

## IMPOSSIBLE HOMECOMING: ALBERTO SAVINIO AND HIS "HERMAPHRODITO"

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### Abstract

This article approaches Alberto Savinio's multifaceted oeuvre by addressing the experimental novel *Hermaphrodito* (1918) in its literary autonomy and epistemological implications. *Hermaphrodito* takes to the extreme the etymological research launched in Nietzsche's *The Genealogy of Morals*, together with Savinio's reflection on "irony" as a key feature of modern art. Through the autobiographical yet fantastic narrative of "homecoming" to his native Greece during WWI, Savinio represents the impossibility of a narrative that is founding myth of Western civilization, the original unity that supports all metaphysical systems from Plato onwards. *Hermaphrodito* features said "homecoming" as both an existential and linguistic impossibility.

### Introduction: "Everything I am was born there"

In his 1939 *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (Anthology of black humor), André Breton famously assigned to the de Chirico brothers a crucial position as surrealism's forefathers, for their unique understanding of the modernist mythmaking creative tension: "The whole, as-yet-unformed modern myth rests at its origins on two bodies of work that are almost undistinguishable in spirit – by Alberto Savinio and his brother, Giorgio de Chirico – and that reached their culminating point just before the war of 1914."<sup>1</sup> Focusing then on Savinio, Breton singled out his "heroic" years in Paris before the Great War. However, Savinio's multifold production spans the first half of the twentieth century. From literature to painting to theater, Savinio's creative output features an eccentric hybridity of modernism mixed with the archaic ghosts of previous civilizations, an original solution that had international impact beyond surrealist circles.<sup>2</sup> Savinio's eclecticism was already apparent in his 1914 concerts in Paris, when he performed on the piano music and lyrics from his first composition, titled "Les chants de la mi-mort" (Songs of the half-dead).<sup>3</sup> Selected lines of "Les chants de la

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mi-mort" would then appear as the epigraph to *Hermaphrodito*, the first and most obscure of Savinio's books, published as a volume in 1918 after its core sections had appeared in the leading Italian avant-garde journal *La Voce* (figure 1).<sup>4</sup> Eclecticism and elusiveness are foremost features of Savinio's work over the course of his career. Yet he left a substantial clue for an overall interpretation of his oeuvre: in 1947 he claimed that in *Hermaphrodito* – his first published volume – all of his subsequent production could be found in embryo.<sup>5</sup>

By following Savinio's self-commentary, this essay not only highlights the pivotal role of *Hermaphrodito* in the author's oeuvre, but also interprets the book as groundbreaking criticism regarding the mythologems of the *return to the origins*, a then-current trope of European culture. Beginning with its very title, Savinio's experimental work is a literary tour de force – defying genres, languages, aesthetic categories, and genders. Through irony, parodic erudite references, and unending linguistic detours, *Hermaphrodito* discloses a constitutional multiplicity at the roots of Western cultural identity, pointing to the impossibility of its ontological unity. The unconventional focus on etymologies and genealogies that characterizes *Hermaphrodito* – and that Savinio admittedly drew from Nietzsche – becomes, in subsequent books, his distinctive method of speculative inquiry and a fundamental inspiration for his imagination.

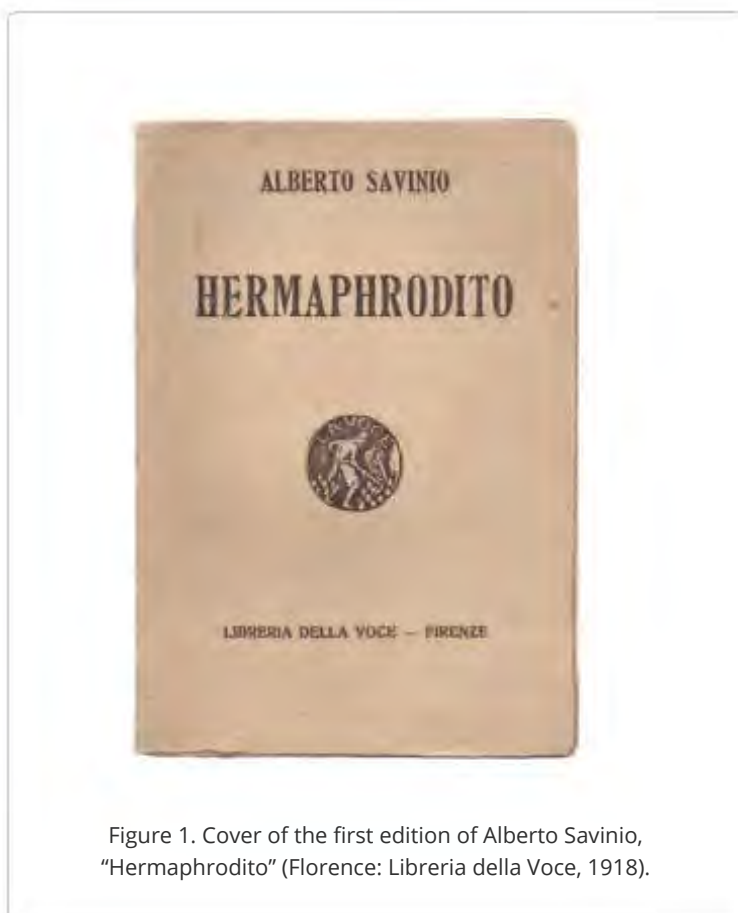


Figure 1. Cover of the first edition of Alberto Savinio, "Hermaphrodito" (Florence: Libreria della Voce, 1918).

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Keala Jewell, in her book *The Art of Enigma: The de Chirico Brothers and the Politics of Modernism* (2004), explores the political underpinnings of what she calls Savinio's "ontology of multiplicity." "Savinio's hermaphrodite," she writes, "is in a class of its own for his own political reasons, namely, to counter representations of idealized, falsely neuter androgyny."<sup>6</sup> Jewell analyzes how Savinio's hermaphrodite is a counterargument to idealistic and fin-de-siècle culture; classical and early modern sources are blended in the author's creation to destabilize acquired moral dichotomies and set values of modernity. Savinio mixes high and low in ebullient neomacaronic prose that is nonetheless ripe with philosophical reflections on the spectral persistence of old ideas in modern concepts. The presence of opposite genders in his hermaphrodite parallels the coexistence of different times that clash with the present – and therefore need a genealogical *descensus ad inferos* to recuperate the pristine pre-Platonic ambiguity where multiple, contradictory meanings coexist. As Savinio claims in a key passage of his novel, "truth itself is inherently contradictory."<sup>7</sup>

In order to destabilize modern clichés and question fossilized tropes originating in the inherited cultural tradition, *Hermaphrodito* takes to the extreme Friedrich Nietzsche's etymological research launched in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887). Savinio's eccentric novel revolves around his own autobiographical yet fantastic "homecoming" to his native Greece during World War I as a soldier for the Italian army. Through the impossibility of finding a "home," Savinio illustrates the absurdity of the founding myth of Western civilization, the original unity that supports all metaphysical systems from Plato onwards.

In *Hermaphrodito*, the myth of an original unity collapses as Savinio's homecoming itself fades from view, ousted by the narrator's unsettling encounter with the hermaphrodite. Savinio's failed homecoming is not just an autobiographical experience, it also corresponds to the unmasking of cultural forgery. The "ontology of multiplicity," Savinio recognizes at the end of his journey, provides then the basis of a post-metaphysical, antisystematic epistemology, which sustains the figure of the hermaphrodite as a main reference for his subsequent works. "Accordingly," Jewell concludes, "his works, beginning with *Hermaphrodito*, strive for the greatest polymorphism imaginable."<sup>8</sup>

*Hermaphrodito* has been the object of disparate interpretations, beginning with the polysemy of its title. Already in 1919, militant art critic Roberto Longhi indicated Savinio's cryptic first book as a possible reservoir of motifs for the metaphysical paintings of de Chirico.<sup>9</sup> Decades later, Maurizio Calvesi evidenced

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the work's influence on the Metaphysical School tout court, beginning with Carlo Carrà (figure 2).<sup>10</sup> The result for both art historians, however, was the appraisal of Savinio's sui generis novel as a hermeneutic key to de Chirico's acclaimed *pictorial* oeuvre, with the consequence of overlooking the volume's and its author's *literary* autonomy.

Scholars of literature – among them Vanni Bramanti and Alfredo Giuliani – have instead interpreted *Hermaphrodito* by first approaching the mythical figure of its title, reminiscent of classical and modern sources, from Plato to Comte de Lautréamont to Guillaume Apollinaire.<sup>11</sup> According to Guido Guglielmi, Savinio's central figure epitomizes the disarticulation of meaning pursued by the author in his work, symbolized by its "neutralization of genders."<sup>12</sup> Alternatively, art critic Paolo Baldacci reads the hermaphrodite of the title – a recurrent trope for Savinio's narrative even beyond his first work – as

emblematic of his intellectual and artistic project, which should embrace the multiplicity of life in every aspect, and is epitomized by the thrust to overcome gender difference.<sup>13</sup> More recently, Jewell has scrutinized not only the gender but also the racial components of the book. She thus underscores the permanence



Figure 2. Carlo Carrà, "L'Idolo ermafrodito" [The Hermaphrodite Idol], 1917. Oil on canvas, 25 9/16 x 16 9/16 in. (65 x 42 cm). Fondation Mattioli Rossi, Switzerland.

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of reactionary undertones together with emancipatory gestures in Savinio's eccentric assemblage of cultural stereotypes, in line with Nietzsche – a constant reference in Savinio's intellectual development, especially at this early stage of his career.<sup>14</sup> In addition, *Hermaphrodito's* piecemeal fashion and tormented editorial history have led Paola Italia to argue for Savinio's only partial authorship.<sup>15</sup> However, in one of the few early sympathetic reviews, the attentive reader Giovanni Papini highlighted *Hermaphrodito* as "unthinkable" if considered through rhetorical or aesthetic delimitations, and that this very "unthinkability" is the "absolute justification of the work."<sup>16</sup> "Unthinkability" – I would add – resonates well with the unclassifiable figure of the book's title.

"Everything I am was born there," writes Savinio in his introduction ("piccola guida") to the 1947 reprint of *Hermaphrodito*. To make his point, the author quotes a letter he recently received from Giuseppe Prezzolini in New York. In the letter, the former editor of *La Voce* – by then director of Columbia University's Italian Academy – confesses that he detested Savinio's book when he published it. Prezzolini claims that he considered it an "indecent pustule, a malefic bubo [sic]." Savinio's following remark is no less surprising. He states that in his multidirectional artistic endeavors,

There is nothing [of my work] that has not been drawn from that "pustule" and from that "bubo," indecent the first and malefic the latter, but both extraordinarily fecund. The great and mysterious breeding force resides in what is evil, or rather what "seems evil to men."<sup>17</sup>

Despite the considerable body of scholarly work on *Hermaphrodito*, Savinio's keen interests in etymologies and genealogies have been investigated for their linguistic and stylistic import but not in connection with memory and autobiography. Taken as epistemological tools for his investigation on the plurality of truths, they parallel the existential problem at the center of the novel: homecoming. The impossibility of homecoming translates in Savinio as the impossibility of a singular mother tongue, thus breaking new ground for his "ontology of multiplicity."<sup>18</sup> Though metaphysical art has long been considered a common language of both de Chirico brothers, Savinio's first novel displays a penchant for humoristic riddles and parodic erudition at odds with his brother's visual enigmas. To interpret the book's baffling paradoxes is to approach Savinio's artistic personality in its autonomy. It is thus necessary to retrace the epistemological foundation of his peculiar search for truth – that is, the *multiplicity* of truth.

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Plato's *Symposium* famously describes the hermaphrodite as the genealogy of man.<sup>19</sup> Yet Savinio's speculative guide through genealogies and etymological thinking is to be found in Nietzsche, the most strenuous opponent of idealism. As for de Chirico's visual architectures, Savinio validates his linguistic journeys and genealogical inquiries through Nietzsche's epistemology and philosophy of language.

Regarding Nietzsche's impact on de Chirico's art, Ara Merjian observes that "the Nietzschean significance of his paintings lies less in explicit contents than the means by which they are rendered."<sup>20</sup> Transferred to the semiotic territory of literature, Merjian's remark offers a viable direction to understand Savinio's early work as well, consistent with the writer's versatility and linguistic sensibility. The two brothers reiterated their intellectual affinity and close artistic collaboration on countless occasions – as Breton himself testified in the *Anthology of Black Humor*. Well documented by scholars, the early encounter with the German philosopher was crucial for both de Chirico and Savinio in the development of a distinctive aesthetics and *Weltanschauung*.<sup>21</sup> Savinio's professed sympathy for Nietzsche, and his typological conception of cultures and genealogical reading of moral values, illuminates the many layers of his writing and the philosophical stance at the kernel of his work.

On a strictly speculative level, philosopher Massimo Cacciari argues that Savinio's relevance today is to be found in his "obstinate resistance towards a unique, dominant Reason."<sup>22</sup> Savinio quested for a plurality of languages and overlapping interpretations in his prose, which are not only essential formal aspects of *Hermaphrodito*, but also key features of the cultural agenda he would pursue throughout his work. The enigma of the home, and the impossibility of its full recovery haunts Savinio's journey back to Greece. As an emblem of a trite metaphysics of origins, homecoming for Savinio is an impossibility both existential and linguistic.

### "The Nudity of Nature"

*Hermaphrodito* is an elusive book from its very title, the hybrid of a French and an Italian word. Savinio's peculiar irony is a characteristic stylistic feature of the text, as well as the parodic pastiche of ancient texts together with voices, habits, and clichés of modern life, and the polyphonic coexistence of different languages – at times in the same sentence. Remarkably, the book has no real beginning but four different endings. It starts with poetic prose and poems written in French by Savinio, a testimony to his Parisian adventures, and proceeds as a hallucinated

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yet extremely lucid autobiographical account. Book chapters seem loosely bound to one another but they follow the author's movements from Paris to Greece. Central to the book are Savinio's multiple experiences of "homecoming:" first his return to Italy from Paris to volunteer as a soldier in World War I, and then his travels through the Italian Peninsula towards his native Greece to serve his country there. The plot, though, is mere opportunity to unleash Savinio's eccentric detours – through uncanny encounters, twisted cultural references, and comic linguistic puns, all blended together and packed with memories, motives, and characters of the European prewar avant-garde.

In an article published in 1919 in the art journal *Valori plastici*, entitled "Anadioménon. Principi di valutazione dell'arte contemporanea" ("Anadyoménon." Assessment principles of contemporary art), Savinio establishes "irony" as a major feature of modern art. Taking a cue from a fragment by Heraclitus – the cryptic declaration "Nature loves to conceal herself" – the writer claims that irony "is nothing but the effect of nudity – and consequently of morality." The human reaction to this nudity – the perceived "nudity of Nature" – is thus "modesty," which induces the artist to deform "the terribly clear appearances he perceives."<sup>23</sup> Savinio portrays this nudity by strenuously deforming memory and experience to comic effect. And yet, the comic in Savinio is not a pure "effect of nudity." The "nudity of Nature" he refers to is not just the nudity of the outside world, but *that of language*. His difficult humor originates from a systematic deformation of language, any language. He creates new, unexpected, humorous combinations from this ongoing deformation. Polyphony is indeed the second main feature of his prose: *Hermaphrodito* exhibits an inextricable intertwining of the most disparate languages.

There is no better example in the book than the hilarious – yet untranslatable – episode called "Il rocchetto di Venere" (Venus's spool). It begins with a reverie of life in Paris, contrasting with the actual situation of the soldier Savinio, who is stuck for some days in Bologna, waiting to head south. Bologna is a city famous for very tasty but fattening food, for the oldest university in Europe, and, also historically, as a hub for prostitutes. But when the prostitute shows up, the author turns her appearance – in a cliché of coterminous modernist literature – upside down. Savinio depicts her as a Spanish noblewoman, with highly eloquent prose parodying and subtly confirming exoticist clichés. The prostitute's real name is Anita, and she comes from Lucca – not exactly one of the fancy cities of the Grand Tour. When Anita tries her best with the newcomer, her thick Tuscan accent betrays her origin. Savinio represents her voice by deforming Italian

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words with effects of irresistible humor. Yet, the episode's apex is her abrupt request: "Tell me, would you like to do the big spool?"<sup>24</sup> Savinio has no idea what "big spool" means ("Sure, it must be some sort of game, erotic complication," he thinks), and the situation leads to a mutual misunderstanding that will be clarified only months later by a friend from Rome explaining the seminal subject with words from another Italian dialect, Milanese.<sup>25</sup> In the text, Savinio never overtly spells out what "big spool" means. Tellingly, he prefers to store up synonyms in every possible language and to comment upon the final revelation through an exclamation from Sicilian dialect: "big spool" stands for "pimp." The passage is critical not only to understanding Savinio's humor but also his epistemology: the whole episode underscores how a language is a specific point of view towards the external world as well as within a peculiar world. Thus, the very act of writing cannot but be a transvaluation, an ironic deformation of the outside world itself.

***Descensus ad Inferos***

After recollections and fragments from the Parisian and Italian avant-garde, the context of the Great War offers Savinio opportunity to explore a more ambitious dimension of his design: through the war, the deformation of meaning will be historical and collective. *Hermaphrodito* was published right after the end of the conflict – after a victory that seriously undermined Italy and its people. In the chapter "Epoca Risorgimento" (Risorgimento Age), Savinio acknowledges the demise of the patriotic ideals that pushed Italian intellectuals to volunteer for the front. In the novel, Savinio portrays himself as a very peculiar soldier. He descends through Italy with the fabricated attitude of a new Goethe, but from the wrong side. Not the Tyrrhenian shores of the Grand Tour – whose cosmopolitan memory haunts the text – but the Adriatic coastline. Instead of contemplating the Roman ruins at Pompeii, Savinio looks at the Mediterranean

Sea from a window in Taranto.<sup>26</sup> Italian identity of the first sections melts and becomes, progressively, liquid – page after page, encounter after encounter. Furthermore, despite a variety of languages cropping up in his prose, all of the situations, all of the encounters with new characters, feature *equivoci*, linguistic misunderstandings.<sup>27</sup> When the soldier Savinio eventually reaches Greece – specifically Salonika – he has not only forgotten his sense of duty, but also lost his own identity: he is not able to properly recognize space and time anymore. Savinio develops an exposé on the limits of human understanding and a denunciation of the spectral quality of life, a condition that only a few years later he would develop in theoretical articles such as "Anadyoménon," in which he describes the "phantasmic" as a fundamental feature of modern art.<sup>28</sup> Irony



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becomes a necessity, not solely a comic choice. Irony witnesses the impossibility of representing the "nudity of Nature," unless mediated through knowledge, history, and memory.<sup>29</sup>

Page after page, Savinio enacts a Nietzschean typological reading of reality, his main reference being the late Nietzsche of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, which he probably read in French, translated by Henri Albert in 1908 for the *Mercure de France*.<sup>30</sup> The pamphlet is the German philosopher's exposure of the inconsistency of Western Judeo-Christian morality through an etymological and philological *descensus ad inferos*, performed by tracing historical developments and shifts of meaning of current values to violent origins. We will return to Nietzsche later, for it is now necessary to follow Savinio's own *descensus* to its multifold and polymorphous conclusion.

On his journey to Greece, Savinio interprets the landscape and events by means of etymologies (again, through language), in an inexhaustible exercise of breaking down given significances. Aided by Nietzschean hermeneutics, *Hermaphrodito* turns into an intellectual, spiritual, and physical search for the origin, a coming back to the *arche* – History, Europe, Savinio himself, even "meaning" were indeed born in Greece. In the last chapter "La partenza dell'argonauta" (The departure of the Argonaut), Savinio seemingly recognizes his fate in the myth of the Greek hero Jason, who left Volos – Savinio's actual birthplace – in pursuit of the Golden Fleece. But the coincidence of the protagonist's biography with the Greek myth has only a linguistic consequence in the text. The superimposition of Jason's and Savinio's journeys offers no allegorical solution, only an untranslatable pun. Savinio writes, "Two hours have passed already – or rather already have passed: and now I feel more than ever like the Argonaut;" the inversion of verb and adverb ("already have passed") reads in the Italian, "*giasone*," like "Jason."<sup>31</sup>

Ironically, the whole book becomes a genealogy; the voyage is both an *anabasis* and a *katabasis*. As in Xenophon's eponymous book, *anabasis* stands for a military expedition from a coastline up to the interior of the country, while *katabasis* moves from the interior to a coastline, especially in its allegorical meaning of "descent in search of understanding" – typical in the ancient world.<sup>32</sup> For Savinio, following the steps of ancient Greek myth and history is but a linguistic convention; erudite references are comic camouflage for the protagonist's loss of direction. *Hermaphrodito* is thus a "military advance" and a

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"journey to the underworld," and at the same time a parody of both. As Nietzsche maintains, genealogies are not dialectical: they can multiply, increase meanings, and nurture interpretations. The novel has indeed four different endings.

In the epilogue, the supposed ending of the book echoes the Argonauts' homecoming.<sup>33</sup> However, not only does Savinio find a home he does not recognize, he also realizes how many different traditions constitute his own identity. Multiplicity is his only metaphysical ground. After concluding with Jason's touching Greek shores once again, Savinio identifies himself in another myth, that of the hermaphrodite, representing the original totality described by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*. Still, Savinio complicates the frame with another coup de théâtre, in which he acknowledges the *other* roots of Western civilization and of his own identity. The last encounter of the novel is with a Jewish hermaphrodite. *Hermaphrodito* finishes then with a chapter in three parts stemming from the accomplished multiplicity of the previous epilogue. Its ironic title ("L'orazione sul tetto della casa;" Oration on a rooftop) and epigraph ("Home, my friends, home! Who, among us, will be able to solve the enigmatic knot of rock?") address precisely the ambiguity of the return – displacement is now ontological and home is the real enigma.

"L'orazione sul tetto della casa" is divided into three sections: "Il politico" (The political man), "Il religioso" (The religious man), and "Il lirico" (The lyrical man). In the first part, Savinio welcomes "the captivating warmth of Jewish character – arid in its surface" as an unexpected possibility of his destiny. This is also the prelude to a second ending, which narrates the encounter with the Jewish hermaphrodite:

In the incomprehensible Sanskrit of that man, I understood that he was carrying in himself and in his own house all the fossils through which he entered in this crooked life; as he was also engendering around himself and in his house all the zoids that would stem from his seed. He was a strange man [...]. Once I examined him carefully, he exposed the terrible fecundity enclosed within his worm-ridden body.

I divined in him a mixture of the two sexes, with evident androgyny and a calculus of patromaternity. I guessed that his ailment was his double genital motor; that his suffering was due as much to ovaries as testicles.<sup>34</sup>

In his own body, the Jewish hermaphrodite conceals the most profound of genealogies. He *is* genealogy. At the end of his voyage, Savinio has found not the *Übermensch* but the *Urmensch*.

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The last and third ending coalesces around the image of a hanging empty glove – present also in de Chirico's painting *Le chant d'amour* (The song of love, 1914; figure 3) – in which Savinio recognizes his destiny.

"On the constantly changing world that yet remains the same, my home will not remain among the houses of men," he concludes. Echoing Heraclitus and Nietzsche, at the end of the book the writer realizes that his identity, his consistence, and his presence are spectral, ironical.<sup>35</sup>

The impossibility of a home, and yet the hopeless craving for one, evenly participate in the ambiguous solution represented by the Jewish hermaphrodite. A genealogy of all men, and the image of the ultimate enigma, it will

be a constant reference for Savinio through new incarnations, providing a special access to his work. As autobiographical as all avant-garde writers are, Savinio will bestow the ironic "urtext" to the same *Hermaphrodito* years later in his novels *Tragedia dell'infanzia* (Tragedy of Childhood, 1937) and chiefly in the ebullient *Infanzia di Nivasio Dolcemare* (Childhood of Nivasio Dolcemare, 1941).

In this last novel, Savinio recounts his early years and the cosmopolitan life of his family in Greece. The author hides himself behind the *Doppelgänger* of Nivasio Dolcemare (whose first name is an anagram of Savinio): "As an Italian born outside Italy, Nivasio Dolcemare considers himself privileged. This 'indirect' birth



Figure 3. Giorgio de Chirico, "Le chant d'amour" [The song of love], 1914. Oil on canvas, 28 3/4 x 23 3/8 in. (73 x 59.1 cm). Museum of Modern Art, New York.

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is an ironic solution, a stylistic solution."<sup>36</sup> Nivasio represents the *genealogy* of Savinio, his antecedent and one of the possibilities of his actual present. Yet if the author denies any "ideal perfection" to childhood, this perfection finds unexpected representation in the following pages. While speaking flamboyantly of childhood and "inversion," Savinio addresses again his main enigma, which is also the subject of his painting *Il riposo di Hermaphrodito* (Hermaphrodito's rest, 1944–45; figure 4): "The sleeping Hermaphroditus represents today, as in the time of the Symposium, the ideal image of perfection. He is not a divine neuter, however, but the divine all-in-all."<sup>37</sup>

### Forgetfulness and Memory

As in the more conventional Platonic version, Savinio's hermaphrodite is, at the same time, a utopia and a genealogy of humankind. To understand this figure's evolution in the creative process of its author, it is now necessary to turn back to Savinio's main theoretical standpoint, Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*, which begins with a momentous question: "Under what conditions did men invent the value-judgments good and evil? *And what value do they themselves possess?*"<sup>38</sup>

Almost a manual for Savinio's hermeneutics, *On the Genealogy of Morals* goes on to read:

What pointed me in the right direction was actually the question of what the designation of good coined in various languages meant from an etymological perspective. I found that they all lead back to the same transformation of concepts – that "refined" or "noble" in the sense of social standing is everywhere the fundamental concept.<sup>39</sup>



Figure 4. Alberto Savinio, "Il riposo di Hermaphrodito" [Hermaphrodite's rest], 1944–45. Oil on canvas. Private Collection.

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Nietzsche elaborates a new, culturally based epistemology by addressing the historicity of morals. In line with his previous essay "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" (1874), which includes the claim that "active forgetfulness" is necessary for the man of action, in *On the Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche states that "one may appreciate immediately to what extent there could be no happiness, no serenity, no hope, no pride, *no present* without forgetfulness,"<sup>40</sup> and that, on the contrary, "the most powerful aid to memory was pain."<sup>41</sup> In Nietzsche's epistemology, the two opposite notions – forgetfulness and memory – should be thoroughly reconsidered, for "all concepts in which a whole process is summarized in signs escape definition; only that which is without history can be defined."<sup>42</sup>

Nietzsche's fundamental insight is crucial for Savinio's poetics – the hermaphrodite seems a paraphrase of the philosopher's conclusion. In the author's own words, the "strange man" summarizes in his body "all the fossils" and "all the zoids that would stem from his seed." The process, or rather, the history of the hermaphrodite's "crooked life" defies any definition. And yet, after grounding his work on a Nietzschean epistemology, Savinio takes Nietzsche's lead in a different direction. In the witty, unparalleled 1942 essay that is the foreword to *Maupassant e "l'altro"* (Maupassant and "the other"), his translations of the French writer Guy de Maupassant, Savinio begins by ironically quoting an ambiguous passage from Nietzsche. The text reads:

"Maupassant: a true Roman"

(Friederich Nietzsche: *Ecce Homo*)

Epigraphs are located at the beginning of a piece of writing for they clarify with very few words its content: this epigraph by Nietzsche illuminates very well the figure of Maupassant inasmuch no one understands what its author wanted to say.<sup>43</sup>

This is only the beginning of Savinio's exuberant detour. The writer adds a note on his own comment concerning Nietzsche's epigraph: "May I hope the reader will understand me when I say one says more *by saying nothing?*"<sup>44</sup>

How might we interpret Savinio's paradox, if not with a smile? Since interpretation, etymology, and meaning are all blurred in his writing, for comic *and* metaphysical goals, with a solid Nietzschean epistemology *and* a consistent Nietzschean forgetfulness, we probably need a sort of new dictionary, a new encyclopedia, where words are not petrified concepts but can be defined *because* of their history and etymology.

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As a matter of fact, Savinio wrote such a book. Published only posthumously in 1977, *Nuova enciclopedia* (New encyclopedia) is a personal compendium of stories, interpretations, etymologies, and jokes with no coherent plan, yet full of sharp insights and original explanations. It is organized as a dictionary, following the topics addressed in alphabetical order (a purely conventional order). Among the many entries of the book, two are particularly poignant for the relationship between Nietzsche's hermeneutics and Savinio's writing. The first is "etymology:" "Etymological discovery is an illumination. Etymological discovery gives us the impression (or the illusion) of touching Truth with our hands [...]. But it is a juvenile sentiment, concluded in the limits of adolescence."<sup>45</sup>

The second, of course, is "Nietzsche:"

Nietzsche is a lyrical man. He is the most typical example of a lyrical man. He is the most lyrically complete man that I know of. Besides his work, his life itself is a lyrical fact. His philological excess, his philosophical excess, his philosophizing with a hammer, his will to power, his political excess, his ideas on states, on war are all forms of lyricism [and] they should be considered *more lyrici*, untied to any purpose – they should be taken as a game.<sup>46</sup>

The last part of *Hermaphrodito*, the last stage of Savinio's anabasis, is indeed entitled "Il lirico" (The lyrical man). In *Maupassant e "l'altro,"* the author imagines Nietzsche "living again" in an adult Nivasio Dolcemare. The passage illustrates how Savinio had overcome the German thinker while linking the philosopher to the pivotal image of his own writing:

Friedrich Nietzsche has renounced to that ostentation of violence that he practiced for the same reasons why an adolescent indulges in growing sideburns on both sides of his face, as they could protect from slaps. Since he understood the falseness, the immoral, mostly the stupid, the "stupid all-too-stupid" of his will to power and of his "philosophizing with a hammer," he was then capable of necessarily developing the lyrical tenderness of his soul, forerunner of the hermaphrodite.<sup>47</sup>

Heraclitus and Nietzsche, continues Savinio, both survive in Nivasio Dolcemare. Both are forerunners of the "ideal perfection" of the hermaphrodite. The writer is setting up here another genealogy for a figure that intentionally becomes more and more blurred, almost spectral, intertwining with the character of Nivasio.<sup>48</sup> Savinio's debt to Nietzsche is also evident in his taking etymological reasoning to extreme ends, to the abyssal depths of metaphor and laughter. In *Infanzia di Nivasio Dolcemare*, the writer remarks on the primacy of this metaphorical practice:

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While searching for the right qualifier for the compassion inspired in him by the Greek God, Nivasio Dolcemare created his first pun [*freddura*], that respectable if not much-respected form of wit. "Bittersweet compassion" is what came to him [...]. The unforeseen pun constituted an "historic turning point" in Nivasio Dolcemare's life, like the discovery of America in the life of the world. Which is not surprising. The pun has a sacred character. Besides which, the pun is the most direct, the liveliest, the most ingenious form of etymology. It is a sudden light projected from "within," from the "mechanism," from the "mystery" of things. It is the unsuspected but highly skillful adversary of religions.<sup>49</sup>

In another book published before World War II, *Dico a te, Clio* (Speaking to Clio, 1939), Savinio will further enrich his praise of puns: "Puns are holy and in them we can recognize the voice of the gods [...]. People as a rule are unable to accept more than one idea at a time. Either young or old, but young and old at the same time, never!"<sup>50</sup> Multiplicity, the possibility of including contrastive states and opposite concepts, is a key focus of Savinio's reflections, between philosophy and aesthetic solutions. For him, *Hermaphrodito* is not only an emblematic book but also the genealogy of its intellectual investigation: "Am I *Hermaphrodito's* father or son?" he ironically asks in his 1947 introduction. Like the horizon of his speculations, Savinio's hermaphrodite is an open limit, the image of an openness resisting every definition, between forgetfulness and memory, between gay science and Dada. "The choice is made. The chorus stops. There is a gleam of laughter from the divine Hermaphroditus," concludes Savinio in *Infanzia di Nivasio Dolcemare*.<sup>51</sup>

**Conclusion: *Hermaphrodito* and Adam**

In Savinio's first book, the impossibility of the founding myth of Western civilization, the metahistorical original unity that supports all metaphysical systems from Plato onwards is singled out. With irony, parodic erudite references, and linguistic misunderstandings, Savinio hints at the historical impossibility of the myth of origins and the fundamental reality hidden behind it, the constitutional ontological multiplicity – of truths, interpretations, genealogies, and thence etymologies.

To depict the fallacy of ontological unity, embodied by the myth of a pristine age before multiplicity, Savinio remarkably pits his hermaphrodite against the myth of Adam. Savinio's *Urmensch* is not "the first man." Consistent with Nietzschean epistemology, the Jewish hermaphrodite is the symbolic negation of the Biblical Adam. In a piercing passage of his *Nuova enciclopedia*, written more than thirty years after *Hermaphrodito*, Savinio concludes:

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ADAM. Name of the first man. Or, better still, name of a man who never existed. Ulysses told Polyphemus that his name was Nobody: he could have said that his name was Adam, the result would have been the same. [...] Prehistoric anthropology does not supply human beings with the myth they are longing for – a myth that the book of Genesis instead provides. This is not a sign that art is superior to science, but that intellectual skills are in mankind still rudimental.<sup>52</sup>

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1. André Breton, "Alberto Savinio," in *Anthology of Black Humor* (San Francisco: City Lights Books 1997), 287. For an exhaustive presentation of the two de Chirico brothers in their multidisciplinary activities, with a special focus on Savinio, see Paolo Baldacci and Wieland Schmied, eds., *Die Andere Moderne: De Chirico, Savinio* (Ostfeldern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2001).
2. Remarkably, Breton's selective appraisal of Savinio runs parallel to his movement's disavowal of de Chirico's art after 1919. On Savinio's and de Chirico's fortunes from the prewar Paris years until the thirties, from Apollinaire to Cocteau, see Maurizio Fagiolo dall'Arco, *Classicismo pittorico. Metafisica, Valori Plastici, Realismo Magico e "900"* (Milan: Costa & Nolan, 2006), especially 65–93. On the relations between Savinio and surrealism, see also Daniele Lo Cascio, "Savinio, Breton, e la strada interrotta dello humor nero," in Franco Petroni and Massimiliano Tortora, eds., *Gli intellettuali italiani e l'Europa (1903–1956)* (Manni: Lecce, 2007), 195–217.
3. Breton, "Alberto Savinio," 289.
4. Alessandro Tinterri, "Note ai testi," in Alberto Savinio, *Hermaphrodito e altri romanzi*, ed. Alessandro Tinterri (Milan: Adelphi, 1995), 899–988, especially 899–922.
5. Alberto Savinio, "Piccola guida alla mia prima opera," in *Hermaphrodito e altri romanzi*, 927.
6. Keala Jewell, *The Art of Enigma: The de Chirico Brothers and the Politics of Modernism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 166, 175.
7. "La verità è appunto tale perché si contraddice." Alberto Savinio, *Hermaphrodito*, ed. Giancarlo Roscioni (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), 178. All quotes from *Hermaphrodito* in this essay are taken from the Einaudi edition edited by Roscioni. Unless otherwise specified, all translations from Italian texts

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are mine. A partial translation of *Hermaphrodito* into English, consisting only of chapters in its central section "La partenza dell'argonauta," can be found in Alberto Savinio, *The Departure of the Argonaut*, illustrated by Francesco Clemente, trans. George Scrivani (New York and London: Petersburg Press, 1986).

8. Jewell, *Art of Enigma*, 166.
9. Roberto Longhi, "Al dio ortopedico," in Giuliano Briganti and Ester Coen, eds., *La pittura metafisica. Catalogo della mostra* (Venice: Neri Pozza 1979), 146–49.
10. Maurizio Calvesi, *La metafisica schiarita. Da De Chirico a Carrà, da Morandi a Savinio* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1982), especially 109–29.
11. See Vanni Bramanti, *Gli dei e gli eroi di Savinio* (Palermo: Sellerio 1983), 16; Alfredo Giuliani, "Savinio dei fantasmi," in Savinio, *Hermaphrodito e altri romanzi*, xx. On the sources of *Hermaphrodito's* title, see also Massimo Carlino, "A proposito di un titolo 'ingombrante,'" in Rosita Tordi, ed., *Mistero dello sguardo. Studi per un profilo di Alberto Savinio* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1992), 21–29.
12. Guido Guglielmi, "L'Hermaphrodito' di Alberto Savinio," in *Prosa italiana del novecento. Umore, metafisica, grottesco* (Turin: Einaudi, 1986), 159.
13. Paolo Baldacci, *De Chirico: The Metaphysical Period 1888–1919* (Boston, New York, Toronto, and London: Bulfinch Press, 1997), 18.
14. Jewell, *Art of Enigma*.
15. Paola Italia, *Il pellegrino appassionato. Savinio scrittore 1915–1925* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2004).
16. Papini's original text reads: "Ogni delimitazione di genere, ogni spalliera di rettorica e d'estetica sono, dinanzi a questo libro, impensabili. E questa impensabilità è la giustificazione assoluta dell'opera." Quoted in Tinterri, "Note ai testi," 916.
17. "Tutto ciò che io sono nasce dal lì;" "non c'è nulla che non tragga dalla quella 'pustola' e da quel 'bubbone,' indecente l'una e malefico l'altro, ma straordinariamente fecondi ambedue. È nel male, o in ciò che agli uomini sembra male, la grande e misteriosa forza generatrice." Savinio, "Piccola guida," 927.
18. Savinio's etymological thinking was first highlighted by Gian Carlo Roscioni, "Nota," in Savinio, *Hermaphrodito*, 235–52. In his important introduction to the volume of Savinio's collected novels, Alfredo Giuliani notes how the author's focus on "genealogies," which can be traced to very early works, continued throughout his literary career. Giuliani, "Savinio dei fantasmi,"

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19. For a feminist critique exploring gender difference by taking a cue from Plato's female figures, see Adriana Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
20. Ara Merjian, *Giorgio de Chirico and the Metaphysical City: Nietzsche, Modernism, Paris* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 6.
21. Among the many contributions examining Nietzsche's influence on de Chirico and Savinio, see Wieland Schmied, "L'art métaphysique de Giorgio De Chirico et la philosophie allemande: Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Weininger," in William Rubin, Wieland Schmied and Jean Clair, eds., *Giorgio de Chirico: Haus der Kunst, Munich 17 novembre 1982 - 30 janvier 1983; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, Musée National de l'Art moderne, 24 février - 25 avril 1983* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1983), 93-109; and Marco Sabbatini, *L'argonauta, l'anatomico, il funambolo. Alberto Savinio dai "Chant de la mi-mort" a "Hermaphrodito"* (Rome: Salerno, 1997).
22. Regarding Savinio, Cacciari speaks of "accanita resistenza alla Ragione unica, dominante." Massimo Cacciari, "Savinio 'europeo,'" in Tordi, ed., *Mistero dello sguardo*, 15.
23. Savinio, "Anadyoménon," in *Metaphysical Art*, ed. Carrà, trans. Tisdall, 162.
24. "Di', vuoi fare il rocchettone?" Savinio, *Hermaphrodito*, 73.
25. *Ibid.*, 83.
26. After his ride along the Adriatic Sea, Savinio narrates his train detour from Bari to Taranto, and a break in a hotel of the port city, where he waits to embark for the Greek front. *Ibid.*, 176.
27. The centrality in *Hermaphrodito* of *equivoci*, linguistic misunderstandings among characters, was first noted in Roscioni, "Nota," 246.
28. The "fantasmico," Savinio writes, is "come il punto, in continuo trasformarsi, del continuo appalesarsi degli aspetti" (The phantasmic [is] like the point, in continuous transformation, where the changing aspects of reality become apparent). Interestingly, this line is missing in the cited English translation of the article as "Anadyoménon." My translation refers to the original text in Savinio, *La nascita di Venere*, 46-47.
29. In this regard, Savinio's and the Metaphysical School's distance from the main tenets of surrealism could not be larger. In another article published in *Valori plastici*, "Primi saggi di filosofia delle arti" (First essays on the philosophy of art), he indeed comments on the necessity of memory and the base "immorality" of dreams

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as sources for modern art (Savinio, *La nascita di Venere*, 101–07). Time and again the author would reiterate the difference between his literary production and Breton's movement. See, for instance, Savinio's own introduction to his collection of short stories *Tutta la vita* (A whole life, 1945), now in *Casa "la Vita" e altri racconti*, ed. Alessandro Tinterri and Paola Italia (Milan: Adelphi, 1999), 555–56.

30. See Davide Bellini, *Dalla tragedia all'enciclopedia. Le poetiche e la biblioteca di Savinio* (Pisa: ETS, 2013), 21.
31. "Due ore son già – o meglio giasone: che mi sento più che mai l'argonauta." Savinio, *Hermaphrodito*, 194.
32. John Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1988), 107.
33. On this aspect, the novel explicitly reads: "Non riesco a sbarazzarmi subito delle mie isteriche voglie di eroismo e, durante le prime ore di bordo, mi dondolo nella speranza che un qualche Apollonio, di Rodi o di altrove, schizzato fuori da uno dei tanti San Grali delle ognora rinnovantisi sensibilità poetiche, voglia prendersi la sudata di cantar la mia raminga storia in carmi bistorti e slegati" (I'm not able to get rid at once of my hysterical cravings for heroism and, during the first hours on board, I dally with the hope that some Apollonius, from Rhodes or elsewhere, squirted out of one of the many Holy Grail of the always renovated poetic sensibilities, would toil to sing the story of my wanderings in crooked and loose rhymes). Savinio, *Hermaphrodito*, 201.
34. *Ibid.*, 229. For this cryptic episode, I made use of Jewell's translation in *Art of Enigma*, 177.
35. The glove is a recurrent trope in the de Chirico brothers' production, especially during their "metaphysical" years. Commenting on another de Chirico painting prominently featuring a red glove in the foreground, *L'énigme de la fatalité* (The enigma of fatality, 1914) Merjian argues, "The hand motif exemplifies the de Chirico brothers' self-fashioning as latter-day prophets [...] the brothers identified in particular with Hermes, bearer of messages and of the *kerykeion* staff." Merjian, *Giorgio De Chirico*, 124. Still, the scholar notes, the red glove allows another, less "metaphysical" interpretation in the words of Savinio's later novel *Infanzia di Nivasio Dolcemare*, in which the protagonist remembers the sign of a peculiar shop in his native Volos, owned by "the Buruni Sisters." The sign featured a bulky red glove, yet Savinio clarifies: "The Buruni Sisters sold gloves, but everybody knew that the Buruni Sisters were really three sirens in disguise.[...] No serious citizen would go into the Buruni Sisters' shop to be fitted with gloves. Informed sources said that the sign of the Red Hand itself concealed an immodest symbol; but who puts much faith in the language of symbols?" Alberto Savinio, *Childhood of Nivasio*

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*Dolcemare*, trans. Richard Pevear (*Hygiene*, CO: Eridanos, 1987), 67. Originally published as *Infanzia di Nivasio Dolcemare* (Turin: Einaudi 1990), 82. Interestingly, the red glove is full and betrays the presence of a hand in de Chirico's *The Enigma of Fatality* and in the Buruni Sisters' shop sign as described in Savinio's *Infanzia di Nivasio Dolcemare*, whereas it is empty and stands only for itself in the paintings *Le chant d'amour* and *Les projets de la jeune fille* (The amusements of a young girl, 1915) and in *Hermaphrodito's* final description. For the cited de Chirico paintings, see Baldacci, *De Chirico*, 262–64, 307–11.

36. Savinio, *Childhood of Nivasio Dolcemare*, 9.
37. *Ibid.*, 29–30.
38. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 5. In all quotes from Nietzsche, emphases are in the original.
39. *Ibid.*, 14.
40. *Ibid.*, 39.
41. *Ibid.*, 42.
42. *Ibid.*, 60.
43. "*Maupassant: un vero Romano.*" / (Federico Nietzsche: *Ecce Homo*) / Le epigrafi sono poste in testa agli scritti, perché ne chiariscano in pochissime parole il contenuto: questa epigrafe di Nietzsche illumina tanto meglio la figura di Maupassant, in quanto non si capisce cosa voglia dire." Alberto Savinio, *Maupassant e "l'altro"* (Milan: Adelphi, 1975), 9.
44. "Ma posso sperare di farmi capire dal lettore, se gli dico che si dice di più *non dicendo niente*?" *Ibid.*, 91. De Chirico, in a moving piece he wrote about his brother, describes the gazes of Olympic gods thus: "the gaze of the one who *knows that there is nothing to know*" (lo sguardo di chi *sa che non c'è nulla da sapere*). Giorgio de Chirico, "[Alberto Savinio]," in *Il meccanismo del pensiero. Critica, polemica, autobiografia, 1911–1943* (Turin, Einaudi, 1985), 368.
45. "La scoperta etimologica è un'illuminazione. La scoperta etimologica ci dà l'impressione (o l'illusione) di toccare con mano la Verità [...]. Ma è sentimento giovanile e chiuso dentro i limiti dell'adolescenza." Alberto Savinio, *Nuova enciclopedia* (Milan: Adelphi, 1977), 139.
46. "Nietzsche è un lirico. È l'esempio più tipico del lirico. È l'uomo più liricamente completo che io conosca. Nonché la sua opera, la sua vita stessa, è un fatto lirico. Il suo filologismo, il suo filosofismo, la sua filosofia del martello, la sua volontà di potenza, il suo politicismo, le sue idee sugli stati, sulla guerra sono altrettante forme di lirismo [e] vanno considerate more lirici, sciolte da qualunque idea di fine, prese come un gioco." *Ibid.*, 270.

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47. "Nietzsche è un lirico. È l'esempio più tipico del lirico. È l'uomo più liricamente completo che io conosca. Nonché la sua opera, la sua vita stessa, è un fatto lirico. Il suo filologismo, il suo filosofismo, la sua filosofia del martello, la sua volontà di potenza, il suo politicismo, le sue idee sugli stati, sulla guerra sono altrettante forme di lirismo [e] vanno considerate more lyrici, sciolte da qualunque idea di fine, prese come un gioco." Ibid.,
48. "Federico Nietzsche ha rinunciato a quella ostentazione della violenza che egli praticava con le medesime ragioni perché l'adolescente si lasciava crescere da ambo le parti della faccia come due paraschiaffi due scopettoni, e avendo capito il falso, l'immorale, lo stupido soprattutto, lo 'stupido troppo stupido' della volontà di potenza e della 'filosofia del martello,' ha potuto dare il necessario sviluppo alla lirica tenerezza della sua anima di precursore dell'ermafrodito." Savinio, *Maupassant e "l'altro,"* 11.
49. Savinio's work features plenty of characters that transform into spectres. The most eloquent instance is the protagonist of the short story "Il Signor Münster," in the collection *Casa "la Vita."* The story has been translated into English as "Mr Münster" by Susan Etlinger in Alberto Savinio, *The Lives of the Gods*, ed. James Brooks (London: Atlas Press, 1992).
50. Savinio, *Childhood of Nivasio Dolcemare*, 117–18.
51. Alberto Savinio, *Speaking to Clio*, trans. John Shepley (Marlboro, VT: The Marlboro Press, 1987), 95. The original text reads: "La freddura è sacra e in essa noi riconosciamo la voce degli dei [...]. La norma non riesce ad accogliere più di una idea per volta. O giovane, o vecchio; ma giovane e assieme vecchio, giammai!" Alberto Savinio, *Dico a te, Clio* (Milan: Adelphi, 1992), 103.
52. Savinio, *Childhood of Nivasio Dolcemare*, 64.
53. "ADAMO. Nome del primo uomo. Per meglio dire, nome di un uomo che non è mai esistito. Ulisse disse a Polifemo che si chiamava Nessuno: poteva dirgli che si chiamava Adamo, e sarebbe stato lo stesso. [...] L'antropologia preistorica non fornisce all'uomo il mito desiderato, che invece gli fornisce il libro della *Genesi*. Segno non di quanto l'arte è superiore alla scienza, ma di quanto rudimentali sono ancora le facoltà intellettive dell'uomo." Savinio, *Nuova enciclopedia*, 21.



## About the Author

Franco Baldasso is the recipient of the 2019 Rome Prize in Modern Italian Studies from the American Academy in Rome. He is the Director of the Italian Program at Bard College, NY, where he is an Assistant Professor of Italian Studies. In his research, he examines the complex relations between Fascism and Modernism, the legacy of political violence in Italy, and the idea of the Mediterranean in modern and contemporary aesthetics. He has authored two books in Italian: *Il cerchio di gesso. Primo Levi narratore e testimone* (Bologna: Edizioni Pendragon, 2007), as well as *Curzio Malaparte, la letteratura crudele. Kaputt, La pelle e la caduta della civiltà europea* (Rome: Carocci, 2019). He also co-edited an issue of *Nemla-Italian Studies* titled "Italy in WWII and the Transition to Democracy: Memory, Fiction, Histories." He contributes to *publicbooks.org*, and is a member of the Advisory Board of the journal *Allegoria*, as well as the Archivio della Memoria of the Centro Studi sulla Grande Guerra "P. Pieri" in Vittorio Veneto, Italy. Baldasso is currently revising the manuscript for a book titled: "Against Redemption: Literary Dissent during the Transition from Fascism to Democracy in Italy."