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**Abstract:** Although sexuality has become a common theme in studies of Aldo Palazzeschi’s work, criticism has not yet fully explored how some of his earliest poems interact with the prevailing cultural assumptions and attitudes circulating when they were written and first published. This study approaches two poems—“Habel Nassab” (1909) and “I fiori” (1913)—that portray a poet-protagonist’s emotionally disturbing encounter with a man who dominates through femininity, weakness, and innocence. The analysis investigates similarities between these stylistically diverse poems and explores how they operate within contemporary views of effeminate homosexual men, often labeled “pederasti” in Italy. The author considers Palazzeschi’s poems alongside comparative sketches of homosexuality, effeminacy, and pederasty, including Paolo Valera’s scandalous reports on the perverse underbelly of Milan in the 1880s, André Gide’s 1902 *L’Immoraliste*, and prewar essays by F.T. Marinetti, Italo Tavolato, and Giovanni Papini. Through this analysis, the author demonstrates how sexuality intersects with broader themes that recur throughout Palazzeschi’s work, and establishes how the texts both reflect and confront their socio-historical context.

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## Desire and Resistance in Two Poems by Aldo Palazzeschi

KRISTIN SZOSTEK CHERTOFF

The years leading up to World War I saw an explosion of discourse around sexuality and morality among Italy's literary elite. Topics such as birth control, prostitution, and chastity were explored in the pages of various journals, including *La Voce* and *Lacerba*, and were tagged as urgent matters of public concern.<sup>1</sup> *La Voce* focused on chastity, virility, birth control, and, more generally, on how sexual practices might be shaped and information about sex controlled and harnessed in order to improve the vitality and biopolitical power of Italy as a nation.<sup>2</sup> *Lacerba* took a more rebellious and inflammatory stance on sexuality, with one of its outspoken cofounders, Italo Tavolato, publishing the article "Elogio della prostituzione" (In praise of prostitution) and, shortly after, the pamphlet *Contro la morale sessuale* (*Against sexual morality*) in 1913.<sup>3</sup> Pederasty, a term that in these circles typically indicated sex between men, one of whom played the feminine or passive role, was one of the topics of debate within the larger discussion of sexuality and morality.<sup>4</sup> In *Contro la morale sessuale*, Tavolato provocatively wrote, "[n]on spiego la pederastia. La elogio" (I don't explain pederasty. I praise it), and derided the repulsion of men who interpreted the existence of "uranism" as a "personal allusion" and felt "violated" when they found that virility did not necessarily mean action.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, in the "Giornale di bordo" of the May 3, 1913 issue of *Lacerba*, Ardengo Soffici admonished the moral indignation of those against "gli amici di Oscar Wilde" (the friends of Oscar Wilde) and

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<sup>1</sup> A history of the public literary discussions of sexuality in Italy during this time period can be found in Mauro Pasqualini's "From the Sexual Question to the Praise of Prostitution: Modernism and Sexual Politics in Florence, 1908-1914," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 21, 3 (2012): 409.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 415. The most high-profile publication of *La Voce* on these subjects was a February 1910 special issue dedicated to "La Questione Sessuale" (The Sexual Question), *La Voce* 2, 9 (1910). The journal also held two conferences on the subject in Florence in October 1910 and April 1912.

<sup>3</sup> Italo Tavolato, "Elogio della prostituzione," *Lacerba* 1, 9 (1913): 89. Italo Tavolato, *Contro la morale sessuale* (Florence: Gonnelli, 1913).

<sup>4</sup> Lorenzo Benadusi has noted that, while "omosessuale" ("homosexual") does not appear in Italian dictionaries of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "sodomia" and "pederasta" ("sodomy" and "pederast") do, with "pederasta" referring especially to an effeminate man who is sexually attracted to other men. See Benadusi, *The enemy of the new man: homosexuality in fascist Italy*, trans. Suzanne Dingee and Jennifer Pudney (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 42 and 303 n16. Although this does not mean that the terms were totally static in their definitions, the particular meaning of "pederasta" that I describe does retain a certain stability in Italy, both among those attempting to condemn or disparage such sex acts and traits and those (few) praising them. For example, Paolo Valera's *Milano sconosciuta* (*Unknown Milan*) (Milano: Lampi di stampa, 2005 [1880]) and an 1918 entry in F.T. Marinetti's diary (*Taccuini 1915-1921*, ed. Alberto Bertoni [Bologna: Il Mulino, 1987]) both equate pederasts with effeminate homosexual men. Valera differentiates "il congiungimento sodomitico" ("the sodomitic connection")—a physical act—with people he interchangeably terms pederasts and inverts, who embody a certain "oscarwildismo" ("oscarwildeanism") in their lifestyle and traits (166). In *Contro la morale sessuale* Tavolato described "omosessualità" as "il tabù più tabù" ("the most taboo taboo") then goes on to cite "saffismo" and "pederastia" ("sapphism" and "pederasty") as the two forms of homosexuality. He writes that the bourgeoisie might close an eye to sapphism, but "non tollera in nessun caso la pederastia, e si sente offeso nella sua triplice dignità di cittadino, di padre e di maschio ogni qualvolta due individui del medesimo sesso abbandonano le norme stabilite dalla maggioranza per seguire le norme tracciate dalla loro natura" ("it does not in any case tolerate pederasty, and it feels offended in its triple dignity as a citizen, father, and male every time that two individuals of the same sex abandon the norms established by the majority to follow the norms laid out by their nature") (20). Pederasty is clearly defined a consensual sex act between two adults, not a relationship of power or education of a man over a boy. All translations are my own.

<sup>5</sup> Pasqualini, "From the Sexual Question to the Praise of Prostitution," 410. Tavolato writes, "Interpretando l'esistenza dell'uranismo come un'allusione personale, il gaglioffo si crede violentato quando viene a sapere che non sempre virilità è sinonimo di attività, e grida allora alla laidezza." *Contro la morale sessuale*, 20-21.

described an evening he and Giovanni Papini had spent among such friends in a nightclub in Naples (although he also determined it necessary to add at the end of the column “non sono pederasta” [I am not a pederast]).<sup>6</sup> Later that year, he painted a work inspired by the evening titled *La tarantella dei pederasti*. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, in contrast, associated pederasts with effeminacy and passivity and viewed these traits as contrary and detrimental to the strong, virile, militant man lionized during this period.<sup>7</sup> Marinetti’s literary harangues even proposed that romance, love, and luxury could feminize men and possibly turn them into pederasts, a view that engaged with contemporary European debates about homosexuality regarding whether it was a vice, developmental disorder, or congenital condition, how it could best be treated, and whether, disease-like, it could spread.<sup>8</sup> Thus, being a “pederast” was not only linked to one’s sexual preference, but could also be linked to one’s effeminacy, deformity, and potential danger to the virile man. This holistic characterization echoes Foucault’s theory of the creation of the homosexual person in the preceding century as a separate species that was abnormal in contrast to the normal paradigm of the heterosexual, monogamous, married couple.<sup>9</sup>

Aldo Palazzeschi was a close friend of Marinetti and moved within the circles of *La Voce* and *Lacerba*, but he did not add a prose voice to the sexuality debates playing out in the magazines. He was by 1913 a published poet and novelist associated with Futurism, as well as a frequent contributor to the contemporary literary magazines, most notably *Lacerba*. Palazzeschi acknowledged privately that he preferred relationships with men, but was understandably averse to declaring his personal sexual preferences in print, a choice that reflected the poet’s general tendency toward total privacy regarding his private life.<sup>10</sup> This stance is perhaps best exemplified by an April 1911 letter from Palazzeschi to Marinetti, which includes a postscript describing his “nuovo innamorato” (new lover) but imploring Marinetti to “strappare quest’appendice” (tear out this addendum), something

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<sup>6</sup> Ardengo Soffici, *Giornale di bordo* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1921), 89-90.

<sup>7</sup> Benadusi, *The enemy of the new man*, 22-24. See also Marinetti’s essays “Contro il lusso femminile” (Against female luxury) and “Il cittadino eroico, l’abolizione delle polizie e le scuole di coraggio” (The heroic citizen, the abolition of the police and of schools of courage) in *Teoria e Invenzione Futurista*, ed. Luciano de Maria (Milano: Mondadori, 1968), 442 and 546. For the uses of the term “pederasta” see 547 and 548.

<sup>8</sup> See note 6 for examples of where Marinetti proposes that feminine activities could turn men into pederasts. The word “homosexual” is said to have been coined by Hungarian Karoly Maria Kertbeny in 1869. See Florence Tamagne, *A History of Homosexuality in Europe: Berlin, London, Paris 1919-1939 Vol. I & II* (New York: Algora, 2006), 6. For approaches to homosexuality see Bruno Wanrooij, *Storia del pudore: la questione sessuale in Italia, 1860-1940* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1990), 195-197; Richard A. Kaye, “Sexual identity at the fin de siècle,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Gail Marshall (New York: CUP, 2007), 63-64; Benadusi, *The enemy of the new man*, 33-34.

<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, *A History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 42-44. “The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality” (43). On the history of “normal” versus “abnormal” sexual practices in Europe see Tamagne, *A History of Homosexuality in Europe*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Benadusi, *The enemy of the new man*, 24. Benadusi describes Palazzeschi’s “maniacal reservation regarding his private life”— not a surprising choice given the contemporary attitudes towards homosexuality. Gino Tellini also describes the “cortina di silenzio” (“curtain of silence”) that Palazzeschi drew around his personal struggles and life, and identifies this silence as the source of the poet’s entire body of work. “Sul comico palazzeschi,” in *Palazzeschi e i territori del comico: Atti del Convegno di Studi: Bergamo, 9-11 dicembre 2004*, ed. Matilde Dillon Wanke and Gino Tellini (Firenze: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2006), 12.

Marinetti obviously did not do.<sup>11</sup> Although the exhortation could be read simply as a dramatic rhetorical gesture, Palazzeschi did renew his appeal to delete the postscript sixty years later when the *Carteggio* was being edited.

Palazzeschi's frankness in his letter, however, cannot necessarily be read as a sign of general open-mindedness on the part of Marinetti, nor should the seeming advocacy and acceptance of *pederastia* by his friends be taken as an indicator of a particular brand of politics. As described above, Marinetti generally viewed *pederasti* unfavorably, and after Palazzeschi's break with futurism Marinetti disparaged him in his private journal, commenting on Palazzeschi's effeminate mannerisms and describing him as "più pederasta che mai" (more of a pederast than ever).<sup>12</sup> Along the same lines, Soffici and Tavolato's seeming comfort with homosexual men and friendship with Palazzeschi should not be taken as part of what one might today consider a comprehensive liberal or progressive world view: although great friends of the poet, Tavolato and Soffici's politics were quite opposed to those of Palazzeschi, most notably before Italy's entrance in World War I and during the fascist *ventennio* after.<sup>13</sup> Tavolato encouraged intervention in World War I and later became a fascist, even working for the regime. Soffici was also a nationalist and, espousing a stance in line with Futurism's founding manifesto, he believed that the violence and upheaval that would accompany an intervention in the war was the only way to overturn a Giolittian era defined by bourgeois morality and excess.<sup>14</sup> He would also sign the "Manifesto degli intellettuali fascisti" (Manifesto of fascist intellectuals) in 1925. Comparing a dedication that Soffici wrote for Palazzeschi in 1925 and two that he had penned in 1914 and 1918, Tellini has identified a shift in language and tone that reflects the increasing ideological separation of the two writers: while the earlier dedications unabashedly praise Palazzeschi and his military feats, the latter characterizes the poet as simple and genuine and identifies him with his Tuscan roots, grasping precisely at a type of artistic regionalism Palazzeschi abhorred.<sup>15</sup> As such, while Palazzeschi was personally accepted by friends, the wave of public acceptance of *pederastia* was certainly not one that endured, nor was it an indicator of any specific brand of politics in the 1910s or in the decades that followed. Indeed, at a distance, it appears to

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<sup>11</sup> F.T. Marinetti and Aldo Palazzeschi, *Carteggio*, ed. Paolo Prestigiacomo (Milano: Mondadori, 1978), 45. The editor notes that Palazzeschi expressed a desire to destroy the postscript again sixty years later, although obviously both Marinetti and the editors of the *Carteggio* never complied with his requests.

<sup>12</sup> Tellini quotes this passage in "Sul comico palazzeschiano," 15-16. See also Marinetti, *Taccuini*, 281-282.

<sup>13</sup> Like many of their literary colleagues, Soffici and Tavolato were both vehemently nationalistic and pro-intervention in World War I. See Soffici, "Per la guerra," *Lacerba* 2, 17 (1914): 253, and Italo Tavolato, "Vogliamo la guerra!," *Lacerba* 2, 21 (1914): 287. Although Palazzeschi eventually fought in World War I, he was initially against intervention. See for example Palazzeschi, "Neutrale," *Lacerba* 2, 24 (1914): 325.

<sup>14</sup> For Soffici's stance on the need for war to "spazzar via ... L'Italia giolittiana...[for Soffici]...il simbolo concreto della concezione 'borghese' della vita" (clear away ... Giolittian Italy ... the concrete symbol of the "bourgeois" conception of life) see Mario Richter, introduction to *Carteggio, Volume 1: 1907-1918*, by Giuseppe Prezzolini and Ardengo Soffici (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1977), xix. The futurist pro-war stance is expressed in numerous manifestos, including F.T. Marinetti's "Fondazione e Manifesto del futurismo:" "Noi vogliamo glorificare la guerra — sola igiene del mondo" (We want to glorify war — the only hygiene of the world) In *I manifesti del futurismo lanciati da Marinetti, Boccioni, Carrà, Bussolo, Balla, Severini, Pratella, de Saint-Point, Appollinaire, Palazzeschi* (Firenze: Lacerba, 1914), 6.

<sup>15</sup> Although Soffici and Palazzeschi remained friends, Tellini has described how Soffici's appraisals of Palazzeschi changed as he realized "quanto radicale e dura e profonda sia la distanza ideologica che lo separa da Palazzeschi" (how radical and difficult and deep the ideological distance was that separated him from Palazzeschi). "Palazzeschi oggi," in *Palazzeschi europeo: Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi: Bonn-Colonia, 30-31 maggio 2005*, ed. Willi Jung and Gino Tellini (Florence: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2007), 8.

have been a brief trend among *lacerbisti* seeking to oppose bourgeois moralism, and many of the poet's friends ultimately wound up on the opposite side of the political spectrum from him.

Despite Palazzeschi's reticence in non-fiction prose on the topic of sexuality and same-sex male desire, he did write literary works that directly approached the subject. The first text to explicitly treat the topic was the 1908 novel *:riflessi* (*:reflections*), in which a decadent-style reclusive prince writes a series of letters to his former lover before mysteriously disappearing.<sup>16</sup> In subsequent years, other works further explored the topic from diverse angles. One such work was the poem "Habel Nassab," a lamentation on the hypnotic pull of the eponymous other that is undoubtedly homoerotic, although characters' attraction is not explicitly consummated or suggested within the limits of the text. The poem appears within the sequence "Le mie ore" (My hours) in Palazzeschi's 1909 collection, *Poemi*, among a series on the poet's home and personal life.<sup>17</sup> As the text progresses, the reader learns that the narrator has been enraptured against his will by his servant's watery eyes. He would like to leave and become a lover and warrior, but he cannot quit Habel Nassab's presence. Habel's femininity, passivity, and seeming innocence ultimately prove quite powerful, drawing the poet to stay by his side. Another such work was "I fiori" (The flowers), a salacious narrative that was first submitted to but denied by Giuseppe Prezzolini for *La Voce* before being published in the April 1913 issue of *Lacerba*.<sup>18</sup> The poem sets out to unmask the sexual deviance hiding under traditional relationships, and to destroy—or, read another way, to redefine—the trope of natural innocence. Although a literal interpretation of "I fiori" would conclude that sexual perversion is everywhere, the use of flowers to represent acts such as incest, prostitution, pederasty, and lesbianism also naturalizes them, defying their contemporary categorization as perversions from a given norm. The figure of the pederast is drawn along the lines of a stereotypical *pederasta* at the time: he is a lily hiding behind a linden tree with a chaste, ingenuous air, his feigned innocence implying concealed deviance and danger.

Interpretations of "Habel" and "I fiori" have not sufficiently explored these texts through the lens of same-sex male desire and the perceived threat of effeminate men and pederasts as they were understood in Palazzeschi's historical context. The eponymous servant in "Habel" has been read variously as an incarnation of Palazzeschi's "clown-like philosophy" and as an alter ego of

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<sup>16</sup> Palazzeschi, *:riflessi* (Milano: Mondadori, 1990 [1908]). Marco Marchi observes that in *:riflessi* "L'immoralismo di Palazzeschi si rivela" (the immoralism of Palazzeschi reveals itself) and brings "esplicitamente alla ribalta...il tema della diversità sessuale" (explicitly to center stage ... the theme of sexuality difference). *Per Palazzeschi* (Firenze: Casa Editrice Le Lettere, 2013), 42. Earlier scholars were less direct about the nature of the relationship: Mario Miccinesi describes it as "una di quelle amicizie che si è soliti definire 'particolari'" (one of those friendships that is usually called "peculiar") but also points out the protagonist's ultimate love for his mother, a "possibile ... complesso edipico" (possible ... Oedipal conflict) (*Palazzeschi* [Firenze: La nuova Italia, 1972], 36). Luciano de Maria similarly describes the relationship as "una profonda amicizia particolare" (a deep peculiar friendship). "Il romanzo decadente di Aldo Palazzeschi," in *:riflessi* (op. cit.), 134.

<sup>17</sup> Aldo Palazzeschi, *Tutte le poesie*, ed. Adele Dei (Milano: Mondadori, 2002), 149.

<sup>18</sup> On the poem's publishing history see F.T. Marinetti and Aldo Palazzeschi, *Carteggio*, 79n3 and 127-129. Ardengo Soffici and Aldo Palazzeschi, *Carteggio, 1912-1960*, ed. Simona Magherini (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura Università degli studi di Firenze, 2011), 28-35. Giovanni Papini and Aldo Palazzeschi, *Carteggio, 1912-1933*, ed. Stefania Alessandra Bottini (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura Università degli studi di Firenze, 2006), 7-17. Aldo Palazzeschi, "I fiori," *Lacerba*, 1, 7 (April 1913): 64-66. "I fiori" was subsequently published in the second edition of the collection *L'incendario* (Milan: Edizioni Futuriste di 'Poesie', 1913) and was described by Marinetti in a letter of the same month as one of Palazzeschi's most licentious poems (*Carteggio*, 79).

Palazzeschi himself.<sup>19</sup> “I fiori” has been interpreted as a work that humorously skewers bourgeois morality and satirizes natural romanticism while discarding traditional poetic language. Although such interpretations are valid, and the homoeroticism of “Habel” has indeed been noted, none have yet fully explored the figures in these poems as portraits of contemporary male desire and its stereotypes, nor have they analyzed these figures in relation to each other.<sup>20</sup> The poems, published four years apart, sketch men who desire other men in simultaneously identical and opposing ways, nearly reflecting each other in their inverse portrayals. In “I fiori,” the pederast is explicitly named and irreverently sketched so as to fully flaunt the stereotypes associated with him, and in “Habel” the object of desire is described but not labeled, an advantage that allows him to elude the all-encompassing definition and assumptions of the “pederast” or “invert” that were culturally prominent at the time. However, despite copious differences in the tone and setting of the poems, Habel and the pederast are both figures who dominate through their captivating pull, tempting the poems’ protagonists—Habel through effeminate impotence and the lily through affected chaste innocence. The reaction of the protagonists—in both poems, a first-person narrator—are remarkably similar. Both experience an inability to speak followed by an emotional upheaval and outburst when confronted with the persuasive temptation of the male other. In this, the poems point to Palazzeschi’s 1914 essay *Il controdolore* (*The counter-pain*), in which the poet prescribes laughter as an antidote to pain.<sup>21</sup> In other words, the clown-like Habel and the comically perverse flowers are actually thin veneers that cover the emotional distress of each poem’s narrator. From another perspective, the pain in the poems is a source for the creation of humor, with laughter not destroying, but triumphing over the drama of life.<sup>22</sup> This study will investigate how each text portrays same-sex desire and reactions and resistance to a potentially dominating encounter with the male other. Moreover, it will consider how these portraits interact with contemporary assumptions and attitudes about pederasts and effeminate men.

Both “Habel” and “I fiori” capture contemporary anxieties around effeminate homosexual men, who were opposed to the virile man and apart from him, occupying a space away from society but also dangerously powerful in their allure and potential to spread their traits and habits and to emasculate those around them.<sup>23</sup> This “type” had been crystallized through descriptions of the Wildean dandy—effeminate, delicate, symbolizing decay in his decadence—whose traits had become synonymous with “homosexual” in the wake of the Wilde trials of the 1890s.<sup>24</sup> During this period,

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<sup>19</sup> Anthony Julian Tamburri, *A Reconsideration of Aldo Palazzeschi’s Poetry (1905-1974): Revisiting the saltimbanco* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998), 37. Ruggiero Stefanini, “Due segnalazioni palazzeschiane,” *Italica* 63, 4 (1986): 381-385. Guido Guglielmi described the speaker’s yearning as comical, ironic-pathetic, and narcissistic. *L’udienza del poeta: saggi su Palazzeschi e il futurismo* (Torino: Einaudi, 1979), 97.

<sup>20</sup> Anthony Julian Tamburri has described the “substratum of homosexuality” in this and other Palazzeschi works. *Semiotics of re-reading: Guido Gozzano, Aldo Palazzeschi, and Italo Calvino* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), 112 n. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Aldo Palazzeschi, “Il controdolore: Manifesto futurista,” *Lacerba* 2.2 (January 1914): 17.

<sup>22</sup> This is a paraphrased translation of an observation of Tellini regarding *Il controdolore*, “Il riso, che ha vinto ma non cancellato il dramma, si connota come umorismo.” “Sul comico palazzeschiano,” 16.

<sup>23</sup> See notes 5, 7, and 8.

<sup>24</sup> Tamagne, *A History of Homosexuality in Europe*, 22-23. Kaye, “Sexual identity at the fin de siècle,” 60. Evidence of the reach and staying power of Wilde’s persona can be found, for example, in the 1923 edition of Paolo Valera’s *Milano sconosciuta: Rinnovata, arricchita di altri scandali politici e postribolari* (ed. Attilio Mangano [Milano: Greco & Greco, 2000 (1923)], accessed June 12, 2012,

the terminology used to describe sex acts between men was slippery. André Gide, for example, differentiated between pederasts and inverts: pederasts, a category in which he placed himself, desired boys and were not by definition effeminate, a stance exemplified by the protagonist Michel in his novel *L'Immoraliste* (*The Immoralist*), and inverts were effeminate homosexuals who deserved the scorn of others.<sup>25</sup> The labels used in Italy were different: writers from Paolo Valera in the 1880s to Tavolato, Soffici, and Marinetti in the first decades of the *Novecento* used the terms “pederastia” and “pederasta” to describe effeminate homosexual men and their sexual practices, although other terms, such as “invertiti,” “omosessualità,” “femminino,” and even “oscarwildismo,” were also used.<sup>26</sup>

Regardless of specific terminology, this type of man had come to be considered anathema to Italy's goals, which required the virile, action-oriented, anti-decadent model citizen who could propel the still relatively newly formed Italian state into the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, the stereotypically masculine man who engaged in sex with men was not assigned this label, and even through the fascist era he was not considered a threat as long as he maintained his aggressive, virile persona.<sup>28</sup> This subtlety highlights the cultural importance of the notion, detailed in Otto Weininger's popular 1903 *Sex and Character*, that a person of any sex could exhibit both masculine and feminine traits, and, further, that one should strive for those considered masculine or virile.<sup>29</sup> Weininger's ideas were well known in Italy, and Papini wrote in his 1915 essay “Miele e pietra” (Honey and stone), “sono weiningeriano. Quando parlo di maschio intendo, ora, la forza, l'energia, la durezza, la fierezza; quando parlo di femmina la mollezza, la dolcezza, la voluttuosità blanda, il tono minore, le lacrime facili.”<sup>30</sup> Although she does not mention Weininger, Valentine de Saint-Point similarly expressed a distaste for femininity and argued the need for virility, or what she calls “il bruto” (the bestial) in her 1912 “Manifesto della Donna Futurista” (Manifesto of the Futurist Woman)<sup>31</sup> Thus, through the masculine/feminine dichotomy, it became possible to apply the labels

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[http://www.liberliber.it/mediateca/libri/v/valera/milano\\_sconosciuta/pdf/milano\\_p.pdf](http://www.liberliber.it/mediateca/libri/v/valera/milano_sconosciuta/pdf/milano_p.pdf)), in which he uses the term “oscarwildismo” to refer to the activity of pederasts.

<sup>25</sup> Naomi Segal, “Gide in Egypt 1939,” in *Cultural Encounters: European Travel Writing in the 1930s*, ed. Charles Burdett and Derek Duncan (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002), 148.

<sup>26</sup> See note 4. Translation of terms: “invert,” “homosexuality,” “oscarwildeanism.” “Femminino” can be loosely translated as “male woman;” literally, it is the word “female” with a male grammatical ending. The term “pederast” to describe a man with this type of sexual practice was also used outside Italy, for example in the 1867 volume *Étude médico-légale sur les attentats aux mœurs* by Auguste Ambroise Tardieu (Paris: J.B. Baillière), which was translated into Italian in 1898 as *Delitti di Libidine: Oltraggi pubblici al pudore, stupri ed attentati al pudore, pederastia e sodomia*. In *La Desinenza in A: Ritratti Umani* by Carlo Dossi, the chapter “Il femminino” relays a debate regarding whether a certain Scioli is a man or a woman—he is male and married to a woman, but dresses and acts in culturally feminine ways and has no children ([Milano: E. Onufrio e Comp., 1878], 268-71).

<sup>27</sup> Benadusi, *The enemy of the new man*, 8-19. As in England, portraying adversaries as effeminate became a potent political weapon. Tamagne, *A History of Homosexuality in Europe*, 27. Benadusi, *The enemy of the new man*, 26.

<sup>28</sup> Benadusi, *The enemy of the new man*, 271-272.

<sup>29</sup> Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character (Geschlecht und Charakter)* (New York: A. L. Burt Company, 1906 [1903]).

<sup>30</sup> “I am Weiningerian. When I speak of the masculine I mean, now, force, energy, hardness, daring; when I speak of the feminine, weakness, sweetness, bland voluptuousness, the minor tone, easy tears.” Papini, *Maschilità* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1921), 95. See also, for example, the 1906 essay “I consigli di Amleto” (The advice of Hamlet), in which Papini, also a proponent of pragmatism, accuses the prince of thinking rather than acting, making him one of those “stanchi ed effeminati spiriti” (tired and effeminate spirits). Papini, *Il Tragico Quotidiano e Il Pilota Cieco* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1920), 12-13.

<sup>31</sup> Valentine de Saint-Point, “Manifesto della donna futurista,” in *I manifesti del futurismo lanciati da Marinetti, Boccioni, Carrà, Bussolo, Balla, Severini, Pratella, de Saint-Point, Apollinaire, Palazzeschi* (Firenze: Lacerba, 1914), 69-74.

masculine and feminine to people of any gender, and even to activities. The fluidity between such attitudes and the figures of Habel and the lily is not hard to discern, and an analysis of the two characters will further illuminate their dialogue with the cultural assumptions within which they were sketched.

Critics have also considered the influence of Palazzeschi's lived experience on the composition of his poems. Tellini, for example, describes how the writer was born from the trauma of his early realization of sexual difference and subsequent suicidal ideation, and how his work "rappresenta l'irradiazione coraggiosa, polimorfa e iridescente, imprevedibile e geniale" of that trauma.<sup>32</sup> My aim here, however, is not to draw specific connections between the writer's personal life and sentiments and these two texts, but rather to consider how the poems operate within prevailing contemporary cultural attitudes and assumptions.<sup>33</sup> To maintain a boundary between Palazzeschi and his poems, I will call the first-person narrator of each text the "speaker."

The tension in "Habel Nassab" revolves around the (mostly) silent power struggle between the speaker and Habel. The text begins and ends with the same rhyming couplet, "Habel Nassab, sei bello tu, / con quegli enormi calzoncini blu!" (Habel Nassab, you're so handsome / in those enormous blue shorts) (ll.1-2 and 79-80), a light-hearted, almost comical phrase that belies the emotion of the intervening lines and supports critical assessments of Habel as a product of Palazzeschi's interest in the clown, jester, or "saltimbanco" (acrobat).<sup>34</sup> The speaker describes Habel as his "solo compagno" (only companion) (l. 4), a faithful servant who follows him silently, observes him as he sleeps, and watches him as he prays. Habel's defining features are his eyes, large, teary, and convex so as to allow the speaker to glimpse inside them "l'immenso mistero d'Oriente" (the immense mystery of the Orient) (l. 31). Habel is also the only person to whom every door is "dischiusa" (unclosed) (l. 6), a description that links the text to several other poems and prose works by Palazzeschi. At the poem's climax, the servant's yearning eyes have the power to arrest the speaker's desire to open the door and leave, successfully imploring him to stay with Habel, who will continue to silently follow and watch his master.

The detail of the open door echoes the closed doors that pepper several of the poet's poems as well as the novel *riflessi*, which, like "Habel", hinges on an undefined relationship of desire between two men, one with a voice and one silent (Valentino and Johnny). In "La porta" (The door), the speaker swears that his door will remain forever closed, repeating, "non s'apre mai quella porta, / mai mai mai" (that door never opens / never never never) (ll. 6-7 and 30-31), while the passersby look at the door and comment on the people inside.<sup>35</sup> In "La finestra terrena" (The ground floor window) the speaker ventures downstairs to peer out from his sealed house at the people who pass and to observe them.<sup>36</sup> In "Torre burla" (Teasing tower), the eponymous tower has no door, and the sound of book pages turning each day inside the structure provokes more and

<sup>32</sup> "represents the courageous, polymorphic and iridescent, unpredictable, and genial irradiation." Tellini, "Palazzeschi oggi," 12.

<sup>33</sup> Anthony Julian Tamburri suggests, conversely, that "Habel Nassab ... can easily be considered the poet's alter-ego" and is "a clear manifestation of personal anguish and anxiety." *Of Saltimbanchi and Incendiari: Aldo Palazzeschi and Avant-Gardism in Italy* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990), 113.

<sup>34</sup> A classic example of Palazzeschi's interest in clowns, jesters, and other nonsensical, outrageous figures is the poem "Chi sono?" (Who am I?) also published in *Poemi* (1909), in which the poet/speaker repeatedly questions his identity, ultimately deciding that he is "Il saltimbanco dell'anima mia" (The acrobat of my soul) (l. 22). Palazzeschi, *Tutte le poesie*, 71. Tamburri also associates Habel with the "saltimbanco." *Of Saltimbanchi and Incendiari*, 82.

<sup>35</sup> Palazzeschi, *Tutte le poesie*, 145.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

more speculation regarding what could be happening inside.<sup>37</sup> The door boundary takes a different turn in “Una casina di cristallo” (A little glass house), in which a glass house allows people to see inside and watch the poet’s every move.<sup>38</sup> In *:riflessi*, the protagonist’s doors remain closed for nearly the entire first part of the novel before he finally opens his villa’s main entrance and disappears, prompting wild conjecture about what happened to him.

In all of these texts, the door separates the protagonist or speaker, “io” (I), from society, or the “tu” (you).<sup>39</sup> Writing about yet another poem with a door separating the speaker from outside society, “Postille” (Footnotes), Guglielmi notes that the boundary between outside and inside both separates and connects the two sides, providing a barrier yet allowing for the possibility of communication.<sup>40</sup> However, the connections never quite bear fruit. Even when the doors are seemingly open or transparent, as in *:riflessi* or “Una casina di cristallo,” the outsiders fail to understand the speaker.<sup>41</sup> Rather, they continue to speculate, an outcome that is best typified by the second part of *:riflessi*, which lists all of the gossip surrounding Valentino’s disappearance. The “io” in each work does not integrate with society, and society cannot pinpoint, or understand, the speaker or protagonist. In this, the dynamic surrounding the closed doors also recalls *Il codice di Perelà* (*The code of Perelà*) in which the city’s citizens do not succeed in defining who or what Perelà is. They are not able to fully comprehend Perelà because they cannot locate him linguistically.<sup>42</sup> The same problem occurs in “Postille,” in which the passersby write epithets on the protagonist’s tombstone—his home is both a villa and tomb in the context of the poem—in their attempts to classify him (interestingly, one of the labels is “pederasta passivo” (passive pederast), although the reference is not explored). By the poem’s end, the protagonist’s servants have washed the stone, and he taunts the people to come write more; the implication is that they will never succeed in correctly categorizing him. The similarities between the closed doors and barriers in so many of Palazzeschi’s texts highlight the great difference in “Habel”: the interlocutor is finally on the inside *with* the speaker, not apart from him. Habel alone is initiated into the world of the “io.” Perhaps most significantly, the linguistic problem disappears because Habel can communicate solely with his eyes, obviating the need for words.

Habel’s large, expressive, lachrymose eyes echo a number of contemporary texts that associate this trait with both male desire and effeminacy.<sup>43</sup> In the 1880 *Milano sconosciuta* (*Unknown*

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 316.

<sup>39</sup> Guglielmi, *L’udienza del poeta*, 29.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 32. Guglielmi notes, however, that there can be some connection, or influence, from one side to the other. For example, in “Una casina di cristallo,” the passersby start to express their own desire to have a similar type of house.

<sup>42</sup> Winfried Wehle had described the citizens’ constant attempt to define and categorize Perelà—an effort which goes unfulfilled. Wehle observes, “Per omogeneizzare questo [Perelà]...sono costretti a dare alla figura indeterminata di Perelà una determinazione umana. Di fronte all’enormità della sua devianza, essi devono procedere in modo fondamentalista ed applicare nei suoi confronti quei criteri basilari che ai loro occhi caratterizzano la *conditio humana*” (To homogenize Perelà...they must give the indeterminate figure a human determination. In the face of the enormity of his deviance, they must proceed in a fundamentalist mode and apply to him the basic criteria that in their eyes characterize the *conditio humana*). See Wehle, “Nel regno dell’intrascendenza. La parabola del “Codice di Perelà,” in *Palazzeschi europeo: Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi: Bonn-Colonia, 30-31 maggio 2005*, ed. Willi Jung and Gino Tellini (Florence: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2007), 78.

<sup>43</sup> Marchi has commented on Palazzeschi’s ambivalent attitude towards the feminine part of his own personality. In part he finds it “disgustoso” (disgusting) and “repellente” (repellent), but he also is “irresistibilmente attratto dal richiamo

*Milan*), a scandalous reportage in the vein of Matilde Serao's 1884 *Il ventre di Napoli* (*The belly of Naples*) or Alfredo Niceforo and Scipio Sighele's 1898 *La mala vita a Roma* (*The evil life in Rome*), Paolo Valera ferrets out and reports on prostitution, pederasty, and other vices on the rapidly urbanizing streets of Milan, pointing out the physical characteristics "dei pederasti e dei sodomiti" (of pederasts and sodomites): clean-shaven "effeminatezza" (effeminacy) with "occhioni grandi" (big eyes) and "capegli un po' ricciuti" (curly hair).<sup>44</sup> In André Gide's *L'Immoraliste*, published seven years before "Habel" in 1902, the first feature the protagonist Michel notices upon seeing the Arab boy Bachir are his "grands yeux silencieux" (large silent eyes); this is the initial moment of attraction in what will become, like Habel's and the speaker's, a relationship of desire without sex.<sup>45</sup> Much more immediate to Palazzeschi's circle, Habel's weepy eyes and passive demeanor anticipate by a few years Papini's association of femininity with "il tono minore, le lacrime facili" (the minor tone, easy tears).<sup>46</sup> Finally, Marchi has suggested that Palazzeschi's own *riflessi* associated same-sex male desire with femininity through the protagonist's name, Valentino Kore, which recalls the Greek *kore*, a female figure.<sup>47</sup> Similarly associating Habel with femininity is the "immense mystery" of the Orient found within his eyes. Anthony Julian Tamburri has read this line as a reference to the dichotomy between the speaker's actual world and the one he desires.<sup>48</sup> Building on this interpretation, Habel's orientalism could also be read as feminizing: like Flaubert's Kuchuk Hanem, Habel possesses an "ignoto infinito" (infinite unknown) in his eyes that reveal green waters, blue skies, the deep sea, and blonde sand (ll. 33-35, 38).<sup>49</sup>

The eyes that are supposed to serve the speaker eventually gain power over him, restraining him despite resistance and a desire to leave the space they share. The speaker cannot help but constantly notice Habel's presence ("talora mi volgo, / gli scuopro sulgi occhi i bagliori lucenti" [sometimes I turn, / I discover sparkling flashes in his eyes] ll. 24-25) and speak silently to him through eye contact ("cogli occhi soltanto mi parla, / cogli occhi gli parlo" [he only speaks to me with his eyes, / I speak to him with my eyes] ll. 19-12). While Habel stays silent throughout the text, ultimately gaining the upper hand without saying a word, the speaker is at one point forced to yell. After remaining silent, an undefined anguish builds up in the speaker: "non so che mi prende, / non so che mi sento... / bruciare negli occhi imperiose / le lagrime...un nodo alla gola..." (I don't know what grips me / I don't know what I feel / in my eyes burn imperious / tears...a knot at my throat) (ll. 45-48). It is not clear whose tears have become "imperiose"—either they are Habel's, and the Orientalized, feminized other has switched roles to become the imposing imperial presence, or they are the speaker's, and Habel's yearning has caused him to regress to emotional sentimentality. In either case, the teary eyes now dominate the speaker, who screams:

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della femminilità, disposto, al di là di ogni autocensura e forma di moralismo cattolico-borghese, a cominciare ad ammetterla e magari provocatoriamente esibirla come componente essenziale del proprio io..." (irresistibly attracted by the call of femininity, disposed, beyond all self-censoring and Catholic-bourgeois moralism, to begin to allow it and perhaps even to provocatively exhibit it as an essential component of his self), Marchi, *Per Palazzeschi*, 21.

<sup>44</sup> Valera, *Milano sconosciuta*, 169-170.

<sup>45</sup> André Gide, *L'Immoraliste* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1930 [1902]), 41. Naomi Segal has observed of *L'Immoraliste*, "homosexual desire is not absent but repressed to about an inch beneath the surface, from where it shapes everything in the text." Naomi Segal, *André Gide: Pederasty and Pedagogy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 169-70.

<sup>46</sup> Papini, *Maschilità*, 95.

<sup>47</sup> Marchi, *Per Palazzeschi*, 42.

<sup>48</sup> Tamburri, *A Reconsideration of Aldo Palazzeschi's Poetry*, 37.

<sup>49</sup> On Flaubert's portrayal of Oriental women see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 184-190.

Vogl'ire! Vogl'ire lontano!  
 La vo' far finita l'orribile vita!  
 Aprire la sudicia porta,  
 sbarrare il coperchio del cofano  
 e gli ori pigliarmi,  
 vogl'ire nel mondo, nel mezzo a la vita,  
 vogl'essere uomo, amante, guerriero,  
 vogli'ire lontano a gioire!<sup>50</sup>

The tantrum reveals the speaker's struggle and exposes the dilemma of space within the poem. The enclosure of the two men alluded to at the beginning of the poem—the door that is open to Habel but closed to everyone else—is confirmed by the speaker's desire to open it. He wants to go into the world to act and be seen, anaphora punctuating his frustration, a sentiment that seemingly opposes the oft-cited impulse to remain enclosed behind sealed doors. However, the instinct to leave is not so much a desire to no longer be with Habel and for a change in his identity as it is a desire not to exist in this way due to fear. The wish is for the courage—and perhaps the outside acceptance—that would allow for open doors. This can be understood through the concept of *sdipanamento* that threads through Palazzeschi's work, which Tellini describes as: “scarcerare la proprio identità, scavare nel ‘proprio io;’ non usare le ‘altrui parole’ ma la grammatica del desiderio; agire come piace e non come ‘si deve;’ proclamare il diritto alla diversità e non vivere nella ‘finzione; non essere automi o astrazioni senza fisicità.”<sup>51</sup> *Sdipanarsi* is the audacity to live one's unique identity in the midst of society, regardless of social norms. If, as Palazzeschi asserts in his essay *Varietà* (*Variety*), there are no two things exactly alike and variety is the principle of nature, *sdipanandosi* would call for a rejection of societal pressure for conformity and categorization, and the open expression of each person's inevitable difference.<sup>52</sup> Through this lens, the inclusion of the speaker's desire to be a lover implies that he wants to not only *be* a lover, but *be seen* as a lover—and, therefore, ideally live openly as the person he is.

After the speaker's outburst, he admits that he will stay closed in with Habel and the poem's denouement recedes back to the opening couplet. His seeming satisfaction with merely being near the servant is similar again to the protagonist's desire in *L'Immoraliste*, which Leo Bersani has described as “a matter of positioning,” with the sharing of space being enough to gratify the men.<sup>53</sup> In the last lines of “Habel Nassab” the speaker relents, “lo sai...rimango, rimango” (you know...I'll stay, I'll stay) (l. 70). He will stay enclosed with his servant, his words implying that Habel already knew this would be the conclusion; the argument is a familiar one, perhaps one that has been repeated before. Habel's hold over the speaker and the speaker's inability to act reinforce the “spazio

<sup>50</sup> Palazzeschi, “Habel Nassab,” ll. 53-60. “I want to go! I want to go far away! / I want to end this horrible life! / Open the filthy door, / unbolt the trunk's lid / seize riches, / I want to go out in the world, in the middle of life, / I want to be a man, a lover, a warrior, / I want to go far away and enjoy life!” (Palazzeschi, *Tutte le poesie*, 150).

<sup>51</sup> “to release one's identity, excavate one's 'own self;’ not use 'others' words' but rather the grammar of desire; act as one pleases and not as 'one should;’ proclaim the right to difference and not live behind a 'façade;’ not be robots or abstractions without corporeality.” Tellini, “Sul comico palazzeschiano,” 20.

<sup>52</sup> Palazzeschi, “Varietà,” in *Opere giovanili* (Milano: Mondadori, 1958), 897-908.

<sup>53</sup> Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 125. The non-physical relationship in *L'Immoraliste* reflected Gide's personal abhorrence of penetrative homosexual sex. Segal, “Gide in Egypt,” 148.

intrapichico e stregato” (intrapyschic and bewitched space) of the poem.<sup>54</sup> Considering the agony of the text, the rhyming couplet that begins and ends the poem can indeed only make sense through the lens of Palazzeschi’s *Il controdolore*, that is, as a remedy to or triumph over pain. The speaker’s repetition of a child-like rhyme is a jarring counterpoint that, like the disconcerting break in tone between the two parts of *:riflessi*—the first a series of somber drawn out letters and the second a series of short, snappy gossip—breaks the spell of the speaker’s agony, allowing for laughter and lightness to enter the text.<sup>55</sup>

The poem’s ending punctuates the power of Habel: his passivity, silence, and effeminate teariness paradoxically make him almost masculine, if masculine means powerful and dominating—or, in Marinetti’s words, “predatory.”<sup>56</sup> This result speaks to contemporary beliefs or stereotypes regarding the contagiousness or power of effeminacy that, although inherently passive, had the active power to convert or feminize “normal” men.<sup>57</sup> The conclusion also echoes a more general connection of passivity and indeterminacy with domination that extends beyond the realm of sexuality within Palazzeschi’s body of work. A passive person becomes dominant whenever he succeeds in provoking reactions and/or confusion from the people around him—for example, Perelà manages to dominate the imagination of the city as the citizens he meets continuously attempt to locate him semantically and conceptually.<sup>58</sup> His passivity as well as his indeterminacy make him a perpetual question mark, a blank slate to be deciphered. Similarly, the speakers of “Torre burla,” “Una casina di cristallo,” and “Una porta” all hold power over passersby because the enclosed subjects’ undefined characters and passive or silent acceptance of judgment capture the minds and attention of those who behold the structures. Guglielmi observes the same phenomenon in “Postille”, in which the “io” provokes “risposte stereotipe e programmate” (stereotypical and programmed responses).<sup>59</sup> Another example of the domination of indeterminacy and passivity can be found in the poem “Lo sconosciuto” (The stranger), which is comprised of a dialogue between two people discussing a stranger in town.<sup>60</sup> One interlocutor asks, “Non mai gli scuoprì / un segno nel volto? / Un sorriso? Una lacrima? / - Mai” (You’ve never glimpsed / a sign on his face? / A smile? A tear? / - Never) (ll. 22-25). The stranger betrays no emotion or identity and he does not engage with others, behavior that demands the obsessive attention of those around him. Taking a further step back, this type of domination also extends to the relationship between reader and text as Palazzeschi tends to decontextualize his poems and narratives, making the reader unable to locate them.<sup>61</sup> “Lo sconosciuto,” for example, begins and ends with questions, and the reader never learns anything about the stranger or the poem’s speakers. The lack of narrative thread—or as Wehle describes, “unity of action”—disorients the reader, leaving her uncertain how to digest the poem. This unease that the text provokes is itself a type of dominance, one in which the poem challenges

<sup>54</sup> Guglielmi describes the bewitching atmosphere of the poem and how the speaker “fallisce” (“fails”), not resisting the dizzying images confronting him. *L’udienza del poeta*, 97-98.

<sup>55</sup> Tellini has noted the “Bipartizione allegramente stridente tra la prima e la seconda parte di *:riflessi?*” (“the cheerfully jarring bipartition between the first and second parts of *:riflessi?*”), “Sul comico palazzeschiiano,” 20.

<sup>56</sup> Marinetti describes a real man as “predatory.” *Taccuini*, 366.

<sup>57</sup> See notes 5, 7, and 8 on contemporary perceptions of the threat of feminization, the association of pederasty with effeminacy, and the pederast’s attack on virility.

<sup>58</sup> Wehle, “Nel regno dell’intrascendenza,” 71-73.

<sup>59</sup> Guglielmi, *L’udienza del poeta*, 32.

<sup>60</sup> Palazzeschi, *Tutte le poesie*, 107.

<sup>61</sup> Wehle, “Nel regno dell’intrascendenza,” 67-68.

the reader to engage in modes of comprehension that are atypical and perhaps uncomfortable. Thus, Habel's domination through passive, silent watchfulness has an undeniable erotic component within the poem, but it also is a variation on a theme that reverberates throughout Palazzeschi's works.

Unlike "Habel Nassab," which does not label but simply describes desire between men and the servant's dominating effeminacy behind closed doors, "I fiori" labels a character "pederasta" with few surrounding details, leaning heavily on the culturally loaded word to encapsulate a number of traits—effeminate, apart, threatening—with which it had been associated.<sup>62</sup> The poem is also quite different in tone and mood. Where "Habel" reads as vulnerable, sensitive, and personal, "I fiori" is brash, purposefully irreverent, and perfectly attuned to contemporary topics of debate. Also significant is each poem's publishing history: Palazzeschi tucked "Habel" within the section of volume called "Le mie ore" concerned with home life and activities, but chose to initially publish "I fiori" at the height of the sexuality debates in *Lacerba*, a magazine known for its outré selections. Importantly, it is this specific milieu that allows the use of the word "pederasta" to be understood as indicating an effeminate man who desires sex with men (as opposed to other definitions, like Gide's) within the context of the poem.<sup>63</sup> Although we do not know exactly what the term meant to Palazzeschi personally, he definitely knew how his readers—some of the first being Soffici, Papini, and Marinetti—would have understood it.<sup>64</sup>

"I fiori" begins with the speaker feeling uncomfortable at a dinner party at which various women subtly make advances at him, prompting him to escape into the garden. This creates an initial structure in which the worldliness of the middle-class dinner party is opposed to the innocence of nature, a traditional romantic and lyric theme.<sup>65</sup> In turn, the garden, which he had believed to be a liberating place with "fresca e pura aria," (fresh and pure air) (l. 45) shocks him when a rose, symbol of romanticism, love, and decadence, reveals that she is a prostitute and then proceeds to list the sexual preferences of the other flowers in the garden. The garden is thus quickly associated with both purity and sexual corruption, a development that erases the initial divide between bourgeois society and the innocence of the garden. Both spaces are characterized by immorality hiding under a veneer of, respectively, social propriety and romantic purity.<sup>66</sup> The types of sexual practices the rose lists are, in order, prostitution, incest, prostitution again, pederasty, sapphism, masturbation, oral sex, and corruption of a minor: in short, all practices that fall outside the bounds of conventional reproductive sexuality within marriage. The poem ends with the speaker thoroughly scandalized and imploring God to open "un nascondiglio / fuori della natura!" (a hideout / outside nature!) (ll. 171-172). Even through this loose version of the plot, the poem's humor is easy to grasp; however, as Tamburri has noted, the poem's tone is not just comical, but also aggressive in its unrelenting assault on the horrified speaker.<sup>67</sup> Throughout the text, feelings of

<sup>62</sup> See notes 5, 7, and 8 on the threat of effeminacy and idea that pederasts threatened men's understanding of virility.

<sup>63</sup> See again note 4.

<sup>64</sup> Marinetti, *Carteggio*, 79. Specific examples of Soffici and Marinetti's understanding of the term are detailed at the beginning of this essay.

<sup>65</sup> Guglielmi has noted the initial opposition of the topoi of "mondanità" and "innocenza" (worldliness and innocence) in the poem. *L'udienza del poeta*, 49. Anthony Julian Tamburri has described the poem as a "spoliation of traditional, lyrical themes and motifs." *Of Saltimbanchi and Incendiari*, 113.

<sup>66</sup> Guglielmi, *L'udienza del poeta*, 49. Tamburri shares Guglielmi's observation of the joining of purity and corruption in the garden and adds, "the romantic ideal of nature, that soothing escape from the brutal and cruel element of reality, is completely divested of its idyllic quality. The two distinct worlds become fused in one [...]." *Of Saltimbanchi and Incendiari*, 113.

<sup>67</sup> *Of Saltimbanchi and Incendiari*, 111.

isolation, shock, and emptiness thread the speaker's experience and leave a lingering residue of uneasiness over each stanza.

Palazzeschi's mention of male-male desire appears at the apex of the poem's arc of sexual deviance when the rose points out and exposes the pederast, a lily (the other flowers are ostensibly in plain sight). Lurking near a tree and with an "arietta ingenua e casta" (simple, chaste air) (l. 136), the lily defines and embodies the character of the seemingly—yet deceptively—innocent and chaste pederast who must be rooted out and identified, similar to Valera's operation in *Milano sconosciuta*. A few lines later, the "modestissima violetta" (modest violet) is revealed as a corrupter of children, specifically the "ciclaminio" (cyclamen) (ll. 152, 158); while this is still not pederasty in the Greek sense of the word (an adult male with a prepubescent boy), the act does involve pedophilia. Thus, the pederast must carry the historical weight of the word, but another figure acts out its meaning. Through the term, the figure retains traces of the pederast's power to educate, or, in this case, attract, the object of his seduction to his way of life. In retrospect, the naming also reflects the contemporary missing language for and even the concept of a person who can be attracted to another person of the same sex without necessarily being predatory or contagious due to his effeminacy, someone who threatens the virility of non-pederastic men and/or boys. In the poem, the appearance of the pederast marks a break in the speaker's behavior; while he at first had lost his voice upon meeting the rose, he breaks his silence after learning of the pederastic lily, repeating the ambiguous exclamation "Anche voi" (You too) (ll. 142, 147, 150) three times and reacting physically to the point of needing to catch his breath. Before engaging in a closer analysis of this passage, however, it is useful to briefly trace the development of the poem to this point.

From its first line, the poem expresses the speaker's nearly constant feelings of uneasiness and uncertainty. The repeated use of ellipses, which appear sprinkled throughout the text, and the description of "un' indefinita pesantezza" (undefined heaviness) that "gravava sul petto" (weighed on my chest) (ll. 4-5) suggest the presence of something lurking, unseen and unidentifiable, similar to "non so che mi prende, / non so che mi sento..." in "Habel" (ll. 45-46). The external weight is then countered with an internal "vuoto infinito" (infinite emptiness) (l. 6) that the speaker feels inside his chest. As the stanza progresses, the opposition between internal and external extends to the juxtaposition of purity and indecency as the speaker debates whether his feelings of disgust for the people at the dinner party reflect his own obscenity or indicate a last sliver of purity that he has somehow retained. Eventually, after two physical advances—a woman pressing on his leg with her own and one stuffing a dessert in his mouth—the speaker escapes into the garden. The covert sexuality of the guests suggests the sexual hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie, a seemingly evergreen topic that formed the basis of Valera's 1884 *Amori bestiali* (*Bestial love*) and was still a popular point of outrage among the literary elite in prewar Italy.<sup>68</sup>

After entering the garden, the speaker launches into a satirical encomium to the garden that echoes concepts and language from a variety of past and future texts. The garden is "pura e serena" (pure and serene) (l. 51) and under its plants the speaker feels "sana protezione" (healthy protection) (l. 59) that allows one to rediscover "i nostri pensieri più puri / sognare casti ideali / dimenticare tutti i mali del mondo, degli uomini, / tutte le nefandezze!" (our purest thoughts / dream of chaste ideals / forget all the ills of the world, of men, / all the vileness!) (ll. 61-64). The passage recalls language from contemporary publications like *Moralità e patria* (*Morality and country*) of 1907, which

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<sup>68</sup> Paolo Valera, *Amori Bestiali* (Milano: La Folla, 1923 [1884]). On futurist opposition to bourgeois hypocrisy see Benadusi, *The enemy of the new man*, 23. See also Tavolato's *Contro la morale sessuale*.

called for chastity, purity, and “sana educazione morale” (healthy moral education).<sup>69</sup> Moreover, like Habel’s eyes, the description of the scene recalls *L’Immoraliste*, in which Michel finds elation, joy, and happiness in a public garden where he is able to forget his exhaustion and discomfort (and where he also finds a young flute player, Lassif, “presque nu” [almost nude]).<sup>70</sup> Looking beyond the poem’s initial composition and publication, the language of the speaker—the “vuoto infinito” and the search for “sana protezione” and purity—also precedes a December 1913 letter from Palazzeschi to Mario Novaro in which the former describes spending hours searching desperately for “qualcosa di sano e di puro, e allora solamente il vuoto mi è dintorno.”<sup>71</sup>

What occurs after the speaker’s praise will negate the possibility that such ideals can exist, or, read another way, will redefine what words like purity and health mean. At the height of his contentment with the garden’s purity, the speaker’s world is quickly overturned when he finds a rose is whispering to a bunch of flower buds on a trellis. She explains that she is a prostitute with scant work that evening, a development that shocks the speaker out of tranquility. From this point forward, the rose becomes the principal speaker of the poem and the first-person speaker is mostly silenced. Her descriptions of the other flowers completely dominate the poem, devouring the idyllic Eden flower by flower; in this modern garden, the traditional pastoral space becomes a marginal one where sexual deviance reigns. After a series of utterances, the speaker falls silent for thirty-two lines, through which he learns of a family of incestuous roses, a hydrangea that fails to profit from her sunflower lover, and two carnation pimps that live off their (female) prostitute lovers. After this monologue the speaker utters again, “Oh!...Oh!...” He is able only to emit sounds, flabbergasted by or perhaps by now simply inured to what he has heard.<sup>72</sup> The rose continues:

E lo vedi quel giglio,  
 Lì, al tronco di quel tiglio?  
 Che arietta ingenua e casta!  
 Ah! Ah! Lo vedi? È un pederasta.  
 - No! No! Basta!  
 - Mio caro, e ci posso far qualcosa,  
 se il giglio è pederasta,  
 se puttana è la rosa?  
 - Anche voi!<sup>73</sup>

The passage, which features heightened dissonance between the insistent, cloying rhymes and the verses’ content, is the culmination of the speaker’s experience in the garden. The lily, who loiters near a tree with his innocent and chaste air, is identified as a pederast, what Tavolato called “il

<sup>69</sup> Giulio Pnitti, *Moralità e patria* (Milano: Cogliati, 1907), 150-2. See also Wanrooij, *Storia del pudore*, 58.

<sup>70</sup> Gide, *L’Immoraliste*, 65-67. Michel describes, “J’oubliais ma fatigue et ma gêne. Je marchais dans une sorte d’extase, d’allégresse silencieuse, d’exaltation des sens et de la chair” (65), and later “je sentais extraordinairement...” (67). “I forgot my exhaustion and my discomfort. I walked in a sort of ecstasy, of silent joy, of exaltation of the senses and flesh.”

<sup>71</sup> “something pure and healthy, and then only emptiness is around me.” Palazzeschi and Mario Novaro, *Carteggio (1910-1914) con le novelle L’Ingegnere e Oreste*, ed. Pino Boero (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1992), 37.

<sup>72</sup> Tamburri suggests that the long list of different flowers “minimiz[es], to a certain degree, the shock value of the list of activities,” *Of Saltimbanchi and Incendiari*, 113.

<sup>73</sup> Palazzeschi, “I fiori,” ll. 134-142. “And do you see that lily, / there, at the trunk of that linden tree? / What a simple, chaste air! / Ah! Ah! See him? He’s a pederast. / - No! No! Enough! / - My dear, what can I do / if the lily’s a pederast, / if the rose is a whore? / - You too!” (Palazzeschi, *Tutte le poesie*, 303).

tabu più tabu” (the most taboo taboo).<sup>74</sup> Like Habel, he appears innocuous and he occupies a somewhat hidden, not public space. He is also the only flower that elicits an exclamation from the rose (“Ah! Ah! Lo vedi?”) that implies he has been caught or exposed. The choice of a lily is at the least a sardonic perversion of the fleur-de-lis, symbol of Florence; more interestingly, it could point to the suggestion that pederasts, like the fleur-de-lis symbol in Florence, are everywhere, a ubiquity that makes them too pervasive to be completely locatable.<sup>75</sup> The choice also echoes Gabriele D’Annunzio’s *romanzi del giglio* (novels of the lily), a cycle of works that ultimately included only one novel, *Le vergini delle rocce* (*The virgin of the rocks*, 1896), and that took as its inspiration the Nietzschean concept of the superman.<sup>76</sup> After the introduction of the lily, the rose’s sarcastic comment implies that his innocence and chastity are feigned, a ruse used to fool other men. The appearance of the pederast lily also prompts the speaker to regain his voice—and his sense of shock—ultimately exclaiming “Anche voi!” (ll. 142, 147, 150) three times as the rose quickly indicates a string of other deviant flowers.<sup>77</sup> Again, this progression mirrors that of the speaker in “Habel,” who also regains his voice after an emotional build up and confrontation with the other. The exclamation “Anche voi!” is the speaker’s full realization that the flowers are just like the diners in the banquettes: pretending externally to be what they appear—respectable citizens and pure flowers—but secretly behaving in deviant ways.

The poem’s conclusion finds the speaker throwing his body to the ground and asking God to have pity on him, imploring, “aprimi un nascondiglio / fuori della natura!” (open a hideout for me / outside nature!) (ll. 171-2). Like the speaker in “Habel,” he wants to escape with an urgency that suggests discomfort. Bourgeois society, with its vulgarity, hypocritical morals, and potential for violence and covert molestation within the supposedly “normal” family, and nature, its purity either dismantled through degeneration to dangerous perversions or revealed to be a myth all along, are unsuitable for the speaker who longs for a space apart from the practices of man and of nature so that he can truly become the “libero cittadino” (free citizen) (l. 69).<sup>78</sup> Another analysis could be that such sexual differences *are* natural and pure and should be accepted rather than labeled defects to be stamped out.<sup>79</sup> This reading would coincide with the writer’s advocacy for identification and acceptance of individual difference in *Varietà*, and would also near the poem to *Interrogatorio della Contessa Maria* (*The interrogation of Countess Maria*), a later work in which “authentic” nature triumphs

<sup>74</sup> Tavolato, *Contro la morale sessuale*, 20.

<sup>75</sup> Bersani describes the concept of being “unlocatably everywhere.” *Homos*, 32.

<sup>76</sup> The connection is intriguing in light of Fausto Curri’s observation in “Dal “superuomo” all’“uomo di fumo.” I futuristi italiani e Nietzsche” that Palazzeschi sought to “contaminate” the idea of the “superman” with the theme of “lightness”—although the figure of the pederast in “I fiori” is not associated with lightness, it would likewise be a contamination of the concept of the *Übermensch*. *Epifanie della modernità* (Bologna: CLUEB, 2000), 41.

<sup>77</sup> Although the monotonous list of deviant flowers may have reduced the impact of the sexual practices (Tamburri, *Of Saltimbanchi and Incendiari*, 113), the sense of the speaker’s shock unquestionably reappears here.

<sup>78</sup> Regarding the speaker’s response to the two spaces, Tamburri observes that the “two distinct worlds...influence the poet-protagonist in a similar manner.” *Ibid.*, 113. Marchi also interprets the poem as a nearing of the worlds of “natura” and “cultura” to show that both are a “serbatoio di vizi e perversioni, di impossibilità normativa, di devianza” (“source of vice and perversion, of normative impossibility, of deviance”). *Per Palazzeschi*, 59.

<sup>79</sup> This interpretation echoes *Contro la morale sessuale*, in which Tavolato supports the pederast’s right to “abbandon[are] le norme stabilite dalla maggioranza per seguire le norme tracciate dalla loro natura” (“abandon the norms established by the majority to follow the norms laid out by their nature”) (20).

“non contaminata da filtri moralistic e culturali” (uncontaminated by moralistic and cultural filters).<sup>80</sup> Support for this interpretation can be found in an interview Palazzeschi gave decades later in which the poet explains, “[u]n tempo la natura era falsata dall’ipocrisia degli uomini, quindi chiedevo di poter uscire dalla natura che porta alla falsità. Ora [...] le stupidaggini che si dicevano ai bambini il secolo scorso in fatto di costumi sessuali oggi nessuno le pronuncia più.”<sup>81</sup>

Looking at the passage from a different perspective separate from the theme of sexuality, the desire for freedom has been read as freedom from the traditional language of romantic and lyric poetry—a type of linguistic and stylistic *sdipanamento* on the part of the poet. By the end of the list of flowers, he has exhausted the traditional meanings and uses of language in “l’atto di disfare il linguaggio” (the act of undoing language) a process in which words reach their limits and there remains no meaning but rather simply the rhythm of the lines and words.<sup>82</sup> In completing this progression to the limits of language, the speaker (and poet) can then finally look for a poetic space beyond those previously available to him. Adele Dei has described Palazzeschi’s new language as one of a “progressiva polverizzazione di un mondo sovraccarico,” citing dialogue and interrogatives—precisely the type of language weaved within the traditional terminology of “I fiori”—as some of the poet’s most notable new and characteristic traits.<sup>83</sup> Within this interpretation, the speaker’s purity is associated with his desire to work unbound and unmarred by traditional poetic style. By finding a place outside this traditional system, he can retain purity of voice and write unhindered.<sup>84</sup>

At this point in the poem, the speaker is either repulsed by his identification with what he has heard or he fails to identify with any of the descriptions of sexuality currently available to him. The body is looking for a new space, one in which it is neither regulated by morality nor subjected to or defined by the contemporary language of deviance. As in “Habel,” the speaker seeks to *sdipanarsi*—to live as one desires and using one’s own language. The norms and language of morality in a watchful society are not just rhetorical, but indeed are the “indefinita pesantezza” that weighs on one’s chest, infinitely emptying one’s heart. The physical experience is similar to Nietzsche’s corporeal metaphor of the social straitjacket that, through the morality of custom, forms man as “predictable.”<sup>85</sup> In “I fiori,” the speaker’s body refuses to become predictable—in other words, it refuses to conform to the language and behaviors recognized as models, acceptable or deviant, by society. Within this space of social unknowability, the voice can barely utter; the body, its acts rejected and unrecognized linguistically, wants to disappear. However, with the choice to refuse to become predictable, the speaker also retains a modicum of power, for the refusal to align with prescribed rules exposes the fact that the laws of norms are what Nietzsche called *gemacht*—or, *made*.

<sup>80</sup> Marchi, *Per Palazzeschi*, 60. Marchi dates *Interrogatorio*, first published in 1988, to about 1925, although it may have been conceived of and drafted earlier (22).

<sup>81</sup> “before nature was falsified by the hypocrisy of men, and so I asked to be able to leave nature, which led to falseness. Now...people no longer tell children the stupid things they used to say about sexual habits in the last century.” Adele Dei quotes this passage in her notes to “I fiori” in Palazzeschi, *Tutte le poesie*, 1108. See also P. Petroni, “Palazzeschi: un giovane scrittore di 80 anni,” in *Il Giornale di Calabria*, October 11, 1972.

<sup>82</sup> Guglielmi, *L’udienza del poeta*, 49.

<sup>83</sup> “progressive pulverization of an overburdened world.” Adele Dei, “Giocare col fuoco. Storia di Palazzeschi poeta,” in *Tutte le poesie* (op. cit.), xxx.

<sup>84</sup> Tamburri recalls Guglielmi’s assessment of language in the poem and suggests the connection of purity with the poet’s drive to avoid using the style of traditional verse. *Of Saltimbanchi and Incendiari*, 115.

<sup>85</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe and ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), II.2 (36-37).

A little over one century later, Judith Butler described this phenomenon as the rebellion of the disruptive body that can, in noncompliance, reveal gender norms as fiction.<sup>86</sup>

Just as the speaker's body is restricted from finding his own space, men who desired other men were restricted linguistically by the caricature of the pederast (or invert or sodomite) that had been discursively built for them through decades of studies, exposés, and other texts. The only alternative is silence, an undefined label or category, such as in "Habel Nassab". Although Palazzeschi's uses of the term pederast (in "I fiori" and in "Postille") do reinforce a specific historical stereotype linked to physical and habitual traits and sexual desire, the very act of claiming the word was perhaps radical in itself, since the alternative was no word, or silence. In "Habel Nassab" no word is used, and the speaker ultimately does not venture outside where he can be seen and his relationships and desires subjected to the binds and violence of imposed linguistic description—agreeing to be seen is agreeing to be policed, and surveillance can only occur when visibility is permitted.<sup>87</sup> In Valera's salacious reports of the late nineteenth century, this visibility is rooted out and imposed so that words can be applied to his subjects; in "Habel" invisibility is preserved through the privacy of the home, allowing the men to exist in a linguistic space without labels; and in "I fiori" hyper-visibility overwhelms the reader with stimuli that expose everything while simultaneously exposing nothing but empty stereotypes.

"Habel Nassab" and "I fiori" both participate in contemporary discourses surrounding male sexuality, desire, and resistance. I do not label Habel a "pederasta" because the poem does not label him as such. However, the characteristics of the contemporary "pederasta" still infiltrate the text in the familiar figure of the effeminate man with a dominating pull over men who could potentially otherwise be the virile men nationalists, futurists, and, later, fascists so celebrated. In "I fiori", the poet does not have to work as hard to portray this type of man, since the use of the term "pederasta" sums up his traits in a single convenient word, one a contemporary reader could swiftly decode. Like the speaker in "Habel," the speaker in "I fiori" is disturbed by the presence of the pederast. This leads him to seek a third space, one apart from bourgeois morality, the weight of stereotypes, and the oppression of language. In both poems, the speaker's resistance to the tyranny of norms, cultural expectations, morality, and language are what lend the text emotion and sadness that are, however, overlaid with the protective mantle of humor as *Il controdolore* prescribed. Through these two wildly diverse poems, Palazzeschi manages to explore the implications of contemporary attitudes toward homosexual men while subtly portraying the humanity of resistance to domination through categorization.

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<sup>86</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999 [1990]), 172-173.

<sup>87</sup> Bersani, *Homos*, 11-12.

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