

## Research Article

# Ungaretti: The Soldier and the Poet

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The study focuses on a very detailed overview of the events both on the Karst section of the Isonzo Front as well as in Brienne-le Chateau, Gigny-Brandon, France, during World War I and Giuseppe Ungaretti's participation in the various battles along with his composition of individual poems. Based on the historical documentation and concurrent reading of his letters from the front and the place and date of the creation of his poems, it can be confirmed that the poet's voluntary participation in the war played a key role in his poetic creation but also in his national self-determination. The detailed overview of the historical facts and his composing also led to the yet undetected inconsistency between the geographical placement of some poems in the village of Lokvica na Krasu and the actual situation on the front.

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## Introduction

The “Great War” is generally regarded as a pivotal period during which “years of atrocities” fatefully marked European history and led to a time of the most fervent nationalisms. Even though “nationalism as an ideology of a young bourgeoisie” (Nečák, Repe, 2005: 3) was conceived in France in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, “in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the nation is the leading political idea, whose most prominent successes were the unifications of Italy (1859/60) and Germany (1870/71)” (Id.: 3–4). The French revolution had indicated the way to a national type of country with a single prevailing language community. “With the exceptions of France, Switzerland, and Portugal, Europe was still ruled by monarchs with unlimited authority” (Id.: 1) and was an “important centre of the world” (Id.: 1) with all of its colonies around the world. Even as European colonialism was nearing its final stages, some “latecomer” countries were scurrying to gain the last territories. Among these was Italy, which occupied Ethiopia in the period 1887–1889.

The year 1882 is particularly pertinent to this study, when England occupied Egypt and its strategically important Suez Canal, whose shares it had already bought in 1875 via the Rothchild bank (Schmitz, 1940: 10).

Ungaretti's father had emigrated from Lucca to Egypt and got a job as an ordinary construction worker constructing the canal (Piccioni, 1970: 12). Giuseppe Ungaretti was born in 1888 in Alexandria in Egypt. Two years after his birth, his father died of diseases caused by the harsh working conditions (Id.: 13). As attested by literary critic Rebay, the Ungarettis lived in:

“The peripheral Moharam Bay, a poor neighbourhood with predominantly Arabs, Israelis, and European workers, where they (Ungaretti's family AN) ran a bakery” (Rebay, 1962: 11). He goes on to explain: “It would happen that the entire apartment complex was awoken at night by the squealing of the family pig that the poet's mother, who provided for the family after her husband's death, would intentionally steer into the bedroom of the boarding Arab serfs to wake them and prod them off to work” (Id.: 11). This quote illustrates that the bakery must also have been run by hiring Arab labourers. Piccioni writes that this was a well-run store where most of the Europeans living in Alexandria at the time would purchase their bread (Piccioni, 1970: 14). We also know that the mother divided the profits from selling the bakery among three people and that Ungaretti almost completely squandered his share through unfortunate investments and speculations, which forced him to move to Paris in 1912 (Pea, 1995: 170–172).

The described scene, usually referenced by critics as a charming anecdote, immediately reveals the colonial attitude the Europeans assumed towards the Arabs in Egypt. In the best case, this is an example of the colonizers' patronizing attitude trying to civilize uneducated and uncivilized locals, but it often manifested as insulting and violent racism.

All that is known of Ungaretti's schooling is that he most likely first attended the catholic Don Bosco Institute (Piccioni, 1970: 20) and then continued his studies at the prestigious “Ecole Suisse Jacob” college. This indicates that Ungaretti grew up in a colonial Egyptian environment in which the English ran the colony politically, while the French created their own cultural milieu and founded their own schools in Egypt. Ungaretti's classes at the Ecole Suisse Jacob were in French with some English language classes. This school was attended mostly by Europeans and a minority of Arabs from wealthier and more influential families. As stressed by Said (Said, 1996), this was the period in which the West, i.e., the French and English in their colonies, created their image of the Orient, which was naturally especially emphasized in schools. Various studies created a completely independent vision of the Orient as imagined or dreamt of in the West, in which the relation of the superordinate to the subordinate was as

constant. In Egypt, schooling became an integral part to civilizing the natives, or, as pointedly illustrated by Macaulay himself, an educational system that would create: “A class of people Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, attitude, ethics, and mind” (Anderson, 2007: 118). A similar process was unravelling at the famous Jacob school in Alexandria; as Said elaborates:

For Barros, the French presence is best seen in French schools where, as he says of a school in Alexandria, ‘It is ravishing to see those little Oriental girls welcoming and so wonderfully reproducing the fantaisie and the melody [in their spoken French] of the Ile-de-France.’ If France does not actually have any colonies there, she is not entirely without possessions [...] to occidentalize the Orientals, to bring them into salubrious contact with France. [...] Yet the bond (or leash) between East and West that he advocates is designed to permit a constant variety of intellectual pressure going from West to East. Barres sees things, not in terms of waves, battles, spiritual adventures, but in terms of the cultivation of intellectual imperialism, as ineradicable as it is subtle (Said, 1977: 245–246).

The attitude the English assumed towards the Arabs is illustrated in this passage from a letter to his friend Prezzolini<sup>1</sup> sent by Ungaretti on 8 November 1914 from Paris:

There was some English professor there, an unbeatable football player, Mister Pickles [...]. Pickles warned Sceab: “Read Nietzsche, smoke a cigarette, and after prepare to suicide<sup>2</sup>” (Ungaretti, 2000: 25).

This writing is all the more distressing as Ungaretti goes on to write that Mohammed Sceab actually did commit suicide in Paris in 1913, precisely the way his professor, Mr. Pickles, had suggested. Sceab departed for Paris as early as in 1910, to be joined by Ungaretti two years later, even living in the same hotel (Piccioni, 1980: 91)<sup>3</sup>.

In 1912, Ungaretti left Egypt for Paris to study at the Sorbonne. He moved to the very epicentre of nationalist and racist ideas in the Parisian intellectual spheres. This is what he wrote to his friend Enrico Pea in a letter from 12 January 1913 from Paris:

I revelled a few days ago reading an article by Maurras in the Action française magazine; truly glorious, of monumental beauty, truly universal, it spoke of nature that man cannot corrupt, of nature that defies such profanities, that even draws new aspects of beauty from these profanities (Piccioni, 1980: 74).

The magazine was founded in 1899 after the Dreyfus affair. Its founder was none other than Charles Maurras, who often assumed expressly racist viewpoints. In Nolte’s opinion:

The fascisms of the 1920s and 1930s traced their theoretical principles to the Action française movement: initially a cultural and then a political organization whose leader from the early 19th century all the way to World War II was Charles Maurras (Carrino, 2018: 101).

In Paris, Ungaretti also follows Bergson's lessons actively supporting France's entry into World War I with the argument:

The fight against Germany is the fight of civilisation against barbarianism. We all feel it, but perhaps our Academy possesses the right authority to express this. Dedicated to the study of psychological moral and social aspects, it fulfils its scientific obligation when sensing in the German brutality and cynicism, its disdain for any truth and justice, merely a regression into the status of a savage (Bergson, 2015: 21).

Later in his letters from the frontline to friends Papini, Preziosi, Soffici, and Carrà, Ungaretti would persistently and almost manically repeat this distinction between Italians as the bearers of two thousand years of history and the barbaric Germans. This gives us insight into Ungaretti's psychological paradox that he voluntarily joined the war to stop barbarianism from dominating:

Since war actually heightens vulnerability, it can be paradoxically understood as a run towards uncertainty with the expressed intent to end uncertainty (Battaglia, 1994: 87).

At the onslaught of World War I in 1914, Ungaretti left France and moved to Italy. In the summer, he fraternized with a group of interventionists led by Mussolini in Versilia, internalized their viewpoints, and became an avid proponent of Italy joining in the war (Piccioni, 1970: 58). The poet described his interventionism at the time: "It was a bunch of claptrap, but people sometimes fool themselves and stand behind stupidities" (Piccioni, 1970: 60).

Lasswell writes:

In politics, uncertainty triggers a rising need to respect a common symbol and to launch projective mechanisms towards outside groups ascribing them nefarious plans. This leads the individual uncertainty to concentrate increasingly on political symbols, which increases the externally oriented tension and not the internally focused one to rise, necessitating an intervention by the elites, which believes in the given moment that an international conflict is functional to its interests (quoted in Battaglia, 1994: 87).

This transition directly leads to and illuminates the contents of the following chapter.

## 1914

It is a known fact that even though Italy was a member of the Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary, it held secret tactical negotiations both with its allies as well as the Entente Forces of Great Britain, France, and Russia in order to gain as much territory as possible in return for joining the war on one or the other side. “This policy was dubbed “Italy’s War Market” in the international diplomatic circles of the day” (Nećak, Repe, 2005: 104). In the end, it signed the Treaty of London on 26 April 1915, according to which:

In the case of a victory by the Entente Forces, Italy would receive South Tyrol up to Brenner Pass, Trieste, the areas of Gorizia, Gradisca, and Tarvisio, part of the then Carniola (along the Mt Triglav–Mt Snežnik–Adriatic Coast line), Istria down to Voloska, the islands of Cres and Lošinj with the adjoining islands, Northern Dalmatia to Ploče with all the major islands, Sazan Island, Bay of Vlorë, the Dodecanese Islands along the coast of Asia Minor (which it had occupied up to 1911) and an appropriate share in any territorial occupations in Asia Minor and Africa (enlargement of Italian colonies, Turkish territories). In return, Italy would declare war on Austria-Hungary (Nećak, Repe, 2005: 103).

Italy did just that and declared war against its former allies on 24 May 1915. “This decision was not made by the Parliament after an extensive debate, but by three people: Prime Minister Antonio Salandra, Minister of Foreign Affairs Sidney Sonnino, and Vittorio Emanuele III” (Del Boca, 2005: 129). “Italian territorial demands greatly exceeded “national wishes” and also foresaw imperialistic intentions that were totally foreign to the vision of conflict as *Risorgimento*” (Id.). In short, the interventionists’ viewpoint, undoubtedly the minority opinion in the beginning, managed to prevail in the end with aggressive propaganda by some intellectual circles. As previously mentioned, some claim this to have been a *de facto* coup: “A coup to the detriment of Giolitti’s followers and socialists or against all political forces that disagreed with Italy entering the war that had, at least up until 1914, represented the “legal” and “real” majority in the country (Michelini, 2019: 100).

In the given objective historical circumstances in which class confrontations were proliferating in Italy and placing the government in a precarious position, the decision to enter the war was actually a rationally calculated play by certain economic and political elites that detected their own double interest in the war: redirecting conflicts outward and strengthening their own economic power.

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Ungaretti's justification of his interventionism represented a sort of intermediate path between the need for an Italian spiritual rebirth, which was said to only be able to propagate under the extreme conditions of war, a territorial salvation, and a self-determination of his own personal identity. He was certain that Italians could only recognize themselves as a nation if they took part in a war that would also liberate as of yet "unliberated" territories. The latter viewpoint is evident in his post-war letters, when he, for example, fervently supported D'Annunzio's occupation of Rijeka and opposed the founding of the Kingdom of SCS (Ungaretti, 1988: 252, 285–286). At the same time, it cannot be overlooked that a person as highly educated as Ungaretti must have been fully aware of all the political implications of such a decision.

From the psychological aspect, such choices and standpoints can be understood as "rational excuses stemming from a personal identification with the country, which causes in individuals a regression that encourages feelings of a narcissistic omnipotence and ascribing to the country that power that is ascribed to the father in childhood" (Battaglia, 1994: 44). This kind of explanation enables us to understand Ungaretti's poem *Italia (Italy)*, in which the poet nationally self-determines while also merging with his words the rest of his brethren (Ungaretti, 1996: 136).

This precise psychological state is evident in Ungaretti's letters to his friends during the war, as well as the ones after the war to Mussolini<sup>4</sup>. It should not be forgotten that Ungaretti grew up in Egypt as a son of Italian immigrants, but one schooled in a French school. As the poet later admitted himself: "I also know that had it not been for Paris, I would not have had a word" (Ungaretti, 2001: 821). The poet was formed in a French cultural environment, making his accession to the war in essence a need for identification – an inclusion into his own ethnic community, as he conceded: "It finally happens that I get my own personal identity in war" (Ibidem)

## 1915–1916

"In its early structure, the Isonzo Front spanned about 90 kilometres of the southern section of the southwestern front," but the "karst battlefield extended across the peaks of hills: Vrh (San Michele del Carso, Quota 275)–Martinščina (S. Martino del Carso, Quota 168)–Sei Busi (Quota 118)–Griža (Quota 70)–Selce (Quota 118)–Košič (Quota 113)–La Rocca (Quota 121)" (Svoljšak, Antoličič, 2018: 195).

This was the very area in which Giuseppe Ungaretti volunteered<sup>5</sup> to fight on the Italian side from 5 December 1915 until March 1918, at which point he and his Brescia Brigade were transferred to the French battlefield to support the French army. We can follow his movements because he outfitted each poem with the date and place of its creation. The rest of the data can be surmised from the numerous letters he wrote to his friends Papini, Prezolini, Soffici, Puccini, Carrà and Marone, mainly intellectuals belonging to the circle of the *La voce* literary magazine. In some cases, the journal of the Brescia Brigade to which the poet belonged is the guide. Using these data, we will try to outline his perception of historical events at the frontline and his concurrent poetry. As Fabi writes:

Even though Ungaretti had been discharged as unfit to fight in the first months, he was later accepted after the unsuccessful Italian offensives at the Isonzo Front and assigned to the 19<sup>th</sup> regiment of the Brescia Brigade, which fell under the 22<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division, included in the XI Corps, dispersed between Sagrado and Gradisca. On 2 December, he was officially accepted into the unit, as is evident from his intake documentation, and assigned to the eighth company of the third battalion. [...] The unit stayed at the frontline until 15 January 1916” (Fabi, 2018: 39–40).

The first piece of information on the poet’s activity in the war is a letter to painter Carlo Carrà, when he informed him on 15 November 1915 that he would stop in Milano on his way to the front to visit him (Ungaretti, 1980: 416). He wrote to friend Prezolini on 5 December 1915 (Ungaretti, 2000: 36), stating that “we are close” and that same day to Giovanni Papini: “Dear Papini, it is time. I will write to you, but in the meantime, say you still love your Giuseppe Ungaretti” (Ungaretti, 1988: 17). This indicates that Ungaretti arrived at the front on the last day of the Fourth Battle of the Isonzo. Despite this:

In the winter months, the fighting at the Isonzo Front abated, and even though there were no major battles during this time, not a day went by when there weren’t scuffles between the scouting parties or cannon bombardment that resulted in casualties on both sides (Klavora, 2007: 164).

These Italian attacks, most of them smaller in scale, lasted until 14 December. [...] On 7 December, they attached San Michele del Carso again. [...] On 8 and 9 December, the III Army renewed their efforts, but they were futile (Schindler, 2002: 192–193).

On the last day of 1915, Ungaretti wrote to Papini:

Dear Papini, I eagerly await your letter. If you but knew the desert I am in. [...] I have spent my days in trenches on top of some hill (Debela Griža, AN), buried in mud. But that is nothing. I wanted this war.

Something else burdens me (Ungaretti, 1988: 17–18).

Klavora writes about the state of this section of the battlefield:

The battalions of the 17<sup>th</sup> infantry division were on positions to the west of the villages of Vrh and Cotiči and to the left of the peak of Debela Griža. The Italian positions were very close, often a mere twenty to thirty paces away. [...] In front of the trenches and even inside, dead bodies lay rotting, emitting an unbearable stench. [...] Around 18 December 1915, the Italians lay heavy siege to the defenders' positions and even focused the cannon fire into the hinterland. There were a few attacks by the Italian infantry (Klavora, 2007: 168).

This then was Ungaretti's introduction to war. However, the letters he sent to Papini do not indicate that the horrors of war he witnessed led him to any conclusions on the senselessness of war. In his poem *Lindoro di deserto* (*Lindoro of the Desert*) which was marked "Cima 4 il 22 dicembre 1915" (Peak Four, December 22, 1915), the contents are oriented towards the introspective. The poet describes the alluring feelings at dawn. The poem develops in a dichotomy between the joy the poet feels at the sight of the beautiful dawn and the comprehension that he is in "a desert" and concluding: "From this ledge of desolation / I hold myself out / to the good weather" (Brock, 2020: 41)<sup>6</sup>.

Klavora provides the following insight and description of the area:

Debela Griža. This hillside spanning about one kilometre in the direction northeast-southeast and marked by Quota 275 actually encompasses four peaks: from north to south, these are peaks 1, 2, 3 (point 275), and 4 (the Italians mark them as Cima 1, 2, 3, and 4) (Klavora, 2007: 260).

The following day, Ungaretti wrote *Veglia* (*Vigil*) on the site, one of his most famous poems, in which he describes staying up all night next to the disfigured body of a fallen soldier, which evoked in him an immense affinity for life. Twenty days on the front therefore triggered two reactions in the poet: a need for estrangement, to run from the experienced horrors, and an immeasurable affection for life. Despite this, he still insists on his notion of the war being necessary, as he writes to Papini. He expresses similar ideas in his letter from 23 March 1916, stating: "After two years, war—France and Italy are as one to me—has cost us too much to stop with no results. I cling desperately to my life [...] I am afraid to die [...]" (Ungaretti, 1988: 19). The horrors of war therefore triggered in the poet both an unstoppable desire to live as well as a desire to write poetry as a means of a temporary respite from hell. The poet confirms: "I also know that had it not been for the Isonzo, I would not have had an original word" (Ungaretti, 2001: 821).

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1916 was a watershed year for Ungaretti; he wrote all 32 poems that comprise his first poetry collection *Il porto sepolto* (The Buried Harbor) in just a few months (from 22 December 1915 to 23 November 1916). The poetry collection was printed and published in Udine on 24 December of that year at the behest of comrade-in-arms and friend Ettore Serra, to whom the final poem of the *Poesia* (Poetry) collection is dedicated. However, the poems of the collection had to be supplemented with those that were published by Vallecchi Publisher in 1919 entitled *Allegria di naufragi* (Joy of Shipwrecks). The poet added to that collection some additional poems from his war period, among others the famous *Militari* (Soldiers) (Ungaretti, 1919: 16) that was composed on the French front in which he synthetically compares soldiers to leaves on trees in the autumn. The poem is very effective at creating a sense of the human transience in the reader.

According to the memories of captain Cortese, the Brescia Brigade was stationed at Versa on 10 March 1916 (Cortese, 1998: 59). The Fifth Battle of the Isonzo, which lasted from 11 to 16 March, was documented with a letter to Papini from 16 March 1916 in which Ungaretti writes: “I am going up again tomorrow” (Ungaretti, 1988: 19). He was probably referring to Debela Griža or Martinščina, where per Klavora (2007: 202), the day of the offensive saw “the most frequent Italian assaults”. He goes on: “Due to the close proximity of our army to the enemy, throwing hand grenades was very frequent, even though “this was a severe violation of the prohibited war actions and the use of prohibited arms” (Id.: 187). This data is also confirmed by Schindler, who writes:

The attacks of Cadorna’s infantry began on the morning of 13 March with actions [...] and more extensive manoeuvres [...] by the XI Corps around the San Michele del Carso. [...] In this section, the XI Corps repeatedly attempted to occupy the hill and that of the nearby San Martino, but the fog and efficiency of the Austrian defence prevented any chance for success (Schindler, 2002: 218).

This information was subsequently confirmed by chaplain Cortese, who writes in his diary on 13 March 1916 about hearing from Romans how the Italian artillery was fiercely bombarding this area, including San Michele del Carso (Cortese, 1998: 60). On 17 March and 3 April 1916, he reports that the hospital stationed in Sdraussina admitted soldiers wounded by hand grenades (Id.: 61, 69). This leads us to conclude that Ungaretti was in Versa up until 16 March and returned to the battlefield on Friday, 17 March, when hand grenade fights were obviously occurring.

“March was a rainy month and water was accumulating in the ditches on the northern slopes of Debela Griža, mixing with the reddish clay soil” (Klavora, 2007: 202). Cortese also complains about the poor March weather and even goes on to write on 24 March: “A very melancholic morning, full of rain. March

is taunting mankind, especially us, warriors, who feel a need for sunshine ...” (Cortese, 1998: 64). In a letter to Papini of 24 April 1916, the poet writes:

Dear Papini, today is Easter, a banal Sunday, and it is raining. But if you saw our soldiers this morning, my brethren, looking over their guarded world, their bewilderment over finding themselves on the roads of this freed village. My dear comrades. Yesterday so lean in the parade, marching proudly along the rhythm, popular. And they faced death in the eye, without knowing why, and when they retook those “bitter” hills, the most inventive, most subservient, most aggressive, most generous—not knowing why—the builders of this land, the Italians [...] (Ungaretti, 1988: 26–27).

The letter reveals two things: the colonial attitude towards areas with a predominantly Slovenian local population (whom Ungaretti never mentions during the war) and glorifying his own nation that will annex the “freed” areas to the Italian territory, “building”, i.e., colonizing them. The poet therefore perceives war as: “Two opposing enemy groups” designated by features like “community, collective identity, an enemy” (Battaglia, 1994: 39). From this viewpoint, Ungaretti then regards military violence as necessary, because it stems from: “Real motivations (protecting its physical integrity, acquiring more goods and riches, increasing authority)” (Id.). It follows then that: “We ascribe to our group the positive characteristics and the negative ones to others. This also highlights the competitive and conflicting relationships between the groups. [...] At stake are the social identity of individuals and internal social cohesion of the community” (Id.: 40). This was the precise reason Ungaretti offered as motivation for his voluntary participation in the war. The need for ethnic identification was especially important to the poet because he grew up abroad. This kind of psychological condition was also present in military chaplain Cortese, who wrote in his diary: “A soldier from the eighth garrison surrendered: what a coward and barbarian: he must have divulged many things...” (Cortese, 1998: 70).

In late April, the III Army renewed their attacks on the section near San Michele del Carso.

Severe night fighting commenced [...] with sapper units [...] with the intention of setting up mines (Schindler, 2002: 222).

Klavora (2007: 221) also writes: “On the final days of April 1916, the Italians began digging a tunnel to the north of Martinščina, near Quota 197. Austrian units detected this and went on to activate a mine that had previously been set there on 8 May 1916, filling the cavern, so that cries for help by the Italian soldiers were heard.” Ungaretti, who had just returned from the hinterlands in Versa, where he composed *A riposo* (At Ease) and *Fase d’oriente* (Eastern Phase) on 27 April, had not taken part in these attacks. In the first,

he describes the rising sun, glistening like diamonds in dew drops on the meadow. The poet indulges in nature in an almost panicked way until the magic of the moment is dashed and the poet instantly turns inward, towards his own darkness. The second is a natural continuation of the first, as the poet is overwhelmed by an erotic desire and memories of beautiful moments gone by. Like in the first poem, the poet is jolted back to the awareness of his own physicality, which burdens him.

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On 9 May 1916, the poet reports to Papini:

Dear Papini, we are no longer in the same position as two letters back: you will understand immediately: the other saint next to it (meaning S. Martino del Carso AN). At dawn, there was a terrible ruckus. Everyone is full of zeal. The soldiers are ravenously hungry: but there is plenty of wine: they would even eat rocks. I eat less than a bird. Health is not the best, but morale has lifted somewhat (Ungaretti, 1988: 32).

Klavora (2007: 225) writes that the Italians attacked Debela Griža that day with flamethrowers, to the north and east of Quota 197. The poet was probably referring to that attack. In late May, on 20, 21, and 23 May, the poet was in the hinterlands in Versa, where he composed three poems: *Annientamento* (Annihilation), with a prevailing erotic motif and the poet stating he is happy in the final verse (Ungaretti, 1996: 14). In these moments, the poet is completely immersed in poetry and feels like a part of universal harmony. This state appears in several of his creations. Ossola thinks the title does not so much hint at the poet's annihilation in God's word, but in the "common cry", the chorality of the poetic word (Ossola, 2020: 134–135). This statement confirms the previous conclusions on the poet's need to identify with his community that: "Offers the individuum a sense of security, because he is protected by the Almighty father (community AN)" (Battaglia, 1994: 44).

In the poem *Tramonto* (Sunset), the sight of a pink sky triggers in the poet a memory of oases, associated with an erotic undertone. The word "nomad" arises, very popular with the poet, since it also describes him symbolically. In the poem *Sera* (Evening), the lyrical subject indulges in melancholy when feeling a light May breeze (Ungaretti, 1919:91,92). All three poems reveal the poet's striving for the absolute, which is the other constant in his poetry and which leads him to a reconciliation with the Roman-Catholic religion after the war.

In his letter to Papini from 26 May 1916, he writes: "Dear Papini, I am worried, as you must also be these days. I should not be thinking of anything but my homeland fighting for "nobleness" (*gentilezza* in the

original) to prevail. But I do think of other things, perhaps to stupefy myself” (Ungaretti, 1988: 39). In this paragraph as well as many others, the poet constantly emphasizes the cultural superiority of Italians over their adversaries. In his eyes, the Italian side was fighting for civilization’s domination over barbarianism, as Fonda claims, in the state of war:

The pressure to act to the detriment of contemplation (is) increased. Estrangement, negation, idealization, and projective identification can deeply mar the image of both the external as well as internal reality. In SP (schizoid-paranoid state AN), the demarcation line separating good from evil is more expressed and in the forefront in terms of the delineation distinguishing the subject from the object. The negative aspects of one’s own group are denied or projected, while the enemy’s positive sides are denied (Fonda, 2016: 580–581).

This ties to a very interesting fact stated by Fabi:

In contrast, no diary author from among the analysed documents calls their opponent “barbarians”, not even in the worst moment of the military conflict, because they understand that the experience is essentially the same on both sides of the trenches (Fabi, 1994: 155).

While Ungaretti’s letter to Papini from 10 May 1916 reads:

Dear Papini, I circled these entrails this morning; on one side there is an unbroken line of prostrate people; I press against the other side to pass by; nothing but the light in the straights in the trenches; some man walking from one to the other, rifle in hand, searching for prey; in some sections, the enemy is but three metres away; they are resting now; it is a great peace (Ungaretti, 1988: 33). In the letter from 26 May 1916: “I should not be thinking of anything but my homeland fighting for “nobleness”” (Id.: 39). Or the letter from 8 July 1916, in which he compares Italians with lions, noble animals pouncing on hyenas. He continues, searching for a suitable word to express his rage and disgust and likens the enemy to “repulsive cattle” (Id.: 50).

The poet’s unchanged view regarding this even after the war is evident from his letter to Soffici from 2 September 1919, in which he writes: “And I am not a Jew, but a Catholic: *I am the Italian nation*”<sup>7</sup> (Ungaretti, 1981: 64). It is quite the opposite then that Ungaretti constantly emphasizes the contrast between the two-millennia-long Italian tradition and the enemy’s barbarianism in his letters to Papini, Soffici, Puccini, Carra, and Prezzolini, with occasional racist outbursts against Jews, the English, Germans, and

Slavs. The paragraph above also relates how: “The energy of the libido is used to create ties within one’s own group, while destructive impulses are outwardly oriented” (Battaglia, 1994: 44). Per Battaglia (1994: 44): “Regression prevents the behaviour of the opposing group to be evaluated objectively.” And: “If it be true that stabile communities are more prone to regression than others, this is all the more true of a country [...] that encourages a sense of narcissistic omnipotence in its citizens and a tendency to ascribe to the country the type of authority that is originally placed onto the father” (Ibidem). This is particularly pertinent to the conclusion of Ungaretti’s poem *Italia* (Italy), as will be illustrated later.

However, this context requires us to highlight another, objectively taboo topic, i.e., killing. It is generally known that the main task of the opposing sides in a war is to overpower and beat the adversary and this includes killing, whether at a distance with bombs or more directly and personally with shooting weapons or even using knives and bats in infantry attacks. As Clausewitz writes on war: “A violent act with the aim to force the opponent to bow to our will; the goal is *always and only* (as in the original AN) to destroy the enemy, to render them completely powerless.” Here: “Military powers must be destroyed to the point where they are unable to keep fighting” (Clausewitz, 1978: 42).

As Fonda pointedly concludes: “However, on this (killings AN), no trace is to be found in the diaries. No one’s diary entries, letters from the front, accounts upon returning home, no one’s memoirs actually mentions killing an enemy, nor what they felt piercing the enemy’s chest with a bayonet, staring into their pleading eyes while they died” (Fonda, 2016: 588). Ungaretti confirms this trend, as he never mentions anything of the sort, although he does stress repeatedly in his letters to Soffici how he fought bravely and was awarded a military commendation. Perhaps the sole indirect hint is what the poet said upon the death of his son: “I know what death means, I have known it from before; but when I lost the best part of me, I feel it inside, from that moment on, death” (Saccone, 2012: 39).

This aspect is not so much relevant with regards to the poet, but rather for understanding the post-war historical development in Italy and the poet’s post-war decisions when he joined Mussolini’s side and unflinchingly actively supported his actions even in dubious moments, like the murder of socialist parliament member Matteotti in June 1924. Two months later, the poet joined the fascist party. (Petrocchi, 1997: 184). Fonda explains the emergence of mass-supported totalitarian systems in the post-war period:

Unexplained and unprocessed war traumas pushed into the subconscious and the *known*, *not thought*, ingrained into the thought of millions of people, containing many similar and overlapping aspects, must be spread into a communal psychosis where *mine*, *yours*, and *his*

is blended into *ours*. This protects the individual, but severely conditions a community, such as is the state, in its functioning, culture, and most of all, its future development and decisions. [...] The Great War spawned both cultural and institutional changes in communities. These, deeply traumatized and deranged from the war, were unable to assemble from the individual fragments of the past anything other than a “horrifying integration”. In actuality, very aggressive and cruel totalitarian dictatorships (communism, fascism, and Nazism) came to power over time after 1918. The common factor, although in differing ideological contexts, was the conviction that the death of millions of people was an appropriate price for the survivors to achieve the promised paradise on Earth. [...] The paranoid thought that “war cleanses a country” once again gained steam. Fascism and Nazism immediately started arming and militarizing themselves (Fonda, 2016: 591).

This interpretation then explains many aspects of Ungaretti's poems and letters, especially from the period 1918–1919. For, if the collection *Il porto sepolto* from 1916 represents the poet's transition and integration into the Italian ethnic community, the poem *Popolo* (My People), published in the collection *Allegria di naufragi* in 1919, dedicated to Mussolini, attests to Fonda's conclusion of his analysis on post-war psychosis (Ungaretti, 1919: 162).



Perhaps the most brutal moment on this part of the battlefield occurred on 29 June 1916 at 5.15 am, when the Austrian side launched an attack and used a mixture of chlorine and phosgene gasses, i.e., choking agents. As Klavara reports:

On the opposing side of the planned gas attack, the units of the Italian XI Corps were stationed to the south of Ločnik west of Gorizia to Zagraj, the 22<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division on the northern section (Brescia and Ferrara Infantry Brigades along with the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment and the 47<sup>th</sup> and 48<sup>th</sup> Regiment). [...] The gas attack struck a heavy blow to the units of the Regina and Pisa Brigades and the units of the Brescia and Ferrara Brigades (Klavara, 2007: 241, 251).

Even military chaplain Cortese documented the cruel event: “Funeral morning. Throwing choking agents on all the peaks of San Michele, Cappuccio, less on San Martino. And bombings [...]. True devastation” (Cortese, 1998: 76).

Based on the postscripts to six poems, we know that Ungaretti was stationed in the hinterlands in Mariano from 25 to 29 May, where he wrote *Fase* (Phase) and *Silenzio* (Silence) (Ungaretti, 1919: 93, 95). As

the poet explains himself, the two poems echo a memory of his birthplace in Egypt and some love story (Ungaretti, 2020: 53). It also demonstrates that the poet had not definitively ethnically self-determined yet, as his youth and his hometown of Egypt were still a source of pleasant memories and poetic inspiration.

As is evident from the postscripts, Ungaretti composed three religiously themed poems on the day of the attack. The poem *Peso* (Weight) interweaves the contrast between a farmer soldier who believes the pendant of St Anthony will protect him and the poet's soul that is lonely, without any such belief and therefore comfort. *Dannazione* (Damnation) is a heart-wrenching scream of the lyrical subject as he, realizing his own and universal mortality, wonders why he has such an aching desire for God. In *Risvegli* (Awakenings), he wonders with horror what God is (Ungaretti, 1919: 97, 98, 99). This triptych clearly paints the image of Ungaretti's God, who appears as an absence, a desire to understand the essence of the divine, one who appears as infinity and defies our transience, not as a comforting presence. To these three poems, the poet added his very own famous *Il porto sepolto* (The Buried Harbour), also the title of his first collection. In it, the poet, a new-age Orpheus, explains that the poet's task is to try to uncover the mysterious and unexplainable in us. He then shares his creations with others.

It has been estimated that the gas attacks claimed the lives of about six thousand Italian soldiers (Klavora, 2007: 252). A further contributing factor was that the Austrian-Hungarian "soldiers of the attacking troops were also outfitted with wooden bats enforced at the tips with metal heads" (Id.: 248–249) to finish off the not yet dead Italian soldiers. Although we may assume that he witnessed the consequences of the attack both on the front as well as the hinterlands, there is no account about it in his poetry or letters. The two letters he sent that same day to Marone<sup>8</sup> detail that he had not published anything noteworthy yet (Ungaretti, 1978: 45–46). The same day to Papini: "Last night, I walked ten km in the rain, let loose singing with the other soldiers; I distanced from myself; I was happy (Ungaretti, 1988: 48). When it comes to letters from active war zones, it must be stressed: "A strict censure was in place and the Italians covered up the event thoroughly for tactical reasons" (Klavora, 2007: 253). Fabi writes the opposite: "News of the horrific attack [...] echoed across every European newspaper" (Fabi, 1994: 47).

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As Schindler (2002: 239) writes, general Cadorna ordered on the first day of July that the III Army must move from Asiago to the area around Gorizia and the Karst. During those days, Ungaretti wrote two letters to Marone. In the first (12 July 1916), he thanks him for the greeting he dedicated to him in his

Diana magazine and goes on to praise Papini as a representative of the “wondrous fatherland” (Ungaretti, 1978: 47); in the second, two days later, he asks how much the publication of the *Il porto sepolto* collection would cost and also sends him the poem by the same name, asking him not to discuss the matter with anyone else (Id.: 49). During the same time, he sends Papini a total of 15 letters (Ungaretti, 1988: 50–67). Some of them contain changes to some poems, but which have not been preserved. Mainly, he constantly praises the “nobleness” of the Italian nation, its illustrious civilization, and degrades the Germans. On 17 July 1916, he reports that they ascended again, probably towards *Martinščina* or *Vrh*. On 29 July, he writes about feeling connected to the other soldiers, to whom he is instinctively sympathetic, which again relates to the previously explained need to identify with his group and get a sense of security. This thought immediately ties to the poem *Soldato* (Soldier), which he composed in *Mariano*, the hinterlands, two days prior and in which he expresses that very feeling of belonging and attachment that pervades the soldiers of the same regiment in moments of risk (Ungaretti, 1919: 108–109). The letters from that period therefore clearly prove that Ungaretti was not thinking about all the warring soldiers, as he claimed after World War II (Ungaretti, 1970: 521) and as still claimed by some literary critics (Ossola, 2020: 178), but only about those in his own regiment, fully confirming Redl’s remarks that:

The very act of donning a uniform causes changes to the personal *Superego*. A soldier wears a uniform in a war, taking part in a collective ritual; his *Superego* is excluded and replaced with the collective one, instructing him to follow the rules of war. [...] More than the internal pulses of aggression, this emphasizes the need to feel a part of the group and play the role he was assigned (Battaglia, 1994: 45–46).

It is precisely this feeling of belonging to a community, reflected in Ungaretti either as a desire to belong to his *Brescia Brigade* or to the Italian nation in the wider context, that features in both his letters from the period as well as his poems, confirming the drawn conclusions and explaining the fact that Ungaretti grew up abroad and therefore felt a more expressed need for his own sense of ethnic belonging, similar to those of the Italian irredentists from *Trento* and *Trieste*, who voluntarily joined the war so as to annex those areas to Italy as well. Based on this, what the poet wrote about the poem at the end of his life is not true:

There is no trace of hatred for the enemy in my poems, nor for anyone else; rather, it is the awareness of the human condition, brotherhood among people who suffer, their mortality (Ungaretti, 1970: 521).

The poet's letters from that period constantly underscore animosity for the enemy, glorify the Italian civilization, and praise the virtues of the soldiers from his regiment for whom he was planning to write a novel at the end of the war (Ungaretti, 1981: 46), in which he would sing praise of their courage and might. His later letters to Puccini reveal that when the poet was transferred to another unit due to illness, he practically begged his friend to be reassigned back to his regiment, where he was adored. Like the previous poem *I fiumi* (My Rivers) (of which the poet said: "It had to be during the war that I finally got my own identification card: signs that helped me immediately recognize myself (and precisely in the moment when my regiment was able to leap forward after long and unsuccessful attempts" (when the Italian forces took San Michele del Carso AN) (Ungaretti, 2001: 821), the poem *Soldato* leads to the logical conclusion from the poem *Italia*, as correctly identified by Ossola when emphasizing that: "The vocative "Fratelli" (brothers) from the poem *Soldati* would lead to the definition from *Italia*: "*I am one poet/one common cry*" (Ungaretti, 2020: 66).

A further irrefutable confirmation of this interpretation is an excerpt from his letter to Soffici of 2 September 1919, in which he explains: "that he calls "gentili" i.e., noble those persons he likes," (these not being Germans therefore, since he constantly designates them as barbarians AN) and that: "The soldiers have proven the greatness of our race. Do you want to make out of the Italian race a race of blacks?" (Ungaretti, 1981: 62–63). The subsequent renaming of the poem into *Fratelli* (Brothers) confirms his hinting at the Italian army. At the same time, another aspect must be emphasized here, additionally illuminating the contents of the poems *Soldato*, *I fiumi*, and *Italia* and Ungaretti's letters, which indicate a clear delineation between the two-millennia Italian civilization and barbarians. Battaglia has concluded in his work that numerous studies "have highlighted some characteristic aspects of the enemy's image. First is the repeated occurrence of the *mirror-image*, i.e., a specular image that bases the enemy's image on the exact opposite of that which the subject has of themselves and their group. [...] This allows me to characterize myself as active, peaceful, and honest while believing of the other to be lazy, aggressive, and devious" (Battaglia, 1994: 47). This kind of delineation also recalls the anecdote about the lazy Arabs from Ungaretti's youth, while also explaining the contrast civilization–barbarianism not only in Ungaretti, but also in Bergson.

Ungaretti had written several poems during this period, although only three have been preserved: the already mentioned *Soldato*, *Malinconia* (Melancholy), which he composed on 10 July 1916 on Quota 141, and *Destino* (Destiny) from 14 July 1916 in Mariano. In the first, he reminisces about beautiful, romantic past moments and describes the sensation of the transience of life (Ungaretti, 1996: 24–25). In the second,

he wonders why we complain when we know that we, as all other creatures, are destined to suffer (Ungaretti, 1996: 26).

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On 1 August, a few days before the sixth offensive, Ungaretti composed *C'era una volta* (Once Upon a Time) on Quota 141, comparing “the copse to the west of Martinščina called Bosco Cappuccio” (Klavora, 2007: 251) to a soft, green sofa that reminds him of a coffee shop, probably in Egypt, where he would doze off in the ambient light, like the moonlight on this quota (Ungaretti, 1996: 110–111). The poem is rooted in a specific space, but it really represents a desire for alienation, also confirmed by its title, which immediately introduces an alienating-fantastical atmosphere into the poem, a need to exit reality and head towards the absolute.

On the other side of the front and during the same period and the same positions, poet Gustav Heinse composed his collection *Brenneder Berg*, in which he explains his war experiences, but with a completely different allusion, as he explains later:

I did not have to fight those four offensives at the front to have already developed in my early years—I was but twenty years old—a mature pacifistic *Weltanschauung*, which rejected war in all its forms, in the conviction that regardless of any technological advancements, we have not outgrown the neolithic, in the most literal sense. [...] It is therefore no wonder that my literary interests leaned towards the circles of poets, such as Hermann Hesse, R. Tagore and Romain Rolland. The *Weltanschauung* and existential tendencies of these renowned poets, later joined by R.M. Rilke, whose creations I would read during the short respites in the trenches with great fervour, even exhilaration, naturally guided my own as well. [...] They seemed to me to be the only human beings wielding a peace torch in their hand, above everything, the true “Malebolgia” of the time, the chaos that destroyed everything (Heinse, 2013: 64–66).

Otto Dix, who was fighting on the eastern front at the time, followed a similar path, painting the Trench in 1920, followed by fifty other paintings four years later, dedicated to the terrors of war: “In the face of ravaged bodies, the massacre, Dix did not turn away, did not look for a solution in the “kingdom of spirituality”” (De Micheli, 2020: 125). Like the two, George Grosz also took part in the war, painting:

Noseless soldiers, war invalids with steel, clay-like hands; two medical soldiers confining a mad soldier into straightjacket made of horse cover material; an armless soldier with various medals greeting a lady who is placing a small cake on his bed; the colonel with his pants undone, hugging a nurse; a medical soldier emptying a jug full of body parts into a ditch... A skeleton donning the clothes of a recruit in front of the military conscription committee (Id.: 126–127).

Bertold Brecht also clearly voiced his antimilitarism, composing a number of anti-war ballads, such as *The Legend of the Dead Soldier*. Intellectuals reacted to the war differently: some openly supported it and even volunteered, while others rejected it vehemently and condemned it as inhumane and unworthy of man.

Based on the available data, Ungaretti took part in the battles during the Sixth Battle of the Isonzo that unfolded from 4 until 17 August 1916 “composed of the XI Italian Corps, headed by general Giorgio Cigliana”, including “the Brescia Brigade with the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> infantry regiment” (Klavora, 2007: 262). During the offensive, the Italians were able to take the top of Debela Griža and force the Austrian-Hungarian units to retreat “to a new line of defence that ran over Quota 212 (Nad Logom), to Lokvica, towards Opatje selo, to Quota 144, and the mouth of the Timava” (Klavora, 2007: 271).

Per Schindler (2002: 243), the Italian offensive began at 10 am on the morning of 4 August with shelling on the Karst near Selce and Vermeljan. All had been quiet in the night between 5 and 6 August as the soldiers were preparing for the attack at 6.45 am.

“On 6 August at 7 am, the Italian cannon shelling continued across the entire line from Tolmin to Devino. The heaviest fire was laid to Debela Griža. At 4 pm, the XI Regiment attacked Vrh and by 6 pm, the soldiers of the Catanzaro, Brescia, and Ferrara Brigades took it” (Klavora, 2007: 264).

Ungaretti obviously took part in this offensive, writing to Papini on 10 August:

Dear Papini, your Ungaretti is sending you hugs from the claimed San Michele.

I have seen miraculous things: a miracle: the wounded felt no pain: the others could not be restrained: it was a cry of endless passion: “You can see the sea, you can see the sea”: wide open spaces at last, Papini: everyone’s beside themselves, we’ve finally arrived!” (Ungaretti, 1988: 66).

Ungaretti wrote quite a few poems during that offensive that tie directly to the scenes of war and have become some of his most famous poems: *Sono una creatura* (I Am a Creature), inscribed “Valloncello di cima 4 il 5 agosto 1916”:

Like this stone / on San Michele/ this cold / this hard / this arid / this impervious / this  
utterly / spiritless/ like this stone / is my / unseen grief // We pay down / death/ by living. //

Gully below Peak Four, August 5, 1916 (Brock, 2020:79)

The conclusion basically explains and complements the poem *Destino* (Destiny). Death is earned by suffering and it is therefore useless to complain, better to accept it stoically (Ungaretti, 2020: 187).

In the afternoon on 6 August, at 3.30 pm, the Italian commanders determined that the situation on the hillsides of Debela Griža is suitable to launch an infantry attack [...] and attacked the defence trenches on all four peaks of Debela Griža (Klavora, 2007: 264).

It was that very day on Cima 4, i.e., Debela Griža, that Ungaretti composed *Immagini di guerra* (War Images), in which he describes the constant shelling that caused the soldiers to cower in the trenches, clinging to it like a snail to its house, and compares the ceaseless noise to the noise he had heard in Egypt when they were paving the roads (Ungaretti, 1919: 114–116).

“On the afternoon of 10 August, the unit abandoned (Hungarian 4<sup>th</sup> regiment AN) their positions on Debela Griža and retreated to a new defence line between Lokvica and Opatje selo.” [...] The army command ordered the units to retreat from the hillsides of Debela Griža over Doberdò to a new defence line running over Quota 212 (above Log), to Lokvica, towards Opatje selo, to Quota 144, and the mouth of the Timava” (Klavora, 2007: 268, 271).

Per Juren:

“On the night between 8 and 9 August, archduke. Joseph ordered the artillery to retreat, especially the medium and heavy batteries. The new battle lines were drawn from the Vipava near Miren, via “Pri Štanti”, ascended to Quota 212, which controlled the access to Dol. From there, it drew back slightly and continued across the plateau to the west of Lokvica, leaving Opatje selo on no man’s land, finally reaching Quota 208 to the north of Nova vas” (Juren, 2007: 25).

Per Schindler: “There were no major battles between 9 and 11 August on the Karst front. Then on 12 August, the Italian forces fiercely attacked Quota 212 or Nad Logem, about three km behind San Michele del Carso. There was fierce fighting between the battling units. The Italians managed to take the quota, only for it to be retaken by the Austrian-Hungarian forces later. They were not able to retake the quota on the following day either. On 14, 15, and 16 August, the Italian units tried to penetrate Lokvica and Opatje selo, to no avail. Entire infantry troops fell on those rocky slopes, wounded and dead” (Schindler, 2002: 262). This data is also confirmed by Juren (and others, 2009: 31–32), writing that the veterans (including Ungaretti? AN) of the Brescia Brigade unsuccessfully tried to penetrate to Lokvica on three occasions on 15 and 16 August after their victorious occupation of Quota 4 (Debela Griža AN). This data was summarized according to the memoir of corporal Valentino Righetti.

Military chaplain Cortese also documented the events of the war, writing in his diary from 6 to 15 August 1916 how the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> brigades broke through to San Michele del Carso and S. Martino and took Quotas 4, 3, and 2. The following day, they advanced to the cemetery in S. Martino to Cotiči. On 13 August, they reached Nad Logem and settled two battalions near the Devetaki (Devetake in the original AN) crossroads. The following day, he reports that first aid was transferred to Devetaki and Vižintini. He spent the night in a valley near Cotiči. Then he journeyed to Devetaki, while the units failed to advance. On 25 August, he reports being relieved by the 21<sup>st</sup> division and retreating to settle on San Michele del Carso, S. Martino, and Cappuccio (Cortese, 1998: 78–79).

In his letter to Prezzolini of 10 January 1917, Ungaretti sends two poems inscribed San Michele, 14 August 1916: *Soldato* (Soldier), which is completely different from the one in the collection *Il porto sepolto*. In it, the poet compares his internal impoverishment to the rock on which he hurls himself when waiting is required and that he has nothing more to offer but this hard life, trampled, like a war-trampled road. The contents of the poem *Notte* (Night) are also completely different from that in the mentioned collection. In the first verses, like in *I fiumi* (The Rivers), the poet discovers that in his veins flow the rivers of countless humanities and that his shadow was being blended with others, which can be understood as a hint to the military position and his national belonging (Ungaretti, 2000: 39).

Ungaretti composed his poem *I fiumi* (Rivers) in the hamlet of Cotiči on the southern edge of San Michele del Carso on the very last day of the offensive. This is undoubtedly the central poem in the collection, marking its delineation. In the poem, the author contemplates his life, depicting it with the rivers that also marked him and concludes that all the rivers that shaped, followed, and marked his life (Serchio, Nile, Seine) have flown into the Soča (Isonzo), allowing him to recognize himself. The poem is expressly

religiously charged, but without a tendency towards the absolute, but rather the poet's christening, identification. Into the Soča then flow and merge his two-thousand-year roots (Serchio), his birth and youth (Nile), and the Seine, in which the poet met himself, and finally the Soča, in which he recognized himself at last (Ungaretti, 1919: 116). As the poet put it, Soča constituted his "personal identification" (Ungaretti, 2020: 194). At the same time, he underscored: "This is a poem in which I very clearly recognize I am a "lucchese" (come from Lucca AN)" (Saccone, 2012: 59). The massacre of the war therefore facilitated Ungaretti's internal recognition and acceptance of his national-ethnic identity. The interesting fact here, one to which the poet himself admitted, is that this happened as San Michele del Carso was being taken. The poem also has a kind of delineating valence, because the *mindset* of belonging from here keeps develops all the way to the poem Italia.

The poem Pellegrinaggio (Pilgrimage) bears the same date and the inscription Valloncello dell'albero isolato (Lone Tree Gully), in which he describes dragging along the mud like a sole for hours (Ungaretti, 1919: 123). The poet calls himself "uomo di pena", which alludes to a kind of stoic attitude towards suffering that is destined for us. But the poem must again be placed into its context, that to the poet, war signified a sacrifice for himself to recognize himself, as he clearly wrote in the poem Fiumi.

At the same time, on the other side of the frontline, senior officer Blašković recounts the fights in those parts:

Dol, leading upward from Soča, served as the way upward to the Italians, while being mercilessly slashed by the fire from the Austrian-Hungarian machineguns, so that blood actually flowed down the hill in streams. Practically nothing was left of the village of Martinščina, even the building foundations were demolished. The roaring fire turned the entire village to dust and ash. [...] Doberdò in the barren karst landscape is a valley where some soil can still be found. This led to cemeteries being placed one next to the other there. But even those cemeteries were repeatedly heaved, first from the Italian grenades, then from the Austrian ones (Klavora, 2007: 272–273).

Ungaretti was personally involved in this attack, experiencing everything, as confirmed by the inscriptions to his poems. Between 22 and 27 August, he composed four more poems in the collection: near the hamlet of Devetaki, on the way from Devetaki to San Michele del Carso, and two in Valloncello dell'albero isolato. In the first poem Paesaggio (Paysage), the poem strays completely from reality while watching the sky, reminiscing about Africa. In the second, La notte bella (The Beautiful Night), he has

similar ruminations while observing the sky. In the third *Sonnolenza* (Sleepiness), he describes nature and the crickets' chirp, which might mean the troops were moving from Devetaki to San Michele del Carso during the night time. The poet feels an inner turmoil at the sight (Ungaretti, 1919:121,125, 127). The final poem *San Martino del Carso*, is among his most famous and ties directly to the horrors of war he witnessed:

Of these houses / there remain / only a few/ pieces of wall // Of so many/ who resembled me/ there remains/ even less// But in my heart / each has a cross // My heart is the most/ broken country // (Brock, 2020: 103)

In his work *Trincee* (Trenches), Carlo Salsa describes the typical sight of a battlefield: "A green glob is eating a shoulder, torn by a moss-covered trunk; a bit higher on the mutilated trunk, out of something that looks like a cut branch "something is choppily dripping"; an infantryman is hanging in the air—he is actually bolted to a beam—"watching the sky" and at the same time the ground "scattered with human remains tangling, sorting, piling up." From here came Ungaretti's "butchered walls" (Quoted in Fabi, 1994: 162).

As the Italian troops retreated on 27 October 1917, Eugenio Vannoni similarly writes about the cemetery in Dol (Vallone): "From afar I greeted and kissed that clump of tilled soil illuminated by nearby fires with a yellowish light, and I continued on silently, pain in my heart, towards Farra" (Juren, 2007: 79).

That day, Ungaretti wrote to Papini (Ungaretti, 1988: 67–68) and sent him three poems that were published in his first collection in a slightly altered form. He also wrote to Marone and sent him the poem *Paesaggio*, which was also published in his first collection, although significantly altered.

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It rained heavily during the first week of September, yet the waging sides were still preparing for the Seventh Battle of the Isonzo. Schindler (2002: 267–268) wrote that the Italian side began massive shelling after 7 September, especially between Nad Logem and Nova vas. The shelling continued on until the morning of 14 September when the Italians transitioned to an attack. Even after fierce battles, among others between Nad Logem and Opatje selo, they were unable to achieve the set goals. The attacks intensified and continued in the subsequent days (Idem: 270–271) and the Italians managed to take Quota 208 to the south of Nova vas. The final attack on 17 September revealed how exhausted the soldiers were so Cadorna ordered the offensive to end. The Italian units were able to advance about 60 m around Opatje selo. Ungaretti wrote four letters to Papini between 2 and 13 September. In one letter, he complains that

the other animals being tortured were now joined by a spider, but that it offered them a brief respite from the horrifying sight (Ungaretti, 1988: 71). In the next one of 10 September from San Michele del Carso, he writes that it is calm like these monotone days and complains he can no longer compose (Id.: 72). These were most likely the first signs of the psychological exhaustion due to which the poet would later constantly ask his superiors and his friend Soffici to transfer him to the hinterland for at least a few months so that he could recover.

Fabi (2018: 77) writes that on 25 August, the regiments were transferred to the “hinterland” to the west of San Michele del Carso, with Ungaretti’s 19<sup>th</sup> regiment being settled between Cima 3 and 4 and S. Martino, where it would remain until 13 September (Id.: 80). After the 13<sup>th</sup>, he returns to the battlefield, where he would remain for a month (Id.: 81) and take part in the seventh offensive (Id.: 82). This is confirmed in a postcard to Papini with a picture of Ungaretti, with the inscription on the back: “To Papini, who leaves me. Lonely tree (Monte San Michele) 10 September 1916,” signed by the poet.

It can be deduced from his poems and letters that Ungaretti was stationed in Lokvica between 23 and 28 September and 1 and 2 October (Ungaretti, 1996: 41–46). Fabi (2018: 82) writes that the first Italian battle line ran in the vicinity. In a postcard to Papini (Ungaretti, 1988: 73) containing poetry that was only published after the poet’s death inscribed “Lice Valley, 28 September 1916,” the poet complains about mangled meat, which alludes to all the scourges caused by the lice, mice, etc. The editor of the letters explains in the in note that this is probably a settlement near the village of Lokvica, where the poet also composed the poem *Nostalgia* (*Nostalgia*), published in the collection *Il porto sepolto* (Ungaretti, 1996: 43–44). In truth, we know based on his inscriptions to the poems in the collection that he wrote five poems in (or better, near) Lokvica: *Attrito* (*Friction*) (23 Sep), *Distacco* (*Detachment*) (24 Sep), *In memoria* (*In Memory*) (30 Sep), *Italia* (*Italy*) (1 Oct), and *Poesia* (*Poetry*) (2 Oct), precisely in that order, which is crucial for a deeper understanding of Ungaretti’s personal development) Ungaretti, 1919:131,133,75,135,137). Here, let us emphasize an interesting piece of historical data: the Italian army took Lokvica only during the ninth offensive, as is evident from historical sources, that is early November (Juren et al., 2014: 22, 32), which attests how Ungaretti’s Brescia Brigade tried to take the village of Lokvica between 15 and 25 August and how its extensive losses forced it to retreat from the direct battlefield (Id.: 32). This was also confirmed by the military chaplain, as we saw. The question then arises why a poet who consistently wrote down the place and date where he composed his poems would incorrectly place the creation of his poems to be somewhere that the Italian army would not take for a month and a half. Cortese also gives very precise data stating on 3 October 1916 that: “The enemy is entertaining itself today in Nad Logem

and the posts of the 20th (battalion AN) in front of the road behind Lokvica by shelling with numerous heavy calibre grenades and shrapnel” (Cortese, 1998: 89).

As far as the “Lice Valley”, it can be reasonably surmised that this was Tercenka Valley, where Ungaretti’s regiment was stationed, as is stated in the diaries of the Brescia Brigade<sup>10</sup>. The valley is to the north of Hudi log, but is still relatively distant to the south of Lokvica. It is hard to believe that Ungaretti did not know exactly where they were positioned and that the village of Lokvica was still behind the Austrian battle line, especially in this period when the waging sides were gaining and losing but a few tens of meters of land. It was certainly here that Ungaretti placed the poem *In memoria* (In Memory), dedicated to the memory of Sceab, who had committed suicide in Paris:” because he no longer had/ a homeland” (Brock, 2020: 33) as the poet said. The poet would cherish his memory until his own death. The poem was therefore dedicated to the memory of his deceased companion, while also glorifying poetry as the thing that retains a permanent memory, as in the conclusion of the poem *San Martino*, where no cross is missing in the poet’s heart, therefore he is retaining the memory while also immortalizing it with the poem and then “scatters them” as he claimed in *Il porto sepolto* Brock, 2020: 37). The poem to Sceab is interesting because Ungaretti starts off by clearly emphasizing Sceab’s displacement, no longer able to return to his nomadic culture, but also unable to become French. This premise leads the poet to erroneously conclude that Sceab committed suicide because he was unable to express his anguish with the poem, for this was precisely where his distress lay: which language should he compose in, when he was no longer a member of his own culture, while also being clearly aware that he is not and would not be French. In contrast, Ungaretti had clearly sensed in his previous poem *I fiumi* that war had re-christened him into an Italian, as he took part in it with the clear intention of once and for all pinning down his personal self-determination (*I remade myself// and met myself//* Brock, 2020:87), which was finally confirmed in his next poem, also a logical consequence of the previous one. Although he was born abroad, Ungaretti was clearly aware that his parents were Italians. His inner turmoil stemmed from the fact that he had received his education and was brought up in a French culture, which he greatly admired and esteemed. His first poems were written in that language. Due to this, he was constantly vacillating between the choice of whether to identify as one or the other culture and as he himself claimed, the decision to volunteer as a soldier of war was a deliberate act to enable him to make a definitive decision, which did in fact happen. The poem dedicated to Sceab is therefore a link between *I fiumi* and *Italia* both in terms of the time and the content. It is a connection as well as Ungaretti’s distance to Sceab, who “had no fatherland”. While the poet definitively identifies himself as a member of the Italian national

community in the first poem, he clearly establishes the distinction between himself and Sceb in the second, for he had gotten a fatherland. The circle is complete in the third poem, as it is both a reflection of himself as well as the entire Italian national community.

I am a poet/ a unanimous cry/ I am a clot of dreams// I am the fruit/ of countless conflicting grafts/ grown in a hothouse// But your people are borne/ by the same land/ that bears me/ Italy// And in this your soldier`s/ uniform/ I rest/ as in my father`s/ cradle// (Brock, 2020:115).

The poem Italia indisputably eternalizes the poet's decision on his sense of belonging to Italians and the Italian land. This happened precisely with the trial by fire, as the poet concludes the poem with the metaphor that in this (meaning Italian) uniform, he rests as if he were in his father's cradle. The poem is composed in the form of a syllogism: the first two stanzas claim that he is a poet, while at the same time echoing the common feeling of all his fellow countrymen, or as Saccone concludes: "The ethical choral accord," which emphasizes "a tendency towards unity, brotherly solidarity with the entire "nation"" (Saccone, 57–58). This naturally implies a connection with the poem Soldati, in which the poet addresses other Italian soldiers as his brothers. In the second stanza, the poet discovers that he is an amalgam of diverse contrasting influences that have matured in him. The final decision on his allegiance to the Italian nation is subsequently underlined here in the second verse of the second stanza, in which the differing cultures in it no longer coalesce, as they do in the poem Fiumi, but are rather clashing with each other like a slip, a foreign body grooving on a new trunk, which had also grown in a greenhouse, so a foreign/ unnatural environment. This indicates there are different clashing influences in the poet that infiltrated him because he grew up in a foreign environment. The third begins with a powerful, contrasting 'but', which means an expressed contrast with the previously stated in the structure of the poem, followed by the vocative Italia, to which the poet fictively turns, as the earth carrying both him and his nation. This is followed by a deduction with the implicit conclusion that the poet feels like in his father's cradle in his uniform, therefore he is Italian. The uniform signifies to Ungaretti a cradle, a new beginning/rebirth, where he finally recognizes himself and/or decides on his national belonging, despite his diverse now "contrasting" cultural influences. The poem is therefore also a direct response and an amendment to the previous one. Since Sceb did not know how/could not self-determine, he committed suicide. The poet used the war for which he volunteered to identify himself as an Italian and was reborn. This conclusion is expressed by the following, last poem, dedicated to Serra, in which he writes the following thought: "When I find/ in this silence of mine/ a word/ it bores into my life / (Brock, 2020:117), therefore a meticulous reflection of his life. This is the final conclusion, which the poet had already

foreseen with the poem *I fiumi* and also concluded and defined with this trilogy. These are poems that undoubtedly reflect the poet's inner maturation, which is also a determination of his identity. The inner tissue of his poetic creation in 1916 must therefore be understood as the realization that both the African and French cultural influences are present in him and that he repeatedly expresses them in his initial poems, the subsequent facing and identification with his brethren from the Brescia Brigade, and finally an identity rebirth. The subsequent different layout of the poems in the collection follows a different, rational arrangement of the contents in which the poem *In memoria* is placed first, as a kind of symbol of all the fallen Italian soldiers that the poet remembers and that will be immortalized forever with his poems, but also as an illustration of the delineation between him, who has achieved his identity (and with him all the other Italian soldiers as he wrote in his poem *Italia*), and Sceab, who was not able to do so and took his own life. In the publication of the same collection from 1923, he again rearranged the order by placing in first place the poem *Il porto sepolto*, which represents a kind of poet's manifest of artistic creation, and the poem *In memoria* in second place. The collection therefore gets a circular theme, as it begins with how the poet creates and concludes with the contents of his creations. At the same time, he claims in the end that the contents are the fruit of his life experiences, leading us to conclude that in the opinion of the poet, the war brought the Italians together for a common goal, the domination of their civilisation, and fatherland. It enabled to the poet an identity self-determination, which is both ethnic and poetic at the same time. Ungaretti is therefore reborn, finding his own identity in the poetic word, expressed in his own mother tongue, which had been, of course impossible for Sceab.

Ungaretti then participated in the Seventh Battle of the Isonzo (14–17 September 1916), as indirectly confirmed by Fabi (2018: 82) when he claimed that the regiments had been transferred to Villesse from 15 to 23 October to rest. From there it was back “to the front in Castagnevizza, Quota 187 Nad Logem, Devetaki and Sagrado” until the end of the year (Id.: 82).” According to Juren, Persegatti, and Pizzamus, the Italians took Quota 212 or Nad Logem and the village of Opatje selo on 12 August 1916. In October, they took the settlements of Nova vas and Nad Bregom, followed by Lokvica, Veliki hrib, and Volkovnjak in November (Juren et al., 2014: 22). Between 23 September and 2 October 1916, Ungaretti composed an impressive six poems inscribed with Lokvica, which is not true based on the historical facts and the diary of the Brescia Brigade to which Ungaretti belonged stating that the soldiers of the regiment were stationed in the Tercenka Valley, to the north of Hudi log, but still a ways away from Lokvica. Later authors claim (Id.: 98) that on 12 October at 4.30 pm, the unverified news spread that they had taken the village of Lokvica, then commanded for the infantry to move forward to the abandoned posts. An

immediate reaction from the Austrians rebutted the attack. Military chaplain Cortese confirms this, writing in his diary: “They say our troops advanced rapidly – so much so that they took Lokvica and more. In those moments of military ecstasy, in moments of strong emotions by the warring soldiers, everything is exaggerated” (Cortese, 1998: 96). The following day, he writes clearly that: “There is talk of rapid advancements at night: we gained on Locvika (written in the original AN)” (Id.: 97).

Juren et al. confirmed subsequently that the Italian units reached the first houses in Lokvica on 23 October (Juren et al., 2009: 102). Similarly, the Brescia Brigade that tried to take Lokvica from the southern side stemming from Tercenka Valley, did not reach the village (Id.: 103). Lokvica was not taken by the Italian Spezia regiment troops until 1 November (Id.: 144). Why would the poet, who always correctly marked the places of his poems, incorrectly mark the location, which was also clearly recognizable, surely more than some unknown valley? The issue is even more puzzling and interesting because in April–May 1918, the poet sent a few poems entitled *Les pierreries ensoleillées* to his friend Marthe Roux in Paris. The poems in the binder are inscribed *Rome March / Villa del Garda April / Camp de Mailly / Paris Mai / 1918*. (Ungaretti, 2000b: 53–54). Some are in Italian, others from the collection *Il porto sepolto* were translated by the author into French, probably because the lady was not fluent in Italian. An inscription to the translation of the poem *Nostalgia* (*Nostalgia*), published on page 43–44 of the collection, is especially telling for this study. In his letter to the lady, the poet expressly refers to page 43 of his collection, but adds a new date to the poem in the binder to Locvizza, 28 November 1916 (Id.: 56). That date correlates to historical facts because we know that the Italians had occupied the village on 1 November 1916. Two years after the events, Ungaretti then correctly inscribed the date below a poem that he supposedly composed in Lokvica. Was this a conscious correction? It certainly does not explain the initial wrong location.

Immediately after the Eight Battle of the Isonzo (from 15 October until 23 October 1916), the poet was supposed to be transferred to Villesse with his Brescia Brigade. On 7 October 1916, Ungaretti sends two postcards to Marone, in which he is looking forward to Papini’s letter and asks Marone not to publish “those things”. The poet therefore sent him some poems as is evident from the letters from 14/7 and 27/8. He concludes the letter by saying he would probably come to Naples for Christmas (Ungaretti, 1978:48–52). He writes to Papini on the same day, saying that he had written him a few letters and asks if he had received them. On 17 October, he thanks him for the *La Voce* magazine (Ungaretti, 1988: 73–74). On 27 October, he writes to Marone again, asking him if he received his previous letter and if the *Diana* magazine had been published (Ungaretti, 1978:53). At the same time, he writes to Papini and thanks him

for his expressed friendship (Ungaretti, 1988:75). More interesting is a letter to Marone in which he doubts he would be able to come to Naples due to the military laws. He ends the letter by writing he is currently convalescing in hospital. The letter is not dated, but judging from the content, it certainly supersedes the one from 7 October. The following day, he asks him to obtain suitable accommodation for Christmas in Naples, saying he does not have a lot of money (Ungaretti, 1978:54-55). This does not explain where the poet was located and how long he stayed in hospital.

Juren et al. (Juren, 2014: 152) write that two battalions of the 20<sup>th</sup> Brescia regiment took part in the unsuccessful attack on Hudi Log. Ungaretti reports to Papini in late November that “I am up here with indefinite memories of beautiful moments” (Ungaretti, 1988: 75). Not even Fabi gives precise information about this period, only that the regiments were stationed in the direct hinterlands near San Michele del Carso and Quota 4. On 23 November, Ungaretti composed the poem *Perchè?* (Why?) inscribed by Carsia Giulia, i.e., Julian Karst, which does not reveal exactly where he was. In the poem, the poet gives in to contemplations on the meaning of life, which is why the poem is placed in the collection directly behind *Destino*, even though it was only composed four months later. The poem is not included in the first edition of the collection *Il porto sepolto* from December 1916. The poet squeezed it into the second edition of the collection, included in *Allegria di naufragi* from 1919. Tying this to the problem of the locations of his poems between 23 September and 2 October 1916 in the village of Lokvica and placing them in this period, as the poem himself attested to madam Roux, it must be concluded that he wrote this poem on the same day as *Attrito* (Friction). This gives rise to a new issue of why the other poems were included in the collection, but this one was not.

In late November, he writes to Papini: “I am up here,” (Ungaretti,1988:75) which leads to the conclusion that he was stationed somewhere near San Michele del Carso and Debela Griža (Quota 4).

In December, he wrote quite a few letters to Marone, notifying him when he would arrive in Naples. Finally, he writes on 13 December 1916 that he would be arriving on the 18<sup>th</sup>, as his first collection *Il porto sepolto* would be coming out on 15 December and he would be able to take it with him (Ungaretti, 1978:55-59). All the subsequent poems were then included in the collection *Allegria di naufragi* from 1919.

On 26 December 1916, he composed *Temporale* (Storm) and *Natale* (Christmas) in Naples. Both poems were included into the new collection from 1919 (Ungaretti, 1919: 58, 61). In the first, he outlines an impression of a quenched nature after the rain; in the second, he describes his ease next to a warm hearth and a desire to be alone, like a placed and forgotten item in the corner. Taking into account the contents of the letters, Ungaretti must have been on leave from 18 December 1916 onward. In December, he wrote

some letters to Papini stating that his poetry collection was coming out and that he would be given the first copy. In the others, he contemplates literature, warns of his insomnia (probably the first signs of the neurasthenia for which he would start asking for a temporary relocation to the hinterland starting from March), reports feeling like a nestled child and that this is probably what heaven was like (Ungaretti, 1988:76-79). The leave must have afforded him a temporary respite and he was able to somewhat recover psychologically.

## 1917

Fabi (2018: 87) writes that the Brescia Brigade was in the hinterland from 1 January 1917 until 6 February 1917: first near Visintini and then in Friuli in Santa Maria la Longa. Ungaretti notified Papini on 3 January 1917 that he would be visiting on his way back from Naples. In the following letter on 5 January 1917, he wrote he was leaving Florence for “up there” (Ungaretti, 1988: 84). Per Fabi (2018: 88), Ungaretti joined his company on 10 January 1917 in Santa Maria La Longa, the safe hinterlands in Friuli, where he would remain until late February (Id.: 89). Ungaretti therefore spent two and a half months away from the front. In January, he wrote a total of 11 letters to Papini (Ungaretti, 1988: 83–94). He states in one: “I have never felt so mentally well, cheerful, and calm” (Ungaretti, 1988: 87). In the rest, he is looking forward to the letters of two friends from France, discusses poetry and poets he currently esteems. Two are particularly interesting: in one, he says he was ill (he received treatment for gangrene on two toes due to frostbite AN) and that he recovered and that it is also snowing “here” in this shallow village (S. Maria L. L. AN). This information is interesting, because in the previous letter from 26 January 1917, the poet sent Papini three poems *Cielo e Mare* (Sky and Sea), in which the lyrical subject is completely immersed and melded together with nature. The poem entitled *Mattina* (Morning) would go on to become one of the most well-known Ungaretti’s poems, comprised of only two verses: “I’m lit with/ immensity//”(Brock,2020:131). Anyone visiting this village sprawling across a vast lowland could easily imagine this snowy area glimmering in the morning sun and would not find it difficult to understand such a masterfully written impression of a moment. In *Burrasca* (Storm), the lyrical subject is faced with his own suffering and God, and *Desiderio* (Wish), in which the poet would want to be as this snowy village, resembling a peaceful sleep. All three poems were somewhat altered and later published in the collection *Allegria* (Ungaretti, 1919: 52, 67, 63). Prior to 10 January, he also writes to Prezzolini that he has returned and his regiment was also at rest, supposedly for a long time. That he was completely healthy and full of hope and that he was

planning many things, including a novel entitled “My ancestors” (Ungaretti, 2000:37-38). He therefore still discusses his own origin and his roots.

On 7 February 1917, he writes to Prezolini that they would be returning to the front (Ungaretti, 2000:41). Based on the inscriptions to the poems, Ungaretti spent the month of February in Versa, where he composed six poems between 14 and 18 February: *La filosofia del poeta* (Poet’s Philosophy), in which the poet compares himself to an experienced sailor setting off for the sea after every shipwreck; *Alba* (Dawn), a glorious colour-auditory impression at dawn; *Transfigurazione in campagna* (Transfiguration in the Countryside), in which he uses a number of comparisons how he feels like the son of farmers, a vagabond, a father of dreams, and finally how he is lost in a kiss that is both exhausting but also calming. *Inizio di sera* (Early Evening) forms a kind of contrapoint to *Alba*, in which the lyrical subject depicts the running out of life, illustrated with the metaphor of an evening, lifting and sun-streamed clouds; *Nostalgia* (Nostalgia), in which he notices how he was, held by the hand, led like a blind man into the distance, and *Godimento* (Pleasure), in which the poet gives in to the pleasure of light, like a fruit that is sweetened in the sunlight, while also concluding how he would repent at night, like a lost howl on a night sky in the middle of a desert (Ungaretti, 1919: 49,51,52,53,55,60). He confides in Papini on 18 January 1917 that he has composed poems that are dearest to him. At the same time, he states that “a hypocrite [...] is a Jew or a German” (Ungaretti, 1988: 101). In the following one, he very directly claims that the usual death depresses him, while “it up there” is the “greatest gift of life” (Id.: 105). From the psychological aspect, the statement can be understood as a need to identify with a role with which an individual is identified and thus unburdened of the internal struggle. This is how Fonda supports this kind of thinking:

In the paranoid *all or nothing* state, which rings out in a group as *with us or without us*, arises the danger of a decision that identifies – assimilates the different or disagrees with the enemy. [...] In its extreme version, the paranoid *all or nothing* causes one to accept risking one’s own life, for if it is not possible to achieve *everything*—victory, destruction of the enemy, the *nothing*—defeat and disintegration of one’s own group causes the perception of life as intolerable (Fonda, 2016: 582).

Despite all the atrocities he witnessed, Ungaretti insists on his need for a martyr death for civilization to prevail over barbarianism, like he claims in the previous letter that Jews and Germans are barbarians. He continues in the following letter from 28 February 1917, where he relates to Papini’s article about his poetry collection, concluding he sought in himself: “My own most authentic source of Italianness” (Id.: 107); his identification with the group is both political and ethnic.

In the month of March, the poet wrote seven letters to Papini (Ungaretti, 1988: 107–115). In the one the editor dates back to the first days of March, Ungaretti claims he “has been up here for two months, in full service” (Ungaretti, 1988: 108), so this could only be somewhere in mid-April as he warns in his letter from 28 February 1917 that he is in “this village”, being Versa. In the following he states not having composed anything since he sent him his last poems, which was a letter from 18 February 1917 (Id.: 110), which again places the letter somewhere in mid-April. In it, he writes having to take an officer’s course in about a month (Ibidem). Fabi (2016: 90) writes that Ungaretti was transferred to Campolongo on 19 May 1917, where he took the obligatory non-commissioned officer course of the XIII Corps. In his letter from 17 March 1917, he glorifies Italians, describing how they sing in the trenches about being Italians and that they are true gentlemen. Actually, the word “gentiluomini” stems from the same root as gentile meaning noble (Id.: 113). On 1 March, the poet also wrote to Puccini, complaining that he is physically and mentally exhausted (Ungaretti, 2015: 21). On the 13<sup>th</sup> of the month, he writes to Papini (Ungaretti, 1988: 112) as well as Carrà (Ungaretti, 1980: 419); to each, he adds a slightly altered second stanza of the poem *Godimento* (Pleasure). To the latter, he writes that he feels more remote from “this rubbish”, not meaning the war, but the harsh criticism of his poetry that had been published in the *La Brigata* magazine.

In April, he writes to both Marone (Ungaretti, 1978: 70) as well as Papini (Ungaretti, 1988: 118–119). To the former about taking an officers’ course in May and to the latter about being proclaimed unfit for the war efforts during a medical examination (29 April) and being transferred to 43. C garrison. Fabi (2016: 90) writes that this allowed the poet to leave the battlefield because these garrisons operated in the hinterlands and dealt with the logistics. Between 18 and 20 April, Ungaretti wrote three poems: *Notte* (Night), in which he defines his life as wretched and frightened in a world burdening him; *Sono malato* (I Am Ill), in which he complains of being tormented by melancholy exhausting his ability to compose, and *Le ore della quiete* (Hours of Tranquillity) in which the poet, in the dark, with icy hands, recognizes his face and looks at himself, left up to infinity (Ungaretti, 1919:68,64,79). All three bear the inscription Vallone, so the poet must have been somewhere near Vižintini, the Italians’ first hinterland or near the northern entrance, under Nad Logem. It could not have been, as Fabi (2018: 93) claims, near the logistical junction near Devetaki, where the poet composed other poems with that inscription (Ungaretti, 1919: 125–127) and would naturally use it again if he were there at that period. On the final day of April, he sent Marone the final, third version of the poem *La filosofia del poeta*, which was composed in Versa on 14 February 1917 (Ungaretti, 1978: 71–72). In it, the lyrical subject uses the metaphor of an experienced sailor setting off for the sea immediately after a shipwreck to describe the poet’s creating. The poem therefore

complements both *Il porto sepolto*, in which the poet describes the process of poetic creation, and *Poesia*, where he determines the contents (world, humankind, poet's life) of his creations. He also writes to Marone (Ungaretti, 1978: 75) to let him know he would be transferred to the 43 garrison the day after next where he would remain for about 15 days, to be followed by a course for non-commissioned officers. This letter is not dated but can be placed somewhere between late April and the early days of May, as he took the course starting from 19 May 1917.

In April, he wrote to Papini four times. He complains that his poor eyesight would certainly prevent him from leading the troops in an attack as an officer. At the same time, he writes about suffering from nervous exhaustion ever since he left the university in Paris, so from 1913 onward. What allowed him to make it through the war were medications and especially his emotional force. This statement also supports the previously mentioned need to identify with the role and its obligations. He also notifies him that he has been transferred to the 43C garrison, where he was proclaimed unfit for the war efforts. In the last day of the month, he added that he heard they were looking for soldiers who spoke French and offers to serve his fatherland in this way (Ungaretti, 2015: 23–27).

On May 1, he again asks Puccini to employ him as a translator. On 19 May 1917, he notifies both Papini and Puccini about taking the officers' course (Ungaretti, 1988: 120 and 2015: 29). In the second letter to Puccini that was not dated, he writes that he is not sure yet whether he would be taking the course and asks him to procure him, at least temporarily, any kind of occupation that would allow him to rest, as neurasthenic as he may be, writing that he could not even sleep anymore (Ungaretti, 2015: 30–33). On 25 May, he asks Marone (Ungaretti, 1978: 79) if he received the second version of the two poems *Alba dal mare* (Sunrise on the Sea) and *Coprime di sonno* (Cover me with Sleep), which were not published in the *Diana* magazine. Based on this data it is therefore clear that the poet had not taken part in the Tenth Battle of the Isonzo (12 May–5 June 1917).

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Fabi (2016: 92–93) writes that Ungaretti returned to the war area around Dol (Vallone) in late June and early July, where he was said to carry out the duties of territory controller. This data is not completely accurate, because Ungaretti composed *Giugno* (June) on 5 July in Campolongo, where he was taking the obligatory officers' course. In it, the poet juxtaposes the murkiness of his soul to daydreaming of memories of love for a woman. He ends by stressing that everything disappears in his darkness, that he cannot sleep and feels like a firefly at the edge of the road, waiting for the night in him to subside

(Ungaretti, 1919: 31–34). It is clear from the letter to Marone from 27 June 1917 that he was still in the officers' course. Two days later, he writes he was returning to his regiment. The following day, he said he was mistaken and would be with the 43th garrison company (Ungaretti, 1978: 82–83). The poet then had returned directly to the war hinterlands in Dol after 5 July.

On 1 July, he writes to Puccini (Ungaretti, 2015: 35) and asks him to be reassigned back to his 19<sup>th</sup> regiment. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of the month (Id.: 36–39), he sends him two letters again beseeching to be reassigned to his 19<sup>th</sup> regiment, where everyone adores him, while saying he was suffering the worst kind of humiliation at the 43C garrison, like any newcomer. He adds in the postscript he was in Sdraussina. Two days later, he again writes two letters (Id.: 40–43); repeating his plea to be transferred to his regiment. In his letter from 16 July, he again stresses his nervous breakdown and his complete exhaustion (Id.: 44). In his letter to Papini, most likely from 13 July, he writes about being at the foot of the Karst, where it was hellishly hot, with chirping crickets, and soldiers marching up and down (Ungaretti, 1988: 125). It can therefore be concluded this was Zdravščina and that the poet was moving between the more or less distant hinterlands of the front. He wrote to Marone that same day (Ungaretti, 1978: 86) saying he was in the hinterlands, enjoying incredible perks and would shortly be awarded a shorter licence.

Fabi's (2018: 93) claim that the poet was probably stationed near Devetaki is incorrect, because Ungaretti had added the inscription Vallone meaning Dol to two poems from this period, while exactly a year prior (24 and 25 August), he wrote Devetachi to two of his poems and even From Devetachi to San Michele (Ungaretti, 1916: 38–39). The poet therefore very accurately marked the places where he composed his poems and it is therefore not surprising that he would later repeatedly emphasize that his poems were a replacement for his diary, tied to the time and place in which they were created. It is then even more surprising that he did not follow this principle for the poems that the author placed to have been composed in Lokvica, when the Italian forces would not take the village for a month, as will be explained below.

In his work *Nad Logem*, Juren (2007: 58–60) concludes the soldiers of the Royal Garrison Artillery were fighting in the direct vicinity of Dol on the Italian side, stationed between Peč and Nad Logem. Was Ungaretti there when he composed the two poems bearing the inscription Vallone? In his memoir, Hugh Edward Dalton notices that Slovenians were living in those villages. Ungaretti never mentions Slovenians in his letters. In the postscripts to his poems, he always writes the Italian version of the village name (Devetachi, Locvizza, etc.). Only in his letter to Puccini (Ungaretti, 2015: 55), after the fall of Kobarid, he

describes Italian soldiers retreating from Nad Logem, because no Italian version existed for that place name. In the same letter, he uses the Italian version for every other place. Svoljšak writes that Italians would consistently change the Slovenian placenames, even though they were not allowed to do so per military law, because they were counting on annexing those areas to the Kingdom of Italy based on the Treaty of London (Svoljšak, 1997: 234). As Sadhguru from Bharat said in 2014 ” “When someone conquers you, the first thing they will do is change your name. This is the technology of dominance, the technology of enslavement.”<sup>11</sup>

In the second half of July, the poet sent nine letters to Marone (Ungaretti, 1978: 87–97), stating that he would probably receive leave and go to Tuscany. He complains never having received the money his brother sent him and being informed the critics gave his poetry collection a positive review; he also constantly asks him to send him an outline of the collection to review, saying that this was worse and more important than two years of war. At the same time, he sent five letters to Puccini (Ungaretti, 2015: 45–51), demanding for a transferal to his regiment, otherwise he would again be afflicted by neurasthenia. At the end of the month, he begs him, even though he was proclaimed unfit to fight, to be transferred to his regiment and with that to the battlefield, as he would otherwise fall deeper into neurasthenia. He also informs he would be taking leave, which also happened in the second half of August, during the Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo. In his letters to Papini (Ungaretti, 1988: 126–137), he repeatedly complains of being exhausted, but that he has bowed down and accepted the sacrifice like Isaac and that he would be coming to visit. He warns Marone would want to reprint his collection, but he does not trust him, concluding that he writes to him every day. Obviously, many letters had gotten lost.

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In his letter from 17 August 1917, the first day of the Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo (17 August–15 September 1917), he greets Marone; in the next one, he keeps asking for the outline of the Anthology in which his poems were to be published (Ungaretti, 1978: 98–99). In the first days of August, he writes to Papini (Ungaretti, 1988: 137–138) complaining that he most likely would not be able to visit before the end of August, that he could not wish for better accommodation, and that it must be continued (the war AN) even if to the last man. This was followed by profanities about the Germans who he claims are responsible for the war and how he hates them. His subsequent letters reveal that he was vacationing in Pieve Santo Stefano, meaning he was visiting Papini in Tuscany. This is also stated by a letter to a friend and writer who was born and spent his youth in Alexandria in Egypt with Ungaretti, Jean-Léon Thuile, in

which he confirms he was staying with Papini. In the same letter, he also welcomes the short respite afforded to him by Divine grace, because he would have to return to the battlefield before long (Ungaretti, 2000b: 43–44). It follows that the poet was in the hinterlands or on leave during that battle. In this period, Ungaretti composed four poems: *Rosa fiammante* (Flaming Rose), a morning impression; *Vanità* (Vanity), a contemplation about the relationship of man to infinity; *Tiepida vaga mattina* (Pleasant Hazy Morning), another flashing morning impression; and *Dal viale di valle* (From the Valley Road), an impression upon the sight of a hillside (Ungaretti, 1919: 39, 40, 44, 45). The first was composed in Dol on 17 August 1917, the second in the same place two days later, the third in Bulciano on 22 August 1917, and the final in Pieve Santo Stefano on the last day of August. The poems were later merged with three others: *Nostalgia* (Nostalgia), *Convalescenza in gita in legno* (Convalescence on a Trip in the Woods), and *Melodia delle gole dell'orco* (Melody of the Ogre's Throats), published in the collection in 1919 with the joint title *Intagli* (Excerpts).

On 1 September, he was in Pieve S. Stefano with Papini, from where they sent a letter to painter Carrà in Ferrara, where the painter was receiving treatment (Ungaretti, 1980: 420). In his letter to Papini on the 6<sup>th</sup> of that month, he informed him he would be leaving on 7 September, back to the front (Ungaretti, 1988: 142). Two days later, he was already at the foothills of the Karst (Id.: 143); taking into account the letter to Puccini (Ungaretti, 2015: 54), this was most likely in Zdravščina. He also wrote to Marone (Ungaretti, 1978: 101–102) and Puccini (Ungaretti, 2015: 52–53), informing the latter that he had returned and that his inability to fight status had been extended for two months, until 10 November. The next day, he demanded quite sternly to be transferred back to his 19<sup>th</sup> Brigade and that he was in the same place, leading us to believe this was still in Zdravščina. In his letter to Carrà, not dated, he mentions he was in Biella and that he was declared unfit to fight, that he hopes to be able to join his brigade as soon as in January. In the subsequent letters to Papini (Ungaretti, 1988: 145–151), he repeatedly stereotypically ascribes good characteristics to Italians and bad ones to Germans. In the last one (25 September 1917), he writes that the most terrible war is the one that is waged against himself (Id.: 151). It can be surmised that this is the psychological exhaustion that kept him from sleep and tormented him relentlessly. It must be stressed that in his pleas for a temporary transferral to other obligations so that he could recover a bit, the poet always added his desire to return to his brigade as an ordinary infantry soldier, so that he could once more execute his obligation. Based on the anthropological philosophy of Arnold Gehlen:

Man is an imperfect creature: distinguished from animals by not being led by his instinct.

From this feature stems his primal instinctive uncertainty to which institutions represent

an external support: they unburden man of the burden of each decision, regardless of the choice that must be made: they therefore have an unburdening function (In Battaglia, 1994: 99).

According to Paul Parini, identification with one's role is a psychological adaptation mechanism:

Identification with one's role not only causes one to act in accordance with the required schemes that stem from the role, but one identifies with it, feeling a narcissistic gratification. [...] He who follows orders and performs their duty, does not experience objective gratification (stemming from the relation), but a narcissistic one (in Battaglia, 1994: 100).

Both explanations give us deeper insight in Ungaretti's decision that he did not wish to become an officer as a wish he constantly expressed, but to remain a simple infantryman and perform his duty.

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As Fabi (2018: 60) writes, Ungaretti had met and conversed with chaplain Carmine Cortese in Versa. This is not evident in any detailed analyses of the chaplain's memories, at least not those directly related to the karst part of the front (he was later transferred to Asiago AN). What is clear is that they shared a stereotypization of the "enemy", as the chaplain describes the Austrians as "white, ugly, resembling flying ears," while the Italians were "wonderful, marvellous" (Cortese, 1998: 70).

An inscription to his letter to Papini from 2 October 1917 offers a better understanding of the poet's attitude to war and his brethren, despite complaining of insomnia and being beside himself:

Did you read Kanzler? Damn Germans: damn: must we endure? We will endure, we will endure: there still exist men who are capable of dying without cruelty to save their nobleness: if cattle must remain on this Earth, let it remain alone; oh, my God, help me with a hint of genius!! And damn Lazzari; and damn any idiocy. Any kind of delinquency. Who will save the incompetent?<sup>12</sup> (Ungaretti, 1980: 152).

These kinds of statements wholly support Fonda's conclusions: "A lack of hope, in the name of *all or nothing* and auto-destruction dictates: "The culture of our community cannot survive in today's world. But let it all be destroyed, for there is no more acceptable future for us."" (Fonda, 2016: 583).

In October, he writes to Papini often. As the poet himself claims (3 October 1917), he writes only to him, because he is neurasthenic (Ungaretti, 1988: 155). In the same letter, he also mentions the poetry cycle *Il ciclo delle 24 ore* (24 Hour Cycle), dedicated to Papini, which the poet estimates to be his finest work. The

Cycle (Ungaretti, 1919:49-79) contains 15 poems that he composed between 26 December 1916 and 26 December 1917 (Ungaretti, 1919:49-70). They have been written of. In the following letter, he notifies him (Id.: 155) that he would be in Paris in December. In the following one, he describes himself as a man who was once very altruistic, but without any calculation, excited without nefarious intentions, who never pretended, held no political convictions, who: “supposedly was not Jewish” (Id.: 157). This is another occurrence of the stereotypic definition of Jews as hypocrites.

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After the penetration of the Austrian-Hungarian and German forces in Kobarid, the Italian army retreated. Ungaretti wrote to Papini 2 November 1917:

My Papini, I’ve been swept away by the events – I could not write sooner because all the connections were severed. We’ve been marching for six days (Ungaretti, 1980: 158).

The following letter:

My Papini, perhaps you received the postcard I sent in a hurry, I finally got to a mailbox, the first after a sad day. I cannot tell you anything. We suffer, but keep up our hopes. Shout to Italians to be brave, to persevere: brave, Papini; shout with all your might to our nation to be strong; for if nobleness must disappear, we will sell it dearly: we are ready to the last man. You will learn the rest when we meet (Ungaretti, 1980: 159).

In his article *Pensare la guerra* (Thinking The War), Ambrosiano explains this mindset:

If one follows without disregarding the sense of shame in it, this immediately leads to the discovery that one is slowly falling in love with the song of the Nazis, that there is a danger of one recklessly accepting the dominant ideologies. One’s sense of shame reminds one to retain one’s personal specificity, which enables one a *critical participation* with the community. As one eludes a sense of shame, this is crystalized into a sense of humiliation, an experience that causes a sense of doom in one’s internal world (mortification) and in the group, a rage and explosive hatred to the reason (any reason) of this humiliation. May these be other people, animals, nature itself (Ambrosiano, 2016: 577).

This kind of appeal to Papini written in *La voce* magazine can also be understood as the consequence of masses of Italian soldiers deserting during the retreat. Per Schindler (2002: 295), Italy was said to have lost 800,000 soldiers, half as many of them deserted. Fabi (2018: 102) reports: “380,000 soldiers

lost/wandering in the hinterland.” In his previous research (1994: 179), he had determined that on 7 December 1917, the government passed a special decree to eliminate criminal procedures and acquitted 27,000 “wayward” soldiers after the fall of Kobarid.

In mid-November, the poet sent two similar letters to Marone (Ungaretti, 1980: 108) and Papini (Ungaretti, 1988: 160), in which he asks whether they would be able to save civilization, with the thought to the former that they would. Even these letters express a visible polarization of civilization vs. barbarianism. At the same time, he reports to Papini about the changes in the organization of the regiments (Id.: 161–163). It is not evident from what has been written where he was stationed, but it is clear that he took part in the fighting. Ungaretti also wrote to Puccini in those days:

My dear Puccini, I have had neither the strength nor the time after a tragic day to write, never mind think. I followed my regiment from Nad Logem whose last troops had left the garrisons where I arrived during the conquering with my 19<sup>th</sup>, crowned in glory. I followed the pilgrimage, astonished, past Vallone on San Michele on Sdraussina along the cemeteries where we left so many who were dear to me (Ungaretti, 2015: 55).

In his letter, he mentions “this Venetian lowland” and writes about having asked on 19 September 1917 to be transferred to his 19<sup>th</sup> brigade and concludes: “Most of all, the Fatherland, our civilization cannot die, it must be gloriously victorious, and for all of this, every drop of my blood is prepared to drench this good earth” (Id.: 56).

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In the first days of December, he asks Marone to send him the anthology and writes he was waiting on what would be decided about him (Ungaretti, 1980: 109). This most likely relates to the request of which he reports to Puccini (Ungaretti, 1988: 56–59) about being transferred to his 19<sup>th</sup> brigade. In the following letters, he constantly asks about the Anthology draft, while the letter from 16 December 1917 reveals that he had been transferred to his brigade. He also wrote to Soffici on 18 December 1917, who was charged with transforming units, especially propaganda among soldiers, and informs him about being in the near vicinity of the 19<sup>th</sup> brigade (Ungaretti, 1981: 3). They remind the editor of the letters that this was in Emilia. Ungaretti asks Soffici to be called to him, so that he could also work on propaganda (Id.: 5). The letter is especially compelling, because the poet glorifies the bravery of Italian soldiers and believes they should be granted some recognition, concluding:

When will this rocky cry explode into the glimmering song of victory? Your cannons, Italy, will drum into the night, a storm of suns: in the gripping machine guns, your infantrymen will appear, like Christmas angel choirs. Jesus' Christmas. A day of lion lambs, to gift you the face of immortal beauty, Italy. For angel choirs sang of peace to good people, but after a week of Passion; but for the price of sacrificing "mummy's boy". This will then transform into a pure and universal civilization of her race and lift deified humankind to the sky. I thought of you, Soffici while pondering these aspects of "nobleness" (Ungaretti, 1981: 5–6).

On 11 December 1917, he wrote to Papini that he was back with his 19<sup>th</sup> brigade. On 18 December 1917, he was certain of victory (Id.: 164). The following day, he offered more accurate data, leading the editors to believe that he was in the Massa Carrara county, where his regiment was after the fall of Kobarid and where the Italian army was being restructured (Id.: 165–166). On 27 December 1917, he writes he was in charge of censure (Id.: 167). This is confirmed in his letter to Soffici from 30 December 1917, tauntingly writing he had gone over the last "Angiollina kisses" (Ungaretti, 1981: 6). In all of his letters, he complains feeling very lonely, because everyone he fraternized with was either dead or gone (Ungaretti, 1981: 8). More and more frequently, he expresses political stands glorifying his nation as the only noble, heroic one. On 26 December 1917, he composed the poem *Dolina notturna* (Sinkhole at Night), inscribed Naples, which leads to the conclusion that he once more visited Marone. This is also the last poem that he placed in the 24 Hour Cycle, dedicated to his friend Papini (Ungaretti, 1919: 65). In his letter from 27 December 1917, he sends an article that was published in the *Il Tempo* magazine on 4 January 1918, said to contain a first-hand report of the battlefield (Ungaretti, 1988: 169). This is an article from the cycle he planned precisely as propaganda among soldiers. Along with the usual glorification of Italian soldiers, he concludes:

Whosoever talks of peace is a thief. One must endure these days; or kill nobleness. [...] Italy wants to be larger, not in territory, which is secondary, but in the spiritual sense, because it deserves it; it refuses to be degraded to the fate of a negro tribe; it wants to be exalted to greatness, which it has tirelessly carved out in the two-thousand-year history of nobleness (30 December 1917) (Ungaretti, 1974: 9).

## 1918

On 1 January 1918, he wrote to both Papini as well as Soffici; complaining to the latter about having frostbite on his feet that bother him, while at the same time asking him to secure him leave (Ungaretti, 1981: 9). He congratulates Papini and asks whether he got the article and that he would write many other things (Ungaretti, 1988: 173).

In January, he repeatedly writes to Marone regarding his poems and his article on Pea. His employment at the Censure Office in Emilia, where the army was being redistributed after the fall of Kobarid, obviously enabled him to devote more time to art (Ungaretti, 1978: 116-121). At the same time, he reports to Soffici (Ungaretti, 1981: 8-9) asking him when he could join him (at the propaganda office AN) and that he plans on writing reports on the battles in which he could encourage the soldiers to renewed efforts. In late January, he reported not feeling well because of his frostbitten toes and severe psychological swings. This is why he asks for leave.

As usual, most of his letters are sent to Papini (1988: 73-185). He is chiefly concerned with re-establishing morale among the soldiers, upset with anyone expressing their view opposing the war, and insists on persevering until the very last man. He writes about Giolitti that he is hypocritical like a Jew. He also writes about planning a few short pieces of prose on his ancestors. He again complains at the end of the month about being very melancholic and plagued by frostbitten legs.

On the first days of February 1918, he writes to both Prezolini (Ungaretti: 2000, 25) as well as Soffici (Ungaretti, 1981: 10-11) and Papini (Ungaretti, 1988: 185). He complains of ill health in all his letters and having rotting toes due to frostbite. He also mentions to Prezolini that this enabled him to stay at Grosso Carreggio (freight carriages) (Ungaretti, 2000: 47). He complains in his letters to Papini that the wounds on his toes were not healing and he was therefore not being sent “up there” (Ungaretti, 1988: 188). A few days later, he wrote about arriving closer to the war in Brescia after some days of marching (Id.: 189). At the end of the month, he wrote about probably coming to Rome (Id.: 190). At the same time, he wrote to Soffici (Ungaretti, 1981: 11-14) complaining about there being no more mud and that frost was beginning, worsening the situation on his leg, so that he should be afforded a few days leave as soon as possible. In his letter from 8 February 1918, he describes how the soldiers of his brigade love him and how it is only enough for him to look into their eyes and they immediately stop complaining about the war. Let us emphasize here that Ungaretti was entrusted with censure, as is related in the letter from 30 December 1917. He concludes the letter by urging Soffici again to procure him leave.

In mid-March, he notifies Soffici (Ungaretti, 1981:15) about being in hospital in Rome convalescing. The next letter reveals he remained in hospital in Rome until April (Id.: 15). This is confirmed by his letter to Prezzolini, where he is even more precise, writing he returned to his regiment on 4 April 1918, having driven for four days in impossible conditions. He concludes by stressing he was “on leave”, which meant he was not on the front and that he was anxious to win again and that as long as he was alive, he would continue on his path (Ungaretti, 2000: 44–45). In his next letter (Id.: 45), he repeats having been in Celio, the hospital in Rome for 15 days, meaning from 15 March 1918 until 30 March 1918. In the same letter, he concludes that “they would be seeing the bear again,” a hint of a battle with the Germans. He continues that “this does not bother him at all, to the contrary, he was looking forward to it” (Ibidem). In two letters from mid-April (Id.: 45–47), he was looking forward to travelling to his chosen fatherland (being France AN), which is why he regarded sacrifice even more necessary, just so the barbarians do not prevail.

Per Fabi (2018: 112), the II Army Corps of the Italian army moved to France in that period: the Brescia Brigade was said to be stationed at Brienne-le Chateau, Gigny- Brandon. In his letter from 19 April 1918, Ungaretti informs Papini about having been in Paris for a few days and that it had been very good and that they had not reached the front yet (Ungaretti, 1988: 46–49). It can therefore be concluded that he spent a few days in Paris in the first half of April. On 19 April 1918, he wrote to Marone to say he had returned to his regiment and that they would soon be beside Apollinaire (Ungaretti, 1978: 122), which hints at France and Paris, Apollinaire’s place of residence.

The letters he sent to Papini (Ungaretti, 1988: 190–203) in that period reveal that he was still in the hinterlands on 12 April 1918, but assumed they would be leaving for the front soon, which did not worry him at all (Ungaretti, 1988: 198). Fabi (2018: 113) writes that the Brescia Brigade was transferred to the d’Avoncourt sector on 26 May and later to Bois de Courton. The poet writes to Papini on 17 April that he would likely meet Apollinaire, alluding to the possibility of being granted leave and going to Paris (Ungaretti, 1988: 202). In those days, he also sent a few letters to Soffici (Ungaretti, 1981: 17), glorifying the French as being extremely civilized.

He informs Papini (Ungaretti, 1988: 204) on 7 May about being in Paris. A few days later (Id.: 205), he writes about being in Paris, i.e., that he had returned to his brigade. In the same letter, he expresses very harsh and aggressive notions about the Pope (Benedict XV AN) and Turati, saying that the French hated them for being directly responsible for the defeat at Kobarid. In the next letter (Id.: 206), he rejoices about having composed some new poems and also translated them into French. They were probably the ones that were included in the *Allegria* collection entitled *Atti primaverili e d’altre stagioni* (Ungaretti, 1919:

23–27). It should be added here that this is how the poet assessed his poems in French in 1942: “This is not my language. There is always something deceitful in them” (Ungaretti, 2000b: 57). On 18 May, he writes about being in Paris again, translating his poems, as the collection *Il porto sepolto* would be published in both languages. Once again, he voices his concern about the enemy, whom he describes as crude and treacherous, abusing Italian articles for their own promotional purposes. In his opinion, it should be written as *Daudet v Action française* (Id.: 207), a newspaper with an expressed nationalist orientation. It is also known that Ungaretti was involved in censorship, which naturally would not be allowed to someone who was not completely reliable. This leads us to conclude that the poet spent some time in Paris in May.

In his letter to Soffici from 8 May 1918, he wrote about being in Paris (Ungaretti, 1981: 18), which means he added that note later, as he had told Papini a day prior about being in Paris. Three days later, the same day as to Papini, he says he had been creating as well as translating, creating a letter with very similar contents to that to Papini (Ungaretti, 1981:19). On 12 May (Id.: 20), he confirms “I have arrived” and that “we will be righteous”, arriving in France, to where they were transferred to support the French army. In the same letter, he is also rejoicing about never having felt better and about being in excellent condition to fight. He does bemoan the brigade temporarily being in a sweeping lowland, with no female gaze, nor “bear fireflies”, hinting at a German presence. In the following letter (Id.: 22), he writes about returning from Paris, enabling us to place the letter somewhere after 18 May, when he wrote to Papini about returning to Paris (Ungaretti, 1988,204). In the same letter, he laments having to go under fire again and if he (Soffici AN) could not save him, that death should come. In only a few days, therefore, the poet’s morale experiences a complete turnover to the extent that he wishes for death. A few days later, he writes to Soffici (Id.: 23) that he could not answer his letter satisfactorily, as he had had a fever and was not feeling good. On 27 May, he writes about being constantly on the road, being transferred, and about having had a backpack on his back and marching for many hours, and being very tired (Id.: 24). This data confirms Fabi’s claim about Ungaretti’s brigade being transferred from St-Ouen to d’Avoncourt (Fabi, 2018: 112–113).

In his June letters to Soffici (Ungaretti, 1981: 27–30), he repeatedly rails that the “ruffians” would not win and that they were approaching the city (Paris). At the same time, he was rejoicing that the Italians excelled in battle and about poems piling up in his heart.

He also writes to Papini in those days (Ungaretti, 1988: 209–212); he rails that the “ruffians would not win” in those letters as well. The contents of the letters are very similar to those to Soffici. He constantly

repeats the Italian civilization standing up against German barbarianism:

“In the meantime, we have stopped sleeping and started hating; in contact with the wonderful people from these parts, how not to hate, and without the possibility of “apaisement”<sup>13</sup> these ruffians that force us to commit these atrocities” (Ungaretti, 1988: 210). On the final days of the war: “And I love this beautiful and epileptic soil, this wild and mild Italy, and I love its people, for my love is limitless. I am completely Italian, [...] I was born of the farmers who had calmly regenerated themselves over millennia on the soil in San Concordio di Lucchesia, a race of such purity as few others” (Id.: 224).

This is how Fonda explains this kind of thinking during the war:

The world of the involved subjects in the war is limited to *object-group-ruffians-demonized* and *object-group-good-idealized*, to which we belong and from which we can barely be differentiated, as homogenization grows into “perfect cohesion”. A loss of a larger part of an individual’s capability for mental autonomy is compensated with a greater participation in the group identity. A stronger Us compensates for a weaker Me. This establishes a fatal attraction between the individual and the community. It follows that fighting for the community and fighting for oneself generally coincides. In contrast, the advantage of identification with the community is glorified so that “sacrificing oneself to save the community ensures the immortality of heroes in memory of the community.” This is how military training is intentionally spread (Fonda, 2016: 581).

This kind of explanation highlights either Ungaretti’s constant idea of the Italian civilization standing up to German barbarianism, while also explaining the poet’s repeated emphasis on the need for a general martyr death and final victory and domination of its, Italian “two-millennia” civilization, as is evident from everything written thus far. Fonda concludes:

These defence mechanisms are functional in creating the vision of an evil enemy. Consequently, we no longer have anything in common with an enemy that is only defined by their negativity, joined by a massive projection of their own. If there are no more common points, empathy is no longer possible: they are no longer *equal* to us and therefore dehumanized, no longer *protected from the taboo of murder*. To the contrary, their killing is socially supported and merited. A paranoid anxiety tumbles the value scale. A care for one’s own survival is at the forefront, while the capability to take care of the other – the enemy dissipates (Fonda, 2016: 581–582).

On 6 June, he informs Prezzolini that Apollinaire was wounded in battle. He glorifies the French as a superior race and notes they were nearing the city and that the “ruffians would not prevail” (Ungaretti, 2000: 49–53). Ungaretti’s viewpoint remains staunchly unchanged: war is necessary for the overrule of the Italian and French civilization over foreign barbarianism.

In July 1918, he wrote two letters to Papini (Ungaretti, 1988: 213–214) reporting about being “in hell” and was therefore hoarding poetry. In the second letter on 18 July 1918, he says it is a miracle he was still alive, as the bullet hit his rifle and just slightly grazed his head. His complete exhaustion led him to faint, only being rescued by his colonel, who had him loaded onto a cart. At the same time, he informs Soffici (Ungaretti, 1981: 31) that he was proposed for an iron cross for bravery under fire. It was awarded to him with decree no. 3160 of the II Army Corps on 1 September 1918.

In August, he laments to Papini (1988: 216–218) about being completely exhausted, unable to sleep, and that he would need three more months of leave to recover. At the same time, he hopes to be able to go on a ten-day leave to Paris in the summer; he would actually travel there in early August, as is evident in the letter from 19 August 1918 to Prezzolini (Ungaretti, 2000: 58–60). He also states that he had been in charge of censorship lately and asking to rejoin the fights, as they suited him. At the time, he was feeling completely exhausted and would urgently need three months of leave, although not in idleness, but in a position in which he could keep serving his country to return to the front later. At the end of the month (26 August 1918), he begs him for help saying that he was on the verge of a breakdown (Id.: 61). Two days later, he sends a letter to painter Carrà (Ungaretti, 1980: 424), claiming he was still stronger than he thought he would be. This letter also outlines the famous verses of the *Militari* (Soldiers) poem, to be published later in the *Allegria* collection (Ungaretti, 1919: 16), which have caused much contention, because literary critics understood it as a sort of ode to all soldiers, while the contents of the letters lead us to conclude that this did not apply to “enemies”. In August, he most often wrote to Soffici (Ungaretti, 1981: 32–44). On 12 August 1918, he asks to be transferred, saying he was always brave, which is also supported by the two recommendations for a special military commendation. He does not wish to be sent to some office, saying he was a fighter, not a bureaucrat. He also writes that the brigade was on leave and that he was coming to Paris on the same day (Id.: 32–34). In the next, he proposes some possible postings and insists on the total annihilation of the ruffians. He finishes by asking for summer leave to Paris (Id.: 35). On the 19<sup>th</sup>, he writes how he left the censure posting and asked to rejoin the fighting (Id.: 36). At the end of the month, at 2 am, he writes, unable to sleep and completely down, once again asking for three months leave. To his favour, he says how he has always bravely fought for his civilization. He also

complains of not being able to go to Paris for ten days due to administrative complications. In the days of the month, he complains about ardently wishing for death, but which was not fond of him. He feels like a “good nation”, co-creating a more beautiful and glorious Italy with his martyrdom (Id.: 41–42). On the last day of August, he asks for a longer leave again, writing that not even unending love for his fatherland and France could overcome this relentless psycho-physical exhaustion (Id.: 43–44).

In September, he again asks Soffici (Ungaretti, 1981: 45) for a longer convalescence period and that he would probably be able to travel to Paris for ten days. The letter from 19 September 1918 (Id.: 46) is especially interesting because the poet plans a poem to glorify his 19<sup>th</sup> regiment, which once again confirms that the poems written for soldiers were intended for Italian soldiers, not all soldiers in general, as Ungaretti later claimed. At the same time, he informs that the colonel prevented him from taking part in the fighting. In the next two (Id.: 48–49), he expresses an unbearable despair, despite being in the hinterland and claiming that he had asked to be sent back to the front to seek his end. About the same time, he writes to Prezzolini asking him to procure him treatment in hospital as soon as possible (Ungaretti, 2000: 62).

The letters from this period therefore clearly reflect the poet’s exhaustion and psychological swings between complete despair and a thirst for death and glorifying war and his fellow fighters so that the French and Italian civilizations could prevail.

In October, he thanks Soffici (Ungaretti, 1981: 50) for having him transferred to the hinterland and promises to remember and immortalize his brethren. Years later, he would expand this view to all mankind, even though everything written thus far makes it clear he was only thinking about Italian soldiers. This leads us to conclude that the poet was no longer participating in the fighting from 20 September onward. This is also confirmed by his letters to Papini (Ungaretti, 1988: 218–222), in which he informs that Soffici had procured him some leave (Ufficio Informazioni del 2. Corpo d’Armata - Information Office of the 2. Army Corps)). In the next one (Id.: 221), he claims propaganda should become a priority, stating that the Italian sacrificed the most and are not receiving the proper recognition because of political manoeuvres.

On 10 November 1918, he got back to Soffici, apologising for letters he wrote in an extreme psychological state, while also writing: “Our dreams are coming true; Italy is shining in its new splendour. I am elated” (Ungaretti, 1981: 51). In the postscript, he adds he would be in Paris the following day. Ungaretti’s unwavering support for the war is easier to understand since:

From the moment the governments and the generals determined that the war caused in 1914 would last a long time, they intended an incredible cultural mobilization for Europeans. [...] The price for creating and nurturing a mass consent to this industrial slaughter was creating a cultural war that was based on hatred, fear, and hysteria: war was sacred and necessary, a crusade to free the world of the enemy's demonic evil, and ensure safety, prosperity, and greatness for the homeland (Mondini, 2019: 9).

As evident from everything written above, Ungaretti adopted this kind of viewpoint and kept it until the end of the war and beyond, launching his political activities on Mussolini's side, because:

The one that was supposed to be "the war to prevent all other wars" contained too many differing meanings not to sow disharmony among Italians rather than peace (Mondini, 2019: 8).

As Fonda explains, the post-war psychological state must be thusly understood:

The end of the war could be compared with awakening after a pathological intoxication. Finding oneself among the ruins one has caused. [...] The traumas (killings, torture AN) stemming from everything we have caused remain neglected and even more fervently denied. These are never topics of conversation. Any efforts to remember in order to process them are aggressively stifled at the root so as not to be rationalized. There is no place for such traumas in culture. Or, there is, but only in the culture of the others, their victims. This is how one's own actions, one's heroes, and one's victims (most often called "martyrs") are idealized. They are denied and all the cruel and negative acts are projected onto a demonized adversary. [...] Traumas during a war are accumulated both in the individual as well as the collective psyche, drawing to a schizoid-paranoid operation and preventing any reconciliation, a renewed transition to a depressed state<sup>14</sup> (Fonda, 2000: 135–136). Fonda's conclusions about the inter-war and post-war psychological state is also subsequently confirmed by the contents of Ungaretti's letter to Papini, which can be placed between late November and the first days of December 1918:

My dear Papini, I am confused; I awaken and this Europe, my God, we have left on our hands is truly a nasty business. Of the victorious countries, save perhaps for England, which is a sort of living fossil mutilated by elephantiasis, a progressive one of course, the rest, like Italy, are nothing but corpses of the dead, on which only pieces of flesh are left for

the more or less phosphorescent worms. I am referring to official matters, those “gaudy ornaments” of the plaster of “read: ideology”, for in our depth kindles a lymph that could restore that flowering splendour that only flourishes on our soil. I mean the Italian nation, the most endowed on this earth, the most skilful and talented, the most hard-working. A founding general meeting is needed. I am closely following Mussolini’s movement that is, believe me, the right path. It is necessary for us to pivot that way. Order order order, harmony harmony harmony; for currently, all I see is mess mess mess (Ungaretti,1988:233).

The cycle is completed the following year, when he publishes the poem *Popolo* (My People) in his collection *Allegria di naufragi*, dedicated to Mussolini, in which he states having found his destiny in a community of those hundreds of thousands that will bear the pyramid while thousands of flags are raised up, against a treacherous enemy, in a common yearning for happiness (Ungaretti, 1919:162).

## Conclusion

An artist’s role in crucial historic moments can be pivotal in co-creating public opinion and supporting or rebelling against totalitarianism. This article details that an intellectual circle was formed under the given circumstances, which utilized strong media propaganda to plunge Italy into a military conflict despite the fact that it was not supported by the majority. Ungaretti’s biography is a prime example of an intellectual who was formed in a Francophonic cultural environment and internalized it as his own. As a child of emigrants, he also understood his ethnic background while simultaneously sensing the breadth of French culture, which prevented him in his early youth from defining himself. This is supported by his decision to continue his studies in Paris and not Italy, along with the fact that his first poems were composed in French. He later admitted to finding himself in a French environment. Up until 1914, he was therefore imbued with admiration and acceptance for French culture and politics. At the onset of the war, he joined Mussolini’s movement in Italy that supported the country entering the war, fervently adopting the ideology. This kind of choice is understandable because nationalism is more pronounced in people who did not grow up in their motherland. The reason the poet stated as the excuse confirms the assumption that war would enable his internal metamorphosis and confirm him as an Italian, which did in fact happen. His national belonging was concurrently formed as political and literary. His volunteering to join the army is of course a political act, but which was also moulded in Ungaretti as a literary one. This is confirmed by him constantly emphasizing the two-thousand-year culture and civilization.

The overview of the poet's participation in individual battles of the Isonzo and French battlefields clearly demonstrates that the poet was gradually ripening into his own transition. From the initial lack of self-determination, where hints and memories of the Arabic and French world were still present as component parts of his personality, there is a gradual encroachment of the awareness and definition of his belonging to the Italian race. His final decision is written the poem *Fiumi*, in which he basically sets a boundary between his place of birth, his French cultural shaping, and his poetic rebirth, which coincides with the realization about his national identity. This makes the poem *Italia* the logical conclusion of this kind of decision process. At the symbolic level, there appears the homeland–mother, with which the poet now wholly identifies, and reflects in his written word the belonging of all his fellow countrymen. In the ritual of the bloody military baptism, the military enabled the poet and his co-fighters to experience a spiritual melding and rebirth, thus solidifying his national belonging, as he rests in it as in his father's crib. The feminine and masculine element forged a new poet-Italian in their spiritual merging, one whose word also expresses the thoughts of all Italians. Ungaretti's poetic path is basically a winding road to gaining a Homeland/Fatherland. This explains his constant emphasizing of the two-thousand-year Italian civilization, supporting and justifying this transition. The lack of self-determination, which naturally constitutes a spiritual bounty, but also requires considerable psychological strength, is gradually redirected toward determination, but whose recentness requires constant reassurance and confirmation; Ungaretti's post-war actions further confirm his national identity both in his support for Mussolini and strengthening Italian political and cultural superiority in Europe. Due to the specifics of his life journey, Ungaretti accepted and supported the war, understanding it as the means for his civilization to prevail, thereby taking the side of those few intellectuals that were supporting Italian interventionism. As we have seen, many other poets and artists were immediately aware of the senselessness of war and opposed it in the name of a higher, supranational humanity.

The concurrent analysis of his participation in the battles and his composing have led to two conclusions: reading his poetry in chronological order has shown how the poet's national belonging was maturing in him. Any later layouts of poems in collections follow other demands, such as shaping an internal message, which, however, also reshapes the meaning of individual compositions, like in the case of the poem dedicated to Sceb. Naturally, this does not in the least diminish the grandeur and beauty of the creations, to the contrary, it adds an additional perspective of the content, although it follows a different logic and consequently differing understanding of their content. It is also important to keep in mind that Ungaretti was not a renowned and established poet at the time, so it is reasonable that he wanted to offer

readers and critics particularly deliberately arranged collections. The other aspect that no one has noticed yet is the explanation why the poet erroneously (?) placed the location of six of his poems that were supposedly composed in Lokvica, but as we have proven with the documentation, they were not composed there, i.e., in that time period. Subsequent studies will have to explain that inconsistency. This inter-war aspect will therefore need to be placed in Ungaretti's personal and poetic development, which may have been neglected due to the specifics of Italian historic outcome after World War II.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Giuseppe Prezzolini (1882–1982) journalist, writer, published, university professor. A key figure at the *La voce* magazine, which he and Giovanni Papini founded in 1908 and ran until 1913. Two years later, he started publishing the political version of the *La voce* magazine. At the outbreak of the war, he conscribed as a soldier, where he was designated to be a company instructor. After Kobarid, he asked to be sent to the frontline.

<sup>2</sup> In English in the original.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed overview of Ungaretti's colonial attitude, see Srebotnjak 2021.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed overview of Ungaretti's support for Mussolini, see Vergelli, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> According to Fabi (1994), about 8,000 men volunteered for the war during the entire war period, mostly men from Trento and Trieste. Later (2018), the author changed his position and claimed some tens of thousands volunteered, but failed to provide any argumentation for this.

<sup>6</sup> All poems's translations in English are quoted from Brock, 2020

<sup>7</sup> Underlined in the original.

<sup>8</sup> Marone, Gherardo (1891-1962) Hispanist, translator, lawyer. Founder of the *La Diana* literary magazine (1951-1917). Ungaretti wrote to him from the front between 1916-1918 and sent him his poems. Marone published some of them in the magazine.

<sup>9</sup> For details on the story of this mulberry to the south of the church of Martinščina see Juren M. 2007,

<sup>10</sup> I would like to take this opportunity to thank Juren Mitja for providing me with the diary of the Brescia brigade.

<sup>11</sup> Viewed September 13th, 2023, <https://simplicius76.substack.com/p/sitrep-91323-tradewinds-of-change>

<sup>12</sup> It is not clear to which statements by the Kanzler he is referring. Costantino Lazzari was among the founders of the Socialist party and therefore advocated for anti-war propaganda. In September 1917, he published a pacifistic statement that was then air-dropped by the opposing side over the Italian troops.

<sup>13</sup> Appeasement, in French in the original.

<sup>14</sup> According to Fonda, this is a state characterized by rationalization and separating oneself from the other. This also enables an individual to perceive their fellow man as their equal, preventing them from harming them in any way (AN).

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