Geographies and Histories of World Literature in Interwar Italian Magazines

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Abstract

This article adopts a historiographical approach to analyse some key debates on world literature that played out in literary and cultural magazines during the Italian Fascist dictatorship. It shows that by hosting such debates – especially on realism – in seemingly random fashion, literary and cultural magazines in the 1920s and 1930s significantly contributed to problematise the cultural politics of a xenophobic regime regarding the arts in general, and literature in particular. To this end, I focus on journals of different sizes, political orientations and visibility to provide different theorisations of world literature. Finally, by discussing the multiple epitomes of world literature that the magazines created, I question the presence of what may be considered a coherent national, or even canonical, literature to argue that world and national literatures could co-exist when made to function not just as literary but also as a cultural mechanism.

Keywords

fascist Italy – La Ronda – Il Convegno – Corrente – Occidente

1 Introduction

Despite their prompt statement of intentions at the start of their public lives, journals and magazines’ publication patterns tend to be rather impromptu affairs: the relationships between editors, translators, agents and authors, submission and printing deadlines, financial pressures, and the consolidation of existing or new networks – these are all factors jeopardising any coherent editorial strategy. In Fascist Italy, too, the presentation of world literature in journals
and magazines was not sustained by a systemic intellectual or financial programme; rather, it was a random exploration of literary works that mapped real and conceptual geographies and histories to reassess the national tradition. What did “world literature” mean for the Italian cultural elites who used literary journals to voice their opinions and aspirations during the Fascist regime? How was world literature conceptualised and presented to readers and writers?

To answer these questions, in this essay I analyse several key debates on world literature in four prominent Italian literary and cultural magazines – *La Ronda* (Rome, 1919–23), *Il Convegno* (Milan, 1920–40), *Occidente* (Rome, 1932–35), and *Corrente di Vita Giovanile* (Milan, 1938–40) – from the beginning to the end of the Fascist dictatorship. I selected these journals because they differed in size, political orientation, generational stance and visibility thereby providing a well-balanced corpus. In them world literature, I argue, was theorised as a multifaceted, unsystematic phenomenon of aesthetic perception across multiple, albeit mostly European, geographies; and it reflected issues related to Italian national literature rather a view of world literature as an autonomous practice or a set of canonical authors. Writing on Luigi Foscolo Benedetto’s 1946 essay “Letteratura mondiale” Charles Leavitt indirectly shows how, despite two contributions by Giuseppe Mazzini in 1829 and Arturo Farinelli in 1924, in Italy world literature was not systematically discussed till after 1945. It was only in the aftermath of WWII that Foscolo Benedetto challenged this unsystematic approach and theorised world literature as a “concrete, powerful system of ideas and practices” meant to build an internationalism able to connect peoples and ideas (Leavitt 1174).

To explore the plurality of meanings and conceptualisations of world literature, I draw on David Damrosch’s anti-systemic definition, according to which world literature stems from “widely disparate societies, with very different histories, frames of cultural reference, and poetics” and is “a mode that is as applicable to individual works as to bodies of material” (4–5). If Damrosch links the

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1 For a critical assessment of the factors which define a magazine, see Brooker and Thacker 1–26 and Bulson 200–20; for a definition of “little magazine,” see Churchill and McKible 1–5; and for a history of little magazines, see Hoffman, Allen and Ulrich 2–4. For a discussion of the role played by journals in Italy in the 1920s and 1930s, see Baldini “La Ronda,” Donnarumma, and Tortora. For a full repertoire of foreign literature published in Italian journals in this period, see Esposito and Patey.

2 By contrast, patterns of translations in publishers’ catalogues followed a logic significantly determined by economic factors; moreover, translated novels were mostly presented as popular literature. For the role of translations in Italy during the fascist regime, see Billiani National Cultures.

3 For a critique of monolithic assumptions about world literature, see Laachir, Marzagora,
study of world literature to historical trajectories, reading practices and receptions, Francesca Orsini emphasises the importance of location, understood in three ways: “as a physical and geopolitical location [...] ; as a particular language work [...] ; [and] as a platform or medium (the journal or magazine)” – as a result, different versions of world literature can emerge “from the same regime and periods” (“World Literature, Indian views” 57). Orsini and Laetitia Zecchin also stress the importance of location as “orientation” (“The Locations of (World) Literature” 2), since in the micro-world of literary journals translators, editors, and writers resort to world literature as a means of positioning and of orienting themselves within their – real or imaginary – cultural geographies to expand their modes of reading (see Evangelista 26).

By exploring the various epitomes of world literature journals created – in their real geographies (where they are published or where their contributing authors live), conceptual geographies (in this case, the debate on the novel), and imaginative geographies (the virtual spaces for cultural exchange) –, I demonstrate how this plurality of conceptualisations and of “meanings” allowed world literature to emerge with varying degrees of visibility and familiarity, and in dialogue with the allegedly univocal Italian national tradition officially patronised by the Fascist regime from the early 1920s. As independent and self-sustained venues, these four journals should not be viewed as implementing the new cultural order that, from 1934 onwards, the Italian and Nazi regimes sought to deploy to forge a new European culture: none was linked to official institutions, received state patronage, or acted in response to direct political demands (Martin 4–6).

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La Ronda’s Ivory Tower

In the rather traditionalist, indifferent and lethargic environment of early 1920s Rome, La Ronda was presented as a bastion for the defence of Italian literary values and as the epitome of that cultural autonomy, which permeated certain literary circles during the Ventennio (Billiani 842–44, Di Biase 104). The editorial team consisted of seven major figures, including senior editor and writer Vincenzo Cardarelli, emerging critics of Anglo-American literature Emilio Cercchi, Carlo Linati and Lorenzo Montano; French literature specialists Riccardo

Orsini “Significant Geographies.” In a recent monograph on fin de siècle cosmopolitism, Stefano Evangelista has proposed an approach to the study of world literature that not only reassesses the debate but also moves across the global and the national by dwelling on a historicised concept of cosmopolitism (25–27).
Bacchelli and Antonio Baldini; and Germanist Marcello Cora.\textsuperscript{4} La Ronda’s editorial presentation was rather spartan: it comprised feature articles in sections like “Incontri e scontri” (which debated topical literary and cultural affairs) and “Convitati di pietra” (two-three pages dedicated to the works and theories of illustrious men of letters of the past, written either in Italian or in the original); and review sections, including the famous “Letters from” and reports about other journals (“Dalle riviste”).\textsuperscript{5}

For La Ronda, a sustained and current international dialogue was needed to re-establish a position, if not of authority, then at least of relevance for Italian literature. Contributions on individual foreign literatures (particularly English, French and German) featured consistently in every section and issue of the journal, accompanied by repeated incursions into Russian territories and the sporadic appearance of Japanese, American, African, Hungarian and Spanish literatures and cultures.\textsuperscript{6} Short reviews introduced contemporary writers (for instance, Maxim Gorky, Emil Ludwig, André Maurois, H. G. Wells, Israel Zangwill), while longer pieces offered panoramic explorations of European literature or of eminent – mostly past – figures, such as Baudelaire, Dostoevsky, Goethe, and Shakespeare.

To renew the national literary tradition after the turmoil of the pre-World War I avantgardes, especially the first wave of Futurism, La Ronda championed a notion of modern classicism based on the example of Giacomo Leopardi. His style was held up as a marker of good prose writing, epitomised in La Ronda by the so-called “artistic prose” – a narrative style that privileged form over content and dismissed the solid plots of realism in favour of fragmented narrative patterns. Broadly, La Ronda’s literary programme mapped onto Goethe’s belief in a new humanism that world literature ideally could shape, if the separate profiles of national literatures were preserved while facilitating the intellectual exchange of ideas, themes and forms through literary journals among – mostly – European literati (Pizer 6).\textsuperscript{7} In an article on Goethe’s Tasso, Cora stressed the notion that Goethe’sanguished classicism was akin to the modern

\textsuperscript{4} La Ronda has received significant critical attention: see Billiani “Return to Order” 824, note 11, 844–45, and notes 16–18. On the figure of Cora, the pseudonym of Mór Korach (1888–1975), a Jewish chemical engineer of Hungarian origins, see Baldini “La Ronda” 104.

\textsuperscript{5} For a bibliography of La Ronda’s contributions on world literature, see Baldini “La Ronda” 115–21.

\textsuperscript{6} See Baldini ("La Ronda" 101–03) for a detailed scrutiny of each literature in terms of frequency and volume.

\textsuperscript{7} In his review of a German magazine dedicated to literary exchanges "Das deutsche Buch" Cora observed a growing interest in national literatures after the end of wwI and the dissolution of the empires (“Title”).
take on the classics expressed by Leopardi in his defence of the classical authors on the grounds of the modern spirit they possessed. Modern classicism, Cora concluded, was for Goethe, for Leopardi and for La Ronda’s an understanding of world literature as a “problema storico” yet “attuale:” as a problem of today’s sensitivity uniting different traditions which were still geographically defined by borders (“Sul Tasso di Goethe” 718, 722).

Contemporary German literature was treated less emphatically in La Ronda. Cora’s review of two novels by the Austro-Bohemian, Jewish playwright and novelist Franz Werfel, Spiegelmensch and Spielehof (both 1920), disapproved of their style. Werfel testified to both the loss of direction experienced by German writers after WWI and their inability to find their way back to Goethe’s “glories” “fasti” (492–95). Cora described new German writing as lacking direction, nothing more than a chaotic mix of Symbolism and Futurism, Buddhism and Christianity, Dostoevsky and Goethe, Expressionism and activism, and drew an unflattering parallel with the macabre experimental dance by the futurist musicologist Francesco Balilla Pratella, L’uomo nero (491–97). In a similar vein, reviewing the 1919 Italian translation of Heinrich Mann’s Il Suddito (Der Untertan, 1918), Lorenzo Montano critiqued, on stylistic grounds, the novel’s simplistic and ineffective critique of the bourgeoisie. The narrative’s marked socio-political overtones were ill-suited to literary writing since history and society could not be subject matters for good literature. According to Montano, contemporary German autobiographical writing was also failing because it broke down the barrier between author, narrator and reader, and did not follow the example on how to build a character Goethe afforded in Werther (“Indiscrezione moderna” 63–64). Despite such stylistic limitations, Montano had to admit that the novel had sold well (100,000 copies in two months) – yet, this was not necessarily a positive outcome in his view since it might point to a dangerous tendency taking root among readers (Il Suddito 73–75). Cora’s conservatism and Montano’s scepticism towards contemporary literature reveal La Ronda’s embrace of stylistic criticism as the only legitimate narrative form standing above borders and its rejection of historicism.

There were exceptions. Cora praised the 12 volumes of Atlantis, a collection of African stories written by authors from northern and central Africa collected by the German ethnologist and archaeologist Leo Frobenius (1873–1938) before the war and published in 1921 in Jena by his friend, the leading German

8 On Mann’s reception in Italy see Sisto 123–40.

9 Baldini discussed a “funzione Goethe” (“Goethe’s function”) to signal how he acted as a compass for moral and literary standards (“La Ronda” 110).
publisher Eugen Diederichs, who had already published works by the anti-western Völkisch ethnographical movement. Frobenius had pioneered an anti-Eurocentric view of historiography through a new methodology that deployed cultural artefacts (myths, songs, folktales) to reconstruct a universal history of which Africa had to be an integral part. Cora invited Italian publishers to learn from their German counterparts how to treat what lay beyond their limited horizons with more respect and diligence, since it might reveal an “unexpected greatness” (“Letteratura Africana” 733). In this way, according to Cora, Italian readers could be turned into readers of world literature. A similar invitation, despite its colonial prejudices, was issued by the surrealist writer and painter Alberto Savinio, who considered the comic novel Le nègre Léonard et maître Jean Mullin (1921) by the novelist and songwriter Pierre Mac Orlan a remarkable effort at a deeper understanding of African people, especially when compared to the provincial, exoticising gaze of Italian writers (491). Likewise, in his review of “Noh” or Accomplishment: A Study of the Classical Stage of Japan (1916) co-authored by Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound, Carlo Linati briefly criticised the famous Japan expert Lafcadio Hearn for his amateurish “raspollature folkloristiche” (“folkloric gleanings,” “Noh” 530). Instead, Linati praised cultural agents and writers (like Fenollosa and Pound) who spent time in Japan to acquaint themselves with their object of study – in this case with Noh actor, Unewaka Minoru – and followed a philologically exact methodological approach that avoided stereotypes or crude mistakes (“Noh” 530). Yet, even in cosmopolitan Linati’s appraisal of non-Western traditions staunch prejudices remained alive, since for him classical Japanese Noh theatre did not constitute a new aesthetic and theatrical project but only a mixture of humanity and puerility typical of the Japanese mind (“umanità e puerilità,” “Noh” 532). Contemporary non-Western writers and thinkers were often “absent” in reviews by Western critics who, by neglecting to observe such traditions in granular detail, did not perceive their writings as “literature” and thereby reiterated European cultural superiority (Orsini “Present Absence” 313–14).

American literature regularly filled the catalogues of Italian publishers in the decades to come. C. I. Claflin’s letters from the United States carried news about the distinguished historian Henry Adams (1838–1918), whose new realist writing was not only in touch with his own historical reality but also accomplished thanks to its terse, enigmatic and dry style (“terso, enigmatico, ascìutto” 131). Claflin also announced Edgar Lee Masters’ thematically controversial

10 See Evangelista (81–2 and 112–16) for an analysis of Hearn’s geographically “rooted” and localised, yet contradictory, cosmopolitanism.
Spoon River Anthology (1915): hardly a conventionally polished piece of writing, it was nonetheless admired as the authentic and powerful expression of a fresh humanistic understanding (528). This view of American literature as concerned with the human side of reality gained increasing popularity in the 1930s, when the American tradition came to be viewed as a means for Italian writers not simply to learn about realism, but also to shape a new anti-Goethe humanism, an inclusive and ethical stance on literary writing that welcomed subjects and topics that had been excluded thus far.

Similarly, British literature was presented as carrying forward a novelistic tradition engaged with society and teaching how to build a solid plot in an accessible style. Short and eclectic reviews of disparate writers like Hilaire Belloc (himself Franco-English), Max Beerbohm, Thomas Hardy, Robert L. Stevenson reinforced this image of the British tradition as invested in communicating unsentimentally with their readers on social – and not solely literary – matters. Its stylistically lucid, at time sarcastic, prose writing was praised for its ability to combine tradition with social critique, topical social challenges, and the needs and demands of the reading public, as in adventure and travel writing, two genres enjoying significant international popularity through many translations.11

As it wandered across the globe, La Ronda did not lose its intellectual compass. France remained the land of literary theory and intellectual engagement: leading Italian critics and artists wrote or translated letters, reviews and long articles about Marcel Proust (Paul Morand), Julien Benda (Bacchelli and Cecchi), André Gide (Raimondi), Albert Thibaudet (Cecchi), Jacques Rivière (Cecchi and Gide) and about the NRF (Baldini “La Ronda” 119–20).12 True, in response to Benjamin Crémieux’s report “Sur la condition présente des lettres italiennes” (first published in the NRF in 1920), Riccardo Bacchelli acknowledged his call for an awakening of the Italian men of letters but firmly rejected his accusation that Italian writers occupied a peripheral position (737). Such an awakening had to happen on national standards and not as a reaction to the vague and inconsistent remarks by a foreigner (“straniero,” 737). Bacchelli’s taut reply read like a betrayal of the unwritten alliance between the two countries, which supposedly shared a sense of cultural fraternity. Cecchi’s review of

11 A few examples include: Belloc, La buona donna (translated by Emilio Cecchi) and La morte di Pietro vagabondo (reviewed in 1919); Chesterton, La risposta del bambino (1919) and Le avventure d’un uomo vivo (translated by Cecchi) (1921); Wells, L’Anima di un Vescovo (1919, a. 1, n. 6); Stevenson, Nei mari del Sud (translated by Cecchi) (1920); Beerbohm, Seven Men (1920) and And Even Now (1920). For a full list see Baldini “La Ronda” 117–18.

12 Gisèle Sapiro has noted how the NRF achieved a position of hegemony within the literary field thanks to its high print runs: from 5,500 copies per month in 1919 to 12,000 by 1928 and 17,000 by 1931. No Italian literary magazine ever reached such high print-runs (127–28).
Benda’s *Le bouquet de Glycère* (1918) (69) and Savinio’s rather negative review of Louis Aragon’s *Anicet ou le Panorama* (1921) (11–12) made a similar point. Bacchelli, Cecchi and Savinio argued that America and Britain could offer Italy new topical realist literary models that, they felt, by the early 1920s France was no longer able to provide.\(^\text{13}\)

In many ways, *La Ronda*’s approach to world literature worked as an antidote to Spengler’s “decline of the West.” It often reserved direct praise only for those canonical authors for whom no corresponding Italian writers could be found, as in the case of plot-rich English literature or “national glories” like Goethe (Lawall 32). If for *La Ronda* world literature was an exercise in praising consolidated literary figures as embodiments of spiritual greatness, while occasionally highlighting examples of non-Western writing as novel sources, for *Il Convegno* it was a much more systematic discovery and presentation of modernist writing as a means of renovating the Italian literary landscape.

### 3 *Il Convegno*: A Literary Apparatus

Enzo Ferrieri launched *Il Convegno – Rivista di letteratura e di tutte le arti* in Milan in February 1920, only a few months after *La Ronda*’s debut. The journal intended to present the best of national and regional Italian literature as well as world literature – here understood largely as European literature. Ferrieri spoke of “la nostra ansiosa tensione verso l’Europa” (“our restless curiosity towards Europe”) because one could feel “nell’aria che in tutte le letterature il linguaggio stave mutando” (“in the air that in every literature the language was changing,” *Il Convegno* 40, 43). If Rome stood for elitism and tradition, Milan was the country’s economic capital and had a growing publishing industry. Ferrieri’s journal, whose reach was wider and more inclusive than *La Ronda*’s, neglected the “father figures” and privileged the works of contemporary writers: Goethe, for example, appeared only in two translations by Oreste Ferrari in 1920 and 1921.

In her study of the rivalry between *La Ronda* and *Il Convegno*, Anna Baldini has highlighted their readership as one of the main differences between the two journals: a “happy few” for *La Ronda*, and a wider middle and upper-middle class for *Il Convegno* (Baldini “Agli esordi” 98–99).\(^\text{14}\) While *La Ronda*

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\(^{13}\) Rather surprisingly, in a period when Paris was central to the intellectual development of Italian writers, *La ninfea bianca* by Mallarmé was the only translation (by Lorenzo Montano) of a contemporary French literary text published in *La Ronda*.

\(^{14}\) There are two major studies of *Il Convegno*: one edited by Antonello and Modena on the
wanted to return to the example of Leopardi’s modern classicism, *Il Convegno* promoted a return to a form of prose marked by a sustained and tightly woven plot echoing, in the best Lombard and national tradition, Alessandro Manzoni’s historical novel *The Betrothed*. Notwithstanding their differences, in the early 1920s these sister journals (“riviste sorelle”) published extensive reviews of contemporary international literature and established a transnational critical dialogue to overcome the chaos of the avantgardes and shape a new kind of prose writing.\(^{15}\)

*Il Convegno* was more selective and systematic in its choices than *La Ronda*, and it can be more appropriately described as a cultural apparatus rather than as a simple magazine: it treated world literature as an overarching context to be discussed in a professional manner by creating structured networks with universities and publishing houses, with a clear orientation towards the “problems of profound significance that are wondering across Europe” (“questioni d’indole generale che si agitano in Europa”), as Giuseppe Ungaretti wrote to Ferrieri in 1927 (Ferrieri “Corrispondenza”). *Il Convegno* focused mainly on modernist writers while at the same time introducing literary traditions from across Europe and beyond, including those of the US, Russia, and Scandinavia.\(^{16}\) Long review articles and translations of key figures (Benda, Conrad, Gide, Lawrence, Proust, Rivière, Tolstoy); “Rassegne” providing wide-ranging news of the transnational literary field; and short critical reviews of the latest publications, though hardly novel in themselves, upheld an idea of world literature which placed all “national traditions” at the same level.

Networking was central to the journal. Ferrieri was an active member of Milanese high society and of national and international institutions: a committee member of the Associazione Nazionale del Libro and of the Circolo Filologico Milanese; secretary of the PenClub in Milan; member of the Amici della lingua francese; and advisor to the Società di Cultura Italo-Germanica.\(^{17}\) The highly successful conferences he held at the Circolo to introduce new authors (including Hans Carossa, Franz Kafka, Emil Ludwig, André Maurois, Thomas Mann, Stefan Zweig) or to commemorate canonical ones, such as Rilke and

\(^{15}\) For the exact figures of contributions for each literature, see Baldini “Agli esordi” 99, Ferrieri to Ravegnani, “Corrispondenza”, “Il Convegno” 1923–1940, 10.

\(^{16}\) In the same year, Ferrieri opened a library of *Il Convegno*; in 1921 a publishing house associated with the journal; and in 1922 a club, Il Circolo del Convegno. See Ferrieri for his own assessment of how and why he published world literature in his journal *Il Convegno*.

\(^{17}\) National Book Association, Milanese Philological Society, Friends of the French Language club, Italo-German Cultural Society.
Goethe, were an effective mechanism that displayed their conception of “world literature” and enhanced the journal’s visibility.

For example, the four conferences on August Strindberg and other Swedish writers (Gustaf Fröding, Verner von Heidenstam and Selma Lagerlöf) that took place at the Circolo del Convegno between 22 February and 10 March 1926 were coordinated by Ferrieri and Giuseppe Gabetti, a professor of German at La Sapienza University in Rome, and were to be followed by a special issue on the Danish writer Jens Peter Jacobsen. As Sara Culeddu has observed, if Ibsen, Kierkegaard and Strindberg were already known in Italy through translators of German literature and were presented as followers of that tradition, the same could not be said for Jacobsen (extracts from his novels Maria Grubbe and Niels Lyne appeared in Il Convegno 1926 456–533), the Norwegian modernist Knut Hamsun (“La terra che sorge” 1920 25–41) and Alexander L. Kielland (“Torbiera” 1921 457–61), who were introduced for the first time as fully-fledged writers from Northern Europe (Culeddu 1–2). Gabetti used the journal to launch his career, give visibility to his publications outside academic circles, and establish an academic branch still taught at La Sapienza. Similarly, Giacomo Prampolini – a young polyglot writer and professional translator from German, Icelandic and Dutch – introduced Dutch and Icelandic poetry into Italian by including them in his pioneering Storia universale della Letteratura (1933, 1938).

As for German literature, Anna Antonello (2–3) has noted that it appeared only sporadically in the first year, with only Ferrieri’s own translation of Frank Wedekind’s scandalous Rabbi Esra (1911). This changed in the second year, thanks to the mediation of the professional translator Lavinia Mazzucchetti, who from October 1921 onwards started suggesting authors to Ferrieri (Ferrieri, “Corrispondenza”). Initially these were modernist and contemporary writers on an upward trajectory in terms of popularity, reflecting both the journal’s mission of introducing modern prose writing in Italy and Ferrieri’s entrepreneurial collaborations with the growing Milanese publishing industry. Mazzucchetti translated Rilke (1927) and Thomas Mann (1927, 1929), while her friend and grand-nephew of Alessandro Manzoni Cristina Baseggi translated Emil Ludwig (1928). Mazzucchetti also facilitated the follow-up publications of Mann’s novellas with the small Milanese publisher Sperling & Kupfer, for which she edited the series “Narratori nordici,” and she later introduced Ludwig to the leading publisher Mondadori (Antonello 3–4).

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18 On the controversy surrounding Hamsun’s Nazi sympathies, see Culeddu. Hamsun was translated by Ferrieri himself, Kielland by Prampolini, and Jacobsen by Gabetti.
19 Giuseppe Menassé and Silvio Benco translated Kafka (1928); Prampolini Leonhard Frank (1929); Alice Cohn Heinrich Mann (1932); and Alessandro Pellegrini, Prampolini and
At the outset, Ferrieri’s journal was best known amongst readers and writers for its translations of Irish literature, including theatre, travel writing and short stories. Every issue in the first year contained a translation, though the frequency dropped in the second year. Linati’s translation of John Millington Synge (“Impressioni sulle isole Aran”) and James Joyce (Esuli), and Alberto Rossi’s translation of the first episode of Ulysses (476–502) exemplify the connection Il Convegno aimed to establish between the local and the cosmopolitan as intersecting geographies: Irish writes could embrace their “local colour” while remaining members of cosmopolitan circles. Indeed, in Ferrieri’s conceptualisation of world literature Joyce was not just an Irish writer but rather a cosmopolitan European writer and a member of the Parisian coterie, since “si inaugura con Joyce una nuova forma di romanzo” (“Joyce inaugurates a new novel form”). “By acquiring Joyce, our journal opened the way to understanding, through European traditions and experiences a modern narrative language” (“per aver preso possesso di Joyce, la nostra rivista apriva la strada, traverso tradizioni ed esperienze europee, alla comprensione di un linguaggio moderno”, Ferrieri “Il Convegno” 45, and Bibbò 123–51).

Carlo Linati, Emilio Cecchi (then based in England) and Guido Tagliabue Morpurgo – all writers as well as critics – selected the works of Anglo-modernist writers for Il Convegno. Cecchi rehearsed his role of cultural mediator: thanks to his friendship with New Zealander Katherine Mansfield’s husband, John Middleton Murry, Cecchi introduced Mansfield’s short stories in Italy in 1923, five years before her official debut in the influential Florentine journal Solaria (Sullam 3–4). A year later, Cecchi revisited Joseph Conrad, one of the literary successes of the 1920s, whom he had already discussed in La Ronda, with a long article on his entire oeuvre, his main contribution to Il Convegno (“Joseph Conrad”). Once again, Cecchi presented Conrad not simply as an adventure writer but as a fine psychologist and as a stylistically accomplished listener to the palpitations of the human heart. Translations of Conrad’s books were best-sellers in Italy, and the publishers’ blurbs stressed the same features that Cecchi emphasised, thereby creating a link between modernism and the market that Cecchi could not have crafted when writing for La Ronda (Billiani National Cultures 69–76). Moreover, the image of Conrad projected by Il Convegno, just like the one of Joyce, was more heterogenous: a member of the European – and not exclusively British – modernist tradition (Cecchi “Note di letteratura inglese” 126–31).
Apart from the furore caused by Linati’s translation and Tagliabue Morpurgo’s defence of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* in 1934 (“Moralismo di Lawrence” 12–28), within *Il Convegno*, literature was not necessarily seen as a prominent marker of stylistic innovation. Cecchi complained to Ferrieri about his decision to put his close friend Linati – far too moderate and not acquainted enough with recent literary trends – in charge of the Anglophone dimension of the journal (Cecchi “Letter”). More generally, by the early 1930s, Ferrieri’s interest in literature was overshadowed by other artistic expressions (radio and theatre) that he considered more representative of modern life. *Il Convegno*’s curiosity for world literature markedly decreased, and before its closure in 1940 it offered very few novelties (only Hans Carossa, Stefan George and Ramón Perez de Ayala).

Both *La Ronda* and *Il Convegno* viewed world literature in abstract terms: as a journey of self-discovery and a way of questioning one’s own ideas about literary writing and national traditions. According to Cardarelli, it was about time to “uscire ed farci intendere in questo contagioso crepuscolo della civiltà moderna europea” (“get out and make ourselves understood in this contagious dusk of European civilisation”), while according to Ferrieri, *Il Convegno* marked “i limiti di un panorama, diciamo di una carta geografica della letteratura del suo tempo” (“the boundaries of a literary map of its day”) by publishing over 300 works by foreign authors in twenty years (“Prologo in tre parti” 6, and “Il Convegno” 59). *La Ronda* did so by taking canonical European authors as a-temporal points of comparisons, *Il Convegno* by systematically exploring a wide range of largely European modernist traditions under the umbrella of world literature. By the early 1930s, however, the rise in prominence of youth culture within the fringes of the regime’s cultural apparatus started to shift the understanding of world literature, from a stylistic repertoire of models (whether classical or modern) to a set of concrete examples of realistic novel writing that would help to build the Italian novel into a socially attuned mechanism, as the case of *Occidente* and *Corrente*, my next two examples, show.

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**Occidente: Transatlantic Novels**

*Occidente: Sintesi dell’attività letteraria nel mondo* was published in Rome from October 1932 until the eve of the Ethiopian war in 1935 under the editorship of Armando Ghelardini, who also owned Edizioni d’Italia. Not unlike *Il Convegno* and *La Ronda*, Ghelardini described the journal’s ideal reader as “a cultivated and intelligent man” (“uomo colto ed intelligente”). *Occidente* had a total print run of 12 quarterly issues with rather limited circulation. Publication
stopped suddenly after issue 12 (May–June 1935), with a short article by Ghelardini himself ominously entitled “Bilancio” (“Balance sheet”). Although issue 13 was ready, it was confiscated by the Fascist police after Ghelardini twice risked house arrest because of the journal’s unorthodox editorial line and the political orientation of some of its more prominent contributors, like the avantgarde novelist Umberto Barbaro. \(^\text{20}\)

*Occidente*’s opening article stated that its purpose was to offer the widest possible overview of literature by putting Italian writers in touch with foreign writers to “affirm European cultural values” (“affermazione dei valori culturali europei”) (“Introduzione” 2). Yet despite this Eurocentric focus, *Occidente*’s idea of world literature was more pragmatic than ideological: it was a mechanism aimed at rebuilding the Italian novel in a realistic mould, rejecting the self-indulgent example set by European, and Italian, Decadentism. The first four issues contained four substantial articles on the novel, with another three in later issues; a flurry of international writers and artists were discussed and translated in all its sections (“Galleria degli scrittori d’Occidente,” “Antologia di Occidente,” “Biblioteca d’Occidente” and “Idee Opere Uomini: Attraverso la stampa internazionale”), alongside review articles that more ambitiously covered Latin American, Chinese and Japanese literatures and cultures, taking the magazine beyond its restrictive “Western” remit. \(^\text{21}\)

Stressing the need for aesthetic renewal, prominent playwright and novelist Massimo Bontempelli, in the opening issue, described the spirit of the moment as positive and constructive, oriented towards “work and life” (“lavoro e vita”) and “action” (“azione”): in this “vitalistic impulse” (“impulso vitalistico”) he saw the convergence of both political and aesthetic aspirations (Bontempelli “Scuola dell’Ottimismo” 2). \(^\text{22}\) In his article “Coefficienti nuovi nel romanzo,” Elio Talarico criticised Decadentism and its lack of construction, its self-referential understanding and rendering of objectivity, adding that the novel had to resist

\(^{20}\) Paolo Flores, Vinicio Paladini and Dino Terra were all closely associated with anarcho-communist circles (Mondello 67–70). Ghelardini was spared house arrest only thanks to the personal intervention of ministers Giuseppe Bottai and Galeazzo Ciano.

\(^{21}\) “Gallery of *Occidente*’s Writers,” “Anthology of *Occidente*,” “Library of *Occidente*,” “Ideas Men Works: Via the International Press.” If translators were always acknowledged, sources were never mentioned; brief biographies of authors translated were provided after each translated piece.

\(^{22}\) In her analysis of the journal’s position within the national cultural field, Alessandra Briganti (18) has shown that by welcoming the most anti-conventional and, in Fascist terms, anti-bourgeois intellectual voices of the Rome-based second Futurist movement, Imaginism, and by paying constant attention to the international literary and artistic scene, *Occidente* expressed a rather original vision of the shape of the novel.
slipping into psychology and focus instead on building solid artistic forms: “What are we waiting for, then, why don’t we begin constructing properly, right now?” (7–9). Talarico and Barbaro saw the new novel as being moved by a desire both to “build” a structure or a plot and to tell a story, though it had to remain a fictional and not a social experiment (Barbari “Considerazioni sul romanzo” 18–22). Alongside these articles on the Italian novel, Occidente’s first issue featured translations of Aldous Huxley’s of D. H. Lawrence (“To The Puritan All Things are Impure”) and D. H. Lawrence’s supernatural social critique in the form of a short story (“The Last Laugh”).

Geographies unfolded under the banner of reawakening a decadent West (“occidente”) through a “strategic geographical miscellany” that resisted “fixed centres and peripheries” (see Jia in this issue) over the next 12 issues. Occidente featured articles on American, French, German, Polish, Hungarian modernist and realist writers (Stanislaw Baczyński, Bela Balazs, James Cain, John Dos Passos, Max Ernst, Hans Fallada, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Valery Larbaud, André Malraux, amongst others). And it did not neglect to publish politically engaged writers, such as Russian Valery Bryusov, Boris Pilnyak and Chinese political figures Madame Chiang-Kai-Shek, Shu Chiung and Japanese writers (translator Asatarō Miyamori). These foreign writers appeared alongside examples of the most progressive strands of Italian writing and articles by figures from the regime’s centre and fringes alike, in an ideal and unproblematic synthesis of conflicting ideologies. Contributions by both filo- and anti-fascist Italian novelists included the likes of Corrado Alvaro, Umberto Barbaro, Massimo Bontempelli, Giuseppe Bottai, Corrado Pavolini, and Elio Vittorini, making for a particularly lively debate.

Embracing the idea of synthesis to foster cultural exchanges, Occidente turned La Ronda’s “Letters from” into more analytical and less personal “Rapporti” (Reports) on world literature. In his “Rapporto dalla Germania,” for example, the former Novecento novelist and journalist Pietro Solari praised German New Objectivity as a fictional experiment that could prevent the further cultural impoverishment of the Italian cultural elites, who had become intellectually parasitic and static in their outlook (41). In his “Rapporto dall’Inghilterra,” Carlo Maria Franzerro revealed that 14,000 new books had been published in the United Kingdom in 1932 alone, and that newspapers The Times and the Observer dedicated more than eight pages of their Sunday supplements to new prose writing: this was still unthinkable in Italy, and even more so in continental Europe, given the writers’ reluctance to leave the ivory tower and pro-

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23 “Che cosa si aspetta dunque, perché non costruire davvero, subito?”
duce more “humane” prose (43, 45). Franzero’s insights into British literature as more attuned to readers’ demands for a more “readable, stylistically accomplished, realist and attuned to contemporary issues” echoed those voiced from La Ronda’s own ivory tower, and the contemporary, modernist, stance of Il Convegno, thereby indicating a generally felt need for change following the example of contemporary foreign authors. A long review article by Yale professor of Romance languages and Dante scholar, Thomas Goddard Bergin offered Italian writers even more explicit suggestions for a change of direction. What had prevented a crisis in the American novel was its acute attention to the fullness of the characters’ psychologies, as in Faulkner, and to stylistic and linguistic experimentation, as in Hemingway. Yet all these writers were considered “deviant,” in the sense that they deviated from the accepted norms of literary writing since they chose to engage as equals with marginalised categories and to stretch their geographies beyond already travelled routes. Many of them, such as Waldo Frank and Stuart Chase, had denied literature any position of autonomy and developed a strong interest in international politics, which had become an integral part of their narratives (“Panorama” page of the quotes?).

The novel no longer needed the heroic, solipsistic gestures of a Julien Sorel, but rather characters who could help build reality and who were ethically convincing, journalist, writer and translator Enrico Rocca claimed: “The children of this century are called Glaeser, Körmendi, Liepmann and Kästner, Kesten and Süskind. Why is this? Even Moravia and Gambini? [...] This liberation is already a form of morality” (53). Rocca was calling for a “liberation” from the elitist literary models of Decadentism and La Ronda’s artistic prose and a more solid national novel that could compete with contemporary expressions and developments abroad.

In Occidente, then, world literature became a vehicle for challenging Decadentism, the prosa d’arte and the consequent lack of engagement with social reality displayed by erstwhile Italian literature. Its understanding of world literature stood in contrast with that expressed both by La Ronda’s modern classicism and Il Convegno’s modernist canon. Occidente’s own putative realist canon typified a literary writing defined as moral commitment, similar in conception to that articulated by the most progressive groups of Fascist youth counterculture.

24 “I figli del secolo oggi si chiamano, Glaeser, Körmendi, Liepmann e Kästner, Kester? e perché? anche Moravia e Gambini? [...] Questa liberazione è già moralità.” Apart from the Hungarian Ferenc Körmendi, all these were 1930s best-selling German authors. In 1929 Alberto Moravia had written a controversial, experimental novel entitled Gli indifferenti, and in 1932 the Istria-born journal Pier Antonio Quarantotti Gambini a collection of short stories, I nostri simili, in the prominent literary magazine Solaria.
Corrente di Vita Giovanile and Youth “Counterculture”

In 1930s Italy, youth culture expressed some of the most significant forms of aesthetic and political dissent from the state apparatus. In 1938, a very young student at the Politecnico University in Milan, Ernesto Treccani, sponsored – with his family’s money – a new Corrente movement and monthly journal, initially entitled Vita Giovanile and subsequently changed to Corrente di Vita Giovanile and, eventually, Corrente. The journal sought to occupy a critical cultural space, albeit within the limitations imposed by the Fascist University Groups. Both Treccani and Nicola Moneta, the senior co-editors, along with the editorial board saw the political crisis that Italy was going through from the 1938 racial laws onwards as an opportunity for change. Between 1938 and 1940, the Corrente movement gathered some of the critics, writers and artists who later laid the foundations of democratic Italy. To accomplish their ambitions, these young intellectuals established a productive dialogue with Antonio Banfi, a leading anti-fascist intellectual and philosophy professor at the Statale University in Milan (Billiani Fascist Modernism 104–08, 190–96). Banfi encouraged a variety of historicism as a return to reality that would dominate Italian philosophical thought after the fall of the regime. Literature had to be embedded in its historical moment, in the reality of its material condition. By the end of the 1930s, within certain fringes of youth culture, like Corrente, it became increasingly clear that any positive transformation within official Fascist culture could only be accomplished by relating national culture to the international scene and welcoming a socially attuned historical humanism.

By the 1940s, in the debate on the novel within Corrente, we encounter a selection of modernist writers like Woolf, Kafka, Valery, or Kipling. In “Autarchia intellettuale … e altre cose,” artist and critic Raffaele de Garda rebuffed the regime’s call for fewer translations: the 1938 racial laws notwithstanding, he argued, culture cannot be limited by national boundaries or regimes. Going against the official, autarchic rhetoric, De Garda launched an invitation for people to collaborate through more – and not fewer – quality translations, to be made readily available to the wider reading public (2). More specifically, the young critics of Corrente focused their analyses of foreign novels on the centrality of character creation to the novel’s structure. Oreste Macrì, writing on

25 For the story of the journal and a catalogue of all its contributions see Luzi.
26 Antonio Bruni, Raffaele de Garda, Vittorio Sereni, Dino del Bo and Alberto Lattuada.
Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, stressed the narrator’s ability to observe his main character’s action from a multifocal perspective in a way that fused biographical, real-life experience with fantasy (3). At the start of World War II, many of the articles in *Corrente* expressed apprehension about the future of Europe and reflected on the role intellectuals could play in preventing the conflict. Writing on Gide, for example, Mario Luzi affirmed that Gide only could enjoy an almost unconditional freedom because he rejected the idea of an absolute morality as foundational to being human and to human behaviour to embrace the idea of morality as relational to its social context (2–4). In “André Maurois biografo e storico,” the erudite noblewoman Amalia Meli Lupi di Soragna, too, praised Maurois’s creation of characters, which was attuned to the historical dimension surrounding them. The abstract relationship between philosophy and praxis had to be broken, and the arts had to embed themselves in the social fabric of their times.

Meanwhile, the very same definition of world literature had also changed. In a 1940 article, French scholar and Stanford professor of comparative literature Albert Guérard defined world literature as a body of works that should ideally be available to everyone, though in practice enjoyed only by Western elites; he also equated it with other notions such as comparative literature (the study of relations between literatures), general literature (the study of common problems) or universal literature (the sum of all literatures in all languages) (56). By creating a taxonomy that considered not only the aesthetic value of the artwork but also its social and political one, Guérard historicised world literature in a similar way to the *Corrente* movement. Despite their different politics and programmes, *Corrente* and *Il Convegno* implicitly turned to “world literature” to challenge Fascist cultural autarchy: the former by establishing experimental realism as the main literary paradigm able to address social matters, the latter by establishing a systematic exchange of literary models to foster cultural openness.

6 Conclusions

Despite their professed “autonomy” from politics, these journals, from their four different locations, were pivotal in maintaining a cultural dialogue and preserving Italian culture from isolation, acting as agents mediating between the national and the international, and between aesthetic and political positions. Because of their own infrastructures and within the sometimes conflicting, and at times traditionalist, agendas and ideologies, these journals presented world literature in no systematic fashion, and they conceptualised it
under various guises still reminiscent of individual narrative traditions spanning Western Europe and North America.

In interwar-Italy, then, world literature existed not as a unitary, self-standing concept, but rather encapsulated multiple and changeable reference points and intersecting geographies (France, Germany, Britain, the USA, and so on), all placed in dialogue with an Italian national tradition in need of renewal. Over the two decades, world literature provided Italian writers and readers not only with a repertoire of different canons and literary examples. Never simply a fixed point of comparison for Italian writers, world literature was not built around canons but framed simultaneously as: a new humanism shaped by Goethe for La Ronda; multiple fictional modernities for II Convegno; a repertoire of new realist fictional models, mostly from Europe and the USA, for Occidente; and a means of escaping the limitations of Fascist Italy and planning for the future for Corrente’s historicism. La Ronda hailed Goethe as the classical model of internationalism, reflecting its own understanding of modern prose writing as a form of classically composed modernity. But its contributors also explored contemporary and earlier literary traditions in search of more accessible ways of writing. Founded at almost the same time, II Convegno pursued La Ronda’s ambition of finding new paradigms of prose writing by focusing instead on the modernist canon while expanding its geographical borders to include Scandinavian literatures, still virtually unknown in Italy. Occidente’s aspiration, voicing the demands of the regime’s fringes, was to explore examples of experimental realist writing which could be used to portray “modern life.”

Despite their lack of a systematic approach to world literature, the formats chosen by these journals were quite uniform, with long review articles to dialogue with a literary tradition, short reviews to present or dismiss contemporary works (occasionally in a rather biased manner), and translations to fill these journals with good writing – whether canonical or not. Moreover, despite its many, sometimes random, conceptualisations, realism was the literary paradigm that ran across the presentation of world literature in these four journals. This culminated in the late in 1930s and early 1940s in Corrente di Vita Giovanile’s call for politically and socially aware literature, in ways that anticipated the post-dictatorship era, when realism, or better neorealism, would become the main cultural paradigm for cultural reconstruction. The journals’ various conceptions of world literature, often presenting expanded versions of European literature, were not aimed at building a militant internationalism to unite readers. Rather, for at least two decades, they were a means to interrogate and challenge the Italian national tradition after World War I, at the peak of the regime’s popularity, and on the eve of World War II, by mapping real,
conceptual and imaginative geographies. Regrettably, in the inter-war period, these only occasionally reached beyond the boundaries of Europe.

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