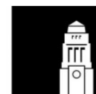

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The liberal imagination of Giovanni Verga:
Verismo as moral realism

Abstract

In this article, I argue that Verga's Verismo should be seen against the backdrop of the writings of the meridionalisti, as well as of his own early works. If scholars have long established the influence of the meridionalisti on Verga's Verismo, the way in which he breaks away from the basic pattern of their moral imaginary has not been explored. By looking at texts by the meridionalisti, I will show how these social scientists were unable to come to terms with the two main features of modern Italy's moral landscape, namely pluralism and the heterogeneity of values. More specifically, it is their Romantic nationalism that prevents the meridionalisti from perceiving those features. And this is where Verga departs from his sources, as well as from his own early narrative fiction. Verga's Verismo is better understood as a form of moral realism, which fully acknowledges the pluralism and heterogeneity of the modern moral experience.

In questo saggio sostengo che il verismo di Verga debba essere letto sullo sfondo delle opere dei meridionalisti, così come delle sue prime opere. Se l'influenza dei meridionalisti su Verga è stata già dimostrata, è rimasto inesplorato il modo in cui Verga rompe con la struttura fondamentale del loro immaginario morale. Concentrandomi sui testi dei meridionalisti, mostro come questi scienziati sociali siano incapaci di fare i conti con le due caratteristiche principali del paesaggio morale dell'Italia moderna: il pluralismo e l'eterogeneità dei valori. Più precisamente, mostro come sia il loro nazionalismo romantico a impedire loro di percepire queste caratteristiche. Ed è qui che Verga si distanzia dalle sue fonti, così come dalla sua narrativa pre-verista. Il verismo va interpretato come una forma di realismo morale grazie a cui Verga riconosce il pluralismo e l'eterogeneità della moderna esperienza morale

Keywords: Giovanni Verga, Verism, realism, liberal imagination, literature and morality, modern Italy
Parole-chiave: Giovanni Verga, verismo, realismo, immaginazione liberale, letteratura e morale, Italia contemporanea

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Introduction: Verga's Verismo and the morals of modernity

In this article, my aim is to show how Giovanni Verga in his Verist works challenges the moral imaginary of the early meridionalisti,[1] and conceives of his Verismo as a form of 'moral realism' that aims at rendering the morals of modernity, which they instead fail to grasp.[2] The influence of the meridionalisti on Verga's Verist works was already noticed by his contemporaries, and has now been established by literary and cultural historians. [3] However, critics and scholars have all insisted on what the public intellectuals who first addressed the Southern Question and Verga have in common. And this is because critical as well as scholarly attention has been focused on the contents and themes that Verga borrowed from the meridionalisti, and on their shared preoccupation with providing a well-informed and down-to-earth account of the living and social conditions in Italy's South.[4]

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[1] In what follows, I will refer to the early meridionalisti—the first public intellectuals and political reformers who became interested in Italy's South—simply as meridionalisti. Here, I am mainly interested in the Neapolitan historian Pasquale Villari (1827-1917), and in Leopoldo Franchetti (1847-1917) and Sidney Sonnino (1847-1922), the two Tuscan politicians and social scientists. I will also include in this group the Sicilian ethnographer Giuseppe Pitrè (1841-1916), who was equally influential in putting the South at the centre of modern Italy's moral imaginary.

[2] In this article, I am adapting to the Italian context Trilling's notions of 'liberal imagination' and 'moral realism'. In Trilling's sense, the 'liberal imagination' has nothing to do with a political doctrine, since it is the ability of a writer to detach herself or himself from any political or moral conception; 'moral realism' is the writer's acceptance of morality's messiness, instability, and dependency on local and contingent social practices and institutions—which is, roughly, what philosophers would call an anti-realist metaphysics of morality. Lionel Trilling, The Liberal Imagination (New York: New York Review of Books 2008 [1950]), pp. xv-xii and pp. 205-222. It should not be surprising that Trilling's notions also work for Giovanni Verga (1840-1920). Henry James (1843-1916) looms large in The Liberal Imagination and, for all their differences, both Verga and James wrote novels in the tradition of Flaubertian realism—see, Peter Brooks, 'Henry James's Turn of the Novel', in Realist Vision (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 180-97.

[3] In a review of I Malavoglia (1881) published anonymously on 7 August 1881 in the journal Rassegna Settimanale—founded and edited by Franchetti and Sonnino themselves—, the literary critic and historian Francesco Torraca wrote: 'io saluto come prova di vigore intellettuale e di ardimento non comune I Malavoglia, che aiuteranno, al pari degli scritti dei Franchetti e dei Sonnino, a far conoscere le condizioni sociali della Sicilia. Però il Verga non ci ha dato nè considerazioni nè statistiche; non ha dimostrato nessuna tesi: esse sono il presupposto, non certo il romanzo', Francesco Torraca, 'I Malavoglia', Scritti critrici (Naples: Perrella, 1907), pp. 374-90 (pp. 382-83). On Torraca, see: Rossana Melis, La bella stagione del Verga (Catania: Fondazione Verga, 1990). For scholarly evidence of the influence of the meridionalisti on Verga, see note 3.

[4] See Romano Luperini, Verga e le strutture narrative del realismo: saggio su Rosso Malpelo (Padua: Liviana, 1976), pp. 7-13; 'Simbolo e ricostruzione intellettuale nei Malavoglia' (1989), in Verga moderno (Roma–Bari: Laterza, 2005), pp. 105-44; Nelson Moe, The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and The Southern Question (Berkley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 272-95; Gabriella Alfieri, Il motto degli antichi: proverbio e contesto nei Malavoglia (Catania: Biblioteca della Fondazione Verga, 1985).

A change of emphasis is needed on both fronts. On the one hand, it is only by casting in sharp relief the moral imaginary of the meridionalisti—and not just the way in which they depict the South—that it is possible to understand why they struggled to come to terms with the making of modern Italy.[5] On the other hand, one must pay careful attention to the shape of Verga's moral imaginary as conveyed by his early as well as his Verist works, in order to see where he as an artist—although not as a public intellectual—parted company with the meridionalisti: the contrast between Verga and them being in his ability to paint modern Italy's moral landscape 'coi colori adatti'.[6] In reassessing Verga's Verismo as a form of moral realism, I want to counter two very influential views. On one view, Verga's Verismo—and more generally, Naturalism—is seen as the culmination of nineteenth-century naïve realism, which the novel of the twentieth-century leaves behind as unfit for representing modernity. Verga's Verist works would then be attempts at representing society in a value-neutral and purely objective way, with events and unproblematic characters—fully-determined by their environments—all lined-up in a causal chain observed by a narrator looking down 'from nowhere'.[7] On the second view, Verga was indeed capable of confronting

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[5] Little attention has been paid to the moral dimension in the writings of the meridionalisti. A notable exception is John Dickie, who recognizes that 'the notion of the "moral" is the pivotal term' in Villari's social thinking: John Dickie, 'The Birth of the Southern Question', in Darkest Italy. The Nation and the Stereotypes of the Mezzogiorno, 1860-1900 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), pp. 53-82 (p. 56). However, Dickie is again interested in tracking the emergence of the Southern Question, rather than in analysing how the meridionalisti confronted modern morality.

[6] Moe does acknowledge the importance of understanding Verga's 'complex narrative procedures' (Moe, p. 278, n. 44), but he never engages with a sustained analysis of Verga's Verist poetics and style. I will discuss later this metaphor, which I have argued elsewhere is crucial for reconstructing Verga's Verist poetics: Alessio Baldini, *Dipingere coi colori adatti:* 'I Malavoglia' e il romanzo moderno (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2012), pp. 31-43.

[7] Here, I have summarized what I take to be the main thrust of the argument against Naturalism put forward by prominent twentieth-century literary critics; for example, see: Giacomo De Benedetti, Verga e il naturalismo (Milan: Garzanti, 1976); Il romanzo del Novecento: quaderni inediti, introduced by Eugenio Montale (Milan: Garzanti: 1998 [1971]); Renato Barilli, La barriera del naturalismo: studi sulla letteratura italiana contemporanea (Milan: Mursia, 1980 [1964]). Recently, a number of scholars and critics have reconsidered the significance of nineteenth-century literary realism; for example, see: Pierluigi Pellini, In una casa di vetro: generi e temi del naturalismo europeo (Florence: Le Monnier, 2004); Brooks, Realist Vision; Guido Mazzoni, 'The Transition to Modernism', in Theory of the Novel, trans. by Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2017), pp. 273-332; Peter Boxall, 'Is This Really Realism?', in The Value of the Novel (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 39-68. For a discussion of the attainable degree of subjectivity and objectivity within various points of view—from the ordinary to the scientific one—, and the idea of 'the view from nowhere', see: Thomas Nagel, The View from Nowhere, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

modernity, but he did so paradoxically from an anti-modern perspective. In his Verist novels and short stories, then, modernity would be understood to appear as utterly immoral, as 'the age of absolute sinfulness',[8] against which traditional rural communities at Italy's Southern margins stood like many besieged sanctuaries of value.[9]

My reading of Verga's Verist works provides an alternative to both views. As I will show, Verga's Verismo is a form of radical perspectivism. His Verist works do not aim at representing just the things and facts that make up the social world as it is; here, the object of representation is rather the social world as perceived, felt, valued, and acted upon by persons who belong to different social groups. And this explains one of the two reasons why Verga's Verismo is better understood as a kind of 'moral realism':[10] Verga's Verist works present readers with a phenomenology of subjective experiences framed by a plurality of moral outlooks. Far from being a disenchanted world devoid of any meaning, modernity is thus for Verga filled with morals—including those of Sicily's rural communities, which he did not see as relics of the past and the only residual source of value. However, it is also crucial to note that Verga was well aware that moral frameworks are made of crooked timber. And this

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[8] This definition of modernity—originally by Fichte—comes from Georg Lukács, 'Preface' (1962), in The Theory of the Novel: a historico-philosophical essay on the forms of the great epic literature, translated by Anna Bostock (Camridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), pp. 11-23 (p. 18). Lukács was immensely influential among Italian Neo-Marxist literary critics—his Theory of the Novel (1920) was translated into Italian in 1962—, including some of the most prominent scholars of Verga. See note 9 for examples.

[9] This second view of Verga was advanced by Luigi Russo, and has been only marginally revised by Neo-Marxist literary criticism in the post-war period. Critics like Alberto Asor Rosa, Vitilio Masiello, and Romano Luperini still shared in the view that Verga in his Verist works depicted modernity as a fully immoral age, and that he saw Sicily's rural traditions as the vanishing source of value; they only disagreed with Russo in that, according to them, Verga's Verist works show that Sicily's rural communities were already corrupted by modernity, and traditional rural culture was doomed to disappear; see: Il caso Verga, ed. by Alberto Asor Rosa (Palermo: Palumbo, 1972); Alberto Asor Rosa, 'I Malavoglia di Giovanni Verga', in Letteratura italiana: le opere, 4 vols., *Dall'Ottocento al* Novecento (Turin: Einaudi: 1992-96), III (1995), pp. 733-877; Vitilio Masiello, Verga tra ideologia e realtà (Bari: De Donato, 1970); 'I Malavoglia e la letteratura europea della rivoluzione industriale', in I miti e la storia: saggi su Foscolo e Verga (Naples: Liguori, 1984), pp. 101-141; Luperini, Verga moderno. This second view of Verga is still very influential; see, for example: Matteo Palumbo, 'Verga e le radici malate del Risorgimento', Ita*lies, Revue d'Études Italiennes*, 15 (2011), *L'envers du* Risorgimento. *Représentations de l'anti*-Risorgimento de 1815 à nos jours, 37-52; Giuseppe Lo Castro, La verità difficile: indagini su Verga (Napoli: Liguori, 2012).

[10] The emphasis is mine.

is the second reason why Verga's Verismo is a kind of 'moral realism':[11] his Verist works tell stories of characters who face moral dilemmas. So, I claim that Verga saw clearly the two main fissures that cut across modern morality. In Verga's Verist vision, modernity is marked both by pluralism—namely, the coexistence of alternative moral outlooks—, and by the 'heterogeneity of morality'—which means that no moral framework is a fully consistent normative system, for they are all made of heterogeneous sources of value, some of which may not be compatible.[12]

I have used 'moral' and other cognate terms several times. Before closing this introduction with an outline of my argument, I shall clarify what I mean by 'morality'. Here, I adopt a broad definition of 'morality', which I do not see as restricted to duties and obligations defined by reason alone: as if one could determine impartially what a person ought to do and how she should treat other people.[13] It is not just that moral duties and obligations are 'only a subset of our normative concerns'.[14] The point is also that it is unclear how a 'narrow morality' could be carved out of the thick web of strings in which it is entangled and that, moreover, pull people in different directions.[15]

[11] The emphasis is mine.

[12] Here, I am adopting Charles Larmore's account of the morals of modernity as characterized by two salient features, namely 'pluralism' and the 'heterogeneity of morality'—which he has confusingly also called 'pluralism' (I will not follow him here). For Larmore's discussion, see: Charles Larmore, 'The heterogeneity of morality', in Patterns of Moral Complexity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 131-50; 'Pluralism and reasonable disagreement', in The Morals of Modernity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 121-74. On the heterogeneity or fragmentation of value, see also: Thomas Nagel, 'The Fragmentation of Value', in Mortal Questions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 128-41.

[13] The most recent attempt at defining morality purely on the basis of objective reasons is Derek Parfit, On What Matters, ed. and introduced by Samuel Scheffler, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). I should add that 'ethics' is the preferred term in the contemporary philosophical literature in English, when the discussion is about morality in a broad sense. On the other hand, the term 'morality' is commonly used when is meant in its narrow sense. I shall not follow the English usage for two reasons. As I will argue, I am not sure that the distinction between 'ethics' and 'morality' can be drawn clearly, if it is pressed far enough. Also, as I will show, the broad sense of 'morality' maps better onto the nineteenth-century Italian usage of the term—which is also consistent with the common usage of the term in romance languages. On this latter point, see: Barbara Carnevali, 'L'osservatorio dei costume. Sul rapporto fra letteratura e filosofia morale', La società degli individui, 32.2 (2008), 26-40; 'Mimesis littéraire et connaissance morale. La tradition de l'«éthopée»', Annales HSS, 2 (2010), 291-322.

[14] Kwame Anthony Appiah The Ethics of Identity (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. xiii.

[15] I take this to be the core of William's argument against a 'purified' morality—one that would contain only impersonal duties and obligations—as a 'peculiar institution': Bernard Williams, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011 [1985, 1993]).

Moral duties and obligations are modelled by, need to adjust to, and can even clash with a messy array of things: beliefs, emotions, desires, relationships, roles, scripts, group memberships—and the list could go on—, which are all wrapped in a bundle of narratives. Seen in this way, a morality—because there is more than one—can be defined as a 'horizon of significance, whereby some things are worthwhile and others less so, and still others not at all'.[16] In other words, a morality is made of all the things that give meaning to a person's life and make her the kind of person she is, thus shaping her identity. It is important to note that what gives meaning to a person's life is not just a matter of individual preference or choice. Rather, it is something that 'people are disposed to see as objectively worthwhile'. [17] And the relative objectivity of what gives meaning to life is well captured by the concept of 'identity': what people find meaningful depends on the kind of person they are or become.[18]

And it is this broad sense of 'morality' that the meridionalisti and Verga have in mind, when they ponder over the moral conditions of their country. In an essay published in 1875, and later collected in his Le lettere meridionali, the historian and leading public intellectual Pasquale Villari wrote that Italians needed a new ideal to inspire them. According to Villari, only social justice could replace the struggle for national independence as the supreme good for which Italian patriots should strive, 'un Dio a cui sacrificare la nostra esistenza': only the pursuit of social justice could reawaken 'quella vita morale, senza cui la nazione non ha scopo, non esiste'. [19] I will come back to Villari's vision of Italy's faded and torn moral fabric, and his conception of how to mend it. For now, I want to emphasize that, when he discussed the 'vita morale', Villari was not only preoccupied with moral duties and obligations, but with

[16] I have borrowed the definition of 'horizon of significance' or, simply, 'horizon' from Charles Taylor, The Ethics of Authenticity, (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press), p. 38.
[17] Susan Wolf, 'Meaning and Morality', in The Variety of Values: Essays on Morality, Meaning, and Love (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 127-140 (p. 131).
[18] On this latter point, see Appiah. It is puzzling that Appiah lists religion, gender, and ethnicity as kinds of identities, but he does not ever mention social class. In contrast to Appiah, I will consider social class as a crucial aspect of modern identities. And this is something of which nineteenth-century intellectuals and writers were very well aware, including Verga, who—as I will show—places social class at the centre of his thinking and imagining of modern identities. On identity as a moral concept, see also: Vincent Descombes, Puzzling Identities, trans. by Stephen Adam Schwartz (Cambridge, MA, and London: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
[19] Pasquale Villari, 'I rimedii' (1875), in Le lettere meridionali ed altri scritti sulla questione sociale in Italia, 2nd edn (Milan: Bocca, 1885), pp. 56-70 (p. 67).

the whole of Italy's 'moral environment', 'the surrounding climate of ideas about how to live'.[20] And when 'vita morale' appeared in the works of the ethnographer Giuseppe Pitrè—who spent his entire career recording and studying Sicilian folklore—, its meaning was as wide. In the twenty-fifth and last volume of the Biblioteca delle tradizioni popolari siciliane, in which he summarized the results of more than fifty years of research, the phrase 'la vita morale di questo popolo immaginoso' refers to the very conditions under which Sicilians living in rural communities could lead meaningful lives: 'tanti anelli di una catena di costumi, di pratiche, di credenze, onde spirito e materia si esplicano insieme'.[21] And in the preface to his pre-Verist novel Eva (1873), Verga accused his readers of not being truthful to the high values of art, beauty, and love—and not just to their duties and obligations—, and reverting to morality only to cover up their low pleasures and material welfare, when he forbid them from preaching 'la moralità, voi che ne avete soltanto per chiudere gli occhi sullo spettacolo delle miserie che create'.[22]

So, the meridionalisti and Verga shared this broad understanding of 'morality'. What set Verga's Verist works apart from his earlier works and the meridionalisti's writings is the different shape of their moral imaginary. This is what I have set out to investigate in this article. In the next paragraph, I will analyse the moral imaginary of the meridionalisti: I will show how their sticking to a Romantic conception of the nation prevented them from coming to terms with the modern moral situation. In the second paragraph, I will demonstrate that Verga's early works display the same basic moral pattern as the writings by the meridionalisti, whereas his Verist works depart from that moral imaginary, to which he opposed the 'liberal imagination' of the writer.[23]

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[20] I took this way of describing morality from Simon Blackburn, Ethics: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 2003 [2001]), p. 1.
[21] Giuseppe Pitrè, 'Avvertenza', in La famiglia, la casa, la vita del popolo siciliano (Palermo: Il Vespro 1978 [1912]), pp. vii-xvii (pp. x-xii).
[22] Giovanni Verga, [preface], 'Eva' (1873), in Tutti i romanzi, ed. by Enrico Ghidetti, 3 vols. (Florence: Sansoni, 1983), II, pp. 87-171 (p. 89). I will come back to the preface to Eva.
[23] For the definition of 'liberal imagination', see note 2.

The moral imaginary of the early meridionalisti

In the years following Italian unification, the Right had focused on consolidating the public finances by raising taxation and curtailing public expenditure.[24] The fallout of these policies was the failure to improve on the living conditions of the poorer strata of the population.[25] It is no surprise that by the mid-1870s the 'questione sociale' came under the spotlight. In parliamentary enquiries, books, and periodicals, politicians and public intellectuals started denouncing and investigating the living conditions of the poor. It was in this context that the writings of the meridionalisti appeared, and these publications would exert a lasting influence on Italian culture and politics, framing the debate on the social question in geographical terms as a debate on the 'questione meridionale'. [26] The most influential publications were the collection of essays Le lettere meridionali (1878) by Pasquale Villari, and the two-volume inquiry La Sicilia nel 1876 (1877) by Leopoldo Franchetti and Sidney Sonnino.[27]

In the second volume of La Sicilia nel 1876, entitled I contadini, Sonnino examined Sicily's agrarian economy and society, discussing in detail the contracts that regulate the use and ownership of the land, as well as the social composition and the politics of Sicily. By focusing on the peasantry, Sonnino put at centre stage the issue of distributive justice, as this was largely down to the distribution of land in nineteenth-century Italy—which was still an agrarian society. In I contadini, Sonnino combined a form of economic determinism with his inability to make sense of a part of Italy with which he was unfamiliar. He treated dismissively the Sicilian peasants' social institutions and culture, without ever trying to imagine from within how it might be like to lead their lives. For Sonnino, a backward agrarian economy was reflected in the peasants' primitive system of beliefs, customs, and norms.[28]

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[24] Valerio Castronovo, *Storia economica d'Italia. Dall'Ottocento ai giorni nostri*, revised edition (Turin: Einaudi, 2013 [1995]), pp. 26-37.

[25] Christopher Duggan, The Force of Destiny: A History of Italy Since 1796 (London: Allen Lane, 2007), p. 264.

[26] Nelson Moe, 'The Emergence of the Southern Question in Villari, Franchetti, and Sonnnino', in *Italy's "Southern question": Orientalism in One Country*, ed. by Jane Schneider (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1998), pp. 51-76.

[27] Quotes from the enquiry by Franchetti and Sonnino are taken from the following edition: Leopoldo Franchetti, Sidney Sonnino, La Sicilia nel 1876, 2 vols. (Florence: Vallecchi, 1974 [1877]).

[28] On Sonnino seen in its historical context, see: Sidney Sonnino e il suo tempo, ed. by Pier Luigi Ballini (Florence: Olschki, 2000); Rossana Melis, 'Una babelica natura: Sidney Sonnino, Emilia Peruzzi e il

In Condizioni politiche e amministrative della Sicilia, the first volume of La Sicilia nel 1876, Franchetti described poverty as the main cause of the peasantry's unrest, and the spread of violence in Sicily. However, Franchetti insisted that establishing law and order was the priority. In doing so, he lumped together the use of violence, ordinary crime, political opposition, and the presence of the mafia. Franchetti shared in the mentality that had underpinned state intervention in Sicily and the Southern mainland for more than a decade. The transition from the Bourbon monarchy to the Kingdom of Italy had failed to bring political stability, economic prosperity, and social justice to the Southern regions, further destabilizing an already precarious political and social order. Successive governments had responded with a brutal repression, waging a series of military campaigns against the brigandage on the Southern mainland and the social unrest that had repeatedly jeopardized political authority in Sicily—and which had been finally clamped down with the end of the Palermitan revolt in 1866.[29] This undeclared civil war would tear apart the moral fabric of modern Italy, undermining trust in government and the rule of law, and fuelling resentment between the regions that had belonged to the Bourbon monarchy and the rest of the country.[30] Despite realizing that a just political order (jus post bellum) had not followed a just patriotic war (jus ad bellum),[31] Franchetti could not envisage that the whole of Sicily would fail unconditionally and enthusiastically to adhere to the project of building the Italian nation, and that many segments of Sicilian society would converge in trying to hinder governmental action, and uphold local liberties, traditions, economic and social arrangements, or even advance alternative ones. Franchetti still saw modern Italy within the contours of Romantic nationalism,

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problema della lingua a Firenze dopo l'Unità', in Lingua nostra, LXIV, 1-2 (March-June 2003), pp. 1-28.

[29] Lucy Riall has drawn attention to Sicily's peculiar situation in those years: Lucy Riall, Sicily and the Unification of Italy: Liberal Policy and Local Power, 1859-1866 (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[30] On this point, see: Duggan, pp. 217-28; Salvatore Lupo, *L'unificazione italiana: Mezzogiorno,* rivoluzione, guerra civile (Rome: Donzelli), pp. 99-150.

[31] On this distinction, see: Michael Walzer, Arguing About War (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004) p. 163.

which had been the main moral source of the Risorgimento.[32] Franchetti conceived of the nation as an organic whole, a harmonious moral space, within which there was no room for a plurality of moral outlooks, for their coexistence would break the nation into pieces.

Whatever Sicilian elements could not be fully absorbed by the body of the nation were to be treated as a disease. Sicilians as such were not apt to contribute to the task of finding remedies to Sicily's ills, for 'è precisamente il loro modo di sentire e di vedere che costituisce la malattia da curare.' Sicilians' opinions, judgments, and suggestions were to be sought attentively, but were to be treated as 'fenomeni, come sintomi d'importanza capitale per chi vuol scuoprire l'indole ed il processo della malattia, non come norme direttive per la cura'.[33] Therefore, if Italy wanted to be successful in searching for and applying effective remedies to Sicily's ills, it had to avail itself 'dei mezzi morali e intellettuali che le offre la Nazione ad esclusione dei Siciliani' or, more precisely, including 'quei pochissimi fra loro che intendono ugualmente lo stato dell'Isola e quello delle società moderne'.[34] Franchetti's final concession to Sicilians was made only to those who already shared his assessment of the situation of Sicily, and his conception of what a modern society ought to be like. It is also worth noting that, when Franchetti spoke of the impossibility of involving Sicilians in the process of political deliberation, he did not have in mind the disenfranchised peasants—they were only the object of his and Sonnino's concerns. Rather, he was thinking of the landowning elites and the professional classes: the small minority who could participate in public debate and politics by influencing public opinion, voting, and running for office.

Franchetti's criticism could well be directed against himself. Here, Franchetti was the one who was unable to acknowledge that, in a modern society, there will inevitably be a plurality of conflicting views about how to conceive and pursue the common

[32] On Franchetti's life-long adherence to Romantic nationalism, see Dickie, pp. 75-76. On the Romantic conception of the nation as the main source of the Risorgimento, see: Alberto Mario Banti, La nazione del Risorgimento: parentela, santità, onore alle origini *dell'Italia unita*, (Turin: Einaudi, 2011 [2000]).
[33] Franchetti, Condizioni politiche e amministrative della Sicilia, in Franchetti, Sonnino, I, p. 221.
[34] Franchetti, pp. 222-23.

good.[35] In another important passage, he went even further, suggesting that Italy and Sicily are two almost entirely distinct and incompatible civilizations—even though he tentatively suggested that they might have parts in common. The idea of the co-existence of two civilizations in Italy—one European and one Mediterranean—had a long history: [36] now, it would become a catch-all explanation of social inequality, and of any failure to reform Italy's economy and society. In Franchetti's moral imaginary, Sicily functioned as a metonymy and a metaphor for the unacknowledged internal social fragmentation of Italy as a modern society.

Franchetti raged with fury on the Sicilian issue. But it was not because Sicily's situation was intractable; rather, it was Franchetti's own moral imaginary that put him in an epistemic and emotional double bind. He could not accept for Sicily to be left on its own terms: '[l]a Sicilia', Franchetti wrote, 'fa parte d'Italia e non si ammette che ne possa esser divisa'. And yet he expressed impatience for imposing changes on the island's social and power structures. Despite his pronouncements, Franchetti's true and only concern was with the moral integrity and material welfare of the nation, which he identified with a homogeneous and superior civilization embodied by the regions of Central and Northern Italy. According to Franchetti, the very coexistence 'della civiltà siciliana e di quella dell'Italia media e superiore in una medesima nazione, è incompatibile colla prosperità di questa nazione'. One of these two imagined civilizations must give way to the other; and it is the Sicilian one that, obviously, must die out, as Sicilians themselves will clearly understand: '[u]na di queste due civiltà deve dunque sparire in quelle sue parti che sono incomparabili con l'altra. Quale sia quella che deve cedere il posto, non crediamo sia oggetto di dubbio per alcun Siciliano di buona fede e di mezzana intelligenza'.[37]

Franchetti and Sonnino conducted a pioneering study of Sicily's economy, society, and politics, aimed at addressing social and economic inequality—which they saw rightly as the main cause of social and political unrest. However, their economic

[35] It must be said that Franchetti's harsh rhetoric was not only morally flawed, but it would also prove politically ineffective. After 1876, the Italian state would be forced to make compromises, for the worst, with the new wave of emerging local elites; see: Lucy Riall, 'Elites in Search of Authority: Political Power and Social Order in Nineteenth-Century Sicily', History Workshop Journal, 55 (2003), 25-46.
[36] See Moe, The View from Vesuvius.
[37] All the quotes in this paragraph are taken from Franchetti, pp. 237-38.

determinism—whereby the backwardness of Sicily's agrarian economy is reflected by its primitive culture—, and the Romantic nationalism around which their moral imaginary was centred prompted them to disavow the basic principles of liberalism. At one point, Franchetti even came to the conclusion that any liberal concern should be set aside, and pleaded for the adoption of authoritarian policies from the part of the government. Sparing his readers 'una chiacchierata sui limiti teorici dello Stato', Franchetti argued that only under ordinary circumstances could citizens be asked to take an active part in the shaping and implementation of governmental policies, whereas 'in Sicilia, fintantoché faccia parte dell'Italia, questi due elementi sono (almeno a parer nostro) incompatibili':[38] 'lo Stato per salvar la Sicilia deve governarla senza la cooperazione dei Siciliani'.[39]

A major influence on Franchetti and Sonnino had been Pasquale Villari, the Neapolitan historian and politician who can be considered the first meridionalista. It is largely due to the success of Villari's Le lettere meridionali—which had circulated widely before their publication as a volume in 1878—that the social question became one of the main topics of public discussion in the mid-1870s. Le lettere meridionali testifies to Villari's wide range of interests, and to his first-hand knowledge of the rural and urban South. In the letters originally sent to Giacomo Dina—which form the core of the book—Villari gave a vivid account of the living conditions of the poor in the South. In the other writings collected in Le lettere meridionali, Villari commented at length on a number of momentous events that had marked modern Italy's recent history, from the immediate aftermath of the unification, to the so-called third war of

[38] Franchetti, p. 223.
[39] Franchetti, p. 238. On Franchetti's subsequent authoritarian turn, see: Stephen C. Bruner, 'Leopoldo Franchetti and Italian Settlement in Eritrea: Emigration, Welfare Colonialism and the Southern Question', European History Quarterly, 39.1 (2009), 71–9. In an essay published in La Nuova Antologia in 1897 and entitled Torniamo allo Statuto, Sonnino famously asked for the restoration of the King's prerogatives on his government, and a reining-in of the influence exerted by the Parliament. See: Sidney Sonnino, 'Torniamo allo Statuto', in Scritti e discorsi extraparlamentari, ed. by Benjamin F. Brown, 2 vols (Bari: Laterza, 1972), I (1870-1902), pp. 575-97. For a nuanced interpretation of Sonnino's controversial essay, see Rolando Nieri, 'Sidney Sonnino e il Torniamo allo Statuto', Rassegna storica del Risorgimento, 83 (1996), 463-512.

independence in 1866, the rise of socialism, and the first assassination attempt on King Umberto I in 1878.

Two main themes run through Le lettere meridionali, binding together what would be otherwise just a collection of occasional writings. Distributive justice was a major concern for Villari, as it would be later for Franchetti and Sonnino. Villari insisted that only social justice could provide a solid foundation for a well-ordered society. Of course, the government had to respond with coercive measures to the illegitimate use of violence, but it was only by improving the economic and living conditions of the poor that social unrest could be prevented. Villari's systemic approach to public security as a social question was innovative and quite radical. Le lettere meridionali is filled with detailed policy proposals that address a wide range of issues. For example, Villari identified in urban planning and sanitation the two key areas of governmental intervention in the inner city of Naples, and envisaged a reform of criminal law and detention legislation, with the objective of appeasing discontent and weakening organized crime. Villari also called for the restriction of child labour in sulphur mines, and the reform of agrarian contracts.

In Villari's view, modern Italy's failure in bringing about social justice was the offshoot of a deeper moral crisis. And this second theme that runs through Le lettere meridionali comes closer to what interests me here. Villari's main concern was with the fading of the horizon of Romantic nationalism, and it was within this moral framework that Villari discussed the Southern Question, as well as the other topics. Against this background, Villari saw modern Italy as a deeply divided country, torn apart by conflicts between factions, groups, and individuals. Parliamentary politics appeared to him only to exacerbate Italy's long-standing woes, namely factionalism and particularism. Only a major political crisis, a war, or a state of emergency—so Villari thought—could eventually heal Italy's wounds, and redeem the nation. As a liberal and an Italian nationalist, Villari had been forced into exile to Florence in 1848. From that point onward, his moral imaginary had at its core the Romantic conception of the nation as an organic whole.

In an essay entitled Di chi è la colpa? O sia la pace e la guerra, which he wrote just after Italy's defeat at the battle of Lissa, Villari set out to examine the causes of

the disastrous military campaign—which, nonetheless, resulted in the annexation of Veneto.[40] Villari drew a long list of factors that had led to Italy's military defeat in 1866: a lack of strategic vision from the part of the central government; inefficient and corrupt local authorities; a cumbersome bureaucracy; the economic, cultural, and scientific underdevelopment of the country. More crucially, the 1866 defeat had opened Villari's eyes to the divisions among social groups that constituted the nation: divisions that he now saw as having being at work also during the unification process. For Villari, a territorial gain acquired by diplomacy rather than military prowess meant the waning of the moral horizon that had framed the Risorgimento: the war, Villari wrote, 'ci ha fatto perdere molte illusioni, ci ha tolto quella fiducia infinita che avevamo in noi stessi. […] Ci è impossibile pensare di noi quello che avevamo pensato prima'.[41] If Italy's territorial claims could be vindicated by diplomatic means rather than military victory, the patriotic war and the figure of the citizen-soldier would lose their moral prominence.[42] Unwittingly, Le lettere meridionali reads as an act of mourning for a double loss: that of the nation felt as an organic whole, and that of the belief in the moral integrity of the patriot who has spent his entire life fighting for the common good.

However, Villari would never give up on his attempt at reviving the fading colours of Romantic nationalism. And in this he is representative of an entire generation of Italian politicians and intellectuals, who will find in Francesco Crispi their more prominent exponent.[43] More than ten years later, Villari would see the first

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[40] Pasquale Villari, 'Di chi è la colpa? O sia la pace e la guerra', in Le lettere meridionali, pp. 255-305. This essay had appeared first in Il Politecnico in September 1866. On the public perception and symbolic meaning of the 1866 defeat, see: Hubert Heyriès, Italia 1866. Storia di una guerra perduta e vinta (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2016).

[41] Villari, 'Di chi è la colpa? O sia la pace e la guerra', p. 255.

[42] This explains why Villari wishes that the military campaign had continued for a year, for the nation would have perfected itself in the prolonged war effort (ibid., p. 264). Consequently, Villari avoids putting the blame on the military for the way in which they conducted the campaign, and reasserts that '[i]l nostro esercito è la nazione perfezionata', the most effective of all the 'forze morali, unificatrici e civilizzatrici del paese' (ibid., p. 262).

[43] Francesco Crispi had played a crucial role in the success of the 1860 campaign led by Giuseppe Garibaldi in Sicily and the Southern mainland, which will result in the unification of Italy in 1861. The most influential politician of his generation, Crispi came to dominate Italian politics in the 1880s and 1890s, when he twice became prime minister, in 1887-91 and 1893-96. On Crispi, see: Christopher Duggan, Francesco Crispi, 1818-1901: From Nation to Nationalism (Oxford and New York: Oxford

assassination attempt on King Umberto I as the symptom of the country's moral disunity and lack of a common purpose. In order to build 'una società tollerabilmente ordinata', Italy needed to stir 'molte forze morali': 'molte istituzioni che riuniscano gl'individui ad uno scopo comune, ne facciano un solo organismo vivente, e lo pongano in condizione di svolgersi e di progredire'.[44] And the two institutions that should contribute more to achieve this goal, according to Villari, were the military and the education system.[45] In Villari's moral imaginary, the soldier embodied the ideal of citizenship: '[i]l soldato italiano', Villari had written in October 1861, 'non è solo il vincitore dell'austriaco, lo sterminatore del brigante; ma è ancora un esempio di morale e di dignità cittadina'.[46] Only the patriotic citizen who identified himself entirely with the nation and was ready to sacrifice himself for his own country—on the model of the soldier—, could both avoid experiencing the heterogeneity of values and help the nation preserve its moral unity: this is the reason why '[l]'esercito è la nostra salute, è il nostro avvenire, il tesoro d'Italia. Ad esso bisogna che sieno rivolte tutte le nostre cure'.[47] Villari envisaged an analogous role for the education system. In I rimedii—the fourth and final essay included in the core section of Le lettere meridionali—, Villari expanded on how to address the social question. He endorsed a progressive and reformist agenda, as he clearly recognized that public education was fundamental for social and economic progress. Given his reformist agenda, it is rather puzzling to read his dismissive remarks on the instrumental value of education: Villari lamented that students had in mind only 'una professione o un impiego; i più eletti pensano alla scienza'.[48] However, education had to have a higher and sacred aim: it had to fill the emptiness that lurked not just in schools, but also in society at large,

University Press, 2002). The political and moral thinking of Villari and Crispi had been deeply influenced by Giuseppe Mazzini, the most important Italian political thinker of the nineteenth century.
[44] Pasquale Villari, 'L'attentato al Re d'Italia' (1878), in Le lettere meridionali, pp. 341-50 (p. 344).
[45] Ibid., pp. 344-46.
[46] Pasquale Villari, 'Lettera alla Perseveranza di Milano, 5 ottobre 1861' (1861), in Le lettere meridionali, pp. 452-58 (p. 456).
[47] Ibid.
[48] Villari, 'I rimedii', p. 69. Villari's conception reflected Italy's dysfunctional education system. On this latter point, see: Marzio Barbagli, Educating For Unemployment: Politics, Labor Markets, and the School System— Italy: 1859-1973, translated by Robert Ross (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

'perché è nel cuore del cittadino'.[49] In Villari's moral imaginary, the achievement of the unification had paradoxically deprived Italians of any sense of purpose, 'perché dopo una vita di sacrifizii, non troviamo più nulla a cui sacrificarci'.[50] The true aim of the education system would then be to instil a renewed patriotism, to which all other values, including instrumental ones, should be subdued. Once removed from the messiness of ordinary concerns, teachers and students could devote themselves to their absolute calling, thus embodying a moral ideal that was analogous with that of the soldier.

I have argued that the moral imaginary of Sonnino, Franchetti, and Villari was shaped by Romantic nationalism, and that this prevented them from acknowledging the pluralism and the heterogeneity that characterize modern Italy's moral situation. To this conclusion, one might object that Franchetti, Sonnino, and Villari had not set out to investigate the plurality of horizons and the variety of values that people encounter in a modern society. In fact, their primary focus was social justice, and the policies that should guide governmental action in attaining it. This objection falls flat if one turns to the writings of the great ethnographer Giuseppe Pitrè, who was the pioneer of the study of the culture of Sicilian rural communities. Although Pitrè spent all his life studying Sicilian folklore, he was unable to imagine from within the horizon of the Sicilian peasantry, or to acknowledge that a person trying to make sense of her life bumps into a variety of values. In the preface to La famiglia, la casa, la vita del popolo siciliano, which I mentioned already, Pitrè wrote:

> La religione vivifica pensieri, affetti ed opere; ma perché male intesa e peggio applicata, viene dagli ignoranti immedesimata con la superstizione. [...] Di siffatti argomenti e di altri assai ragiona il libro; ma argomenti di ben altra natura e forse più bizzarri offre la vita morale di questo popolo immaginoso. [...] Il passato non è morto: il passato vive tuttora in noi e con noi, e ci accompagna e si manifesta al talamo nuziale, accanto alla culla, attorno alla bara, nelle feste, nei giuochi, negli spettacoli, in casa, in chiesa, per istrada, nei campi, sui monti, dappertutto! Vive e parla un linguaggio intelligibile e suadente alle persone che per inerzia psichica rimangono ancora in grado di mentalità inferiore, o di mancato sviluppo, o refrattarie al progresso, o ribelli al nuovo. Panici, desideri, speranze, miserie d'ogni

[49] Villari, 'I rimedii', p. 69.
[50] Ibid.

> genere, hanno preghiere, intenzionalmente devote, ma sostanzialmente magiche; e ve ne sono per malattie, fascini, divinazioni, scongiuri, a fin di bene e a fin di male.[51]

Pitrè was far from being a neutral observer of Sicilian peasants' customs and social institutions, as he claimed to be. While he perfectly saw the point of practicing canonical Roman Catholicism, he disqualified as mere superstition the syncretic forms of folk religion practiced by the peasantry. As is the case of the other meridionalisti, Pitrè was unable to imagine from within the horizon of Sicily's rural communities, thus rendering modern Italy's moral pluralism. And he only reluctantly admitted that a person trying to lead and make sense of her life will avail herself, for good or ill, of an assortment of rituals, practices, and believes that cannot be reduced to a single source of value. Pitrè was also ready to add that this is just the way in which childish people behave. One must wait fifty years or so, before Ernesto De Martino, another ethnographer who would spend his career trying to understand Southern rural communities, would come to terms with the plurality of moral horizons and the heterogeneity of values, by taking seriously the low forms of folk religiosity in Lucania and Puglia, as well as the incoherent and yet for them meaningful ways in which people confront what lies beyond their control: things like birth, illness, death, love, work, and the environment.[52] And the epistemic shift that sets apart De Martino from Pitrè was made possible by the impact on Italian culture of the writers who had tried to imagine from within the horizons of the rural communities of Italy's Southern margins—from Giovanni Verga and Grazia Deledda, down to Carlo Levi. [53] And it is to Giovanni Verga that I will turn my attention in the next section of this article, for Verga was not just the first and most influential author to make this attempt, but also the most consistent.

[51] Pitrè, La famiglia, la casa, la vita del popolo siciliano, pp. x-xii.
[52] Here, I am referring to Ernesto De Martino, Morte e pianto rituale nel mondo antico dal lamento pagano al pianto di Maria (Turin: Einaudi, 1958); Sud e magia (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1959); La terra del rimorso: contributo a una storia religiosa del Sud (Milan: Il Saggiator, 1961).
[53] On this epistemic shift, see also: David Forgacs, 'Souths', in *Italy's Margins: Social Exclusion and* Nation Formation since 1861 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2014), pp. 139-196.

From literary moralism to Verismo: literature and morality in Giovanni Verga

In nineteenth-century Italy, literature and morality had never been entirely separate. The literary tradition played a major role in shaping the moral imaginary of the Risorgimento. From nation building to individual soul-making, educated people thought of literature as a moral compass: they would write and read literary texts to inspire and be inspired, to guide and be guided to action and, ultimately, in their quest for meaning—both in personal and public life. Narrative fiction played a prominent role in the shaping of this moral imaginary, from I promessi sposi (1827) by Alessandro Manzoni to the other historical novels by Domenico Guerrazzi, Massimo D'Azeglio, Tommaso Grossi, Niccolò Tommaseo, Giuseppe Rovani, up to Le confessioni di un italiano (1867) by Ippolito Nievo.[54]

The young Verga was no exception. He was educated privately at the school of Antonino Abate, a man of letters and fervent republican nationalist who instilled in his pupils 'la concezione che faceva dell'ideale il piedistallo della letteratura', the purpose of which was '"scuotere" e "infiammare" gli animi per trasmettere l'ideale'.[55] Deeply marked by the historical novels of Domenico Guerrazzi, Massimo D'Azeglio, Tommaso Grossi, Dumas père, and the local literary celebrity Domenico Castorina, among others,[56] Verga came of age when the Risorgimento was reaching its climax, and had not yet turned twenty when Garibaldi's volunteers landed in Sicily. This campaign and the subsequent events had a huge impact on the young Verga. In 1860-61, he co-founded and briefly co-directed with his friend Nicolò Niceforo, who would subsequently become president of the Court of Appeal, four local periodicals supporting the Italian nationalist cause. For a few months, he was also enlisted in one

[54] For the close link between morality—both personal and public—, and narrative fiction in early- and mid-nineteenth-century Italy, see Carla Riccardi, 'Pensiero politico, teorie letterarie e narrativa tra Risorgimento e Unità', Strumenti critici, 2 (2011), 231-59.
[55] Andrea Manganaro, 'Il giovane Verga e il Risorgimento', Annali della Fondazione Verga, 4 (2011), 59-78 (p. 61). On Antonino Abate, see Antonio Di Grado, 'Il maestro di Verga: gli "astratti furori" di Antonino Abate', I romani catanesi di Giovanni Verga: Atti del primo Convegno di Studi, Catania, 23-24 novembre 1979 (Catania: Biblioteca della Fondazione Verga, 1981), pp. 67-80.
[56] Gabriella Alfieri, Verga (Rome: Sellerio), p. 78. On Domenico Castorina, see Piero Meli, 'Un genio mancato: Domenico Castorina, ovvero il cattivo maestro di Giovanni Verga', Otto/Novecento, 30.1 (2006), 39-46.

of the battalions of the Guardia nazionale that operated in Catania and the surrounding area, even though he soon took permanent leave, in order to pursue a literary career.[57]

It is no surprise that Verga's early novels embodied the Romantic conception of public and personal morality that underpinned nineteenth-century patriotism. Writing in the style of the historical romance a lá Dumas pére, Verga conveyed in these works a quixotic vision of Romantic morality, which he nevertheless took very seriously. Following on from the Manzonian tradition, Amore e Patria (1856-57), I Carbonari della montagna (1861-62), and Sulle lagune (1862-63) tell stories of a young couple whose star-crossed love and adventures are set against the backdrop of dark times marked by political conflict and war. This narrative design allowed Verga to imagine a comprehensive morality that is more than just a political ideal, for his heroes' and heroines' fight for freedom and national liberation is intermingled with their search for the true love, and the journey of self-discovery and affirmation.[58]

Amore e patria—the first unpublished novel by Verga—[59] is set on the East Coast of North America at the time of the Revolution, and testifies to the enduring influence of the American War of Independence as an 'instrument to explain and justify Italy's struggle for national independence'.[60] Verga's other two early novels were written and published in the midst of momentous historical events. While Verga was working on I Carbonari della montagna, news of Garibaldi's expedition reached Sicily. As Verga declares in the preface, which is the quintessential statement of his 'patriottismo

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[57] Alfieri, Verga, pp. 35-36. These periodicals were: Roma degli Italiani. Organo della Società Unitaria Italiana; Italia contemporanea; *L'Indipendente*; Il Diavoletto. There is very few and vague information on Verga's involvement in the military operations of the Guardia nazionale on the ground. His experience lasted only few months, after which his family paid for his release from service 3100 lire, which is equivalent to circa 15.000 euros in today's prices. See: Giulio Cattaneo, Giovanni Verga (Turin: UTET, pp. 38-41).

[58] From early on, Verga's literary imagination is framed by a sense of moral equality between men and women. On this point, see: Susan Amatangelo, Figuring Women: A Thematic Study of Giovanni *Verga's Female Characters* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004).

[59] Verga wrote Amore e patria between 1856-57. If not otherwise indicated, I am relying on Branciforti's seminal work for information about publication and Verga's writing process: Francesco Branciforti, 'Lo scrittoio del verista', in *I tempi e le opere di Giovanni Verga. Contributi per l'Edizione* nazionale (Florence: Le Monier, 1986), pp. 57- 170. Long thought to be lost, the manuscript has now been found; see: Salvina Bosco, 'Le carte rapite', Annali della Fondazione Verga, 5 (2012), 127-152.

[60] Axel Körner, America in Italy: The United States in the Political Thought and Imagination of the Risorgimento, 1763-1865 (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 54. Here, Körner is commenting on the reception of the historian Carlo Botta, who was among Verga's sources (Alfieri, Verga, p, 29).

nazionale unitario',[61] he stopped writing 'in mezzo alle ansie supreme dell'aspettativa dell'aprile 1860',[62] only to resume a few months later, after Garibaldi had triumphed in Sicily and was pressing northwards into the Southern mainland. In the preface to I Carbonari della montagna, which is set in Calabria, Verga embraces a moralistic conception of literature: by writing his novel, he dares to say with some hesitation, it had seemed to him 'di combattere anche la nostra battaglia morale ai Borboni e a Clary'.[63] In August 1862, La Nuova Europa started publishing Sulle lagune. However, the authorities soon stopped the publication of the newspaper for its harsh criticism of how the government was handling Garibaldi's failed expedition to seize Rome. The remaining episodes would finally appear in 1863. Sulle lagune expresses both Verga's frustration at Garibaldi's defeat and the future hope of seeing the Italian unification complete. Sulle lagune is set in 1860, in Venice, which was still part of Austria-Hungary. The destiny of the two protagonists, an Austro-Hungarian officer and a young Italian woman, both patriots and lovers, remains unknown, as does that of Italy. In a final address to his readers, the narrator wonders whether 'due giovani' will be seen marching in the vanguard, when 'ai liberi italiani sarà dato di spezzare le catene dei fratelli schiavi, quando l'inno nazionale risuonerà sotto il Palazzo dei Dogi'.[64]

Even when he had left Catania for Florence (1865-70) and then Milan (1871-92), Verga would hold on to moral considerations when assessing the artistic value of literary works.[65] In a latter sent in January 1874 to his friend and writer Luigi Capuana, Verga cobbled together a short review of Flaubert's Madame Bovary (1857), reproaching Flaubert for his lack of moral principles: 'il libro è scritto da scettico, anche riguardo alle passioni che descrive, o da uomo che non ha principi ben stabiliti, il che è peggio'.[66] Despite the change in content, the novels of the 'ciclo

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[61] Andrea Manganaro, '"correva Garibaldi coi suoi mille diavoli rossi". Verga e il 1860', in Esperienze letterarie, 2 (2013), 3-16 (3).
[62] Giovanni Verga, I Carbonari della montagna, in Tutti i romanzi,, I, pp. 1-357 (p. 3).
[63] Ibid.
[64] Giovanni Verga, Sulle lagune, in Tutti i romanzi, I, pp. 359-439 (p. 439).
[65] On this point, see: Roberto Bigazzi, *I colori del vero. Vent'anni di narrativa* (1860-1880) (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1969), pp. 360-99.
[66] Giovanni Verga, 'Lettera a Capuana, Catania, 14 gennaio 1874)', in: Carteggio Verga-Capuana, ed. by Gino Raya (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1984), p. 29. On this letter by Verga, see: Pierluigi Pellini, In una casa di vetro. Generi e temi del naturalismo europeo (Firenze: Le Monnier, 2004), pp. 15-34.

“mondano”’—[67] from Una peccatrice (1866) to Eros (1875)—do not mark a substantive change either in Verga’s view of the relationship between literature and morality, or in the shape of his moral imaginary. For all their differences in narrative design, these novels are either framed by authorial commentaries or told in an overtly melodramatic style from which the author’s judgment transpires, impelling readers to draw clear moral lessons. In contrast with his early historical romances, Verga now dropped the patriotic theme, but he delved into the demi-monde of artists and courtesans, as well as into the upper classes’ domestic sphere, in search of a ‘hypergood’ that could work as an everyday substitute for the patriotic ideal.[68] He continued to see narrative fiction as a means to find and advance the one value that could alone make people’s lives meaningful. Still unclear about what path could lead to the good, Verga swerved between Romantic love, the pursuit of art, and conjugal happiness.

In Una peccatrice, the dramatist Pietro Brusio is unable to live up to the ideal of absolute love: this is the story of ‘un amore onnipotente’, [69] and ‘le splendide promesse del suo [Pietro’s] ingegno, che l’amore di un giorno aveva elevato sino al genio della sua anima fervente, erano cadute con quest’amore istesso’.[70] Storia di una capinera (1871) puts a woman’s voice at centre stage. Forced to take the vows as a nun, Maria loses her beloved and dies from a mental breakdown. Maria is presented as the innocent victim of pure cruelty: ‘è morta come una santa’.[71] Once again, Romantic love is the one and only value that could have filled the character’s craving for meaning. As the narrator says in the prologue, Maria died of this moral void, ‘perché […] soffriva qualche cosa oltre la fame e la sete’.[72]

In the preface to Eva, literature is assigned the task of moralizing society: ‘in un’atmosfera di Banche e di Imprese industriali’, the preface reads, what lies at the

[67] This definition is taken from Alfieri, Verga, p. 101.
[68] I take the notion of ‘hypergood’ from Taylor, who defines it as a good that is not only ‘incomparably more important than others’, but provides ‘the standpoint from which’ all other goods ‘must be weighed, judged, decided about’, Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 63.
[69] Giovanni Verga, Una peccatrice, in Tutti i romanzi, I, pp. 441-549 (p. 446).
[70] Ibid., pp. 548-49.
[71] Ibid., p. 85.
[72] Giovanni Verga, Storia di una capinera, in Tutti i romanzi, II, pp. 1-86 (p. 3).

bottom of modern civilization is just 'il godimento materiale'; art absorbs 'ebbrezze amare' and 'dolori sconosciuti', and throws them into the face of those who preach 'la moralità' only to avoid acknowledging the pain that they have caused.[73] It is true that the moral content of Verga's novel changes, but the underlying pattern of his moral imaginary is unvaried. Eva is at the same time a novel of moral disillusion and reminiscence of the good: if art and Romantic love are degraded to mere illusions, family moves to higher ground.[74] Enrico Lanti is a painter from Catania who falls in love with a ballerina, but feels 'falso nell'arte com'ero fuori del vero nella vita'.[75] He expresses his regret for having left his family 'per correr dietro a quelle larve',[76] and, on his deathbed, he curses both love and art: 'Maledetta! Menzogna infame che mi hai rubato la felicità vera! (…) E maledetta anche te, arte bugiarda!';[77] finally, his last look is on his beloved ones, 'come se volesse saziarsi della felicità di vederseli accanto mentre sentiva l'angoscia di allontanarsene sempre più ogni secondo'.[78] Tigre reale (1875) and Eros were the first two works to be conceived and written while Verga was in Milan. Set in the social sphere of the upper classes, these two novels propose conjugal love as the touchstone of moral life. In accordance with his polemic stance against the social groups that claim to be setting society's moral standards, Verga tells stories of couples who fail to abide by that ideal. In Tigre reale, the marriage between the erstwhile poet and diplomat Giorgio La Ferlita and Erminia is marred by reciprocal infidelity. At the end, any illusion of family unity is dispelled. As Erminia protests her love for Giorgio, he embraces her 'senza una lacrima, ma come un cadavere'.[79] And in Eros, the marquis Alberto, who is a scoundrel, shoots himself on his wife's deathbed, having realized that his marriage with Adele was the one thing that gave his life meaning.

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[73] Giovanni Verga, Eva, p. 89.
[74] On this point, see: Gino Tellini, *L'invenzione della realtà. Studi verghiani* (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1993), p. 182.
[75] Verga, Eva, p. 150.
[76] Ibid., p. 101.
[77] Ibid., p. 169.
[78] Ibid., p. 170.
[79] Giovanni Verga, Tigre reale, in Tutti i romanzi, pp. 173-259 (p. 259).

In his pre-Verist works, Verga not only tells stories that revolve around one overarching value, he also sees this hypergood as the keystone of a single comprehensive morality that fits everyone. This is not because his imagination is confined to a homogenous social space. In fact, Verga's moralism is still clearly visible in Nedda (1874)—his first work ever to be set in rural Sicily. In this short story, Verga sets out to provoke a moral shock in his readers by letting them feel 'l'effetto di mille sensazioni che farebbero incanutire i vostri capelli e solcherebbero di rughe la vostra fronte'.[80] Nedda is a seasonal olive-picker who lives in dire poverty. When her lover, Janu, dies, Nedda is left alone to provide for their child. As Nedda refuses to leave her daughter at the foundling wheel, the baby starves to death. The narrator frequently intervenes with comments reprimanding the peasant community for moral obtuseness in judging Nedda and her choices. Nedda, on the other hand, is portrayed as a flawless character, driven only by love. Verga's ideals of Romantic and domestic love still shape the narrative, which cannot account for the values that hold the community together, nor it can render Nedda's harrowing moral experience—as her story is reduced to an edifying tale. But something changes with Rosso Malpelo (1878), Verga's first Verist work. Rosso is a red-headed boy who works in a sand mine near Catania. Marked by social marginality, Rosso is frequently beaten. When he accepts to venture into an unexplored gallery, he is never seen again. What is striking about Rosso Malpelo is not what the story tells, but how and why it tells it. Crucially, Verga is not trying to score any moral point. Rather, his objective is to sharpen his readers' moral perception. From the start, the narrative plunges the upper- and middle-class readers into the alien moral landscape of a poor rural community of Southern miners:

> Malpelo si chiamava così perché aveva i capelli rossi; ed aveva i capelli rossi perché era un ragazzo malizioso e cattivo, che prometteva di riescire un fior di birbone. Sicché tutti alla cava della rena rossa lo chiamavano Malpelo; e persino

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[80] Giovanni Verga, Nedda, in Tutte le novelle, edited by Carla Riccardi (Milan: Mondadori, 1979), pp. 3-31 (p. 6).

sua madre col sentirgli dir sempre a quel modo aveva quasi dimenticato il suo nome di battesimo.[81]

This statement clearly does not express the author's point of view. Marked by the imperfetto, evaluative adjectives and an interpretive mode,[82] the opening of Rosso Malpelo is an instance of free indirect style, of which Verga makes an original use: these sentences do not report an individual character's speech, silent thinking or feeling; rather, readers are asked to imagine from within what it feels like to be a member of a community who believes that being red-headed is an ominous sign. Rosso Malpelo is the first narrative embodiment of Verga's moral realism. What is represented in this passage is not a value-free set of facts, but a glimpse of the horizon on which miners rely to make sense of their lives. It is again from the community's point of view that readers see the mine engineer, who is called to inspect the gallery where Rosso's father died. From this vantage-point, the engineer's behaviour is incomprehensible: when he hurries back to the theatre, the miners shrug their shoulders and go back to work. Here, Verga makes visible the plurality of horizons that make up the moral landscape of modern Italy. However, Rosso Malpelo displays another aspect of Verga's moral realism: the characters are moved by a host of incompatible values. As a character, Rosso is full of conflicting thoughts and feelings. While violent and even cruel, he also shows a deep attachment to people who are important to him. The others likewise possess a moral view that is not simple or static. After Rosso's death, the young miners turn him into a figure to be feared and respected: 'i ragazzi della cava abbassano la voce quando parlano di lui nel sotterraneo, ché hanno paura di vederselo comparire dinanzi, coi capelli rossi e quegli occhiacci grigi'.[83]

How did this change come about? Three factors contributed to this radical transformation in the basic pattern of Verga's moral imaginary. First, he was affected

[81] Giovanni Verga, 'Rosso Malpelo', in Vita dei campi, pp. 173-89 (p. 173), in Tutte le novella, pp. 127-226.
[82] For the analysis of the free indirect style, I rely on Anne Banfield, Unspeakable Sentences. Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction (Boston, MA, London, and Melbourne: Routledge & Kegan, 1982), pp. 88ff.
[83] Verga, Rosso Malpelo, p. 189.

by the years spent in Florence and, more crucially, Milan, which was Italy's economic and cultural capital. In a letter to Capuana, Verga writes:

> Pel *Padron 'Ntoni* penso d'andare a stare una settimana o due, a lavoro finito, ad Aci Trezza onde dare il tono locale. A lavoro finito però, e a te non sembrerà strano cotesto, che da lontano in questo genere di lavori l'ottica qualche volta, quasi sempre, è più efficace ed artistica, se non più giusta, e da vicino i colori sono troppo sbiaditi quando non sono già sulla tavolozza.
>
> Addio. Avevo in animo da un pezzo di scriverti la lunga letterona che ti scaravento addosso. Tu hai la nostalgia di Milano ed io quella di Sicilia, così siam fatti noi che non avremo mai posa e vera felicità.[84]

Here, Verga refers to I Malavoglia (1881), which he still calls *Padron 'Ntoni*, showing his awareness of the geographical and social distance that separates a Sicilian rural community from 'la città più città d'Italia', as he would call Milan in a piece full of admiration for the wonders of modern life.[85] Verga would become the first post-unification writer to tell stories about 'un'Italia d'identità nazionale non vacante né labile, bensì un'identità nazionale plurima. Una e tante Italie'.[86] In this passage, Verga evokes the conflict he felt between his sense of belonging to Sicily and the striving for autonomy that he associated with his life as a writer in Milan: he acutely perceived the heterogeneity of the values that can make one's own life meaningful.

A collaborator of the Rassegna Settimanale, Verga participated in the debate on the Southern question. [87] This is the second factor that contributed to the reshaping of his moral imaginary: this debate gave him the opportunity to revise his vision of the making of modern Italy. But the third and more decisive factor that explains the

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[84] Giovanni Verga, 'Lettera a Luigi Capuana, Milano, 17 maggio 1878', in Carteggio Verga-Capuana), p. 61.

[85] Giovanni Verga, I dintorni di Milano (1881), in Tutte le novelle, pp. 853-58 (p. 856). Verga wrote this piece for the Espozione narionale.

[86] Gino Tellini, 'Tra Manzoni e Verga: una e tante Italie', in Paragone, 99-100-101 (2012), pp. 125-138 (p. 138). In order to make readers perceive this Italy's plural identities, Verga invented a hybrid literary language. In I Malavoglia, Verga employed «un italiano "colorato" di siciliano, ma intelligibile a tutti», Gabriella Alfieri, 'Verso un parlato nazionale-unitario: l'italiano etnificato di Verga come modello sociolinguistico', in *L'Unità d'Italia nella rappresentazione dei veristi*, ed. by Giuseppe Sorbello, Annali della Fondazione Verga, 3 (2010), pp. 7-30 (p. 10).

[87] On Verga and Villari, see: Rossana Melis, 'Pasquale Villari e Giovanni Verga', Giornale storico della letteratura italiana, 526 (1987), pp. 244-56. On Verga' relationhips with the editorial board of the Rassegna settimanale, see: Rossana Melis, La bella stagione del Verga: Francesco Torraca e i primi critici verghiani (1875-1885) (Catania: Biblioteca della Fondazione Verga, 1990).

radical change in Verga's moral imaginary is his elaboration of Verismo as a narrative poetics. In order to spell out clearly how Verga intended Verismo as a form of moral realism, it is important to distinguish a negative and a positive aspect, as it is the failure to see these that makes the standard accounts confusing.[88]

On the negative side, Verga's Verismo is a form of autonomism. Verga conceived of the literary work as independent from the author's morality. In a letter sent to Capuana just after the publication of I Malavoglia, Verga wrote: 'si deve arrivare a sopprimere il nome dell'artista dal piedistallo della sua opera, quando questa vive da sé; sai la mia vecchia fissazione di una ideale opera d'arte tanto perfetta da avere in sé stessa tutto il suo organismo'.[89] He had explained his conception of the work of art as an autonomous organism in the preface to I Malavoglia: 'Chi osserva questo spettacolo non ha il diritto di giudicarlo; è già molto se riesce a trarsi un istante fuori del campo della lotta per studiarla senza passione, e rendere la scena nettamente, coi colori adatti, tale da dare la rappresentazione della realtà com'è stata, o come avrebbe dovuto essere'. For Verga, the author has no right to judge the scene according to his own moral standards; he should, instead, paint it with the appropriate colours. This metaphor introduces the positive aspect of Verga's Verismo. Unless one considers its positive aspect, Verismo might look as if it aimed at an impersonal and neutral account of social facts. In fact, the opposite is true. In a less well-know letter, Verga clarified the meaning of the metaphor, writing:

> bisogna entrare nella pelle dei personaggi immaginati, e vedere coi loro occhi e rendere colle loro parole quel ch'essi vedono e sentono e fanno, per metterli vivi al mondo dell'arte Dipingere il quadro coi colori adatti, in una parola, da cima a fondo, nella parlata degli attori e nella descrizione delle scene com'essi le vedono, per vivere in loro e con loro—Un contadino ad esempio della bella natura e del bel mattino non vede che quanto gli promette per la raccolta.[90]

[88] Here, I am thinking of Giovanni Pirodda, *L'eclissi dell'au*tore. Tecnica ed esperimenti verghiani (Cagliari: Editrice Democratica Sarda, 1976), and Guido Baldi, *L'artificio della regressione. Tecnica* narrativa e idelogia nel Verga verista (Naples: Liguori, 1980).

[89] Giovanni Verga, 'A Capuana, Milano, 19 febbraio 1881', in Carteggio Verga-Capuana, pp. 158-59.

[90] Giovanni Verga, 'Lettera a Nicola Scarano, Catania, 12 marzo 1915', in Lettere sparse, ed. by Giovanna Finocchiaro Chimirri (Roma: Bulzoni: 1979), pp. 404-05 (p. 404).

‘Dipingere il quadro coi colori’ means depicting social reality as it is acted upon, experienced, felt, and perceived by members of different social groups, whose lives are framed by different moralities. In Verga’s Verist works, modern Italy appears as a multi-coloured tapestry woven from the plurality of moral outlooks that frame the lives of people belonging to different social groups. Thus, each novel should have its special features rendered with appropriate means:

> ‘[il] realismo io l’intendo cosí (…) prendere un lato della fisionomia della vita italiana moderna, a partire dalle classi infime, dove la lotta è limitata al pane quotidiano, come nel *Padron ’Ntoni*, e a finire nelle varie aspirazioni, nelle ideali avidità de *L’uomo di lusso*, passando per le avidità basse alle vanità del Mastro don Gesualdo, rappresentante della vita di provincia, alle ambizioni di un deputato.[91]

Described in positive terms Verga’s Verismo captures the second feature of modern Italy’s moral landscape, namely the heterogeneity of values. As he writes in the preface to I Malavoglia:

> Il cammino fatale, incessante, spesso faticoso e febbrile che segue l’umanità per raggiungere la conquista del progresso, è grandioso nel suo risultato, visto nell’insieme, da lontano. Nella luce gloriosa che l’accompagna dileguansi le irrequietudini, le avidità, l’egoismo, tutte le passioni, tutti i vizi che si trasformano in virtù, tutte le debolezze che aiutano l’immane lavoro, tutte le contraddizioni, dal cui attrito sviluppasi la luce della verità. Il risultato umanitario copre quanto c’è di meschino negli interessi particolari che lo producono; li giustifica quasi come mezzi necessari a stimolare l’attività dell’individuo cooperante inconscio a beneficio di tutti. Ogni movente di cotesto lavorio universale, dalla ricerca del benessere materiale, alle più elevate ambizioni, è legittimato dal solo fatto della sua opportunità a raggiungere lo scopo del movimento incessante; e quando si conosce dove vada questa immensa corrente dell’attività umana, non si domanda al certo come ci va. Solo l’osservatore, travolto anch’esso dalla fiumana, guardandosi attorno, ha il diritto di interessarsi ai deboli che restano per via, ai fiacchi che si lasciano sorpassare dall’onda per finire più presto, ai vinti che levano le braccia disperate, e piegano il capo sotto il piede brutale dei sopravvegnenti, i vincitori d’oggi, affrettati anch’essi, avidi anch’essi d’arrivare, e che saranno sorpassati domani.[92]

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[91] Giovanni Verga, ‘A Salvatore Paola Verdura, Milano, 21 aprile 1878’, in Lettere sparse, pp. 79-80 (p. 80).

[92] Giovanni Verga, I Malavoglia, ed. by Ferruccio Cecco (Torino: Einaudi 1997 [1881]), pp. 8-9.

From this extract, it is clear that Verga cannot be considered an anti-modern writer. In line with the early meridionalisti, Verga acknowledged the beneficial effects of economic and social progress. Following the classic utilitarian argument, he identified the moral good with society's general welfare. However, he saw that general utility does not exhaust other sources of value, with which it can come into conflict. Echoing the literary and philosophical tradition of the 'liberalism of fear',[93] Verga reminded his readers that the principle of equal right to respect and concern for every individual cannot be overridden by considerations over society's general welfare. Individuals themselves will be moved to action by all sorts of values, which are not reducible to each other.

Verga's project of a novelistic cycle entitled I Vinti, which should have painted modern Italy's moral landscape, would remain unfinished. However, Verga was able to embody his Verist vision in one single novel: I Malavoglia. This novel tells the story of there generations of a family who live in Aci Treza, an isolated fishing village on Sicily's Eastern coast. The narrative covers roughly ten years of the immediate post-unification period, from 1863 to the mid or late 1870s. When the eldest grandson, 'Ntoni, is drafted to join the navy, and his sister Mena becomes old enough to get married, their grandfather Padron 'Ntoni ventures into a risky business, which he thinks will solve the family's financial woes. He buys on credit a load of lupins from zio Crocifisso, a well-known local usurer. However, the family's situation turns sour when the boat sinks and Bastianazzo, 'Ntoni's father, dies in the shipwreck. The family will never be able fully to pay back the debt, and the deaths of other family members and other misfortunes will lead to the loss of the house and the boat, which had been rescued and repaired. As 'Ntoni's younger brother, Alessi, reconstitutes a family together with a former neighbour, Nunziata, Mena resolves not to get married, and 'Ntoni leaves for good, after five years spent in prison. As with Rosso Malpelo, the readers of I Malavoglia are fully immersed into the fishermen's lives, whose horizon frames the narrative. Despite leading harrowing lives in a grim environment,

[93] The phrase 'liberalism of fear' was coined by Judith Shklar: Judith N. Shklar, Ordinary Vices (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1984), p. 5.

the fishermen proudly identify themselves as 'gente di mare'. [94] Through news coming from 'Ntoni and two young soldiers returning from the battle of Lissa, as well as from trips of the family to Catania, readers also perceive the horizon of urban life looming in the background. By reading I Malavoglia, one can imagine how the plurality of Italy's moral horizons might have been rendered, if the larger cycle had been completed. In this single novel, Verga manages to capture the heterogeneity of values by placing at the centre of his family saga the life stories of Mena and 'Ntoni, who struggle to reconcile their sense of belonging to their family with their striving for individual autonomy. 'Ntoni's life project takes the form of an attempt to break away from his family and leave the village in search of fortune. Eve though it is hidden under her apparent submissiveness, Mena's sense of herself is no less strong than 'Ntoni's. At first, Mena strenuously defends her sense of self by refusing to express publicly, during the 'visita di conoscenza', her consent to the marriage arranged by her family. Later, she will show again her autonomy by refusing to marry Alfio Mosca, whom she once loved, deciding instead to attend to her nieces and nephews. [95] It is by following these two stories that readers can imagine the moral dilemmas that confront individuals facing the heterogeneity of values in a modern society. In accordance with Verga's Verist poetics, it is impossible to derive a moral teaching from I Malavoglia. The fishermen's community is riddled with factional conflicts, and the narrator seems to be taking the sides now of one party, now of another. And it is also difficult to judge how the characters are leading their lives. 'Ntoni's decision to leave can be seen as a liberating prospect or a sad loss; and Mena's refusal to marry might look either as an affirmation of herself or as stubborn conservatism. I

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[94] This phrase is taken from Fantasticheria (1879): Giovanni Verga, 'Fantasticheria', in Vita dei campi, pp. 129-36 (p. 130). I have discussed elsewhere the importance of Fantasticheria: Alessio Baldini, 'Putting the Self into Perspective: Fiction and Moral Imagination in Giovanni Verga", The Italianist, 35.3 (2015), 'Self-Reflection in Italian Literature', ed. by O. Santovetti, 369-383.

[95] By refusing to marry, Mena is also following the community's customs. The villagers would be shocked if she got married, since her sister Lia has dishonoured her family by fleeing to Catania and becoming a prostitute. And yet, Mena takes her choice autonomously, and gives reasons for it. On this point, see: Rossana Melis, *'I viaggi, il desiderio: le giovani donne Malavoglia e gli spazi dell'attesa'*, in I Malavoglia (Catania: Biblioteca della Fondazione Verga, 1982), pp. 209-35; Amatangelo, pp. 54-58; Alessio Baldini, Dipingere coi colori adatti, pp. 158-82.

Malavoglia stands out as a broken piece of Verga's larger fresco of modern Italy's moral landscape; and yet, it is a piece that he painted 'coi colori adatti'.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that Verga's Verismo should be seen against the backdrop of the writings of the meridionalisti, as well as of his own early works. If scholars have long established the influence of the meridionalisti on Verga's Verismo, the way in which he breaks away from the basic pattern of their moral imaginary has not been explored. By looking at texts by the meridionalisti, I have shown how these social scientists were unable to come to terms with the two main features of modern Italy's moral landscape, namely pluralism and the heterogeneity of values. More specifically, it is their Romantic nationalism that prevents the meridionalisti from perceiving those features. And this is where Verga departs from his sources, as well as from his own early narrative fiction. Verga's Verismo is better understood as a form of moral realism, which fully acknowledges the pluralism and heterogeneity of the modern moral experience.