

Drawing Testimony, Coming to Writing: Ebe Cagli Seidenberg's *Le sabbie del silenzio* and *Il Tempo dei Dioscuri*

Ogni persona che lascia la propria terra è
come un albero trapiantato altrove,
guai a privarlo delle proprie radici.

Amara Lakhous

For the person who has lost everything...
language becomes the country.
One enters the country of words.

One cannot not speak of the scandals of an
epoch.

Hélène Cixous

Coming to writing, in the words of writer and theorist Hélène Cixous (1991), means to “get past the wall” or the multiple walls of interdiction that forbid individual expression—foreignness, Jewishness, femininity, and so forth.¹ Exile is inextricably connected to foreignness, loss, and mourning. While it may produce silence, exile has also a tremendous potential to generate and nurture its opposite: a voice for those who are silent. To Cixous, who was born in Algeria in 1937 to a German Jewish mother and a French military officer of Algerian and Jewish origins, the journey towards writing started with the death of her father and the condition of having a foreign mother, which created for her the necessity to live, write, and confront her own composite identity.

This essay considers the question of how “coming to writing” describes the creative process, how mourning becomes language, and how the emptiness of silence turns into word, in relation to the life and literary work of Italian Jewish writer Ebe Cagli Seidenberg. In other words, how did Cagli’s exile to the U.S. facilitate her voice? And how did language become, for her, nothing less than a form of “country”? In examining her journey to testimonial writing, I contend that visual imagery—a combination of visual artifacts and visual memories—plays a major role in getting past the wall of silence, overcoming the impasse of oral communication, and fashioning powerful narratives of displacement and sense of foreignness abroad, but also discrimination and disengagement within Italy.

1. “*One cannot not speak of the scandals of an epoch.*”²

For Ebe Cagli Seidenberg such scandals were the racial laws of 1938. Born in Ancona, Italy, in 1915, and raised in Rome in a middle class Jewish family, Cagli received a *laurea* in Literature in 1937, and left Italy for the United States after the approval of the Fascist racial laws of 1938. In the U.S., she completed her doctoral studies at Johns Hopkins University under the supervision of Charles S. Singleton, and later moved to California where she started her literary career. As a young victim of racial discrimination in her native country, Cagli’s personal and artistic journey bears the mark of specific socio-political realities as she fashioned a safe place abroad. Not only did the Italian racial laws cause a deep sense of fracture in her roots (that she often called “lo strappo nelle radici”), they were part of the driving force of her desire to bear witness to that scandal, as well to honor the struggle of uprooted people seeking a sense of home and normalcy.

Ebe Cagli is one of about two thousand Italian Jews who crossed the Atlantic in the late 1930s to seek refuge in the United States. Her story is part of a heterogeneous diaspora characterized by remarkable professional success in many fields—including Nobel Prize awards to Salvador Luria, Emilio Segrè, and Franco Modigliani—but also extraordinary personal sacrifice of ordinary people. In the writings of journalist Gianna Pontecorboli, who has collected oral and written memories in her *America, nuova terra promessa*, the name of Ebe Cagli appears infrequently, and is usually associated with that of her older brother Corrado Cagli. Corrado was a visual artist and well known in the Italian art scene. Some of his work had been exhibited in New York before 1938 when he fled Italy to find refuge, first in Paris and later in the United States. Unlike Ebe, after World War II he returned to Rome where he resumed his artistic activity.

In fact, as I discuss below, the visual work of Corrado Cagli is centrally important to his sister’s writing, especially in her literary formulation of silence. Corrado’s drawing *Lo Sgombero* (ca. 1939-40) is a particularly useful example of how Ebe wrote about exile through visual mediation. I propose that this act of mediation served to dismantle her wall of silence and developed her testimonial writing. The visual and literary modes of representation that are distinctive of Cagli’s work are defined as two crucial forms of displacement, and tied to the author’s own experience of exile, sense of fracture, and determination to denounce the effects of racial discrimination on individual and collective identity. In particular, the visual mode is explored here for its capacity to articulate—by images and visual metaphors—the liminal condition of the uprooted individual vis-à-vis a fundamental impasse in communicating it through speech and orality. The

displacement that occurs in the author's written language signals another modality, in which familiar notions and models (such as Massimo Bontempelli's "povertà conquistata") are redefined in the transnational trajectory of Cagli's life and work. These intertextual connections between visual language and testimonial writing are best described through the first two novels of a five-volume series, "Ciclo dell'esilio obbligato" ("Cycle of the Forced Exile"), which the author published between 1975 and 1991. They include *Le sabbie del silenzio* (1975, *The Sands of Silence*), and *Il Tempo dei Dioscuri* (1980, *The Time of the Dioscuri*).³

Le sabbie del silenzio anticipates a number of thematic and stylistic elements of *Il Tempo dei Dioscuri* and the Cycle at large: family and nation, isolation and foreignness of the exile in the host country, sense of fracture masked behind a "normal" life, memory, and so on. Among these, familial and national ties occupy a privileged space in the first two novels of the series, both of which offer comparative views of the exilic experience of Italian Jewish siblings. The return of Anna, the narrator, from the United States to her dying mother Elvira, in Rome, is the basic storyline of *Le sabbie*. In the three parts, the shift from the present of the narration to the past allows for an elaborate reconstruction of her family history, its lost Jewish identity, and its diasporic destiny. The novel is centered on Anna and her older sister Paola, both residents of the U.S. but holding profoundly different notions about life in America. *Il Tempo dei Dioscuri* is an autobiographical novel in which the first-person female narrator, Ebe, embarks on the uneasy task—as Giuliano Manacorda observes in the foreword to the novel (5-7)—of comparing her experience of exile to that of her brother Corrado, who died in 1976 and is the dedicatee of the novel. Organized in six parts (plus one that collects letters, drawings, and other materials), this novel depicts the fast and disruptive transition from a protected life in Rome before the racial laws to the flight to the United States and the subsequent years of war. In the new country, Ebe is a refugee student while her brother joins the army as a U.S. citizen. At the end of the war, he permanently returns to Rome while his sister settles in California with her husband, Abraham Seidenberg.

The first two volumes of the cycle, *Le sabbie del silenzio* and *Il Tempo dei Dioscuri*, address a common question that is synthesized by the opening epigraph of *Le sabbie*, borrowed from "The Wail of Enion" (in *The Four Zoas*, one of William Blake's unfinished prophetic books): "What is the price of Experience? do men / buy it for a song / Or wisdom for a dance in the street? No, / it is bought with the price / Of all that a man hath, his house, his wife, / his children. / Wisdom is sold in the desolate market where none come to buy..." (11-14). The titles of Cagli's volumes point directly to figurative language, a vocabulary that speaks to the price of the exilic

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experience and its suspended identities. *Il Tempo dei Dioscuri* evokes the inseparability of Ebe and Corrado during “il tempo di prima,” before the racial laws, when Corrado had opened an art studio in Rome, near the Capitolium Square and the equestrian statues of the Dioscuri (hence the title of the book). The statues also symbolize the close tie between Ebe and Corrado during their youth in Italy. Born on the same day and month (not year), they are introduced as inseparable as Castor and Pollux, the Dioscuri of Greek mythology, also known as the “Heavenly Twins.”⁴ For Ebe and Corrado, the trauma of the racial laws marks instead the beginning of their overlapping but diverse paths and worldviews. The increasing miscommunication between the two siblings emerges from the narrative of *Il Tempo* and reconnects it to the earlier volume. Indeed, the “sands of silence” conjure up one of the most distinctive traits of Ebe Cagli’s entire production, namely, the obstacles to oral communication. For a variety of reasons, often associated with the trauma of displacement and their condition of refugees, most of her characters in the Cycle experience great difficulty performing speech acts and developing a voice of their own. A difficulty exacerbated by specific situations such as the absence of attentive and sympathetic listeners. Retreating to silence and being silenced are complementary facets that the author explores in depth. As Anna, the narrator of *Le sabbie*, puts it: “I didn’t suspect that silence was like quicksands” (108).⁵ Silence plays a key role on multiple levels in Cagli’s novels, from identity self-definition, to individual and family relationships, rapport to places of origin, and evading political responsibility.

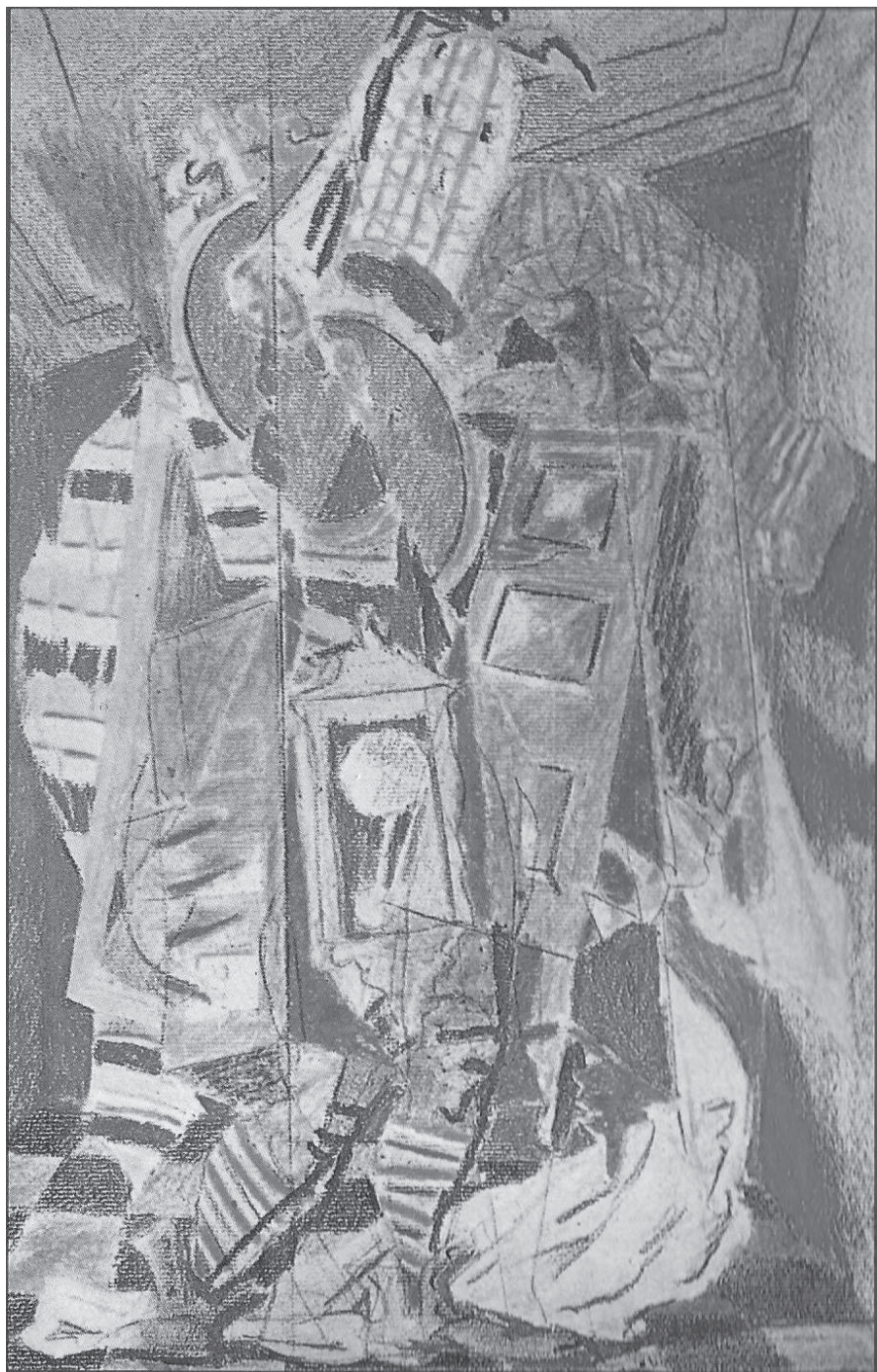
In both *Le sabbie* and *Il Tempo*, displacement is clearly regarded as a coercive process that produces silence and inner *fratture*, or fractures. In this space, I am interested in showing how visual imagery (both visual artifacts and visual memories) shapes Cagli’s approach to writing about silence and deracination from her own liminal position, as a woman who perceived the racial laws as the cause of her “forced exile.” In *Il Tempo* we find a wealth of compelling images, given the book’s focus on the American journey of painter Corrado Cagli vis-à-vis his sister Ebe’s. Ebe Cagli appropriates several of Corrado’s artworks in order to testify, in literary form, to their diverging trajectories—one of return, the other of permanent exile—as well as to the tragedy of World War II. Moreover, some key visual representations of displacement contained in *Il Tempo* have their intertextual referents within *Le sabbie*, where they are introduced for the first time.

2. Visual Traces: *Sgombero’s* Liminality

The most prominent visual example of displacement and liminality is certainly *Lo Sgombero*, a pastel drawing that Corrado produces in Baltimore

between 1939 and 1940, while briefly joining his sister before the breakout of the war. Literally meaning “the move,” “sgombero” refers in Italian to the act of clearing and moving out of a place, with the possible implication—unfortunately resonating in the history of Jews—that the area is to be evacuated because it is deemed dangerous. In *Il Tempo*, the subject of the drawing is actually a strange, clumsy, and ambiguous character caught in the act of performing a “sgombero,” of emptying a disproportionately small room. Sgombero is a “mannequin-man with his head half hidden by a tangle of rags, his torso made up of a small drawer, a pendulum-clock, a cage, a mirror, all balanced between his arms that, contorted from the effort, ended in two red claws” (81). What is visually striking about Sgombero is, on the one hand, the quantity of cumbersome and varied objects that his large upper body holds, and on the other hand, the effect of distortion and ambiguity deriving from the position of his legs that appear to go backward rather than follow the movement of his head and body. As the painter puts it: “Poor thing, he must go ahead, but he has so much desire to go back.” Despite finding the drawing conceptually inspiring,⁶ Corrado is disappointed with its pathos-ridden mixture of yellow, blue, and red, and its Cubist effect that instead, he believes, a noted painter that Ebe also knows in person (possibly de Chirico) would appreciate.⁷

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Sgombero is an ambiguous character whose humble appearance, clumsiness and precarious balance resonate with the female narrator's perception of herself, divided between two countries, wounded, with her "useless loyalty to the country that had rejected me" and longing for a sense of stability in the new country (115). Ebe identifies with Sgombero immediately and unexpectedly. As I argued elsewhere, she experiences a sentient encounter with Sgombero, visually and emotionally, to the extent that she saves the drawing from the wastepaper basket, keeps it with her for years, and chooses it as the original cover of *Il Tempo*. Like the mannequin-man, Ebe precariously holds together two worlds, she is suspended between inside and outside, past and future, the memory of her origins and the ongoing construction of a home in the world. In this respect, Sgombero's position on the threshold can be regarded as a metaphor of the migrant's liminal condition. It evokes fragility and mobility as complementary sides of the composite, hybrid identity that Ebe wants to claim for herself within *Il Tempo*. It is the embodiment of imprisoning mobility (Ferraro 190).

The drawing is introduced as part of Ebe's personal transformative journey from a young student and Corrado's "little sister" who leaves her protected life in the capital of Italy to a woman tested by the unforeseen coming of the racial laws. The counterpart to *Lo Sgombero*, with whose condition of fragility Ebe empathizes, is another drawing, *Davide e Golia* which instead is more representative of Corrado's personality and his response to contemporary historical events. The direct relationship between the two drawings is made clear by the transfer of *Lo Sgombero* from the original front cover of *Il Tempo* to the back cover when the book was reprinted in 1996 to honor the twentieth anniversary of Corrado Cagli's death. *Davide e Golia* took its place on the front cover. This visual move thus reinforces the internal motif of the dialogue between Ebe and her brother.⁸ Corrado completes *Davide e Golia* in the spring of 1938. He is aware of the dangers of anti-Semitism in Italy, and his drawing is both "a warning" and a response to racial violence. A powerful and defiant David is portrayed in the act of lifting his arm and showing the beheaded giant Goliath, while being threatened from behind by a gloomy figure.

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“Do you remember the passage in the Bible? And if Saul killed one thousand, and David killed ten thousand.”

“I didn’t know it.” I could not take my eyes off of David.

“Do you like it?”

“Very much, most of all.”

“Then, take it.... Learn this motto. Perhaps we’ll have to recall it often.”

“What do you mean?”

“Didn’t you read those articles in the newspapers?”

“No.” My mother wasn’t interested in politics and had passed that lack of interest onto me. (*Il Tempo* 24)

Ebe is mesmerized by the drawing but her approach to art and literature, at this point in her life, before the racial laws, is clearly disconnected from civic engagement. Her immature view of the world contrasts with Corrado’s sense of reality and mature confidence. In the summer of 1938, while vacationing in Versilia with her brother, Ebe is petrified at the view of the pink poster that announces the exclusion of the Jews from the schools of the Kingdom of Italy (27). Corrado takes her home and paints her portrait: “You understand, yes? This is our answer to what is happening: the only possible answer” (28). Corrado is equally confident, from the outset, about the decision to flee Italy: “There is no choice. I would despise myself if I accepted the ghetto when I have the opportunity to escape,” whereas Ebe is afraid of leaving “into the fray” (35). Nevertheless, she flees as well.

These different attitudes highlight the subjective dimension of the migratory process. In the novel, while both Ebe and Corrado exercise what Mezzadra terms “diritto di fuga” (“right of flight”), only Corrado acts as a “subject” of his movement, fully responsible for it. His is a political choice, an *esodo* (“exodus”) in Virno’s words, an abandonment of social oppression that is not a “negative gesture” but rather implies affirmative action and responsibility (55), as the literary representation of his intense life outside of Italy (especially in the U.S. army) illustrates in *Il Tempo*. On the contrary, Ebe submits to movement, accepts it passively. As a result, the uncertainty about the real necessity of fleeing aggravates her sense of inadequacy in the new country. In her early twenties she finds herself a refugee in Baltimore, unprepared to live in a new language and shocked by her own sense of vulnerability. How can she possibly identify with the triumphant David of Corrado’s drawing? She is not ready to give up, but fashioning a stronger independent self requires a radical reconfiguration of the past on her part. It is in this context—chronologically preceding the production of *Lo Sgombero*—that we can appreciate Ebe’s repositioning vis-à-vis her brother

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through the act of taking a drawing off the wall and locking the image of the proud David which she associates with Corrado in a drawer.

I believed that I too was optimistic. But I had only borrowed that optimism from a far richer nature than mine [Corrado's]. Suddenly, I turned against the proud David, *trembling with rebellion*. Some can and others cannot, I wanted to shout at him, some have the glory of a demiurge inside themselves and others only have a modest fate. But then, you shouldn't have, you shouldn't have.... I had removed the pins with cautious fingers, not to ruin the piece of paper, and I had placed it in a drawer [...]. I was trembling before the locked drawer, pressing a fist against my lips to suppress... what? A moan? A shout? I had to forget everything: the sky behind the Dioscuri, the bronze griffon on the door that introduced me to wonderful worlds [...]. I wasn't ready to die; so, to give in to my modest fate, to accept this dull life, I had to forget everything: I had to suppress the splendor inside me. (56, emphasis mine)

Such a moment of anger and rebellion marks for Ebe the beginning of a new complex, even painful, phase of personal growth. If she is to survive in the United States, she must let go of nostalgic memories of the carefree years of her youth in Rome, as well as the idea that she is inseparable from Corrado, a sort of mythical figure in her eyes. Indeed, the paths of the two siblings soon separate both physically and from an anthropological standpoint. The ambiguous position of Sgombero on the threshold reflects the continuous negotiations that Ebe performs first as a refugee student and later, upon completing her doctoral studies, as a language instructor and the wife of Daniel (alter ego of Abraham Seidenberg), a professor of mathematics whom she follows to Boston and later to Berkeley, California, by the fall of 1945. Contrary to Corrado's return to Rome after five years in the U.S. army, Ebe's liminality emerges as a permanent condition when she returns to Rome after the war to visit her mother and regain "an internal unity, a sense of continuity" breached in the aftermath of the racial laws (164). In the section titled "Per ritrovare i visi familiari" ("To find the old familiar faces"), the language adopted to describe Ebe's first and later trips to Rome highlights the impossibility to refashion a whole self. Ebe is perceived as a tourist and perceives herself as a "character without a background" and "a hybrid product" (167). Nobody in her family, not even her mother, asks her about her exile, nor can she be an active participant in the collective memories of the war that her original community shares. She remains a marginal, silenced figure still defined by her relationship to Corrado, "the Maestro's sister" (170).

Notably, the author borrows again from Corrado's artistic imagination to distinguish the diverging trajectories of the two siblings. Ebe's mother explains Corrado's homecoming and re-integration into the Italian society as a result of his anthropological convictions: "I have reflected before making a decision, but my roots are here. You cannot violate you own individuality. A human being is like a tree: it suffers when it's transplanted. Everyone has their own landscape" (166). Corrado expresses a similar concept in one of the letters he writes from a camp for displaced persons in 1945, also included in *Il Tempo*: "It is definitely wrong to force a figure by Caravaggio into a Liebermann's landscape" (224, original in English).⁹ Accordingly, the exile and the war are crucial experiences that, nevertheless, cannot actively coexist with Corrado's attempt to regain a sense of self after his return. As Ebe puts it, "in order to re-create his myths, he had had to fight against ruins and ghosts, push them into a remote past" (191). The conscious effort or internal need to remove himself from that American past sadly, but inevitably, coincides with the impossibility of resuming an authentic dialogue with Ebe. In fact, her personal journey moves in the opposite direction: she believes that in her youth, myths led her to false hopes that reality abruptly shattered. The only myth that she has saved is Corrado himself, as she states at the end of the volume (197), while paying a last visit to her deceased brother in Rome.

The last sections of *Il Tempo* reiterate the identification of Ebe with Sgombero's liminal position, both evocative of fragility and claiming the right to a plural and composite identity: "I was an ant. I wanted to preserve everything, keep the past alive and blend it in the present; I wanted to bring together in a delicate balance the two worlds that had shaped me" (192). Her attempt "to hold too many things" makes her similar to Sgombero, the humble, almost grotesque, mannequin-man that also holds a clock that always marks the same time, a sort of reminder that divided identities cannot be canceled or forgotten, but can be compassionately accepted and claimed.

How symbolic some of my instinctive acts! When I had saved it from the wastebasket, when I had persisted in placing it always in front of the triumphant David. Yes, what I loved in Sgombero was compassion. ... Compassion had been the key that had made me discover my own inner life and possibly grasp others', sometimes. (194)

3. *Visual Memories of fracture*

The symbolic power of Sgombero in its dialogic relationship to Davide, as well as the question of uprootedness from one's original landscape, are distinctive of Ebe Cagli Seidenberg's visual approach to testimonial writing.

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This imaginary is intertextually connected to the first novel of the Cycle, *Le sabbie del silenzio*, which was published in 1975, when Corrado was still alive. If the aesthetics of suspension expressed by Sgombro can be read as an attempt to shape and claim a composite identity emerging from “lo strappo nelle radici” (Ferraro 2009), the visual language of *Le sabbie* evokes especially the original sense of fracture. The narrators of *Le sabbie* and *Il Tempo* share an analogous profile: they are both females who grow up in Fascist Rome protected by family and society; love art and literature and are indifferent to politics; spend their summers in Versilia where they experience separation from Italian society for the first time, when they both read the same pink poster that announces the expulsion of Jews from public schools. On the diegetic level, the two stories diverge after the arrival of Ebe and Anna in the United States: both continue their studies of literature in Baltimore, but whereas Ebe builds a solid conjugal relationship with Daniel, Anna’s rushed wedding with Bernie soon fails. As a refugee and enemy alien, Anna cannot secure funding for her studies, therefore her visa is likely to be denied, a situation that is reminiscent of the legal pressures and sense of precariousness that migrants often have to face in their adopted countries. Bernie, an American student, comes to her aid by proposing to marry her, a quick solution to her immigration problem and a chance for Anna to claim U.S. citizenship after a few years. This moment never comes, however, because although grateful to Bernie, Anna divorces him when she realizes that their cultural differences are overwhelming. She is not the “balabuste” (Yiddish for “good homemaker”) that Bernie would like to have next to him, a perfect homemaker and protective mother (indeed, a prototype of the Jewish American woman embodied by June in this novel and present in some of Cagli’s works). The narrator explains her disassociation from the young generation of Jewish Americans that she encounters in the host country: “[t]hey had not entered the reality of what was occurring in Europe: there was a whole ocean in between and there was also the natural desire to protect one’s faith in life” (*Le sabbie* 194). Bernie is one of them. He has never left American soil, and his optimism inevitably clashes with Anna’s negativity and sense of isolation which emerges, for instance, from her relationship to the Kriegers, her host family in Baltimore, or her daily habit to greet the female mannequin that “like a lovely landlady” (151), stands in the shop window of a modest Good Will store near Anna’s place.

He had helped me. What was I expecting from him? That he would join me in exile? I had to learn to be like the others, lose myself in this crowd of young couples.... But inside me there was a *fracture*. I was like a lame person who strives to keep pace with the healthy, and the fracture hurts... (177, emphasis mine)

While in *Il Tempo* Ebe comes to see herself as a hybrid product of two worlds and strives to negotiate between them, in this earlier novel the narrator feels an irreconcilable *fracture*, an incurable scar. The simile of the lame used to visualize Anna's "rottura" stresses the connection between inner space and physical movement through outer space, a link that is strengthened by Anna's memory of her Atlantic passage. "Gibraltar, the last point of Europe. The fracture had begun there, and I was carrying it inside me, I didn't know how to heal it. It was as if I were deformed, *with the head forwards and the feet backwards*" (186, emphasis added). Clearly, this image has Sgombero as its intertextual referent, while adding a geographical component to the artistic representation of liminality. As a matter of fact, in the book, the memory of Gibraltar, a threshold to Europe, is triggered by Anna's trip with Bernie to another liminal location, the U.S.-Mexico border, where she obtains a permanent visa. The roller shutters of the local shops, a basilica, a fountain, the green benches, and two women dressed in mourning conjure up familiar pictures for Anna, a Mediterranean and even Roman atmosphere that is otherwise totally alien in the U.S. This "perception of the known, of the already seen" (180), a sort of reversed *estrangement*, is the result of a deceptive game that Anna engages in with the aid of the surrounding elements. She indulges in it to fulfill her desire of proximity to Italy, now that she is about to take a further step away from that land by becoming a permanent resident of the United States. Every time she follows these Mediterranean simulacra closely, Anna realizes her mistake, and expresses her disappointment by the same rhetorical question that she uses about Bernie. For instance, hearing and seeing women dressed in mourning, she reflects that they could have been "two lower-class women from Trastevere" except for the fact that they speak Spanish. So, she wonders: "But what had I expected to hear?" (181); and similarly regarding the basilica, "What had I expected to find? Marble statues, frescoes?" (183). In other words, everything in this border town is a "parvenza," an illusory bridge to an absent third country, Italy, except for an unfamiliar exotic tree whose flowers (synesthetically described "of a brazen red"), elicit the memory of Gibraltar (185). Ironically, that "Judas tree" is the only reliable element in the picture, resistant to any fantasy of Italianization, and so powerful to evoke the locus of Anna's fracture.

Ebe Cagli also explores, for the first time in *Le sabbie*, the notion that each human being belongs to a specific landscape. Paola, Anna's older sister, has settled on the other side of the Atlantic with Igor, her Eastern European husband, after rejecting Italy, "A cursed country ... [that] closes all the doors to a foreigner" (38), and has distanced herself from her parents: "They don't understand anything, they are bourgeois, full of selfishness, fixed ideas, and biases. At times, I hate them..." (39). Paola's relationship

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with her native country is antithetical to Corrado's in *Il Tempo*: her repudiation of Italy and her Italian origins counters his decision to return to Rome. Besides, her deliberate adherence to the American lifestyle seems to belie his anthropological view of landscape, by which transplantation is always an act of violence on the individual. In *Le sabbie*, this notion is endorsed by Anna, a refugee herself, who thus explains her failed marriage to Bernie and attempts to reconstruct an existence in the United States: "I wanted to try. But see, a painter friend of mine told me in Rome: '... I don't know if you can start all over ... it's like if you took, say, a figure of Raphael and placed it in a Dutch landscape'" (199). Anna's vision is ideally close to that of the female narrator of *Il Tempo*: despite the darkness of the Fascist regime, she does not renounce her Italian past and believes that people pay a high price for social and cultural adjustment even when that change is sought, as it is for Paola. Paola leaves Italy long before the racial laws, and by the time Anna reaches her in the new country, she feels full-fledgedly American and happy to have buried her memories of a poor and corrupt Italy. She may have very good reasons for pledging loyalty to the nation that has offered her and her family prosperity. Nonetheless, Anna distrusts the mask that her sister bears: "That Anglo-Saxon reserve that she praised so much and wanted to force upon herself was the opposite of her Mediterranean temperament" (74). That change has occurred in Paola's habits is a given, but Anna's comment makes us see it as a self-imposed act of repression motivated by the desire to conform to cultural schemes other than one's own. Therefore, either successful or not in its outcome, transplantation is regarded as a coercive process in both novels.¹⁰ More importantly, however, both Paola and Corrado regard their personal exiles as acts of active resistance to discrimination against minorities in Italy. For Anna and Ebe, on the other hand, forging a critical consciousness of discrimination is a long process that begins after the physical journey of exile, and involves the mediation of an external medium—visual language—to transform silence into voice and testimonial word.

4. Fashioning Testimonial Writing: Visual Art, Language, and Civic Engagement

The prominent role of visual art within Cagli's writing, or at least within the processes she took to write, leads to a number of questions about her stylistic choices and the testimonial nature of her texts. For instance, *Il Tempo* is constructed as an active dialogue between the first-person narrative and the abundant insertion of portraits, photographs, letters, and drawings that enhance, and are enhanced by, that narrative. These paratextual materials interwoven with the written language convey "lo strappo nelle radici" and

corroborate a work of testimonial literature with “evidence” that events occurred. How can language bear witness to private relationships of love towards family, nation and culture, and at once engage with national politics and denounce the injustice of racial exclusion? In other words, how do art and literature become mediums of civic engagement?

The racial laws of 1938 and the sudden displacement from Italy to the United States are the historical causes of a separation between what the writer terms “il tempo di prima” (“the time before the exile”) and the time afterwards. The physical and emotional “strappo” of Ebe Cagli inevitably becomes part of her language, which is deeply intimate and personal as well as a testimony to the “general tragedy” of the racial laws (6), as critic Giuliano Manacorda states in his foreword to *Il Tempo dei Dioscuri*:

I had the good fortune of being perhaps the first reader of this precious novel by Ebe Seidenberg; precious for the testimony that could appear totally *private*, but that soon involves an entire generation, and for the frankness of a language that registers the memory of facts as a reality still fully alive. (5, emphasis in the original)

Manacorda commends the author’s ability to commemorate her well-known brother without effacing her own personality, and the documentary quality of the volume. Autobiographical in nature, it chronicles student life in Baltimore between the 1930s and 1940s from the viewpoint of an Italian Jewish female refugee who pursues a doctoral degree in Italian literature at Johns Hopkins University. The writer provides detailed descriptions of situations and characters such as Daniel, Ebe’s future husband, and Kocher, her advisor and refugee himself. She also blends symbols and objects associated with Corrado Cagli—the Dioscuri, and the drawings of *Davide e Golia* and *Lo sgombero* being the most relevant ones—that evoke the passage from a sheltered adolescence spent between Rome and the Versilia seashore to life in the United States.

In agreeing with a reading of *Il Tempo* as a private testimony and a work of civic engagement, I contend that Ebe Cagli’s adoption of Corrado’s artwork offers valuable insights on the shaping of testimonial writing as a political act. The humbleness and the sense of spatial displacement that *Sgombero* conveys in the process of “moving out” are echoed by the humble language that the writer chooses in order to portray discrimination and exile. I also believe that Ebe’s disassociation from the triumphant David and her identification with *Sgombero* define a symbolic passage to an independent view of art as a medium of collective memory meant to raise awareness of the danger of civic disengagement within society.

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In her “Cielo dell’esilio obbligato,” Cagli pursued what Massimo Bontempelli called “povertà conquistata” (“poverty obtained”) that is a clear, simple, essential, “naked” style that rather than being an innate quality proceeds from the trials of life and according to the subject’s capacity for self discipline. Bontempelli drew on Luigi Pirandello to formulate such a notion of “povertà conquistata.” In 1934 the Sicilian dramatist had been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for his groundbreaking approach to drama and the stage. In the commemorative speech that Bontempelli delivered in 1937 in memoriam of Pirandello, he asserts:

He wanted to die naked. *Maschere nude [Naked Masks]* he entitled his theatrical *corpus*. *La vita nuda [Naked Life]* one of his collections of novellas. What he calls nakedness is the attained simplicity. It belongs to all great wits this thirst for getting rid of the superfluous, the embellishing, the worthless ... It is understood that I am talking about poverty obtained. Nakedness and poverty not as a starting point, but as a point of arrival. And I say arrival, not return. The poverty-nakedness attained through honest self-discipline is not that from which we may have started at birth: this, when correctly attained, is packed full of all the trials gathered during an attentive life. (*Introduzioni* 31, my translation).

Bontempelli, who was married to Amelia Della Pergola, a sister of Ebe’s mother, certainly had some influence on the artistic endeavors of Ebe and her brother Corrado. In the 1920s, he had theorized the principles of “magic realism,” and Corrado and Ebe were familiar with many of the ideas condensed in that formula, such as: the invention of new myths after WWI; the power of imagination to penetrate ordinary life and pervade it with a magical atmosphere; the quest for the “elemental” and for a superior simplicity in art and literature; and so forth.¹¹ Echoes of these notions are scattered throughout *Il Tempo* and can be found, for instance, in Corrado’s cult of myths which also attracts Ebe as an adolescent (19-21).

The quest for a superior simplicity, for “povertà conquistata,” is deeply affected by Ebe’s sense of displacement in the U.S. Her adviser, Professor Kucher, a European refugee, encourages her to abandon the facile virtuosity of her Fascist intellectual education for a model of mental discipline that values the human experience embedded in the work of art, and an interpretive approach to the page “without the deadweight of presuming a culture, as if you were a blank slate” (57). Kucher guides Ebe in her studies on the symbolic value of objects (*res*) in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, but he also influences her reflection about her own daily life. In order to overcome her fear of living as a refugee, she re-conceptualizes her past as deception of its

splendor and myths, of her sense of the marvelous during her years in Rome. More importantly, she starts fashioning a sense of home and belonging independently from Corrado, and yet in relation to his artwork. Sgombero, as I have suggested, embodies simultaneously a condition of mobility and imprisonment that is typical of the migrant subject, suspended between worlds. From the perspective of civic engagement, it is also remarkable that the author, in constructing a testimonial writing space, has decided to consistently adopt Italian as the language of choice throughout the Cycle. This move speaks to her aim to reach out to an Italian audience and provide it with stories of racial discrimination and uprooting that are direct consequences of Italian national politics. In contrast to the rhetoric of Fascism, her language is unpretentious and rises from the silence of traumatic experience. In this sense, its “poverty” is “conquistata” (“earned”) through trials and self-discipline. It is a displaced language both because it travels with the exile and absorbs other linguistic and cultural traditions, and because, as I claim, it needs the mediation of visual art in order to find its place.

The testimonial power of art, in its visual and literary modes, is stated in *Il Tempo* through the conspicuous insertion of drawings, photographs, letters and magazine pages throughout and at the end of the book. Sometimes the images, such as those portraying ordinary life in Baltimore, are interjected and briefly followed by captions that provide visual context to the narrative without necessarily receiving further attention in the main text. Other times, these visual materials are fully integrated in the narrative and support the written reconstruction of the exile and the war years. Besides *Davide e Golia* and *Lo Sgombero*, particularly relevant is the interpolation of letters, drawings, and poems that Corrado sent to his sister from several locations on the West Coast of the United States (e.g., Fort Lewis, Yakima, Monterey, San Luis Obispo, Oakland) and Europe between 1942 and 1945. Ebe Cagli often presents the letters both in translation and in their original form—handwritten in English—noting that it became natural to write to each other in English, a language that four years earlier neither of them knew (119).

The letters are dated and allow us to follow Corrado’s hardships during his five military campaigns, his tenacious attempts to assert his identity as a painter and a poet while constantly engaged in military maneuvers. Writing from a military camp in San Luis Obispo, California, in 1942, Corrado comments on the spectacular colors of the Valley at sunset, “but he who is a soldier only preserves the eyes of the painter” (137). Before being sent overseas as an artilleryman, Corrado writes: “This painting of mine ... I am not a good judge anymore, only God knows what I am doing. But all this must come to an end” (150). In the face of the war, Corrado’s life

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is transformed into a long series of interruptions that alter his self-confidence and cause a sense of alienation. The intense correspondence with Ebe records these difficulties as well as innumerable practical situations in which Corrado, for instance, asks his sister for basic goods (Burma Shave razors, chocolate bars, playing cards) while both siblings are on the East Coast, before his departure for England. The symbolism of objects remains a trait of their relationship. From London in 1944, he sends her a small wooden box purposefully left empty “to leave a bit of space for my devotion” (154). Later on, in 1945, a letter from a camp for displaced persons in K lleda, Germany, captures his inner turmoil in relation to the Italian prisoners of war living in gloomy barracks. He knows that their return to Italy is approaching, but they can hardly believe it, so they gather outside and in a circle sing the saddest songs. This letter, along with five others, is reproduced entirely in a separate section of the book, and translated into Italian by Ebe Cagli, sometimes playfully addressed as “Ebolino.” In the original letter, Corrado concludes his thoughts with an analogy underlined earlier:

Listening to these Italian fellows my love and devotion was complicated by a sense of pity as deep as the roots of my soul. During these days my blood as well as my mind have been upset. It is definitely wrong to force a figure by Caravaggio into a Liebermann’s landscape, but what should be said can not be said. (224)

Corrado’s participation in the war effort is portrayed in the last sections of *Il Tempo* also through his war drawings and excerpts from *The Caisson*, a magazine circulating among the US soldiers during the war and to which he contributed with his illustrations. As Ebe Cagli suggests (227), the combination of pride and a humorist vein makes this magazine an interesting document. Its pages depict multiple aspects of daily life in the 188th Field Artillery Regiment, including sports news, calisthenics, the Sergeant working in the kitchen, pay day and taxes, and welcoming messages to the batteries of men who have “traded the zoot suits for the olive drabs” (239).

Corrado’s personal letters and the materials from *The Caisson*, in *Il Tempo*, are the most valued evidence of his exile and war experience. They reveal the intention to deliver a first-hand source of information on the artist’s military life, while the translations into Italian make them accessible to Italian readers. The interplay of two or more languages in this and other volumes of the Cycle is not surprising considering the writer’s decision to convey in Italian the intricacies, also linguistic, implied in the experience of exile outside of Italy.

Corrado Cagli offers an extraordinary example of civic engagement through his art and life experience. But Ebe Cagli also addresses issues of

political disengagement in her novels, especially focusing on the passivity that prevailed across the Italian Jewish community when the signs of racial discrimination were becoming a real threat in Fascist Italy. A passive attitude is present in both *Il Tempo* and *Le sabbie*, often emerging in the form of questioning or reproach coming from Jewish people in the U.S. to Anna and Ebe, who appear uncomfortable and sometimes ashamed. As I pointed out, the female narrators share several characteristics, including their love for literature and art countered by a total disaffection to politics during their upbringing in Rome. In *Le sabbie*, the tension between civic engagement and disengagement is crucial to the family dynamics. Influenced by her mother's opinion that politics is "[d]irty stuff. You need not deal with it" (16), Anna, like Ebe in *Il Tempo*, never feels attracted to it. On the contrary, her sister's interest in politics is decisive for her life choices. At the university, she first befriends a group of Eastern European students passionate about the cause of Zionism, and then meets Igor, a brilliant student, but a foreigner, poor, and openly anti-fascist, and thus a social outcast. Igor's struggles are only hinted at in the novel, as the family past is reconstructed through the memories of Anna who was a child when Paola was engaged to Igor. As soon as he wins a scholarship in the United States, the couple leaves Italy, arousing resentment in Paola's parents "against the foreigner who had taken their daughter away" (39).

Paola's father is the only other person in the family to be interested in politics, but his ambiguity is striking in this regard: in one pocket he carries a small portrait of Mussolini, and in the other, a picture of Stalin. "You never know, this way I will not run the risk of being wrong, right?" (21). In the same fashion, to avoid risks in the afterlife, he always carries an image of the Star of David and one of Jesus in his pockets. The father opts for a day-to-day survival in a society that shows signs of instability, and calls on tradition to continue nurturing his sense of national belonging: "But I'm fine in my country, as were our grandfathers, great-grandfathers and those before them" (34). This familial blend of political indulgence, passivity, unconcern, and ambiguity confirms the immobility of the bourgeois Italian Jewish family under Fascism that is also underscored in *Il Tempo*. Indeed, Paola's sensibility to politics derives from the outside, from people external to the family circle and to the nation. Furthermore, like in the other novel, emphasis is placed on the effects of the racial laws on the family members, in terms of physical dispersal and reconfiguration or silencing of their relations. While the father dies in an accident long before their approval, his wife and children escape persecution in different places: Anna reaches Paola in the United States; Elvira hides from the Nazis in the small town of Reggio with her sister Mimi; and her son, Carlo, removed from his role of captain of the "Regia Nave Dante Alighieri," flees to Tripoli with his wife Naomi.

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Raggio, Tripoli, and the United States form a map of the family diaspora even more scattered than the one we can infer from the epistolary exchange between Ebe and Corrado in *Il Tempo*. Also in this novel, letters and poems are forms of private communication that acquire a testimonial function. Between 1938 and 1945 Elvira, the only member of the family to remain on Italian soil, collects the letters and documents that her children send her from abroad. The few fragments that Anna reads and comments evoke a geography of suspension that stretches from the transatlantic cities and the Italian peninsula to Libya. Libya, which D'Annunzio called the "fourth shore of Italy," became a colony in 1911 and was annexed into the Italian state in 1939. By 1940, when Carlo flees to Africa, Tripoli is the prototype of the Italian colonial city, as Mia Fuller has argued.¹² On the one hand, the textual reference to Tripoli, although cursory, is of interest because it represents this city as a place of refuge *from* Italy rather than a symbol of Fascist Italy's expansion and urban colonialism. On the other hand, Carlo's employment in Tripoli at his father-in-law's "firm saved under a false name and entrusted to 'Aryan' friends" (93), may suggest an ambiguous relation between suspension (as in the removal and expulsion of the Jews from public roles) and private involvement in the national project of colonization. In any case, the appearance of Tripoli in the novel twists together and complicates the ties between the story of the narrator's family and the history of centripetal movements that concern Italy.

In the context of *Le sabbie*, Carlo's letter from Libya aims to reassure his mother about his conditions. Anna captures in his tone a resigned, acquiescent, almost passive attitude, which seems to characterize Carlo after his later return to Rome: too old to be a captain, he accepts an office job (at the ministry) and plays bridge to "fill up" his life. For Anna, her brother's apathy is the sign of the invisible mutilation, a deep wound, that the racial laws have produced on Carlo and, possibly, on many others like him. Anna herself feels that fracture, and the strategies that she uses to convey it, I contend, reveal remarkable similarities with the aesthetics of suspension expressed in *Lo Sgombero*. Similarly to Ebe's in *Il Tempo*, therefore, Anna endorses the idea that "forced exile" is a violent process for the human being, but she lacks Ebe's determination to claim her hybrid identity.

5. Reading

In conclusion, Ebe Cagli's journey towards writing is rooted in intermediality, a process in which she adopts Corrado's visual art to forge and claim a voice of her own. His images elicit her imagination and progressively become intertwined with her reflection on the unforeseen

experience of exile abroad. Overcoming the wall of silence that the trauma of racial marginalization produces in her life, the author finds a safe home for herself in the written word. By fusing together or correlating a variety of visual sources and documents, she also builds a powerful memory of life under Fascist Italy, and courageously speaks about issues of civic engagement and disengagement. Her deliberate choice of writing in Italian from outside of Italy is also a testament to her will to reach out to an Italian readership. At the same time this preference places her writings in a liminal position vis-à-vis other testimonial works centered on Italian Jewry, such as those by Giorgio Bassani, Natalia Ginzburg, and Elsa Morante.

In a 1989 essay on the “Writer between Two Worlds,” Paolo Valesio states that the image which “seems to best represent the work of a writer at the point of his highest commitment is that of a threshold” (268). The act of moving back and forth (or transgressing) across languages, cultures, mentalities, is not only a quality of the “true writer” in his view, but it averts the threat of a “folkloristic literary diplomacy, in which every writer becomes a mouthpiece confined within a group too distinctly defined” (268). Cagli is a *sui generis* author in this sense, since she does not technically belong to the body of immigrants, whom Valesio refers to as “expatriates,” writing in Italian in the U.S. (the same group with which Valesio identifies himself). To be sure, she shares many aspects with them: relative isolation; lack of immediate horizontal ties with Italians and consequent concentration on the “vertical dimension” of Italian literary tradition; community-based (rather than nationally-oriented) work; and the production of a writing nourished by distance (i.e., mediated) and silence. In addition, as a refugee, her choice to represent “the micropolitics of the quotidian” in Italian may be seen as a means to preserve her dignity as Italian. Valesio describes this as an “intensely linguistic vindication” that in his view has not occurred on the part of the anti-fascist exiles (270).

Cagli’s testimonial writing is an intricate and complicated journey across media, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. She recasts historical racial exclusion into aesthetic practice and, in turn, raises important questions about the contemporary status of Italy as an emerging multiethnic and multiracial nation. It is in this new transnational literary environment that Cagli’s work can overcome its invisibility and find a new home, if we read her with other threshold writers, Jewish or non Jewish, refugees, migrant women writers, artists that explore the limits and possibilities of liminal spaces.

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ENDNOTES

¹ In “*Coming to Writing*” and *Other Essays*; see especially “Writing Past the Wall or the Passion according to H.C.” by Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cixous and Jenson vii-xxii).

² See Cixous, “From the Scene” 11.

³ *Gente sul Pacifico* (1982, *People on the Pacific*), *Come ospiti: Eva ed altri* (1991, *As Guests: Eva and Others*), and the collection of three short novels set in America *Quando i santi marceranno* (1983, *When the Saints Go Marching in*) complete the *Cycle*. Ebe Cagli started her literary activity in California under the supervision of Wallace Stegner, and in 1957 her first novel, *Before the Cock Crows*, was published by Little, Brown, and Company in English, under the pseudonym of Bettina Postani. The book received a number of favorable reviews by the American press. “It is with sustained mood and visual effectiveness that this story is told... [Miss Postani is] a thoughtful and imaginative new author” wrote, for instance, Joanne Bourne for *New York Times* (“Three Lives and One,” 24 November 1957). In the *Washington Post and Times Herald* (13 October 1957), we read: “[a]n impressive first novel,” written in a style that is “simple, lyrical and beautifully plastic.” Curiously, in the review, this “timeless” story of “passion and tragedy” is contrastively compared to Calvino’s *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* (1947), which “tells a pitiful anecdote of Italy under Nazi domination.” The several positive reviews inspired Ebe Cagli to continue writing, but she chose to write her subsequent works all in Italian. *Before the Cock Crows*, whose first chapter had previously appeared in *Stanford Short Stories 1956*, (Wallace Stegner and Richard Showcroft eds.) was later published in Italian as *L’incantatore di serpenti*. It is a coming-of-age novel told in the first person by Ada, a girl who after World War II leaves her wet nurse and the small village of Raggio (later mentioned in *Le sabbie*) to join her widowed mother and older siblings in the city. On this novel, its relation to Cagli’s later works, and the existential and psychological dimension of exile in her narrative, see Roberto Salsano, “Esilio coatto e solitudine esistenziale.” Beside *Before the Cock Crows* and *Ciclo dell’esilio obbligato*, Ebe Cagli also published the autobiographical novel *Casa in vendita* (2001) and *Visite d’inverno. Racconti di vari paesi* (2001). On this volume, see Roberto Salsano, “Dimora ed esilio.”

⁴ The Dioscuri were different by nature (Castor was mortal, while Pollux was immortal), but partook in a common fate as combatants and travelers.

⁵ All translations of Ebe Cagli’s texts into English are mine unless otherwise specified.

⁶ The same contrast between backward and forward movement is expressed in a later drawing by Corrado, *Trinacria* (1940), also included in *Il Tempo*. Sicily is represented as a mythical creature, “beautiful and monstrous at once” (113), with two torsos and two curly heads. One figure turns nostalgically back and brings a string instrument and a pilgrim’s staff; the other is blindfolded, and runs forward with nothing to bring with her. The three-legged creature shows a dynamism that Sgombero—clumsy and overwhelmed with objects—seems to lack. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to Corrado’s drawing as Sgombero (rather than *Lo Sgombero*) every time I want to stress the human side of that hybrid “mannequin-man,” as the artist’s own wording (“Poveraccio, ...”) also suggests.

⁷ Di Genova suggests that the indirect reference is to Giorgio de Chirico, whose composite figures and Metaphysical painting also appear in Corrado’s *Un altro sgombero* (1944), which he sent from Germany to Ebe: “Just another sgombero. The way it came out of a battlefield and a collision of ink bottles” (*Il Tempo* 160-1). On the reference to de Chirico see Di Genova 32. Interestingly, Giorgio de Chirico and his brother Alberto Savinio were close enough to be

nicknamed “*I Dioscuri*.” See also Maurizio Fagiolo dell’Arco et al., *The Dioscuri: Giorgio De Chirico and Alberto Savinio in Paris, 1924-1931*.

⁸ See my article “Between Italy and America: Exile and Suspension in Ebe Cagli Seidenberg’s *Il Tempo dei Dioscuri*” for an in-depth analysis of the sibling’s parallel journey of exile and suspension in *Il Tempo dei Dioscuri*, and the different meaning that the anthropological notion of liminality assumes in their experience.

⁹ Cagli conceived landscape in physical, visual and cultural terms. He defined America “una grande divoratrice di uomini” (“a big man-eater”) due to its pretentiousness, and superficiality (Valsecchi, “Visita a Corrado Cagli” 302). On the human perception of “landscape” and its theorizations, see Hirsch and O’Hanlon; Flint and Morphy; Eugenio Turri; Farinelli (38-73).

¹⁰ The use of the word “maschera” (“mask”) in this context must also be noted because, throughout the Cycle, the narrator often resorts to the theatrical figure of the mask to signal social attitudes and behavioral patterns that do not correspond to the real desires, needs, or temperament of a character. Such repression, self-imposed or not, may lead to tragic consequences, as most poignantly depicted in the last novel, *Come ospiti: Eva ed altri*.

¹¹ For an overview of the principles of “magic realism,” see Massimo Bontempelli, *Realismo magico e altri scritti sull’arte*.

¹² In chapter 7 of *Moderns Abroad: Architecture, Cities and Italian Imperialism*, Fuller describes Tripoli as a “colonial” city (as opposed to an imperial city) for its contradictory combination of adaptation of the colonizer to the local built environment and simultaneous perception of the city as European. See Chapter 2 for an analysis of the physical and rhetorical constructions of the Italian colonies in Africa. In the 1930s, the Fascist government also sponsored settlements of Italian farmers (“demographic colonization”) in rural areas as a remedy to overpopulation and poverty in Italy.

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