poet himself. Furthermore, his words are expected to carry the weight of responsibility;²² his is not frivolous poetry, it is expected to hold in its depths all of the emotion of the human experience and to subvert normative culture, complacent society and oppressive government. He is the (often self-declared) outsider, the reject, with the potential to become a prophet. His potential as prophet, indeed, depends on his very position as society's *persona non grata*. The aura of the singer-songwriter, together with his authenticity, lend to his words the figurative and sublime power of the criminal cum martyr's last words before death. Yet, his death is only figurative, the public, generally, does not demand that he sacrifice himself in order to demonstrate his authenticity, in order to demonstrate his dedication to whatever cause his public associates him with.

The line between witnessing a secular, artistic genius and a religious prophet and thus the line between a figurative sacrifice, perhaps of one's personal life and privacy for example, and of a literal death (considered alternately as the execution of a blasphemer and martyrdom), can be obscured, as it was for Mark David Chapman, who accused Lennon of blasphemy and assassinated him.²³ In Italy, however, the case is particular, due in part to Italy's near history: the social repression and censorship experienced by a generation across the twenty years of Fascism and the events and results of WWII and the and frustration and disappointment experienced in 1948 when during the Italian Republic's first elections, the Italian left (formed of Europe's largest communist party, Togliatti's *Partito Comunista Italiano* and the *Partito Socialista*) lost to the Christian Democrats, in a defeat some argue was guaranteed by America via the Marshall Plan. And due in part to Italy's contemporary history, Tenco's foundational sacrifice (1967) and the tense and violent decade of civil strife in Italian that followed the 1968 student and worker revolts, which marked just the beginning of a series heterogeneous counter-cultural (artistic and political) movements. All of which set the *cantautore* to steep in a public, during *gli anni di piombo/la strategia di tensione*, that was roiling, engaged, active, desperate, and self-sacrificing, and that demanded proofs of authenticity that included, at times, imprisonment, at times death. It is important to remember the climate of the times: the Prime Minister, Aldo Moro, was kidnapped and assassinated; public figures like Franca Rame²⁴, Dori Ghezzi and Fabrizio De André,²⁵ himself, were kidnapped, and variously violated, tortured, and held for ransom; and great thinkers saw fit to choose sword over pen. Indeed, Antonio Negri, like Antonio Gramsci before him, wrote many of his best-known works from behind bars, serving time, not as a political prisoner, but accused

22 In the Italian case Cantacronache is the supreme and earliest example of the singer distinguishing herself as *impegnata*, politically and socially active, refusing to allow music to be defined by the popular music, or *musica leggera*, that ignored the past, specifically the recent war and Resistance. As Sebastiano Ferrari points out, the Turin collective from the 1950s sought to create a "realist song dealing with social and political issues" and "revolutionize the *canzonetta* by giving it a sense of intelligence." S. FERRARI. "The Advent of the 'Committed Song' in Italy: The Role of the Cantacronache in the Renewal of Italian Popular Music." *In Politics and Culture in Post-War Italy*, Linda Risso and Monica Boria eds. Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006. pp. 88-9.

23 J. JONES. *Let Me Take You Down : Inside the Mind of Mark David Chapman, the Man Who Killed John Lennon*. London: Virgin, 1993. p. 118.

24 On March 9, 1973, Dario's Fo's lifelong companion, and artist and feminist movement activist in her own right, Franca Rame, was kidnapped and raped by a group of far-right terrorists.

25 De André and his wife and popular artist, Dori Ghezzi, were kidnapped from their home in Sardegna on August 27, 1979, and held by a group anonymous Sardinian kidnappers demanding ransom from De André's father. They were held for four months outside, chained to a tree in a forest, and hooded unless being fed.

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in the 1990s of acts of political terrorism during the 1970s.

If the singer-songwriter was central to the counter-cultural activism of other young movements in the West, movements that were exceedingly less violent (indeed, most often pacifistic), less fervently political, and less enduring than those in Italy, then what role would *cantautori* play in Italy's counter-cultural epoch? They, like their public, and by their public and for their public, were expected to engage as well, not just artistically, but politically and, above all, personally, like Tenco. Tenco shot himself in the head in his Sanremo hotel room when he was disqualified from the competition. It would seem that he killed himself, then, because he lost, but De André explains that his friend went to the festival unwilling, forced by his record label: "He, only he, was the first Italian *cantautore*, ... He went to Sanremo without wanting to. ... It was truly a sacrifice for him to enter in the *bolgia* of Sanremo."²⁶ It would seem to De André that the banality and humiliation of his first sacrifice, led him to choose a second sacrifice, into which he could instill his own meaning. His action could also be read as an act of demythifying the popular festival, which put on airs of democracy but, rather, spoon-fed to the public, so-called *musica leggera*, or easy-listening. Sanremo winners are not canzone but *canzonette*, which Turin's music collective, the Cantacronache, considered "gastronomic" songs,²⁷ literally created for consumption, and which Umberto Eco investigates in his 1964 "*La canzone di consumo*" or "The song for consumption" in *Apocalittici e integrati*.

When Tenco's songs—raw, unglamorous and dealing in the human experiences—lose to the *canzonette* of the easy-listening machine, Tenco despairs not only for himself and his art, but for the public, who does not see through the myth of the spectacle itself and therefore cannot arrive at anything deeper than the superficial *canzonette*. Roland Barthes argues that there are three ways that post-modern artists attempt to break down myth: (1) by obscuring significance, (2) by teaching the public to read the highly coded language of myth and (3) by saying nothing at all, believing that the most effective mode of combatting modern myth was by refusing to give it voice.²⁸ Whether this was Tenco's goal or not, it proved effective, and the *cantautore* finally gained the public ear when he stopped singing. The public that had looked on Italy's first *cantautore* with what De André calls "hatred and ignorance"²⁹ in his 1967 song dedicated to his friend's death "January's Prayer," after his death looked to *cantautori* in expectation, in part of words that elucidate human experience, as has often been the storyteller's role, and that naturally belongs to the *cantautore*. But in expectation, at times, that the *cantautore* play the role he latently plays, as described above, of executed cum martyr.

Most explicitly, this role is played by Francesco De Gregori during the "Palalido incident," when in 1977 a group of extreme left demonstrators interrupted a concert in Milan to contest De Gregori's claim of solidarity with the left. Protestors were upset that De Gregori's management had cancelled a tour that had been essentially free to the public, tickets covering only the costs with some proceeds going too far left extra-parliamentary organization, Lotta continua (Continuous Struggle). They accused him of attempting to profit from his so-called political leanings and accused him of being beholden to the capitalist machine.³⁰

26 "Fu lui, solo lui, il primo cantautore italiano ... Perché è diventato famoso soltanto dopo la morte? ... Ci andò di malavoglia [a Sanremo]. ... Era un vero e proprio sacrificio, entrare nella bolgia di Sanremo." C. SASSI, and W. PISTARINI, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

27 M. L. STRANIERO, S. LIBEROVICI, E. JONA, G. DE MARIA. *Le canzoni delle cattive coscienza*. Milano: Bompiani, 1964. p. 5.

28 R. BARTHES. *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2012.

29 "Signori benpensanti / spero non vi dispiaccia / se in cielo, in mezzo ai Santi / Dio, fra le sue braccia / soffocherà il singhiozzo / di quelle labbra smorte / che all'odio e all'ignoranza / preferirono la morte."

30 This came during a time that many were protesting ticket prices, a movement instigated by the periodical *Re nudo* (The Nude King).

The agitators called De Gregori back onto stage after the concert and held a mock trial. The agitators played the roles of judge, jury, and executioner, while De Gregori replies to their questions and accusations at the microphone. Amongst other charges, an agitator, recorded by a journalist who was still in the audience, says, “Music doesn’t make a revolution. First you make the revolution, and then you can begin to think of the arts and music. Mayakovsky said that, he was a true revolutionary and committed suicide. You should commit suicide too!”³¹ In this moment, the complex public role of the *cantautore* is at its most explicit, he is at once expected to be an artist, performer, revolutionary, and martyr. When he does not completely fulfill his role, he is charged by the people as a sort of traitor to communism, socialism, and more generally, populism.

When Svetlana Boym talks about the case of Mayakovsky in her *Death in Quotation Marks*, she points out that due to “peculiar cultural and political circumstances, the reaction against the Romantic myth of the poet was much less pronounced in Russia than, for instance, in France.”³² That is, the cult of the poet endures in Russia, while Europe begins a process of killing the author, distancing his personality and his biography from his productions. A part of the ‘peculiar circumstances’ that she cites, is political oppression experienced before and after the revolution. She argues that “the cult of the poet thrives on political oppression. ... The poet is supposed to be more than just a poet and to have a cultural mission. He can be a voice and a consciousness of the nation, a martyr, dying young, a Christ-like figure, who takes upon himself the sufferings of people.”³³ This explains Mayakovsky’s anachronistic romantic legacy in the 20th century, and it illuminates the role Italians hoped and expected *cantautori* would play. Italy in the 20th century experienced a confusing spectrum of political oppression, first 20 years of Fascism under Mussolini, then the 1948 elections that, with the aid of the US and the Marshall Plan, would defeat Europe’s largest Socialist party in a victory that put the liberal Christian Democrats in power for the next 40 years. Yet, Italy along with the rest of western Europe, in part the US, and particularly France, headed towards the polemic but influential announcement of the death of the author.

The author’s death refers specifically to an idea tested by the historical avant-garde, as the Surrealists, for example, practiced automatic writing, letting go of the idea of the genius of the poet, and returning to a revised idea of the poetic muse who flows and writes through the poet. New Criticism in the United States followed with its challenge to authorial intent and its tenet of intentional fallacy. Roland Barthes declared the author officially dead in his 1967 essay, “La mort de l’auteur,” which was quickly challenged by Foucault in his 1969 “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?” and by many others to follow. The essay, however, continues to be highly influential in European and US criticism, and while it is still controversial, the author, generally, has not been fully united with his productions. And there is another death of the author that is perhaps even more important, when discussing the influence of Mayakovsky as well as poets in the West, and that is the loss of the cult figure of the poet as associated with his work. Boym states that in Russia his cult status remains because of ‘particular conditions’ and ‘political oppression.’ I agree, and would like to specify those conditions further by including the rise and diversification of spectacle in capitalist society. In Russia the poet does not compete with the radio star, film star, socialite, while in the West, the cult of

31 “La rivoluzione non si fa con la musica. Prima si fa la rivoluzione, poi si potrà pensare alle arti o la musica. Lo diceva anche Majakovskji che era un vero rivoluzionario e si è suicidato. Suicidati anche tu!” M. LUZZATTO FEGIZ. “Concerto interrotto e palco invaso al Palalido.” *Corriere della Sera* 3 Apr. 1976.

32 S. BOYM. *Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 120.

33 *ibid.* p. 120.

personality gradually transitions to obscure the poet.

In the particular conditions of Italy, then, the *cantautore* stands in the perfect, the sole position to take the place of the sort of poet that Mayakovsky represents. Mayakovsky's life and death are more complex than often popularly remembered, for example, he did not commit suicide in the name of the revolution, but rather, either for personal reasons as the Soviets claimed, or, as some believe, due to his belief that the revolution, ultimately, was a failure. However, he represents to many, and certainly to the student activists who tried De Gregori, a poet-revolutionary, a poet-hero, which Boym calls "a distinctly modern phenomenon which presents an alternative to the image of the alienated and effaced poet."³⁴ The poet-hero is a return from the 'art for art's sake' bohemian 19th-century poet, Ugo Foscolo is an early-romantic Italian example who precedes the slogan and movement, while the two great Italian poet-heroes of the 20th century, Gabriele D'Annunzio and F.T. Marinetti, both revolutionaries, in the arts and in the political sphere, are problematic figures that create, perhaps, a distrust of the figure of the politically-driven poet in the second postwar Italy. D'Annunzio earns the title of poet-hero as he transitioned from a decadent author to an aviator and literal revolutionary leader in Fiume; while Marinetti fights in WWI and participates in D'Annunzio's annexation of Fiume, and politicizes his poetry and art from the beginning, famously declaring war on museums and the sanitation of the world. They are problematic for the youths of the counterculture because of their positions in relation to Mussolini. D'Annunzio is supported by the Fascist regime in his later years, in exchange for his forfeiting the political stage, while Marinetti participates in Mussolini's early manifestations and then later adheres himself, and Futurism, to the Regime. Mussolini himself came on the scene as a supporter of socialist and artistic revolutionary movements, only after his March on Rome did he begin a transition to conservative Fascism.

For the legacy left by these actors in the domain of politicized art, perhaps, poet-heroes fall out of favor in the second half of the 20th century in Italy for a generation scarred not just by consumerism and capitalism, but by the Fascism that preceded it. Their motives become suspect whenever their scope falls beyond the strictly literary; as De Gregori wrote in "Storie d'ieri" (Yesterday's Tales), performed on his 1975 album *Rimmel* as well as De André's 1975 *Volume 8*, "Mussolini too wrote poetry, / what ugly creatures, poets, / every time they open their mouths it's to trick."³⁵ At the same time, poets are not considered so vital to intellectual youth culture anymore, precisely because their scope lies outside the social and political fight. Consider, for example, Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1971 criticism of Eugenio Montale and Montale's response. Pasolini says Montale's *Satura* is "antimarxist" and "easily ceding to bourgeois attitudes,"³⁶ while Montale responds to Pasolini and other critics³⁷ by asserting that his scope is not urgently present, but eternal.

In these particular conditions, in a nation that had suffered generations of political stagnation and oppression, in a culture that was losing its poets for various reasons, to whom could the people turn for

³⁴ *ibid.* p. 160.

³⁵ "Mussolini ha scritto anche poesie, / i poeti che brutte creature, / ogni volta che parlano è una truffa"

³⁶ "Egli ha fatto trapelare nei suoi tre libri che chi dice «io» è un uomo grigio, laconico, irreprensibile, romantico ma ironico ... piene di un sentimento più cosmico che amoroso, e che facilmente cedono ai comportamenti prestabiliti della buona borghesia." in P. PASOLINI. "Recensione Di Satura." *Nuovi argomenti* 21. January - March (1971).

³⁷ "non si trattò mai d'una fuga / ma solo di un rispettabile / prendere le distanze ... Che la partita è chiusa per chi rifiuta / le distanze e s'affretta come tu fai, Malvolio / perchè sai che domain sarà impossibile anche / alla tua astuzia." E. MONTALE. *Diario del '71 e del '72*. Milano, Mondadori: 1973.

heroes? The answer is arrived at naturally, the spectacularized and ritualized poets of the 20th-century, the *cantautori*. They are youth heroes across the West, but in Italy, their role is emphasized, in part perhaps due to Tenco's original sacrifice, and in part due to the particular conditions of political oppression in Italy that differed so greatly from the conditions in France, England, or the USA. Italian youths did not want just words and spectacle from their *cantautori*. They did not seek an anthem, or only inspiration, but adhesion and action.

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