



Il Paradosso Dello Spirito Russo: Piero Gobetti and the Genius of Liberal Revolution

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Il Paradosso dello spirito russo: Piero Gobetti and the Genius of Liberal Revolution

A dissertation presented

by

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to

The Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures

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Abstract

This dissertation examines Piero Gobetti's activity as a student of Russian language and culture, and proposes that it be understood as a formative phase in a larger process of self-construction, through which Gobetti attempted to incarnate the ideal figure of the Genius.

Gobetti, an icon of the Italian antifascist resistance, has long been known to have nurtured a particular interest in Russian culture, but the details of his engagement with Russian language, literature and history have generally been left aside in discussions of his accomplishments, or presented as a response to the October revolution. Examination of Gobetti's personal library, his published writings and correspondence, and the personal papers and correspondence left by his wife, Ada, reveals that Gobetti's interest in Russia and Russian culture began before the October revolution, however, sparked by the discovery of literary heroes in whom he could see himself reflected. From these beginnings the dissertation traces the development of Gobetti's Russian studies through language learning, literary translation and criticism to the historical study of the Russian revolutionary tradition, and proposes that the stages of Gobetti's pursuit of the Russian spirit were driven by a search for images of genius which contributed, in turn, to a larger process of imaginative self-construction. Viewed in this light, Gobetti's Russian studies appear integral to his life and work, and open a new perspective on his achievements and his heroic myth.

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I - Outsideness

What follows is an outsider's view of an insider's subject. For Italians Piero Gobetti is an iconic figure in the history of the twentieth century, his image a staple of school histories of antifascism and the 1920s. For the inhabitants of Turin, he is a source of particular pride as a symbol of local virtue, and a guarantor of the ex-capital's continued national prominence. And in recent decades, as Italy has lurched from one governmental crisis to the next, he has been held up as a potential source from which a nationally authentic alternative to the corruption of the existing political establishment might emerge. Having died young, Gobetti has lived on in national and regional culture as a fountain of perpetual youth, incarnating a purity of purpose and achievement that leave the future open to every positive aspiration. Alternatively, one might say that in the national imagination Gobetti represents the hope discovered by Italy-Pandora at the bottom of the her empty box in 1945, when the tide of violence and destruction unleashed by its opening during World War I began at last to recede. The survivors of those three decades of tumult and hardship were schooled, above all, in compromise; they were well acquainted, in other words, with precisely that grey area of human experience most alien to Gobetti's temperament and activity as they have been posthumously presented. Gobetti's legendary courage and determination have served as foils to the doubts, weaknesses and failings of his compatriots' lived experience, and his innocence continues to be hailed as an antidote to every species of *trasformismo*, the cycle of eternal return that Italians identify as one of the principal vices of national political life, a wellspring of cynicism and despair famously represented by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa in his novel, *Il Gattopardo*.¹ Unlike the novel's protagonist, Prince Fabrizio Corbera di Salina, Gobetti is

¹ The title is usually translated as *The Leopard*, and *trasformismo* summarized in the words of one of the main characters, Tancredi Falconeri, as the understanding that "if we want everything to stay the same, then everything has to change." Giuseppe Tommaso di Lampedusa. *Il Gattopardo*. Nuova edizione riveduta a cura di Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi. Milano: Feltrinelli, 2007, p. 50. Here and elsewhere translations are mine unless otherwise specified. Though the novel depicts events in Sicily from era of the Risorgimento, it was written in the wake of World War II.

always portrayed as spotless, and many Italians continue to take a proprietary interest in the maintenance of this image.

It is not an image which has been readily transmitted beyond Italian borders, however. Outside Italy Gobetti remains virtually unknown, the subject of a handful of theses and scholarly monographs which gravitate, for the most part, around themes determined by existing Italian scholarship. It is an irony of this situation that Gobetti has frequently been invoked by Italian commentators as one of the most “European” intellectuals of his generation, a person of genuinely international horizons, and has been commended for his efforts to combat provincialism in Italian cultural life. In this context his study of Russian language and literature has been acknowledged as important – according to one commentator his work as a translator from Russian represents one of his greatest services to Italian letters² – yet this activity remains substantially absent from most studies of Gobetti, presented fleetingly, if at all, and usually as an area of secondary importance with respect to his political thought and to his work as what Antonio Gramsci called an “*organizzatore di cultura*.”³ Gobetti’s heroic myth has been constructed without it, his interest in Russian culture frequently recast after the fact to suit the polemical needs of the moment as a prescient understanding of Soviet power, an ideological commitment to communism, or even a prophetic vision of the collapse of the USSR.⁴

² “The work of translation from Russian springs from a more autonomous impulse, in which the sense of discovery and or necessity is more acute: it is one of the most noteworthy steps taken by Gobetti on the path towards making our culture less provincial.” Umberto Morra di Lavriano. *Vita di Piero Gobetti*. Torino: Centro Studi Piero Gobetti, 1984, p. 122.

³ The original reference is from “Alcuni temi della questione meridionale,” an article Gramsci prepared in 1926 prior to his arrest, eventually published in January, 1930 in *Lo Stato operaio*, the journal of the Italian Communist Party, which was issued monthly in Paris from 1927 to 1939 under the direction of Palmiro Togliatti. Cited here as collected in, A. Gramsci. *Opere*, vol. 12, *La costruzione del Partito comunista: 1923-1926*. A cura di Elsa Fubini. Torino: Einaudi, 1971, p. 157.

⁴ There is one recent work that has begun to redress this imbalance, Laurent Béghin’s monumentally detailed study, *Da Gobetti a Ginzburg: diffusione e ricezione della cultura russa nella Torino del primo dopoguerra*, Bruxelles: Institut historique belge de Rome, 2007. Chapter II, “Piero Gobetti e la Russia,” pp. 135-216, provides a detailed description of Gobetti’s activity as a student of Russian language and culture. As a broad reception study, however, his work is not explicitly concerned with reevaluating Gobetti or his posthumous image in light of this information.

I will argue, however, that an approach to Gobetti which originates in an exploration of his Russian literary culture can provide both a fuller picture of his accomplishments and a new understanding of their significance. Examining Gobetti's experience from the perspective of Russian cultural history reveals patterns in his behavior that have previously gone unrecognized for lack of relevant contextual knowledge,⁵ and permits an account of his activity that incorporates sources which have been left aside for decades as marginal or irrelevant. Gobetti remains a Protean figure, stubbornly resistant to interpretive classification. Discomfort in accounting for the range of his activities has led commentators to separate consideration of his literary and critical interests from the analysis of his political activism and his work as a publicist. These areas of his "work" are, in turn, usually kept separate from any discussion of his personal life. Russian cultural history offers a perspective from which all the many areas of Gobetti's work may be considered together as parts of a whole, in an account that encompasses both his public and private lives and reflects his own sense of personal integrity.

My first step towards a revised understanding of Gobetti thus consists in proposing a change of perspective. This is not a new strategy in Gobetti studies, at least not recent ones, which are all, perforce, revisions: what is new is the choice of a vantage point defined by a specific foreign culture. The handful of other foreign scholars who have written on Gobetti, all in recent years, have chosen to explore neglected aspects of the Italian context or to situate their studies within broader disciplinary

⁵ Not being a Slavist, Béghin does not consider the content of Gobetti's Russian readings, nor their place in the Russian literary tradition in his description of Gobetti's activity as a translator and critic. Further, as he notes in his epilogue, the question of the relationship between literature and life marks the interpretive boundary of his study:

There remains the question of literature's impact on life, of the literary work as a creator of ethical or behavioral norms, and, ultimately, of literature's social function. In other words, in a dictatorial context like that of fascist Italy, could reading Russian authors, above all the classics of the nineteenth century, or those in whom preoccupations of a moral nature were particularly strong, have helped to create and bring to maturity a political engagement in favor of truth and justice, two values dear to the great Russian tradition. With such a question, we reach the limits of this work. (Béghin, *op. cit.*, p. 461)

horizons that transcend national cultures.⁶ Italian scholars, meanwhile, have taken an exclusively national perspective for granted, even when producing significant reassessments. Introducing his sweeping reconsideration of Gobetti's achievements which appeared in 2000, and remains the most comprehensive study of Gobetti to date, Italian historian Marco Gervasoni criticizes the bulk of existing Italian scholarship for an approach that is "martyrological" and "excessively internal to the history of political thought," advocating an intellectual effort to "place the historical object called Piero Gobetti at a distance." Historiographical revision depends, he says, "not so much on changing the value judgements of previous historiographies, or on the aspiration to an Olympian 'impartiality,' ... so much as it does on donning new lenses, and on the repositioning of the historian at vantage points different from those of the past." Surely; but there are implicit limits to Gervasoni's notions of distance and repositioning with respect to "the historical object called Piero Gobetti," his statement of general principle notwithstanding, and they are defined by nationality. He identifies the main stimulus for his

⁶ See: Niamh Cullen. *Piero Gobetti's Turin*: (Peter Lang, 2011); David Ward. *Piero Gobetti's New World: Antifascism, Liberalism, Writing*. (University of Toronto Press, 2010); James Martin. *Piero Gobetti and the Politics of Liberal Revolution* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Laurent Béghin. *Da Gobetti a Ginzburg: diffusione e ricezione della cultura russa nella Torino del primo dopoguerra*, (Institut historique belge de Rome, 2007).

One of the incidental benefits of these choices has been to avoid the daunting task of confronting the Italian sensibilities that have defined Gobetti's image and legacy. Michel Cassac, who takes a psychoanalytic approach and argues in his doctoral thesis that Gobetti's behavior was marked by profound narcissism, is a notable exception in this regard. His work challenges the established image of Gobetti as a hero and lay saint; it also remains the only major recent study that continues to languish in manuscript form, however. See: Michel Cassac. *Piero Gobetti (1901-1926) ou l'intègre liberté: au-delà du mythe*, Université de Lille, III, Doctoral thesis, 1995.

The ferocity of critical reaction to representations of Gobetti and other Turinese antifascists that have challenged the received image of their virtue may be gauged from an article by Norberto Bobbio which appeared in the Turin daily *La Stampa* on May 27, 2000. The article was a review of Angelo D'Orsi's book, *La Cultura a Torino tra le due guerre*. D'Orsi, a professor of history at the University of Turin, argued that far from being pillars of intransigent virtue, most intellectuals and cultural figures in Turin between the wars inhabited a moral "grey zone" of compromise with the regime. Bobbio, his mentor and the most prominent living representative of antifascism in the city, responded with a scathing, front-page article that acknowledged the book's academic merits, while condemning D'Orsi out of hand for his inability to distinguish between "culture" as expressed in intellectual and artistic works and the individual behavior of those who produced it, and for a morally repugnant attempt to blame the victims of fascism for their own persecution. Having dedicated twenty years of his life to producing the book, D'Orsi was reportedly obliged by Bobbio's review "to dedicate his second life to earning his own forgiveness." See: Vittorio Messori & Aldo Cazzullo. *Il Mistero di Torino: due ipotesi su una capitale incompresa*. Milano: Mondadori, 2004, p. 433. Bobbio's article, "La Storia vista dai persecutori," is available from the online archive of *La Stampa* at: http://www.archiviolaStampa.it/component/option,com_lastampa/task,search/mod,avanzata/action,viewer/Itemid,3/page,1/articleid,0424_01_2000_0142_0001_3640956/.

investigation of Gobetti as “the conviction, recently expressed by Reinhardt Koselleck, that ‘in moments of great changes in the ‘fields of experience,’ it is a more or less natural tendency to affirm a ‘historiography that rewrites’ rather than one which ‘registers’ and one which ‘develops.’” He does not explain, however, what experience of change has led him to produce a historiography that “revises” rather than one which “registers” or “develops:” as an Italian writing in the late 1990s for an Italian audience, he presumably felt no need even to name the *manipulate* (“clean hands”) investigations into political corruption which began in 1992 and convulsed national public life, leading to the collapse of the major governing parties and, eventually, to Silvio Berlusconi’s rise. The use of the word “natural” to describe the inclination to reexamine the past is telling in this context, implying as it does that an involuntarily shared experience is the ultimate justification for any reconsideration of Gobetti’s legacy.⁷

Gobetti himself did not hesitate to interrogate foreign cultures in search of solutions to what he perceived as Italy’s most pressing problems; indeed, his entire engagement with Russian history and literature has been described, in terms reminiscent of Stendhal’s definition of the novel, as holding up a mirror to Italian history in order to reveal its nature and possibilities more clearly.⁸ Reading from the outside was one of Gobetti’s preferred strategies as a cultural critic, though it has not been explicitly acknowledged, and his own activity has not benefited from such an approach to date. Even less discussed is the fact that Gobetti approached Italian culture from the outside at a personal level: in his plebeian origins he was an outsider to the elite world of Italian culture, and he staked his identity on the acquisition of its idiom. The originality and productivity of his cultural engagement resulted in large

⁷ All citations in this paragraph are from: Marco Gervasoni. *L’intellettuale come eroe. Piero Gobetti e le culture del Novecento*. Milano: Nuova Italia, 2000, pp. 6-7.

⁸ “In other words, Russia was for [Gobetti] a mirror which reflected Italian political and intellectual history, even though it distorted and exaggerated some of their traits; but [a mirror] in which it was possible also to glimpse the hope of a political renewal. In short, Russia as a metaphor for Italy, for its past and for one possible [version] of its future.” (Béghin, *op. cit.*, p. 215)

measure, I will argue, from his constant striving to overcome this original separation from the object of his ambitions. His myth does not reflect this struggle because the myth was created and maintained by those who already belonged to the cultural elite. Gobetti died striving to perpetuate their world – or so he has been represented – and in return they accorded him full posthumous recognition, elevating him to the status of a martyr. Widespread acknowledgment of his personal charisma and integrity may be read in this context as one side of a tacit cultural bargain in which Gobetti’s recognition as a leader repays his sacrifice in defense of an elite culture threatened by the advent of mass social and political movements indifferent to its claims of privilege. As part of this larger trajectory, the study of Russian language and literature afforded Gobetti a protected space in which to construct his identity, a space especially important to his development during the brief season of his social and intellectual debut.

Gobetti’s attention to critical perspective also makes him very much a child of the times with respect to Russian critics of his generation. The brief span of his public intellectual life, 1918-1926, overlaps with the period of greatest activity by the Russian Formalists, and coincides with the years in which Viktor Shklovsky coined his influential term “defamiliarization” as part of a broader critical approach set out in his monograph, *On the Theory of Prose*.⁹ Gobetti was an adept at this strategy of “making the familiar strange,” which perfectly suited his temperament as an iconoclast, and his desire to bring about cultural renovation by provoking the reconsideration of received ideas and practices. Gobetti’s fondness for paradox embodies this tendency: his slogan “liberal revolution” aimed, among other things, to defamiliarize existing political categories. His identification of the “heretics” who are the protagonists of his revisionist history of Italian unification, *Risorgimento senza eroi*, offers another example of his use of this strategy, and reveals clearly the link he perceived between the adoption of a

⁹ Defamiliarization, or *остранение*, first appeared as a term in Shklovsky’s essay “Art as Device,” published in 1917; *The Theory of Prose* was originally published in 1925.

defamiliarized perspective and the renewal of national public life which he advocated.¹⁰ The position of the heretic, or more generally, the outsider, was one that preoccupied Russian thinkers of Gobetti's generation as they, too, experienced the destruction of the cultural world they had inherited, marginalization, and persecution at the hands of a mass movement that strove to redefine individual and national identities according to increasingly closed and rigid norms. Like Gobetti, they found themselves forcibly rejected within their own society by the proponents of a new political ideology, and were obliged to accommodate, if not accept, a hostile view of themselves as enemies, to occupy an outsider's position with respect to their native culture. This experience contributed to an acute awareness of the importance of difference, separation and "otherness" to the formation of individual and collective identity; and to the oblique expression of political resistance through cultural analyses that emphasized the power and creative potential of diversity, dynamic exchange and open-endedness. As Mikhail Bakhtin, another eminent literary and cultural critic of this generation, put it, near the end of a long life of reflection: "A great part of understanding is the outsideness (*вненаходимость*) of the one who seeks to understand, -- in time, in space, in culture, -- with respect to that which he wishes creatively to understand."¹¹

In Bakhtin's larger analysis, outsideness is necessary because it enables dialogue, an exchange that requires the existence of two distinct perspectives. Dialogue, in turn, is what makes it possible for

¹⁰ Piero Gobetti. *Risorgimento senza eroi: studi sul pensiero piemontese nel Risorgimento*. Torino: Edizioni del Baretto, 1926. Gobetti's study of the dramatist Vittorio Alfieri (1749-1803) provides another example of his defamiliarizing approach to iconic national figures. Gobetti chose to write his undergraduate thesis on Alfieri's political philosophy, which he identified through an extended analysis of Alfieri's dramas. Regarded as a creative artist, Alfieri was not generally thought to have had a "political philosophy" worthy of the name by the standards of Gobetti's day. See: Piero Gobetti. *La Filosofia politica di Vittorio Alfieri*. Torino: A. Pittavino, 1923.

¹¹ М. М. Бахтин. "Ответ на вопрос редакции «Нового Мира»." *Собрание сочинений в 7-и томах*, т. 6, "Проблемы Поэтика Достоевского," 1963; "Работы 1960-х и 1970-х гг.," под ред. С. Г. Бочаров и Л. А. Гоготишвили. Москва, 2002, сс. 451-457. I will refer to the article in English as "Response to a Question from the *Novy Mir* Editorial Staff," using the title established when the essay was published in English as part of: M. M. Bakhtin. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Translated by Vern W. McGee. Edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.

the individual “creatively to understand” himself and others, to perceive an additional dimension that would remain invisible from any single vantage point, as it were.¹² Caryl Emerson and Gary Saul Morson describe this process as the realization of potentials latent in any given individual or culture: dialogue provokes a specific articulation of potential, a specific interpretation of meaning, which each side can then identify and assimilate.¹³ Each articulation creates the possibility of others, because it is necessarily an incomplete expression of all available potential, and because it changes the positions of both participants in the dialogue, which can thus be endlessly renewed from fresh points of departure. This renewal is the key to understanding as a creative process, rather than one of “simple duplication” which would bring nothing “new” or “enriching” to either side.¹⁴ It is creative understanding which is important to Bakhtin, because it enables mutual comprehension and growth without debasing or sacrificing the identity of either party: “*Creative understanding* does not renounce itself, its place, its place in time or its culture, and it does not forget anything.”¹⁵ With respect to culture, Bakhtin is therefore emphatic about the importance of outsideness for creative understanding:

In the realm of culture, outsideness is the most powerful lever of understanding. [...] A foreign culture discovers itself more fully and deeply only in the eyes of a different culture. [...] We put new questions to a foreign culture that it would not put to itself, we seek in it answers to our own questions, and the foreign culture answers us, uncovering before us new aspects of itself, new depths of meaning. Without one’s own questions, it is impossible creatively to understand anything different and foreign (serious, genuine questions, of course). When two cultures meet in this way, they do not flow together and merge; each retains its unity and open integrity, yet they mutually enrich one another.¹⁶

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 457.

¹³ Gary Saul Morson & Caryl Emerson. *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990. Their insights on this topic are succinctly stated in the section “Dialogue and Other Cultures” pp. 54-56, in Part I, Chapter I, “Global Concepts: Prosaics, Unfinalizability, Dialogue,” pp. 15-62.

¹⁴ Bakhtin, *op. cit.*, p. 456.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 456-7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 457.

This is, I will argue, the approach that Gobetti takes in his study of Russia, and Bakhtin's remarks allow us to see clearly that creativity is its key element. So while I agree with Laurent Béghin that Gobetti's study of Russia is intimately connected to his analysis of Italian history and society, I find Béghin's choice of metaphor to describe the connection revealingly misplaced. Rather than holding up a mirror to Italian society with his study of Russia, I will argue that Gobetti makes a passage "through the looking-glass," into an imaginative world where he is an active participant. Like Alice, he wants to go beyond the immediate reflection, to explore the world behind it in the depth of an imaginary third dimension. In this, as in everything he did, Gobetti was a champion of creativity rather than mimesis, and I will argue that this distinction is fundamental to understanding his self-construction and his myth.

Bakhtin explains that "a certain living one's way in to a foreign culture, the possibility of taking a look at the world through its eyes, is, of course, a necessary moment in the process of understanding it."¹⁷ The phrase "living one's way in," for which Bakhtin coins the term "*вживание*," captures nicely the nature of Gobetti's engagement with Russian culture as an experiential process, the preparatory work of creative understanding that included not only language study, literary translation, criticism and the study of Russian history, but also personal development: *bildung*, in a word. Retracing the stages of this process offers, in turn, an opportunity to "live one's way in" to Gobetti's own world, and to discover the origins of the questions which he asked of Russian culture. Gobetti's larger goal was a program of cultural renovation designed to form a new, liberal, governing elite which would transform Italy into a modern nation, completing the process of national self-creation begun by the *Risorgimento* in the 1860s. His Russian studies contributed not only to the formulation of this program, but also, and especially, to his self-creation as its guiding force; and it is this connection that makes their

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 456.

examination so valuable for understanding him and his work. The image of Gobetti which emerges from this investigation can, moreover, in true dialogic fashion, inform our understanding of Bakhtin and the roots of his self-conception as a critic. Liberal revolution and outsideness are intimately related, and originate in a discourse of creative power that should give us pause, as critics and as citizens, even as it stimulates our imaginations.

II - Piero Gobetti: *Più Forte della Morte*

*Но не хочу, о други, умирать;
Я жить хочу, чтоб мыслить и страдать*¹⁸

On Wednesday, February 3, 1926, Piero Gobetti caught the train to Genoa from the Porta Nuova station in Turin, embarking on the first leg of his journey into political exile in France. He was 24 years old. Following a violent campaign of harassment directed against him by the fascist regime during the previous two years, the independent press which he ran had been shut down, and with it his flagship review, *La Rivoluzione Liberale*. In addition he had been banned from further editorial work and from publishing in other outlets, his existing publications had been blacklisted, his house had been searched on repeated occasions, his papers confiscated, and he had been detained repeatedly for questioning by the police. Of his many public initiatives only a cultural review, *Il Baretto*, remained alive, thanks to friends and family who stepped in to run it in his absence. Gobetti's nascent career as a militant journalist and public intellectual was in ruins and his health, already fragile, had been further weakened by beatings from fascist *squadristi* in June, 1924 and September, 1925. Profoundly discouraged by his situation in Italy, and worried that he might be denied passage at the border, Gobetti told almost no one about his departure. Only his wife Ada accompanied him to the station, with their five-week-old son, Paolo, in her arms. The winter of 1926 was a hard one, and as they rattled through the streets towards Porta Nuova in a horse-drawn cab there was a sudden snowfall. Gobetti would remember it later, during the journey, jotting in his notebook: "The last vision of Turin: through the glass barrel that lurches along in the snow, the driver's enormous cape (his ultimate poetry) dominating the scene. A northern

¹⁸ "But I do not want to die, my friends; I want to live, so as to think and suffer." A. S. Pushkin, "Elegy," 1830. The full text is available at: "Элегия (Пушкин)." - Викитека. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 May 2016 <[https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Элегия_\(Пушкин\)](https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Элегия_(Пушкин))>.

farewell for my northern heart.”¹⁹ At the station Ada accompanied him through the hall to the doors at the head of the platform stairs to say goodbye, pausing long enough under the station’s arches for a tearful embrace, and to see him start down the steps to the train, before retreating with Paolo into the warmth of the enclosed hall.²⁰



In Genoa the poet Eugenio Montale came to Piazza Principe, the main station, to meet Gobetti and keep him company while he waited for his connection: the two young men paced the platforms and

¹⁹ Piero Gobetti. *L'Editore ideale. Frammenti autobiografici con iconografia*. A cura e con prefazione di Franco Antonicelli. Milano: All'Insegna del pesce d'oro, 1966, p. 87. Horse-drawn taxis were still common in Turin and other Italian cities in the 1920s. They were generally Hackney coaches, known in Italy by their French name as *fiacres*: large, enclosed boxes on four wheels. Unlike private coaches, many of the Italian taxis were constructed with glass panels on the front and sides, as a concession to propriety; hence Gobetti's sense of being in a glass "barrel," with a view dominated by the flapping cape of the driver, who sat in front.

²⁰ These details are attested in the entry that Ada made in her diary for February 3rd. The text is reproduced in full on the following page, with a reference. The photograph is of the interior of the Porta Nuova Station in the early years of the twentieth century, and is taken from: "Vecchie Foto E Cartoline Di Stazioni Ferroviarie." *Il Chiaroscuro*. N.p., n.d. Web. 07 May 2016. <<http://www.ilchiaroscuro.altervista.org/vecchie-foto-e-cartoline-di-stazioni-ferroviarie/nggallery/image/155>>.

chatted about Gobetti's plans, and his ambitions for a new, international phase of his editorial career.²¹ Overnight Gobetti crossed into France and traveled on to Paris, where he arrived on the morning of the 4th and settled himself in a small hotel on the Left Bank, at 31, Rue des Écoles. Having seen her husband off, Ada meanwhile returned to their apartment in Turin to await word of his successful arrival in Paris, and an invitation to join him, once he had found somewhere suitable for them all to stay. The drama of her vigil over the course of the following fortnight can be reconstructed on the basis of her diary and correspondence.²²

* * * * *

[Turin] 3 February, [1926]

At the moment you left, a snow shower: thick, white, sudden. As if it wanted, icy and pale, to freeze the torment of parting a little.

You suffered, too, leaving me. Tears were trembling in your eyes, too, when you lifted your head after kissing the baby's forehead, while he was sleeping peacefully with his little hands open and outstretched like a salute.

You pressed me passionately to your heart, but since I was trembling a little and couldn't overcome my distress, you said to me, "Don't get upset. The baby mustn't suffer. You'll come soon, too, and we'll be so happy. But if you cry now, how can I leave calmly?"

I understood that it was again my duty to smile, and I smiled at you while I kissed you, conquering my pain. I would have liked to tell you so many little, childish things, but sometimes words are so empty and useless. I abandoned myself on your chest with a wild desire to merge myself with you, to disappear in you.

²¹ Eugenio Montale. "Gobetti." *Corriere della sera*, 16 February, 1951. Gobetti had discovered Montale's work in 1924 and published his first collection of verse, *Ossi di seppia* (*Cuttlefish Bones*), in 1925. Montale would go on to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1975.

²² Ada's correspondence with Piero and her diary, held in the archives of the Centro Studi Piero Gobetti in Turin, have been published in: Piero and Ada Gobetti. *Nella tua breve esistenza. Lettere, 1918-1926*. A cura di Ersilia Alessandrone Perona. Torino: Einaudi, 1991. The letters she received from other friends and acquaintance in: *L'Autunno delle libertà. Lettere ad Ada in morte di Piero Gobetti*. A cura di Bartolo Gariglio. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2009. Individual citations are given in a single note at the end of the section, in order to minimize distraction from the flow of the material. Ada dated only some entries in her diary, though it is possible from their contents to work out how to order them with respect to her correspondence and the two articles from the Turinese daily *La Stampa* which I have included. Where dates and signatures are missing from letters (generally from Gobetti's), I have also omitted them, labeling such passages as necessary to avoid confusion with diary entries. In typically programmatic fashion, Gobetti began writing to Ada in French once he arrived in France; I have indicated this in the letters by leaving an opening phrase, sometimes a word or two elsewhere, in French. He switched back to Italian only for his last two messages.

I went with you as far as the door. When you were already on your way down the stairs you turned and said to me, with your dear, rascally smile, “When you come to Paris, don’t forget *Poussin*.”²³ “No, no,” I shouted gaily to you, and then I went back in. I heard the thud of the carriage door.

And now I’m here, in the lonely house, next to the baby’s cradle, and he’s sleeping again, with his little hands outstretched, and it looks as though he’s smiling in his sleep. I’m thinking of my other child far away, who is tired, perhaps, or sad, and surely thinking, lulled by the clatter of the train, of his two babies far away.

But why this anxiety? You left confident and serene. I don’t have to do anything but wait peacefully, watching over the little one, until you send for me. And then, with what infinite joy I’ll find myself back in your arms!

No, I’m not crying, my little one. You won’t suffer that misery. I want to be cheerful and happy, not give in to the sadness of his solitude. To console myself, thinking that soon I’ll find the smile of our life whole again.

* * * * *

At this moment you’re arriving in Paris. In the dim, uncertain winter twilight the blue-black outlines of the Parisian suburbs pass before your eyes. And you forget the fatigue and loneliness of the long night’s travel and feel the ardor of battle stirring in your soul. If I were with you, you would search out my hand and silently clasp it, with that gesture of habit which is so dear to me.

But I’m far away, and you won’t find my hand when you search for it. I can’t sleep any more – I’ve given the little one his milk – and now I’m thinking of you with humble, infinite, profound adoration. I am so yours that you can’t help but feel a movement of tenderness and a force in your heart.

* * * * *

Ma chérie,

safely arrived. No obstacles at the border. I found my room at Rue des Écoles, 31. E[mery] is in Paris. I’ve seen Prezzolini, too, and I’m meeting him tomorrow evening.

I couldn’t do anything today. I slept two hours. Apartments are very expensive, and you can find them easily. I’m not rushing, so as to find a good one.

Remember that you have to register the subscribers who have paid M. Fortunato.

On a chair in my study I left a folder with old articles, papers, notes, etc. When the time comes, you’ll need to bring me it.

I’m writing to you in great haste, so I can’t search for affectionate words in this language, which I now consider made for business.

Is *Poussin* still *malin* and melancholy? Send letters of no importance here. Don’t give anyone the other address. Tell all my friends to write to me here taking whatever precautions are appropriate.

Goodbye, *ma petite*, and be good.

Greetings to my parents and yours. Remember to number the letters 1, then 2... 3 etc.

²³ “*Poussin*” is the French word for “chick,” and was their nickname for Paolo.

* * * * *

I'm a little sad, sweetheart, because I haven't had any news of you yet. But I'm not faltering; I'm so sure nothing bad can happen to our love; and the perfect intimacy of the last few days has united us so securely that we can't feel ourselves alone. But I would like to hear your voice, which brings me – even from far away – the echo of your smile.

* * * * *

Paris, samedi le 6 février, 1926

Ma petite chérie,

Yesterday I received your letter of the 3rd and 4th. You'll receive mine of the 4th with some delay, because I put it in the post only yesterday evening.

Thursday night I had dinner with our friend from Cambridge [Francesco Saverio Nitti]. They're all here, all the children. They have a very nice house on the first floor of a modern building on a very wealthy avenue. They pay 50,000 francs in rent, naturally. *Monsieur* is still an optimist – his professional duty, I told him. *Madame* thinks they will never see the fatherland again. They weren't able to save anything of their Italian goods and chattels, which is a pretty state for a man who's been slandered as he has. He is too fatuous, perhaps; but also too noble.

Yesterday evening I had dinner with Pontius Pilate [Giuseppe Prezzolini]. Dolores was very sweet. She sided all the time with me against her husband's philo-fascist skepticism. She wants to divorce, because he is no longer the man she married. The truth is, it's for the family that he has to earn a lot, and consequently adapt himself and not be too bold. He admitted his failure. He made a very sorry impression on me.

I've had an offer to go to Nice, as the editor of a French and Italian paper, but I'm not even considering it. I have to stay here.

We must give up the idea of bringing the furniture. Pontius Pilate told me a small shipment of essential items (he has 4 little rooms) will cost 8,000 francs. You'll bring only two or three trunks or chests with crockery, clothing, etc., and have them sent to Paris direct: that way the customs inspection will be done in Paris.

If Adriano [Olivetti] comes to Turin, you can ask him if he'll send us an m [m.20 typewriter] to Paris in payment for past and future advertisements, with no other charges for us.

Did the B [*Il Baretti*] come out?

10-12 copies should be sent to Pontius Pilate.

Goodbye to everyone.

Kisses to you and *Poussin*.

* * * * *

How cheery and confident your two letters of today are, my love. They've made me full of festive impatience to join you.

Of course you can't not succeed: in anything. Because your every action has its justification, its goodness, in itself, and has no need of external confirmations. You have never measured your abilities by the success of any particular enterprise, something that's absurd, silly. Your abilities are demonstrated in the action you complete, in which you believe. And you don't look for anything else.

Perhaps it's this indifference of yours that brings you success. Because you never feel indecision, my intrepid child. And your inner conscience is enough for you. This serene force of yours – which is also the fruit and conquest of long, moral labors – is nevertheless so fresh and light, as if it were an ingrained, instinctive force belonging to some elemental creature. There is nothing pedantic or dry in you. Your spiritual and moral conquests are truly perfect because their weight and impact don't make themselves felt.

You make me think sometimes of Siegfried, of Achilles, the eternally youthful heroes, on account of your laughing, childlike nature, which isn't recklessness, but an active, fruitful affirmation.

* * * * *

[*Paris, le 7 février, 1926*] 3

The rental business is very simple: I understand everything now, but it's nasty all the same.

There's a rent control system here. Landlords can't raise rents just as they want, at least not in the old buildings. So everyone stays in their apartments, and you can't find apartments in old buildings unless you have friends and connections. The new buildings are all in the suburbs and are all very expensive. I found one: 1 bedroom, dining room, kitchen, bath, central heat. Costs no less than 4500 francs – with an extra bedroom, 6500.

You can find rentals on those terms (in the suburbs, on any floor) any time you like. They're attractive and comfortable. They go up in rows here every day. You can't have an office in one.

If you look using an agency you have to pay 100-200 francs to get a *single* address, with no guarantee the thing will do. If, since you've seen that it won't do, you pay again, you'll get another address. When you've found something, you pay the agency 10% (of the annual rent). Sometimes you have to pay the concierge another 10%.

I went to see your friend yesterday evening. She had already had your letter. I hope that with her this business will be easier. She has connections, concierge friends. She didn't even know about the gauntlet you run in those agencies. She told me in horrified tones about ridiculous rents (1500-2000 fr.).

I hope, with her connections, to find at least 2-3 rooms for the moment. Since you'll be here, we'll look for a space for the bookshop and an apartment not too far off. Perhaps it will all be done in 8 days. Otherwise I'll rent one of those apartments in the new buildings that I told you about.

You can send the proofs to Vincenzino [Nitti]'s address, Avenue de la Tour Maubourg, 41, as soon as you get them.

You can write to your friend to thank her for her kindness.

Greetings to *Poussin*

* * * * *

Our new house will be very simple and bare.

But perhaps it's a good thing that shipping is so difficult, so we can hardly take anything with us. Better to keep this house as it is, for when we come back. And since life has given us this privilege, too – as I see it now – of starting everything completely afresh, in one fell swoop, it's better that everything be new, simple, cheerful.

I'll get just a few things for the new house — I'd like two or three rooms in the Latin Quarter, near the Luxembourg — but all fresh and light. When you go to the Louvre (in the beginning I won't be able to come so as not to leave the baby) you'll bring me reproductions of the paintings you like most and we'll people the walls with them. Perhaps we'll have the odd framed picture. Bit by bit we'll get books, mostly French ones, naturally. We'll study French literature, which we hardly know anything about. That way we'll renew our personal culture, too.

And then? And then? Will we return one day to this house, or will we leave behind that other little house, too, and go ever further afield?

Who knows? It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter. So long as we're together it will always be a joy to begin again, anywhere, and make everything new.

You're already starting to chirp, little one. How happy I would be if, when we arrived in Paris, you knew how to say "Papà."

I know it's impossible. But I think how your father's blue eyes would shine with joy, and how the misery of our recent separation would vanish in that happiness.

What a long time it seems to me you've been away, my love. Every so often I'm seized by a tremendous anxiety to see you, so intense it's painful. To see your eyes, your hands, your face again, to hear your little endearments: how can we go on being apart?

But soon a letter from you will arrive that will say: come, I'm waiting for you. How joyfully I'll bring you your child, and see your blonde head bent anxiously over him again while he sleeps.

I have so much love in me, and I can't make you feel it all, like this, from far away. My soul is swollen up with all this affection I can't give.

* * * * *

Paris 10 [February, 1926] 12.30

Affectionately

Piero

Telegram from Piero to Ada

* * * * *

[Paris, 11 February, 1926]

Dear ones,

Since I'm changing addresses, it would be better from now on if you wrote to me at the Sun King's [LUIGI Emery's] address, as Ada did for no. 2.

Here everything is going very slowly, and making me very tired.

Affectionately yours

For D[idi]

How much material is there by now for a new hat [an issue of *Il Baretto* — a *beretto*, or beret]? The minute the workman has got it down, send it to me so I can correct it. Tell him to do it soon. Otherwise it won't be possible to keep up with the competition from abroad. Did the latest model go down well?

I shan't write any more because I'm very tired. Greetings to *Poussin*, whom I saw in his salon.

Tell my friends not to write for the moment: I'll write to them. You reply to old uncle B. in Naples [Benedetto Croce], and send me his letter, if you can.

Piero, to his parents and Ada

* * * * *

[Turin] 14 February [1926] 5

I got your letter of the 11th from Ninin. I hope by now you'll have had the one from Pontius Pilate.

You tell me you're tired: don't worry if you can't write to me very much, just take good care of yourself and try to manage things so you don't tire yourself too much. I beg you, for Poussin's sake as well.

Don't run about too much looking for lodgings. You already have so many other things to do! Any hole in the wall will do for the time being: once I'm there we can get everything straight. How is it that you're not in the Rue des Écoles any more? If you give me the new address, I'll send you a small package with the handkerchiefs and other little things.

So far Arnaldo has sent me only the bear (5 1/2 columns) for the hat: any day now Davide and Mr. Costazzurra should bring me their galleys. As soon as I have it all, I'll send it to you.

The proofs of your Gogol came, and I've already corrected them and sent them back. Bernardino sends everything punctually and it's all taken care of. The only thing that bothers me is Guido's silence: tomorrow I'll write to him again, for the third time.

Our little one is very well, as ever. I'm sending you a first photograph of him. Don't leave it out in the light too much because it's not fixed yet, so it will fade. Soon I'll send you some other better ones with Poussin asleep and awake. For now, you'll have to be content with this proof.

I've been taking him outside a bit for a day or two, and I think the fresh air does him good. Yesterday I got the bill from Dr. V. (240), and tomorrow I'll go and pay it. Nothing so far from the others.

Sweetheart, send a word or two often to reassure me, even if you can't write me anything longer. This separation is really too miserable without the comfort of a living word. And as soon as it's possible, send for me to join you. I'll come immediately, and bring you *Poussin*.

Goodbye, little one, and when you feel lonely, think of the affection of your

didi

Best wishes from my parents

* * * * *

Instead of the letter from you that I was expecting, a few obscure lines in which you say you're tired.

I feel oppressed by a great anxiety: you're tired, and you don't have my hands and my heart to give you rest. You're alone, in that big city you hardly know, and there isn't anyone who can answer your childlike need for affection.

But why don't you send for me, why don't you want me with you? I wrote to you right away: let me come, whatever happens, we'll make the best of things, nothing matters besides our affection. The baby won't suffer either, I swear it: I'll be able to take care of him and protect him from the cold, from the journey; I'll be able to defend both of my children against any kind of harm. But not like this, from far away. My passion shatters against the emptiness, and I can't do anything to close this distance that

separates us. Let me come right away: your weariness will vanish in my arms. Nothing else matters. Why should we still be far apart?

No, I'm not upset, sweetheart. I am serene and calm. Perhaps my fears are worse than reality. I'm not upset. See, I'm not leaving right away, as my heart wishes, I'm waiting for a word from you, I'm as reasonable and serene as you want me to be. The little one isn't suffering. But call me to your side, send me that one word which your heart must surely already have silently pronounced.

I await that word in a clear flame of expectancy and love.

I've sent you a photo of the little one: how you'll smile when you see it! How could you possibly not to want him with you immediately, the baby waving his little hands in the arms of his smiling mother?

* * * * *

Paris, 41 bis, Bd. de la Tour Maubourg
14 February, 1926

My dear Mrs. Gobetti,

Tonight I am taking upon myself a responsibility, unbeknownst to your husband; but you are so good and intelligent that you will be able to understand and sympathize with my impulse. Your husband has been ill for a few days with generalized bronchitis, and will have to stay in bed for quite a while. My son is caring for him with affection, and he lacks materially for nothing; also because it seemed preferable to move him from the hotel where he had ended up, which wasn't even very clean, to a clinic, where he is afforded every possible care. Your husband isn't very well, however: he is depressed from time to time, has some heart trouble and, above all, he is tired and lonely by himself in a foreign country. In such physical circumstances a beloved face and the caring attention of close family can do more than any medicine. Please permit me to offer you some advice. Since you have decided to come to Paris, why don't you come right away? I believe it would be the immediate recovery of Gobetti, and you could use those days to look for a house as well, and provide for everything you'll need to get settled in Paris.

I needn't tell you that we are completely at your disposal in anything we can do to make the beginnings of your life here easier. I'll start by saying that you may even trust us with Paolo, during those hours when Gobetti has need of you. I shan't reread or reflect further, but put this letter of mine in the mail to you, thinking in my heart that you'll be glad of it.

Antonia Nitti Persico

* * * * *

Dear Mrs. Gobetti,

Please don't worry yourself over the silence from our friend. He has tired himself somewhat in recent days, and had a slight recurrence of his illness. But he is being extremely well looked after and helped by a number of friends. I thought it best to tell how things stand, in order that you not worry unnecessarily. He bids me greet you all, and tell you above all not to imagine things worse than they are.

Please know that in the meantime I am always ready to do everything necessary for our friend, and that I remain sincerely yours,

G. Prezzolini

* * * * *

Paris, 16 [February, 1926], night

Piero Gobetti, who had been in Paris for several days on some editorial business, died unexpectedly today. He was ill and, on friends' advice, had been taken to Dr. Bach's clinic two days ago. Yesterday evening at 11 o'clock, the friends who were taking care of him were able to observe a noticeable improvement; but today at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, when the doctor went to see him, he found himself before a cadaver. Gobetti had died without anyone's noticing.

La Stampa, 17 February, 1926

* * * * *

16 February

It's not possible.
It *shouldn't* be possible.

Don't think, don't think, don't go mad.
The child mustn't suffer, he mustn't cry looking in vain for his milk.
You have your whole life to cry, to suffer.
But now you must think of his son.

* * * * *

Turin, 17. [II.1926]

Madam,

The announcement that I have just read in *La Stampa* has produced in all of us a feeling of anguish and of revolt against the inevitable. It doesn't seem possible to us that your Piero, so lively and courageous and enthusiastic, is no more! My wife, my children and I offer you our heartfelt sympathy.

Luigi Einaudi

* * * * *

My love, my baby, my life, I wasn't there at your side in the hotel room, in the room at the clinic, when you needed me most.

You were alone. Sad and all alone, as you used to say jokingly last autumn, when you were ill, and if I left the room for a moment I found you tossing and turning, with your hair sticking up and your head hidden in the gap between the two pillows, pretending not to see me come back in: "Didi has left me all alone... I'm all alone here... sad and all alone..." And how your eyes sparkled when I came over to you and pressed your head to my heart.

It wasn't enough for you, no, to know that I was in the next room, the certain knowledge of my love wasn't enough for you. You wanted me nearby, just as I was, with my smile, my hands, and my lips on your forehead; and for me to straighten your pillows and give you the shawl, and press you to my heart.

And now you were alone, when your heart must have called me for a long time; and I didn't hear, and I couldn't come running to give you peace with my caresses, and maybe it seemed to you that my love for you wasn't as deep as you thought, since I couldn't appear miraculously at your side.

I suffer from this solitude of yours in intense spasms. What was all this love worth, in the end, if it couldn't reunite us in a supreme moment?

It's atrocious to think that you won't come back; but a greater torment, a greater anguish for me is the pain of your sorrow that I wasn't able to dispel.

* * * * *

Naples, 18.II.1926

Beg you express Gobetti family our profound grief their misfortune that strikes us all

Benedetto [Croce]

Telegram from Croce to his sister-in-law, Luisa Rossi, a friend and neighbor of Ada's in Turin

* * * * *

We were infinitely close. When we were apart for a few days (oh few, few, and you always arrived a day earlier than planned!) we lived only in a state of longing for one another.

Whatever we had felt, or thought, or done during those days seemed real to us only when we had told it to each other, when it was no longer either mine or yours, but had become common to both of us, ours.

There was nothing good in us that wasn't ours, and everything had its beauty and its truth in the very fact of being common to us.

And now – this horrible blank: not knowing what you thought during those days when you were far away from me. It's not fair. It's not fair. Your whole life was mine, and those days – the last ones, the most important and sacred – I'll never know what they were like. And I won't know if you understood. I won't know if you asked for me, if you asked for your son. My love, my love, all this affection that I haven't been able to give you, that I'll never be able to give you any more, and that you must have searched for in vain. Why all this? Why? I can't accept it, I can't bow down my head. Because you are my faith and I can't believe that your heart is no longer beating.

You won't hear your son call you "Papà," you won't see him smile and hold up his arms to you.

But at least you saw him, at least you knew he existed. And if you understood that you were dying, it must have been a gift of peace, the thought of him, continuing your life.

Perhaps that's why you loved him so touchingly, and were jealous of his every breath, and didn't want anyone to come near him, so that he would see you, and you alone, and be able to remember you. Oh, if only he could remember your face! But he's cheerful as can be, doesn't know a thing, just smiles and smiles.

When he can understand it, I'll teach him your love. I'll teach him to see you and love you in everything that's good and strong and noble in his soul.

* * * * *

London, 18 February

My dear child,

Know that I am near you in your terrible grief. I cannot think of this loss without feeling oppressed by an anguish that knows no comfort. And I imagine what you must be suffering, how desperate your torment is. I feel as though I have lost a root in life. I feel aged by many years. That boy was truly one of my favorites. Something of me had passed into him. In him I felt myself live again with the best parts of my soul. All shattered! All destroyed! I want to shout my pain furiously, and I cannot.

Please embrace Gobetti's father and mother for me: his poor mother!

G. Salvemini

* * * * *

Paris, 19, night

This morning at 9 o'clock, funeral services for Piero Gobetti were conducted in the Chapel of the Virgin at the church of St. Honoré of Eylau, Place Victor Hugo. News of the young Turinese writer's premature end, announced yesterday in the newspapers, brought numerous French journalists and political figures, as well as correspondents from the major Italian newspapers and various members of the *émigré* community, together around his bier, which was covered with flowers provided by the affection of his friends.

The ceremony bore the spontaneous imprint of deep, personal mourning; and it could not have been otherwise in the presence of his father's dramatic grief, which, in its simple, rough humanity swept away partisan cares and reflexes, fixing everyone's thoughts in stark contemplation on the silent tragedy of the 25-year-old life shattered, by an almost instantaneous thunderbolt, so far from his home, from his wife and Fatherland.

[...]

This morning's funeral services, rendered more solemn by the performance of a mass with choral accompaniment, ended at 10 o'clock. The body, followed by almost all those in attendance, was then taken to the Père Lachaise cemetery, where it received provisional burial.

La Stampa, 20 February, 1926

* * * * *

But it's not true, it's not true: you will come back. I don't know when, it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter. You will come back, and your little one will run to you, and you'll lift him up in your arms. And I'll hold you so tight, and never let you go again, never again.

It's an empty dream, all this, a test you wanted to put me to. You can see me, hear me; and I will show myself worthy of your love.

When you think the test has lasted long enough, you'll come back and never leave me. Many years will have passed, perhaps, but your eyes will shine just as they always did, and again I'll hear the affectionate tones of your voice.

Dearest, my little one, my love, I'm waiting for you. I'll wait for you forever. I need to wait for you in order to keep on living.

* * * * *

Ada made seven more entries in her diary during the month of February before abandoning it, as she struggled to come to terms with Gobetti's death. Obedient to her family's wishes, she did not travel to Paris for his funeral, but stayed in Turin with Paolo, her mother and mother-in-law, while her father went with Gobetti's father to represent their households at the service.²⁴ At 23, Ada found herself not only the widowed mother of an infant, but also the custodian of her husband's controversial legacy.²⁵ Overwhelmed, she went through a prolonged period of withdrawal, from which Benedetto Croce helped her to emerge: he and his family befriended her during their annual summer visits to the Piedmont, and in time he encouraged her to take up her intellectual interests again. Slowly she began to rebuild a life for herself and Paolo in Turin.²⁶

* * *

As Ada's diary and correspondence make clear, Gobetti's sudden death was shocking to all who knew him, provoking widespread anger and despair, accompanied for many by a sense of helplessness. The trauma of loss was exacerbated for his family and friends in Italy by the fact that they were deprived of the usual public rituals of mourning: the hastily organized funeral in Paris and provisional burial at Père Lachaise were never followed by the repatriation of Gobetti's remains, so no services or public

²⁴ The two men brought back the few personal belongings that Piero had with him at the time of his death. The letters he had received from Ada were lost. Her final letter of February 14th appears here because it was never sent, and so was preserved with her papers.

²⁵ Both roles are identified in the letters of condolence which Ada received, though, as Bartolo Gariglio notes, only the women who wrote to Ada addressed her personal situation directly; for the men she remained, above all, her husband's representative. See *L'Autunno delle libertà*, p. xxiii. The summary of Ada's reaction to Gobetti's death which follows is based on Gariglio's remarks on p. xxxiii.

²⁶ The passages in the preceding section are taken from, in order: *Nella tua breve esistenza*, pp. 691-692; *Ibid.*, p. 692; *Ibid.*, p. 639; *Ibid.*, p. 693; *Ibid.*, p. 641-642; *Ibid.*, p. 694; *Ibid.*, pp. 644-645; *Ibid.*, p. 695; *Ibid.*, p. 647; *Ibid.*, p. 648; *Ibid.*, pp. 649-650; *Ibid.*, pp. 695-696; *L'Autunno delle libertà*, p. 171-172; *Ibid.*, p. 207; *La Stampa*, 17 febbraio 1926, p.2; *Nella tua breve esistenza*, p. 697; *L'Autunno delle libertà*, p. 75; *Nella tua breve esistenza*, pp. 697-698; *L'Autunno delle libertà*, p.69; *Nella tua breve esistenza*, pp. 698-699; *L'Autunno delle libertà*, p. 239; *La Stampa*, 20 febbraio 1926, p. 7; *Nella tua breve esistenza*, p. 699

commemorations were held in Turin. There had been no farewells when he left for Paris. Gobetti simply vanished from the scene; and though the details of his departure, illness and death were known, and would be made public, the end of his life was experienced as a forced disappearance. Immediately it became the subject of competing stories, as people tried to fill the void, a battleground in the propaganda wars that accompanied the rise of fascism and the consolidation of its hold on power. While the regime belittled Gobetti as an insignificant figure, abandoned in exile by even his closest friends and family, his supporters lionized him as a courageous hero who had been driven to his death, a martyr for the cause of antifascism. Gobetti's death became the defining moment of his life, which in turn became a myth, one of the central myths of the antifascist resistance. "Henceforth Gobetti is a uniform, a program for life," one militant supporter exclaimed in his letter of condolence to Ada, "his teaching will not be lost."²⁷

Gobetti's heroic myth has dominated the representation of his life ever since. His supporters went on to be leaders of the resistance to fascism and, later, of the armed struggle against German occupation. After the war many were major figures in government during the period of post-war

²⁷ The phrase is taken from Carlo Rosselli's letter to Ada, *L'Autunno delle libertà*, p. 223. A full examination of Gobetti's myth, the images it has generated, and the political and cultural uses that have been made of them, is beyond the scope of this study. The Italian literature on the subject is voluminous, covering the entire period from his death to the present day, and including publications in a wide variety of popular and academic genres. The best summary of its trajectory since World War II is contained in Marco Gervasoni, *L'intellettuale come eroe. Piero Gobetti e le culture del Novecento*. Milano: La Nuova Italia, 2000, Chapter IX, "Novus rerum nascitur ordo? L'Italia repubblicana e gli spettri di Gobetti," pp. 409-464. The letters of condolence written to Ada record the birth of the myth, as Gariglio points out (*L'Autunno delle libertà*, p. xvii), and with it the initial passage of Gobetti's image from individual to collective memory, as Ersilia Alessandrone Perona notes in "Alle radici della fortuna di Piero Gobetti," in *Gobetti tra Riforma e rivoluzione*. A cura di A. Cabella e O. Mazzoleni. Milano: FrancoAngeli, 1999, p. 121. The myth's core images – Gobetti as hero, law-giver, prophet, and saint – are all present in outline in the letters, which reveal especially clearly the first stage of Gobetti's secular beatification: Ada received no fewer than five letters of condolence asking for photographs of her husband, as though he were a saint whose image could convey blessings. See the letters in *L'Autunno delle libertà* from Lelio Basso (p. 13), Oreste Ciattino (p. 61), Pietro Fillak (pp. 87-8), Rocco Santacroce, (p. 241), and Lionello Vincenti (p. 288).

reconstruction, founding fathers of the new Republic of Italy.²⁸ Throughout they kept Gobetti's memory alive as a source of inspiration and courage, and in victory they honored him as one of the harbingers of Italy's democratic rebirth. Gobetti's myth embodied their sense of active participation and success in the victory over fascism and nazism, and in the reconstruction of a their nation as a democracy after the war; and it continues to be a source of pride and dignity in this regard for many Italians today. In later years this symbolism has also made Gobetti's image an object of political contention, as representatives of the various factions involved in the resistance have sought to validate their positions by claiming his legacy or, in some cases, by attempting to undermine it. The ghosts of fascism, and of the civil war that accompanied the end of World War II in Italy, have still not been fully laid to rest, and Gobetti's myth continues to be used in national political debate as a proxy for settling old scores opened during these conflicts, for challenging the political order that has been established in the intervening years and, more generally, as a weapon in the struggle for control over the history of the period.²⁹ The greatest casualty of these memory wars has been Gobetti himself, the historical Gobetti, whose life story has been reduced to a political creed, and whose image has acquired an emotional charge that prevents dispassionate investigation of his activities.

²⁸ A core group of Gobetti's friends and supporters developed a program of revolutionary "liberal socialism," and went on to found the conspiratorial organization *Giustizia e Libertà*, active in Turin in 1929-30, until the arrest and imprisonment or exile of its leaders. In 1942 the surviving members of *GL* joined with other liberals and socialists to found the *Partito d'Azione*; and in 1943-5 they fought as partisans against the German occupation. Ferruccio Parri, leader of the *PdA*, and of the armed resistance in northern Italy, became Prime Minister of the first independent Italian government formed after the war in 1945. Other members of the *PdA* were, like Vittorio Foa, elected to the Constituent Assembly which drafted the constitution of the new Republic. Many others went on to prominent academic careers, including Franco Venturi, the historian of the Enlightenment whom Slavists also remember for his history of Russian populism, known in English as *Roots of Revolution*. Others were not so fortunate. Leone Ginzburg, the first Slavist appointed to the University of Turin, and father of the historian Carlo Ginzburg, was a founding member of both *GL* and the *PdA*. He was arrested in Rome in 1943 while working at a clandestine press and passed into the hands of the SS at the *Regina Coeli* prison, where he was tortured to death in February, 1944.

²⁹ For complementary discussions of this struggle by historians approaching the period through the experiences of protagonists from opposing camps, see: Tommaso Piffer. *Il Banchiere della Resistenza: Alfredo Pizzoni, il protagonista cancellato della guerra di liberazione*. Mondadori, 2005, especially pp. 238-243; and Giovanni De Luna. *Storia del Partito d'Azione 1942-1947*. 2a edizione. Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1997, especially the preface, pp. IX-XVIII.

It is symptomatic of this situation that Gobetti has been the subject of many portraits, both pictorial and literary, but not of a full biography, despite the oceans of ink spilled in commemoration of his activities.³⁰ Many aspects of his life have, in fact, scarcely been investigated: the commercial side of his work as editor and publisher, for example, or his childhood and family history, not to mention his study of Russian language and literature.³¹ As a result important actors have been relegated to the background of his story, where they have not been omitted altogether; and while considerable effort has been expended on identifying Gobetti's intellectual contacts at the national and international levels, little has been done to situate him among the various local communities which surrounded him in Turin. Gobetti's public intellectual life has remained the focus of even the most recent scholarly investigations, his published works or, in a few cases, the preparatory materials which went into their creation, the principal sources. His private life and local context have remained in the historiographical shadows.

To a large extent the trajectory followed by "Gobetti studies" has been determined by the

³⁰ Surviving images of Gobetti include a number of posed photographs, a caricature published in the Palermo daily *L'Orà* in 1923, and the oil painting produced by Felice Casorati for the inauguration of the Gobetti Center in 1961. They have been collected and published, together with many other related images, in: C. Pianciola. *Piero Gobetti: una biografia per immagini*. Cavallermaggiore: Gribaudo, 2001. The most influential verbal "portrait" is Norberto Bobbio's "Ritratto di Piero Gobetti," which forms the first chapter of his *Italia fedele: il mondo di Gobetti*, published in 1986; the most comprehensive intellectual portrait, Marco Gervasoni's *Piero Gobetti: l'intellettuale come eroe*. Other depictions of Gobetti in various media have consistently been modeled on genres other than biography. Descriptions of a clearly hagiographical bent include: Augusto Monti. "Con Piero Gobetti Vivo e Morto." *Belfagor*. Vol. XI, 1956, pp. 203-211; and, Umberto Morra di Lavriano. *Vita di Piero Gobetti*. Torino: Centro Studi Piero Gobetti, 1984. The documentary film made by Gobetti's son Paolo and released in 1992, together with an accompanying transcript of the interviews on which it is based, is entitled "*Racconto interrotto*," an "interrupted story" dedicated to conveying "Piero Gobetti in the memories of his friends." Alberto Cabella's account of Gobetti's life, published in 1994, *Elogio della libertà: una biografia di Piero Gobetti (In Praise of Liberty: A Biography of Piero Gobetti)*, is an encomium which remains firmly attached to the heroic myth despite laying claim in its subtitle to the status of a biography.

Marco Scavino notes in his introduction to the published catalog of the Gobetti archive that the conclusion of the long process of ordering and describing the materials it contains will enable scholars "to think also about the possibility of realizing a true biographical profile of [Gobetti], attentive to all the complexity and contradictions of his personal, intellectual and political circumstances." In an accompanying note he adds, more explicitly: "Though there are at the moment various excellent studies available in this regard [...] a real biography of Gobetti is lacking." *L'Archivio di Piero Gobetti. Tracce di una prodigiosa giovinezza*. A cura di Silvana Barbalato, con i contributi di Carla Gobetti, Ersilia Alessandrone Perona, Marco Scavino. Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2010, p. 19.

³¹ Scavino mentions the history of Gobetti's editorial and publishing enterprises as a potential topic of investigation in his essay (*L'Archivio di Piero Gobetti*, p. 18). The observation about Gobetti's childhood is mine.

availability of sources, and reflects the history of the documentary holdings now housed in the Gobetti Center.³² For the twenty years following Gobetti's death, fascist repression did much to ensure the destruction and dispersal of Gobetti's own publications, and of many others to which he contributed: the recovery of his published work was therefore an essential first step towards securing his legacy. This process began in the immediate aftermath of World War II and continued through the 1960s, when an edition of Gobetti's works was put out by the Turinese publisher Einaudi in three volumes, full runs of his periodicals were assembled, and copies of almost all the volumes issued by his own publishing house were recovered. At this point attention turned to the creation of a personal archive. Initially this effort focused on the recuperation of Gobetti's voluminous correspondence, later, on the assembly of notes and drafts used to prepare his published writing, and records associated with running his journals. As part of this effort, Ada donated the apartment at via Fabro, 6, which she had continued to inhabit since his death, to house the new archive and provide space for its consultation, creating the *Centro Studi Piero Gobetti*. From the 1960s through 2010 work proceeded slowly and painstakingly on the assembly and processing of the archive, to which access was limited. Most scholarly activity continued, of necessity, to center on Gobetti's published works.

The Gobetti we know from scholarly investigation is therefore Gobetti the writer, the public figure of authority which he constructed for himself. A great deal of work has been done in Italy to situate his public voice amid those which surrounded him in contemporary national debates, and, following his own lead, to identify him as an intellectual descendant of particular national traditions of thought. His precocious success as a child writing school compositions has even been described. Only recently,

³² This story is described in detail in the introductory essays to the catalog of the Gobetti archive: Carla Nosenzo Gobetti. "Presentazione;" Marco Scavino. "L'archivio del fondo Gobetti e lo stato degli studi gobettiani;" Ersilia Alessandrone Perona. "Dall'archivio personale all'edizione di fonti: il carteggio di Piero Gobetti;" Silvana Barbalato. "Introduzione;" in *L'Archivio di Piero Gobetti: tracce di una prodigiosa giovinezza*. A cura di Silvana Barbalato. Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2010. The following summary is based on the information they contain.

however, has attention been drawn explicitly to the performative nature of Gobetti's identity as a writer, and this still in order to discuss his contributions to public debate.³³ The private background to his writerly performance is a topic that has not been broached: it belongs to Gobetti's life as a reader, another area of his activity which has received short shrift in scholarly analysis, though not, as it happens, for lack of sources. When Ada donated their apartment to create the Gobetti center, she donated it as it was, with Gobetti's entire personal library still on the shelves of his study; remarkably, the building had suffered no direct damage during the war, and fascist raids had not extended to the removal or destruction of Gobetti's books. With attention focused on the recovery of his writing and personal papers, they have remained an underexploited resource, however, either for their intellectual content, or for what they can tell us about the place reading occupied in Gobetti's life, and the communities to which it connected him.³⁴

The story of Gobetti's engagement with Russian language and literature is above all the story of his private life as a reader. Reconstructing it produces a form of literary biography, and is an exercise which can tell us a great deal not only about his interest in Russia, but also about his historical circumstances, his self-construction as a writer and public figure, and his place in the culture of his day. Unfortunately, this process has little to gain directly from the existing secondary literature, most of which leaves these areas of his life untouched, when it does not engage in active myth-making about them. For this reason I have chosen to introduce Gobetti with a dramatic reconstruction of the events surrounding his death using primary sources, as a way to begin uncovering the historical reality of his life, to introduce some of the most important people who shaped it and the cultural worlds they inhabited, and to see

³³ See: David Ward. *Piero Gobetti's New World. Antifascism, Liberalism, Writing*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010.

³⁴ An exception to this trend is Emanuela Bufacchi's study of Gobetti's attention to Dante: Emanuela Bufacchi. *Il Mito di Dante nel pensiero di Gobetti*. Premessa di Cosimo Ceccuti. Quaderni della Nuova Antologia, LI. Firenze: Le Monnier, 1994

briefly where the contours of his Russian literary interests emerge against this background.

Ada Prospero (1902-1968) was not only Gobetti's wife, she was his partner in every endeavor to which he turned his hand, and her role in his life cannot be overestimated.³⁵ She and Gobetti grew up in separate apartments in the same building in the center of Turin, where their parents ran family businesses: the Gobettis ran a corner store; the Prosperos were greengrocers. Like Gobetti, Ada was an only child, and the object of great care and attention at home. The Prosperos were better off than the Gobettis, however, – they were designated suppliers to the royal household, – so Ada's education included significant extracurricular opportunities, including, in particular, musical training. Ada was a gifted musician, and trained throughout childhood and adolescence as both a singer and pianist; she was preparing to begin a performing career as a soprano at the time of her engagement to Gobetti. Following his lead, however, she gave up her musical ambitions, and enrolled at the university. At the same time she threw herself into supporting his writing, translating and publishing, and was herself a prolific contributor to his three reviews, as well as *de facto* administrative assistant. Gobetti and Ada were inseparable, their devotion a legend among friends and acquaintance; from the time they actually met, in September 1918, they were seldom apart and, as Ada's correspondence indicates, were in constant contact by mail whenever they were obliged to separate.

After Gobetti's death, Ada eventually returned to intellectual life as a translator and children's author. She remained active in the antifascist resistance in Turin, joining first *Giustizia e libertà* and then the *Partito d'Azione*. During World War II she participated actively in the Resistance and distinguished herself by her courage; at the end of the war she was elected deputy mayor of Turin. In 1956 she

³⁵ There is, unfortunately, no biography available of Ada, either. What follows is a summary based on a variety of sources, in particular: Andrea Gobetti: *Piacere, Ada Gobetti: l'emozione educativa*. Regia di Teo De Luigi. Sceneggiatura di Andrea Gobetti. Torino: Centro Studio Piero Gobetti, 2008; and Jomarie Alano. 'A Life of Resistance: Ada Prospero Marchesini Gobetti (1902–1968).' The University of Rochester, Doctoral thesis, 2002. The Gobetti center houses a substantial archive of Ada's papers, and these include materials assembled by her mother related to Ada's upbringing. The archive is described on the Center's website: <http://www.centrogobetti.it/larchivio/larchivio/139-fondo-ada-prospiero-gobetti.html>.

published an account of her wartime activities entitled, *Diario partigiano*.³⁶ After the war she also threw herself into efforts in support of women's rights, while continuing her work as a translator; and in 1959 she founded a periodical named *Il Giornale dei Genitori*, or, *The Parents' Journal*, in a pioneering effort to promote public discussion of family life and childhood education. In connection with this work she also became the Italian translator of Doctor Spock. As one of her contemporaries in the resistance, Vittorio Foa, reflected many years later in his memoirs:

Ada was a prodigy of creative energy and feminine grace. She possessed a rare gift, the gift of omnipresence, and was present, even if unexpected, in moments of difficulty and bitterness, present in order to help, to console and to promote the [common] good.³⁷

Ada's letters and diary entries reveal the existence of a more complicated reality beneath the surface of her and Gobetti's legendary love, however. Reading through these sources in sequence, one is immediately struck by the disparity between Ada's intimate tone, her constant preoccupation with Gobetti's welfare, her idyllic musings on their future life, and Gobetti's abrupt, judgmental accounts of all the people he has seen, the places he has been, and the worldly affairs with which he is preoccupied in Paris. His letters, with their sparse, formulaic endearments, read more like bulletins from a war-time front than contributions to an intimate conversation, while Ada's are so diligently loving as to become in places saccharine, and to sound a disquietingly false note of self-abnegation. On both sides the correspondence is heavily stylized, testimony to a substantial, joint, myth-making effort which seems, in Ada's case, to be based on a traditional image of feminine subservience at odds with both her childhood education and her life after Gobetti's death. Gobetti's pose as a consummate man of action, on the other hand, seems to rest on an unappealing foundation of self-involvement at odds with his public image as a

³⁶ Ada Gobetti. *Diario Partigiano*. Torino: Einaudi, 1956. Ada's diary has recently been translated into English: Ada Gobetti. *Partisan Diary: a woman's life in the Italian Resistance*. Translated and edited by Jomarie Alano. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014.

³⁷ Vittorio Foa. *Il Cavallo e la torre*. Torino: Einaudi, 1991, p. 132. Remarking further on Ada's vitality and *joie de vivre*, Foa reports that when Italo Calvino first read her *Partisan Diary*, he exclaimed, "God, what a good time you all had!" Croce, on the other hand, apparently responded, "I didn't understand it." (*Ibid.*, p. 133)

self-sacrificing martyr: he does not once inquire after Ada's health and spirits, despite Paolo's recent arrival and his own departure, but issues a steady stream of secretarial instructions for her attention, before admonishing her to "be good." Ada, meanwhile, assures him that he resembles Siegfried and Achilles in his "laughing, childlike nature," and protests her own "profound adoration," the "clear flame of expectancy and love" with which she awaits his instructions. The mixture of patronage and dependency is a surprise, given their legendary reputations.

"Your whole life was mine," Ada later cries in anguish, addressing Gobetti from the pages of her diary after receiving the news of his death: "and those days – the last ones, the most important and sacred – I'll never know what they were like." Beneath her grief and sorrow, we catch a glimpse of an ideal love imagined as complete mutual possession, a Platonic fusion of souls in which Gobetti is as much "hers" as she is "his:" "we were infinitely close," as she puts it. The reality of how she and Gobetti attained this spiritually egalitarian ideal is suggested by some of her other comments. "Whatever we had felt, or thought, or done during those days seemed real to us only when we had told it to each other, when it was no longer either mine or yours, but had become common to both of us, ours." Their love comes into existence as a joint narrative: Ada's use of this time-honored image reveals the importance of reading and writing to their identity as a couple, at the same time that it suggests the dangers such a literary approach poses. While love is meant to be born as narrative, there is always the danger that it will be born of narrative, that the participants will try to force it into existence with stories of their choosing, not their lived experience. They will confuse a deliberate imposition of form with the spontaneous process of its creation, in other words. "It's an empty dream, all this, a test you wanted to put me to," Ada remonstrates in her diary with Gobetti, "you can see me, hear me; and I will show myself worthy of your love. When you think the test has lasted long enough, you'll come back and never leave me." Her unexpected image evokes a love which resembles an examination rather than a joint narrative, and raises

the specter of emotions conjured out of abstract figures.

Besides the depth and complexity of her and Gobetti's attachment, Ada's correspondence also reveals the extent of Gobetti's contacts among the intellectual elite of his day. Francesco Saverio Nitti, (1868-1953), whom Gobetti visited on the very night of his arrival in Paris, was a political economist who had also made a prominent political career before being forced into exile by Mussolini in 1925. Nitti had been Prime Minister of Italy in 1919-20, during the crisis over d'Annunzio's occupation of Fiume; his wife, Antonia Nitti Persico, was the daughter of an eminent jurist from Naples with connections of her own to the liberal establishment. Giuseppe Prezzolini, (1882-1982) was a noted editor, publisher and author, best known as founder and director of the Florentine review *La Voce* from 1908-1913. Though Gobetti refers to Prezzolini as "Pontius Pilate" in one of his letters from Paris to Ada, deriding Prezzolini's attempt to maintain a neutral stance with respect to the fascist regime, the two were close, and Prezzolini is commonly identified as one of Gobetti's four principal mentors. The other three are all represented in Ada's correspondence by their letters of condolence. Luigi Einaudi (1874-1961) was a prominent economist and professor at the University of Turin with whom Gobetti studied as an undergraduate, and who became a contributor to his reviews. Einaudi was also active in the antifascist resistance and served, after the war, as the second President of the Italian Republic from 1948-1955. Giulio Einaudi, the publisher, was his son. Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), the eminent philosopher and historian of culture, was also an early supporter of Gobetti's, and a contributor to his reviews, as was Gaetano Salvemini (1873-1957) a historian who dedicated much of his life to political activism and antifascist resistance. Forced into exile by Mussolini in 1925, Salvemini moved between Britain and France for several years working with other exiles in the conspiratorial underground. In 1930 he moved to the United States and became the first occupant of the De Bosis Chair of Italian Studies at Harvard, where he remained on the faculty until 1948, when he returned to Italy. As even this brief enumeration

makes clear, Gobetti had been taken up by some of the most eminent figures in Italian intellectual and political life, publicly identified as one of the most promising members of his generation, and much was anticipated from his career.

Gobetti's two greatest and most self-sacrificing supporters are almost entirely missing from the sources, however: his parents, Giovanni Battista and Angela, née Canuto. One of the most poignant images contained in the sources is provided by *La Stampa's* description of Gobetti's father, isolated by his "dramatic grief" and "simple, rough humanity" among the mourners in the church of Saint Honoré d'Eylau in Paris. This description marks the only point at which Gobetti's parents make an appearance, and it is fleeting: Gobetti's mother is absent, his father an emotional shadow. In the paper's report, Giovanni Battista Gobetti appears a stranger at his own son's funeral, moreover, out of place with his immoderate display of emotion and "rough" manners, however salutary his sincere emotion in banishing "partisan" reactions. As the report hints, his position is a function of class. For all the haste of its preparation, Gobetti's funeral was an elegant and formal affair, a full choral mass celebrated in the heart of one of the wealthiest Parisian *arrondissements*, and attended by a range of notable French and Italian public figures. After the service Gobetti's body was taken to Père Lachaise; in time a plot was purchased in the cemetery, and Gobetti's remains were transferred to a permanent grave there.³⁸ Apart from honoring Gobetti personally, his funeral and burial were intended to send a clear message about his importance, in Italy and abroad, and the high esteem in which he was held by his supporters. Despite the organizers' generosity, however, these arrangements had the effect of appropriating Gobetti and his story for the educated elite, and took the desirability of this appropriation for granted. Against the background of the funeral's ceremonial pomp, Gobetti's shopkeeper father stood out not only for his

³⁸ This effort was organized and funded by the Nitti family, whose members provided for Gobetti in death as they had during his final illness, with great kindness, generosity and discretion. Antonia Nitti Persico kept Ada abreast of these preparations in her letters, and wrote describing Gobetti's interment in his final resting place on March 30, a ceremony which Ada was also unable to attend. See Gariglio, *op cit.*, pp. 172-3

grief but also for his social origins, his presence a reminder of the gulf that separated the family into which Gobetti had been born from the circles in which he moved as an intellectual and activist.³⁹

Gobetti was the exceptionally bright child of a lower-class family who made a meteoric rise into public life on the strength of his intellectual precocity. His parents were first-generation, urban migrants: they had moved to Turin from the surrounding countryside and opened a corner grocery a few years before his birth in 1901. Minimally educated, they were making their way up in the world thanks to the small business to which they devoted all their energies, and they stinted nothing in the effort to give Gobetti, their only child, the education and opportunities they had not enjoyed. From elementary school onwards he, in turn, distinguished himself as a star pupil. Though their efforts enabled his achievements, Gobetti's parents could not follow him into the world of privilege to which his education gave him access, so they stayed in the background of his public activities. Privately, however, Gobetti remained very much part of the family, living with his parents and running his reviews and publishing house from their apartment in the city center throughout his years as a student. After their marriage in January 1923, he and Ada continued to live with his parents for about a year, until their families were able to set them up in an independent apartment. It was his parents' savings which provided for Gobetti's education and gave him the capital necessary to make an independent start in journalism; and their practical example which encouraged him to run his publishing ventures as self-supporting businesses. Gobetti's story is thus one of extraordinarily rapid upward social mobility, though it is not usually described in these terms. His

³⁹ The evocation of Giovanni Battista Gobetti's spontaneous emotionality and innocence also draws on a powerful stereotype which emerged in Italian public discourse during World War I, and was later exploited by the fascist regime in the construction of its youth movement: the "*popolo bambino*," or "childlike masses." The *popolo bambino* is one of several stereotypes of public discourse which formed a backdrop to Gobetti's development, but which have been relegated to the shadows of the high-brow literature, periodicals and academic works against which his ideas and activity are usually situated. Niamh Cullen, the only scholar who has addressed such influences explicitly, uses *La Stampa* extensively as a source in her discussion of Gobetti's attachment to local myths of Turinese identity. She does not venture a larger judgement as to what the revelation of such influences can tell us about Gobetti as a reader, questions which go to the heart of his ambitions, but also beyond the remit of her study. Antonio Gibelli has provided a full treatment of the politicization of childhood as part of the Italian search for a national self-image in his study, *Il popolo bambino. Infanzia e nazione dalla Grande Guerra a Salò*. Torino: Einaudi, 2005.

funeral in Paris represents the peak of this trajectory, and the moment of his definitive assimilation into the elite. It is also, coincidentally, the moment of his passage into the immortality of national myth. With the creation of the myth, however, Gobetti's own family was written out of his history, and he was definitively separated from his origins.

Gobetti thus lived in a world split not just between private and public spheres, but between two completely separate socio-economic communities. Many among the cultural elite of his day saw no need to join these disparate worlds with any kind of bridge. "One can say very little about the specific environment in which Gobetti was raised," his friend Umberto Morra di Lavriano remarked, decades later, in his incomplete description of Gobetti's life,

and that really only by metaphor and analogy. The shopkeeping, petty bourgeoisie to which Gobetti's parents belonged has a history too pale and indistinct to suggest that anyone would try to record it by carefully taking notes or keeping a diary; his peasant forebears most likely had not even the alphabet at their disposal for such exercises.⁴⁰

The complacency of the remark is breathtaking, its snobbery and disregard for those who lived their lives outside the charmed circle of elite culture. It gives some measure, as a result, of the emotional distance which Gobetti was obliged to travel in creating a space for himself in Italian public life. It is part of his myth that he burst onto the public stage at 17 already a fully formed intellect, just as "Minerva issued forth in her armor from the mind of Jove," to stay with Morra's turn of phrase.⁴¹ Others have described, with greater reserve, Gobetti's "prodigious youth," his "unique" and "miraculous" example of a complete life's work laid out in such a short space of time.⁴² The historical effect is the same: to suppress acknowledgement of Gobetti's lower-class origins, and to ascribe his achievements to extraordinary innate gifts. Despite his unquestionable intelligence, Gobetti was nevertheless involved in a tremendous

⁴⁰ Umberto Morra di Lavriano. *Vita di Piero Gobetti*. Torino: Centro Studi Piero Gobetti, 1984, p. 38.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38

⁴² Norberto Bobbio. *Italia fedele. Il mondo di Gobetti*. Firenze: Passigli, 1986, p. 9

effort of self-construction as he tried to live up to the expectations of what Elena Croce has vividly described as *lo snobismo liberale*, and to overcome the perceived disadvantages of his background.⁴³ His study of Russian language and literature is central to this effort, and should be seen against the background of his ambition, and his attempt to bridge the gap between these divided worlds.

The sources also suggest how much of Gobetti's activity depended on the support of women, another group of participants largely omitted from existing accounts of his life and work. Besides Ada, whom we see doing everything from supervising the production of *Il Baretto* to paying doctor's bills and preparing care packages, as well as looking after an infant, we catch sight of Ada's unnamed friend, who is busily helping Gobetti to navigate the Parisian property rental market with her connections, Dolores Prezzolini and Antonia Nitti Persico, who open their homes to Gobetti during his stay in Paris. Gobetti's mother is present in the background, too, though we do not hear her voice, and Gaetano Salvemini is the only one of Gobetti's acquaintance to acknowledge her individually in the wake of Gobetti's death. Despite their different individual and class backgrounds, these women all contributed to the maintenance of a private space essential to Gobetti's pursuit of his many projects, and to the maintenance of his public image as a future leader, though their activity is absent from his myth. It was this private space which sheltered and defined Gobetti's Russian studies in their early stages, another fact which has doubtless contributed to their subsequent neglect.

Gobetti's bookishness has also been a commonplace of commentary on his life since Giuseppe Prezzolini remarked disparagingly on it in the 1920s.⁴⁴ The contribution made by Gobetti's reading to his behavior has hardly been investigated, however. This omission is due in part to the image of Gobetti fostered by his myth as a heroic individual who underwent no development; and in part to the prolonged

⁴³ Elena Croce. *Lo snobismo liberale*. Milano: Mondadori, 1964.

⁴⁴ Prezzolini repeats his judgment in a later essay collected in: Giuseppe Prezzolini. *L'Italiano inutile*. Firenze: Vallecchi, 1964, pp. 259-264. His reference to Gobetti's bookishness appears on p. 264.

inaccessibility of those sources which provide most information about his personal life. His correspondence with Ada, an indispensable resource in this regard, was not published until 1991, the first volume of his general correspondence, not till 2003. Even since then, however, the wealth of information contained in these meticulously edited volumes has not been much explored: the only studies linking Gobetti's personal behavior explicitly with underlying literary and cultural models are contained in their introductions, by the editor, Ersilia Alessandrone Perona, and a lone article which she published separately in 1990.⁴⁵ This neglect reflects, among other things, a persistent disregard for the letters as literary sources in their own right: like Ada's diary, they were not created solely for private use, as their ultimate publication should perhaps alert us. Their stylization, like their preservation, suggests that they were written with an eye to a wider audience, and one which included later generations: they are familiar letters, and need to be examined in conjunction with his readings, as well as his other writing, for what they can tell us about Gobetti's self-construction. Literary contextualization of this sort has been discouraged, however, by insistence on Gobetti's mythical identity as a kind of revealed, and so static, truth.

In her fifth letter to Gobetti, of February 14, Ada makes a cryptic reference to receiving "the bear (5 1/2 columns) for the hat," and mentions that "[his] Gogol" has come back from the typesetter for proofreading. The first reference is to a translation of Chekhov's dramatic sketch, "*Медведь*," ("The Bear"), which she and Gobetti translated for publication in *Il Baretto*; the second is to a critical profile of Gogol which Gobetti wrote for the Roman periodical, the *Rivista d'Italia*. Both were published posthumously, and the article on Gogol was also later included in Gobetti's *Il Paradosso dello spirito russo*. As her remarks reveal, Ada and Gobetti were still devoting considerable time to the study of

⁴⁵ Ersilia Alessandrone Perona. "Il sistema Ada-Piero. Un percorso nel carteggio Ada Prospero-Piero Gobetti," *Mezzosecolo*, 7, 1990, pp. 280-307; "Introduzione," *Nella tua breve esistenza*, pp. VII-LI; Piero Gobetti. *Carteggio 1918-1922*. A cura di Ersilia Alessandrone Perona. Torino: Einaudi, 2003, "Introduzione," pp. XVII-LXXXI. The next volume of Gobetti's correspondence, covering 1923, is due out this year, to coincide with the ninetieth anniversary of his death.

Russian literature, even at this very difficult moment in their lives. Gobetti's article on Gogol is particularly noteworthy as testimony to their common intellectual passion: he stayed up writing it on the night of December 28, 1925, while waiting for news of Paolo's birth. The practical details contained in Ada's letter give no sense, however, of the larger place these projects occupied in her and Gobetti's imaginative lives. To get a sense of its dimensions, the sources with which I opened need to be set alongside a Russian text with which Ada and Gobetti were familiar from their work as translators.

In 1920 the publishing house associated with the literary and political review *La Voce* put out a small volume containing five short stories and a one-act drama by Aleksandr Ivanovich Kuprin, as part of its series *Il Libro per tutti*, or *Books for Everyone*. The six texts were "translated directly from the Russian by Piero Gobetti and Ada Prospero," as the title page indicates. A note at the end of the volume adds that the translations were made in 1919. Gobetti, in typically thorough and conscientious fashion, also included a note at the front stating that the stories first appeared in the Russian literary journal *Нива* (*The Cornfield*) in 1912, and citing the Russian edition of Kuprin's complete works from which he and Ada worked while making the translations.⁴⁶ This information reveals that he and Ada chose the texts individually and ordered them for presentation in the *La Voce* edition.⁴⁷ In pride of place at the end of the collection they put the shortest and most dramatic of the stories, "*Сильнее смерти*," which they rendered as "*Più Forte della Morte*," or, "*Stronger than Death*." Spare and allusive, the story compresses the history of a love affair into two cinematic scenes which show the lovers' final parting. I reproduce it here in its entirety:

⁴⁶ Gobetti specifies simply "(editore Marcs, Pietroburgo)" in the note, but adds that the stories are contained in Volume VI, and gives their pagination. From this it is possible to establish that he used: А.И. Куприн. *Полное собрание сочинений в девяти томах*. Санкт-Петербург: Издание Товарищества А.Ф.Маркс, 1912. Kuprin wrote "*Сильнее смерти*" in 1897; if Gobetti knew this, he did not mention it.

⁴⁷ The sequence of the translations differs from both the sequence of their original publication and the sequence in which they were reproduced in Kuprin's complete works.

Stronger than Death

- Goodbye...
- Oh no, my dear... Don't say "goodbye"... See you later...
- Goodbye...
- So this means... never?
- You know it yourself... Goodbye.
- Never?

He could find no answer to this passionate question. He was glad he was leaving, breaking off this oppressive, tiresome relationship at last, after three years; but a dim feeling of pity would not allow him to be cruel. The second bell rang.

From above, from the carriage doorway, he saw her standing on the platform, so small and sorrowful, with that sad, long-familiar face, in that same, long-familiar dress... And he remembered the aphorism of some wit or other: "Flight is often victory in love." Impatiently he said:

– What use is it for us to rake over the same old coals for the hundredth time? You and I have both agreed that separation is inevitable. Barely audibly she answered:

– Yes, you wanted it this way...

– And you? Didn't you just agree with me? Or haven't you had enough of the humiliations we've endured in this three-way marriage?

She was silent. He thought to himself that her glance was that of a faithful and intelligent dog whose master had just struck it in anger.

The bell burst into a long, light trill, then fell silent for a moment, and one after another three loud, slow strokes rang out.

He went down the steps, and she had already raised her veil for a parting kiss when a sudden thought caused her to start back.

– My dear, – she whispered, gasping. – My dear... one last request...

– What is it?

– We are about to part... Forever... I know that you don't love me any more... But... give me one more hour... Look – it's now quarter to eleven. Give me your word that tonight at midnight you'll think of me... That won't be hard for you, will it?...

He laughed.

– Very well. There's nothing hard in that. By what do you ask it for?

– You give me your word?

– Yes. I give my word. But why are you asking me to do this?

– You see, at that very same moment, minute for minute, second for second, I'll be thinking of you.

Thinking with all the force of my will, with all the strength of my love. Who knows? Maybe separation doesn't exist for the will, and we'll see each other one more time.

– How strangely you talk...

– But remember, you gave your word...

– I'll keep it. Don't worry.

– You'll be thinking, hard, deeply, passionately?

– Yes, yes. Goodbye.

– See you later...

He sat in the carriage, unconsciously following the rhythmic thumping of the wheels... The strangely joyful feeling of freedom had vanished immediately from his spirit, giving way to an unexpected, dull, unbearable sadness. Some mysterious force called up in his mind with pitiless clarity the subtlest, most insignificant details of the novel he had just finished, reading the last page with relief. Why could he still not get those two wonderful lines by the great poet out of his mind:

“Like wine, the sorrow of passing days
Grows stronger in my soul with time”?

It was around midnight.

The rhythm of the wheels, the swaying of the red curtain around the lamp, and the nervous whistles of the steam engine prevented him from sleeping... Now this proud, freedom-loving man would have given all his pride and his freedom for the possibility of seeing the woman he had abandoned, even for a moment. And suddenly, opening his eyes and coming to, as it were, from this momentary drowsiness, he saw her before him, sitting on the padded bench, covered in a canvas sheet... She didn't say anything, but her eyes shone with endless love and unspoken accusation.

– Who are you?! Why are you here?! – he cried, starting up from his seat in horror.

She shook her head sorrowfully and evaporated in an instant, melting away like morning fog.

The following day he learned that she had poisoned herself in the night, while he was traveling away from the city.⁴⁸

In its structure, setting, characters, language and tone, the story appears to be a model for the entries in Ada's diary that describe Gobetti's departure from Turin and his journey to Paris. Given their obvious stylization, it is hardly surprising to find that some of Ada's diary entries have literary models; nor that these should be texts on which she had worked closely as a translator; but the story's broader coincidence with her and Gobetti's circumstances is arresting. The effect is of a literary premonition, a piece of foreshadowing that crosses the boundary between art and life in just the manner evoked by Kuprin in his story; and it suggests that their Russian readings exercised a powerful influence over Gobetti and Ada both on and off the page. Was Gobetti's departure for Paris at some level, then, a response to his reading of Kuprin? The answer to this question is complex and requires, in the first place, a return to the beginnings of Gobetti's interest in Russian culture, an attempt to find out what drew him to the study of Russian language and literature and shaped his choice of readings, setting him on the path to his encounter with Kuprin. I take up this task in my next chapter. Here I close by returning briefly to the couplet which Kuprin's narrator cites, and which is key to the interpretation of the story, with the suggestion that Pushkin's "Elegy" of 1830, from which it is taken, offers a glimpse of

⁴⁸ The original text is taken from: А. И. Куприн. *Собрание сочинений в 9 томах*. М.: Худ. литература, 1971. Том 2 С. 145-147.

the literary figure which so captivated Gobetti's imagination when he came across it in his Russian readings, and which promised him a way to be "stronger than death:"

Элегия

Безумных лет угасшее веселье
 Мне тяжело, как смутное похмелье.
 Но, как вино – печаль минувших дней
 В моей душе чем старе, тем сильней.
 Мой путь уныл. Сулит мне труд и горе
 Грядущего волнуемое море.

Но не хочу, о други, умирать;
 Я жить хочу, чтоб мыслить и страдать;
 И ведаю, мне будут наслажденья
 Меж горестей, забот и треволненья:
 Порой опять гармонией упьюсь,
 Над вымыслом слезами обольюсь,
 И может быть – на мой закат печальный
 Блеснет любовь улыбкою прощальной.

Elegy

The fading gaiety of my wild years
 Lies heavily upon me, like a bleary hangover.
 Like wine, the sorrow of passing days
 Grows stronger in my soul with time.
 My path is bleak. The rough seas
 Of the future promise me toil and grief.

But I do not want to die, my friends;
 I want to live, so as to think and suffer;
 And there will be joys, I know, among
 The worries, griefs and tribulations:
 At times, again, I will be drunk with inspiration,
 Pour forth tears over my fanciful inventions,
 And love will shine, perhaps, on my sorrowful
 Decline with a parting smile.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ "Элегия (Пушкин)." Викитека. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 May 2016 <[https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Элегия_\(Пушкин\)](https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Элегия_(Пушкин))>.

III - A Hero of Our Times

...gli italiani hanno innumerevoli punti di contatto con gli slavi...⁵⁰

On Thursday, 13 September, 1917, the Provisional Government in Petrograd clung unsteadily to power. What appeared to be an attempted military coup, initiated four days earlier and led by the Commander-in-Chief of Russian forces, Lavr Kornilov, had been defeated by prompt action from the Prime Minister Alexander Kerensky and the Duma, in alliance with the Petrograd Soviet. The “Savage Division” of Caucasian cavalry sent by Kornilov to march on the capital had laid down its arms without firing a shot, and its commander, General Krymov, had committed suicide after a private meeting with Kerensky. Kornilov, officially declared a rebel, had been stripped of his command by Kerensky, who appointed General Mikhail Alexeyev the new Commander-in-Chief, with orders to arrest Kornilov and all those supporting him. At General Staff headquarters in Mogilyov, 400 miles south of the capital, Kornilov declared his personal responsibility for events, and ordered the officers and troops loyal to him to stand down, lest there be unnecessary bloodshed. Meanwhile the German army was consolidating its positions along the Gulf of Riga, having captured the city on September 3rd and routed the Russian army, while the Bolsheviks, newly rehabilitated as allies of the Provisional Government in the struggle against Kornilov, hastened to capitalize on their opportunity to extend control over the Soviets and the workers of Petrograd.⁵¹

Across Europe attention was turned anxiously to Russia as the “Kornilov Affair” unfolded, and

⁵⁰ “...the Italians have innumerable points of contact with the Slavs...” Curzio Malaparte. *Viva Caporetto! La rivolta dei santi maledetti*. Secondo il testo della prima edizione 1921. A cura di Mario Biondi. Firenze: Vallecchi, 1995, p.56

⁵¹ The Kornilov uprising has provoked much discussion and been the subject of conflicting interpretations. Accounts by contemporary participants include those left by Trotsky, Kerensky, and Milyukov. Differing scholarly analyses in English may be found in: Orlando Figes. *A People’s Tragedy: the Russian Revolution, 1891-1924*. New York: Penguin Books, 1998; Peter Kenez. *Red Attack, White Resistance: Civil War in South Russia, 1918*. Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2004; Richard Pipes. *The Russian Revolution*. First edition. New York: Knopf, 1990

the balance of power on the Eastern front hung by a thread. In Italy, the Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo was drawing simultaneously to a close, with both the Italian and Austro-Hungarian armies stretched to breaking point. Italian gains had been significant, and left the Italian army poised to strike a decisive blow against the Austro-Hungarians, but having outrun their supply lines, the Italians were unable to consolidate their positions and launch a further attack. The outcome of the battle therefore remained inconclusive, like those of its ten, equally bloody predecessors. With morale low, and units spread thin along advance positions, the Italians feared the arrival of German reinforcements to the Austro-Hungarian lines, should Russia be defeated or make a separate peace.⁵²

In Turin, the news from Russia had taken precedence even over news from the Italian front lines for three days, as the scale of the challenge to the Provisional Government became apparent. On September 11th the city's most prominent daily newspaper, *La Stampa*, led with the headline: "Kornilov orders Kerensky to give him powers to form new government;"⁵³ on the 12th, "Kornilov marches on Petrograd with his troops;"⁵⁴ and on the 13th, "Intervention by Milyukov and Alexeyev to resolve conflict."⁵⁵ Reports gathered from all over Europe were dominated by reactions to the Russian situation as people struggled to grasp the rapidly unfolding events. Summing up his impressions, Ludovic Naudeau, the correspondent in Russia for the French newspaper *Le Temps*, captured the prevailing mood of uncertainty and suspense:

On the cloudy and shifting stage on which the uncertain phases of the revolution unfold, the most famous actors themselves are able only to grope their way forward, making every sort of obeisance in the direction of

⁵² For a vivid and comprehensive account in English of Italian participation in World War I, see: Mark Thompson. *The White War: life and death on the Italian front 1915-1919*. London: Faber, 2008.

⁵³ «Korniloff intima a Kerenski di consegnarli i poteri per formare un nuovo Governo.» *La Stampa*. 11 settembre, 1917, p. 1. This and all other articles cited are available from the online archive of *La Stampa* at: <http://www.archiviolaStampa.it>.

⁵⁴ «Korniloff marcia con le sue truppe su Pietrogrado.» *Ibid.*, 12 settembre, 1917, p. 1.

⁵⁵ «L'Intervento di Miliukoff e di Alexieff per risolvere il conflitto.» *Ibid.*, 13 settembre, 1917, p. 1.

Destiny, which they feel, instinctively, is stronger than they.”⁵⁶

In his article about the recent collapse of negotiations to form a new French government, *La Stampa*'s own correspondent in Paris concluded more simply: “All eyes are turned to Petrograd.”⁵⁷ And while Turin's, and the world's, attention was thus transfixed by the latest of Russia's revolutionary crises, the 16-year-old Piero Gobetti went out and bought his first work of Russian literature, carefully writing the date on which he acquired it at the top of the title page: 13 September, 1917.



⁵⁶ «Le incognite e le contraddizioni della situazione.» *Ibid.* 13 settembre, 1917, p. 1

⁵⁷ «Il nostro corrispondente ci telegrafa da Parigi, 12, ore 10.25» *Ibid.*, p. 2

A Hero of Our Times, one of the prose masterpieces of Russian Romanticism: what more natural choice for a boy steeped in patriotic war rhetoric, anxiously awaiting the call to “offer his blood” for the Fatherland? Or for a future advocate of “liberal revolution,” watching attentively as Russia’s moderate, parliamentary leaders struggled to defend the regime they had created after deposing the Czar? Or for a passionate admirer of the girl whose lovely soprano voice filtered up from an apartment below his own, and whose dark, “gypsy” looks and Slavic origins called to mind the beautiful “savage” heroines of Russian Romantic fantasy? Or for a spectacularly precocious student already viewed as a prodigy by his teachers, and encouraged to see himself in Lermontov’s image as a Genius, the creator of new, imaginative worlds?

Except that this is not how the start of Gobetti’s interest in Russia has usually been represented. The question of what prompted him to begin studying Russian culture has always remained something of a mystery, answered largely by extrapolation from an analysis of his political views, and in keeping with a periodization of his life constructed to support his heroic myth. His beginnings as a reader of Russian literature have been overlooked in consequence. This chapter will be devoted to an examination of Gobetti’s first readings in Russian literature in order to fill this gap, and suggest new answers to the questions of how and why he took up the study of Russian culture. The timing of his start is particularly important, because it contradicts the received wisdom that he was responding to the Bolshevik revolution. I therefore explore the historical context of the moment in some detail, in search of alternative motivations and influences, using the Turinese daily *La Stampa* as a source from which to reconstruct both contemporary events and the language of public discourse in which Gobetti would have encountered them. From this historical setting and from Gobetti’s first reading a powerful cultural subtext emerges that connects his exploration of Russian literature with the circumstances of the moment, and with his search for a personal narrative of identity: the figure of the Genius. I conclude

with sketch of its contours, and suggest that Gobetti's first contact with Russian culture was prompted by a desire to explore the figure of the Genius as a model for his own self-construction.

Most commentators have assumed that Gobetti's study of Russian culture began in the autumn of 1918, at the moment that is generally accepted as the start of his public intellectual life, marked by his matriculation at the Law faculty of the University of Turin and the simultaneous launch of *Energie Nove*, (*New Energies*), the first of the three independent reviews that he founded. The philosopher Norberto Bobbio, a younger Turinese contemporary of Gobetti's, sets out what has become the standard periodization of Gobetti's life, beginning with his "debut" in late 1918, in his influential "*Ritratto di Piero Gobetti*:"

Gobetti's seven years, 1918-1925, are crucial, dramatic and decisive years for the history of our country: from the end of the war through the establishment of the fascist regime. [...] This seven year span may usefully be divided into three periods, which I will call those of preparation (late 1918—early 1920), waiting (1920—early 1922), and engagement (early 1922—late 1925).⁵⁸

Late 1918 is understood by extension from this framework to be the moment at which Gobetti's interest in Russia also began, part of the public intellectual activity that would culminate in his antifascist resistance. Only one commentator, Umberto Morra di Lavriano has suggested a different and earlier start to Gobetti's Russian studies, though he offers no explanation for his suggestion, preferring simply to evoke the entire episode as another of the mysteries of Gobetti's precocious development:

What induced Gobetti and his companion, later fiancée, Ada Prospero, to throw themselves headlong into an intense study of the Russian language during the first period [of their relationship] in high school? A divination? Or did they await the call of the October Revolution?"⁵⁹

Morra links the start of Russian lessons with the beginning of Gobetti's relationship with Ada, and suggests that they began learning the language while they were both still in school, so before the autumn

⁵⁸ Norberto Bobbio. *Italia fedele: il mondo di Gobetti*. Firenze: Passigli, 1986, pp. 13-14

⁵⁹ Umberto Morra di Lavriano. *La Vita di Piero Gobetti*. Torino: Centro Studi Piero Gobetti, 1984, p. 118.

of 1918, perhaps even before the October Revolution. In a note included in the published edition of her and Gobetti's personal correspondence, Ada dates the start of the language lessons to the autumn of 1918, however.⁶⁰ While Morra seems therefore to have been wrong in dating the start of their language learning, his intuition of an earlier, private interest in Russia was correct, as Gobetti's library shows.

The neglect of Gobetti's early literary readings has been abetted by the widespread conviction that his interest in Russia was primarily political, the extension, more specifically, of an interest in Bolshevism. Gobetti's Russian studies have generally been presented as divided between political analysis, a response to the October Revolution, and literary criticism and translation, an effort to combat Italian cultural provincialism. His political interests have consistently been presented as more significant, and received the lion's share of critical attention.⁶¹ The tendency to separate Gobetti's political from his literary activities, and relegate the latter to secondary status, has also characterized the interpretation of his achievements overall.⁶² One consequence of this tendency has been to generate the assumption that the October Revolution was the source of Gobetti's interest in all things Russian, and

⁶⁰ "In the autumn of 1918 they had begun to study Russian together, taking lessons from Rachele Gutman Polledro." *Nella tua breve esistenza*, p. 22, Note 4

⁶¹ See, for example, Vittorio Strada's introduction to the 1969 reissue of *Il Paradosso dello spirito russo*: Gobetti's *Paradox* seems open to two possible angles of approach: the literary angle, which is quantitatively dominant, seems to impose itself during the reading process...the fact that these writers are seen *sub specie ideologiae*, however,... suggests this reflection to its source, to the problem of the Russian intelligentsia and the Bolshevik revolution, in other words, locating the the unity and the spirit of the whole work in a particular political interest. An analysis of *The Paradox of the Russian Spirit* therefore seems destined to unfold in a space enclosed by the larger zone of Gobetti's entire political thought, and the smaller zone of his simultaneous and serious study of Russian literature. Piero Gobetti. *Il Paradosso dello spirito russo*. Introduzione di Vittorio Strada. Torino: Einaudi, 1969, p. VII

⁶² Niamh Cullen summarizes this situation in her recent study: "Far too often, however, the literature on both Gramsci and Gobetti privileges their roles as theorists above all else. It is only in recent years that this balance is beginning to be redressed in the case of Gobetti." "It is also only in very recent years," she adds, "that scholars outside Italy are beginning to discover Gobetti...However, [their studies] still consider Gobetti primarily as a political theorist and polemicist, and an examination of his broader career as editor, publisher and organizer is outside their remit."

Niamh Cullen. *Piero Gobetti's Turin: modernity, myth, and memory*. Oxford/New York: Peter Lang, 2011, pp. 5-6
A striking, material expression of this bias is provided by the thematic organization of Einaudi's edition of Gobetti's *Complete Works*, and the order in which the volumes were published: first to appear were the *Scritti Politici* in 1960; second, the *Scritti Storici, Letterari e Filosofici* in 1969; third and last, the *Scritti di Critica Teatrale* in 1974.

assumption reinforced by the unusual nature of Gobetti's early writings on Bolshevism, and their privileged reception.

In 1919 Gobetti embarked on an ambitious program of intellectual self-development, and noted in his diary on August 24 that he was "studying Bolshevism minutely" as part of a general attempt to "form his political consciousness."⁶³ In the July 25th issue of *Energie Nove* he published an article entitled, "Review of Political Questions," and subtitled, "Socialist experiments," in which he included a summary of the situation in Russia, and famously announced that Bolshevism had already failed: "The Marxist experiment in Russia has certainly failed; the old objections of the liberal economy are stronger than ever against the supporters of the nationalizations: Bolshevism is another proof of this."⁶⁴ In October 1920 he wrote an essay on "The Russia of the Soviets," in which he analyzed the contemporary situation in Russia, and reiterated his earlier views.⁶⁵ The essay was eventually published in 1921, one of a number of articles he wrote for the periodical press on contemporary political figures and events in Russia. In these articles he first elaborated his view of the Bolshevik takeover as a "liberal" revolution. As Leone Ginzburg noted in 1932, with these articles Gobetti became the first independent Italian commentator to publish analyses which set the Bolshevik revolution in the context of Russian political history, and this attention to historical context gave his judgements a depth unusual at the time.⁶⁶ The

⁶³ The italics are Gobetti's. Piero Gobetti. *L'Editore ideale*. Milano: Vanni Scheiwiller, 1966, p. 53.

⁶⁴ Piero Gobetti. "Rassegna di questioni politiche." *Energie Nove*. Serie II, No. 6, 25 luglio, 1919, pp. 132-9. Cited from the text reprinted in: Piero Gobetti. *Scritti politici*. A cura di Paolo Spriano. Turin: Einaudi, 1960, pp. 150-151.

⁶⁵ Piero Gobetti. "La Russia dei Soviet", *Rivista di Milano*, 20 February, 1921. Reprinted in Piero Gobetti. *Scritti politici*. A cura di Paolo Spriano. Turin: Einaudi, 1960, pp. 197-206

⁶⁶ "Gobetti's investigations are valuable precisely for their effort to insert the phenomenon [of the Russian revolution] in its particular climate, establishing the precedents of the immediate situation... Gobetti was the first non-communist to see the place and the value of the Bolshevik movement in the history of Russian political doctrine, while he recognized the internal difficulties overcome by the movement in order to affirm itself, in spite of those elements prone to misrepresent its principles."

Leone Ginzburg. "Gobetti e il significato della rivoluzione russa." *Scritti*. Torino: Einaudi, 1964, p. 10. The article was originally published in: *Quaderni di Giustizia e Libertà*, n. 5; dicembre 1932, pp. 88-92.

articles were collected and published posthumously in 1926 in the volume entitled *Il Paradosso dello spirito russo*, (*The Paradox of the Russian Spirit*), which remained, as Ginzburg also noted, one of Gobetti's most read works during the rest of the interwar period, as the precocity of his insights continued to inspire admiration.⁶⁷ During the Cold War, and especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, his early certainty of the failure of Bolshevism as a form of socialism conferred a further, prophetic authority on his judgements. It is one of the ironies of Gobetti's legacy, however, that his writings on Russia have rarely been afforded the same contextualization that he made a point of striving for when he produced them.

Against this background it is an interesting surprise to find that Gobetti's attention to Russian culture began before the October Revolution.⁶⁸ Kornilov, not the Bolsheviks, dominated the news from Russia in early September 1917, and "the revolution" still meant the February revolution of that year, which toppled the monarchy and established the Provisional Government. Russia was still viewed as a beleaguered ally by the Western powers, and the Provisional Government enjoyed an ideological reputation as one of the most liberal governments in Europe, at least on paper.⁶⁹ It was apparent to many observers that the power-sharing arrangement brokered in April with the Petrograd Soviet was unstable, but with the suppression of Kornilov the Provisional Government appeared to defeat the strongest

⁶⁷ "*The Paradox of the Russian Spirit* is among Gobetti's most frequently consulted books... When one then reflects that the third part of the book is composed of articles written around 1921...the importance becomes more apparent of an attitude which permitted Gobetti, first of all of us, to look at the Russian revolution as, above all, a historical phenomenon, and one belonging to Russian history." *Ibid.*, p. 9

As Giovanni De Luna has noted, police records show that Gobetti's *Paradosso* was one of the works frequently confiscated from those who were arrested in the late 1920s and 1930s for militant antifascism. See: Giovanni de Luna. *Donne in oggetto. L'antifascismo nella società italiana 1922-1939*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1995, p. 400, n. II. Laurent Béghin also remarks on this fact. See Béghin, *op. cit.*, p. 216

⁶⁸ The October revolution occurred on 7 November, 1917, in the Gregorian calendar, or 25 October in the Julian calendar then in use in Russia.

⁶⁹ For a detailed account of Russian Liberalism as a political force in the late imperial period, see: Melissa Kirschke Stockdale. *Paul Milyukov and the Quest for a liberal Russia, 1880-1918*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996

immediate challenge to its authority, in the form of a right-wing, military coup widely expected to precede a czarist restoration. The Bolsheviks had earlier been dispersed and their public influence diminished by their defeat during the “July Days” protests; the fact that Kerensky had offered them a golden opportunity to regain power through the Soviets when he sought their support against Kornilov became apparent to many observers only later. So when Gobetti bought his copy of Lermontov, Russia still appeared to be making a transition from autocracy to parliamentary government by a liberal elite. Viewed from this perspective, Russia offered obvious parallels with Italy, where liberals were also in power, and also struggling to govern while prosecuting an unsuccessful war. Unlike their Italian counterparts, however, the Russian liberals had rapidly enacted a bold program of progressive legislation that included the separation of church and state and the affirmation of fundamental civil rights. These would be key demands made by Italian liberal reformers during the interwar period, both actively championed by Gobetti. While it was not obvious that they could support this ambitious agenda in practice, the Russian liberals appeared more progressive than their Italian counterparts, and more responsive to the needs of their population. In September 1917 Russia therefore appeared to be defending a liberal revolution, as the Provisional Government struggled to retain the power it had acquired in February, and to realize its program of legislative reform.

For anyone in Turin, there was additional reason to follow the political situation in Russia, which had recently impinged directly on life in the city. These events, too, have gone unremarked in discussions of Gobetti’s early interest in Russia, because they preceded the October revolution. On August 5 and 13, 1917, a delegation appointed by the First All-Russian Congress of Soviets passed through Turin on the last leg of a tour of European nations begun in June in Stockholm, as part of the Petrograd Soviet’s efforts to convene a third “Zimmerwald conference” of international socialist

organizations opposed to the war.⁷⁰ On August 5th the delegates, who had arrived from France by train, met briefly in private with representatives of local socialist groups before moving on to their other Italian destinations. When they returned on the 13th, however, they were met by a crowd of approximately 40,000 people, who had assembled in front of the *Camera del Lavoro*, the home of the city's labor unions, to hear them speak. It was the first major public assembly that had been permitted in the city since Italy's entry into the war in 1915, which had been accompanied by a general strike.

Turin was Italy's largest industrial center, thanks to the presence of Fiat, and its factories were essential to the production of arms and other military supplies. In order to keep the factories operating at full capacity, workers of draft age were seconded to their employers, a fact which meant that Turin had a large population of able-bodied, working men present throughout the war. The factories were also, by this logic, treated as a second front and placed under martial law, so the workers were subjected to the same harsh discipline as active troops. This approach was no more effective in fostering patriotic loyalty on the Po than on the Isonzo, creating instead a restive working population that was increasingly resentful of its treatment and aware of its power as a political force. Even before the war Turin's early industrialization had made it a center of left-wing political activity, and control over its workers an issue of concern to the government; the war had only exacerbated this anxiety. As the fighting dragged on through the summer of 1917 without apparent gains, despite astronomical numbers of casualties, rates of desertion and draft-dodging began to rise rapidly. By August 1917 food shortages had become acute in Turin, as in other Italian cities, and even bread was in short supply. Popular desperation was increased by the obvious incompetence and corruption of the system by which supplies of flour, bread and ration

⁷⁰ The first and second conferences were held in the Swiss towns of Zimmerwald and Kienthal, on 5-8 September, 1915, and 24-30 April, 1916, respectively. The third conference was planned for Stockholm, 5-12 September, 1917, though it was not eventually convened. The first conference was one of the events that brought Lenin's name to wider attention in Italy. The description that follows is taken primarily from: Giancarlo Carcano. *Cronaca di una rivolta. I moti torinesi del '17*. Torino: Edizioni Stampatori, 1977; and Rex A. Wade. *The Russian Search for Peace, February-October, 1917*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969.

coupons were distributed. Revolt in the factories seemed imminent to many. In this unstable environment the Italian government hoped that the delegates from the Petrograd Soviet would bring a conciliatory message to the workers of Turin, acknowledging their sacrifices while encouraging them to keep up the fight against Germany and Austria alongside their Russian allies until victory could be won.

Such was, indeed, the delegates' message, for they were moderates by Russian standards of the day, and supported the Provisional Government's commitment to the war. The group was led by Iosif Petrovich Goldenberg, who was, in 1914, a Menshevik and a supporter of Plekhanov, committed to Russian participation in the war.⁷¹ The other delegates included Henryk Erlich, a long-standing member of the Bund (and father of the scholars Alexander and Victor), Aleksandr Nikolaevich Smirnov, a Menshevik who was an outspoken opponent of the Bolsheviks throughout the revolutionary period, Vladimir Nikolaevich Rozanov, another Menshevik (and nephew of the philosopher Vasily Rozanov), and Nikolai Sergeevich Rusanov, a Socialist Revolutionary.⁷² It is unclear how many members of the delegation arrived in Turin at the outset of the visit; reports in *La Stampa* confirm, however, that only Goldenberg and Smirnov returned and spoke at the rally on the 13th.⁷³ The disjuncture reported between the contents of their speeches and the reception they were given is remarkable. Goldenberg and

⁷¹ Goldenberg had joined the Bolsheviks when they were created in London in 1903, and would later return to the party in 1920, but at the time of his visit to Turin he was openly opposed to Lenin and the Bolshevik program.

⁷² Wade, *op. cit.*, p. 105

⁷³ Carcano mentions the arrival on the 5th of Goldenberg, Erlich and Smirnov, but lists a fourth member of the group as "Ronskanov," apparently following information taken from Paolo Spriano's *Storia di Torino operaio e socialista, de De Amicis a Gramsci* (Turin, 1973). Spriano's information reappears verbatim in Celestino Canteri's more recent *Memorie del nostro '900* (Milan, 2004). Unfortunately it appears to be mistaken: there is no record in any other source of a delegate by the odd name of Ronskanov; the name reflects, I would guess, a misreading that conflates Rozanov and Rusanov. *La Stampa* published a lengthy interview conducted by its own correspondent while the delegates were in Paris, before their Italian journey, and lists all four of them correctly; its report of the rally on the 13th mentions only Goldenberg and Smirnov. Spriano's inaccuracy is typical of the oversight which has characterized attention to the actual Russian context of Gobetti's day in later analyses of his Russian interests, and reflects both a lack of knowledge, and a tendency to subordinate factual details to the development of an interpretive framework dominated by a political agenda, of the Italian left, in Spriano's case. See: Domenico Russo. "Conversando coi delegati del 'Soviet.'" *La Stampa*, 5 Agosto, 1917, pp. 1-2; and "L'arrivo dei delegati del Soviet." *La Stampa*, 14 August, 1917, p. 3

Smirnov praised the Italian workers' support of the war effort, and their "international consciousness," but they were at pains to dissociate themselves from the Bolsheviks, and Lenin in particular, whom Goldenberg described as a "fanatic," though he defended Lenin from accusations of being a German collaborator or spy (a view inferred from Bolshevik demands for unilateral peace). Perhaps not surprisingly, the Italian crowd failed to apprehend these details of party program and alignment, and responded simply with cheers of support for "the Russian revolution" and cries of "*Evviva Lenin!*" The moderation of the delegates' position was lost in the clamor of their reception and the general acclaim for Lenin as leader of the entire Russian revolutionary movement. So while the delegates delivered the message hoped for by the Italian authorities, their listeners turned the meeting into a rally in the name of Lenin.⁷⁴ The details of the complex Russian political landscape were blotted out by the image of its greatest agitator, and the Italian authorities were left with precisely the antagonistic situation they had been trying to avoid. As the crowd dispersed at the end of the evening, there were violent clashes with police in nearby streets.

Within two weeks of the delegates' visit, moreover, Turin descended into civic violence so severe that the army was called in to restore order. The bread crisis, simmering during the delegates' visit, boiled over into riots on August 23, as the workers took to the streets demanding adequate supplies of bread and flour. When the authorities responded by issuing more bread coupons without controls to

⁷⁴ It is, of course, impossible to say how much the workers knew about Lenin and his ideas, though probably very little. It is clear from newspaper reports that local hosts, left-wing activists of various types and union leaders, influenced the reception of the delegates' speeches with their translations. Goldenberg spoke in French, and his words were given a "free translation" by one of his Italian hosts, who added his own commentary on the development of contacts between the proletariat of different cities, while Smirnov spoke in Russian and his speech was translated by "a Russian residing on our city," according to *La Stampa*. ("L'Arrivo dei delegati del 'Soviet.'" *La Stampa*, 14 Agosto, 1917, p. 3.) The crowd's reaction was therefore shaped to some degree by local agendas, though the Italians were unlikely to have reduced their own political program to nothing but the image of Lenin. It is also true that *La Stampa*, as the paper of the city's establishment, had an interest in presenting the workers as victims (willing or unwilling) of left-wing agitation, as part of advocating a firm hand to keep them in their place, and so might have exaggerated the impression of manipulation (or linguistic incompetence) on the part of the activists. Spontaneous or planned, however, the strongest reaction from the delegates' audience was clearly the identification of the Russian revolution with the person of Lenin.

ensure their fair redemption, and without ensuring the general distribution of either bread or flour, the enraged workers took up arms and began to advance from the outer neighborhoods in which they lived towards the city center. In several places they reached the Roman quadrilateral, as the heart of the city is still known, threatening to overcome local police and *carabinieri*, and attack municipal administrative buildings. At this point the authorities called in the army, and the Commander-in-Chief, General Cadorna, authorized the immediate suppression of the revolt by any means. Pitched battles raged as the workers defended hastily made barricades, one of which went up near the *Camera del Lavoro*, a few blocks from the Gobetti family's apartment in Via XX Settembre. The workers were no match for regular troops, however, and were soon dispersed, despite heavy fighting and many casualties. In the meantime the parallels between these riots and the riots in July in Petrograd had become clear, as was the relevance of Lenin's slogan "Peace, Bread, and Land" to the Turinese workers' situation. The presence in the city shortly beforehand of the delegation from the Petrograd Soviet contributed to the impression that the riots might be the prelude to a worker-led attempt at revolution. Events in Petrograd seemed to foreshadow those in Turin, with the figure of Lenin hovering over them like a guiding spirit, above and beyond party politics.

Against this background, why choose to read a nineteenth-century novel? And why specifically *A Hero of Our Times*? Clearly Gobetti read the novel in translation, so language study was not yet among his interests. He was a voracious and eclectic reader, however, and acquired a very large personal library during his brief life, including approximately 170 volumes devoted to Russian literature and history alone. Bookish and precociously intellectual, Gobetti approached everything he did by reading: to an extremely large extent, his personal environment was a verbal one. Given that Russian affairs dominated the news, and seemed to indicate a direction in which Italian society might also be headed, it is quite possible that he would have been curious to sample a work of Russian literature in response. What

circumstances, and what qualities of the work itself, might have prompted him to pick up a copy of Lermontov's novel? And what can we learn from his choice about the nature of his interest in Russia and Russian culture?

The language of heroism was everywhere in the Italian press and in all public discussion of the war, despite the fact that by September 1917 the Italian army was falling apart, and the Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo, or August offensive, was conducted only with rear guard action by the *carabinieri*, who shot those found retreating.⁷⁵ In Italy, as elsewhere in Europe, the new reality of war as mechanized slaughter was not reflected in public rhetoric, which was still dominated by Romantic imagery of gallant charges and daring individual actions that ended with equal heroism in victory or in death. The war in the air, still a novelty and an object of wonder, was represented in even more glamorous terms, with aviators depicted as god-like heroes at home among the clouds and stars, or compared to medieval knights going into battle on their chargers.⁷⁶ In Italy this tendency was exacerbated by draconian censorship exercised directly by the military over war reporting, which resulted in the fabrication of acceptable stories and silence about the many failings of the war effort. On September 13 *La Stampa* featured two accounts of front-line action, one of which offers a particularly revealing snapshot of this language and imagery. It gives a sense of the verbal environment that would have constituted Gobetti's primary experience of the war, and of the emotions and expectations it aimed to manipulate. It also provides a glimpse, in the background, of the man who was the most famous source of this language, Gabriele d'Annunzio, and an

⁷⁵ "In 1917 the infantry was enormously "demoralized." It no longer believed in anything, it had faith in no one. It wanted peace; at any price. ...The May offensive had exhausted the foot soldiers' resistance; the August [offensive], brutally conducted by main force, using the *carabinieri*, had exposed the wounds from which the people of the trenches were suffering." Malaparte, *Viva Caporetto!* p.119

⁷⁶ Francesco Baracca, Italy's most famous and successful ace, emblazoned his aircraft with a rearing black stallion, for example. The emblem, known as *il cavallino rampante*, remained so popular and evocative after Baracca's death in combat in 1917, that in 1923 Enzo Ferrari asked Baracca's family to let him use it for his new race-car team, Scuderia Ferrari, literally the "Ferrari Racing Stables." It remains the Ferrari logo to this day.

indication of his influence over the contemporary Italian imagination.

The article presents a summary of heroic traits so complete as to seem fantastic, and conjures images that were part of a wider culture of patriotic heroism and sacrifice:

His Majesty the King has awarded another Gold medal posthumously to Second Lieutenant-in-training Garibaldi Franceschi, of Modena.

Not yet twenty and commander of a platoon of shock troops, during the winter he had already undertaken various daring local actions with his unit, for which he had been recommended for a Bronze and a Silver medal. With his calm, resolute courage, his spirit undaunted by any difficulty, and his habit of reducing even the most difficult engagements to a maximal simplicity of execution, Franceschi had been able to instill in his troops a security and a confidence such that even a seasoned officer could not have inspired greater.

From the morning of May 23 onwards, while his regiment was preparing for the arduous offensive on the Castagnavizza front, Franceschi showed himself full of fervor and sacred impatience. He had armed himself with a small tricolor, and promised himself to be the first to plant it on the ruins of the tormented Castagnavizza. When the order was given for the assault, he sprang forward at the head of his platoon and led it, fearless, to the designated goal. Hit twice, he ignored his wounds; and while he was trying to plant the tangible sign of victory on the conquered position, a burst of machine-gun fire caught him and threw him back, dead, on the doubly hallowed flag.⁷⁷

This flamboyant rhetoric drew on an image of the Romantic hero that was particularly associated in Italy with the figure of Garibaldi and the military campaigns of the *Risorgimento*, and so provided a powerful instrument for the manipulation of patriotic sentiment.⁷⁸ More immediately, it also reflected the recent actions and speeches of Gabriele d'Annunzio, (1863-1938), the Decadent writer who became a celebrated military hero and orator during the war. A literary prodigy who emerged in the 1870s, d'Annunzio turned the Romantic figure of the hero into an aesthetic platform on which to stage himself, adding elements of the Nietzschean superman in the creation of his own public persona.⁷⁹ By the turn of the twentieth century he was internationally well known for his self-promoting mix of literary aestheticism and worldly adventures, which included a series of celebrated sexual conquests. Alongside this scandalous

⁷⁷ «La medaglia d'oro all'aspirante Franceschi.» *La Stampa*. 13 settembre, 1917, p. 1

⁷⁸ “*Et qu'est-ce qu'on peut refuser à Garibaldi?*” as Lea Massari's character, Clara Chevalier, remarks in Louis Malle's *Le Souffle au Coeur*.

²⁶ D'Annunzio left a voluminous written record of his life, and has been much studied: what follows is a brief sketch of only those aspects of his activity relevant to my argument. For an excellent recent biography in English see: Lucy Hughes-Hallett. *The Pike: Gabriele D'Annunzio -- Poet, Seducer and Preacher of War*. London: Fourth Estate, 2013.

decadence, d'Annunzio cultivated an image as a Romantic poet-prophet, acquiring the nickname "*Il Vate*," or, "The Bard." A fervent nationalist, he militated for Italian intervention in World War I, invoking the spirit of Garibaldi, and volunteered in 1915 for active duty, despite being 52.

D'Annunzio subsequently saw combat on land and sea and in the air in a variety of actions that were generally of greater dramatic than military significance, and which served him as the basis for oratory and gestures which he developed into his own political theater of nationalism. Prominent among these gestures was the use of the national flag as a symbol both of victory and of heroic sacrifice, a shroud for the fallen consecrated with their own blood. His most famous use of the flag occurred in May 1917, during the tenth battle of the Isonzo, when he created what became known as the "Banner of Randaccio," an Italian tricolor which he used to envelope the body of his dying friend Giovanni Randaccio after a failed assault across the Timavo river.⁸⁰ At Randaccio's funeral the flag was draped over his coffin. A month later, when Randaccio was exhumed and ceremonially reburied in *terra redenta*, the blood-stained flag was again draped over the coffin while d'Annunzio gave a funeral oration in which he identified the flag as the symbolic shroud of all the war dead, a sacred relic reminiscent of the Shroud of Turin. The oration was widely publicized and became a source of apocryphal stories, of which the article in *La Stampa* provides, I think, an example.⁸¹ True to the images conjured by d'Annunzio in his writings about Randaccio and other glorious soldiers, the hero of the article in *La Stampa* is very young, hardly more

⁸⁰ The following summary is based on the section entitled, "Touching the Absent Body: The 'Banner of Randaccio,'" in Chapter 5 of Laura Wittman's study, *The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Modern Mourning, and the Reinvention of the Mystical Body*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011, pp. 212-230.

⁸¹ See Wittman, pp. 214-215. The story in *La Stampa* also takes place in late May, 1917, during the tenth battle of the Isonzo, though the location is moved slightly north, to the slopes of the Castagnavizza, on the Carso, and the "doubly hallowed flag" has shrunk in size (d'Annunzio's original was an oversized banner). The action described is otherwise remarkably similar. While "Garibaldi" can be used as a male name, its symbolism seems, in this context, too good to be true; and the correct form for a real individual would have been "Garibaldo," as it was for the nine-year-old boy Garibaldo Marussi, whom d'Annunzio took with him in his plane as a mascot on his famous "Flight over Vienna" in August 1917, when he and a squadron of Italian pilots flew over the Alps and dropped 400,000 propaganda leaflets on the unsuspecting Viennese.

than a boy, yet preternaturally gifted as a leader: daring, calm and resolute, he is possessed of courage, indomitable spirit and penetrating intelligence; he inspires security and confidence in his troops even as he is filled with “fervor and sacred impatience” before battle; in the field he is fearless and determined, halted only by death. As d’Annunzio wrote of Randaccio, “to make war with him was a sublime intoxication.”⁸²

However glorious his presence, the hero was ultimately a sacrificial victim, as this reference to “sublime intoxication” implies, and his death was both expected and celebrated as a redemptive gesture in the d’Annunzian rhetoric of the day. Some of the unintended and frightening consequences of this heroic calling were also visible in the pages of *La Stampa*, behind the purple prose of the lead article, and they reveal the ruthlessness with which the heroic myth was constructed in reality. On September 13 the “*Cronaca cittadina*,” or “City Chronicle,” section contained the following report:

Attorney Mr. Gerolamo Conta, who yesterday shot himself in the head with a revolver with the intent to kill himself, has died at the Main Military Hospital, to which he was urgently transported. The wounded man’s condition was critical, and he did die the same evening. Mr. Conta was not an officer but a soldier. Various explanations of what drove him to this tragic step are in circulation.⁸³

The family’s announcement of the death appears in the next column, and begins with the defensive statement that Conta “died unexpectedly, after having risked his life for the Fatherland at the front.”⁸⁴

Whatever he had endured, Gerolamo Conta evidently could not go on, like so many soldiers who returned from the trenches, usually to recuperate from serious injury, at this point in the war.⁸⁵ Rather

⁸² Quoted in Hughes-Hallett, p. 424

⁸³ *La Stampa*, 13 September, 1917, p. 3

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3

⁸⁵ Regulation leave was rarely granted by late 1917, given the desperate shortage of men in uniform, and then only for short rest periods in the rear, rather than a return home. Soldiers were also kept near the front to prevent them from spreading panic among the population with their stories of the horrors and futility of the campaign on the Isonzo, and to prevent desertion, which was rampant.

than desert and hide, he decided to end his life, and the evasive report of his death raises the specter of failed courage, the shameful inability to live up to the fatherland's need for heroic sacrifice. Soldiers were expected to return victorious or die fighting; and as Italians increasingly realized, if soldiers did not choose to die, they and their shameful example would be destroyed by their commanders. Any hesitation or retreat from combat was officially regarded as treason. It was thus forbidden to have contact with prisoners of war, on the assumption that they were tantamount to deserters, and thousands of Italian prisoners of war died unnecessarily of starvation and disease because families were not allowed to send them supplies. The same logic led the Italian High Command to order the shelling of Italian infantry from the rear with their own guns if they failed to advance, and to introduce the practice of decimation.⁸⁶ D'Annunzio advocated both these measures and is known to have practiced at least one of them: having carried his friend Randaccio to safety over the Timavo in May 1917, he then trained the brigade's guns on those soldiers who had been taken prisoner by the Austrians and were still visible in the field.⁸⁷ Death was considered preferable to any form of failure; there was no place in the d'Annunzian imaginative universe for the mutilated survival that was the lot of so many who returned from the trenches.⁸⁸ Gobetti would have been well aware of these expectations, and of the imperative to self-sacrifice that they promoted.

Gobetti may also have been curious about the role of the "Savage Division" in the Kornilov affair,

⁸⁶ Decimation is a form of military discipline first used by the Romans to punish units guilty of capital offenses such as mutiny or desertion. An offending unit is divided into groups of 10, and each group then holds a lottery to select one member for execution by those remaining.

⁸⁷ The description of d'Annunzio's behavior at the Timavo is taken from Hughes-Hallett, pp. 424-427. The attitude towards death as necessary self-sacrifice also corresponds to the definition of "altruistic suicide" formulated by Durkheim in his study of 1897, *Le Suicide*, and reflects an image of Italian society as what he termed "highly integrated," meaning that individual needs were subordinated to those of the group. This was certainly the image of national unity promoted in Italian war propaganda. The classic example Durkheim gives is of the soldier who sacrifices himself in battle.

⁸⁸ Hence the galvanizing power of d'Annunzio's subsequent rejection of the Versailles treaty, which he described as forcing Italy to accept a "mutilated peace" with respect to the territorial gains hoped for along the Adriatic coast, a situation from which the nation needed to be violently redeemed.

and so been attracted by Lermontov's evocation of the exotic world of the nineteenth-century Russian military in the Caucasus. Kornilov's use of the division to threaten Petrograd was prominently reported in *La Stampa*, and included a detailed description of these famous troops:

The announcement of Kornilov's march made an impression on the crowds, above all for the reputation of the troops which are accompanying him. The "Savage Division" was created at the outset of hostilities of elements taken from the muslim populations of the Caucasus: it is a cavalry unit of the first order: it obeys the Military Code of the regular cavalry, and was put to its first test in the war on the south-west front in Galicia. Since 1916 it has been under the command of Grand Duke Michael, the brother of the Czar, a fact which suggests that the loyalties of the division may extend beyond the person of Kornilov. Anet, in the *Petit Parisien*, praises their valor as follows: [The division] is of incomparable *élan*; life in the trenches does not please its men; their favorite order is the charge; they give the impression of a hurricane unleashed; they march upon the enemy trampling everything and everyone underfoot in their fierce rush; a single one of their regiments was enough to storm the fortified village of Brzezany during Brusilov's famous offensive. The Russian infantrymen, witnesses to the marvelous charge, raised enthusiastic cheers. They return along the length of the battlefield peaceful, simple, in good humor, like big boys despite their warlike appearance; with their uniforms, their enormous astrakhan hats, their tunics and their daggers in their belts, scimitars, and cartridges across their chests they inspire dread.⁸⁹

The Romantic stereotype of the mountain warrior is transmitted in this description essentially unchanged by the passage of nearly a century that separates it from Lermontov's writing, combining the same elements of oriental exoticism with the image of the "noble savage." The link between the division and the aristocratic elite of the Russian officer corps is also emphasized, and marks another point of historical continuity with Lermontov's depiction of military life. This Romantic image of the Savage Division resonated further in the Italian imagination of the day because it coincided with that of the muslim troops of the Austro-Hungarian army, the infantry from Bosnia-Herzegovina, who were similarly renowned on the Italian front for their ferocity. Like the Savage Division, the Bosnians had distinctively "oriental" uniforms, including a fez which they wore in battle, and were considered crack troops, whom Austrian commanders deployed in some of the most difficult engagements they confronted.

The image of their Slavic neighbors in the Balkans as a primitive foil for the ancient and cultivated Italian race, and their connection with the muslim culture of the Ottoman empire, was a

⁸⁹ *La Stampa*, 13 September, 1917, p. 4

recurrent feature of Italian public discourse at this time; it was analogous to the image of the Scythian prevalent in Russia, though manipulated to disparage, rather than promote, Slavic culture. It had particular immediacy for Gobetti thanks to his imaginative attachment to Ada Prospero, whose mother's family was from Bihač, in Bosnia.⁹⁰ Gobetti had not officially made Ada's acquaintance at this point, but had taken notice of her in the stairwell of their building and become her secret admirer. As Ada would later record in her diary, the legend of this early attachment would become part of their private mythology as a couple, including Gobetti's early vision of her as his guardian angel, later as his Beatrice.⁹¹ Gobetti developed various essentially literary images against which he defined Ada as their romance and courtship later progressed, and one of these was that of the "wild girl," a female "noble savage" full of "Gypsy" or "nomadic" blood: innocent, emotional, spontaneous and in harmony with the natural world. Ada's "eastern" origins contributed to the development of this image, which both used in their correspondence with one another. The trope of love for the *дикарька*, or wild girl, was, of course, a defining feature of Russian Romantic literature, and especially prominent Lermontov's work. The opening tale of *A Hero of Our Times*, "Bela," gives the theme one of its most distinctive and renowned expressions in the Russian tradition, and this connection with his own circumstances perhaps also appealed to Gobetti's curiosity, as well as his bookish imagination.⁹²

⁹⁰ Olimpia Biacchi was a major presence in her daughter's life, and devoted unusual energy to guiding Ada's education and personal development. An archive of her papers relating to Ada's childhood is preserved in the Gobetti Center archives.

⁹¹ "And then you told me the story of long ago, which I know: of a boy who every morning met a girl with long curls and an innocent smile, and imagined that the girl was the little angel who went with him to guide his steps – and then, when one day the boy had read Dante and found Beatrice, the girl 'clothed in the color of vivid flame' became the ideal woman, became love." *Nella tua breve esistenza*, p. 684.

⁹² Gobetti does not appear to have known the poem, but it is Lermontov's "Ангел смерти" ("The Angel of Death") which perhaps most recalls his and Ada's situation: "Так, миру чуждый, Зораим/Не вовсе беден – Ада с ним!/Она резва, как лань степная,/Мила, как цвет душистый рая;/Все страстно в ней: и грудь, и стан,/Глаза – два солнца южных стран./[...]Судьбина их соединила,/А разлучит – одна могила!" "Though a stranger in the world, Zoraim/Is hardly poor – Ada is with him!/She is lively as a doe on the steppe./Lovely as the fragrant blossom of heaven/In her all is ardent: her breast, her bearing./Her eyes are two sun from southern climes./[...]Fate has joined them./They will be parted only by the grave!"

Lermontov's novel is first and foremost a study of the hero, however, though its ironic vision is presented in an entirely different key from that of d'Annunzio's heroic portraits.⁹³ One would expect the protagonist, Pechorin, to be the focus of Gobetti's attention, given the prevailing rhetorical climate and his own situation as a prospective "war hero." Gobetti was in the habit not only of dating his books when he purchased them, but also of underlining and annotating as he read, so it is possible, on occasion, to discern the outlines of his interest in a particular text from his annotations. His copy of *A Hero of Our Times* is full of underlining, indicating that he read it attentively from start to finish, and it contains some marginal annotations. Unfortunately the handwritten notes are few, many illegible thanks to the deterioration of the cheap paper on which the book was printed, and Gobetti's use of pencil for his markings; they offer no significant information about his reactions to the novel. From his underlinings it does appear that his attention was concentrated on the figure of Pechorin: he underlines not only the narrator's descriptions of Pechorin, but the reactions to him of other characters, and the descriptions of him they provide; but the underlinings are so copious that they suggest as much a diligent scholastic response, which would naturally focus on Pechorin, as anything more pointed. While it is clear that Gobetti read the novel very carefully, his copy tells us nothing more specific about his reaction to it.

But perhaps it was the author, and not the hero, who attracted Gobetti to the novel? His copy of the novel contains a preface which provides an engaging biographical sketch of Lermontov that would have filled any immediate gaps in his knowledge. This description is beset with none of the ironies that complicate the presentation of Pechorin in the novel, and tries to situate Lermontov in terms that would

⁹³ They are not, perhaps, so distant in their appeal, given the roots of Lermontov's work in the early serials of Eugène Sue, and their depictions of what Umberto Eco would later identify as the "*superuomo di massa*," or "superman of the masses." See: Umberto Eco. *Il Superuomo di massa. Retorica e ideologia nel romanzo popolare*. Milano: Bompiani, 2001 (1976).

be accessible to contemporary Italian readers.⁹⁴ Read with hindsight it provides some remarkable parallels with Gobetti's own trajectory, and with various elements of Gobetti's character as he tried to create it, and as handed down in his myth. Lermontov is described as one of the "principle representatives of Byron's desolating poetry," and his "noble, free and solitary spirit" as "in continuous revolt against the implacable muscovite aristocracy."⁹⁵ The posture is reminiscent of Gobetti's own self-consciously "intransigent" resistance to fascism, and before that, his rage against the corrupt governing establishment he identified with Giolitti and the Italian Liberal party. Interestingly, the author of the preface, Strafforello, quotes at length a description by Herzen of Lermontov (without citing a source), in which Herzen evokes the Decembrist uprising as a critical moment for his and Lermontov's generation, but one in which they were too young to participate: "Forcibly gagged and repressing its tears [our generation] learned to concentrate its own emotions and to live on its own ideas."⁹⁶ Missing a crucial moment of heroic action was also the defining experience of Gobetti's generation, which came of age just too late to serve in World War I; the later need to "repress tears," and live in a deliberately constructed solitude are common to descriptions of antifascist resistance, and also directly applicable to Gobetti's

⁹⁴ The mountains of the Caucasus are described, for example, as "inhospitable and grandiose like our Alps." In general the description is historically accurate, though Pushkin, whose death is recounted at the start in order to explain Lermontov's subsequent reaction and banishment, is misidentified as "Mussin-Puschkin." The preface is by the translator, Gustavo Strafforello. Michele Lermontoff. *L'Eroe dei nostri giorni*. Tradotto di Gustavo Strafforello. Milano: Sonzogno, 1917. p. 3

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5 Herzen's phrase, as rendered by Strafforello, is suggestive in the context of Gobetti's later opposition to fascist censorship. Gobetti is credited with having coined the term "*la stampa imbavagliata*," or the "gagged press," in a sentence he used as a header for several issues of *La Rivoluzione Liberale* in 1924: "*In regime di stampa imbavagliata il vero articolista è il lettore: egli deve leggere tra le righe*;" "Under a regime with a gagged press, the one who really writes the articles is the reader: he has to read between the lines." Herzen refers, in Strafforello's rendition, to his generation precisely as "*imbavagliata dalla forza*," or "forcibly gagged." On Gobetti's use of the term as part of his *illuminismo*, or attachment to the values of the Enlightenment, Valentina Marchesi has observed that for Gobetti, "*illuminismo* represents a style of work, a complex renovation of Italian spiritual life, necessary in order to 'reestablish a decorous tone' (it is Gobetti who writes this, picking up on a term invoked by Debenedetti in his *Observations*) capable of opposing fascist barbarity and, in particular, the constraints imposed by the regime on the media and cultural groups with the so-called 'gagged press,' to use a famous image coined by Gobetti himself." Valentina Marchesi. *Eugenio Montale Critico Letteraria*. Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2013, p. 12.

experience. Further, Lermontov is portrayed by Herzen as a thinker, rather than a lyric poet, burdened by “the iron ball of skepticism” which was “chained to his foot during all his meditations and in all his joys.”⁹⁷ Lermontov’s work reflects the “sad and virile reflection” which was “always [visible] on his brow,” and this reflection was the substance of his “poetry, his torture and his strength.”⁹⁸ “To the misfortune,” Herzen adds, “(in a despotic country) of truly great clarity of vision, he added another, — the daring to say anything without restraint and without regard for the consequences.”⁹⁹ Again, the parallels with Gobetti’s myth are striking, and with Gobetti’s own conception of his duties, as a thinker, a writer and a leader. The need always to make a rational and “virile” response, rather than giving way to emotion and “hysterics” was a constant preoccupation of Gobetti’s, and an instruction he frequently gave to Ada; it is reflected in her description of his departure for Paris. “People don’t begin to imagine how this man struggled,” Herzen continues, “how much he suffered before he dared to express his thoughts;” and this description, too, fits both Gobetti’s self-image, and the image of him that was promoted after his death as a martyr. The need for “autocriticism” is a constant refrain in his letters to Ada, as is the necessity of suffering through painful reflection in search of truth. Herzen concludes by evoking Lermontov’s “maturity of thought” and his “isolation, which does not share the public’s hopes and fears, and which instils the courage to confess this rupture,”¹⁰⁰ offering another image which could also be applied to Gobetti, and citing courage, the virtue which Gobetti is most often described as possessing.

It is quite likely, moreover, that Gobetti was actively encouraged in the autumn of 1917 to see himself in Lermontov’s image as a budding Genius. In September, 1917, Gobetti decided, with the

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5

encouragement of his philosophy teacher and mentor, Balbino Giuliano, to accelerate the completion of his schooling by taking the school certificate exams a year early, in the summer of 1918. His graduation would enable him to volunteer for military service earlier, a patriotic effort in which Giuliano encouraged his students. Giuliano would have been well aware of Gobetti's academic prowess and of his reputation as a prodigy. The two were close, and Gobetti felt a particular "spiritual communion" with Giuliano, as his letters to Ada of the following year indicate.¹⁰¹ The extent of Giuliano's continuing influence on Gobetti is also apparent from the prominence of Giuliano's writings in the early issues of *Energie Nove* published a year later.¹⁰²

A modest intellect, Giuliano had nevertheless made something of a name for himself in the pre-war period in theosophical circles, and was, in 1905, a founding member of the *Biblioteca filosofica* in Florence, which promoted the study of theosophy and other forms of spiritualism. Theosophy was popular in Italy in the period preceding World War I, and attracted not only Italian converts, but a significant number of Russian émigrés: theosophical societies were a channel for the introduction of Russian literature and culture into Italy by dint of the contacts they fostered between these two groups.¹⁰³ A number of Russian émigrés who were active theosophists also worked as translators of Russian literature, including Ewa Kuhn, later the wife of Giovanni Amendola, who would lead the ill-fated

¹⁰¹ "Today I'll see Giuliano, who should have arrived yesterday from Bordighera," Gobetti wrote to Ada on 18 August, 1919: "Nothing depends on him. I'm sure he'll do any work I give him. But I'll be happy to see him and feel a little spiritual intimacy." *Nella tua breve esistenza*, p. 112

¹⁰² In lieu of a manifesto or other programmatic introduction, Gobetti opened with an article by Giuliano entitled "Rinnovamento," to which he appended a brief statement of his own. *Energie Nove*, Serie I. No. 1. Torino, 1-15 Novembre, 1918, pp. 1-2

¹⁰³ Theosophy as a movement was also, of course, widely associated with the person of Helena Blavatska, and so associated particularly with Russian spirituality and culture. In Italy Blavatska's fame was increased by the fact that she had reportedly participated alongside Garibaldi's troops in the battle of Mentana in 1867. According to legend she was wounded and left for dead on the battlefield, only to return miraculously to her senses and be rescued by the Red Shirts.

parliamentary opposition to Mussolini in the early 1920s.¹⁰⁴ It is quite possible that Giuliano knew Kuhn and Amendola personally, and was exposed to Russian literature in the theosophical circles he frequented. In 1919, when Piero and Ada published their translations of Kuprin with *La Voce*, Piero dedicated the volume to Giuliano. There has been no discussion of why Gobetti made this particular dedication; the fact of his doing so is mentioned, if at all, as proof of commendable personal loyalty to his former teacher, despite Giuliano's increasingly obvious fascist sympathies. The dedication could be readily explained, however, if it were Giuliano who had helped Gobetti to discover Russian literature in the autumn of 1917, when Gobetti was his student. Giuliano would have been in a position to draw a connection between Gobetti and Lermontov, and to recommend *A Hero of Our Times*, thanks to a knowledge of Russian literature acquired through his theosophical circles. In his own philosophical reflections, moreover, Giuliano adhered to a neo-Platonist belief in an absolute realm to which exceptional, creative individuals had privileged access: he might well have felt that he had encountered such an individual in his pupil Gobetti, and been keen to steer him towards the work of a predecessor, Lermontov.¹⁰⁵

* * *

In summary, an attentive examination of Gobetti's library makes clear that his interest in Russian culture began not in the autumn of 1918, as a response to Bolshevism, but a year earlier, before the October Revolution, with his discovery of Lermontov in September 1917. The moment was one of heightened interest in Russia, as the Kornilov revolt was put down, and this crisis of "liberal revolution" for the Provisional Government prefigured the famous paradox with which Gobetti would later define his

¹⁰⁴ Ewa Kuhn became one of the principal translators of Dostoevsky into Italian, and Gobetti eventually acquired one of her translations: F. Dostoievski. *I Ragazzi*. Traduzione de E. Kuhn Amendola. Milano: Facchi, 1922

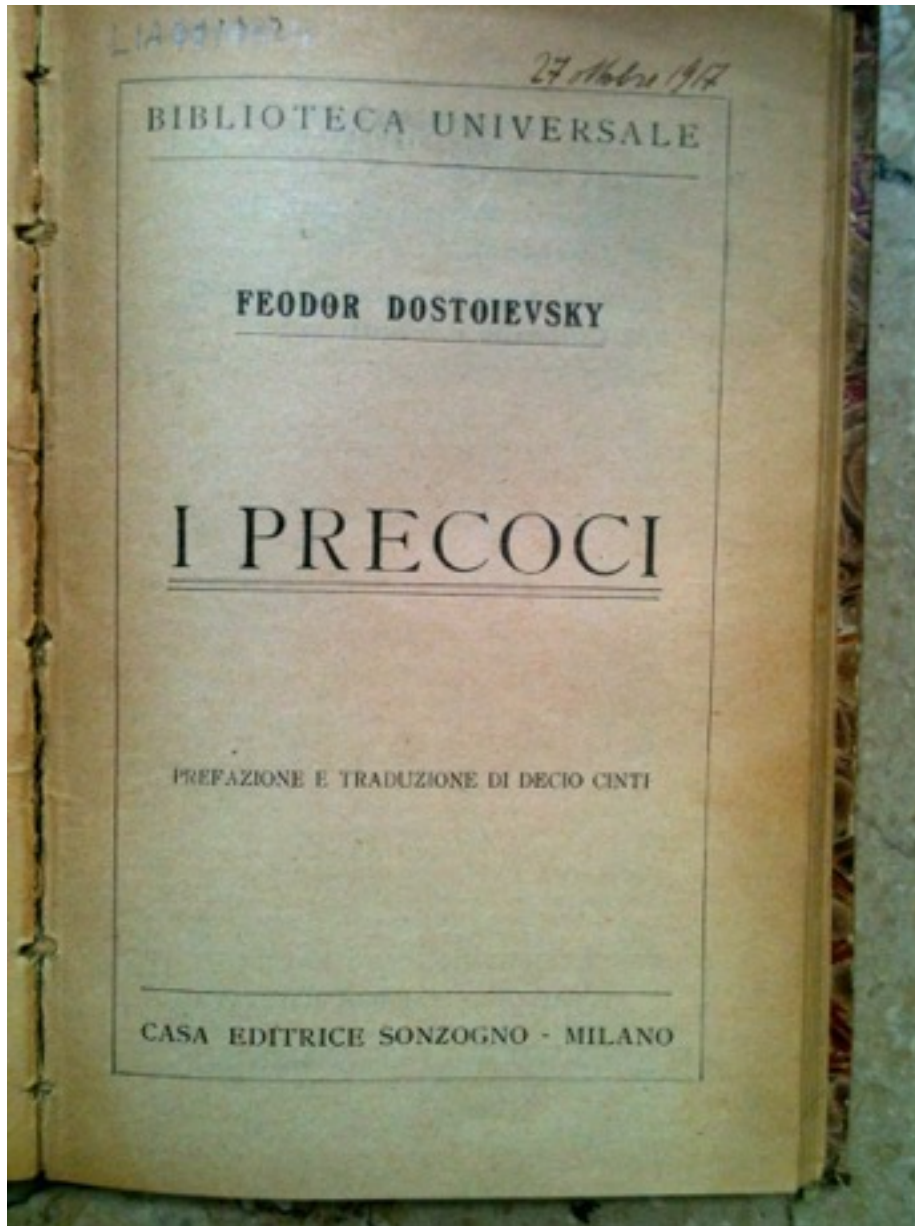
¹⁰⁵ For a description of the evolution of Giuliano's thought, see: Roberto Pertici. "Giuliano, Balbino." In *Dizionario Biografico – Treccani*. Treccani, n.d. Web. 08 May 2016. <[http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/balbino-giuliano_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/>](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/balbino-giuliano_(Dizionario-Biografico)/>).

own activity. Recent events in Turin encouraged, moreover, a sense that events in Petrograd foreshadowed those in the “subalpine capital,” and that the spirit of Russian history could be a guide for Italy. It was also a moment when Italian public discourse was dominated by a rhetoric of heroism which would have given Lermontov’s novel fresh relevance to a patriotic boy anticipating his own conscription. While the Hero loomed large, however, there was another, even more powerful and fascinating figure hovering over contemporary imaginations, the Genius. The Genius was a creator, not a sacrificial victim like the Hero; he was distinguished not only by courage but by intelligence, and a prophetic foresight which enabled him to discern the movements of history and to guide human conscience and action. Two such figures are visible against the historical background of Gobetti’s experience in September 1917, Lenin and d’Annunzio, and a third, Lermontov, emerges from his chosen reading in Russian literature. Gobetti’s own circumstances as a precocious student suggest that he may have been encouraged to see himself in Lermontov’s example by his mentor Balbino Giuliano; and that he would have been aware of Lenin and d’Annunzio not only as powerful contemporary leaders, but as figures of Genius on which he might model himself.

A single book does not, however, make the man, no matter how suggestive the circumstances of its discovery. I therefore turn, in my next chapter, to the examination of additional evidence which connects Gobetti’s early Russian readings with the attempt to “realize his Genius,” as the contemporary Italian idiom put it, and to a brief discussion of the Genius as a figure of the Western cultural imagination.

IV - The Boy Genius

A Hero of Our Times was not the only Russian work Gobetti read in the autumn of 1917. Six weeks after his first purchase, he acquired another volume of Russian literature, again carefully dating the title page: 27 October, 1917. As the date reveals, this purchase was also made prior to the Bolshevik revolution; and the title page shows that Gobetti chose another work by one of Russia's greatest writers.



It is not evident at first glance, however, which work Gobetti acquired, since Dostoevsky did not publish anything under a title which would translate directly into Italian as *I Precoci*, (*The Precocious*). Closer inspection reveals that the volume is, in fact, a separate edition of Book X of *The Brothers Karamazov*, known in English as “The Boys,” in Russian as “*Мальчишки*.” The change of title indicates the path by which the Russian text reached Italy: it had first been translated and published as a separate volume in Paris in 1889 under the title *Les Précoces* by the prolific Franco-Russian translator Elie Halpérine-Kaminsky; Gobetti’s edition is an Italian translation of this French version.¹⁰⁶ The borrowed title also suggests the nature of the work’s appeal for Gobetti: its portrait of a gifted, precocious boy, Kolya Krasotkin, an exemplary figure much closer to Gobetti’s age and circumstances than Lermontov’s hero Pechorin. With this second, pre-revolutionary purchase Gobetti’s interest in Russian literature appears more clearly linked to the search for a figure in which he could recognize himself, and which might serve as a point of reference for his own development, or with which others, like Balbino Giuliano, might have identified him. His reading of Dostoevsky also suggests a psychological turn, an interest in the exceptional individual’s inner growth and development, as opposed to the kaleidoscopic pattern of cultural references that defines Pechorin against the background of his society.

Gobetti probably also acquired one more Russian literary classic before the start of the October revolution: Pushkin’s historical novel, *The Captain’s Daughter*. On the first page of his copy of *A Hero of Our Times*, Gobetti wrote in under the title, “*Vedi la figlia del capitano di Puskin*,” or, “See Pushkin’s *The Captain’s Daughter*,” suggesting that he picked up a copy of Pushkin’s novel at roughly the same time that he was reading Lermontov. His library contains, in fact, two copies of *The Captain’s Daughter*, and though neither bears a date of acquisition, one is from the same inexpensive series as his copies of Lermontov and Dostoevsky, making it a plausible candidate for purchase with the other two, in the

¹⁰⁶ Th. Dostoïewsky. *Les Précoces*. Trad. du russe par E. Halpérine-Kaminsky. Paris: V. Havard, 1889

autumn of 1917. The plot and themes of *The Captain's Daughter* offer parallels with Gobetti's situation at the time, what is more: the protagonist and narrator, Pyotr Grinyov, begins the story with his departure from the family home at sixteen for military service; and this event is soon followed by the outbreak of conflict, the military campaign to suppress the peasant revolt led by Emelyan Pugachov. The young hero's childish dreams of a glamorous life in the capital are dashed at the outset by his father's insistence that he serve in the provinces, "in the army," where he won't "loll around playing pranks,"¹⁰⁷ and he is sent to a remote outpost beyond the Volga, where he is immediately caught up in the violence of the revolt: so begins a tale of extraordinary adventures which mark his coming of age. One can see how Pushkin's novel might appeal to a boy of sixteen eager to make his mark in the adult world; and how the coincidence of his own circumstances with those of a hero from another era might suggest that he could aspire to a special role in the present. It is a naïve view; but not so uncommon, perhaps, in an adolescent filled with idealistic ambition and aware of his own intellectual gifts.

The sophistication of Pushkin's narrative is at odds with a simple, heroic reading, of course, and in time Gobetti would demonstrate a remarkable awareness of the eighteenth-century tone and spirit of adventure which Grinyov's narration so artfully captures, and which was integral to Pushkin's work. In a critical sketch published after his death in *The Paradox of the Russian Spirit*, Gobetti opens by announcing that "Pushkin's secret, as an artist, is his versatility." The "false formula of [Pushkin's] Romanticism," created in the West by short-sighted critics, should be corrected, in Gobetti's view, by recognizing the strict separation of Pushkin's life and art:

As in every classical author, it is necessary in Pushkin to distinguish rigorously his life from his works: he is a figure antithetical to Lermontov, [who was] an extremely modern lyric poet, at the cost [to himself] of awakening subtle torments and surges of the most jealous precocity.

¹⁰⁷ "Фундаментальная Электронная Библиотека 'Русская Литература и Фольклор:' Капитанская Дочка." N.p., n.d. Web. 09 May 2016. <<http://feb-web.ru/feb/pushkin/texts/push17/volo8/y082277-.htm>>. The citation is taken from p. 282 of the electronic edition; the translation is mine.

Pushkin's life, in which a curious person may discover some Byronic elements, is the *lost time* of a dissipated wastrel. His art reassembles all [his] experiences, from readings to daily incidents, from observations of exotic places to dramas of the passions, [and] raises them to a level of pure fantasy, dominating them with a serene indifference: it is the *recovered time* of the most expert traveler.¹⁰⁸

This perceptive comment was unusual, when Gobetti made it, not only for its acuity but for its confident opposition to the received wisdom of the times, as Vittorio Strada notes in his introduction to the 1969 edition of *The Paradox of the Russian Spirit*.¹⁰⁹ Oddly, however, Gobetti seems not to have grasped the extent to which the very spirit he identifies informs the narrative construction of *The Captain's Daughter*. At the end of his sketch he describes the novel as the "happiest product" of the "serene and reasonable sunset" of Pushkin's career, of a retreat into "history, the novel and popular legend" which followed the publication of *Eugene Onegin*, and in which "inspiration had diminished, [but] there remained good taste and a sovereign intelligence."¹¹⁰ The novel "retains a rustic poetry, an idyllic tone of cordial and monotonous intimacy," he adds:

It is an episode of Russian history, a criticism barely adumbrated of existing customs held in check by the good sense of the conservative. Pushkin was already convinced that he needed to adopt a noble and reserved tone: he had become a man of the establishment with an enormous literary patrimony to defend.¹¹¹

Grinyov's Voltairean inheritance seems suddenly to have evaporated, driven off by the need to adhere to a psychological reading of Pushkin's career which belies Gobetti's earlier flash of profound understanding, and his ardent call for the critical separation of life and work.

The bewildering imbalance of Gobetti's critical judgements with respect to the Russian authors he discusses is, as Strada remarks, characteristic of the entire volume. Gobetti's literary portraits are as

¹⁰⁸ *Il paradosso dello spirito russo*, p. 27

¹⁰⁹ In responding to the portraits of Russian writers which make up the second section of the volume, Strada remarks, "we will appreciate [...] the assessment of 'the legend of a Byronic Pushkin,' a legend which reigned, when Gobetti refuted it, all but supreme." *Il Paradosso dello spirito russo*, p. XIX.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 28

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28

full of “blunders” as “illuminating moments,” Strada notes, contrasting the caliber of Gobetti’s insight into Pushkin with his “disproportionate recognition” of Leonid Andreev.¹¹² Strada attributes Gobetti’s misguided assessment of Andreev to an overriding need for consistency in his historical analysis of the Russian *intelligentsia*. Andreev’s fame was considerable at the turn of the century, but even so “Gobetti overvalued Andreev, to the point of putting him ahead of much more original writers such as Chekhov and Gorky,” and for “reasons inherent in his conception of the nature of the *intelligentsia*,” much more than “indiscriminate adherence to what was then widely accepted opinion.”¹¹³ “Perhaps better than any other Russian writer of the time,” Strada observes, “and certainly in the form that was easiest to apprehend, Andreev served to conclude the trajectory of the *intelligentsia* which Gobetti had unhesitatingly traced out.”¹¹⁴ Paraphrasing Gobetti, he concludes:

The drama of the “abstractness” of the *intelligentsia* finds its frankest expression in Andreev, in the very moment of its extreme dissolution. [Andreev], too ‘is ill with abstractness like Dostoevsky and like Turgenev. Except that then abstractness had substance; now, when it is time to concretize [its] results, it is degeneration, it is an illness. Andreev will die of it, as soon as reality becomes too strong.’ (p. 12) In the face of this symbolic agony and death of the *intelligentsia*, the literary and the ideological tastes of an era, that of Gobetti, so remote from us now, are one and the same.¹¹⁵

Strada’s identification of Gobetti’s drive for internal consistency rings true, and would certainly account for a blind spot with respect to Andreev, but it begs the question of why someone who was as perceptive and intelligent a reader as Gobetti would limit himself to such a rigid interpretive schema. Strada’s last remark offers an elusive response to this second question, and one which brings us back to the figure of the Genius. The “symbolic agony and death” of the Russian *intelligentsia* evoked by Gobetti

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. XIX

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. XIX, note 1

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. XIX, note 1

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. XIX, note 1. Strada quotes from Gobetti’s “Profile “ of Andreev reproduced later in the volume, but the page reference appears to be mistaken. The other quotations in the note are found in the same volume on the pages indicated; this material is found on page 71.

marks a point of imaginative convergence for the era's "literary and ideological tastes," Strada remarks: a point where aesthetic imagination and normative belief come together, in other words, and so where the imaginative figures of literature take on prescriptive authority. Seen from the far side of the abyss of ideologically motivated violence which separated Gobetti's era from that of the 1960s, such faith in the products of the human imagination had certainly become "remote," unthinkable, indeed, after that experience of mass slaughter and degradation. But for Gobetti, in 1917, faith in the authority of the imaginable was still alive. It sanctioned the pursuit of education, and made the acquisition of knowledge a path to moral and intellectual authority, as well as self-advancement. The Genius was, in this context, the patron saint of meritocracy, of the intelligent but humbly born like Gobetti, eager to make their way into the elites of their societies, a paradoxically democratizing role we have tended to forget since its association with Europe's totalitarian dictators. Faith in its powers and the exercise of the authority it conferred came at the price of ideological consistency, however, and of identification with its ideal. It is this weakness, this fatal flaw, that Strada is, with great delicacy, identifying at the heart of Gobetti's engagement with Russian literature. Gobetti's peculiarly obtuse reading of Leonid Andreev has its deepest roots in the implicit conviction of his own Genius: he could not abandon his historical and literary interpretations, once articulated, without abandoning this self-image, too.

With the subject of Gobetti's devotion to Andreev, I anticipate my argument, however. Returning to Gobetti's first Russian readings, it seems clear that they offered characters, plots and themes in which Gobetti would have been able to see himself and his circumstances reflected, and onto which he might therefore have projected his own hopes, fears and ambitions – the starting point of a story he could live out for himself. But is the protagonist of this story a Genius; or an intellectual Hero, as Marco Gervasoni has suggested; or some other figure altogether? Before examining the rest of Gobetti's Russian readings, his language study and translating in search of an answer to this question, I

turn briefly to a discussion of the figure of the Genius, and to some episodes from Gobetti's early life and writings which also shed light on the nature of his narrative self-construction.

In his 2013 study, *Divine Fury: A History of Genius*, Darrin McMahon traces the history of the Genius from the Classical age to the present.¹¹⁶ His early material serves as background to the discussion of the “modern genius” which is his main focus, and which is also the figure relevant to Gobetti.¹¹⁷ The modern genius is a creation of the Enlightenment, McMahon observes in his introduction; but while “scholars have long recognized [its] emergence in this period as the highest human type,” there has not been similar consensus about the reasons for its appearance.¹¹⁸ McMahon proposes, by way of explanation, the confluence during the Enlightenment of two “broad transformations” of Western society:¹¹⁹ the progressive secularization of belief, and the rise of an ideal of human equality. In the context of the first, the modern genius emerges as a replacement for God and “those exalted beings [...] who had long been trusted to lead us to him,” and serves as proof that “the gradual disenchantment of the world was accompanied from the outset by continual re-enchantment.”¹²⁰ In the context of the second, the genius formed part of a “shadow language of inequality” that served to “elevate the few above the many,” and “[registered] a profound protest against doctrines of universal equality.”¹²¹ Accepting the broad outlines of McMahon's historical explanation, I would add that the figure of the modern genius has always been identified as a creature of paradox, and that its ability to contain and simultaneously represent opposing ideas, emotions and characteristics is its deepest and most enduring trait.

¹¹⁶ Darrin M. McMahon. *Divine Fury: A History of Genius*. New York: Basic Books, 2013

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xvii

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xvii

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xviii

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xviii

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. xx

On a related note, McMahon situates his project against the background of existing historiography as an attempt to “recall the evil with the good” when contemplating the image of genius.¹²² Since World War II, he argues, when the “good genius” of Einstein was victorious in the battle for Western loyalties over the evil genius of Hitler, historians have “abetted this triumph, showing themselves little inclined to think of genius in connection with a man like Hitler.”¹²³ “If we wish to appreciate the role that genius has played in the modern world,” however, then we must “recall the evil with the good, bearing in mind the uncomfortable thought that genius is ultimately the product of the hopes and longings of ordinary people;”¹²⁴ that we all are, to a significant degree, the creators of genius. This is not to deny the real attributes of those identified as geni, he adds, but “to recognize the commonsense fact that genius is in part a social creation,” and therefore to keep in mind that it serves a purpose for everyone who participates in its creation.¹²⁵ An appreciation of genius as a social construction also serves, lastly, as a reminder that “extraordinary human beings not only define their own images,” but “[step] into molds;”¹²⁶ that they are good readers as much as good writers, one might say, with Gobetti in mind.

McMahon’s insistence on the social origins of the genius serves as a foil to the originality which is the other “defining feature of genius in its modern form.”¹²⁷ The genius embodies a collective aspiration to individuality, and his ability to create a new and unique identity derives from mastery of the creative potential inherent in this paradox. From among the endless, contradictory possibilities contained in his

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. xvi

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. xvi

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xvi

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xvi

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xvi

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xvi

situation, the genius exposes combinations which are invisible to those around him, giving them a form which enables others to perceive and understand their meaning. The genius is “original” in the most literal sense: he reveals new knowledge by giving form to the inchoate, and his own identity is the first and greatest of these creations. McMahon does not choose to frame this aspect of the genius’ identity in epistemological terms, but the gift of revelation is central to all the historical variations of modern genius he discusses, and essential to the genius’ role as an intermediary between the human and the divine realms. In this revelatory sense the genius is always a creator, giving concrete, particular expression to the universal and transcendent; and he always occupies a place outside the rules and conventions which govern those who surround him.

Already in this general description we have enough information to begin picking out signs of the pursuit of genius from Gobetti’s life and work. His fondness for paradox, for instance, is captured in the titles of so many of his publications: “*La rivoluzione liberale*,” “*Risorgimento senza eroi*,” “*Il Paradosso dello spirito russo*.” The language of genius permeates his writing in many genres, indeed; the question is whether its appearance can be dismissed as a reflection of the spirit or the tastes of the times, as Strada suggests, or whether it represents something more deliberate and far-reaching, and so more significant to an understanding of Gobetti’s accomplishments. The fragmentary autobiographical writings which he left are particularly interesting in this context, because they show Gobetti indeed constructing a personal myth of genius. In the first instance, this effort involved the representation of his own early childhood as a time of isolation and precocious struggle in which he formed himself by his own efforts alone, from a void, as it were, in keeping with the image of the genius. “My childhood education could not have been more curtailed, left as it was to me alone,” he remarks at the start of a brief, undated and incomplete

description of his family life.¹²⁸ In another he writes, “I am rich in instinct, in a basic impulse to life; poor and alone in everything else.”¹²⁹ “History has not given me an inheritance of any sort,” he adds:

the environment in which I lived offered me no communication; it did not add to my problems; I owe nobody anything. If I wanted history, I have had to create it for myself; if I wanted to understand, I have had to live; my taste has been formed by hard intent. I sinned out of an almost infantile love for culture and philosophy: I had to love something, with all the obscure, hidden violence of my original will to live; and you have to attach yourself at a certain point with greater passion to that which you create artificially.¹³⁰

In these excerpts we see both his self-construction and his awareness of it, his deliberate efforts to guide the process. The contrast with what is known of his actual childhood, so energetically supported by his devoted parents, is striking, and betrays the force of his ambition and his desire to overcome his background. “I had to hurry, too,” he adds by way of final explanation, “if I look at myself now, I see precisely the mean, ferocious desire of the poor man who wants to get rich.”¹³¹ Also striking is his depiction of himself as “sinning” at such an early age, assuming a cut-down model of the Faustian mantle in his explorations of “culture and philosophy.” Gobetti’s “sin” seems to consist in the “artificial” creation of an object for his affections: the Promethean pose gives his ambition the allure of tragic grandeur; it also suggests, with its implicit contrast of “artificial” and “natural” creativity, the burden of anxiety under which Gobetti labored to overcome his identification from birth with a culturally insignificant and undesirable background. Gobetti’s depiction of his childhood as a lonely, heroic struggle for knowledge and recognition echoes the attitudes and poses which Dostoevsky attributes to Kolya Krasotkin in *The Boys*, though Dostoevsky’s narrative never loses sight of the fact that Krasotkin is in fact a child. What is astonishing in Gobetti’s case is that his autobiographical fragments have been

¹²⁸ Piero Gobetti. *L'Editore ideale. Frammenti autobiografici con iconografia*. A cura e con prefazione di Franco Antonicelli. Milano: All'Insegna del pesce d'oro, 1966, p. 25

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 42

accepted on occasion by later commentators as evidence of mature self-understanding, rather than of his wishful self-creation in writing.¹³²

McMahon illustrates the evolution of the genius with a wide variety of historical figures, of which the most prominent is Napoleon Bonaparte. Napoleon was the “iconic genius” of the Romantic age, who succeeded not only in realizing the figure of genius inherited from the eighteenth century, but in expanding and transforming it beyond recognition, leaving a legacy that would still dominate perceptions of genius a century later when Gobetti was coming of age. In Napoleon the hero, or “soldier of glory,” and the “great man” of the eighteenth century were fused with the poetic genius of the Romantic era, and transformed by the infusion of personal charisma: “the genius could be a poet of the political, remaking the world in his image.”¹³³ When he formulated his definition of charisma as an ‘ideal type’ of leadership, Weber held up Napoleon as the clearest embodiment of this newly recognized force, which gave the genius a powerful emotional aura, an attractive energy with which he was able to dominate those around him. Napoleon’s charismatic appearance marked a critical moment in which the genius absorbed elements of celebrity and fame into his heroic persona.¹³⁴

Interestingly, a look through the first issue of *Energie Nove* (1-15 November, 1918), reveals that Gobetti included an article devoted to Napoleon Bonaparte, “Two Poems on the Death of Napoleon,”

¹³² The most startling example of this sort is contained in Norberto Bobbio’s “Portrait of Piero Gobetti.” Discussing the large volume of personal notes which Gobetti left, in addition to his correspondence and the annotations in his books, Bobbio observes: “Since [Gobetti] wrote rapidly, and almost without second thoughts, every note, even spontaneous, and every fragment, even incomplete, are almost always texts capable of passing the test of publication. To cite an example, in this context, there is the beautiful little book of previously unedited fragments edited by Franco Antonicelli and entitled *The Ideal Editor*, where one can read stupendous autobiographical fragments and diary entries, in addition to the celebrated *Farewell* which was published posthumously in *Il Baretti*. The following, illuminating self-definition will do to give some sense of the value of these fragments: ‘I believe I can recognize my most fundamental qualities in a formidable insensitivity and an inexhaustible will. The insensitivity represents both my passivity and the measure of my [capacities], my serenity and my irony. All that is tragic in my life, on the other hand, is a matter of my *will*.’” Norberto Bobbio. *Italia fedele. Il mondo di Gobetti*. Firenze: Passigli, 1986, pp. 12-13.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 123

¹³⁴ McMahon’s discussion of Weber’s concept of charisma appears on p. 121.

written by his friend and collaborator Angelo Tasca. The article takes up five pages of the sixteen-page issue, moreover, almost a third of the print space: it is unlikely to have been an afterthought, inserted to fill a last-minute gap in the proofs. The article is an extended comparison of two odes, Lamartine's "*Bonaparte*," published in his *Nouvelles Méditations Poétiques* in 1823, and Manzoni's "*Cinque maggio*," written in 1821, shortly after Bonaparte's death, and which served Lamartine as a model. Aside from gratifying national pride by demonstrating the superiority of Manzoni's ode, Tasca's article holds up the figure of Manzoni's Bonaparte as a worthy complement to other great portraits of Bonaparte created by Carlyle and Hugo: "beside the Carlylean "hero," the "great man" of Hugo [...] the heroic and human Napoleon of our poet takes his place with dignity."¹³⁵ The historical progress of the genius could hardly be more clearly laid out, together with his paradoxical nature. Tasca's comment makes plain that, for him and his contemporaries, the figure of the hero had been subsumed in the figure of the Napoleon's genius: while valor remained a primary trait of genius, it had been superseded by creative power. Tasca's insistence on the inspired eloquence of Manzoni's verse is part of a strategy designed to suggest this fusion by placing Manzoni's genius on a par with Napoleon's, and using it as a lens through which to contemplate "*l'uom fatale*," as Manzoni famously designated the fallen emperor.¹³⁶ The genius of action is thus evoked with words provided by the genius of inspiration. In this context Tasca's criticism of Lamartine serves to call up another stereotype of genius, the prophet unheeded in his own land. Tasca is at pains to show that Lamartine's ode was a product of worldly vanity written without true emotion, an insipid imitation of Manzoni's inspired reaction to the news of Napoleon's death:

Manzoni's ode was written in a few days, in the state of profound emotion into which news of the death of "*l'uom fatale*" plunged his spirit; years later, Lamartine write a piece of occasional poetry, brought to [the

¹³⁵ Angelo Tasca. "Due poesie in morte di napoleone." *Energie Nove*, Serie I, no. 1 (1-15 Novembre) Torino, 1918, p. 13

¹³⁶ "The 'poverty' [of Manzoni's pen] is, in this case, the poet's true wealth, an inner discipline which prevents his words from getting beyond his control or overcoming his images, and carrying them floating off beyond the bounds of true inspiration, to burst as little bubbles of greater or lesser iridescence." *Ibid.*, p. 10.

task] by the model [of Manzoni's verse], which dominated him at a moment when Napoleon had already become for him, and so many others of his contemporaries, a symbol, an emblem. Lamartine is not thinking much about Napoleon: he has his mixed program of constitutional loyalty and republican virtue to produce in verse; Napoleon is a pretext, neither here nor there, and inspiration is eliminated by an inner anachronism.¹³⁷

While Napoleon's compatriot Lamartine is unable to find more in him than an empty symbol, Manzoni apprehends the emperor's greatness with spontaneous and profound emotion: Napoleon is better appreciated in Italy than in his homeland, and Italians can take comfort in the thought that they are the true inheritors of his spiritual legacy.

The image of the napoleonic genius had a significant impact on Gobetti's interpretation of the October revolution. To take but a single example from his early writing on political events in Russia, his much-quoted declaration of the failure of the revolution as a "Marxist experiment," published in *Energie Nove* in July 1919, (and to which I referred in Chapter III), is followed by a striking description of Lenin and Trotsky:

The Russian revolution is not only in the socialist experiment. The foundations of a new state are being laid there. Lenin and Trotsky are not just Bolsheviks (Marxist majoritarians), they are men of action who have awakened a people and are recreating its spirit.¹³⁸

Lenin and Trotsky are "men of action" in the image of Napoleon, and they have "awakened" the Russian people in order to "recreate its spirit:" they are men of genius, rather than any specific political party or doctrine, and the Bolshevik revolution is a creative process far greater in scope than that of a mere socialist "experiment." The revolution has been transformed from a political process into a revelation, a great awakening in which the Russian nation discovers its true identity under the guidance of its own napoleonic leaders. Gobetti's subsequent definition of the revolution as "liberal" because it increased the freedom of the Russian people had its roots in this image of a restoration of the Russian spirit.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10. Tasca quotes from Lamartine's correspondence earlier in the article, as evidence of Lamartine's position.

¹³⁸ Piero Gobetti. "Rassegna di questioni politiche." *Energie Nove*. Serie II, No. 6, 25 luglio, 1919, p. 138.

Many of the other representatives of genius discussed by McMahon crop up in Gobetti's readings and in the written record of his life, marking a large number of the stages through which his self-construction passed. One last example, described in his correspondence with Ada, gives a sense of the depth of his emotional investment in the process. In a letter to Ada written on 8 and 9 August, 1920, Gobetti discusses an early Nietzschean phase, through which he passed before he knew her. "I have a weakness which is greater than any other, and is perhaps the only truly dangerous one," he begins:

I am afraid of my egotism. Because you know when I was a boy, in middle school, and the thought of you was still fragmentary and weak, I played the man who doesn't fear human limits, and is beyond good and evil, and subordinates everything to his 'formidable genius.' I even became brutal. I remember one day I happened to be with Manfredini, who was limping because he had had a fall, and I made him tumble down the stairs to show him that I was above pity. It's a small thing, but significant.

Then I found myself in you. But I remember the moment of my Nietzschean spirit with disgust. And I want to have the deepest possible relations with my friends and acquaintance, because I don't want to use them for my own ends, as I know I could, and would."¹³⁹

There is no other evidence available to establish whether this episode actually occurred, but its veracity is beside the point, with respect to Gobetti's self-construction: what the letter makes abundantly clear is his desire to establish a spiritual pedigree of genius. For all his disavowal and disgust, Gobetti's description of his "Nietzschean spirit" betrays an urge to affirm the existence of his exceptional powers. "It's a small thing, but significant," he remarks of his behavior towards Manfredini, managing to emphasize the deep importance of the episode while apparently writing it off. Similarly, with respect to his friends, he doesn't want "to use them for [his] own ends;" but he "could, and would," or else there would be nothing to fear. In the context of the entire letter, this ambivalence appears as one gesture in a larger performance designed to solicit Ada's emotional support by revealing the inner workings of his tormented genius.

Gobetti opens with a dramatic scene which recalls the spiritual temptations of a saint: he is alone at night in the dark, in his room, overwhelmed with sadness and weeping for reasons he cannot

¹³⁹ *Nella tua breve esistenza*, p. 290

understand. He calls out to Ada, whom he addresses as “Beatrice,” to come to him, before breaking off the letter, exclaiming, “*Che desolazione!*” This portion is dated August 8. The rest is dated August 9, and begins with a coy “morning-after” disclaimer: “I hesitated for a moment, wondering if I should tear up the sheet of paper, or send it to you.”¹⁴⁰ “But now I’m afraid of my hesitation,” he immediately continues, “I have to be sincere to the point of brutality with you, and tell you even about my moments of madness.”¹⁴¹ His confession of “Nietzschean” brutality is foreshadowed here in his approach to Ada, as he reveals his experience of “moments of madness,” another classic sign of genius. “But last night’s episode was not one of madness,” he again counters, before launching into an extended description of the event:

I cried for about an hour before falling asleep, without knowing why, without reason, just like that, spontaneously. First I was speaking, then I went up, thinking. I was thinking about my books, about the pieces of work I had to get done. I was thinking that night was falling. And a [feeling of] desolation took hold of me for a moment, and I started sobbing uncontrollably with your name on my lips. I calmed myself a bit by writing you those barely intelligible lines in the dark. But when I went to bed, I cried some more.

Then something like a moment of lucidity took hold of me, and the infinity of space appeared to me, the eternal, beyond time, a material, religious absolute, in which my spirit lost itself, stunned. And I was tormented by doubt.

I was for some time without knowledge [of my surroundings], as if annihilated.

I felt I should cancel myself out, perhaps pray, think of God. Then Beatrice drew me towards life and reality, as [she did] a few moments earlier, when I interrupted my tears while writing to you.

You can tell from my tone that now all that is finished. I feel almost gratified, contemplating and analyzing it, despite feeling a certain sadness when I see it clearly before me.¹⁴²

Gobetti’s vision is one of rapture, of spiritual possession, his description of the experience a kind of calling card of genius. He presents it to Ada with such ingenuous flourish, however, as to create an unsettling impression of deliberation; beneath the exalted sentiments and worshipful respect for Ada-Beatrice, the outlines of less admirable emotional postures appear. “I feel almost gratified,” he concludes, unfortunately, ruining the effect. While he may never have pushed his friend Manfredini

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 289

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 289

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 289-90

down the staircase of their school, here we find Gobetti unquestionably tyrannizing Ada, who is cast in the role of captive audience for his self-aggrandizing performance of genius.

The genius, as McMahon points out, was essentially a male figure, though he was endowed over time with certain “feminine” sensibilities as part of his nineteenth-century inheritance. His charisma and artistic powers made him uniquely able not only to stir emotion but also, in his relations with women, to possess and reshape their personalities entirely. In Gobetti’s case, the expression of this aspect of his genius is especially closely tied to his study of Russian language and literature, to which I turn in my two next chapters.

V - Learning Russian

*И вот уже мечтою странной
Душа наполнилась моя.*¹⁴³

In the autumn of 1918 Piero Gobetti began taking Russian language lessons. He shared the lessons with Ada Prospero, who also attended the *liceo* Gioberti and was a neighbor in his family's apartment building at Via XX Settembre, 60. Their teacher was Rachele Gutman Polledro, a Russian émigrée living in the city.¹⁴⁴ It has generally been assumed that the lessons were part of Gobetti's response to the October revolution, one element of a characteristically thoroughgoing, independent study of Bolshevism, and that they marked the beginning of his interest in Russian history and culture. As the evidence of his personal library makes clear, however, Gobetti had already begun reading Russian literature in translation a year earlier, before the October revolution; and as I have discussed, his readings were centered on the image of Genius, rather than an investigation of Bolshevism *per se*. These discoveries suggest that Gobetti's interest in the language also had other motives, and goals other than understanding the rise of the Bolsheviks. This chapter investigates the information available about Piero's and Ada's Russian language study in order to present a clearer and more detailed picture of the place it occupied in their lives, what their lessons entailed, and what they were able to achieve as students of Russian. For Piero the lessons were, I think, a continuation of his effort to "realize his genius," as the contemporary Italian idiom put it, through the simultaneous pursuit of the Russian spirit and of a sentimental education with Ada. In addition to knowledge of the language and practice as a literary

¹⁴³ "And then my soul was filled/With a strange dream." A. S. Pushkin "The Little Flower" The full text is available at: "Цветок (Пушкин)." Викитека. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 May 2016. <[https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Цветок_\(Пушкин\)](https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Цветок_(Пушкин))>. The translation is mine.

¹⁴⁴ Rachele Gutman Polledro appears in different sources under a variety of renderings of her name: Rachele Gutman, Rachele Gutmann-Polledro, Rachele Gutmann Polledro. Polledro was her husband's last name, which she joined occasionally to her own. I shall refer to her from here on as "Rachele Gutman."

translator, the lessons provided him with a private social sphere in which he could develop his relationship with Ada. The innovative and thorough instruction offered by their teacher also laid the foundations of his knowledge of the Russian literary tradition, and very probably contributed to his understanding of the history of Russian radicalism at the same time. For Ada, the lessons were the start of a long and successful career as a translator, one which she pursued throughout her life, though she abandoned the study of Russian after Piero's death. The available evidence suggests that she did the bulk of the work that went into their joint translations. It also suggests that her experience of the lessons as a sentimental education was, on occasion, painful. And, lastly, that her attention later in life to questions of women's emancipation, childhood education and family life may have derived from her early contact with Rachele Gutman, who put many progressive ideas about personal freedom for women into practice in her own life.

What little direct testimony exists about their Russian lessons has been provided by Ada, and indicates that she and Piero took up Russian primarily for personal, rather than intellectual, reasons. In an interview given in 1963 for the first television program made about him, Ada described her activities at the time she and Piero began learning Russian, and spoke about their motives for starting the lessons:

In truth I began attending – the university, that is – two years before I was actually enrolled. Partly because I had entered into that group of friends which gravitated around Piero, and, above all, because I wanted to spend as much time as possible with him. It was this desire to be together that led us into one of our common undertakings of those years, and that was the study of the Russian language. We went to the lessons together, and very soon began translating. Studying the language encouraged Piero to study the phenomenon of the Russian revolution.¹⁴⁵

Whatever intellectual curiosity may also have informed them, the Russian lessons were, in the first place, an excuse for Piero and Ada simply to meet and spend time together. As this admission implies, their

¹⁴⁵ The text of the interview is reproduced in: *Racconto interrotto: Piero Gobetti nel ricordo degli amici*. Torino: Centro Studi Piero Gobetti, 1992, p. 28. This monograph was published to accompany the film of the same title directed and produced by Gobetti's son Paolo, and released in the same year: *Racconto interrotto*. Regia: Paolo Gobetti e Claudio Cormio. Prod. Cooperativa "28 dicembre," 1992; available on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VmVAo7V8NpY>. Footage of Ada's interview was also later included in a film devoted entirely to Ada: *Piacere, Ada Gobetti. L'emozione educativa*. Regia di Teo De Luigi. Sceneggiatura di Andrea Gobetti. Centro Studi Piero Gobetti, 2008.

acquaintance at the beginning of the autumn had rapidly declared itself a romantic passion: Piero's first letter to Ada was sent on September 14; by September 28 he is beginning a subsequent letter "*Hic incipit*," with an allusion to Dante's *Vita Nova*, and remarking, albeit jokingly, that "the prospect of spending two days without seeing or speaking to one another is rather sad."¹⁴⁶ On October 30, as Ada would later frequently recall, they began what they saw as the new era of their life as a couple. Piero was 17, Ada 16; he had just graduated a year early and was preparing to enter university, she had two more years of schooling ahead before she would make the same transition. They were adolescents, in other words, still living at home, entirely dependent on their parents, and bound by the proprieties that governed family life and relations between young people before marriage. Both were only children of energetically devoted parents, moreover, and thus the objects of particular attention at home. In this context Russian lessons offered an irreproachably respectable activity which also gave them a measure of privacy and independence, a momentary escape from parental supervision and from some of the constraints of social etiquette, as well as a chance to establish a sphere of activity that was theirs alone. In a letter of 1924, Ada recalled fondly how the two of them pressed close to each other under their umbrella on the way across the city to lessons on rainy days, enjoying a rare, sanctioned opportunity for intimacy.¹⁴⁷

Ada mentions also in the interview that she and Piero "very soon began translating;" this is an astonishing understatement that raises the questions of how and what they learned, and their goals as students of Russian. There is no record of exactly when they had their first lesson, but it cannot have

¹⁴⁶ *Nella tua breve esistenza*, p. 11. Despite living in the same building, Piero and Ada did not become directly acquainted until September 1918.

¹⁴⁷ "I am so happy today, I don't know why, with a playful happiness like on that day when we were going to lessons and it was raining so hard, and with the umbrella for an excuse, Didi pressed so close to Piero, and we both laughed (remember?), with a laugh as fresh as the rain." *Nella tua breve esistenza*, p. 248. "*Un petit coin de parapluie, /Contre un coin de paradis*," as Georges Brassens puts it.

been earlier than September 14, 1918 when Piero sent her his initial letter. Nevertheless in February 1919 they published their first translation of a literary work, Leonid Andreev's short story, "Бездна" ("The Abyss") in Gobetti's review, *Energie Nove*. Despite their unquestionable intelligence and motivation, it hardly seems likely that they produced the translation unaided, after only three or four months of language instruction; and indeed, when Gobetti published it as a separate edition later that year, in an attempt to start a series of literary monographs alongside the review, he included their teacher's name with theirs as a translator. The translation appears to have been a guided exercise produced as part of their language lessons. This explanation is confirmed by material in Ada's personal archive at the Gobetti Center: her notebook from the lessons survives, and contains a working draft of the text.¹⁴⁸ The notebook shows Ada's early exercises gradually replaced by work on short texts, followed by draft translations of two short stories by Leonid Andreev, "Бездна" (The Abyss), and "Марсельез" (The Marseillaise), which fill the remaining pages. Other notebooks and papers held in the same folder contain almost entirely drafts and proofs of translations, all of literary works.¹⁴⁹ Knowledge of Russian literature and the practice of literary translation were evidently the main goals of the lessons, rather than conversational fluency or an active written command of the language.

The *liceo* Gioberti which Piero and Ada attended was a *liceo classico*; a literary approach to Russian would thus have been a natural extension of the training in Latin and Greek that formed the core of their school curriculum. It was also consonant with prevalent attitudes among the upper-middle classes to the study of living languages as an intellectual pursuit, undertaken for the acquisition of

¹⁴⁸ Centro Studi Piero Gobetti, Fondo Ada Prospero Gobetti, Serie 2: "Materiali dell'infanzia, della giovinezza, della vita con Piero, 1902 - 1928," UA 36/1. Ada noted "January 1919" at the end of the draft, indicating that she finished it at most four months after beginning the lessons.

¹⁴⁹ The folder also contains some notes on Russian folklore and on Andreev, and proofs of a later review by Gobetti of an Italian translation of K. A. Fedin's *The Brothers*. Centro Studi Piero Gobetti, Fondo Ada Prospero Gobetti, Serie 2: UA 36/1-6; UA 37/1-3; UA 38/1-4; UA 39/1-2.

cultural knowledge rather than practical skills. In her memoir of family life, for example, Elena Croce recalls her father's attitude towards language learning as something that could be taken for granted: "My father's pedagogical vision seemed not to consider, in actual fact, language learning as an endeavor which involved any particular difficulty or merit."¹⁵⁰ She goes on to describe his supervision of her own language learning, conceived as a means to the proper appreciation of literature, and concentrated on the rapid acquisition of reading knowledge:

Thanks to this undervaluation of language study, and to the emphasis on the necessity of reading poetry in the original, we all quickly learned to read various languages, while no particular expectations were ever attached to conversation, because, at the outside, our efforts as interpreters in everyday situations were greeted as a pleasant surprise during the trips on which our father took us with a certain regularity as we were growing up.¹⁵¹

Language courses designed to promote an active spoken and written command of a living language were still a novelty, as was the practice of linguistic immersion in an academic environment. Describing his own unconventional education, Giuseppe Prezzolini still recalled with gratitude, half a century later, his guardian's willingness to let him travel to France in 1900, when he was 18, to enroll in a language course: "I wanted to go abroad to learn French (the first summer courses were then opening at the University of Grenoble to teach the language through the presence of native speakers, a system that has since done well the world over) and he let me go."¹⁵² More common in this respect was the experience of Vittorio Foa, whose father chose to send him abroad to members of their extended family in preparation for a career in business, a training for which the acquisition of a foreign language formed part of the social background:

I was 14, was ahead in school, and went to Paris as a guest of one of my aunts to work in some commercial firm, chosen I don't know how. During the day I worked, in long trousers, as a bookkeeper and typist in French; in

¹⁵⁰ Elena Croce. *L'Infanzia dorata e Ricordi familiari*. Milano: Adelphi, 1979, p. 142

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 142-143

¹⁵² Giuseppe Prezzolini. *L'Italiano inutile*. Firenze: Vallecchi, 1964, p. 77

the evenings, in shorts, I kept my aunt company during her social rounds...¹⁵³

Such a decision meant interrupting schooling, however, and precluded, in the longer term, the prospect of a university education. Foa would chafe at this paternal imposition for the rest of his life, as having deprived him of the education that would have given him a proper cultural foundation: “I have always regretted not having studied, having been through university without attending it, because I was working eight hours a day, six days a week, and finding myself at age twenty as ignorant as a mole.”¹⁵⁴ Looking back even on his extraordinary participation in the antifascist underground, he would lament specifically his “lack of a cultural background in an endeavor which required a gaze capable of seeing far into the future.”¹⁵⁵ His practical knowledge of French was simply, in Foa’s view, a skill necessary for commerce; and this was a view widely shared at the time. Whatever their immediate circumstances or aspirations, the opportunity to acquire active command of a living language also involved, for all these individuals, the financial resources and social connections necessary for travel: fluency in a living language was, in consequence, still the privilege of the well-to-do.

What is novel in Piero’s and Ada’s situation is then, first, the choice of a literary approach to Russian, not a language which then formed part of the repertoire of elite culture. Russian language was hardly spoken, and Russian literature was not widely or well known in Italy at this point. Access to Russian literature was, for the most part, through French translations, or Italian translations of French editions, both of which usually fell well short of the literary attainments of the originals. The stereotype of the barbarian Slav then prevalent encouraged a view of Russian and other Slavic peoples as primitive, moreover, lacking cultural traditions of significance and possessed, at best, of exotic appeal. If Piero and

¹⁵³ Vittorio Foa. *Il Cavallo e la Torre*. Torino: Einaudi, 1991, p. 25

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26

Ada had wanted to expand their cultural foundation through formal study of a living language, German would have been a more obvious, and sanctioned, choice.¹⁵⁶ It was a language in which neither had any background, and one respected as the bearer of great artistic and intellectual traditions. For Ada, it would have been a natural accompaniment to her voice training, for Gobetti, an offshoot of his existing interest in German philosophy.¹⁵⁷ The pioneering aspect of learning Russian seems to have contributed to its appeal, however, as part of their construction of a “new life,” as did the authority conferred by acquiring what was then a rare form of expertise. Likewise the element of daring, for Gobetti in particular, inherent in setting himself against received cultural wisdom and championing a neglected, even disparaged, tradition. Taking up Russian was, in this respect, a gesture uniquely open to Gobetti on account of his background: his parents provided material support but imposed no expectations of their own on his intellectual and cultural activities. He was free in consequence to experiment in ways that his contemporaries from more conventional upper-middle-class families were not, and to devote himself to projects that challenged accepted cultural norms.¹⁵⁸ His investment in learning Russian represents in this respect an expression of his belief in the relevance of the Russian example for Italy, and thus in his own ability to discern the patterns and movements of history beneath the surface of contemporary events, in true Crocean style. Knowledge of the language was essential in order to have access to the Russian spirit, as expressed in Russian literature; discerning the nature of this spirit, its development and significance, constituted an interpretive endeavor of Genius.

¹⁵⁶ French was taught as part of their school curriculum, Ada’s remarks about “knowing nothing” of French literature notwithstanding. Gobetti knew French well enough to produce, in 1922, a translation of the Catholic philosopher Lucien Laberthonnière’s study, *Le réalisme chrétien et l’idéalisme grec*, written in 1904; and while not entirely fluent, he was clearly able to speak and write when he arrived Paris in early 1926.

¹⁵⁷ Evidence from their correspondence indicates that Ada did, in fact, later learn German, and that she also took German lessons from Rachele Gutman: see her letter of September 5, 1921 in *Nella tua breve esistenza*, p. 487. Gutman herself was multilingual, and translated from Yiddish and German, as well as Russian.

¹⁵⁸ One wonders, in this connection, what the Prosperos thought of the enterprise. There is no direct evidence available with which to answer this question, but it seems possible they were wary of Gobetti’s eruption into Ada’s life, and of his schemes for transforming her education, given the effort that they had already invested in guiding her development.

A second novel aspect of Piero's and Ada's Russian lessons was the professionalism of their teacher, her extensive experience providing formal instruction, and her comprehensive approach to language teaching as cultural education. The quality of the training she offered was unusual not only for instruction in Russian, but for instruction in any living language at the time. Rachele Gutman had arrived in Turin in 1904 from her native Białystok, intending to study medicine. She had emigrated in order to escape the restrictions placed on the enrollment of Jewish students at universities in the Russian empire.¹⁵⁹ She supported herself by giving private Russian lessons, and Alfredo Polledro, her future husband, was one of her first students. Both were also active in anarcho-syndicalist circles, especially Polledro, who was subject to repeated detention and incarceration in 1905-6 for his political activities. In 1906 the couple left the Piedmont, probably to avoid another arrest for Polledro, and traveled through Eastern Europe, before settling in Provence in 1907, first in Marseilles, then in Nice. In 1908 Polledro was included in an amnesty for political offenders, and he and Rachele Gutman were able to return to the Piedmont, where she gave birth to twin boys in April. Seeking stability for the family, Polledro found steady work, and in April he and Gutman were married in a civil ceremony. Gutman subsequently took up language teaching again, but now as a full profession. Initially she gave private lessons, then joined the staff of the privately run Berlitz and Zysle language schools. In 1916 she was hired to teach in two state-run schools, a middle school and a vocational high school devoted to commerce, where Russian had been newly introduced as part of the curriculum. At this point she also began to prepare and publish instructional materials, with her husband's help, producing the first series of Russian language teaching texts commercially available in Italy. She also began publishing her own literary translations. At the time

¹⁵⁹ There has been no extended treatment of Rachele Gutman's life to date. This and the following information is based on: Laurent Béghin. "Rachele Gutman." *Russi in Italia*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Aug. 2015. <<http://www.russinitalia.it/dettaglio.php?id=739>>. This webpage offers the fullest existing presentation of information about Rachele Gutman, together with a full list of available sources, principally a memoir written by her husband, which remains unpublished and in family hands; and an extract from this manuscript which appears in an honors thesis by a student at the University of Turin: Roberto Alessio, "Le traduzioni dal russo a Torino negli anni Venti del nostro secolo." Honors Thesis, Università degli Studi di Torino, 1987-1988 (relatrice: prof. Marina Federica Rossi Varese).

that Piero and Ada began their lessons with her, Rachele Gutman was thus an experienced language teacher specializing in instruction for adolescents of high-school age: she could offer not just individual tutoring, but a complete curricular program supported by purpose-made instructional materials, and guidance in literary translation that stemmed directly from her own ongoing practice. As a native speaker, she was also in a position to enrich this program in person with attention to contemporary idiom and a wide range of practical and cultural information, knowledge to which travel had previously been the only functional means of access.

Ada's notebook gives a sense of the stages through which her and Piero's lessons proceeded, and this evidence can be supplemented by consulting the language texts which Gutman and Polledro were developing or had already published: a text of Pushkin's short story "Барышня-крестьянка," ("The Princess-Peasant") annotated and accented for teaching, published in 1916; a Russian grammar, published in 1917; and an anthology of Russian literary texts designed to serve as the basis for comprehension exercises, grammar instruction and vocabulary acquisition, published in 1919.¹⁶⁰ Gobetti's library does not contain copies of the grammar or the reading anthology, but Ada's notebook shows her working on materials found in each. In all probability, she and Piero worked from a copy of the newly published grammar text, even if they did not own it, and used reading materials which Rachele Gutman Polledro was developing in preparation for the publication of the anthology. A loose sheet tucked in to the middle of the notebook shows a brief schedule, giving an indication of the intensity of Piero's and Ada's efforts: it notes meetings planned for six days of the week, Monday through Saturday,

¹⁶⁰ A. S. Puschkin. *La Signorina-Contadina*. Novella di Puschkin. Testo russo con accentazione, versione letterale e libera, e note grammaticali di Rachele Gutmann-Polledro, Alfredo Polledro. Torino: S. Lattes, 1916 [Pushkin's story is one of his *Belkin Tales*, and is known in English under a variety of titles, including "The Squire's Daughter" and "The Amateur Peasant Girl." My rendition is literal, and not taken from any extant publication.]

Rachele Gutmann-Polledro, Alfredo Polledro. *Grammatica Russa Teorico-Pratica*. Con accentazione, esercizi, lettura, nomenclatura e dizionario. Torino: S. Lattes, 1917

Rachele Gutmann-Polledro, Alfredo Polledro. *Antologia Russa*. Con studio particolare dei verbi, accentazione dell'intero testo, note e questionari. Torino: A. Lattes, 1919

for an hour each day. Even allowing for some social distraction, they were devoting significant time and effort to this new venture.

Ada's notebook shows her working steadily through the exercises of Rachele Gutman's grammar manual, beginning with simple writing practice and vocabulary, and advancing rapidly through a range of basic grammatical constructions: regular declension patterns, and those of a handful of irregular nouns; an introductory selection of verbs of motion, regular first conjugation verbs, and constructions necessary for "to be," "to have," and "to be able;" verbal aspect; numbers, time and dates; capitals, countries and languages; seasons and weather. Gradually translations of short reading texts into Italian appear, mainly of fables: "The Two Companions;" "The Sailor and the Merchant;" "The Mother;" "The Crow and the Magpie." A last pair of exercises, not from the grammar text, then give way to translations of literary texts: four poems which would later form part of Gutman's reading anthology, and then the two short stories by Andreev, which were not included in the anthology.¹⁶¹ It seems from this sequence that Ada got about two-thirds of the way through the lessons in the grammar before shifting her focus to translation. Apparently she learned the rest of the material in the process of work on individual translations, for which knowledge of these topics would certainly have been necessary. It is impossible to say how much of this study was accomplished in lessons, and how much by a combination of independent work and occasional consultation.¹⁶² Neither is it clear how long the lessons lasted – certainly into early 1919, when Ada and Piero finished the Andreev translation for *Energie Nove*, and perhaps longer, to include the translation of "The Marseillaise" that is in the notebook – nor why they stopped. Perhaps they were no longer able to keep up the time commitment to the lessons; perhaps their families lowered a

¹⁶¹ The poems were, in order: "Цветок" ("The Little Flower") by Pushkin; "Памяти Чехова" ("In Memory of Chekhov") by Skitalets; "Горный лес" ("The Mountain Forest") by Bunin; "Из чужбины" ("From a Foreign Land") by Skitalets; they appear on pages 97, 132-3, 132 and 134, respectively, of Rachele Gutman's *Grammatica russa*.

¹⁶² The notebook shows no dates, unfortunately, nor any other information about the practical organization of the lessons.

financial bar; or perhaps they felt they had learned enough to be able to manage from there on by themselves, book in hand. It seems likely, at any rate, given that Ada's archive contains no other record of work done for lessons, that by the spring of 1919 she and Piero were reading and translating Russian literature essentially on their own, and turning to Rachele Gutman for occasional suggestions, corrections and editing. That Ada kept up contact with Rachele Gutman is apparent from a later reference in her correspondence with Piero to consulting about a translation with "*la gaspadina*," as she endearingly, if erroneously, designated their teacher.¹⁶³

Piero's and Ada's active knowledge of Russian was quite limited, then: they covered most of a first-year grammar syllabus before devoting themselves exclusively to the practice of literary translation. There is no evidence that they pursued contact with members of the Russian-speaking community in Turin, or anywhere else in Italy, other than as their translations and Piero's criticism brought them a handful of émigré correspondents.¹⁶⁴ It is also unclear how much Gobetti actually used whatever Russian he acquired: there are no surviving notebooks or papers of his related to the lessons, nor any drafts of the translations he and Ada subsequently published. This gap in the evidence may be circumstantial: aside the losses caused by fascist searches and confiscation during his lifetime, there is anecdotal evidence that after his death, his parents' apartment was destroyed by a fire, and that there was a fire in a warehouse

¹⁶³ *Nella tua breve esistenza*, p. 487. The letter, written on September 5, 1921, also provides a translation of a postcard which Piero had received from the writer Osip Felin together with a copy of Felin's recently published novel *Одна из дорог*, in Italian *Il bivio*. "Here's what I have been able to understand of Felin's postcard," Ada writes, setting out a quick summary, following which she adds that if Gobetti can wait a little longer before responding, she will have time to check with Rachele Gutman, so that he'll "be surer, when replying, not to make any *gaffes*." From this exchange it seems clear that Ada was not only functioning as Gobetti's secretary but as his interpreter in exchanges with Russian contacts, with continuing help from Rachele Gutman. According to Ada, Felin invited Gobetti to "write to me in Russian, if you wish, or [...] in Italian."

¹⁶⁴ These included, in addition to Felin, the musician Lydia Natus, who wrote Gobetti a gushing letter of praise from Petrograd after reading his article, "Leonida Andreiev in Italia," *Energie Nove*, 30 September, 1919. Gobetti sent Ada an amused summary of Natus' screed in a letter of August 30, 1920, with the preamble, "Finally, here's a really astonishing piece of news! *Lidusa* has written to me." (*Nella tua breve esistenza*, pp. 308-309) The missing link between these disparate figures appears to have been the poet Clemente Rebora: Rebora translated Andreiev into Italian, as Gobetti noted in his article, dedicating the translation to "*Lidusa, mia iniziatrice*," a phrase "calculated to engender some curiosity," as Ersilia Alessandrone Perona adds in the notes to Gobetti's letter (*Nella tua breve esistenza*, p. 310)

where materials related to his journals and publishing house were stored.¹⁶⁵ His notebooks may simply have been destroyed. The absence of draft translations by Gobetti may also reflect a common reality of the times, however, that men were often supported behind the scenes in their intellectual labors by female family members, who provided a great deal of unacknowledged assistance in the form of research, editing and translation. Many of Ada's draft translations show corrections in Gobetti's hand, suggesting that he only edited what was essentially her work.¹⁶⁶ It is also clear from a survey of Gobetti's library that he read most of the works of Russian literature he consulted in Italian translation. Gobetti's mother, in addition, did quantities of copying for him in Italian, as well as helping with the production and distribution of his reviews.¹⁶⁷ Gobetti's frenetic pace of work, his rapid passages from one subject to another, and the wide range of his activities are all part of his myth: the prosaic reality, with respect to Russian literature, may have been that he simply did not have time to struggle through complex texts in a language in which he was not fluent, and contented himself with a combination of reading in translation and collaborative work on translations produced by Ada. Against this deflating observation it should be noted in conclusion that the loose sheet in Ada's notebook on which a weekly lesson schedule is jotted also shows a homework exercise, and both are in Piero's hand. This sheet offers the only available glimpse of his abilities as a student of Russian, and it shows him to be Ada's equal at this early stage. Ada's version of the same exercise is contained in the notebook; both were corrected by Rachele

¹⁶⁵ Augusto Monti describes a fire at Gobetti's parents' flat in: Augusto Monti. "Con Piero Gobetti Vivo e Morto." *Belfagor*. Vol. XI, 1956, pp. 203-211. The article is so clearly mythologizing in its aims, however, that it is impossible to give it credence without support from additional sources, which I have not found. Reports of the warehouse fire are mentioned by Silvana Barbalato in her introduction to the archive, but she is careful to indicate that they are only anecdotal. See: *L'Archivio di Piero Gobetti: tracce di una prodigiosa giovinezza*. A cura di Silvana Barbalato. Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2010, p. 33

¹⁶⁶ This is true of her translation of the poem by Skitalets, "Памяти Чехова," ("In Memory of Chekhov") on page 31 of her notebook, where Gobetti's interpolations are clearly visible, of her work on "The Abyss," also in the notebook, and of drafts of several other translations contained her archive, which I in detail in Chapter VI.

¹⁶⁷ This fact is not discussed in the secondary literature, but is apparent from materials contained in the Gobetti archive, which show her handwriting, and is part of the family knowledge handed down orally by Ada. I am grateful to Silvana Barbalato for making me aware of this situation, and to Piera Tachis for additional conversation about it.

Gutman. Comparison reveals that Ada and Piero made a similar number of mistakes, but that these mistakes were distinct: they were learning the material and doing the exercises independently, in other words. It may therefore be that Gobetti achieved a good reading knowledge of Russian, even if he subsequently exercised it relatively little.

Rachele Gutman brought a distinctive sensibility to her work as a teacher, and many of its contours are visible in the exercises and readings which she included in her textbooks, and on which Ada worked. “Virtue is greater than power, but many people love only power and wealth,” Ada begins one of her exercises, translating from Italian into Russian, “the power of kings and emperors is often a danger to the freedom of peoples.” “I have not read today’s news,” the exercise continues, followed by, “We listened to a story about the death of a hero in the war.”¹⁶⁸ “No,” Ada writes as part of another exercise, “I do not wish to have as much money as Rothschild.”¹⁶⁹ Lesson 23, on whole numbers and fractions, ends with a text for translation from Russian into Italian entitled, “A German law of 1916,” which turns out to provide a summary of the various restrictions on soap rationing that were part of the German war effort, and concludes deprecatingly that from August 1916, a German received only “an eighth of a Russian pound of soap per month” with which to wash himself.¹⁷⁰ Throughout the text, excerpts for reading and translation are chosen with a view to entertainment, combining linguistic instruction and social commentary with humor. The very first text of the volume, indeed, designed to illustrate cursive handwriting, manages also to get in a dig at “the power of kings,” with an anecdote about a cunning Dutch innkeeper who charges his king an outrageous price for a breakfast of eggs.¹⁷¹

Gutman’s personal commitment to egalitarian principles and social activism was no less

¹⁶⁸ *Grammatica russa*, Lezione 5a, esercizio 10, p. 18. Ada’s version of the exercise is on p. 21 of her notebook.

¹⁶⁹ Ada’s notebook, p. 32

¹⁷⁰ *Grammatica russa.*, pp. 131-2

¹⁷¹ “Редкие короли” (Rare Kings), *Ibid.*, pp. xxiii-xxiv

engaging. She and Polledro made no concession to the institution of marriage at the outset of their relationship, choosing to live as a couple without undergoing a ceremony of any kind. The decision to marry legally in 1908 was a concession to propriety undertaken with their newborn sons in mind, and they entered only into a civil union, a relatively rare choice in Italy at the time. Both were active “neo-Malthusians,” or promoters of birth control, and Polledro joined forces with the German sociologist Robert Michels, then resident in Turin, to establish a journal dedicated to publicizing and supporting this cause, entitled *L'educazione sessuale*, (*Sexual Education*). Throughout their marriage and professional collaboration Gutman worked alongside her husband as an equal partner, and her name appeared on her work as primary author, in contrast to the situation endured by so many other accomplished wives who remained in their husbands’ professional shadows.¹⁷² She enjoyed a quiet fame in Turin in the immediate post-war period for her teaching, and this was augmented by the critical reception of her and Polledro’s literary translations as well as, from 1926 onwards, the attention that their publishing house, Slavia, attracted nationwide.¹⁷³ When he chose to study Russian during his long incarceration, Antonio Gramsci would request only her textbooks, as the best available. As Piero and Ada set out on the adventure of constructing a new joint identity for themselves, Rachele Gutman offered an immediate example of a successful personal challenge to convention, and a living link with the Russian radical tradition. Ada’s later career recalls many of Gutman’s achievements, and suggests that Gutman’s personal example exercised particular influence over her development.

The carefully chosen sequence of literary readings which she used to support her language instruction was another of Gutman’s innovative pedagogical accomplishments, and offered Piero and Ada

¹⁷² This situation changed only after 1938, when the promulgation of Mussolini’s racial laws made it dangerous for her to publish under her own name, and she placed her translations under her husband’s name.

¹⁷³ Gutman’s appointment to teach in state schools was testimony to the respect accorded to her professionalism and local standing: the Minister of Education responsible for the introduction of Russian to the curricula of public schools was Francesco Ruffini, himself Turinese.

a historical overview of the Russian literary tradition conveyed through a series of accessible reading texts. It was a background that they could not have acquired from any other source at the time.¹⁷⁴ While Gutman's and Polledro's reading anthology was not yet published when Piero and Ada began their lessons, it is clear from Ada's notebook that they were given texts that formed part of its preparatory materials, that it had already been conceived in outline, in other words. After its publication the following year, Piero and Ada would have been able to use the anthology as a guide for independent exploration of Russian literature; its availability perhaps contributed, indeed, to their switching from regular lessons to independent work as translators. Designed in the first place to offer a sequence of accented texts that would train students' ears to the vagaries of Russian mobile stress patterns, the texts also exposed students to a well chosen selection of prose and verse, beginning with a sequence of fables by Tolstoy, and culminating in a variety of lyrics by contemporary poets. Along the way almost all the great authors of the Russian nineteenth century were represented. Even more unusually, works by contemporary writers were included in abundance, and singled out, so that students would know which authors they might follow in current intellectual discussion. Such serious attention to writers of the Silver Age was unusual at the time in Italy, thanks to a prevalent distaste in intellectual circles for Symbolist and Decadent writers, who were viewed as having sunk to a nadir of personal and aesthetic dissolution.¹⁷⁵ The association of Russia with political radicalism and the culture of early socialism (and so, by extension, with the image of the phalanstery as a breeding ground of unsavory personal relations)

¹⁷⁴ De Vogüé's history circulated in French and in Italian translation, for example, but reliance on such substitutes for direct knowledge of literary works was rightly one of the things with which Gobetti reproached contemporary Italian critics and readers.

¹⁷⁵ Benedetto Croce was the most influential and vociferous proponent of this view in Italy. For a discussion of changing attitudes to writers of the Silver Age, both in and outside Russia, see: Otto Boele. *Erotic Nihilism in Late Imperial Russia. The Case of Mikhail Artsybashev's Sanin*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2009.

reinforced this aversion to contemporary Russian writing.¹⁷⁶ This vision would haunt Russian assessments, too, for some time, but Rachele Gutman seems to have been free of it. In her teaching she clearly made significant effort to expose her students to works of contemporary Russian literature, which were treated as a legitimate chapter in the story of the development of Russian literary culture.¹⁷⁷

Piero and Ada worked only on contemporary authors as translators, what is more, and devoted particular attention to the prose of Leonid Andreev, who was very popular in Italy for both his drama and his prose, despite the fact that he epitomized the Decadence against which Croce and other Italian intellectuals reacted so vigorously. Their interest began under Gutman's supervision, and reflected her own interest as a translator in Andreev; it seems likely that much of their subsequent attention to contemporary authors also derived from her continued guidance, either directly, in consultation with Ada, or indirectly through the selections in the reading anthology. In his critical studies of Russian literature Gobetti was at pains, as he had been in his assessment of the October revolution, to set contemporary figures against historical tradition, and so he also devoted considerable attention to the great Russian writers of the nineteenth century, as the articles collected in his *Paradox of the Russian Spirit* attest. His personal library contains works by a remarkably wide range of nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors, indicating the breadth of his reading. This combination of a broad view of Russian literary history with perceptive attention to individual contemporary writers was what distinguished Gobetti as a critic and translator on the contemporary Italian scene, and its roots are to be found in Rachele Gutman's inspired presentation of Russian literature as part of her language teaching.

¹⁷⁶ For a discussion of sexuality as a source of anxiety and conflict in Soviet society in the 1920s, and the roots of this unease in reactions to the culture of early socialism, see: Eric Naiman. *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997

¹⁷⁷ The one contemporary literary movement which found no place in her anthology was Futurism. While this might reflect a cultural bias on Gutman's part, I think it just as likely that the omission was due to the difficulty that most Futurist lyrics would have presented to beginning students of Russian. Piero and Ada, in turn, devoted no attention to works by Russian Futurists, though Piero fell briefly under the spell of some of the Italian Futurists in 1918-19.

Behind Gobetti's work, her guiding hand needs to be acknowledged as an important source of his "divinatory" understanding of Russian culture.

Ada's notebook also reveals another side of her and Piero's Russian studies, the exuberant playfulness of their relationship as it flourished in the private space created by the lessons. Ada's work is sprinkled with affectionate words and phrases written in by Piero, ranging from a Russianized diminutive, "дидюша," tucked in between lines of her writing, to a large scrawl across most of one homework exercise, "Я люблю Диду!" ("I love Didi!") after which Ada has added "всегда, всегда," ("forever, forever").¹⁷⁸ He seems to have sent himself up, too, as part of this banter, scribbling all across one page in pencil, "uno ciuffo dritto sullo fesso," [sic] or, roughly, "a tuft of hair sticking up on the nitwit," a reference to his trademark head of unruly curls.¹⁷⁹ Their endeavors were evidently accompanied by a healthy dose of adolescent high spirits and silliness, as well as higher-minded ambitions for cultural renovation. Russian contributed to this experimentation by providing a secret code, a private language in which they could make declarations and play games that would not have passed parental scrutiny if left in accessible form in Italian. The use of Russian as linguistic camouflage is especially visible in their letters from this early period of their relationship, which are punctuated with individual Cyrillic characters, Russian words and phrases, and passages of Italian transliterated into the Cyrillic alphabet. Together these devices allowed them to create their own private language, a gesture that was at once a coy and rather old-fashioned lovers' game, and an expression of their sense that they

¹⁷⁸ Pages 20 ad 27 of Ada's notebook, respectively.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3

were beginning a new era together, living a personal revolution.¹⁸⁰ Like everything else he turned his hand to, Gobetti's study of Russian was marked by a strong component of linguistic performance, expressed first and foremost in this invention of a hybrid idiolect.

While Ada adopted their personal "revolutionary" calendar with more enthusiasm, Piero spent more energy on developing their new, private language. Particularly significant was the use, common to both, though much more frequent in Piero's letters, of the Cyrillic capital letter Л (*L*), to designate "любовь" (love). While Ada tended to use it as part of opening or closing phrases that stood apart from the rest of the letter, and more often wrote out a few Russian words in their entirety, Piero used the character alone as a type of symbolic punctuation, introducing it not only to designate "love," but to create rhythmic patterns in his sentences that emphasized particular passages of his thought.¹⁸¹ Ada's usage remained focused on the denotative meaning of the underlying word, while Piero's became part of a repertoire of expressive gestures with which he tried to convey states of emotional exaltation. Extraordinary in this respect is the letter he wrote to Ada during the night of April 15-16, 1919, while traveling from Turin to Florence to attend the national conference of "the friends of *L'Unità*," Gaetano Salvemini's political journal. Clearly in the grip of great excitement, he wrote the letter in installments throughout the journey, during which he seems not to have slept at all. At 10.40 pm, he records going out into the corridor from his compartment, and watching the passing landscape from the window.

¹⁸⁰ "Assai ottocentesco," or "Very nineteenth-century," is Morra di Lavriano's comment on these code games in his *Vita di Piero Gobetti*, p. 122. Making another "revolutionary" gesture, Piero and Ada also adopted a new calendar, which started on the day they declared themselves to one another. Ada was more inclined to date her letters with reference to this secret chronology, as she did, for example, on April 17, 1919, which she indicates as "giorno no. 1680 d.n.a." or "day no. 168 of our era." Immediately before the date she writes, "ялп," short for, "I love Piero." Fifteen months later, in 1920, she sent him a card dated: "2 agosto. Anno II a renovazione" or, "2 August. Year II of renovation." *Nella tua breve esistenza*, pp. 30 & 265

¹⁸¹ Typical for Ada are the letters of April 16, 1919, which closes with "любовь" written in under her signature, of April 17, discussed above, and of April 18, which opens, "любовь всегда очень," or "much love always." Apart from these phrases, the letters contain no other Russian words or characters. Gobetti's letters written during the same period, April 15-20, equally frequent and generally longer, contain not a single word in Russian, but are larded with capital Лs, which he deploys with obvious stylistic intent, and integrates into his Italian sentences. *Nella tua breve esistenza*, pp. 17-43.

“Outside, there is the *moon*,” he writes:

And he who is sufficiently pure can raise himself to it, can live in this moment and feel the affection in a euphoria of understanding among all those spirits which are nearby and consciously *brothers*, and which look on it from all sides.

Frequent hills deprive me of its sight, but the flame is not extinguished. Watercourses *J* meandering here and there store the light of the ideal, taking on a silver sheen. Only the galleries snatch it from you, but then the steep drops at the mouth, a superhuman work that I realize in myself, seem purpose built so that one leaves all gloom behind, and rises up to the understanding that returns finally with the light and with the fresh air. There is smoke; obstacles, but the ideal is not obscured because it knows how to find the echo and the correspondence in other places...There is the sparkle of a torrent. The lights of a house. But the sky is more beautiful. Can there be anyone who fears Bolshevism in such divine air. But, alas, the beautiful night is only in me, it doesn't exist in the ugly heart of an envious proletarian or an arrogant bourgeois.¹⁸²

At 11.03, while the train is stopped on the line, and the rest of the passengers sleep, he wonders:

What is there to prevent us from smashing into the oncoming train, which comes towards us unknown, from the other [direction]? I don't know why, but this solitude attracts me and terrifies me and alarms me. It gives me an image of the end *J of peace J* but I want nothing but struggle.¹⁸³

And then, shortly afterwards, he adds: “Tonight I would really have liked to speak of something grand *J* to sing the exaltation of it *J* But let the punctuation *J* speak and sing *J* for me!”¹⁸⁴ At 11.30, he interrupts his jottings “to go and join [himself] with those who *inhabit* the moon *in spirit*,”¹⁸⁵ taking another look out the window from the corridor as the train makes the final approach to Genoa.

Subsequently he returns to his seat to record another moment of rapturous contemplation:

A divine spectacle. Approaching Sampierdarena. The moon has vanished. Far away between two lines of hills an emptiness has appeared. And I caught for a moment the groping of the sky as it searches for the sea *J* the eternal! The sea can be understood only in the darkness: especially if the soul is not dark!
Long live idealism *J*!¹⁸⁶

Earlier in the letter Gobetti mentions Ardengo Soffici's *Kobilek*, and it is clear from the structure

¹⁸² *Nella tua breve esistenza*, pp. 18-19. The italics are Gobetti's.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 19

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20

of the middle passage that his use of the Cyrillic *Л* is partly an attempt at a Futurist style.¹⁸⁷ More important, however, is the association Gobetti creates between his love for Ada, and the experience of what he represents as a moment of inspiration, which is accompanied not only by a sublime elevation of his spirit, but a sensation of unity with those around him, of his ability to contain their emotions and aspirations within himself. Gobetti's is a classic Romantic vision of the poet's simultaneous unity with the world and with a transcendent spiritual reality, completed by a troubling sense of his own mortality, of a peace which attracts him even as it terrifies him, and which he refuses in the name of continued struggle. His love for Ada is an ideal, represented in symbolic form by the letter *Л*, which stimulates him to receive inspiration; Bolshevism, far from being a political program, is an emblem of spiritual freedom, of the "beautiful night" of poetic inspiration which is "only in me." Gobetti is casting himself as a creative Genius, whose visionary power extends even to the creation of new linguistic symbols, and whose spirit can contain the experience of entire worlds.¹⁸⁸

To return to Ada, she, too, added doodles and personal jottings to her notebook, though hers vary in their emotional coloring. Inside the back cover, she has jotted down "любовь," ("love"), and then, in a corner where it is more difficult to spot, "Я люблю Пьеро," ("I love Piero"); but on an inside page we find her using the Cyrillic alphabet as a cipher, and noting cryptically: "Я л П. анке се П. не любит Д."¹⁸⁹ The middle phrase is in transliterated Italian, "*anche se*," meaning, "even if," so that the whole becomes: "I love P. even if P. doesn't love D." This might pass for nothing more than a light-hearted tease, were it not for the phrase written, with emphasis and in Italian, across the inside front

¹⁸⁷ Ardengo Soffici. *Kobilek. Giornale di battaglia*. Firenze: Libreria della Voce, 1918

¹⁸⁸ The meeting in Florence to which he was traveling would bring him into contact with both Salvemini and Prezzolini for the first time, and his letters to Ada during the course of his stay show him eagerly identifying Salvemini as a Genius, and Prezzolini as "the most intelligent editor in Italy". (*Nella tua breve esistenza*, p. 31) Genius was on his mind, and he was seeking men of Genius who could be his guides as he took his own precocious first steps in public life.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33 This is, in fact, the only occasion on which Ada resorted to the Cyrillic alphabet as a cipher.

cover of the folder in which the notebook was stored: “*Piero è un angelo iniquo!*” or, “Piero is an evil angel!” Ersilia Alessandrone Perona mentions this phrase in her study of Piero’s and Ada’s relationship, written to accompany the publication of their correspondence, but she does not connect it specifically to their Russian lessons.¹⁹⁰ As she notes, Ada soon found herself at sea in the relationship with Piero, who was completely wrapped up in his own ambitions, oblivious to Ada’s emotional needs, and saw it as Ada’s job to identify with his interests and program. His affection came at a steep price for Ada, who soon found her entire range of musical activities condemned, her personal gaiety held up as proof of impulsive superficiality, and her love of the outdoors used, together with her mother’s Bosnian heritage, to identify her as a Romantic primitive. In this context the private world created by their Russian studies became a decidedly mixed blessing: inside its charmed circle Piero was able to dominate Ada unimpeded, and try out poses and ideas which would have seemed pretentious, immature, even cruel or offensive, in a wider public circle. It is a sign of the importance of this private space to Gobetti’s self-construction that we find the most direct record of Ada’s anger and unhappiness with him scribbled in her Russian language notebook.

Gobetti’s relationship with Ada is the most extraordinary and least acknowledged project through which he sought to express himself as a Genius: the creation of a perfect woman as a partner. His identification of her as his Beatrice is well known from their letters, apparently part of one of the longest-standing verbal traditions of Italian courtship. Less discussed is his thoroughgoing attempt to remake Ada in reality according to his own prescriptions, an experiment which had much less to do with Dante’s vision of Beatrice than it did with the eighteenth-century rediscovery of the story of Pygmalion and Galatea, and the accompanying conviction that human nature could be deliberately shaped. For Gobetti the vision of Ada as Beatrice was not at all a decorous figure of speech, but an integral part of his

¹⁹⁰ Ersilia Alessandrone Perona. “Il sistema Ada-Piero. Un percorso nel carteggio Ada Prospero-Piero Gobetti,” *Mezzosecolo*, 7, 1990, pp. 280-307

own project of self-construction. As he noted in a journal entry in August, 1919, a year or so into their relationship:

I had to make myself a new moral sense, a strong sense of life, at sixteen, in large measure at seventeen, and since I made it thinking of her, I will always be grateful to her. Only a girl such as I dreamed of could have given me an immediate sense of elevation. I believed in her and I love her so much because she still makes me believe now.¹⁹¹

The self-absorption of his attachment to Ada is striking, and becomes clearer still in his subsequent remarks about what he views as the complete reciprocity of their spiritual relationship:

Now that I have renewed myself, and that she has renewed herself, too, I feel that I see her as my beautiful soulmate, like an angel who guides me, and whom I must help, at the same time, to materialize herself in reality, out of the soft ether in which she lives. I am at once pupil and teacher, and can only love on this condition. If I were constrained even for a moment to consider the difference of gender as one of spiritual capacity, I don't know what frightful sense of desolation I would experience; perhaps my heart would burst. It would be like taking away my spirit, my historical experience. This love is a conquest of mine. I would have to go mad to lose it. If I lost it, I would go mad. But I can't lose it. I have the security of the eternal in me. The pulse, the heat of great things which can go up, but not come down!¹⁹²

The naivety and raw vulnerability of his attachment to Ada are here exposed, and with them his overwhelming need to ensure, at all costs, the continued existence of the relationship on his own terms. It is hardly an edifying combination. To be sure, Gobetti's ultimate vision was one of mutual love and fulfillment, but his view of what this entailed, and how it was to be attained, involved for Ada a process of reeducation that would extinguish all her independent interests and talents. The fact that this process was intended to run parallel to the torments of "autocriticism" to which he subjected himself in the search for inner perfection furnished her at best cold comfort. But then, what is present happiness when compared with the "security of the eternal?"¹⁹³

The "Beatrice Project," as I have dubbed it, is an aspect of Gobetti's widely acknowledged

¹⁹¹ *L'Editore ideale*, p. 51

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 52

¹⁹³ For a thorough discussion of Gobetti's evident narcissism as a contributing factor to this process, see: Michel Cassac. *Piero Gobetti, 1901-1926, ou l'intègre liberté: au-delà du mythe*. Doctoral thesis. Université de Lille, III, 1995. Ada's desperate struggles against her Galatean imprisonment are clearly visible in her correspondence with Piero, though they have so far received public acknowledgement only in Ersilia Alessandrone Perona's description of "the Ada-Piero system."

illuminismo which has not been included in his myth, but which is thrown into sharp relief by the investigation of his Russian studies.¹⁹⁴ His and Ada's language lessons provided the perfect backdrop for its development: the combination of an informal private space, in which Gobetti could experiment with the construction of his own and Ada's identities, and a reservoir of literary and behavioral models on which to draw in the process. A brief look at his and Ada's translating projects, for example, makes this connection plain. Piero and Ada focused, in their work as translators from Russian, on contemporary texts which depict couples, and explore the relationship between love, intimacy and artistic creation. The underlying model of Pygmalion and Galatea is everywhere apparent, most strikingly in the selection of stories by Aleksandr Kuprin which they prepared in 1919-20, just as they were living through the process of "renewal" described by Gobetti in his diary. Other stories depict individuals in the midst of political revolution, revealing the intimate connection between personal and social transformation. My next chapter is devoted to a detailed examination of Piero's and Ada's translating, and the place it occupied in their lives; I content myself here with the observation that Gobetti emerges from this activity as a direct descendant of Rousseau, rather than the founders of classical Liberalism with whom he has usually been compared.

Gobetti's efforts to transform Ada also recall the *жизнетворчество* (life-creation) of the Russian Symbolists, another cultural model he and Ada probably encountered through their Russian lessons. Thanks to Rachele Gutman, he and Ada were acquainted with some poems by Aleksandr Blok and Valerii Bryusov, perhaps even a few by Andrei Bely, though it is not clear what they might have known about the contemporary lives of these poets. About Dmitry Merezhkovsky and Zinaida Gippius, on the other hand, they seem to have known quite a bit. This should come as no surprise, given Rachele Gutman's and Alfredo Polledro's anarchist sympathies, and the fact that they had lived on the French

¹⁹⁴ For a vivid historical case study of a related episode from the eighteenth century, see: Wendy Moore. *How to Create the Perfect Wife*. London: Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, 2013

Riviera in 1907-8. Merezhkovsky and Gippius stayed regularly on the Riviera during this period, bringing with them the anarchist terrorist Boris Savinkov, after his escape from Russia in 1906.¹⁹⁵ Merezhkovsky and Gippius had taken Savinkov under their wing during the winter of 1906-7, and encouraged him to write about his experiences as a terrorist. It was a tense, frequently unsatisfying relationship for all concerned, as their letters attest, and in 1908 they drifted apart when Savinkov plunged back into political and terrorist activity; but Savinkov did begin to write, and eventually produced a widely read memoir and several novels, the first of which, *Конь бледный* (*Pale Horse*), he published in Nice in 1913 under the pseudonym chosen for him by Gippius, V. Ropshin.¹⁹⁶

During their travels in 1906, Gutman and Polledro made their way north through central Europe to Bialystok and then St. Petersburg, before returning to settle in Marseille, and then Nice, in 1907.¹⁹⁷ Given these movements and their prior history, it seems probable that they were part of the network which then linked the anarchist underground in the Russian Empire to the Russian colonies on the Riviera, and so that they might have come into contact with Merezhkovsky, Gippius and Savinkov when they were all living in and around Nice in 1906-1908. Piero and Ada read both Merezhkovsky and Savinkov: in 1917 Gobetti included a substantial excerpt, which he entitled “*L’anima russa e la rivoluzione*” (“The Russian soul and the revolution”), taken from an (uncited) essay by Merezhkovsky, in the first issue of *Energie Nove*; and in 1920 he began searching for a publisher for a translation of Savinkov’s novel *То, чего не было* (*What Never Happened*).¹⁹⁸ While Merezhkovsky was well known

¹⁹⁵ Savinkov had been arrested in Sevastopol while planning an assassination attempt on Admiral Chukhin, commander of the Black Sea fleet, and sentenced to death, but managed to escape to Roumania, before moving on to Paris.

¹⁹⁶ «Революционное христовство»: Письма Мережковских к Борису Савинкову. Вступительная статья, составление, подготовка текстов и комментарии Е. И. Гончаровой. СПб.: Издательство «Пусшкинский Дом», 2009. Houghton holds a copy of: В. Ропшин. *Конь бледный*. Ницца: Кн-во М. А. Туманова, 1913

¹⁹⁷ Laurent Béghin. “Rachele Gutman.” *Russi in Italia*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Aug. 2015. <<http://www.russinitalia.it/dettaglio.php?id=739>>

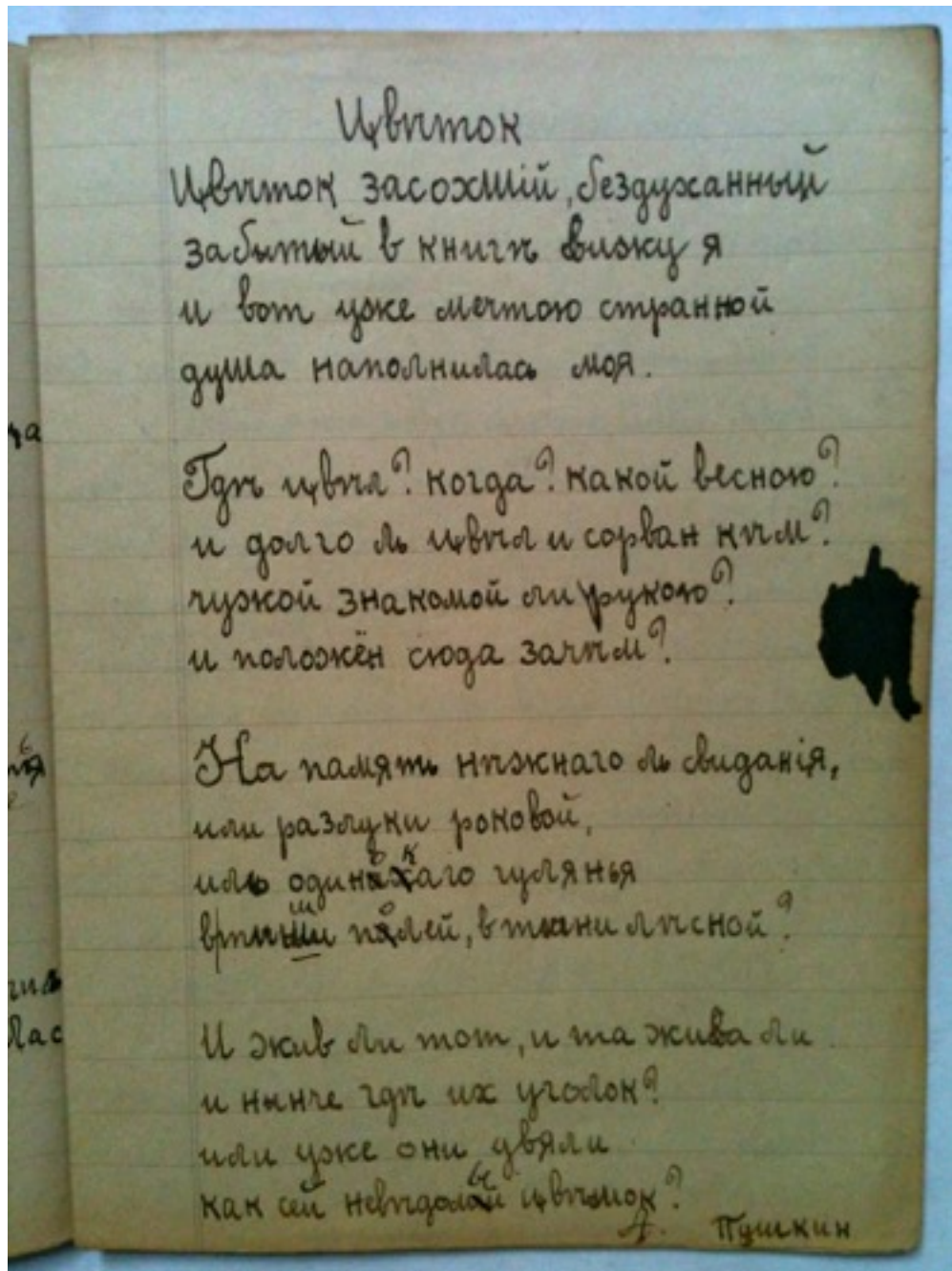
¹⁹⁸ *Nella tua breve esistenza*, pp. 173-4. Gobetti could find no takers for the project, which fell through.

across Europe for his novels, which were widely translated, his journalism did not attract the same attention, and Savinkov was hardly a household name in Turin, so it seems probable that Rachele Gutman suggested these readings to Piero and Ada. There is no direct evidence that Piero and Ada also knew about Merezhkovsky's and Gippius' own unconventional search for a transcendent union; but again, it seems likely to have been part of the cultural background which accompanied Rachele Gutman's teaching. A focus on Dante would have provided another connection with Merezhkovsky's work, and his vision of ideal love.

To recap, the available evidence suggests that Ada and Piero received a thorough introduction to the Russian language, and were certainly exposed to idiomatic, contemporary Russian, even if they did not learn to speak it. Ada's notebook shows that they were able to write well as beginning students, though they never produced independent writing in Russian. Their language instruction was accompanied by an unusually complete presentation of Russian literature, which gave a sense not only of the evolution of the Russian literary tradition, but of the variety of contemporary writers, and contributed to their joint success as translators, as well as to Gobetti's individual success as a critic of Russian literature. Rachele Gutman's instruction emphasized and developed the connections between language, culture and behavior, offering a form of immersion unusual at the time. Though designed independently of Ada and Piero, it was an approach ideally suited to their interest in learning Russian as part of a total experience, their "rebirth" as a couple and the creation of a new, joint identity. Gutman's own lively personality and unusual experience also offered a living connection to the Russian radical tradition and, more immediately, a precedent for collaborative work on literary translation as part of an emancipated partnership between husband and wife.

Of the poems they read and translated during their lessons, Ada seems to have spent most time with Pushkin's lyric "*Цветок*" ("The Little Flower"), copying it out twice as well as translating it.

Piero's declaration of love is scribbled across her first, rough copy of the poem, followed by her note "forever, forever." The lyric is especially appropriate to their situation, of course, with its evocation of a love preserved, in emblem, by a flower pressed between the pages of a book. And like many of the Russian works they read, it emphasizes the connection between life and literature, and the power of artistic creativity, like love, to triumph over death. I reproduce her fair copy here:



In July 2012, while I was looking through the volumes of Russian literature in Gobetti's library, I came across his copy of Dostoevsky's novel *Недоросль* (*The Adolescent*). As I began looking through it the book fell open to where something had been inserted and forgotten: flattened between the pages was a small leaf. Luckily I thought to check more closely, and so I found that it was, indeed, a four-leaf clover, a last echo, perhaps, of the youthful hope and ambition with which he and Ada set out in search of the Russian spirit.



VI - Reliving the Creative Act: *Allez!*

Beginning in February 1919, Piero and Ada published translations of 19 works of Russian literature: nine short stories and a drama by Leonid Andreev, eight short stories by Aleksandr Kuprin, and a dramatic sketch by Anton Chekhov.¹⁹⁹ In addition to these published translations, they made plans for a variety of others, some of which were never realized, and some of which were prepared in manuscript but taken no further: Ada's correspondence shows her working on Bunin's sketch "Мертвое море" ("The Dead Sea") in September, 1919, and thinking, in August, 1920, of translating Kuprin's novel *Молох* (*Moloch*); Piero's that he tried to find a publisher who would agree to sponsor a translation of Boris Savinkov's novel *То, чего не было* (*What Never Happened*) in 1920-21²⁰⁰. The reasons for the collapse of these projects are sometimes revealed in their letters, too: inappropriate length for inclusion in a chosen periodical; a mismatch between the content of the works chosen and the potential outlet; editorial "fright," as Gobetti saw it, with respect to the works themselves; or simply lack of time.²⁰¹ It is possible that they planned or worked on additional translations of which we now have no record, at times when they were together in Turin, and had no need to correspond about such projects. The eclectic selection of works in Russian in Gobetti's library suggests that he and Ada explored issues of contemporary periodicals and monographs in search of material; and it is clear from both his criticism and his correspondence with Ada that Gobetti went on reading and studying Russian literature right up to his departure for Paris in 1926.

¹⁹⁹ These works are all listed together at the start of my bibliography.

²⁰⁰ *Nella tua breve esistenza*, pp. 173-4 and p. 269; and Piero Gobetti. *Carteggio 1918-1922*. A cura di Ersilia Alessandrone Perona. Torino: Einaudi, 2003, p. 244. Gobetti proposed the translation of Savinkov's novel to Giuseppe Prezzolini in a letter of 26 December, 1921.

²⁰¹ *Nella tua breve esistenza*, p. III. Gobetti's reference is to Prezzolini's reaction in the summer of 1919 to a proposed volume of stories by Andreev. Ada discusses problems of length and fit with respect to placing translations of various pieces by Bunin in her letter cited above.

Their known translations were all produced in a single wave of activity in 1919-1920, however, and most were published during this period, too. Of the handful of translations they published later, references in their correspondence establish that all but one were produced in 1919-20; and it is likely that the remaining one, a translation of Kuprin's short story "Осенние Цветы" ("Autumn Flowers"), was translated in 1919 with the others that were subsequently included in the volume published by *La Voce* in 1920. Their activity as translators of Russian therefore belongs mainly to the period of their debut, as students of Russian and as a couple. This is due, in the first place, to the fact that the process of translation occupied a privileged place in their lives as a bridge between the study of Russian language and their creation together of a new, ideal identity. Sitting side by side over their Russian texts clearly had sentimental appeal simply as a way of spending time together; but their interest in translation went deeper than this immediate social contact. Italian attitudes to translation were dominated at the time by the views of Benedetto Croce, for whom translation involved reliving the spiritual experience of the author, the creative act by which the work had come into being. Seen in this way, translation became a kind of apprenticeship in creativity, as the translator retraced the imaginative and emotional footsteps of the author, and rendered this inner journey directly into his or her own language. Translating literature, like divining the movements of History, became an interpretive task hallowed by inspiration, a means of access to eternal truth through identification with the experience of creative Genius. It also provided a model for the experience of love, in which two individuals merged their thoughts and feelings in a shared moment of creativity, and were raised to a new level of spiritual understanding. Such was the vision on which Piero's and Ada's conception of their own relationship was founded, as a contemporary reliving of Dante's *Vita Nova*: translation was, quite literally, the heart of this process.

The historical context of the moment would also have contributed to demand for translations from Russian, and to Piero's and Ada's sense of living out a revolution begun in Russia, but destined to

spread across the world and encompass their own experience. The two-year period from 1919 to 1920 is known in Italy as the *biennio rosso*, or red biennium, a period during which conflict erupted across the peninsula as the Italian economy entered a downward spiral of increasing debt and inflation, provoking mass protests by the industrial and rural working classes, whose standard of living fell even further with respect to pre-war levels than it had during the conflict. In Italy, as elsewhere in the world, this period of the first Red Scare was one in which the spread of socialist revolution from Russia was viewed in many quarters as a real possibility, generating tremendous hopes and fears in different sectors of the population. Attention to Russian culture, and especially to the history of its revolutionary tradition, was acute; the publication of Ada's and Piero's translations would have been sustained by this wider preoccupation with Russia, and the desire to understand the implications of its recent upheavals for other nations. By the close of 1920 government reaction against the perceived revolutionary threat had put an end to unrest in most countries, however, and caused many left-wing activists to withdraw empty-handed from the public arena. In Italy the disbanding of the Turin factory occupations in September brought protest to an end with a victory for the government and industrial management, and though municipal elections in November returned Socialists to power in several regions of the country, the immediate threat of a socialist take-over had been averted. In the process, the left-wing revolutionary agenda had also been exposed as impotent; from this moment fascism would begin its rise, as the left was split by the secession of Gramsci and his supporters from the Socialist Party, and their creation of the Italian Communist Party. Ada's and Piero's activity as translators from Russian tapered off as this shift in Italian political life occurred.

At a practical level, their work as translators was driven in significant measure by the availability of outlets for publication. While their first two, perhaps three, translations of short stories by Andreev were outgrowths of their language lessons, and were published in *Energie Nove*, their subsequent efforts

were largely conceived as book projects, with publication in a variety of papers in Liguria, Lombardy and the Piedmont as a fallback. After meeting Giuseppe Prezzolini at the conference of the “Friends of *l’Unità*” in Florence in April, 1919, Gobetti wrote to Prezzolini proposing a volume of translations of works by Andreev. According to Gobetti, Prezzolini “took fright” at this proposal and declined, only to make a counterproposal several months later to place Gobetti’s translations in a daily paper.²⁰² On Prezzolini’s recommendation their translation of Andreev’s story, “*Из рассказа, который никогда не будет окончен*” (“From the story which will never be finished”), subsequently appeared in the Genoan paper *L’Azione* in September, 1919; but after this initial success, the paper took no more of their translations. Gobetti himself placed their version of Andreev’s “*Марсельез*” (“The Marseillaise”) in August with a paper in Asti, *L’Ascesa*, and it was published in October.²⁰³ In 1920 a volume containing three of their translations of short stories by Andreev appeared as part of the *Biblioteca Universale* series put out by the Milanese publisher Sonzogno, together with a critical introduction by Gobetti; and in 1921 their translation of Andreev’s drama, *Савва (Ignis sanat)* (*Savva (Ignis sanat)*), appeared as a separate volume with the publisher A. Taddei of Ferrara. Meanwhile most of their translations of short stories by Kuprin were published in a single volume by *La Voce* in Rome in 1920, as I mentioned in Chapter II. One more, “*Тост*” (“The Toast”), came out on 8 August, 1920 in the Milanese weekly, *Il Mondo*. This first, intense wave of activity accounted for the bulk of their publications. In 1923-4 they placed what was to be a final, small round of individual pieces, including two stories by Andreev and one by Kuprin, and a one-act sketch by Chekhov.²⁰⁴ By this time, with

²⁰² See Piero’s letter to Ada of 18 August, 1919; *Nella tua breve esistenza*, p. 111

²⁰³ See Piero’s letter of 14 August, 1919; *Nella tua breve esistenza*, p. 103

²⁰⁴ The first of the two stories by Andreev, which appeared under the title “*Dal racconto che non sarà mai finito*,” was, in fact, a reprint of their translation of his story “*Из рассказа, который никогда не будет окончен*,” to which they had first given the title, “*La barricata*,” when it was published in September, 1919.

Mussolini bearing down heavily on the press in general, and on Gobetti in particular, their circle of outlets had diminished significantly; and Gobetti was throwing most of his efforts into the struggle against the regime.

In literary terms, Ada's and Piero's work as translators was also circumscribed by the fact that they concentrated almost exclusively on only two authors, Andreev and Kuprin. This narrow focus doubtless in part reflected their limited knowledge of the language, and, more generally, of Russian literature. Andreev's and Kuprin's short works have the advantage of being written in language accessible to students in the early stages of language acquisition; and their initial choice of texts by Andreev was clearly guided by Rachele Gutman as part of their lessons. It seems likely that she suggested Kuprin as well, given that Ada continued to work with her regularly. It is, moreover, probable that she was their only immediate supplier of Russian-language materials, and so that her commercial connections, as well as literary interests, dictated what they were able to work on. Gobetti's collection of volumes in Russian contains a number of books with stamps showing that they had been withdrawn from circulation for sale from Russian lending libraries in various Italian cities including Turin, Naples and Rome; access to such sales would have been something that Rachele Gutman could provide.

Examining the content of the works they translated suggests that Ada's and Piero's attention to Andreev and Kuprin reflected more than just circumstantial pressures, however; and that it was guided by Gobetti's continuing project of self-construction. The very first story they tackled, for example, Andreev's "*Бездна*" ("The Abyss"), opens with the portrait of a young couple which clearly recalls their own situation:

The day was already drawing to a close, and the two of them were still walking and talking without noticing either the hour or the path. [...]

And the fact that ahead it was getting dark neither interrupted nor changed their conversation. Clear, heart-felt and quiet, it flowed with a peaceful current, and touched upon only one thing: the strength, beauty and immortality of love. They were both young: the girl was only seventeen, Nemovetsky four years older, and they were both in student uniforms, she in the modest brown dress of a high-school student, he in the

attractive uniform of a student at a technical institute. And like their speech, everything about them was young, beautiful and clean: the slender, lithe figures which looked as though they were penetrated by the air, and of the same substance with it, the springy step and fresh voices which sounded a note of pensive tenderness even in their simple words, like a stream on a quiet spring night when all the snow has not yet disappeared from the dark fields.²⁰⁵

In this particular case we know that Ada and Piero were fully aware of the coincidence, since Gobetti referred to it in their correspondence; and that he reflected on it in connection with their translating, what is more. Writing to Ada on 14 August, 1919, Gobetti remarks that he is correcting the proofs of their translation of Andreev's story "Ангелочек" ("The Little Angel"), "going over the translation a bit, and savoring [the story's] appealing subtleties."²⁰⁶ Reflecting on the meaning of its final scene, he compares it tentatively with a scene in one of Andreev's plays, *Жизнь человека* (*The Life of Man*), by which he has also been struck. "And after all," he adds, "if every work of translation is essentially original, we can put our own feelings into it," referring to Croce's position.²⁰⁷ "But in this case it would be rather out of place, don't you think?" he then continues, before adding "(as long as there are the first pages of *Бездна*)."²⁰⁸ Having made this distinction, (and confirmed their identification with Andreev's protagonists), he then returns to Croce, and the question of originality in translation:

From which one can see that Croce's assertion shouldn't be taken too literally. A translation is never an original work because it is a rethinking and a fusion and recreation, based on an object established and given by history. A translation cannot contain the *pathos* of the translator, but his *sympathos*.²⁰⁹

Translation is a reliving, for Gobetti, of past experience, and it allows the translator to follow the creative development of the author, rather than to produce original works of his own.

Assembling an "illustrated" creative biography is exactly what Gobetti felt he and Ada were doing

²⁰⁵ Л. Н. Андреев. "Бездна" "Lib.ru/Классика: Андреев Леонид Николаевич. Бездна." Lib.ru/Классика. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 May 2016. <http://az.lib.ru/a/andreev_l_n/text_0240.shtml>.

²⁰⁶ *Nella tua breve esistenza*, p. 202

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 102

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 102

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 102-3

when they translated Andreev, as later passages in the same letter make clear. Referring to the idea he proposed to Prezzolini of an entire volume of translations by Andreev, he remarks that “it will be necessary to put something together that really gives an idea of Andreev’s worth, and of his interior development.”²¹⁰ It is this that is missing from the Italian literary scene, he feels: existing translations have made available Andreev’s “moving and important” works, but not given a sense of his development; and in this regard “what Clemente Rebora has translated has no special character whatsoever.”²¹¹ He and Ada are in a position to offer something different and better, however: “at the point we have reached, we can offer an excellent idea of A[ndreev]’s art.”²¹² With the stories they have already translated they can give “an idea of the preparatory work” of his early years, illustrate the moment in which “a personality begins to affirm itself,” and “there are all sorts of the most disparate attempts” to write in various genres.²¹³ They can then show “a good affirmation” of his development in one or two stories, and finally the conclusion of his creative youth in two “serious, sincere, lively” stories, one of which is “The Abyss.”²¹⁴ After that will follow “some stories which give a sample of the most diverse elaborations of his maturity, which is less well known in Italy.”²¹⁵ While he may be sketching out the contours of Andreev’s literary development on one level, on another Gobetti seems to be exploring a creative biography parallel to his own, to be finding a creative double in the Russian writer.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 103

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 103. Gobetti writes off, with one of his characteristic swipes, the selection of texts contained in a volume of translations by the poet Clemente Rebora: *Lazzaro e alte novelle di Leonid Andreev*. Firenze: Vallecchi, 1919. Though he did not think much of Rebora’s choice of stories, Gobetti praised his translations fulsomely in a review of the volume published in *Energie Nove* a month later (cf. “Leonida Andreiev in Italia.” *Energie Nove*, 30 September 1919, pp. 345-50). It was this review which provoked a response from the pianist Lydia Natus.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103

²¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 103

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 103

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103

A comparison of the language Gobetti uses in his criticism to describe Andreev's development with the language of the self-descriptions in his letters and autobiographical fragments is revealing in this context. "In Andreev one must see the temperament of an enthusiast," he asserts, in his review of September, 1919:

full of love for the whole universe, who struggles against society and can't succeed in understanding it because he finds mistrust and needs love. [Andreev] has rendered marvelously this sense of total isolation, of absence of love, representing the tragedy of the individual who encloses himself in his gloomy individuality, and perceives only the struggles of his own heart."²¹⁶

For all his inner gloom, Andreev is nevertheless a "revolutionary under the nightmare of czarism, who needs to sing of universal love, because the justification of life lies only in this."²¹⁷ Or again, in the "Profile," also written in 1919, which opens the critical introduction to the volume of translations he and Ada put out with Sonzogno in 1920:

There is no truth and there is no security. Will he gather himself in himself? Find the truth in himself? External life has injected him with the poison of self-criticism. He doesn't know himself any more: he analyzes himself, torments himself, dissects himself.

He has two realities in himself, each equally false, in unresolvable conflict. And he witnesses their combat as a spectator, but as they consume one another, so he, too, is consumed. He hopes for the light, and it doesn't come: he wants love and finds mistrust.

Isolation: there is his torture. To feel himself alone, not to find the truth, not to distinguish the real from the unreal, the dream from the real, the mad from the sound mind. Not to know the world and not to know himself.

You tell me this is skepticism, you consider it a sensual and superficial aestheticism because you have not have not seen it well up from its profound reality of lived history.²¹⁸

These evocations of a tormented, heroic solitude recall Gobetti's mythologizing description of his childhood discussed in Chapter IV, as well as several passages from his brief attempt to keep a diary in

²¹⁶ Piero Gobetti. "Leonida Andreiev in Italia." *Energie Nove*, 30 September 1919. Cited from the text in: *Il Paradosso dello spirito russo e altri scritti sulla letteratura russa*. Introduzione di Vittorio Strada. Torino: Einaudi, 1976, p. 61

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 61

²¹⁸ From the preface to: *Figlio dell'uomo i altre novelle*. Tradotte direttamente dal russo da Piero Gobetti e Ada Prospero, con uno studio critico sull'autore. Milano: Sonzogno. n. d. (1920); cited from the text in, *Il Paradosso dello spirito russo e altri scritti sulla letteratura russa*. Introduzione di Vittorio Strada. Torino: Einaudi, 1976, p. 68. The 1976 edition of *Il Paradosso* dates the appearance of the *Figlio dell'uomo* translation with Sonzogno to 1919, but 1920 is attested as the date of publication on p. 22 of the bibliographic note that follows Gobetti's preface to his later translation of *Savva (Ignis Sanat)*, and so I use it here.

the summer of 1919:

For so long I was an egotist. A familial education of little strength had kept me in a state of moral unconsciousness. As a little boy I was wicked with a crude sense of satisfaction, because I had at least an invincible sense of sincerity, despite trying on so many occasions to subdue it, suffocate it.²¹⁹

And it often happens this way. That our vital center seems to have been displaced, it doesn't seem clear and true anymore in the whirl of action, that you don't understand anymore why you don't know any longer which / you correspond to, a desire for burial overcomes you, for apathy, for a mystical death.²²⁰

Two days of torture, of anguish, of desperation. Inert, I watched my soul come apart. The torment of auto-criticism. I can't master myself anymore. I'm stopping because I can't analyze myself. It is a danger from which I might not be able to get myself up.²²¹

Clearly Gobetti was viewing Andreev and himself through the same lens.

The projected collection of Andreev's translations was never realized, however: Prezzolini balked, and even Sonzogno, which finally agreed to put something out, cut Gobetti's offerings down to three stories only. Aside the ambitious dimensions of Gobetti's project, these reactions were almost certainly due to an unspoken unease with the material he chose, and with his pursuit of Andreev as an exemplary figure. Many of Andreev's early stories were lurid, by the standards of the day, and had caused scandal when they were originally published in Russia. "The Abyss," in particular, had caused a sensation with its vampiric ending: Andreev was accused of producing pornography, and Sofia Andreevna Tolstoy wrote a scathing denunciation of his work and morals which she had printed up as a pamphlet. Italian reactions were not so different, perhaps, if quieter: Gobetti's interest in Andreev, and his and Ada's translation of "The Abyss" in particular, have met with studied silence since they first appeared. The handful of commentators who mention his interest in Andreev do so, like Strada, in deprecating terms, and Andreev's unpalatable representations of sexuality and madness are discreetly

²¹⁹ *L'Editore ideale*, p. 51. "23.viii.1919, evening."

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61. "26.viii."

²²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 62-3. "28.viii."

tucked away behind the idea of the “taste of the times,” or “*le mal du siècle*.”²²² Ada was more forthright in a letter to Gobetti of 17 September, 1919: “I saw in the paper this morning that Leonid Andreev is dead: of a psychic trauma, or a mental illness, the logical end of his cerebral personality.”²²³ Andreev’s long and painful struggle with what has subsequently been recognized as bipolar disorder was visible during his lifetime but widely misunderstood, and explained with reference to the decadence of the era.²²⁴ It gave him the aura of a “fallen genius,” of an artist who crossed the thin line which separated the exalted from the demonic, and this aspect of his reputation seems to have increased Gobetti’s interest in him. The peril of this fascination, expressed in terms of poor taste, seems to have been clear to a number of those around him.

They were right to be concerned. Gobetti’s diary of the summer of 1919 shows him in the grip a full-blown crisis of genius. The Nietzschean moment he describes in his letter to Ada of the following year is revealed in his diary as much more recent and profound, nourished by torments of self-criticism like those he attributed to Andreev. “It’s true,” he wrote, on 26 August:

There is so much instability, so much mobility of situation and action that sometimes life appears a frightful enigma, as a tremendous destiny which persecutes you, and won’t leave you alone. There’s no place in life for the weak. Either we are defeated, and then it is necessary to disappear, and we disappear slowly, passively, even if we don’t die. Or we are more than men, and then we win. But to be *more than men* it is necessary to know how to shape the soul wonderfully, without mercy and without fear, it is necessary to know how to be a man at every moment, and that is, to know how to be a man who is always different, always present to himself, always a tamer who stops before nothing, because he knows how to recognize himself at every moment, and has no other end, no other life besides his spirituality. I force myself to attain this at every moment, and I force myself in torment, sometimes without noticing, because there is also life in the torture. We must not let ourselves be dominated by what is external, not believe in anything except in what our pulse and ardor can

²²² “It is a pity,” Umberto Morra di Lavriano writes in his *Vita di Piero Gobetti*, “that [Gobetti’s] enthusiasm fell on an incommensurate hero like Andreev, who was in himself of little importance and, whatever Gobetti tried to argue, ill with an “illness of the times” picked up in the West and transplanted unevenly in Russia.”

²²³ *Nella tua breve esistenza*, p. 163.

²²⁴ Frederick White has explored and documented in great detail the nature of Andreev’s illness, the reactions of Andreev’s contemporaries to it, and the ways in which it informed Andreev’s writing. See: Frederick H. White. *Memoirs and Madness: Leonid Andreev through the Prism of the Literary Portrait*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006; and Frederick H. White. *Degeneration, decadence and disease in the Russian fin de siècle. Neurasthenia in the life and work of Leonid Andreev*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2014.

become – ours because profoundly human, and only human. We have in ourselves our own negation, our demon, which we vanquish, becoming heroes through the victory. And this is beautiful: knowing how to perceive evil as something of our own, even as we throw it out of ourselves. Attaining this profound self-knowledge which makes us destroy pain as soon as we perceive it, because our omnipresence is the omnipresence of subjects, and the domination of discouragement, of evil, by a new element, that is, which creates good by becoming a subject and an actor. And in this way, in successive trials of self-awareness, we conquer always a new truth.²²⁵

Tellingly, Gobetti uses this nineteenth-century language of the creative superman in his critical profile of Andreev, in order to remind his readers that Andreev had “the temperament of an enthusiast.”

Enthusiasm was, in this context, an inheritance from the eighteenth-century vocabulary of genius, and designated an uncontrollable excess of energy which was negatively perceived as a dangerous and irrational abandon.

Gobetti was also keenly aware of his own fragile health, a weakness which he attempted systematically to deny or suppress. He was, from childhood, a slight boy despite his energy, and by the time he went to register for military service, his stature had become a matter of concern. As he wrote to Ada, on 4 September, 1920, after the visit: “I am 1m 73-and-a-half [cm] tall, my chest is 77 [cm] – this last measurement is a bit scant, with respect to the first.”²²⁶ He also suffered from recurrent bouts of illness, some of which were serious, such as the one which put an early end to his military service. These episodes weighed heavily on his imagination, too, as Ersilia Alessandrone Perona makes plain in her introduction to his early correspondence. “During his long convalescence in the Turin military hospital, to which he was confined from the end of January to the end of March, 1922,” she notes, Gobetti “perceived his debility as a regression.”²²⁷ Rather than accept the need for rest, however, “he reacted to this condition by trying to ignore it, and to keep up with his correspondence – *La Rivoluzione Liberale*

²²⁵ *L'Editore ideale*, pp. 59-60

²²⁶ *Nella tua breve esistenza*, p. 366. Gobetti's measurements convert to approximately 5' 8" and 30."

²²⁷ Piero Gobetti. *Carteggio 1918-1922*. A cura di Ersilia Alessandrone Perona. Torino: Einaudi, 2003, pp. XXXIII-XXXIV.

had only just been founded – with Ada’s help.”²²⁸ Lombroso, it is worth recalling, was a professor at the University of Turin from 1876 until his death in 1909: his legacy remained an especially vivid one in the city, which continued to maintain his Museum of Criminal Anthropology after his death. The implications of seeing an illness as a regression would not likely have been lost on Gobetti, whose library contains works by and about Lombroso, including *Genio e follia (Genius and Madness)*. The fear of finding in himself the seeds of madness would have been an anguishing prospect.

Andreev and his work thus provided Gobetti with a vision of the genius’ heroic struggle for identity in the face of his gifts, of the terrifying prospect of dissolution into the universal that could result from any inherent weakness or flaw in his psychological make-up, from the loss of the inner balance which allowed him to inhabit both the human and the divine realms. In response, Gobetti conjured up the figure of the Nietzschean superman, the creative individual able to save himself by imposing his will on the threatening universe. The moment is one of a towering, heroic masculinity which proves itself in spiritual combat. His work with Ada on their selection of short stories by Kuprin, on the other hand, offered a respite from the *sturm und drang* of his engagement with Andreev. It did not distract him from his pursuit of genius, however; on the contrary, it offered a chance to explore another well-known but more peaceful figure associated with the life-giving miracle of artistic creativity.

Gobetti himself presented Kuprin and Andreev as opposing figures, though he did not describe their differences explicitly in terms of genius. In the “Critical Note” which he appended to the translations, he begins by observing that “Aleksandr Kuprin, who is still living, was born in 1870, one year before L. Andreev.”²²⁹ “These artists’ worlds seem nevertheless to be separated by an abyss,” he goes on, however:

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. XXXIV

²²⁹ A. I. Kuprin. *Allez!* Tradotto direttamente dal russo da Piero Gobetti e Ada Prospero. Il Libro per tutti, No. 6. Roma: La Voce, n. d. (1920), p. 107.

Andreev is the painful expression of a gloomy drama of isolation: the isolation of man before nature – before mystery; of Russia before Europe, of the artist before the efforts of a people which strives towards civilization and concreteness. This drama, theorized by Chaadaev, has its moments in Dostoevsky, in Belinsky, in Tolstoy; its first serenity in Gogol; its last voice of collapsing passion in Andreev; its resolution in Lenin – concreteness in the face of abstraction – society against individualism (a rift which seems abstract to our civilization, but which is tremendously real in the Russian crisis).

Kuprin is outside this tradition.

In Kuprin, there is acceptance of reality: his idealism is realism.²³⁰

The entire description is structured as a study in contrast which begins from a point of common origin, the moment of the two writers' births, and culminates in the discovery of Kuprin's "realistic idealism." It is a brief exercise in the rhetoric of paradox – the paradox of the Russian spirit, no less – and reveals both the opposition across which Gobetti is structuring his presentation of Kuprin and Andreev (the ideal and the real), and the genial powers of illumination with which he implicitly credits himself. The schematic and unconvincing trajectory of Russian cultural development to which he is obviously attached (and which Strada remarks on in his discussion of Gobetti's understanding of Andreev) has its logic in his rhetoric of paradox, not in the reality of Russian cultural history, about which he clearly knew very little. And underlying the need to sustain this paradoxical argument is a desire to give form to the substance of his own genius.

Gobetti identifies Kuprin as a "realist," by which he seems to mean that Kuprin accepts the material reality of the world around him, and does not struggle for change. Kuprin's is an "expression of fulfillment, almost of certainty," he observes, returning to one of the key terms of his self-descriptions.²³¹ For Gobetti this implies a lower level of spiritual achievement: it does not "negate [Kuprin's] art, but limits its spontaneity."²³² As an artist, Kuprin "does not know mystery: over mystery he affirms life, in its evident reality and certainty, even when that certainty is mere convention, and the

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 107

²³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 108

²³² *Ibid.*, p. 108

evident reality becomes expressively generic.”²³³ As a result, Gobetti observes, Kuprin’s “most beautiful pages” are those of his novel *Суламит* (*Sulamith*), which “[affirm] a value,” and contain a “reality, which becomes clearer and more serene in its inspiration the more minutely it is pursued [at the level of] style.”²³⁴ Evoking *Sulamith*, Gobetti identifies Kuprin as a poet of love, and associates his art with an implicitly feminine orientation towards the sensually concrete and the emotional, as opposed to the virile realm of ideal abstraction.²³⁵ This opposition between Andreev’s “masculine” and Kuprin’s “feminine” art creates, of course, a parallel with Piero’s and Ada’s situation as translators, and reveals another of the cultural models which informed their activity: their “emancipated” partnership seems, in fact, to have been based on a deep essentialism which prescribes very narrow, traditional gender roles for each of them.

Given this commentary of Gobetti’s, it comes as no surprise that the six stories which he and Ada included in their volume all focus on an intimate relationship between a man and a woman. The protagonists are depicted in relative isolation, against a background of minor figures, who are barely differentiated from one another, and one or two interior spaces: the effect is of a series of dramatic, or perhaps melodramatic, *tableaux*. In only one, the sketch entitled “The Clown,” are the protagonists depicted as part of a family, and Kuprin manages their entrances and exits to emphasize the characters’ separation from one another. In keeping with this generic orientation, the stories all describe performances: four of the six depict performing artists, both on and off the stage (“Allez!,” “The Demigod,” “A Caprice” and “The Clown”); the remaining two present their protagonists in staged situations in which generic expectations are very strong, and there is a character who “directs” the action

²³³ *Ibid.*, p. 109

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 109

²³⁵ Gobetti owned a copy of Kuprin’s novella in Russian.

(“Marianna,” “Stronger Than Death”). The stories all contain layers of performance, what is more: in each one the protagonists perform for some larger public, often invisible, and privately for one another. The ironic distance created by these layered performances enables Kuprin to contrast the protagonists’ artistic and personal lives, their experiences of creativity and love. Together the stories present a sequence of ironic variations on the legend of Pygmalion and Galatea, in which a figure of artistic authority awakens the emotions and talents of a young follower, only to be overtaken by events. The roles of creator and created are recombined across all the possible variations of age and gender, while Kuprin’s underlying vision of the dangers of creative power, and its complete amorality as a form of love, remains constant.

Gobetti’s activity as a translator from Russian represented another stage in his pursuit of his genius, as he contemplated the image of the Faustian fallen genius in the work of Leonid Andreev, and of Pygmalion, the genius overtaken by his own creation, in that of Aleksandr Kuprin.

VII - Conclusion

To conclude, the story of Piero Gobetti's interest in Russian culture is, above all, the story of his self-construction as a Genius. A close look at the details of his Russian studies opens a window on the private heart of this effort, its beginnings, and provides a vantage point from which we can observe its expression in the rest of his activities. Gobetti was first drawn to Russian culture not by the October revolution and an interest in Bolshevism, but by a series of literary images in which he could recognize himself as an exceptional individual, a Genius, and onto which he could project his hopes and ambitions for the future. From this beginning, he went on to learn Russian in order to read Russian literature in the original, following the movements of the Russian spirit as it was expressed in the lives and works of Russia's greatest writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Simultaneously he studied the history of the Russian revolutionary tradition, so he could trace the social and political developments which led to the apotheosis of the Russian spirit in Lenin and Trotsky, the two "men of action" who had recently awakened the Russian people and were "recreating its soul." Gobetti went in search of the Russian spirit among Russia's writers and revolutionary leaders, its men of artistic and political genius, who in turn offered him models on which he might base his own self-construction.

Gobetti's study of Russian language and culture also allowed him to pursue an apprenticeship in creativity, the most important attribute of genius, by working on literary translations. Understood as a reliving of the author's creative act, Gobetti's work as a translator of Russian short stories and dramatic sketches enabled him imaginatively to identify with his chosen subject, and experience moments of creative inspiration. It also allowed him to explore particular stereotypes of genius: in Leonid Andreev, his favorite author, Gobetti identified the figure of a "fallen genius" in whom the pre-revolutionary Russian literary tradition found its culmination; and in the work of Aleksandr Kuprin, the other Russian author on whom he concentrated his attention as a translator, he picked out the image of Pygmalion, the

creative genius overtaken by his creation. In addition to pursuing the image of genius in the lives and works of these two authors, Gobetti's Russian lessons and translation projects also enabled him to explore his own creative powers in his relationship with Ada Prospero, his companion in all his Russian studies, eventually his wife. Their Russian lessons provided a private space in which the two of them could live out their early love as a revolutionary project, through which they would be born again in a transcendent union, with Gobetti guiding the emergence of Ada's tremulous spirit into eternal light. Rather than Pygmalion and Galatea, however, in practice Gobetti and Ada more often resembled Henry Higgins and Eliza Doolittle, with Gobetti insisting on an oppressive regime of emotional and intellectual control over Ada, who was imprisoned in a subservient role.

Gobetti's self-construction as a Genius was also an attempt to create a public persona adequate not only to the promptings of his own intelligence and ambition, but also to the expectations of those around him. The charisma attributed to him by his contemporaries, and which has contributed to the posthumous longevity of his myth, indicates how fully he managed to accomplish this feat of individual and collective self-creation. At an individual level, the attempt to incarnate genius represented his response to the challenges of upward social mobility, to the problem of acquiring personal authority in a society still dominated by a culture of patronage and a traditional elite to which his birth did not give him access. At a collective level, Gobetti's personal struggle coincided with what Italians perceived as their nation's struggle to acquire a coherent identity in the wake of the *Risorgimento* and unification, and so to acquire authority and be recognized on the contemporary world stage. The coincidence of these private and public ambitions has made his image the repository of great national hope and pride: the figure of the Genius is the cultural symbol in which Gobetti's myth is united with his lived experience.

Like most efforts of self-construction, Gobetti's attempt to incarnate genius was thus a response to a perceived outsidership, in both his private and his public lives; and the ability to focus attention on

this split in Gobetti's world seems to be what makes a Bakhtinian perspective on his life so revealing. But what is it in Bakhtin's work that produces this interpretive fit? Can what we have learned about Gobetti's search for genius help us to understand Bakhtin's critical practice? In an attempt to answer these questions, I now turn back to Bakhtin and his notion of outsideness, with an analysis of the the article on which I drew in my first section.

Afterword - Exotopia

Mikhail Bakhtin's critical "boom" over the past thirty years has always had its doubters and detractors. Amid the euphoria of his global reception a few voices have continued stubbornly to cry in the academic wilderness that Bakhtin, and his work, are not what they have been made to appear; and that his elevation to the status of a cultural saint, like the wholesale adoption of theoretical novelties discovered in his work, is founded on a reprehensible disregard for the specificities of his situation and of the works he actually produced. In the spring of 1986, reviewing Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist's new study of Bakhtin in *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Irwin Titunik objected sharply that, in his opinion, "the authors of this book have failed in their main task – to *study* Baxtin [sic]." ²³⁶

Elaborating on this sweeping charge, he taxed them with "[opting] instead to utilize their formidable knowledge of their subject to synthesize a Baxtin in the image dictated by their particular and unstinting enthusiasm for their subject," before concluding that "Clark and Holquist have produced what can only be described, figuratively *and* literally speaking, as *hagiography*, that is, an account both of a 'saint' of ideas (like Einstein, to whom the authors compare Baxtin) and of a Christian." ²³⁷ He was willing to admit that "the question as to whether Baxtin warrants figurative or literal sanctification is admittedly an open one," and even that "a positive answer is presumably really possible," though "if so, it remains to be substantiated;" but he attacked Clark and Holquist repeatedly for failing to stay close enough to Bakhtin's texts, or within the boundaries of the facts that could be established about his life and work. ²³⁸

Despite their having "put together by far the fullest, most detailed biography of Baxtin now available," they had been unable to obtain factual information about "a number of important events and activities in

²³⁶ Katerina Clark, Michael Holquist. *Mikhail Bakhtin*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1984; I. R. Titunik. "The Baxtin Problem: Concerning Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist's *Mikhail Bakhtin*." *SEEJ*. Vol. 30, No. 1 (Spring, 1986), p. 91

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 91

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 91

Baxtin's life;" and yet, to Titunik's dismay, "the lacunae in the information about even the most important aspects of Baxtin's life does not prevent the authors from presenting a picture of Baxtin *tout entier*."²³⁹ For Titunik, Clark and Holquist's Bakhtin thus springs disconcertingly from a void, and though it was created "with flair and verve, with intelligence and imagination, with love and devotion," and could even "turn out to be true," still "the elementary business of studying Baxtin," detailed textual criticism and archival work, remains "on the agenda, waiting."²⁴⁰

Almost fifteen years later Ken Hirschkop felt that little had changed in this regard, despite the creation of a critical industry surrounding Bakhtin and his works in the interim. "I have become convinced," he remarks in the preface to his study, *Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy*:

that the last thing we should worry about these days is whether or not we are capturing the spirit of Bakhtin's work. For capturing his spirit has not got us very far. It has left us not with a knowledge of his work, but with a series of Bakhtin-figures or totems, each equally ambitious, equally insightful, equally dogmatic, and absolutely different from every other figure. The spirit of Bakhtin's enterprise usually turns out to be something global, impressive, fairly vague, and uncannily familiar, which makes me think that the letter of his work is what we should be looking at. In the detail of his text – wherein God dwells, of course – lie the problems, the sources, the unacknowledged debts, the historical negotiations and tensions, which may or may not add up to something whole.²⁴¹

For Hirschkop the departure into intellectual idolatry is a result not just of insufficient basic study, but of a wider disregard for Bakhtin's historical context, a critical orientation which has schematized the interpretation of Bakhtin's writings, and trivialized its conclusions. "When Bakhtin wrote about dialogism," Hirschkop notes:

it was in the context of the culture around him; when he wrote of heteroglot language, it was as a creature of modern Europe. The crises he faced were distinctly of his time, the ethical pressures and confusions the historical fate of twentieth-century Europe. If we fail to see this (as Bakhtin himself sometimes did), we use his words not as a bridge between our world and his, but as a way to fill in the river itself. In that flat expanse we will find not a particular conception of dialogue, a specific model of language, an argument for novelistic prose which makes historical sense, but language as such, novelness as such, as if these were metaphysical

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 92

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 95

²⁴¹ Ken Hirschkop. *Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy*. Oxford: OUP, 1999, p. vii

substances traveling effortlessly over historical terrain. Which is to say, we will find only those ideas we are sure of already.²⁴²

What we need, he concludes, is a “a more ‘historical’ Bakhtin.”²⁴³

As Hirschkop goes on to observe, however, while “for a long time we knew very little about Bakhtin’s life, thanks to the efforts of post-*glasnost* Bakhtin scholarship we now know even less.”²⁴⁴ Similarly, he adds, the appearance in 1996 of the first volume of Bakhtin’s long-awaited *Collected Works* in Russian established not scholarly consensus, but an awareness that “virtually every Bakhtin text in print is corrupt,” and that even this definitive edition had “an axe to grind” in its presentation of Bakhtin’s writings.²⁴⁵ The paradoxical result of increased attention to Bakhtin has been to cast doubt on much of what has previously been represented as known about his life and work; and, in some areas, significantly to diminish his reputation by exposing fabrications which he passed off as biographical truth, and examples of plagiarism in his work.²⁴⁶ In the larger picture, these discoveries have revealed the force of the myths surrounding Bakhtin, and the moral and political convictions sustaining them. “These myths are not the myths generated by Soviet censorship,” Hirschkop remarks:

but myths generated in the course of its demise. Indirectly, therefore, they reveal to us the founding myth of Bakhtin scholarship itself – that all that stands between us and Bakhtin is the heavy hand of official politics and Soviet repression. Those reclaiming Bakhtin’s work rightly believed they were undoing the distortions of the

²⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. vii-viii

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 7

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. III

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 124

²⁴⁶ Hirschkop discusses a variety of these episodes in detail in his third chapter, “Bakhtin Myths and Bakhtin History,” (pp. 111-193), including, on the biographical front, evidence that Bakhtin’s account of his noble family line was untrue (pp. 111-112); that he never, in fact, attended university, as he claimed to have done (pp. 140-141); and that the study of the *Bildungsroman* that he claimed to have made during the 1930s was, in fact, never written (p. 113). With respect to Bakhtin’s intellectual life, Hirschkop notes evidence that Bakhtin was dependent on German secondary sources for a significant amount of his knowledge of European literary culture (pp. 113-114), and work by Brian Poole establishing that “several pages of *Rabelais and his World* are lifted word-for-word from Ernst Cassirer’s *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*,” (p. 114), citing: Brian Poole. “Bakhtin and Cassirer: The Philosophical Origins of Bakhtin’s Carnival Messianism.” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 97: 3/4 (1998), 542-2.

past.²⁴⁷

The attempt to define Bakhtin's life and work thus emerges as a partisan endeavor that is part of a larger struggle for control over collective memory of the Soviet period, and involves first and foremost the creation of a public record. Thus "no piece of biographical information, no letter, no edition or reminiscence appears which does not play a part in a campaign for Bakhtin's reputation, however purely intentioned the provider or scholar;"²⁴⁸ and in consequence Bakhtin's life and works "have come to us not in the form of an inheritance, carefully preserved and lovingly handed on to the next generation, but as something forcefully disinterred in the midst of an argument among competing heirs."²⁴⁹ The need for scholarly care in recovering the historical Bakhtin is thus all the more pressing, since, as Hirschkop delicately concludes, "scholarship can never afford to forget that history is not only the storm that blows it off course, but also the wind that fills its sails."²⁵⁰

Over the past fifteen years this situation has gradually changed, as a new scholarly consensus has begun to emerge with respect to Bakhtin. Textual study and archival research have started to deflate both the overblown claims of Bakhtin's myth and the indignation of its critics, and indicated new directions in which less partial investigation of his life and work might proceed. Some of these new paths have led to revelations about Bakhtin's sources, others to fuller historical contextualization of his thought: in 2002 Caryl Emerson pointed out Bakhtin's affinities with Russian anarchist and idealist traditions; and in 2008 Alina Wyman published a revealing, extended comparison of his thought with that of the German

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 114

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 114-115 For a discussion of the state of the Bakhtin archive at this time, and the struggles over his legacy, see: Peter Hitchcock. "The Bakhtin Centre and the State of the Archive: An Interview with David Shepherd." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 97: 3/4, Summer/Fall 1998, pp. 753-772.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 114

phenomenologist Max Scheler.²⁵¹ The identification of Bakhtin’s early-twentieth-century “philosophical neighbors,” to borrow Wyman’s phrase, and the comparative exploration of their work have offered real insight into the nature of Bakhtin’s intellectual achievements. It is with these developments in mind that I turn here to a close analysis of the text from which I drew the concept of outsideness when framing my study of Gobetti, Bakhtin’s essay known as “*Ответ на вопрос редакции «Нового Мира»*” or, “Response to a Question from the Editorial Staff of *Novyi Mir*.” Brief and uncontested as this text is, it has not, to my knowledge, been the object of a close reading, though a few key passages from it are often quoted in discussions of outsideness, since it contains one of Bakhtin’s clearest statements on the subject. I offer my analysis as a necessary consideration of method, in the context of my own study, and more broadly as a contribution to the study of the historical Bakhtin and the letter of one of his texts. What is it that makes Bakhtin’s concept of outsideness so revealing, as a lens through which to view Gobetti? And what, if anything, can this connection tell us about Bakhtin, his work, and its extraordinary reception?

* * * * *

Before turning to a discussion of the essay’s composition, a word about its publication, and so about the editions in which it is now available and the information they provide. The essay was first published in 1970, under a different title, in the November issue of *Novyi Mir*, the monthly journal of the Writers’ Union of the USSR.²⁵² It was republished in 1979, five years after Bakhtin’s death, as part of a collection of Bakhtin’s essays edited by the literary scholar S. G. Bocharov and entitled *Эстетика*

²⁵¹ Caryl Emerson. “Bakhtin after the Boom: Pro and Contra.” *The Journal of European Studies*, xxxii (2002) pp. 3-26. Alina Wyman. “Bakhtin and Scheler: Toward a Theory of Active Understanding.” *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 86, No. 1 (January 2008) pp. 58-89. Brian Poole revealed Bakhtin’s debts to Scheler and other German phenomenologists in his contribution to: Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd, eds. *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, revised and expanded second edition. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2001

²⁵² М. М. Бахтин. “Смелее пользоваться возможностями.” *Новый Мир*. Москва: Союз Писателей СССР, 1970, II, 237-240. I return to the question of the change in title below.

словесного творчества, or, *The Aesthetics of Verbal Creation*.²⁵³ At this point it acquired the title under which it is now known, and under which it was again republished in 2002, in volume six of Bakhtin's *Collected Works*, edited by Bocharov and L. A. Gogotishvili.²⁵⁴ The *Collected Works* includes significant critical apparatus and is the most comprehensive scholarly edition of Bakhtin's work published to date, though it does not lay claim to the status of a full critical edition. With respect to the *Novyi Mir* essay, it includes copies of preparatory notes and drafts contained in the Bakhtin archive, and is the only source of such documentary information available outside the archive. The notes and commentary it provides reveal significant gaps and uncertainties in current knowledge of the text, however, and need themselves to be read critically as part of a larger interpretive effort.

Bakhtin wrote the essay during the autumn of 1970, in response to a written request from the *Novyi Mir* editorial staff; the letter is preserved in the Bakhtin archive.²⁵⁵ At this point he and his wife, Elena, were living in Grivno, about 60 km south of Moscow, in an old people's home to which they had been transferred from the Kremlin hospital in May.²⁵⁶ The letter Bakhtin received asks specifically for "an interview," and notes that one of the journal's senior editors will be sent to see him "for this purpose."²⁵⁷ There is no evidence provided in the *Collected Works* that anyone from *Novyi Mir* ever visited Bakhtin in person, however, and of the three draft manuscripts which are reproduced in the

²⁵³ М. М. Бахтин. *Эстетика словесного творчества*. Москва: Искусство, 1979.

²⁵⁴ М. М. Бахтин. "Ответ на вопрос редакции «Нового Мира»." *Собрание сочинений в 7-и томах*, т. 6, "Проблемы Поэтика Достоевского," 1963; "Работы 1960-х и 1970-х гг., под ред. С. Г. Бочаров и Л. А. Гоготшвили. Москва, 2002, сс. 451-457.

²⁵⁵ The text of the letter, dated September 8 and signed by one of the deputy editors, V. Litvinov, is reproduced as part of the introduction to the text in the *Collected Works*, p. 703. The editors add that the letter is on stationery carrying the *Novyi Mir* letterhead.

²⁵⁶ Clark & Holquist, p. 337

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 703 The Russian text reads: "The editorial staff of *Novyi Mir* would like to invite you to give an interview for issue No. 11 of the journal [...] To this end the senior editor Inna Petrovna Borisova has been directed to visit you."

critical apparatus, only one is organized in a question-and-answer format, a structure which does not survive in the published text. The notes accompanying this draft refer only to the “rhetorical division of the text into questions and answers,” moreover, and there is no mention in any of the commentary of an interview.²⁵⁸ It is unclear whether one took place.²⁵⁹ The request from *Novyi Mir* gives the topic of the prospective interview as “The Literary Scholarship of our Day,” and asks Bakhtin to address it by providing his “view of the state of contemporary literary scholarship, its prospects, and those of its problems which are in need of resolution.”²⁶⁰ The instructions are clear, and the note reads like a writing prompt: an interview would not have been necessary for Bakhtin to produce a written text in response. It remains an open question to what extent one was ever envisaged, on either side.

The editors of the *Collected Works* also reveal in their discussion that, in addition to the three manuscript drafts they have included in the notes, the archive contains a fourth draft in typescript which they chose not to include, and which they identify provisionally as a first draft submitted by Bakhtin for editing, based on the hand-written corrections it contains.²⁶¹ They go on to say that these corrections are incorporated into the text published in *Novyi Mir*, but that they cannot identify the typescript as a final draft, because comparison reveals numerous other passages in the *Novyi Mir* text which are not present in the typescript. They add that a large number of these passages, defined as examples of “editorial

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 726, Note 33. “The rhetorical division of the text into questions and answers is absent from the published variants of the text, including the present edition.”

²⁵⁹ In their introduction to the collection of essays in *Speech Genres*, Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist say that, “the volume opens with a transcript of Bakhtin’s remarks to a reporter from *Novyi Mir*.” (*Speech Genres*, p. xi) They do not cite a source for this observation, however. From the documents included in the *Collected Works*, it is not possible to say without doubt that an interview took place; and the draft materials it does contain make plain that describing the essay as an interview “transcript” is inaccurate.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 703. “...an interview on the theme of “Literary scholarship in our times,” in which you would lay out your view of the state of contemporary literary scholarship, its prospects, and those of its issues which need to be solved.”

²⁶¹ “Aside from these three manuscripts, the Bakhtin Archive contains a typescript, which appears to be the first [draft] given by M. M. Bakhtin to the editors, since it contains editorial corrections.” *Ibid.*, p. 704

interference,” were eliminated by Bocharov when he reprinted the essay as part of *The Aesthetics of Verbal Creation* in 1979, revealing the existence of another version of the text, also omitted from the *Collected Works*.²⁶² They posit the existence of a lost final draft representing a combination of sections “analogous” to various passages in the three manuscript drafts with the unpublished typescript.²⁶³ In making this argument they imply that editorial corrections were imposed against Bakhtin’s will, but since they offer no evidence of how Bakhtin worked with the editorial staff, it is impossible to know whether he did or did not review and accept any of the changes; without the hypothetical final draft, it becomes impossible to say how much of the text published in *Novyi Mir* is indisputably Bakhtin’s. Despite its late composition and immediate publication, doubt therefore still lingers over the validity of the text and the nature of Bakhtin’s relationship to it. A brief look at the historical background against which it was written and published will give some sense of the issues at stake, both for Bakhtin in producing the essay, and for and his posthumous editors in establishing an authoritative version.

In early 1970 *Novyi Mir* underwent a sea change in orientation. Having led the journal from 1950 to 1954, and again from 1958, the writer Aleksandr Tvardovsky was forced to resign as editor-in-chief in February, after a prolonged campaign against him by representatives of official literary culture. Under his leadership *Novyi Mir* had been at the forefront of the Thaw, the cultural liberalization set in motion by Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin at the Communist Party’s twentieth congress in February, 1956. In November, 1962 the journal famously published Solzhenitsyn’s short story *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*; throughout the 1960s it led critical discussion of the Stalinist past. Khrushchev, as premier,

²⁶² “These corrections were incorporated into the first published version in *Novyi Mir*, but were rejected by A. G. Bocharov when the text was republished in *The Aesthetics of Verbal Creation*.” *Ibid.*, p. 704

²⁶³ “The identification of this typescript as a preliminary version is due in part to the fact it does not contain several fragments which were included in the first published version in *Novyi Mir*, and of which there are analogs in the first two handwritten working drafts (see note 28), from which it follows that the typescript reflects only a preliminary stage of the work, and that there was a final rough draft, composed of fragments from the three early rough drafts. This final version has not been found in either typescript or manuscript form.” *Ibid.*, p. 704

tolerated and even encouraged Tvardovsky's openness as part of a sanctioned program of destalinization. By the end of the decade, however, the political establishment had lost its appetite for critical revision of the Soviet past, and moved to suppress opposition voices. When Tvardovsky was forced to resign from the editorship of *Novyi Mir*, a large part of the editorial staff resigned with him in protest, and the journal ceased to have any political or artistic independence. The events surrounding Tvardovsky's resignation thus marked a turning point in Soviet literary and intellectual culture, a public end to official tolerance of destalinization and the cultural liberalization on which it was based. By the time Bakhtin's contribution was solicited, *Novyi Mir* was under the control of conservative party ideologues.

The Thaw had created a period of intense debate across Soviet society, as people were afforded a first opportunity to speak openly about their experiences under Stalin. Public life was also marked by the return of survivors from the Gulag and other internal exiles, whose reappearance and rehabilitation posed a host of uncomfortable questions about how Soviet society as a whole, and its members individually, should view themselves. Bakhtin's reappearance in Moscow and his reintegration into public intellectual life were themselves results of this process. Literary debate became, as so often in Russian history, a vehicle for the discussion of larger social and political issues, and was colored by strong personal and moral passions. The bitterness of its battles reflected the high stakes involved: cultural authority in the new society that was emerging from Stalinism, and the power to which this authority would entitle those in whom it was recognized. Supporters of the Thaw among the literary intelligentsia felt themselves to be the bearers of a moral authority visible in their aesthetic taste, personal behavior and intellectual training, an elite *культу́рность* typical of nineteenth-century European liberalism. Those who opposed the Thaw, and were generally associated with the existing regime, subscribed to their own version of *культу́рность* shaped by what they viewed as a properly socialist ideological consciousness, or *иде́йность*. Rooted in questions of taste and interpretive judgment on

both sides, their debates were protracted and viciously personal, but could not resolve the question of authority. Power, meanwhile, continued to depend on established patronage networks. Only after some time did any of the participants discover a way to connect literary debates focused on authority with the acquisition of new and real power, by turning to the community of their readers. As the 1960s progressed, Tvardovsky became adept at using reader's letters for support in his battles with both the authorities and his literary rivals, and began to base his claims to authority on what Polly Jones has identified as an "imagined community of readers."²⁶⁴ Supporters of the Thaw were just turning their attention to shaping an emergent reading public at the time of the authorities' crackdown on *Novyi Mir*.

Against this charged background the publication of Bakhtin's essay was not only an intellectual event, but a moral and political gesture; the question is, of what sort? Where did Bakhtin's loyalties lie? He had been taken up during the 1960s and championed by members of the liberal intelligentsia who supported the Thaw, and yet here he was publishing an essay in *Novyi Mir* after its take-over by the conservatives. Could he have volunteered to do so? Or been made an invitation to contribute that he could not refuse, given his and his wife's dependence on the authorities for housing and medical treatment?²⁶⁵ Was publishing the essay an opportunity to take on the establishment with an attack couched in aesopian language? Or was Bakhtin ultimately indifferent to the political context in which his work appeared, a literary scholar who was simply a "spokesman for the profession" at this point in his life?²⁶⁶ With respect to the context of publication, had Bakhtin wanted to make an unequivocal gesture

²⁶⁴ Polly Jones. "The Personal and the Political: Opposition to the Thaw and Literary Identity in the 1950s and 1960s." *The Thaw: Soviet Society and Culture during the 1950s and 1960s*. Edited by Denis Kozlov and Eleonory Gilburd. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013, pp. 256. In support of her conclusion Jones cites: Denis Kozlov. *The Readers of Novyi Mir, 1945-70: Twentieth-Century Experience and Soviet Historical Consciousness*. PhD Dissertation, University of Toronto, 2005

²⁶⁵ The Bakhtins had been placed in the Kremlin hospital thanks to a connection with Yury Andropov, then head of the KGB.

²⁶⁶ Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson use this phrase to describe Bakhtin's last years. See: Gary Saul Morson & Caryl Emerson. *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990, pp. 96-100

of support for Tvardovsky, he would perhaps have chosen to boycott the journal, and published a statement of protest somewhere else. On the other hand, the feat of placing an attack on the new official line in the journal itself, under the noses of its new leadership, might have appealed as a more ingenious triumph. It is even possible that Bakhtin wished to discomfit his new, younger supporters with a demonstration of independence, offering an implicit admonition to rise above contemporary circumstance. If he left notes or correspondence containing details of his personal attitudes, or the contact he had with the *Novyi Mir* staff, they have not been made public. Of his notes and drafts, only some are available, and the most important variant, the typescript containing editorial corrections, has not been released for public scrutiny by those in charge of the Bakhtin archive. Bocharov's presentation of the text has shifted over time, moreover, in a fashion which suggests that he has been uncertain how to interpret the essay's structure and language, what to make of its overall meaning, and therefore whether or not to endorse Bakhtin's authorship. There remains the published text, to which I now turn in an effort to clarify Bakhtin's position, and the message he was trying to convey.

* * * * *

Bakhtin's "Response" is an essay which appears to lose its way. It starts out in straightforward fashion, with a series of observations that seem to be advancing towards an interpretive conclusion, only to wander from the topic halfway through, circle back on its argument, and then stray off again, disappearing into a cloud of vague pronouncements, neologisms and unexpected imagery. At the same time its emotional pitch rises, and the author's tone becomes increasingly emphatic. His attempt to close with a positive declaration only deepens the impression that his message has escaped him. No wonder, then, that the original title, "Bolder Use of Possibilities," caused discomfort in some of his readers and was eventually removed, to be replaced with something more modest and functional: "Response to a Question from the Editors of *Novyi Mir*." Bakhtin wrote the essay in 1970, at the age of 75, under

difficult conditions. He and his wife had just been forced to move to a place they did not know, and where they were relatively isolated from their friends. Bakhtin himself was frail, an invalid, and suffered from chronic emphysema. His wife's heart was failing, and she was increasingly unable to perform the innumerable tasks with which she had tended to him and supported his work for forty-nine years. Perhaps, in view of these circumstances, Bakhtin was simply losing his touch? Or perhaps, given the upheavals at *Novyi Mir* earlier in the year, his text was edited with a heavy hand by one of the conservative ideologues who had taken control of the journal, and its original coherence destroyed? Doubts about Bakhtin's relationship to the text have persisted, reflecting interpretive unease over its structure and conclusion. It hardly seems an answer to the question with which it begins.

But Bakhtin's essay is not trying to come to a conclusion. In place of a linear argument or narrative it is offering a revelation, centered on the exposure of a paradox.²⁶⁷ It is at epistemological odds with the expectations of those who seek a conclusion. Revelation is universal knowledge which stands outside the temporal flow of human experience, so it must be apprehended by means of a logic different from those of analytical argument or narrative description. These epistemological strategies proceed by selecting and ordering a series of facts; their concern is with the justification of their selections, and of the order in which they make them. Following their choices leads to a particular conclusion. A paradox, by contrast, aims to present both sides of an argument at once, to entertain simultaneously all the possibilities latent in a given situation. Contemplation of the contradictions it exposes produces a burst of understanding. Such moments of understanding may be repeated, but they cannot be joined in a linear account of development; nor can they be reduced or structured by the elimination of any of their component parts. A paradox does not resolve divisions and differences, it keeps them in play. The difficulty of Bakhtin's text stems, I think, from the opposition between the linear structure solicited by

²⁶⁷ The following discussion is indebted to Boris Groys's discussion of paradox in the first chapter of his study *The Communist Postscript*, on "The Linguistification of Society." Boris Groys. *The Communist Postscript*. London: Verso, 2009, pp. 1-31

the editors of *Novyi Mir* with their question, and the paradoxical structure in which Bakhtin seeks to present his answer. Asked to describe where contemporary literary scholarship stands, how it got there, and where it should go, Bakhtin sets himself to communicate the timeless essence of what it knows.

We should recall that Bakhtin is considering specifically *literaturovedenie*, that new discipline named in the 1920s, when he was still a young man producing his first intellectual work. Half a century later, he is reminding his readers of a tension inherent in the name: *literaturovedenie* designates both a knowledge of literature gained by careful study of what has been written in the past, and the capacity to lead the study of literature into the future by communicating new knowledge in written form.²⁶⁸ The *literaturoved* himself must therefore be both a receptive reader, prepared to submit to the demands of his material, and an authoritative writer able, in turn, to impose himself on his own readers. He is not only an interpreter but a creator in his own right, thanks to his privileged access to the revelations of literary art. Viewed in this light he is therefore also an artist, deriving his authority from access to universal truth, and offering himself as a living bridge between the eternal and the temporally bounded reality of human existence. *Literaturovedenie* is the offspring of his art, a “young science,” to reproduce Bakhtin’s gender-marked image, over which he must exercise paternal authority, but towards which he also feels the attraction of a lover. To put it in the terms it was designed to replace, the *literaturoved* is both critic and philologist, and must reconcile his role as arbiter of form with his love of words in all their expressive variety. Bakhtin’s essay is implicitly a meditation on the divided nature of the *literaturoved* and his struggle to inhabit the paradox of his authority, the dependence of his god-like creative power as a writer on his emotional vulnerability and capacity for self-abandonment as a human reader.

The essay is remarkable for the symmetry of its structure, despite the meandering impression it

²⁶⁸ Like the German, “*literaturwissenschaft*,” of which its name is a calque, *literaturovedenie* is a “science” which integrates the personal development of its practitioner.

creates on first reading. It falls into two parts of equal length, in which Bakhtin seems at first glance to follow the guidelines he was given by the editors of *Novyi Mir*, first considering the state of contemporary literary studies (paragraphs 1-9), then indicating some directions in which it might usefully develop (paragraphs 10-18). The midpoint is marked by the presentation of the paradox that is Bakhtin's main concern, and which he introduces and repeats in consecutive paragraphs (9 and 10), preserving the balance of his verbal composition around its center. As it appeared in *Novyi Mir*, the essay was framed by references in the title and concluding paragraph to "daring" and "possibilities," which draw attention to key aspects of Bakhtin's paradoxical vision. The two halves of the essay are distinct in tone and mirror one another, the first "negative," dominated by criticism of his contemporary context, and the second "positive," devoted to a discussion of the liberating spiritual mission *literaturovedenie* is called to undertake. Throughout, Bakhtin's observations and ideas are couched in a language of absence and potential which gives his remarks a mysterious, divinatory air.

The text is full of revelations, what is more, and the first concerns its genre. Bakhtin opens in a familiar tone, introducing himself indirectly by describing how he comes to the subject at hand. "The editorial staff of *Novyi Mir* has asked me how I would evaluate the current state of literary scholarship," he starts out, before adding modestly, "of course, it is difficult to answer this question categorically or with much assurance."²⁶⁹ "When evaluating our own times, our own contemporaneity, we always tend to err (in one direction or another)," he continues, aligning himself deftly and flatteringly with his readers, and soliciting their sympathetic participation in his effort, "and this must be taken into account. Nonetheless, I shall attempt a response."²⁷⁰ In five sentences Bakhtin has set out his topic and gathered his audience to him. The conversation of which his remarks were ostensibly a part has evaporated and

²⁶⁹ Bakhtin, "Otvét," p. 451

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 451

the *Novyi Mir* editorial staff has been consigned to the background, having played its role as a foil against which Bakhtin could define his position and rally his audience. He is free to guide his listeners forward. The opening is a rhetorical *tour de force*, and immediately reveals the fact that this piece of writing is neither an essay nor an interview but a printed lecture, and one composed by an author who was evidently an expert performer on the podium.

“Our *literaturovedenie* has great possibilities at its disposal,” Bakhtin continues, reinforcing his alignment with his listeners and separating himself still further from the community of literary scholars which he is supposed to be representing.²⁷¹ As this distancing maneuver suggests, however, he is not enthusiastic about the use that is being made of this potential. While admitting the existence of “serious and talented” literary scholars (“including young ones”), “high scientific traditions” developed before and after the October revolution, and “necessary external conditions,” he concludes that recent literary scholarship, especially of the past decade, “does not realize these possibilities,” and does not “respond to those demands which we have a right to make of it.” “It all seems to me rather gray and gloomy,” he observes, using a stock phrase from Thaw era debates. Current literary scholarship is characterized for Bakhtin not by what it is or does, but by what it lacks: bold new ideas, original discoveries and healthy competition among different schools of thought. “Some sort of fear has taken hold,” as he sees it, “of risk-taking in research, a fear of hypotheses.” This fear is catastrophic for the development of *literaturovedenie*, which is still in its infancy, and does not command “tried and tested methods” like those of the natural sciences. Coupled with the absence of healthy intellectual competition, fear of risk-taking leads to the triumph of truisms and platitudes, “in which,” he adds drily, “we are not lacking.”

Read against the background of events at *Novyi Mir*, Bakhtin’s discussion suggests at first that he is taking care to avoid any hint of a connection with the newly triumphant conservative establishment. He

²⁷¹ *Ibid.* This, and all other citations in this paragraph are taken from p. 451

is quick, however, to damn with faint praise even the handful of works he selects for approval in his survey of the contemporary scene, passing rapidly over the appearance of some generically “decent and useful books,” and “deep and interesting articles.”²⁷² He does single out three works for special mention, naming them and their authors and calling them “great events;” but even then he characterizes them only as “gratifying in the highest degree” for their respective approaches, without discussing any of their specific methods or conclusions.²⁷³ “I will, perhaps, touch upon these works again as our conversation unfolds,” he adds, coyly; and so he does, in paragraph eight, but only to reiterate in general terms what seems to be their one merit, the fact that they “do not tear literature away from culture,” but “try to understand literary events within the differentiated unity of the whole culture of their epoch.”²⁷⁴ He has nothing concrete to say about how they realize this aim, nor about the insights they provide. Nor, indeed, about their authors: he gives the impression that once a correct approach is taken, the study of literature progresses independently of the individual scholars involved.

There is, in fact, no concrete information given in this opening section. What emerges clearly from it is not a picture of contemporary literary scholarship, but Bakhtin’s authoritative voice, and the relationships he creates with it. The question of the state of *literaturovedenie* becomes a question of faith in Bakhtin as its exponent: its problems are presented in emotional terms as a crisis of confidence, of authority, to which Bakhtin is responding obliquely with a demonstration of his own prowess. He personalizes the situation, rather than explaining it, pushing his listeners towards a choice of allegiance; but he offers only rhetoric, in the end, on which to base it. His own rhetorical behavior does not make it obvious where his audience should place its trust, moreover: his bond with his listeners is created at the

²⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 451

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 452. The works Bakhtin individually are:

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 452

expense of the literary scholars who are nominally his colleagues, but whom he appears to be selling down the river in order to retain his listeners' sympathy for himself. "Bakhtin, too, was a fifth columnist," Terry Eagleton has observed, in a different context, and some of the foundation for Eagleton's glib-sounding generalization is visible in this opening section of the text.²⁷⁵ There is more to Bakhtin's approach than just undermining his putative colleagues, however: even *literaturovedenie* falls under his personalizing influence. Still a "young science," (*молодая наука*), she needs appropriate care and guidance in order for her "character" to be properly formed: as the gender-marking of the image implies, she is figuratively cast in the role of Galatea to his Pygmalion. Bakhtin's authority as *literaturoved* becomes that of the artist who gives form to the products of his imagination, and thereby brings them into being; his authority is expressed in an aesthetic moment which reenacts God's creation of the world. No wonder, then, that as his listeners we, too, are dependent on a gift of form rather than substantive content: Bakhtin's authority is conveyed to us in the rhetorical contours of his voice, which we are invited implicitly to understand as a token of his creative power, an offer not only of knowledge, but of protection and guidance. The choice is ours, whether to trust him or not, but it represents, in the end, a leap of faith; and like the contemporary literary scholars he describes, we will need courage, or "daring," to make it.

Having personified *literaturovedenie*, and taken her under his protective wing, Bakhtin turns his

²⁷⁵ Eagleton, Terry. "I Contain Multitudes." Rev. of *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Word in the World*, by Graham Pechey. London Review of Books 29.12 (2007): 13-15. 8 Mar. 2014 <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n12/terry-eagleton/i-contain-multitudes>>. Caryl Emerson has remarked elsewhere that Bakhtin "had no interest in undermining the tools of his trade;" perhaps not, but he was certainly not averse to undermining his interlocutors. Rather than practicing a trade as a professional scholar of literature, in any case, Bakhtin understood himself to be exercising a spiritual calling as its interpreter, as a later passage of this lecture makes explicit. Faith and trust are indeed at the center of this effort, but they exist with respect to individuals, not abstract "tools" or methods. Bakhtin is at pains, in a later passage, to reiterate the need for a variety of methods among practitioners of *literaturovedenie*: any approach can be helpful, in his view, so long as it is practiced in the right spirit; again, the fundamental question is that of the character of the practitioner. In this respect Bakhtin is deeply at odds with the practice of experimental science, to which he seems to have had very little exposure, and which serves as a foil here for his discussion of *literaturovedenie*. Caryl Emerson's remark is taken from: Caryl Emerson. "Bakhtin after the Boom: Pro and Contra." *The Journal of European Studies*, xxxii (2002) pp. 3-4

attention to identifying the two most pressing tasks she should address. These tasks turn out to be so broadly framed as to be devoid of substance, however, and give rise not to specific recommendations but fresh criticisms of existing practice. “First of all,” he announces, “*literaturovedenie* should establish a closer connection with cultural history,” because literature “is an inextricable part of culture, and it cannot be understood in isolation from the overall context of the entire culture of a given era.”²⁷⁶ This is all very well as a general principle, but gives little to go on for the student of any particular work; and it soon becomes apparent that this “task” is valuable to Bakhtin mainly as a corrective to existing bad practice. Contemporary error consists, as he sees it, in taking literature out of historical context and “[relating] it directly, over the head of culture, so to speak, to socio-economic factors,” and in indulging a “narrow specificity” of approach which stays too close to the “specific characteristics” of literature. With these cryptic phrases, Bakhtin disposes of Socialist Realism, Formalism and Structuralism, rescuing the study of literature from the depredations of either a crude, ideological materialism or a narrowly formal emphasis on linguistic structures.²⁷⁷ He particularly decries the “specificity” of formal and structural approaches, which has led literary scholars to neglect questions of interdependence between different areas of culture, to forget that cultural activity is often most intense in those boundary areas which lie between established disciplinary fields, and to be distracted by the creation of straw men, in the form of period classifications, which offer no access to “the powerful, deep currents of culture” that “really [define] writers’ creativity.”²⁷⁸ With such misguided approaches, “it is impossible to

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 452

²⁷⁷ Bocharov identifies and discusses Bakhtin’s allusions to structuralism in a number of his notes to the text: 4, 5, 6, 8, 11, 23, 42.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 453 This last charge is reminiscent of Croce’s objections, decades earlier, to the use of genre as a category of literary analysis. Like Bakhtin, Croce was opposed to the substitution of formal templates for the attempt to enter into the creative experience of the author, and suspicious, as Bakhtin is here, of the ease with which such templates could be used as normative, rather than descriptive or classificatory tools. The comparison helps to reveal one of Bakhtin’s underlying motivations: he is reacting against both Soviet ideology and structural linguistics as forms of positivism, to which he opposes an idealist vision of literature as the expression of a historical spirit.

penetrate the depths of great works,” Bakhtin concludes, “and literature itself begins to seem a petty and frivolous affair.”²⁷⁹

If the first task of *literaturovedenie* is to take an integral approach to literature as one element of a larger cultural whole, its second task, according to Bakhtin, is to view any given work against the entire backdrop of literary history. “If literature should not be studied in isolation from the whole culture of an era,” he adds, “then it is even more pernicious to enclose a literary event in the era of its creation alone, in its contemporary circumstances.”²⁸⁰ Scholars are accustomed to explaining a writer against the background of his own times, he observes, and so they are “afraid to go far in time from the event being studied,” despite the fact that the work itself “sends its roots back into the distant past.”²⁸¹ “Great works of literature are prepared over centuries,” he asserts, and in the moment of their creation “only the ripe fruits of a prolonged and complicated process of ripening are picked.”²⁸² By “trying to understand and explain a work only from the conditions of its own era,” we will “never penetrate the depths of its meaning.”²⁸³ Like the first, Bakhtin defines this second task in negative terms – what literary scholarship should avoid, what is missed, if a mistaken approach is followed – and once again he avoids any specific methodological recommendations. *Literaturovedenie* emerges from his discussion of its two most pressing tasks as a curiously evasive practice in consequence, defined primarily by its ability to escape the interpretive limitations of any given time or place. Its main aim appears defensive, moreover: to prevent the trivialization of literature, to reclaim meaning from encroaching obscurity.

Which begs the question of what, if any, positive approach Bakhtin is advocating? How might we

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 453

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 453

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 453

²⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 453-4

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 454

go back in time to examine the long process by which a great work comes to fruition? And what would we gain if we did this? Bakhtin answers these questions indirectly with his reference to “understanding and explaining a work.”²⁸⁴ These are the two tasks which the study of literature has, in fact, to address, and about which he is really offering advice; but they are obscured, rather than articulated, in his opening discussion of contemporary *literaturovedenie*. They correspond to the fundamental activities of reading and writing by which literary scholars first understand, and then explain, the works which they study. In this first half of his lecture Bakhtin is reflecting on the problem of understanding as he contemplates what he sees as his contemporaries’ inability to read. The two negative tasks which he articulates as he enumerates their failings are by-products of a larger, tacit attempt to chastise them into greater openness and empathy as readers. Questions of “method” are a red herring: the real substance of interpretive effort is moral, as Bakhtin presents it, and involves the cultivation of those personal attitudes necessary to empathetic reading. Such an approach will create fuller understanding as the reader does his or her best to apprehend all the various experiences which informed the author’s creative process, and so found expression in the work. *Literaturovedenie* is faced not with methodological problems or tasks, but with moral duties: Bakhtin’s positive program is a call to humility and brotherly love in responding to literary creativity.

The “slippage” that reveals the moral underpinnings of Bakhtin’s message accompanies a shift in his attention away from the contemporary context. It also falls at the mid-point of the lecture, the fulcrum around which his reflections are balanced. “Enclosure within the era also makes it impossible to understand the work’s future life in subsequent centuries,” he adds, and “this life presents itself as a kind of paradox.” Fully to understand a work, the literary scholar must abandon the limits of period perspective and follow where the work itself takes him, for “works break through the boundaries of their

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 454

own time, they live in centuries, that is, in *great time* and frequently (with great works, always) their lives are fuller and more intense there than in their own time.”²⁸⁵ This new, universal perspective encompasses not only the future, but the past as well, because a work “cannot live in future centuries if it has not somehow also absorbed into itself past centuries.” If it were born only of the present day, a literary work would not “continue the past, nor have any substantive connection with it,” and so could not live in the future. “Everything that belongs only to the present, dies with it,” Bakhtin concludes, bringing the first half of his lecture to a close. Making a transition as rapid and complete as that of his opening paragraph, he sweeps away contemporary literary scholarship, together with all purely contemporary phenomena, and plunges his listeners abruptly into the contemplation of eternity.

Bakhtin does not use the words “eternity” or “eternal,” however, but coins the term “*большое время*,” or “great time,” to designate the all-encompassing dimension in which great works “live.” He speaks of their “future life,” and of the past which they must “somehow absorb,” but not of their “eternal life,” though that is what this incorporation of past, present and future existence implies they possess. Unlike the other neologisms he uses – *вживание* (living one’s way in) and *вненаходимость* (outsideness) – “great time” is an invention specific to this lecture, created here in the exposure of its central paradox, that a great work of literature can be wholly the product of a transient historical moment, and yet live forever, speaking with fresh power and immediacy to future generations of readers who have no knowledge of the time in which it was created. Or, more succinctly and generally, that great art transcends the human experience of time. Embodying both past and present, a great work will outlive its human creator; and in doing so it offers the promise of future life for all who apprehend its message, of redemption from the material destruction of “everything that belongs to the present” through access to spiritual truth. The metaphors of incarnation and resurrection which underlie Bakhtin’s description are

²⁸⁵ Bakhtin, “Reply,” p. 454. Here I have used verbatim Vern McGee’s translation published in *Speech Genres*, p. 4

clear, though he chooses not to make them explicit, nor to use any language which might connect them specifically to Christian faith or practice. It is not the author, moreover, but the work which possesses redeeming power, thanks to its incarnation of all past experience; and it is the work which is resurrected, Christ-like, by future generations of literary scholars, to partake of a “more intensive, fuller life” in “great time.”²⁸⁶ Bakhtin’s neologism draws attention to the Christian underpinnings of his thought, at the same time that it marks a refusal to identify with the Christian tradition by adopting its vocabulary. Taking the paradox of Christ’s equally divine and human nature as an unspoken starting point, Bakhtin translates this article of religious faith into the secular paradox of literary creativity and offers, in the process, another demonstration of his own creative powers by coining a new term. He undercuts the hubris of the gesture by avoiding explicit reference to the Christian subtext, even as he keeps it close to the surface of his listeners’ attention.

Bakhtin’s introduction of his paradox is also marked by the introduction of organic imagery: literary works appear to grow like the tree of life, sinking deep roots through great time; or to represent, as his description progresses, the ripe fruits of the tree’s millennial growth, of a “lengthy and complex process of maturation.”²⁸⁷ In either case, their life is the product of a natural force beyond human control: man may make his home among the roots of this spiritual tree, climb in its branches and even harvest its fruit, but he cannot control its growth. Those closest to it, the authors of literary works, seem able to tap the tree, gaining access to the flow of its inner energy like sap; but still they remain dependent on the tree’s power. Stepping away from Christian figures, Bakhtin reaches back to the pagan imagery of Norse myth, perhaps even Shamanic ritual, in order to depict literary creativity as the product of a primeval life force, and to emphasize man’s integration into the organic world this force has created.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 454

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 453-4

Man's physical and spiritual existence are united in his experience of the living world, as Bakhtin depicts them with this image, and the literary work is a manifestation of their organic unity. The author is implicitly compared not to Christ, but to Odin, who sacrificed himself to himself on the branches of a great tree, according to Norse legend, in order to receive the runes of wisdom and power from the sacred pool at its foot.²⁸⁸ "Great time" is that of the poetic *Edda*, for Bakhtin, as well as of Christ's resurrection, encompassing eras of both pagan and Christian faith.

"The life of great works in distant future eras seems, as I have already said, a paradox,"²⁸⁹ Bakhtin remarks, turning his listeners firmly towards the future as he opens the second half of his lecture. "In the process of their life after death, they are enriched with new meanings, new senses; it is as if these works outgrew what they were in the era of their creation." The future life of great works is now explicitly their "life after death," but it has lost the eschatological significance of Christian resurrection; rather than a culminating transformation, it has become a point of departure for fresh growth that also recalls the build-up of geological deposits in the earth. Bakhtin's reiteration of his central insight creates a rhetorical point of departure in his lecture, moreover, as his own reflections begin to move in a new direction. "Neither Shakespeare himself, nor his contemporaries, knew the 'great Shakespeare' whom we know today," he continues, and we could never "squeeze our Shakespeare into the Elizabethan era." Of course, he continues, we may "add to Shakespeare's works inventions that they do not contain," we may "modernize and distort him," but such deformations are inevitable and unimportant. Shakespeare grows "thanks to what really was and is in his works," not the passing fancies of any later era. He and his

²⁸⁸ "I know that I hung on a windswept tree/nine long nights,/wounded with a spear, dedicated to Odin,/myself to myself,/on that tree of which no man knows/from where its roots run."

From the "Sayings of the High One," or "*Hávamál*," in *The Poetic Edda*. Translated by Carolyne Larrington. Revised edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 32

The Shamanic origins of belief in the tree of life are discussed by Hilda Ellis Davidson in *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe*. London, New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 69

²⁸⁹ Bakhtin, "Otvét," p. 454

contemporaries were “unable consciously to perceive and appreciate” all that his works contained because “meanings [*смысловые явления*] may exist in hidden form, as potentials.” The “treasures of meaning” embedded in Shakespeare’s works were “centuries, even millennia, in the making” before he ever lived, but remained “hidden in the language” in a wide variety of forms.²⁹⁰

Remarkably, in a lecture ostensibly devoted to Russian literary scholarship and aimed at a Russian audience, Bakhtin chooses to illustrate his concept of the literary after-life with an extended consideration of a single, foreign author. He makes only a passing gesture in the direction of the Russian critical tradition, remarking that Belinsky “spoke, in his day, of the fact that every era discovers something new in the great works of the past,” and his comment reads as though it were inserted after the fact. Of Russian writers, as opposed to critics, he says nothing at all. Following his own advice, he chooses an author from a much earlier era, and a universally acclaimed master; but why Shakespeare, in particular, one wonders? Bakhtin says nothing about him and his work that would not apply equally to many other great authors. In the European context Dante springs to mind as, if anything, a better choice because more remote in time, as well as the acknowledged father of the Italian literary language; or Cervantes, perhaps, or Rabelais, to whom Bakhtin had already devoted so much thought. Bakhtin’s sudden introduction of Shakespeare seems unmotivated, mysterious with respect to the lecture’s internal development; and this logical gap is in keeping with the air of mystery which Bakhtin creates around the buried “treasures of meaning” that guarantee the immortality of great literary works. These treasures are revealed only in “propitious” [*благоприятные*] circumstances, yielded up from “the depths” of language and culture as if read from the entrails of a sacrificial animal, or received in a moment of oracular inspiration. For all the knowledge and skill employed in its discovery, meaning remains a revelation.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 454-5. All quotations in the preceding paragraph are taken from paragraphs 10 and 11 of Bakhtin’s essay.

Making another associative leap, Bakhtin then remarks that Shakespeare, “like any artist [художник], built his works not of dead elements, not of bricks, but of forms already laden with meaning, filled with it.” Shakespeare is suddenly transformed from interpreter to creator, from author to artist. The trigger for this metaphorical shift is Bakhtin’s discussion of genre, which he identifies as a crucial vehicle for the transmission of that “powerful popular culture” which sends its roots back into “prehistoric antiquity,” and generates the critical store of hidden meanings assimilated by Shakespeare and other authors. “Genres have an exceptionally important function,” he observes, because “over the course of their centuries-long lives” they become repositories of different “forms of seeing and understanding,” which “accumulate” in them [накаплиются] like dripping water or stone formations. “For the writer-artisan, genre serves as an exterior template,” he continues, and “a great artist awakens the possibilities of meaning that have been laid down in it.” Bakhtin’s author-artist now awakens dormant forms, he liberates the meaning inherent in them with a life-giving, creative act. Even the simplest forms respond to his touch; none is so reduced as to be a “dead element,” unable to receive the breath of life from his imagination.

The author’s access to these cultural memories is imperfect, however, limited by his individual situation and perspective. “Shakespeare made use of and included in his works a vast treasure of potential meanings which could not, in his day, be fully discovered and recognized,” Bakhtin explains, because “the author himself and his contemporaries see, perceive and appreciate first of all that which is closest to their own times.” As a result, “the author is the prisoner of his era, of his contemporary circumstances.” From a liberator the author has turned into a captive, locked away with the hidden meanings that enrich his work. The act of writing has momentarily confined his work in a chosen form, limited its meaning to a set of available interpretations and imprisoned him within their parameters. “Future times will liberate him from this captivity,” however, Bakhtin asserts, “and *literaturovedenie* is

called to assist in this liberation.” Following in the author’s footsteps, literary scholarship now also has a liberating mission, a calling to rescue the author and his work from the “prison of his times,” the partial understanding that threatens to freeze them in a given moment and a given form.

This liberation is represented as a rebirth or reawakening, however, rather than a resurrection: works and their authors seem increasingly to enjoy a life “beyond” death, for Bakhtin, rather than a life “after” death. The author does not die, nor is he killed to expiate sin or propitiate a judgmental deity. He and his work slip down, instead, into the sedimentary depths of cultural life and become dormant, invisible, until some combination of human curiosity and cultural disturbance bring them to light again, to rejoin the flow of life on earth’s surface. Rather than a sacrificial victim, the author has become a sleeping prince, or perhaps a giant, peacefully awaiting the moment when the spell that binds him is lifted. Bakhtin’s gentle image suggests the possibility of a fairy-tale ending to the author’s story, moreover, an innocent awakening free of retribution, a release from the irrevocable choices of the past and the responsibility they entailed. The liberation of the author, and the many meanings of his work, appears in yet a new light as a redemptive gesture of love. And memory, in aesthetic form, becomes an open gateway to the future.

“It does not follow at all from what we have said that the writer’s contemporary era can somehow be ignored,” Bakhtin then hastens to add, “or that [the author’s] creative work can be thrown back into the past or projected into the future.” Though he needs to be liberated from it, “[the author’s] contemporary era retains all its enormous and, in many ways, decisive significance.” Scholarly analysis of a work can begin “only with [the author’s contemporary era],” and must “continually refer back to it,” because “works of literature reveal themselves first of all within the differentiated cultural unity of the era in which they were created.” The author’s creative process is dependent on his contemporary circumstances, and so they must always be taken into account; but the interpretation of his work should

not be limited to the consideration of these circumstances alone. Nor should the cultures of past eras be viewed as self-contained, as “something ready-made, fully complete and irrevocably departed, deceased.” Having abandoned the immediate present of Soviet literary scholarship at the end of the first half of the lecture, Bakhtin now circles back on his argument to take up the idea of the author’s present as a creative moment of passage which gives new form to the stored cultural knowledge of the past.

“Spengler’s ideas about closed and complete cultural worlds still exert great influence over historians and literary scholars today,” Bakhtin continues, introducing another unexpected figure into his discussion, “but these ideas stand in need of significant revision.” A culture represents an “open unity,” Bakhtin asserts, rather than the “closed circle” proposed by Spengler, and all these various unities are integrated into “the process by which the culture of humanity as a whole comes into being.” “Vast possibilities of meaning have been laid down in every past culture,” Bakhtin adds, even though these possibilities remained “undiscovered, unacknowledged and unused over the course of the entire historical existence of that culture.” “Antiquity did not know itself as we know it today,” he reminds his listeners, and the distance which separates us from, say, the ancient Greeks, has had an “enormous transformative significance,” because it has been “filled with discoveries of ever more assets of meaning about which the Greeks really knew nothing, despite having created them.” Even Spengler “was able to discover new depths of meaning” in his own “wonderful” analyses of classical culture, and participated in spite of himself “in the great task of liberating antiquity from the prison of time.” For Spengler there is none of the faint praise which qualified Bakhtin’s assessment of contemporary Soviet literary scholarship: his analyses are “wonderful,” their errors and oversights notwithstanding, because they restore life to classical culture by connecting it with a new present, and opening it to new interpretations. His analyses seem only to gain in Bakhtin’s eyes, what is more, from the fact that Spengler arrived at them “in spite of himself.” Like the ancient Greeks, and Shakespeare, Spengler appears at his most perceptive and

revelatory when he has least conscious control over his material.

Half a century on, Bakhtin “reawakens” Oswald Spengler, a figure cast into the cultural depths by the rise of Nazism and Stalinism, in order to address the state of literary scholarship in the post-Thaw Soviet Union. With this gesture Bakhtin not only makes a contribution of his own to debates over the Stalinist legacy, he also reveals the creative present to which he is returning in his lecture – the revolutionary moment that accompanied the end of World War I, when he was a young man producing his first intellectual work, and when Spengler’s *Decline of the West* became an overnight sensation.²⁹¹ Spengler’s catastrophic view of Western culture would seem to have been borne out over the course of the intervening years; can the same be said of his faith in Russia as an alternative, a source of cultural renewal? Should Spengler and his method be resurrected, in consequence? Bakhtin appears to be grappling with these unspoken questions as he reaches back in time, over the heads of his contemporaries and the entire period of Soviet rule, to the moment in which the Bolshevik state was created. In doing so he implicitly reframes the debate over destalinization as a debate over the legitimacy of the entire Bolshevik project. He also provides an example of the “bolder use of possibilities” which gave his lecture its original title, and which his conservative editors appear not to have caught.

“We should underline that we are speaking here about new depths of meaning laid down in the cultures of past eras,” Bakhtin continues, “and not about the expansion of our factual, material knowledge of them.” This empirical knowledge is continually being increased by “archaeological excavations, the discovery of new texts, the perfection of techniques for their deciphering, [and] reconstructions,” which furnish us with examples of “new material carriers of meaning,” or “bodies” in which meaning is transmitted. There is a great difference which must be recognized between the

²⁹¹ The first volume of Spengler’s study, subtitled “Outline of a Morphology of World History,” was first published in July, 1918, then again, in revised form, in 1922. The second volume appeared in 1923, when both volumes also acquired individual subtitles: “Form and Actuality,” and “Perspectives of World History.”

discovery of new “depths of meaning” in a culture, and the discovery of these new, material “bodies,” and Bakhtin is at pains to distinguish between the two in order, it seems, to distinguish Spengler’s interpretive activity from the work of archaeologists, textual scholars and others who handle the material artifacts from which culture is constructed. “But it is impermissible to draw an absolute boundary between body and meaning in the field of culture,” he then immediately adds, executing a neat u-turn, because “culture is not created of dead elements,” and “even a simple brick, as we have already said, expresses something with its form in the hands of a builder.” Discoveries of new “carriers of meaning” therefore “introduce corrections into our conceptions of meaning, and can even require their substantive revision.” His initial distinction between form and meaning collapses, as Bakhtin returns to the language of incarnation which marked his earlier reflections on the life of literary works in great time, and to the image of a brick as a living form in the hands of the artist-craftsman. The cultural “depths” of meaning and its material surface are organically connected, just as a culture’s past is connected with the author’s creative present, as the culture’s stores of meaning provide fertile soil from which his works can grow.

Continuing his polemic with Spengler, Bakhtin then tackles the question of cultural identity, which he treats as a function of perspective. “There exists a persistent but one-sided, and so mistaken, notion that the best understanding of a foreign culture comes, as it were, from emigrating to it and looking at the world through its eyes, forgetting about one’s own culture.” “Such a notion is, as I said, one-sided,” he immediately reiterates. “A certain living one’s way in to a foreign culture, the ability to look at the world through its eyes, is, of course, a necessary moment in the process of understanding a foreign culture,” he continues, “but if understanding were exhausted in this moment alone, then it would be nothing more than simple duplication, and would not bring with itself anything new or enriching.” Entering into another cultural perspective is not, by itself, enough for Bakhtin; empathetic perception, however accurate and profound, is not a sufficient end in the cultural sphere. “Creative understanding,”

on the other hand, “does not renounce itself, its place in time or its culture, and it does not forget anything.” Bakhtin has, at last, made his way to the positive recommendation absent from the first half of his lecture: the ultimate goal of *literaturovedenie* is not just understanding, but creative understanding; and the creativity which distinguishes it requires a full understanding of both a foreign culture and one’s own. The boundaries between cultures are porous to individuals, Bakhtin implies, and must remain so, if any single culture is to retain its creative power.

True to form, Bakhtin personifies creative understanding rather than explaining it, but he is able to describe its character only in negative terms: creative understanding does not renounce or forget any part of its identity. And with this description we encounter the limits of Bakhtin’s imaginative project, the point at which it breaks down. Bakhtin’s *literaturoved* is called upon fully to understand two cultures, a process which requires assimilating the entire historical memory of each one. Not only that, every part of this vast store of knowledge must remain equally accessible to him at any time. It is a heroic task which surpasses the capacities of any individual; hence Bakhtin’s need to personify it with an abstract figure, and his inability to set out a concrete method for its attainment. Once again the real task Bakhtin is advocating turns out to be the observance of a moral duty implicit in the negative description he provides: creative understanding does not renounce or forget, but keeps faith with its past; it is not guilty of betrayal. Faith, then, is the ultimate source of creative inspiration for Bakhtin, and betrayal the sin which threatens to poison its well-springs. Behind his reaction to Spengler’s theoretical pronouncements, the historical specter of “socialism in one country,” the Soviet betrayal of revolutionary internationalism, haunts Bakhtin’s discussion, as do those of Stalinist terror, and of a culture divided by emigration and

exile.²⁹²

Outsideness is “of great importance for understanding,” Bakhtin continues, the observer’s outsideness “in time, in space [and] in culture with respect to what he is trying creatively to understand.” Creative understanding depends on this separation, which enables the outsider to see things invisible to those who belong to a given culture. “After all, a person cannot really see even his own external appearance, or make sense of it as a whole,” Bakhtin adds, and “no mirrors or photographs will help him. Only other people can see and understand his full external appearance, thanks to their spatial outsideness, and to the fact that they are – other.” Relations between cultures have suddenly become relations between individuals, as Bakhtin offers an analogy by way of explanation, while outsideness has become a condition for being understood. Other people “see and make sense of” the individual’s external appearance, understanding him and his identity better than he can himself: the situation calls to mind Bakhtin’s earlier image of the *literaturoved* as Pygmalion, sculpting his young science, Galatea, into being. Bakhtin’s outside observer seems now to be both subject and object of creative understanding.

“In the realm of culture, outsideness is the most powerful lever of understanding.” Bakhtin opens the last paragraph of his discussion with another unexpected image as he launches in to the extended comparison which concludes his presentation of creative understanding. “A foreign culture discovers itself more fully and in greater depth only in the eyes of another culture,” he observes, “though not in its entirety because yet other cultures will appear which will see and understand even more.” The two cultures’ eyes now meet, and they are transformed: “One meaning will reveal its depths, meeting and coming into contact with another “foreign” meaning,” and “something will begin between them like a

²⁹² “Creative understanding” was also a stock term of Soviet criticism which figured regularly in the literary debates of the 1960s, usually as part of the phrase “creative understanding of Marxism-Leninism.” Bakhtin performs his own feat of verbal reanimation here as he breathes new meaning into it, offering another demonstration of his creative powers. At the same time he keeps faith with the term’s usage in the 1920s, when it was part of a Marxist discourse which had not yet been reduced to ideological dogma.

dialogue, which overcomes the enclosure and one-sidedness of these meanings, these cultures.”

Creative understanding is born here of a lover’s glance, like Galatea awakening under Pygmalion’s astonished eyes, as the pursuit of meaning becomes, for Bakhtin, a matter of desire. “We ask a foreign culture new questions, which it has not asked itself; we seek in it an answer to our own questions, and the foreign culture answers us, revealing new sides of itself to us, new depths of meaning.” Like Galatea, the foreign culture (*чужая культура*) is not only unveiled by her observer’s admiring gaze, she responds to him by revealing herself, and answering his questions. “It is impossible creatively to understand anything different or foreign without one’s own questions,” Bakhtin continues, “though they must be serious, genuine questions.” The pursuit of this loving understanding must spring from a genuine desire for knowledge and be reciprocal, but not threaten the identity of either individual: in their “dialogic encounter” the two cultures “enrich one another mutually,” but they “do not flow together and merge;” rather, “each retains its unity and open wholeness.”

“So far as my own assessment of the long-term prospects for the development of our literary scholarship is concerned,” Bakhtin then hastily adds, jumping to an abrupt conclusion, “I think that the prospects are definitely good, since we have great possibilities [at our disposal]. In our scholarly research we lack only boldness, without which one cannot ascend the heights or plumb the depths.”

The job of the *literaturoved*, then, is to “understand and explain” literature in order to illuminate the paradox of its immortality, illustrating the ways in which a work is the product of a particular historical period, while simultaneously revealing the universal “depths of meaning” it contains, and its eternal life as a source of wisdom and creative potential for future generations of readers.²⁹³ He is to do this, moreover, in a way that enriches each author and reader without detracting from their identity, from their existing perceptions and understanding. *Literaturovedenie* is to be judged on its ability to

²⁹³ Bakhtin, “Response,” p. 454

accomplish this daunting task.²⁹⁴ It is an impossible task, in point of fact, for an ordinary human being, requiring the *literaturoved* be able, like the works he reads, to break through into “great time” by dint of an inexhaustible capacity for empathy and understanding. It is, rather, a spiritual calling conferred by what resembles a movement of divine grace, a spiritual election. More even than a lecture, Bakhtin’s text is therefore framed to resemble an oracular pronouncement, a transitory moment of inspiration to which he abandons himself. As this structure suggests, Bakhtin conceived the role of the *literaturoved* in the image of Genius, as a secular prophet of culture, a creator of understanding. Rather than a version of multicultural “outsideness” in a globalizing world, Bakhtin’s vision of the *literaturoved* celebrates an “exotopia,” an ideal place beyond the realm of human experience, from which transcendent knowledge is communicated.²⁹⁵

We could see Bakhtin’s stance as evidence of hubris, proof that he felt himself called to a position of authority over his listeners, elevated by his privileged understanding of the truths of art. The rhetorical command with which he delivers his opinions, the apparent ease with which he turns the tables on those who invited him to speak, and his dismissive treatment of other literary scholars all contribute to an initial impression of arrogance; but these gestures, concentrated in the first half of his lecture, are only part of Bakhtin’s performance. In the second half Bakhtin makes little distinction between himself as speaker, the listeners in his audience, the contemporary scholars or future students of literature whom he evokes in his lecture. As readers we are all equal, in the sense that any one of us, with sufficient care and

²⁹⁴ Bakhtin avoids, here and throughout the essay, describing a great literary work as a “monument” (*памятник*), preferring to stick with the term “work” (*произведение*). The distinction appears to be part of his response to the paradoxical question he offers for consideration: a monument is, strictly speaking, a place holder, a memorial to past greatness; it creates nothing new, and cannot speak independently, but provides an echo of what has gone before. A work, on the other hand, represents a new creation, written to transmit the author’s experience and engage a future reading public; like *literaturovedenie*, the term suggests both knowing and leading.

²⁹⁵ I take this term from: Valentina Ambrosio. “Michail Michajlovič Bachtin: Exotopia ed azione responsabile,” *Lletres de Filosofia i Humanitats*, revista digital de la Facultat de Filosofia de Catalunya. Universitat Ramon Llull, 2 (2010): 80-113.

attention, can discover the hidden treasures of literature and resurrect the authors of the past to new life. Ken Hirschkop has described Bakhtin's approach as an "aesthetic for democracy," and so it is here, as Bakhtin throws wide the doors to the storehouse of literature, inviting his listeners to come in and discover for themselves the treasures it contains. *Literaturovedenie* is called to free the author from the prison of his times, and the process by which it accomplishes this task is open to any reader with sufficient desire to participate. The only attributes he or she requires are the courage to explore and a commitment to active empathy, that "creative understanding" which Bakhtin champions at the end of his lecture. We are all invited to see ourselves as readers in this image, equal members of a spiritual community of culture.

Bakhtin formed his public persona as a teacher and lecturer in the immediate post-revolutionary period, and spent a great deal of time during the 1920s giving lectures and participating in other public educational initiatives in Nevel and Vitebsk. He spent most of the rest of his life in other peripheral locations where he continued to teach and to write, apparently with great success: his popularity on the podium and his generosity with his students are the subject of legend. Bakhtin thus spent his life as a teacher and scholar speaking mainly to audiences of provincial students, encouraging the study of literature among those for whom access to literary culture must often have represented a tremendous discovery. His career spanned the period in which the Soviet drive for universal literacy transformed Russian life, and made readers of entire new cohorts of the population, and we can perhaps better understand the concern with reading latent in his lecture, and his commitment to Genius as a model of authority, in light of this circumstance.

The Genius, like the saint or oracle, is an intermediary dedicated to the service of both a transcendent power and a temporal audience. Bakhtin's service to his contemporaries resided only partly in conveying an interpretive truth about individual works or traditions; it also, perhaps mainly, consisted

in encouraging his students to see themselves as readers, and offering himself as a spiritual guide on the journey of discovery that reading made possible. In this role he acted as a “director of conscience,” to borrow a phrase from the French practice of Catholicism, responsible for the spiritual development of his charges. He assumed this guiding role in obedience to a higher imperative, however, as part of a calling to which he abdicated his individual voice. His interpretive authority was thus always located outside himself, in the greater, transcendent reality to which literature and all forms of creative expression give access; and the persona of the Genius which he adopted before his public conferred only the passing appearance of a supreme, individual authority. In his own person he remained a reader like those around him, striving for understanding and empathy, an aspirant to truth sustained by an all-embracing, spiritual love.

To come back, at last, to the question of what makes Bakhtin’s “Response” such a revealing lens through which to view Gobetti, the answer turns out to hinge on a historical coincidence masked by the circumstances of the lecture’s publication. The creative present of Bakhtin’s “Response” is not that of the Soviet Thaw in which it was published, but of the Bolshevik revolution, which Bakhtin lived through as a young man. And it is, of course, the same historical moment in which the young Piero Gobetti was first turning to the study of Russian language and literature, hoping to harness his generation’s “new energies” and transform Italian culture. Half a century later, Bakhtin’s lecture gives fresh expression to the ideas and attitudes which shaped this revolutionary moment and, with it, his and Gobetti’s generation of young intellectuals. The moment cannot explain everything about their subsequent lives and work, as Bakhtin reminds us repeatedly with respect to other authors and periods, but it provides a common point of interpretive departure and, in Bakhtin’s case, of return.

The Genius was the greatest symbolic figure of those revolutionary times, vested with authority over every area of human life thanks to his extraordinary individual gifts. He could lead human society

towards its brightest future because he was able to grasp the patterns of development immanent in human history. He could embody the aspirations of his entire nation because he was able to grasp the movements of every individual soul. He could give form to new ideas and objects, and breathe life into these forms. In everything the Genius was creative, and this creativity sprang from the paradox of his dual nature, simultaneously human and divine. Bakhtin's *literaturoved*, with his concern for the simultaneous experience of "outsideness" and "living one's way in" to other cultures, his mastery of paradox and his desire to promote creative understanding, is a figure of Genius. He is thus the perfect guide for an exploration of Gobetti's heroic attempt to incarnate this same figure in the "liberal revolution" of his own life and work.

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