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Abstract: This article explores Umberto Saba's (1983-1957) only and unfinished novel, *Ernesto* (1975), from the perspective of sexuality and Queer studies, while also paying attention to the novel's language and its autobiographical underpinnings. By examining aspects of the work that render it an important testimony of queer desire, this essay aims to shine a light on *Ernesto* as an important Italian literary text and on the text's ability to reveal significant and timeless aspects of the human condition, especially with respect to sexual desire, its liberational potential, and its relationship to social structures. Through its theoretical framework, the article also aims to reclaim Queer analytical perspectives that derive from an Italian context, such as those found in Mario Mieli's, Teresa de Lauretis', and Luciano Parinetto's critical theories. Therefore, while this essay joins the conversation of Queer studies in the Anglophone world, it concurrently reclaims space for Italian literature and thought within this presently Anglo-centric field of inquiry.

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The Importance of Being *Ernesto*: Queerness and Multidirectional Desire in Umberto Saba's Unfinished Novel¹

PAOLO FRASCÀ

Introduction

A coloro che si domandano se si nasce o si diventa omosessuali, bisogna rispondere che si nasce dotati di una disponibilità erotica amplissima, rivolta prima di tutto verso se stessi e la madre e poi via via rivolta verso “tutti” gli altri, indipendentemente dal loro sesso, e verso il mondo, e che si diventa, a causa dell’educastrazione, eterosessuali o omosessuali (rimuovendo gli impulsi omoerotici nel primo caso, rimuovendo quelli eterosessuali nel secondo).²

In his study *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, Mario Mieli discusses institutionalized heterosexuality as an issue not only for homosexuals, but for people of all sexual orientations. Within a Marxist and psychoanalytic frame, Mieli attacks a social system that “mutilates” individuals, reducing—“castrating”—them of wide-ranging erotic capabilities. With Mieli as an access point into theoretical frameworks that are today known as Queer³ approaches to the study of sexuality, this essay explores Umberto Saba’s unfinished and posthumously published novel *Ernesto* with particular focus on the multidirectional, queer nature of the protagonist’s desire. Although scholarly attention has recognized the importance of *Ernesto* as a cornerstone of Italian gay literature and there are several persuasive and well-founded analyses of this work in Italian and English, the novel nevertheless remains marginalized within the realms of both Italian cultural studies and the study of sexual historicities more broadly.⁴ By examining aspects of the novel that render it an important testimony of queer desire, this essay aims to shine a light on Saba’s novel while also reclaiming Queer analytical frameworks which, like Mieli’s, derive from an Italian context. While this essay joins the

¹ I would like to thank my doctoral dissertation committee, especially my supervisor, Prof. Luca Somigli, for their helpful feedback on this article, which is a reduced version of a thesis chapter. I would also like to thank Prof. Ellen Nerenberg and the two anonymous peer-reviewers for their precious observations and suggestions. The title of this article, which is taken from an essay I wrote in 2014 for a graduate course in Sexuality Studies, is a play on words that references Oscar Wilde’s comedy, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. I very recently (2016) noticed that, not surprisingly, someone else had preceded me in drawing this connection: one of the subheadings of William Van Watson’s article “Adapting to Heterocentricity: The Film Versions of Umberto Saba’s *Ernesto* and Giorgio Bassani’s *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*,” found in *Queer Italia: Same Sex Desire in Italian Literature and Film* (Palgrave, 2004) bears a similar title. Unfortunately, Dr. Watson passed away suddenly in May 2014, coincidentally while I was working on the above-mentioned graduate paper. I never had the opportunity to meet Dr. Watson, but reading eulogies and short biographies written about him helped me understand his voice in Italian Studies, and I think of him as someone who pushed the boundaries within which many scholars in Italian, including myself, operate today. I humbly dedicate this article to the memory of Dr. Watson and his passion for the study of sexuality within the Italian cultural context.

² “To all those who still wonder whether they are born homosexual or become so, we must reply that everyone is born endowed with a complete range of erotic capability, directed first of all towards the self and the mother, and then gradually turning outward to ‘everyone’ else, irrespective of their sex, in fact towards the entire world. They become either heterosexual or homosexual only as a result of educastration (repressing their homoerotic impulses in the first case, and their heterosexual ones in the second.” Mario Mieli, *Homosexuality and Liberation: Elements of a Gay Critique*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Gay Men’s Press, 1980), 24–25. *Educastration* (It. *educastrazione*) was coined by Mario Mieli to describe the process of sexual mutilation carried out by a society in which sexual behaviour is highly institutionalized (and strict parameters are enforced). The original citation is from Mario Mieli, *Elementi di critica omosessuale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1977), 13. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Mieli’s *Elementi di critica omosessuale* herein are those of Fernbach.

³ In this article, “Queer” is capitalized when used in reference to theoretical approaches commonly known as such.

⁴ For example, Daniele 1977, Mitchell 1995, Woods 1998, Van Watson 2004, Duncan 2006, among others.

conversation of Queer Studies in the English-speaking world, it concurrently prioritizes the reclaiming of a space for Italian thought within this presently Anglo-centric field of inquiry.

Mieli explores liberation by way of Eros, capable of razing all societal barriers, a process intended to bring about a utopian collectivist social order. More specifically, throughout his work, Mieli describes capitalism as the “acquisitive ethos” born out of the repression of the anus as an erotogenic zone.⁵ As Derek Duncan observed in *Reading and Writing Homosexuality: A Case of Possible Difference*, Mieli identifies the homosexual body as a tool for liberation, with the anal zone being a “site of liberational possibility.”⁶ The importance of the anus as a site of social potentialities is also noted by other theorists working within the same historical period. Luciano Parinetto, for instance, describes the dynamics of anality and its relationship to sadism as a “dialettica fecale (espulsione, ritenzione)” that polarizes erotic engagements into “activity” and “passivity” (the precursors, he argues, of masculinity and femininity), and summarizes the social reverberations of such a process through a handy formula: “feci = proprietà corporea = dono = pene = denaro = proprietà ecc.”⁷ Certainly, one must acknowledge that such theories of anality often seem to focus on male bodies and desires, and consequently cannot be applied universally. At the same time, however, it is in meditations on masculinity itself that many theories find strong grounds for productive and affirmative inquiry, especially for the critique of social hierarchies and inequalities.

In his scholarship, Mieli often uses the image of the young boy forced to emulate his father, the exemplar of systemic sexual despotism. According to Mieli’s theorization, society forces the male child to restrict himself to masculinity, while simultaneously constraining the female child to develop aspects that are representative only of her psychological femininity, thereby annihilating mental and biological hermaphroditism from their conscious selves.⁸ Mieli, who committed suicide at the age of thirty-one, epitomized the refusal of gender roles, as his own lifestyle was characterized by strong public attempts to liberate himself from any form of sexual, physiological and psychological restriction and to defy any constrictive psychosocial threshold. Biographers note that his defiant attitude did not diminish even after a period of forced confinement to a psychiatric institute. Mieli, instead, continued to rebel in very explicit ways, which were at once intellectual, political, and performative; he persevered with powerful and uncompromising attacks to a social system that completely rejected him and those like him:

Si vesti da donna, si chiamò travestito, fondò “Fuori” [Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano] e si battè per i diritti di tutti. Mario Mieli si esibì più volte gustando merda e bevendo il proprio piscio pubblicamente come a fornire un supporto umano e pensante ai prodotti più nascosti e più inumani dell’uomo; come a farsi forte di quella merda con cui una società bigotta, borghese e clericale aveva tentato di coprirlo.⁹

⁵ Mieli, *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, 8. For this, Mieli relies on Freud’s observation that in men, anal intercourse does not necessarily equal homosexuality (in “Tre saggi,” 45).

⁶ Derek Duncan, *Reading and Writing Italian Homosexuality: A Case of Possible Difference* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006), 150.

⁷ “fecal dialectic (expulsion, retention);” “feces = bodily property = gift = penis = money = property, etc.” In Luciano Parinetto, *Corpo e rivoluzione in Marx. Morte diavolo analità* (Milan-Udine: Mimesis, 2015), 217–219. First edition 1977. Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this article are my own.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁹ “He wore women’s clothes, he called himself a transvestite, he founded “Fuori” and fought for the rights of all people. In his performances, Mario Mieli often tasted shit and drank his own piss publicly, as if to provide thoughtful human support to the most hidden and unhuman products of humankind; as if to make good use of the same shit under which he had been buried by a bigoted, bourgeois, and clerical society.” “Mario Mieli: chi era costei?”. *Circolo di cultura omosessuale Mario Mieli*. Web. Accessed February 12, 2016. <http://www.mariomieli.net/mario-mieli>

Mieli's ability to highlight and critique, through scholarly activity, activism, and performance, what he believed to be the primordial, deep-rooted causes of social disease is unique and commendable. Mieli's positionalities render him, per Teresa De Lauretis, an "eccentric" individual who tested the boundaries of even the most open-minded, and certainly the limits of his own social formation: this is also clearly reflected in his autobiographical novel, *Il risveglio dei faraoni* (*The Awakening of the Pharaohs*). Mieli's shocking performances were supported by an analytic depth that rendered his actions not simple statements of rebellion or defiance, but, rather, strong political acts aimed to sharply confront societal norms and taboos. De Lauretis's conceptualization of *soggetti eccentrici* informs not only the figure of Mieli, but also of Saba—and not only in reference to the eccentricity of *Ernesto*, but of his general poetics—and the protagonist of his novel *Ernesto*.¹⁰ For de Lauretis, a subject is "eccentrico rispetto al campo sociale, ai dispositivi istituzionali, al simbolico, allo stesso linguaggio, è un soggetto che contemporaneamente risponde e resiste ai discorsi che lo interpellano, e al medesimo tempo soggiace e sfugge alle proprie determinazioni sociali."¹¹ This subject constantly disengages from hegemonic paradigms and is mobile in their positionality; from a sexual standpoint, we could infer that this subject is able to critically question their own desires and how these are informed by normativity. De Lauretis's *soggetto eccentrico* and Mieli's idea of universal hermaphroditism (which he calls *transessualità*) provide an indispensable decentring, *Queer*, approach to the literary analysis that follows.

Interestingly, it was Giulio Einaudi Editore that published both Mieli's *Elementi di critica omosessuale* in 1977 and Umberto Saba's *Ernesto* in 1975: a connection that warrants further inquiry into the editorial board members' vision and sociopolitical stances at the time. Saba's is an explicitly homoerotic tale that the author had begun more than 20 years earlier (in 1953). *Ernesto*, whose first tentative title was *Intimità* (*Intimacy*), tells the story of a young boy who discovers his sexuality and its intersections with social structures through a relationship with an older man, followed by an encounter with a female prostitute, and, finally, a strong feeling of attraction towards a young boy. The novel is divided into four complete chapters and "Quasi una conclusione" ("Almost an Ending"), all written in 1953, with a short chapter added in 1957. There is consensus among most scholars on the fact the the novel should be considered incomplete (whether intentionally or not) due mainly to three reasons: on many occasions, including within the text itself, the author admits that the work will remain unfinished; the last (fifth) chapter, which describes the encounter with the young Ilio, is considerably shorter than all other four chapters; the outcome of the encounter with Ilio is left undetermined, as opposed to the other two previous romantic/sexual encounters.

The publication of Saba's novel granted Italian homosexuals literary relevance, since this work is the "most resonant example" of a scarce or almost nonexistent Italian queer or gay literary tradition.¹² The publication of *Ernesto* also helped to highlight the need for critical analysis whose approach acknowledges *queerness* (understood, in this context, as sexual non-normativity) as an important trans-historical facet of Italian cultural production, therefore helping to create a fertile field of discussion in modern Italian culture and providing an important tool of identification for many readers.

¹⁰ See: Umberto Saba, "Quello che resta da fare ai poeti." *La Voce* (Firenze: 1911), 674-681. It is a short piece where the author outlines his poetics, which were radically divergent from the trends of the time, and caused the poet to be significantly marginalized from the literary community.

¹¹ "eccentric with respect to the social context, to the institutional devices, to the symbolic, to language itself; this is a subject that simultaneously answers to and resists the discourses that call upon them, and that, at the same time, complies with and escapes their own social determinacy." Teresa De Lauretis, *Soggetti Eccentrici* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1999), 8.

¹² Derek Duncan, *Reading and Writing Italian Homosexuality: A Case of Possible Difference* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 6.

Ernesto: Between Self-Censorship and Self-Expression

In *Ernesto*, Saba writes of a fatherless teenager who encounters an older man with whom he will share his first (homo)sexual experiences. This will set the protagonist on a journey of self-discovery and denial, but also the possibility of future happiness. Many elements in *Ernesto* make it worthy of in-depth analysis by queer theorists and Italianists alike, as it treats sexuality within the larger and very intricate context of the geographical, linguistic, socio-cultural, and political circumstances of its historical frame. *Ernesto* may at first appear engaged with coming-of-age dynamics characteristic of the *Bildungsroman*. Yet it is the multidirectionality of Ernesto's sexual desire (which spans homosexuality and heterosexuality, but often even escapes these reductive categories) and his divergent political stance, which are themselves difficult to categorize, that make the novel truly noteworthy. Moreover, the unmistakable autobiographical elements of *Ernesto* also cry out for further analysis. For instance, Saba himself was involved in what could be broadly described as a pederastic relationship with a young man, Federico Almansi, his *celesti scolaro*, as a family friend and mentor (a similar relationship is the fulcrum of the novel at hand).¹³ The narrated events take place in Saba's native Trieste (a city with which he also has an elaborate emotional relationship that he characterizes erotically: "Trieste ha una scontrosa | grazia. Se piace, | è come un ragazzaccio aspro e vorace | con gli occhi azzurri e mani troppo grandi | per regalare un fiore; | come un amore | con gelosia").¹⁴ Further, the novel's historical frame of Trieste under Austro-Hungarian rule parallels the author's childhood.¹⁵ Many other apparent commonalities between the work and the author's life can be identified and will be returned to. Massimiliano Jattoni concurs about the autobiographical aspects of *Ernesto* on an erotic level, since, as he observes, the novel clearly seeks to verbalize the homosexual tensions of the young Saba, caught between abandonment by his father and the affective austerity of his mother.¹⁶ Chiara Fabbian also notes that "nell'opera postuma *Ernesto* [Saba] sembra riconoscere che i conflitti irrisolti dell'infanzia lo avevano portato all'omosessualità, come ricerca dell'affetto e del padre che gli erano mancati."¹⁷ Additionally, the novel was published some 20 years after the author's death—though Saba's letters attest that he never intended for *Ernesto* to be published. Sixteen letters in which Saba discusses *Ernesto* with what is often an anxious and self-censoring tone, and always addressed only to very close family members or friends, were published with the 1977 edition of the novel by Einaudi. In the letters, Saba explains that even if the novel "fosse pubblicabile, sarebbe incomprendibile" due to reasons of both language and content.¹⁸ Consequently, it was to remain strictly locked in a drawer, the keys to which were always to be held by his daughter, Linuccia, who, despite her father's instructions, bravely saw to its

¹³ While attempting to do away with strict categories of sexual practice, I refer to the pederastic pattern as it is useful in identifying a classical, erotic dynamic dear to both Saba and to previous critics (see Baldoni 2005, for instance) that broadly indicates an eroto-pedagogical relationship between a more dominant older man and a young boy. Saba refers to Almansi as his "celestial pupil" on several occasions.

¹⁴ "Trieste, with its sullen | grace. If one loves it, | it is like a raucous and voracious boy | with blue eyes and hands that are too big | to bring you flowers; | like a love, | the jealous kind." Umberto Saba, *Tutte le poesie* (Milan: Mondadori, 2011), 89.

¹⁵ *Ernesto* is sixteen years old and the novel takes place in 1898; Umberto Saba was born in 1883.

¹⁶ Massimiliano Jattoni, "Gli umani amori. La tematica omoerotica nell'opera di Umberto Saba," *The Italianist* 24, no. 1 (2004): 33.

¹⁷ "in his posthumous work *Ernesto*, [Saba] seems to recognize that it is his unresolved childhood conflicts that had brought him to homosexuality: a search for affection and a father, both of which he had lacked at a young age." Chiara Fabbian, "Poesia in cucina: Lina e il mondo femminile nella rappresentazione di Umberto Saba," *Modern Language Notes* 117, no. 1 (2002): 175.

¹⁸ "if it were publishable, it would be incomprehensible." Umberto Saba, "Sedici lettere in cui si parla di Ernesto," ed. Sergio Miniussi, in *Ernesto* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), 158.

posthumous publication. Such self-censorship was born of Saba's intimate relationship with the text, along with what appears to be an uncanny sense of shame. Like the novel he keeps under lock and key, Saba himself had been locked in a closet all of his life, and he was not going to let *Ernesto*, a "putel di casa," escape from a simple drawer; not, at least, until after his last breath.¹⁹ In a letter to Linuccia, he issued strict commands as to the manuscript's handling:

Vorrei mandar[ti] [*Ernesto*]; ma dovrei essere certo di tre cose: 1) Che né tu, né Carlo lo lasciate in giro, o lo tenete in cassetti non chiusi a chiave, e le chiavi in vostre mani. 2) Che non lo fai leggere a nessuno, tranne a Carlo e, se mai, a Bettina; non però a casa sua. Se vuol leggere il primo e il secondo capitolo, deve farlo a casa tua o a casa di Carlo. 3) Che dopo letto, me lo rendi.²⁰

Saba often attributes the unpublishability of *Ernesto* to the limited accessibility of its language (its use of regional dialect is especially noticeable in dialogues), which he was not willing to compromise, saying "[i]l linguaggio non è mutabile: il racconto è nato proprio da quello."²¹ Yet the use of a more cryptic language may perhaps be a kind of alibi. It is also an attempt to mask (as poetry had done up until that time) what may be Saba's most intimate secrets through the use of a language that is more intimate and domestic, yet at the same time unconventional and marginal. As such, language is not the main reason for the work's *closetedness*. Saba reveals this—that it is the very content of the tale that renders it unpublishable—on many occasions throughout the remarkable "Sedici lettere." In one audacious letter he addresses to Professor Tullio Mogno, the character Ernesto himself writes to the addressee in the first person, denouncing his creator:

In quel libro egli racconta tutto di me, anche le cose che non si devono dire; ma mi ha giurato che non lo pubblicherà mai, e che, quando sarà finito, lo leggerà solo a due o tre amici fidati. Speriamo 1) che non finirà mai il libro; 2) che, se lo finirà, manterrà la promessa.²² (163)

This and other letters reveal that *Ernesto* would voluntarily remain an unfinished novel, or perhaps an *unfinishable* one. The lack of a proper ending, however, does not undermine the wholeness of the work; on the contrary, it increases its imaginative and liberatory clout. Even within the novel, the narrator admits that "[q]uesta non è – è chiaro – tutta la storia di Ernesto."²³ *Ernesto* will obtain different conclusions in the imaginary of his readers and, perhaps, in the actuality of the life of the many out there who may identify with the protagonist, in a possible future where Ernesto's desires are not considered "bass[i] e volgar[i] (magari anche proibit[i])" (15).²⁴ As Sergio Miniussi notes in his commentary on Saba's correspondence:

¹⁹ A "houseboy."

²⁰ "I'd like to send you [*Ernesto*]; but I'd have to be sure of three things, first: 1) That neither you nor Carlo will leave it unattended or keep it in drawers that are unlocked, and the keys should be in your possession. 2) That you do not let anyone else read it, only Carlo, and, perhaps, Bettina; but not at her house. If she wishes to read the first or second chapter, she should do so at your house or Carlo's. 3) That after you read it, you return it to me." Saba, "Sedici lettere," 147.

²¹ "The language cannot be changed: it is the language itself that gave birth to the story." Ibid, 143.

²² "In that book, he reveals everything about me, even the things that should not be said; but he promised that he will never publish it, and that, when he finishes it, he'll read it only to two or three close friends. Let's hope that 1) he never finishes the book; 2) that, if he does, he'll keep his promise.) Ibid, 163.

²³ "This, clearly, is not the young Ernesto's whole story." Umberto Saba, *Ernesto*, trans. Mark Thompson (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1987), 109. Original citation from Umberto Saba, *Ernesto* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), 121. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of *Ernesto* are those of Thompson.

²⁴ "low, coarse subjects (even forbidden ones)" (20).

Ernesto entra ormai in quell'insolito paradiso in cui vivono i personaggi 'incompiuti' della poesia di ogni tempo [...] [che] non approdano alla parola *fine*, eppure talmente completi e ricchi di metamorfosi e di destino nei loro autori da provocare poi nella coscienza dei lettori una risonanza profonda.²⁵

Especially because of the central role that the author affords his readers in the interpretation of his unfinished work, it is of utmost importance to carefully explore *Ernesto* and its power to help us reflect on fundamental aspects of the human condition.

Paternal Loss and Homosexual Desire

Ernesto is first introduced as Mieli's *uncastrated child*, de Lauretis's *soggetto eccentrico* whose erotic capabilities remain open to the many possibilities with which he is presented. Ernesto is, initially, free from any aesthetic bonds (particularly age and gender) that would otherwise limit his sexual object-choice:

Ernesto non era nell'età estetica (doveva arrivarci in breve, ma attraverso altre vie e per altri oggetti); le sue preferenze gli erano dettate unicamente dalla sensualità del momento; ed era una sensualità molto variabile: incerta – perfino – come si è visto per quanto riguardava la meta. Non si era mai chiesto, per esempio, se l'uomo era bello o brutto; lo aveva ascoltato per ragioni estranee all'estetica: desiderava di essere amato, e l'uomo l'amava. (C'erano, naturalmente, altre cause, più profonde, ma il ragazzo le ignorava).²⁶

Ernesto's father leaves his mother six months before the birth of their child. It is perhaps the father's absence that delays Ernesto's process of what Mieli defines as "educastration."²⁷ As he is characterized, Ernesto presents the reader with the raw material of effervescent, multidirectional desire; a desire that has not yet been effectively informed by social hierarchies of desirability. Through de Lauretis, we may see Ernesto as a subject whose articulation is variable and organized by fleeting parameters of difference: "[il] soggetto, ora concepito come mobile o molteplice, ossia organizzato attraverso coordinate variabili di differenza."²⁸ Mieli points out that psychoanalysis defines the first expressions of eroticism as "undifferentiated." He notes that, "[s]econdo Freud: il bambino è 'costituzionalmente qualificato' al polimorfismo 'perverso': tutte le cosiddette 'perversioni' fanno parte della sessualità infantile (sadismo, masochismo, coprofilia, esibizionismo, voyeurismo, omosessualità ecc.)," and concludes that the selection of a sexual object, for the child, is dictated more by circumstantial factors than by sexuality itself, conditioned, for example, by the

²⁵ "Ernesto, by now, has entered the unusual paradise inhabited by the incomplete characters of the poetry of every epoch [...] [who] are never afforded an ending but are, at the same time, so complete, so full of transformations and a sense of destiny in the author's mind that is able to provoke a deep resonance in the conscience of readers." Saba, "Sedici lettere," 163.

²⁶ "Ernesto had not reached the aesthetic age [he would do soon, but travelling by other routes and other means]; his sympathies were ruled solely by the sensuality of the moment, and his was a very fickle sensuality, unsure – clearly enough – even of its desires. For instance, he had never wondered if the man was handsome or not; he responded to him for reasons which had nothing aesthetic about them: he wanted to be loved, and the man loved him. (Of course there were other, deeper reasons, but the boy was not conscious of them.)" Saba and Thompson, *Ernesto*, 58. (Original from Saba, *Ernesto*, 61.)

²⁷ It is worth keeping in mind that Saba's father also left the family before the author's birth. This loss has a great influence on Saba as well as on Ernesto, while it also adds weight to the novel's autobiographical importance.

²⁸ "[the] subject, now conceived as mobile or manifold; that is, organized through variable coordinates of difference." De Lauretis, *Soggetti eccentrici*, 12.

many instances of circumstantial variation in a child's day and life.²⁹ This state is characterized by a primordial, unhindered type of erotic desire that is adaptive rather than adapted, and that is, most of all, indiscriminate.³⁰ Mieli labels this polymorphous eroticism using the word *transessualità*, and, following Freud, consequentially separates human sexuality from biological reproductivity in his theoretical approach. De Lauretis takes a similar tack, denouncing "l'eterosessualità come istituzione sociale," and not as a biological preconfiguration; sexuality must, therefore, "essere distinta sul piano teorico dal desiderio e dal comportamento sessuale dei singoli individui."³¹

When first introduced, Ernesto appears not just a homosexual teenager discovering or exploring his attraction towards men. Ernesto's sexuality is instead heterogeneous and volatile not because he stubbornly defies societal norms that attempt to constrict it (he has not internalized these norms, though he is aware of them), but because his desire is unstable and in a state of constant renegotiation. The absence of a father and of his sexually restrictive force, often highlighted as one of the liberatory factors in the character's sexuality, defies the most important normative script in the child's life: that of an ideal, heteropatriarchal family nucleus. Being fatherless automatically disenfranchises Ernesto from the governing dogma, rendering him *imperfect* by preventing his desires from regulation by the hegemonic paradigm of the father's masculinity and the mandate to emulate it. The absence of enforced erotic systematization (the *educastrazione* of his femininity) leaves him younger than his years, while it is perhaps the very lack of a father figure that may drive his attraction towards an older man, as if he were unconsciously seeking "quel po' di protezione paterna, che egli, rimasto più bambino della sua età e virtualmente senza padre [...] inconsciamente cercava."³² This is countered by his lustful attraction towards Ilio, the younger boy of the novel's last episode, as well as by his attraction to women, such as the nannies his mother hired for him and Tanda, the prostitute. Mieli and readers may agree that Ernesto's deviance from the sexual norm owes to his virtual orphanhood, yet this speculative diagnosis warrants further clarification. Ernesto is *trans-sexual* (better yet: *uncastrated*) not because he does not have a father from whom to inherit masculinity through the repression of feminine traits, but because the very absence of a father has prevented this erotic mutilation (*educastrazione*): the paternal loss prevents a more disastrous loss (that of erotic polymorphism).³³ This circuitous notion is delineated by Mieli, who is able to clearly trace the trajectory of (self-)mutilation, through identification only with the father, that occurs in the male child, limiting his full potential for self-affirmation:

²⁹ "According to Freud, the child is constitutionally disposed to be 'polymorphously perverse', and all the so-called 'perversions' form part of the infantile sexuality [sadism, masochism, coprophilia, exhibitionism, voyeurism, homosexuality, etc.]" Mieli, *Homosexuality and Liberation*, 23–24. (Mieli, *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, 12–13.)

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

³¹ "heterosexuality as a social institution"; "be theoretically sundered from desire and from the sexual behavior of single individuals." De Lauretis, *Soggetti eccentrici*, 9.

³² The direct quote derives from Saba, *Ernesto*, 29. In addition, Chiara Fabbian makes a very interesting connection between the fact that Ernesto's male partner remains unnamed throughout the work and one of Saba's poems, "L'uomo" ("The Man"), dedicated to the father he never had: "[f]orse non un caso che, per tutta la lunghezza del libro, quest'uomo non venga mai nominato per nome ma, sempre, con il generico 'l'uomo', e che Saba avesse scritto un poema dal titolo 'L'Uomo', nel quale egli stesso riconosce di avere 'voluto creare [...] una figura "paterna", il padre che mancò alla sua infanzia" ("Storia e cronistoria del *Canzoniere*", in *Prose* [540]). (perhaps it is not by chance that, throughout the entire work, this man is never named but is always referred to with the generic noun "man," and that Saba also wrote a poem titled "The Man," in which he himself recognizes that he "wanted to create [...] a 'paternal' figure, the father that had been missing in his childhood.")

³³ According to Mieli, the loss/absence of the father prevents *educastrazione* in the male child because "il figlio non si può identificare col padre e cioè non può costruirsi una personalità simile a quella paterna se non sacrificando se stesso, la propria transessualità e in particolare la propria 'femminilità'" (Mieli, 20). ("The son cannot identify with the father, and hence cannot construct a personality like his, except by sacrificing himself, his trans-sexuality and in particular his 'femininity.'" Mieli, *Homosexuality and Liberation*, 33.)

[T]ramite questa identificazione, il bambino, come il padre, proietta sulla madre e sulle altre donne gli elementi “femminili” esistenti nella propria psiche; elementi che gli si impone di non ammettere alla coscienza, costringendolo a vergognarsene, malgrado essi lo attraggano profondamente in quanto componente fondamentale del suo essere. Da ciò deriva una delle più grandi calamità che abbiano colpito la specie: il rifiuto, da parte dell’uomo, di riconoscere in sé la “donna”, la transessualità.³⁴

Interpolating Jungian theory, Mieli emphasizes how the (male) child learns to adopt “una personalità artificiale, consona alla Norma vigente nel mondo ‘esterno’ e che, nel contempo, si ponga come difesa contro i pericoli del mondo ‘esterno,’ i trabocchetti del palcoscenico delle Persone” (20).³⁵ Mieli’s thoughts anticipate Judith Butler’s theories on sexual performativity, which also argue for a view of gender as a form of “psychic mime” that helps the subject present itself as a stable and singular gendered entity.³⁶ Ernesto, however, does not seem to be concealing any aspect of his sexuality or to subordinately perform an assigned role. The void caused by his father’s flight leaves space for Ernesto’s erotic energy to take many forms, letting it spur in any direction it may. As Butler speculates, “[p]erhaps the economy of desire always works through refusal and loss of some kind.”³⁷ Ernesto’s desire may not necessarily represent the natural, immaculate expression of unaltered infantile sexual energy, as the mother (and other family members) also contribute to the shaping of his sexuality. Yet, the lack of a father figure, seen as the main engendering regulatory force for the male child, affords Ernesto a higher degree of freedom to explore the diverse types of erotic desire that he may have developed during childhood. If, as Butler notes, gender identifications “are established in part through prohibitions which *demand the loss* of certain sexual attachments, and demand as well that those losses *not* be avowed, and *not* be grieved,” then this unnatural loss has not been imposed upon him.³⁸ Paradoxically, due to the absence of a paternal figure, Ernesto has not been required to reject this very figure as a potential object of erotic desire.

“*Vecchio e giovane*”

Un vecchio amava un ragazzo. Egli, bimbo
gatto in vista selvatico - temeva
castighi a occulti pensieri. Ora due
cose nel cuore lasciano un'impronta
dolce: la donna che regola il passo
leggero al tuo la prima volta, e il bimbo
che, al fine tu lo salvi, fiducioso

³⁴ “Through this identification, the child, like his father, comes to project onto the mother and other women the ‘feminine’ elements that exist within his own psyche, elements that are not meant to be admitted to consciousness, leading him to be ashamed of them, despite the deep attraction that they hold as fundamental components of his own being. This is responsible for one of the greatest disasters that has happened to our species: the refusal by the man to recognise the ‘woman’ in himself, i.e. to recognise his trans-sexuality.” Mieli, *Homosexuality and Liberation*, 32. (Mieli, *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, 20.)

³⁵ “an artificial personality, in keeping with the Norm prevailing in the ‘external’ world, and also providing a defence against the dangers of this world, the pitfalls that threaten on the stage where personas interact.” Mieli, *Homosexuality and Liberation*, 32–33.

³⁶ Sarah Salih and Judith Butler (eds.), *The Judith Butler Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 20.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 244.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 247.

mette la sua manina nella tua.³⁹

Ernesto and his partner's sexual encounters take place in locations visible to and mappable by God alone.⁴⁰ The two partners hide away from society but recognize that a higher being may be aware of their actions—a God who, within the confines of Saba's novel, does not pass judgement on their acts. As the older factory worker begins to make sexual contact with Ernesto, and as the man's penis begins to penetrate his anus, the boy realizes the magnitude of the event: “Sono perduto,’ pensò tra sé, in un lampo; ma senza nessun rammarico, nessun desiderio di tornare indietro. Poi provò una strana indefinibile sensazione di caldo (non priva, in principio, di dolcezza) come l'uomo trovò e stabilì contatto” (19).⁴¹ Like the particular *non-loss* of his father, Saba's use of *loss* here (“perduto”) betokens the power of liberation. More than *being* lost, Ernesto realizes what he *has* lost—in this case, his place in the hegemonic framework of masculinity—and continues to embrace the varied nature of his desires by claiming the anus as an erotogenic sphincter and employing it as such.⁴²

Other aspects of this encounter align Saba's *Ernesto* with Italian theorists of homosexuality. Once their sexual encounter ends, the man cleans the semen from Ernesto's body, either as a caring gesture or as a way to remove evidence of their encounter or both. This gesture reminds the reader once again of Ernesto's sexual infantilism: as the man cleans his body, Ernesto feels like a “piccolo bambino, disorientato e confuso.”⁴³ This response comports with Mieli's psychoanalytical stance that infantilism is a distinctive characteristic of homosexuality. In his explanation of this point, Mieli cites clinical psychoanalyst Franco Fornari (1921–1985), who, in his scholarship, asserts that the homosexual male identifies himself with his mother and imagines his partner as a replacement of himself as a child. He takes on the role of the mother and attributes that of the child to his partner (in an attempt) to recreate an autarkic infantile erotic relationship; a consensual pursuit of pleasure that acknowledges the innate nature of eroticism.⁴⁴ While these can be problematic generalizations, especially if infantilism is viewed as a lack of maturity—when perhaps it should not, Mieli would happily argue—they do help to unpack some aspects of the relationship between Ernesto and the older man. Eventually, the reader presumes, Ernesto will stop being the child and begin himself to

³⁹ “An old man loved a boy. He, a child, | –a savage cat, he seemed–afraid | of punishments for secret thoughts. Now, two | are the things that leave their sweet mark | on the heart: the woman who, for the first time, | attunes her soft pace to yours, and the child, | of whom you are the final savior, as he places | his trustful little hand in yours.” Saba, *Tutte le poesie*, 560.

⁴⁰ Saba, *Ernesto*, 18.

⁴¹ “All at once he thought *I'm lost*, but there was no regret, no wish to turn back. Then (and not at first without sweet pleasure) he felt a strange, unknown heat as the man found and made contact” (23).

⁴² Mieli highlights the reclaiming of anal pleasure in men as “uno degli elementi fondamentali della critica avanzata dal movimento gay nei confronti dell'ipotesi dello status quo genitale-eterosessuale da parte dell'ideologia dominante. Leggiamo nel *Rapport contre la normalité*: ‘Bisogna domandare ai borghesi: – In che rapporto sei con il tuo buco del culo, a parte l'obbligo di cacare? Fa parte del tuo corpo, della tua parola, dei tuoi sensi allo stesso titolo della bocca o delle orecchie? E se hai deciso che l'ano non serve che a defecare, perché la tua bocca ha altri usi oltre a quello di mangiare?’” (133–134). (“one of the basic elements in the critique made by the gay movement of the hypostatizing of the heterosexual-genital status quo by the dominant ideology. As the French gay liberationists expressed it: ‘We have to ask the bourgeoisie: What is your relationship with your arsehole, apart from having to use it to shit with? Is it part of your body, your speech, your senses, in the same way as your mouth or ears? And if you've decided that the only purpose of the anus is to defecate, then why do you use your mouth for other things besides eating?’” Mieli, *Homosexuality and Liberation*, 138.) This could, however, be seen as deeply problematic as it portrays the (active) phallus as an indispensable symbol and tool of liberation, which might perpetrate phallogocentricity in the very attempt to reject virility as a deleterious and limiting norm.

⁴³ “little baby, bewildered and confused.” Saba and Thompson, *Ernesto*, 23–24. (Saba, *Ernesto*, 19.)

⁴⁴ Mieli, *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, 203.

project this fantasy onto someone else. We witness this through his strong attraction towards the younger Ilio in the last finished episode of this unfinished novel.

As Mieli notes, the (re)discovery of anal pleasure is central to virility: heterosexual men recognize the fragility of their masculinity, a fragility represented by the anus itself.⁴⁵ For heterosexual men who consider manhood pivotal to their identity, to be “fucked” leads to “loss” and destruction.⁴⁶ Yet, if all negativity—a negativity not only associated with homosexuality but especially with femininity, the reason why a salutary project of sexual liberation must include all marginalizations and subordinations—were to be taken away from the role of the receiver, then being penetrated could be simply seen as a pleasurable encounter of two or more bodies.⁴⁷ This strong desire to preserve heteronormative masculinity, according to Mieli, renders heterosexual men incapable of loving women (more colloquially: if the male does not know how to receive penetrative pleasure, he will never fully know how to provide it)—“chi ama farsi scopare, invece, può imparare a scopare con ‘arte.’ Sa come dare piacere (come riceverne) e sblocca la fissazione limitatissima dei ruoli stereotipati. Scopare diventa veramente un rapporto di reciprocità, un atto intersoggettivo” (135).⁴⁸ In *Ernesto*, however, Saba lets us witness the way in which normative associations of masculinity (active performance) and femininity (passivity) can also infect queer encounters, with age being a regulating factor in this particular episode, and a fear of loss of masculinity also being present in the incorruptibly active, dominant partner. This is exemplified by the episode in which Ernesto no longer wishes to be on the receiving end of anal coitus, but the man refuses to switch roles, relying on age difference as the regulating factor of the sexual dynamics at hand:

- Son stufo, – disse [Ernesto] un altro giorno; – una volta volessi far anche mi. Era quello che l’uomo prevedeva e temeva. [...]
- A chi? – disse.
- A lei, per esempio –. E guardò, ma anche questa volta con poca convinzione, l’uomo. [...]
- No xe bel, – disse – far con un omo. Xe robe che se ghe fa solo ai giovineti, prima ancora che ghe cressi la barba [...]. Se fussi un giovineto de la sua età, ben volentieri ghe darío el cambio. (30)⁴⁹

The man’s refusal to be sexually flexible, the lack of *eccentricity*, and the unidirectionality of his desire cause Ernesto to disengage and eventually reject the man by leaving the workplace where their encounters would normally take place. This is the point at which he begins to pursue his desire for women.

Ernesto and Women

Reciprocity and intersubjectivity are exemplified in *Ernesto* by the encounter with the female

⁴⁵ Ibid., 140. The heterosexual man is, whether consciously or subconsciously, aware, or worse, scared, of the pleasure-generating potential of his anus.

⁴⁶ This negative perception, of course, spills into language, as we see in both English and Italian: “I’m fucked!”, “I’m screwed!”, “(Go) fuck yourself!”, “Screw you!”, “Va’ a farti fottere!”, “Vaffanculo!” (“Vai a fare/farla/farlo in culo,” with clear reference to passive sodomy); “(Farsi) prendere per il culo!”, “Sono fottuto!”, etc.

⁴⁷ Mieli, *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, 135.

⁴⁸ “Someone who likes being fucked, on the other hand, will himself know how to fuck well. He knows how to give pleasure, as he knows how to receive it, and he unblocks the restricted fixation of stereotyped roles. To fuck then truly becomes a relation of reciprocity, an intersubjective act.” Mieli, *Homosexuality and Liberation*, 140.

⁴⁹ “I’m fed up, he announced another time. Can’t I do it myself once? The man had been expecting this, and fearing it too. [...] Who with? Why not with you? He looked at the man, but without much conviction. [...] It isn’t good doing it to a man, he said. It’s something you only do to boys before they start shaving [...]. If I was a lad your own age I’d gladly take it in turn with you” (32).

prostitute Tanda, brought into being by Ernesto's desire to experience active performativity and to allow his identity to be shaped by yet another aspect of his sexual drive. The resulting exchange between the two is one of pure desire, not bound by monetary or other materialistic ties. In this episode, the economy of pleasures transcends other tangible economies; it is a pure *intersubjective act* of blissful exchanges. While this heterosexual encounter may seem to re-establish the norm, the novel's final episode with Ilio clarifies that the sexual encounter with Tanda is understood as only one of many milestones in Ernesto's journey of erotic self-discovery, and not as its normative teleological terminus. As the previous section of this essay illustrated, the transition from passive to active desire on Ernesto's part is announced even before he goes in search of a prostitute. This not only accentuates the pederastic pattern so dear to Saba, but also foreshadows Ernesto's desire to seek a female sexual partner.⁵⁰ It is not much later that we witness every event foreseen by the man: Ernesto visits a barber shop to receive a haircut under the command of his mother, who is a failed educator, but nonetheless an authoritative educator. The barber grazes his cheek and notices hair growing on the boy's face: "El speti un momento, – gli disse; – sento qua un poco de barba. Se el ga un fià de pazienza, ghe la cavo in un momento."⁵¹ As Ernesto's facial hair is shaved for the first time, something within the boy shifts, and the experience becomes traumatic. The event is, interestingly, accompanied by a telling apparition of the man he had shared sexual encounters with: "Gli passò per la mente – un attimo – l'uomo; lo vide, lontano, come se piangesse" (58).⁵² Once the barber has finished, Ernesto quickly flees so that "nessuno si accor[g]e che aveva le lacrime agli occhi" (58).⁵³ Different from his earlier encounter with the man, the boy is faced with a different, painful loss, accompanied by a deep sense of melancholia.⁵⁴ As we are told at the beginning of this very episode, Ernesto is not comfortable with the feeling of loss: "Ernesto non amava perdere nulla della sua persona, nemmeno di quelle parti di essa destinate a ricrescere" (47), but understood very well that some losses, in life, are unavoidable.⁵⁵ He therefore decides to accept his fate and let the barber do as he wishes: "in balia del suo conscio torturatore, si rassegnò a farsi tagliare i capelli, come ad una necessità, sia pure sgradevole, della dolce vita. (Più tardi, quando gli si fece ostile e difficile, l'avrebbe chiamata 'calda')" (55).⁵⁶ His first shave marks an important transition. Ernesto has become a *man* and must bid farewell to his older male partner, offering yet another example of Saba's loyalty to the pederastic pattern. Just as his older partner had explained and foreseen, being sexually submissive (being the receptive partner) is only something that young boys do before they start shaving, the man had explained, and before they start going with women, he had thought but not dared utter.

During one of the first conversations with the older man who would become his first sexual partner, Ernesto was asked about his relationship with women. Saba's protagonist sternly replied that he had decided to wait until the age of eighteen to be with women, but Saba immediately complicates this straightforward response and indicates Ernesto's multidirectional sexuality. The

⁵⁰ Ernesto's insubordinate attitude as the passive partner reflects what Luca Baldoni describes as "the crisis of the pederastic model in [...] Saba, [who] forces himself to address the question of Federico's [Saba's young partner] adult (hetero)sexual orientation" ("Un vecchio amava un ragazzo," 232).

⁵¹ "Just a moment, he said, there's a bit of beard here. If you can wait I'll have it off in a trice." Saba and Thompson, *Ernesto*, 54. (Saba, *Ernesto*, 57.)

⁵² "For a second he seemed to see the man far off, weeping" (55).

⁵³ "No one noticed the tears in his eyes" (55).

⁵⁴ In a letter to his daughter written on July 25, 1953, Saba describes a specific kind of melancholia, one that belongs to "the things that end with youth" (Sedici lettere, 147).

⁵⁵ "Ernesto never liked to lose any part of himself, even when the part always grew back" (49).

⁵⁶ "totally in the power of his unwitting tormentor, Ernesto resigned himself to the haircut as one of sweet life's necessities, however nasty it might be (years later, when life had turned hostile and grown difficult for him, he would call it not sweet but *passionate*)" (51).

reader is almost immediately informed that, “forse, aveva dimenticato che, due anni prima, sua madre aveva dovuto licenziare una giovane serva, alla quale Ernesto dava continuamente noia in cucina” (6).⁵⁷ Indeed, Ernesto’s mother, in an attempt to censor what she may have viewed as precocious behavior, “aveva assunto sempre, per precauzione, delle domestiche vecchie, brutte, deformi” (6).⁵⁸ The sequencing of these passages is significant. The fact that Saba adds this parenthetical note immediately after answering a question about Ernesto’s desire for women indicates that, indeed, Ernesto had shown early signs of attraction to females.

The image of the nanny—recurrent throughout Saba’s *oeuvre*—is re-proposed when Ernesto seeks a prostitute. As soon as he enters the sex worker’s home, he notices the particular scent of “biancheria nuova, appena tagliata; lo stesso che gli piaceva tanto nella casa della sua balia” (63).⁵⁹ This tallies with one particular nanny that had left a positive imprint in Saba’s own memory, “l’eterna Peppa [...] la mia buona, fida nutrice.”⁶⁰ Giuseppina (Peppa) Schobar/Sabaz, from whose last name some have argued Saba drew inspiration for his own pseudonym, looked after the poet for a few years of infancy, years he remembered as pleasant and serene. The young maid, whose personality was merry and jovial (like a typical girl from the *contado*, or county), had built a strong, affectionate, and happy relationship with the young Berto.⁶¹ This bond is identical, of course, to the character Ernesto’s relationship with his own nanny, in whose house the character had resided as a young boy. We find Saba’s affection for his *balia* (nanny) in the way Ernesto fondly describes his own attachment to his nanny: “e ghe voio anche ben. No son miga el solo a volerghe ben alla sua balia [...] che fino ai quattro-cinque ani son vissudo in casa de la mia baia, in campagna” (46), and in the way the love was reciprocated in a maternal way: “la giovane donna gli voleva bene come fosse stato suo figlio (il suo era appena morto)” (50).⁶² In the episode with Tanda, the prostitute, who “forse era anche una buona donna, con repressi istinti materni” (64), Ernesto is, time and again, reminded of his *baia*.⁶³ This happens when he learns that the prostitute is of Slovenian origins, another attribute she shares with his nanny (and Saba’s own). As he notes, “[u]n’altra cosa [lo] colpì, e gli ricordò di nuovo la casa della balia fu un lumino che ardeva sotto un’immagine della Madonna, poco lontano dal letto grande (matrimoniale) con le lenzuola fresche di bucato [...], queste coincidenze accrescevano, forse, il suo imbarazzo” (64).⁶⁴ Ernesto’s sexual performance is,

⁵⁷ “Perhaps he had forgotten that two years before, his mother had had to give notice to a young servant girl whom Ernesto was forever pestering in the kitchen” (12).

⁵⁸ “made sure to employ only misshapen, ugly old women” (12).

⁵⁹ “fresh linen, newly sewn—the same odour he used to like so much in his nanny’s house” (60).

⁶⁰ “the eternal Peppa [...] my kind, trusty wet nurse.” Saba, *Tutte le poesie*, 423.

⁶¹ Cristina Benussi Frandoli, *Umberto Saba: sei donne per un poeta* (Empoli: Ibiskos, 2003), 31. “Al seno | approdo di colei che Berto ancora | mi chiama, al primo, all’amoroso seno | ai verdi paradisi dell’infanzia.” Saba, *Tutte le poesie*, 405. (I cling to the breast | of she who still calls me Berto, | to that first, loving breast, | to the green paradise of infancy.)

⁶² “and I love her. I’m not the only one to love his nanny...I lived with my nanny in her house in the country till I was four or five” (45); “He was as precious to her as her own son (who had died in infancy)” (49). Just like Peppa, Saba’s own nanny: “giovane, forte e piena di risorse guadagnava così qualche soldo in più, pur continuando a svolgere le faccende consuete...La donna si affezionò ad Umberto come fosse il figlio che aveva perduto; dandosene in parte pace poichè si era in un’epoca nella quale la mortalità infantile era ancora alta.” Benussi Frandoli, *Umberto Saba*, 30–31. (young, strong, and full of resources, she earned some extra money that way, even though she continued to carry out her habitual chores...The woman grew very fond of Umberto, as if he had been the child she had lost; though she had come to terms with the loss, given that infant mortality was still very high at the time.)

⁶³ “Maybe she was an ordinary good woman with repressed maternal instincts” (60).

⁶⁴ “Another thing Ernesto noticed, reminding him again of his nanny’s house, was a little lamp burning beneath an image of the Madonna, not far from the double bed with its freshly laundered sheets. I bet you haven’t flown the nest yet, have you, said the woman, feeling Ernesto’s embarrassment, for he was neither taking off his clothes nor laying a hand on hers” (60).

nonetheless, completely unhindered by the reminiscent thoughts of his nanny.⁶⁵ Rather, both the boy and the prostitute find great pleasure in their encounter:

Ernesto provò un grande piacere, ma che non gli riuscì nuovo. Gli parve di averlo provato già altre volte, di saperlo da sempre, da prima ancora della sua nascita. Si sentiva come un uomo che, dopo un viaggio avventuroso, ritorna nella sua casa, di cui conosce e ritrova tutto: la collocazione dei mobili, i ripostigli; ogni cosa insomma. (67)⁶⁶

These comments about an odyssey and a return remind readers of Saba's commitment to classical culture. A similar allusion to Homer is made in relation to Ernesto's involvement with the factory worker, in the first episode. When Ernesto refuses to continue his relationship with the older man, he associates his physical characteristics to those of Ulysses, remarking that "[p]iù tardi, quando lesse con rapimento l'*Iliade* di Omero nella traduzione del Monti, doveva dare alla figura fisica di Ulisse i tratti fisici dell'uomo" (41).⁶⁷ Both with Tanda and the older man, Saba makes a point of referring to the idyllic world of Greek mythology, which not only accommodates for the writer's desire to create a utopian space where erotic energy can take many shapes and exist unbound by social restrictions, but generates an implicit yet cogent link to the sexual practices of the ancient world, especially as concerns the pederastic pattern, which acquires, thanks to Saba's reference, a useful, albeit temporary, level of cultural normalization.

The pederastic model also holds a significant biographical valence, given that Saba himself was involved in a relationship with his mentee, Federico Almansi, a context in which Saba often cast himself as the "father" (Ulysses).⁶⁸ The encounter with Tanda yields a similar parental (maternal) pattern in the articulation of the sexual exchange. Saba notes that "[g]li sembrava, così nudo, poco più di un bambino; e la sua mano gli accarezzò, come ad un bambino, le natiche" (66).⁶⁹ This maternal approach, when adopting the mythological lens that Saba attempts to apply to Ernesto's first erotic encounter, may seem more unnatural than his homosexual encounters, as it is also, at least initially, characterized by a sense of procedurality. Their encounter does, however, have a very positive outcome. Tanda describes the pleasure she obtains from their erotic encounter as one that "sarebbe più che bastato a pagarla" (68).⁷⁰ The episode ends with Tanda reminding Ernesto of her name and reassuring him that "un mulo come ti no ga sempre bisogno de pagar. Mi gaverò sempre gusto de vederte, gratis o no" (68).⁷¹ This is an indirect yet forceful jab at the capitalization of sexual activity: by offering free, demonetized, and unquantifiable pleasure, Tanda liberates herself and Ernesto of the economic bond that represents their relationship (perhaps Ernesto has already done this by giving her almost his

⁶⁵ "[...] la donna pensò, per un momento, che [Ernesto] fosse ammalato d'impotenza giovanile. Ma si accorse ad un'occhiata – e della scoperta fu lieta – di aver sbagliato diagnosi." Saba, *Ernesto*, 65. ("she wondered for a moment if it was not a case of first-time impotence. But a glance told her that she was wrong, and she was glad." Saba and Thompson, *Ernesto*, 61.)

⁶⁶ "Ernesto's pleasure was great but it was not new to him. Surely he had experienced it before, known it more than once – known it always, even before he was born. He felt like a man arriving home after a perilous voyage, returning to the place where he knows everything and now finds it again: how the furniture is arranged, where the cupboards are – everything" (62–63).

⁶⁷ "When he came to read the *Iliad* in the Monti translation for the first, entrancing time, he would imagine Ulysses with as being physically like the man" (40).

⁶⁸ Baldoni, "Un vecchio amava un ragazzo," 5.

⁶⁹ "he seemed scarcely more than a little boy, and she stroked his buttocks as if that were all he was" (62).

⁷⁰ "was payment more than enough" (63).

⁷¹ "a lad like you doesn't have to pay every time. You'll always be welcome, with money or without" (63–64). Interestingly enough, we learn the prostitute's name but never the name of Ernesto's first partner.

entire paycheck as payment while in reality her services are quite low-cost). Ernesto, however pleased by the interaction, is left with a sense of confusion: “la matassa un po’ arruffata dei suoi pensieri [...] [che] doveva attendere molti anni per incominciare appena a dipanarla” (68).⁷²

Ernesto’s erotic experiences with both sexes leave him perplexed by the lack of conceptual categories through which he may interpret and rationalize his experiences. Ernesto does not think of himself as homo- or heterosexual, and this could be a source of significant discomfort given the environment in which he lives: one that requires individuals to identify with and subscribe to specific gender roles within a binary system. This internal discomfort is projected onto his surroundings when, following the encounter with Tanda, Ernesto has a drink of water at a public fountain. A group of girls who see him begin to giggle, and Ernesto completely misinterprets their playful laughter and the fact that they “avevano la stessa età di Ernesto, e nessun altro modo per attirarsi una sua occhiata” (70).⁷³ He becomes paranoid and believes they are aware of everything that he has done: “[l]e sa tuto, —pensò, —le sa de l’omo, le sa de che logo che vegno: devo aver scritto in faccia qualcosa de strano; e xe per questo che le ridi de mi” (70).⁷⁴ At this point, Ernesto is overcome with a feeling of regret regarding the occurrences of that day: “la giornata, incominciata con la barba fatta a tradimento da Bernardo, finiva, così, male” (71).⁷⁵ This feeling is countered with an unexpected thought of the older man, which provides relief “—di questo almeno era sicuro — l’aveva (a suo modo) amato; e, forse (se egli lo avesse voluto) l’avrebbe amato ancora...” (71), almost as if to accentuate the sentimental value of his homoerotic relationship vis-à-vis the fleeting, heterosexual encounter with Tanda.⁷⁶ After all, Ernesto only “desiderava [solo] di essere amato” and his certainty that “l’uomo lo amava” affords him a sense of security and safety (61).⁷⁷ This further validates our need to view Ernesto as a character whose final object of erotic choice is not determined by aesthetics, gender, or other surface-level determinants, but by the basic need to feel desired and loved.

Queer Anticapitalism

The contrast between a sexual relationship rooted in capitalism and one based on the intangible exchange of pleasure is exemplified by the semantic shift between the terms “prostitution” (typically heteronormative) and “cruising” (mostly a queer subcultural practice, with some degree of interchangeability). As Mieli explains, “[s]e nel linguaggio dei prostituti e delle prostitute battere significa cercare clienti, per noi omosessuali invece battere non vuol dire prostituirsi, bensì, semplicemente, cercare altre persone ‘che ci stiano.’”⁷⁸ In the episode with Tanda, we witness the demonetization of a commodified sexual practice, which, though seen as perverse, is a sanctioned and accepted instrument of patriarchy. Ernesto and Tanda unknowingly turn prostitution into cruising, whereas, preceding the encounter, Ernesto was convinced that “una prostituta non poteva

⁷² “the tangled skein of his thoughts [...]. The snags would not begin to be loosened for many years” (64).

⁷³ “they were about the same age as Ernesto and knew no other way to attract his eye” (65–66).

⁷⁴ “They know everything, he thought. They know about the man and they know where I’ve been today: somehow they can see it written all over me, that’s why they’re laughing” (65).

⁷⁵ “So the day which had started with Bernardo’s treacherous shave now ended badly” (66).

⁷⁶ “—he was sure of this, at least—[he] had loved him in his way, and perhaps (had Ernesto so wished) would love him still...” (66).

⁷⁷ “he wanted [only] to be loved”; “the man loved him” (58).

⁷⁸ Mieli, *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, 12n. As Fernbach writes, “Here Mario makes an untranslatable pun on the words ‘*combattendo*’ (struggling) and ‘*battendo*’ (cruising). This nicely connects the two aspects of fighting against oppression and spreading gay pleasure.” Mieli, *Homosexuality and Liberation*, 231. Fernbach does not provide a translation of this note of Mieli’s, so here is mine: “if in the language of prostitution *battere* (cruising) means to look for customers, for us homosexuals *battere* does not mean to prostitute oneself but simply to look for others who are ‘down for it.’”

– ed egli lo sapeva – amarlo; se andava con lui era per soldi” (62).⁷⁹ Tanda and Ernesto’s encounter has indeed been *queered* by pleasure: Ernesto is not able to monetarily quantify their experience and is willing to pay any price for it (his entire paycheck, in fact), while Tanda does not wish for any compensation at all, as she does not see the encounter as an act of commercial consumption. Ernesto no longer receives a service, since their encounter is a reciprocal exchange of pleasure. Tanda is also portrayed as the dominant partner and given primary agency in the encounter, *queering* this episode further: once Ernesto confesses that it is his first time engaging in sex with a woman, she assures him she will lead the way. “Oh, caro!” she says, “[e] guardò meglio Ernesto [...]. – ‘No sta aver paura, [...] fazo tuto mi. Ti intato spoite’” (65).⁸⁰ The refusal to commodify their desire and enjoyment is exemplary of Saba’s (and Mieli’s) own rejection of capitalism and announces a strong political message. This decommodification of sexual encounters can also be witnessed, though more subtly, in the first episode, when the older man informs Ernesto that his encounters with other young boys were in return for cash, yet, “[s]e fosse stato ricco, gli sarebbe piaciuto fare ad Ernesto un magnifico regalo (*non in soldi*)” (23, emphasis added).⁸¹ Ernesto’s energy is capable of bringing about a different type of pleasure, of establishing a connection with his partners that escapes and goes beyond material retribution or monetary quantifiability. In both cases—with the prostitute who always receives payment for her services, and with the man who often paid to have sex with younger boys—Ernesto involuntarily shifts the social paradigm, which results in a refusal of the capitalization of sexuality. The casual, meaningless, monetized encounters become a momentous, emotional, and incalculable exchange of pleasure. The word “present” or “gift” is also used when Tanda reflects upon her encounter with the young man and “sentì che, quel pomeriggio, il destino le faceva uno strano, inaspettato regalo” (65).⁸² The rejection of materiality is ever-present in *Ernesto* and culminates with the character quitting his job. Before Ernesto writes the letter to his employer that will get him fired, he feels that he has already been replaced by another boy characterized by “Nordic” features. Saba rationalizes this in a way that effectively connects racial issues with the social order in place and also obviously brings to mind issues of Saba’s own identity as a Jewish-Italian living in Trieste, Austria-Hungary. By leaving his job, Ernesto is able to avoid his older lover, in whom he is no longer sexually interested, and to escape his feeling of being an instrument of capitalism, as he “earnestly” (“non aveva peli sulla lingua, poteva parlar franco” [111]) expresses in his angry letter by calling his boss, Mr. Wilder, a “strozzino” and a “sfruttatore” (89).⁸³

Ernesto’s Eagerness

As we have seen, Ernesto is often erotically quasi-nonchalant; he appears driven by what, in psychoanalytic terms would be described as “endogenous stimuli,” or *Sexualtrieb*.⁸⁴ Ernesto, the innocent and inexperienced teenager, becomes the initiator of sex during his first sexual encounter with the older man who nevertheless brags about his sexual encounters with younger boys. Ernesto reaches out and touches the man with “la mano diventata un po’ molle e sudata, e la posò

⁷⁹ “Now a prostitute could not love him, and he knew it: she would go with him for money” (58).

⁸⁰ “Oh you poor love! the woman thought out loud. She looked at Ernesto more closely [...]. Don’t be scared, she said, leave it to me. Take your clothes off now” (60–61).

⁸¹ “If he had been well off he would have given Ernesto a splendid present (*not money*)” (26, emphasis added).

⁸² “[she] sensed that fate had sent her this afternoon a strange, unaccountable gift” (61).

⁸³ “a boy who liked to speak his mind” (100); a “skinflint” and an “exploiter” (83).

⁸⁴ “While the word drive or sexual drive (*Sexualtrieb*) first appeared in the *Three Essays*, other homologous terms such as ‘endogenous stimuli’ were already present in Freud’s first metapsychological work [...]. These precursors of the drive, the endogenous stimuli, were said to ‘have their origin in the cells of the body and give rise to the major needs: hunger, respiration and sexuality.’” De Lauretis, *Freud’s Drive*, 60.

timidamente sulla gamba dell'uomo. Risalì adagio, fino a sfiorargli appena, e come per caso, il sesso. Poi alzò la testa. Sorrise luminoso, e guardò l'uomo arditamente in faccia" (15).⁸⁵

The young protagonist seems to follow an innate instinct that can leave even the most sexually experienced man at a loss for words: "Ernesto pareva più sciolto di lui" (15).⁸⁶ The boy is driven by his instinctual sexual desire, not a culturally constructed behavioural model. Saba's protagonist's lack of inhibition is particularly evident in the way he smoothly rejects any periphrastic speech and gets right to the point by pursuing his erotic goals, even in circumstances he has never experienced. To the circumlocutory and redundant questions the man is asking—"Nol se ricorda più de quell che gavemo parlà ieri? Che el me ga quasi promesso? Nol sa quel che me piasería tanto farghe?"—Ernesto swiftly replies: "Mettermelo in culo," his response coated with a tone of "serene innocence" (14).⁸⁷ The man is taken aback by this blunt, effortless retort, especially given the Ernesto's lack of sexual experience. Ernesto's frankness and honesty—his dumbfounding *earnestness*—is a personal characteristic that becomes central to the novel, and it adds much psychological depth to this character:

Con quella frase netta e precisa, il ragazzo rivelava, senza saperlo, quello che, molti anni più tardi, dopo molte esperienze e molto dolore, sarebbe stato il suo 'stile': quel giungere al cuore delle cose, al centro arroventato della vita, superando insistenze ed inibizioni, senza perifrasi e giri inutile di parole; si trattasse di cose considerate basse e volgari (magari proibite) o di altre considerate 'sublimi', e situandole tutte – come fa la Natura – sullo stesso piano. Ma allora non ci pensava certo. (15)⁸⁸

The foreshadowing effect of this essentialist passage forces the reader to reflect upon and appreciate the struggles for the truth of desire, not rigorously outlined as proper or acceptable by a hegemonic mandate. Being a mature sixteen-year-old, Ernesto is very much aware of the social standards to which he is not yet bound by adulthood (and eventually, perhaps, that he will reject by choice). In this way, as we have seen, he very much represents de Lauretis's eccentric subject:

[u]n soggetto capace di disaffiliarsi dalle sue stesse appartenenze e conoscenze acquisite, dunque disidentificato dalle formazioni culturali dominanti ma anche critico e autodislocato rispetto a quelle minoritarie con pretese egemoniche [...]. Un soggetto che sa di costituirsi nel corso di una storia sempre *in fieri*, in un processo di interpretazione e di riscrittura di sé a partire da un'altra cognizione del sociale, della cultura, della soggettività.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ "his hand...which had become damp with sweat, and laid it timidly on the man's leg. He drew his hand up and along till, lightly and as if by chance, it brushed his sex. Then he looked up boldly at the man, a luminous smile on his face" (15).

⁸⁶ "It was Ernesto who seemed the more prompt of the two" (15).

⁸⁷ "Don't you remember what we talked about yesterday? What you good as promised me? Don't you know what I'm so longing to do with you?" "You want to put it up my arse" (19).

⁸⁸ "Without being aware of it himself, the boy's clear answer showed what many years later, after much experience and much suffering, would become his own 'style': his reaching to the heart of things, to the red-hot core of life, overcoming dogma and inhibition without evasion or word-spinning, whether he was treating low, coarse subjects (even forbidden ones) or those which people call sublime, putting them all on the same level, as Nature does. But none of this was on his mind at the time" (20).

⁸⁹ "a subject that is able to disentangle themselves from their very own sense of belonging and previously acquired knowledge, therefore disidentified from dominant cultural formations but also critical and self-dislocated with respect to minoritarian ones with hegemonic drives [...]. A subject that is able to constitute themselves within the course of a history that is always in-the-making, within a process of interpretation and rewriting of the self starting from a different perception of the social, of culture, and of subjectivity." De Lauretis, *Soggetti eccentrici*, 8–9.

Ernesto is a character who rejects any type of authoritative behaviour, whether of his mother, his employer, or his lover(s). He will always follow what he believes to be the simple truth of life by treating the *forbidden subjects* in the same way as he does the ones that *people call sublime*; this universalizing paradigm entails the rejection of the hierarchical structure of behaviors one must follow in order to fit into institutional parameters. Saba's capitalized *Natura* can be juxtaposed with Mieli's capitalized *Norma* and de Lauretis's *formazioni culturali dominanti*, against which one must struggle to achieve the *concrete utopia* of trans-sexuality. As Mieli describes it:

Soltanto la lotta di coloro che sono i soggetti storici dell'antitesi fondamentale alla Norma eterosessuale maschile può portare al superamento dell'opposizione attuale tra sesso e sesso e tra genitalità eterosessuale e omosessualità o altre cosiddette 'perversioni'. Se la transessualità è il vero telos, si potrà conseguire solamente quando le donne avranno sconfitto il 'potere' maschile fondato sulla polarità dei sessi e gli omosessuali avranno abolito la Norma diffondendo l'omosessualità universalmente.⁹⁰

According to Mieli, a state of utopian trans-sexuality would ultimately lead to the fall of capitalism, which, he states, is nothing but the sublimation of certain erotic tendencies into labor (25), as well as the transferral of erotic ecstasy into material transactionality, the sort of monetary (self-)eroticism Ernesto recognizes in his employer. Saba's foreshadowing of a utopian space also bears a sense of retrospective loss or melancholia. When he speaks of "molti anni più tardi, dopo molte esperienze e molto dolore" (15) in reference to Ernesto's understanding of his sexual experiences, he is also referring to his own life.⁹¹ Saba is aware of what it means to have grown *up* with desires for (sexual) freedom and grown *out* of a stage where such freedom may have seemed attainable. Saba's existence was characterized by neither happiness nor fulfilment. From his sexual repression to his experience as a Jewish man during the Holocaust, from the absence of his father to the death of his beloved wife (a year before his own), his life was filled with painful occurrences. Literary expression was one way to articulate this pain. As Alessandro Cinquegrani observes, "[l]'opera di Saba è sempre un continuo, infinito palinsesto, una riscrittura inesausta della propria vita, benché condotta in una dimensione letteraria al massimo grado perchè minimamente trasfigurata."⁹² Saba considered the human race diseased to the core, too separate from its natural, healthier state. He expresses this negativism in the poem "L'uomo e gli animali" ("Mankind and Animals"): "Uomo, la tua sventura è senza fondo. | Sei troppo e troppo poco. Con invidia | (tu pensi invece con disprezzo) guardi | gli animali, che immune di riguardi | e di pudori, dicono la vita e le sue leggi. (Ne dicono il fondo)."⁹³ The author dreams of a more natural state of things, a world in which he (or Ernesto) could find a way of being without having to suffer for many years, a realm of existence where humans would return to their natural, perhaps primordial bliss, and be liberated from the diseased constructs of modernity. Similarly, in a letter to his friend Bruno Pincherle, he writes:

[l]a gente, Bruno mio, ha un bisogno, un bisogno urgente di 'mettersi in libertà', di essere

⁹⁰ Mieli, *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, 25. ("Only the struggle of those who are the historical subjects of the basic antithesis to the male heterosexual Norm can lead to overcoming the present opposition between the two sexes, and that between genital heterosexuality and homosexuality or other so-called 'perversions.'" Mieli, *Homosexuality and Liberation*, 38.)

⁹¹ "after much experience and much suffering" (20).

⁹² "Saba's work is always a continuous, interminable palimpsest, a tireless rewriting of his own life, though carried out in a literary dimension of the highest degree with minimal transfiguration." Alessandro Cinquegrani, *Solitudine di Umberto Saba: da Ernesto al Canzoniere* (Venice: Marsilio, 2007), 26.

⁹³ "Mankind, your misfortune is unending | You are too much and too little | With envy (you think, instead, with despise) | you look at animals, which without any regards | or discretion, speak of life | and its laws (they reveal its truth). Saba, *Tutte le poesie*, 633.

insomma liberata dalle sue inibizioni. Questo sarebbe il mestiere della mia vecchiaia [...]. Ed Ernesto non aveva inibizioni, o poche poche, e in forma più graziosa che angosciata. (Non era un decadente, era un primitivo).⁹⁴

As I have attempted to illustrate here, it is impossible to sever Saba's work from his personal narrative—the artist's life is, to his art, like the roots of a tree, says Aldo Priore, and attempting to separate them “toglierebbe un fondamento base alla psicologia” of his work, which permits “un'analisi introspettiva delle inclinazioni naturali del soggetto e dei motivi che hanno ispirato la sua opera.”⁹⁵ The foreshadowing and the desire for a utopian future in *Ernesto* can easily be compared to the author's own personal experiences. We can corroborate this association with a letter he writes to his friend, Nello Stock, where he asserts that, in order to finish this novel, he would need “un'atmosfera lieta, come (almeno nel ricordo, ma anche nella realtà) l'adolescenza.”⁹⁶ With these words, Saba enters the nostalgic but pleasant dimension of a blissful, idealized past, a utopian harmony that is needed in order for this novel to be given the ending that it will never see, if not through the creative power of readership. The incompleteness of *Ernesto* is perhaps an allusion to the utopia of freedom, inaccessible at present and deferred to a potential futurity. What has been impossible for Saba is not impossible for his imagination, and perhaps not for Ernesto, in a future that does not need to be written but that can be dreamt or imagined by Saba, his readers, Mieli, and many others:

un futuro libero, per la realizzazione di quel giardino dell'esistenza intersoggettiva in cui ognuno coglie a piacimento e secondo i suoi bisogni i frutti dell'albero del piacere, del sapere, di quella 'scienza' che sarà gaia scienza. L'essere umano avrà vinto la lotta millenaria con la natura: allora potrà entrare in rapporto armonico con essa e con se stesso.⁹⁷

In order for *Ernesto* to have a happy ending, Saba must achieve a calm which he never found and which even his deathbed attempts to finish the novel did not create. Before setting the novel aside in 1953, Saba attempts to conclude the work with a short reflection titled “Quasi una conclusione.” Here, the author considers the impossibility to grant the novel a worthy ending in order to provide closure to himself and readers alike. Saba will eventually return to the work in 1957, the year of his death, to add a “Quinto episodio” (“Fifth Episode”). Here, Ernesto meets a younger boy, Ilio, with whom he falls in love, though no clear ending is provided, and readers do not know if the boys' friendship grows into a romantic-sexual relationship. The author notes that, in order for the story to achieve its full potential, it would have to be another hundred pages long at least (121), yet the hastily-written last chapter (in 1957) does not add much to the novel, if not a few pages (about ten). The last chapter does, however, provide the reader with clear imaginative directions: it

⁹⁴ My dear Bruno, people have an urgent need to “free themselves,” to be liberated from their inhibitions. This should be my work in old age. And Ernesto had no inhibitions, or very few, and in a form that was more gracious than distressing. (He was not decadent; he was primitive). Saba, “Sedici lettere,” 145.

⁹⁵ “would take away a fundamental aspect from the psychology”; “an introspective analysis of the natural inclinations of the subject and of the causes of inspiration for his work.” Aldo Priore, *Umberto Saba: il poeta fanciullo* (Trieste: Luglio Editore, 2012), 11.

⁹⁶ “a peaceful atmosphere, like the one [at least in memory, but also in reality] of adolescence.” Saba, “Sedici lettere,” 156.

⁹⁷ “a free future that will allow for the creation of a haven of intersubjective existence, in which every individual will pick, as they wish, the fruit of the trees of pleasure and knowledge, of that ‘science’ that will be a gay [gaia, or joyous] science. Humankind will have won the age-old battle against nature: humans will therefore be able to enter into a harmonious relationship with nature and with their own selves.” Mieli, *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, 207 (Translation mine).

hints, though tenuously, at a possibility for the future fulfillment of the protagonist's desires.⁹⁸ The novel must remain unfinished, with the hope of achieving completeness in the imaginary of its readers and, perhaps, in the actuality of the life of the many out there who may identify with Ernesto, in a possible future where Ernesto's (Saba's) happiness (the fulfillment of his desires) is not a *forbidden subject*.

The Long Journey of Liberation

Saba had long equated writing with sexuality and reproduction. We can see manifested in his conceptualization the sort of multidirectional queerness that I have been discussing. For example, a poem, as he described it, “è un'erezione,” an erection, but a novel “è un parto.”⁹⁹ Though Saba did not intend to publish the novel during his lifetime, the very act of writing *Ernesto* functions as a sort of liberatory declaration, the fulfillment of a long-repressed desire, not unlike some aspects of sexuality and reproduction, like orgasm, parturition, or a man's (re)discovery of anal pleasure. There remain many aspects of the novel deserving of analytical attention in a queer mode; for one, the role of Ernesto's mother as *educastrator*, a function filled with psychoanalytical implications. Further, there are many additional connections to be drawn into proximity with Saba's letters in which he discusses different aspects of the novel, including different possible endings. Much more methodical consideration should be paid to the protagonist's sexual metamorphosis from multidirectionality and innocence to denial and narcissism.

As Elsa Morante writes, it is the very liberatory function that gives art a reason to exist. While *Ernesto*, as Morante continues, might be interpreted in different (sometimes negative) ways, especially by those “contaminated by taboos,” for Ernesto himself, the experiences he undergoes “rimangono puramente ciò che sono: semplici incontri umani, di per sé innocenti (poiché lui non è stato contaminato).”¹⁰⁰ Saba admits that his fatigue will lead to an unfinished novel. The importance of Ernesto is, then, that of *not* being a complete story. *Ernesto* does not have an ending because it cannot end; it must not. *Ernesto* is only a hopeful beginning for a non-normative future: “[t]uttavia – così almeno egli si dice – non bisogna mai disperare del futuro. ‘Non esistono guerre perdute, esistono solo vittorie rimandate’” (121).¹⁰¹

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⁹⁸ A possible, heteronormatively salvaged ending is provided by the cinematic transposition of *Ernesto* (1978), by director Salvatore Samperi. I analyze the film in my dissertation work.

⁹⁹ “is a birth.” Saba, “Sedici lettere,” 152.

¹⁰⁰ “remain purely what they are: simple human encounters, inherently innocent (because he has not been contaminated).” Saba, *Ernesto*, back cover (Translation mine).

¹⁰¹ “Yet there is no need to despair of the future – or so he tells himself; *There are no lost wars, only victories postponed*” (109).

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