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Mondo pollame divenuto malaticcio/duna di morti.
-Amelia Rosselli[1]

It is an unsurpassably spectacular gesture to place even Christ
in the realm of the provisional, the everyday, the unreliable.
-Walter Benjamin[2]

A fast-paced dance of worried, loud, and oftentimes controversial[3] interventions by renowned philosophers started to appear at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in various venues,[4] prompting readers to reflect upon the conditions that led to the health emergency, and the (threatening) political implications of the new global paradigm quickly unfolding in front of our very eyes. Present in these reflections was a consistent anxiety regarding the transformations that

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[1] "Fowl world that has become sickly/dune of the dead." Amelia Rosselli, *Cantilena (poesie per Rocco Scotellaro)*, in *Le poesie*, ed. Emmanuela Tandello (Milan: Garzanti, 2004), 14.
[2] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (New York: Verso, 1998), 183.
[3] I am here referring specifically to Giorgio Agamben's interventions, which first appeared online on the Quodlibet blog "Una voce" ("A Voice"), and were later collected in Giorgio Agamben, *A che punto siamo? L'epidemia come politica* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2021). The book appeared in the US and in the UK shortly thereafter: Giorgio Agamben, *Where Are We Now? The Epidemic as Politics*, trans. Valeria Dani (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021; and London: Eris, 2021). Agamben's articles ferociously criticized the emergency measures enforced in Italy to contain the virus (lockdowns, remote learning, vaccine passes, etc.), reading them as threats to freedom that ought to be resisted. His articles have solicited many puzzled reactions worldwide: among the least generous responses, it is worth mentioning Benjamin Bratton's "Agamben, Having Been Lost," in *The Revenge of the Real: Politics for a Post-Pandemic World* (London: Verso, 2021), 109–119. I certainly believe that Agamben's thought, here, fatally avoids the materialist analysis that the emergence of the virus deserves: the construction of a mass of universal, faceless subjects fails to account for the social inequalities that the pandemic has exacerbated, on the one hand, and the multiple ways that power affects different bodies (and their positionalities within economic systems) on the other. In this sense, I agree with Fernando Castrillón and Thomas Marchevsky's general diagnosis of Agamben's texts: "Agamben's mistake here is in confusing his conception of biopolitics […] and the material facts of an all too real virus." And yet, while "Agamben's totalizing generalizations and misapprehension on critical points can often dilute the overall power of his critique, it is also true that we cannot so easily dismiss the entirety of his approach, especially if we change some of its temporal dimensions." Fernando Castrillón and Thomas Marchevsky, introduction to *Coronavirus, Psychoanalysis, and Philosophy: Conversations on Pandemics, Politics, and Society* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021), 7–8.
[4] Significant essays (authored by, among others, Jean-Luc Nancy, Elettra Stimilli, Roberto Esposito, Divya Dwivedi and Shaj Mohan) have been collected in Fernando Castrillón and Thomas Marchevsky, eds., *Coronavirus, Psychoanalysis, and Philosophy: Conversations on Pandemics, Politics, and Society*.

the widespread measures against the disease – quarantine, self-isolation, and superimposed lockdowns – would inevitably perform on the understanding of the flesh, of intimacy, and of touch.[5] This was especially true at the dawn of the pandemic: early scientific studies – later developed and refuted by a more thorough observation of the virus – prompted many around the world to look at contaminated surfaces (fomites) and contacts with others as one of the main vectors of disease. We later learned that, in fact, the virus is primarily spread through aerosols: touching surfaces (including human skin), while representing a risk, does not account for the majority of infections.[6] Thinking about touch, especially in light of the paranoia surrounding the first phases of the pandemic, raises central questions about the proximity (or lack thereof) with the other; moreover, it sheds light on the accelerated reliance upon technology to keep "in contact" with our communities while privileging sight as a mode of relationality.

While the recent, insistent imperative to return to a so-called "normality" – dictated by panicked market logics and not, in fact, by the disappearance of the virus – might tempt us to dismiss the contradictory tensions that arose in the aftermath of this historical moment, delving into the paradigmatic shift that the last two years have generated feels like an urgent endeavor. As a form of resistance against any mediatic and theoretical abstractions, we must ask: What would it mean to approach the lyric when thinking about the diseased body, the dangers and potentialities of isolation, and the everyday fear of contagion? What is the value of turning to an understanding of poetry that might proudly elude a practical answer, escape the assumed (but not always achieved) lucidity of a comforting solution, and help us grasp (or at least acknowledge) the ineffability of the current crisis? This article could be perhaps read as a perilous experiment: if it is true – as I believe it is – that the binary between poetry and theory should be permanently defied,[7] then some of Amelia Rosselli's *Variazioni belliche* (1964, *War Variations*)[8] could lead us into thinking beyond the mediatic hygiene that bombards us with graphs and projected figures, thus disclosing an eidetic and experiential horizon able to illuminate the present (in a way, to infect it). In privileging this approach, which centers the lyric without demanding any

[5] See, by way of example, Sonja Šurbatović, "Alteration of the Touch into a Gaze – Reading Through the Drawing," *Aisthesis* 14, no.1 (July 1, 2021): 57–69.

[6] For an early assessment of the persistence of the virus on surfaces, see Neeltje van Doremalen, Trenton Bushmaker, Dylan H. Morris, Myndi G. Holbrook, Amandine Gamble, Brandi N. Williamson, Azaibi Tamin, et al. "Aerosol and Surface Stability of SARS-CoV-2 as Compared with SARS-CoV-1," *New England Journal of Medicine* 382, no. 16 (April 16, 2020): 1564–1567. Emanuel Goldman later demonstrated that the studies on fomites did not consider real-life scenarios. Goldman's findings have been matched by similar evidence ever since. See Emanuel Goldman, "Exaggerated Risk of Transmission of COVID-19 by Fomites," *The Lancet. Infectious Diseases* 20, no. 8 (August 2020): 892–893.

[7] This follows the words by Audre Lorde, who succinctly writes in "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" that, "[p]oetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before." Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 38. The introduction to the volume spells out this concept further: "But what about the 'conflict' between poetry and theory, between their separate and seemingly incompatible spheres? We have been told that poetry expresses what we feel, and theory states what we know; that the poet creates out of the heat of the moment, while the theorist's mode is, of necessity, cool and reasoned; that one is art and therefore experienced 'subjectively,' and the other is scholarship, held accountable in the 'objective' world of ideas. We have been told that poetry has a soul and theory has a mind and that we have to choose between them." Nancy K. Bereano, introduction to *Sister Outsider*, 8–9.

[8] While Garzanti published the collection in 1964, Amelia Rosselli indicated the triennial 1959–1961 as the drafting period of *Variazioni belliche*. Different and fascinating hypotheses around the collection's working phase, however, have variously emerged. See Silvia De March, *Amelia Rosselli tra poesia e storia* (Naples: L'ancora del Mediterraneo, 2006), 171–172.

comforting or practical answer of it, I embrace Karen Pinkus' formulation of what could be defined as "impractical humanities": by resisting the "tyranny of the practical,"[9] it is perhaps important to use "literature and literary language"[10] as tools to "help scramble our thinking"[11] about the pandemic, and the way we have interacted (and will interact) with its material consequences. Rosselli's poetry, placed against our times, unveils a dual promise: on the one hand, it pierces the narrative around subjects as indistinct bodies affected by state control and treated as mere data points; on the other, it seeks to drag the theological into the mundane with a move that recent considerations by Western theorists only abstractly attempted to perform.

One of Rosselli's lyrics, in particular, comments upon (and dislodges) the prohibition of touching[12] contained in the *Noli me tangere* story,[13] echoing the long-lived fascination that Western critical theory has felt towards Judeo-Christian tales as sites of "critical inquiry."[14] After charting the topoi of isolation and disease in some of Rosselli's *variazioni*, I will briefly evoke the use that the evangelical tale and, more broadly, the subject of touch have found in Žižek, Agamben, and Irigaray: these interpretative attempts will constitute the background for a thorough reading of the *variazione* that rewrites the *Noli me tangere* scene. Rosselli's lyrics will give us a glimpse of a new language of loss and seclusion able to question the well-worn constructs through which we are accustomed to reading the pandemic: beyond the shapeless nature of the biopolitical subject, and the numeric reports circulated by the media, the poet conflates civic participation and solitude, invoking the materiality of death and the concertedness of the sacred within the vertigo of a personal and epochal shift.

I. *Cercatemi e fuoriuscite*.[15]

If – as many of the contemporary critical interventions around Rosselli propose[16] – we choose to distill Pasolini's glorious review of *Variazioni belliche* out from the slightly pathologizing diagnosis of the poet's sophisticated (and more than conscious) linguistic operations,[17] then we

[9] Karen Pinkus, *Fuel. A Speculative Dictionary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 4.
[10] Ibid., 6–7.
[11] Ibid., 6.
[12] "The 'prohibition of touching' has been the starting point of a long visual tradition which is characterised by that fascinating, condensed, almost frozen energy, where the senses play an important role. The reason for the prohibition on touching is a *crux* in the history of the interpretation of the *Noli me tangere*. In John 20:17, Jesus himself offers a possible explanation: 'because I am not yet ascended to my Father.'" Barbara Baert, "The Pact Between Space and Gaze. The Narrative and the Iconic in *Noli Me Tangere*," in *Noli Me Tangere in Interdisciplinary Perspective: Textual, Iconographic and Contemporary Interpretations*, eds. Reimund Bieringer, Barbara Baert, and Karlijn Demasure (Leuven: Peeters, 2016), 192–193.
[13] John 20:13–18.
[14] Mitchell M. Harris, "Review of Jean-Luc Nancy, *Noli Me Tangere: On the Raising of the Body*," *H-German*, *H-Net Reviews*, June 2009, https://networks.h-net.org/node/35008/reviews/45764/harris-nancy-noli-me-tangere-raising-body.
[15] Amelia Rosselli, *Variazioni belliche* (henceforth *VB*), in *Le poesie*, 312.
[16] See Daniela La Penna, "'Cercatemi e fuoriuscite': Biography, Textuality, and Gender in Recent Criticism on Amelia Rosselli," *Italian Studies* 65, no. 2 (July 2010): 282.
[17] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Notizia su Amelia Rosselli, *Il Menabò Di Letteratura*, no. 6 (1963): 66–69. Pasolini's review officially introduced Rosselli to the Italian post-war intelligentsia: his analysis converges on the idea of linguistic "lapsus," under which he reads the first selection of variations published in the journal before his intervention. Pasolini writes that "i lapsus sotto forma di errore lessicale e grammaticale, come accade qui, lasciano la parola quella che è: semplicemente la rivelano sotto un aspetto orrendo, di oggettività putrefatta o ridicola. L'agonia o la morte non mutano il mondo" (67; "Slips, taking on the form of lexical and grammatical error, as is the case here,

might find that Rosselli's collection gifts us with many lyrical insights around the subjective (and collective, as I will argue later) articulation of isolation, contagion, and disease, indicating novel possibilities for a political response to the aftermath of a monumental historical turn.

Arguably Rosselli's most influential work, *Variazioni belliche* officially commenced her poetic career. Semantically radical and formally innovative, the lyrics blend bellicose images with sensual conversations with an unidentified other, melancholic analyses of the self and the world, allegorical personifications, and hallucinated Christological visions. When asked about the theme of the collection, Rosselli answers:

> Ho voluto esprimere il nascere e il morire di una passionalità da principio imbrigliata e contorta, e poi sfociata in lotta e denuncia; solo verso le ultime pagine il libro si placa e le poesie diventano meno violente, più trasparenti. C'è anche nella parte centrale una problematica religiosa che, al momento della delusione, sfocia in libertà dalla *passione*.[18]
>
> (I wanted to express the birth and death of a passionality that was from the first bridled and contorted, and then led into battle and denunciation; it is only toward the last pages that the book is placated and the poems become less violent, more transparent. There is also a religious problematic in the central section that, at the moment of disillusionment, leads into the freedom of passion.)[19]

This brief statement clarifies, on the one hand, the movement upon which the collection is constructed. On the other, it insinuates an identification – here exquisitely linguistic – between the Christic agony and the lyrical subject's excursus. In Rosselli, the word "passione" is truly understood in its double meaning: a sensual longing and the prolonged sacrifice of Christ interchange in a tireless dance of complex ambiguity, which empties the theological of its ineffable nature and transfers it into the multifaceted precariousness of the ordinary. The idiosyncratic landscape of *Variazioni belliche*, where frenzied nocturnal ruminations intertwine with the engagement with (and the exposure of) the carnal both in its sexual and mortal

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leave the word as is: they simply reveal it under a horrendous aspect of putrefied or ridiculous objectivity. Agony or death do not change the world" ["A Note on Amelia Rosselli, by Pier Paolo Pasolini," trans. Jennifer Scappettone, in *Locomotrix. Selected Poetry and Prose of Amelia Rosselli* {Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012}, 282]). Later in the review, Pasolini admits that the poetic of lapsus is, nevertheless, just one of the many luminous aspects of this poetry: "aggiungo che il tema del lapsus è un piccolo tema secondario e irrisorio rispetto i grandi temi della Nevrosi e del Mistero che percorrono il corpo di queste poesie: è solo un filo che ho seguito per poter produrre qualche effato su questo splendido testo che si propone come ineffando" (69; "I will add that the theme of the slip is small, secondary and trifling with respect to the great themes of Neurosis and Mystery that pervade the corpus of these poems: it is only a thread I have followed so as to devise some christening [*effato*] of this splendid text that proposes itself as ineffabling" ["A Note on Amelia Rosselli, by Pier Paolo Pasolini," trans. Jennifer Scappettone, in *Locomotrix. Selected Poetry and Prose of Amelia Rosselli*, 283]). Amelia Rosselli will later refute the lapsus as the key to her own poetic in the fundamental "Partitura in versi," in *Una scrittura plurale. Saggi e interventi critici* (Novara: interlinea, 2004), 307. For the long and problematic influence that Pasolini's intervention held on later studies of Rosselli, see the excellent Cesare Catà, "Il lapsus della critica italiana novecentesca: il caso letterario 'Amelia Rosselli,'" *Italianistica. Rivista di letteratura italiana* XXXVIII, no. 1 (2009): 149–174.

[18] Amelia Rosselli, "Intervista ad Amelia Rosselli," interview by Giacinto Spagnoletti, in *Una scrittura plurale. Saggi e interventi critici*, 298. Emphasis added.

[19] Amelia Roselli, "Extreme Facts: An Interview with Giacinto Spagnoletti," trans. Jennifer Scappettone, in *Locomotrix. Selected Poetry and Prose of Amelia Rosselli*, 260.

ramifications, creates a perpetual motion that bounces the reader – rather quickly – between nightmarish atmospheres of captivity and *ek-stases*.

> La stanchezza riposava su due guanciali e la notte era
> una olocausta molto vicino alla pazzia: la stanchezza era
> una follia di vivere secondo i dogmi cristiani che io non
> sentivo vicino alla mia maturità.
>
> Condizionata alla morte essa rimava vocaboli tormentosi
> con una gran voglia di piangere. Ma sciupavo i miei verd'anni
> con le mucosa sempre aperta.[20]
>
> (Fatigue rested on two pillows and the night was
> a holocaust very close to madness: fatigue was
> a folly of living according to Christian dogmas I didn't
> feel close to my maturity.
>
> Conditioned to death she rhymed tormenting dictionaries
> with a great craving cry. But I was wasting my green years
> with mucous membranes always open.)[21]

Sexual liberation and the superimposed imperative of Christian dogmas are the opposing contours of a creatural condition that is experienced in melancholia and isolation: the night is a "holocaust" dangerously close to insanity, and the poet (conditioned by and towards death) rhymes "tormenting dictionaries" while living (and wasting her best years) with the "mucous membranes always open." The exposure of the flesh – or better, of its cavities – is expressed through a cold (and yet vague) scientific lexicon: the moist opening to the other is simultaneously welcoming and distracting, suggesting an understanding of the self as a fleshly machine that is recipient of attention and, potentially, disease. Tiredness, here personified as a living character who rests its head onto two pillows (sleeping on "due guanciali" is an idiomatic expression indicating one's serene, unbothered attitude), wishes to conduct a Christian life, and is drawn to death. The body is an uncontrollable threshold, one that exceeds the agency of the subject and exposes her vulnerability to pleasure and infection. The torment of solitude, of confinement (one that Rosselli also crucially recognizes as the occasion for productivity) brings forth the desire of escaping one's own cell: but that, alas, is a waste of potential – one that is navigated in openness and fear, through a battle of opposites that avoids any reconciliation. The echo of isolation, which constellates the above *variazione* and many others, is often articulated through a language of confinement, against an unreachable urban setting:

> Perché non spero tornare giammai nella città delle bellezze
> eccomi di ritorno in me stessa. Perché non spero mai ritrovare
> me stessa, eccomi di ritorno fra delle mura. Le mura pesanti

[20] Rosselli, *VB*, 305. The last verse of the poem reads differently across editions of *Variazioni belliche*. In the recent bilingual publication (with translations by Lucia Re and Paul Vangelisti), as an example, we find "ma sciupavo i miei verd'anni/con *la* mucosa sempre aperta" (emphasis mine). Amelia Rosselli, *War Variations*, trans. Lucia Re and Paul Vangelisti (Los Angeles: Otis Books 2016), 310.
[21] Ibid., 311.

e ignare rinchiudono il prigioniero.[22]
(Because I do not hope ever to return to the city of beauty
here I am back inside myself. Because I do not hope ever to find
myself again, here I am back between walls. Heavy and dull
walls shut in the prisoner.)[23]

The impossibility of going back to the "city of beauty" forces a return to oneself: but the self is lost and impossible to recuperate, given the micro-apocalypse that has invested it.[24] The theme of the return (or better, the failure to ever go back to a locus of security and comfort, mentally or geographically), certainly persistent in Rosselli's opus,[25] finds in the poet's displaced existence[26] the most obvious and literal explanation. And yet, this short lyric presents the reader with complex layers of meanings and references beyond mere biographical elements: critics have noticed that the expressions "perché non spero tornare" and "perché non spero mai ritrovare" reverberate T.S. Eliot's "Ash Wednesday" opening lines, which eerily stammer[27] "[b]ecause I do not hope to turn again/Because I do not hope/Because I do not hope to turn."[28] Moreover, this

[22] Rosselli, *VB*, in *Le poesie*, 316.
[23] Rosselli, *War Variations*, 333.
[24] The linguistic revolution in Rosselli's poetry mirrors and contrasts a "microapocalisse del soggetto, una parodia del lirico che nella sua poesia prenderà la forma di un percorso che scinde schizofrenicamente l'io e di un continuo sottrarsi dell'oggetto del desiderio" ("micro-apocalypse of the subject, a parody of the lyric that in her poetry will become a journey that schizophrenically splits the self, with a perpetual flinching of the object of desire"). Alessandro Baldacci, *Amelia Rosselli. Una disarmonia perfetta* (Bari: Laterza, 2007), 59.
[25] By way of example, see an often-quoted verse appearing in *Variazioni belliche*: "Pistola levata infallibile sul mio ritorno in patria/tu cominci bene e finisci male ma non fallisci" (Rosselli, *VB*, in *Le poesie*, 224; "Pistol raised infallible against my coming home./you begin well and end badly but you don't fail" [Rosselli, *War Variations*, 149]).
[26] Rosselli's life took place in different countries and continents. Her mobility (and her consequent plurilingualism) was generated by a personal and historical mutilation: after the murder of her father Carlo in 1937 at the hands of the fascists, her travels and moves intensified. The poet's long exile created an accumulation of languages, which become the site of trauma – their fragmentation and overlapping mirror the tragic siege that denied the young Amelia a peaceful youth. For a more thorough recollection of the early years of Rosselli's biography, especially in the aftermath of her father's assassination, see Baldacci, *Amelia Rosselli. Una disarmonia perfetta*, 10–16; and Silvia De March, *Amelia Rosselli tra poesia e storia*, 20–25.
[27] See Jennifer Scappettone, "Stanza as 'Homicile': The Poetry of Amelia Rosselli (Paris 1930–Rome 1996)," in *Locomotrix. Selected Poetry and Prose of Amelia Rosselli*, 35.
[28] T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1952), 60. Amelia Rosselli admits the influence that Eliot had exercised on her youth in the introduction to "Spazi metrici": "Da giovanissima leggendo ogni sorta di poesie, qualvolta in inglese (classici e no), qualvolta in francese o in italiano, e leggendo molta prosa (Faulkner per esempio, o la poesia prosastica di Eliot), mi sono chiesta come uscire dalla banalità del solito verso libero, che allora mi pareva sgangherato, senza giustificazione storica, e soprattutto, esausto" (Amelia Rosselli, "Introduzione a Spazi metrici," in *Una scrittura plurale*, 59; "Having read all sorts of poetry from the time that I was very young, at times in English [classic and non], at times in French or in Italian, and having read a lot of prose [Faulkner, for example, or the poetic prose of Eliot], I asked myself how to escape from the banality of the usual free verse, which at the time seemed unhinged, lacking in historical justification, and above all, exhausted" [Amelia Rosselli, "Introduction to 'Metrical Spaces,'" trans. Jennifer Scappettone, in *Locomotrix. Selected Poetry and Prose of Amelia Rosselli*, 245]). In their similar allegorical operations, Eliot and Rosselli gather around themselves the flawed spinsters of a lost totality and, in a more than erudite process of accumulation, try to reconstitute a comforting order in the aftermath of an explosion. Both poets are preoccupied with the macro-theme of an impossible regeneration, and their mourning gaze (which discloses a very similar relationship to the catastrophes of the twentieth century) incessantly tries to revive the livid atmospheres of their apocalyptic tableaux. Petrified and impotent, the lyrical subject cannot cease to studder: language thus lives as a fragment among fragments.

poem is particularly significant for our analysis in light of its further articulation of the tropes of isolation and imprisonment.[29] As Scappettone observed, Rosselli's work features "[f]racture, arson, even urination and ejaculation versus ubiquitous walls: the revolt against persecution suffered by a person imprisoned before even entering the world persists in her poetry's paradoxical collusions of liberty and incarceration, union – whether sexual, spiritual, or political – and detachment."[30] Remarkably, content and form coincide in an incandescent unicum: Rosselli, encouraged by a conversation with Pasolini,[31] writes a revealing appendix ("Spazi metrici" ["Metrical Spaces"]) to *Variazioni belliche* with the goal of illustrating the process behind the lyrics that constitute the collection and their relationship with sounds, ideas, and space. The cube-shape of these poems, which Rosselli regards as a vehicle towards a universal form, is based upon the word "come definizione e senso, idea, pozzo della comunicazione"[32] ("as definition and sense, idea, well of communication")[33] understood in its entirety, and not on the phoneme. This formula matches the eidetic dimension with the linguistic one:

> […] consideravo perfino "il" e "la" e "come" come "idee", e non meramente congiunzioni e precisazioni di un discorso esprimente una idea. Premettevo che il discorso intero indicasse il pensiero stesso, e cioè che la frase […] fosse una idea divenuta un poco più complessa e maneggiabile, e che il periodo fosse l'esposizione logica di una idea non statica come quella materializzatasi nella parola, ma piuttosto dinamica e "in divenire" e spesso anche inconscia. Volendo

[29] These images of entrapment will find in Rosselli's later collection *Serie ospedaliera* (Milan: Il saggiatore, 1969), written between 1962 and 1965, a major, painful development: the lyrics, generated by a long hospitalization, bear witness to the tragic experience of the stasis that results from illness and isolation (accompanied by an extreme formal rigor). Even more disquietingly, Rosselli will publish a short text titled "Storia di una malattia" (1977): in this work, the poet describes the supposed (or imaginary) attempts on her life carried out by the CIA, detailing the ways it constantly tried to poison and surveil her through an intricate web of everyday, silent incursions (Rosselli could not feel safe in her own domicile). Amelia Rosselli, "Storia di una malattia," in *Una scrittura plurale*, 317–326. These two works might have had represented a more obvious object of study in the present moment: however, I believe that *Variazioni belliche*, while dwelling upon questions of isolation and disease perhaps more obliquely, represents Rosselli's blueprint for her poetics to come (together with the earlier *La libellula* [Milan: SE, 1996], written in 1958). More specifically, the impetuses behind *Variazioni belliche* – the search for a personal and collective meaning in the aftermath of the war, the dance between an aborted transcendence and the hopeless reality of one's solitude – place these lyrics in an abyss from which the subject articulates "preghiere assurde" ("absurd prayers") while "tutto il mondo crollava" (Amelia Rosselli, *VB*, in *Le poesie*, 299; "the whole world was crumbling"). I believe that the allegorical treatment of the sacred as a space for impossible redemptions, together with the nightmarish images of a self-imposed confinement that lead Rosselli to rhyme "contro/pareti che sanguinano" (Amelia Rosselli, *VB*, in *Le poesie*, 222; "against/bleeding walls"), speak about the potentialities of this collection in the current crisis, and we ought to measure its radical significance vis-à-vis the present recuperations of the evangelical tale (often taken rather literally) by contemporary critical theorists.

[30] Scappettone, "Stanza as 'Homicile'," 35.

[31] "Ricordo che mi riuscì impossibile chiarire i miei intenti, specie quelli che trattassero di metrica. Pasolini mi chiese di scrivere di ciò che tanto m'aveva impacciata nello spiegare. Tornata a casa, spaventata dal difficile impegno, descrissi in modo non troppo tecnico quello che in conversazione era impossibile precisare" (Amelia Rosselli, "Introduzione a Spazi metrici," in *Una scrittura plurale*, 60; "I remember that it proved impossible to clarify my intentions, especially those that had to do with meter. Pasolini asked me to write about what had encumbered me so in explaining. Returning home, frightened by the difficult task, I described in a way that was not overly technical what was impossible to specify in conversation" [Rosselli, "Introduction to 'Metrical Spaces,'" in *Locomotrix. Selected Poetry and Prose of Amelia Rosselli*, 246]).

[32] Rosselli, "Spazi metrici," in *Le poesie*, 338.

[33] Amelia Rosselli, "Metrical Spaces," trans. Jennifer Scappettone, in *Locomotrix. Selected Poetry and Prose of Amelia Rosselli*, 248.

> allargare la mia classificazione davvero non troppo scientifica, inserivo l'ideogramma cinese tra la frase, e la parola, e traducevo il rullo cinese in delirante corso di pensiero occidentale.[34]
>
> ([…] [I] considered even *il*, *la*, and *come* to be "ideas," and not merely conjunctions or specifications of an argument expressing an idea. I posited that the whole argument should indicate the thought itself, and thus that the phrase […] was an idea that had become slightly more complex and manageable, and that the sentence was the logical exposition of an idea, not static like the one materialized in the word, but rather, dynamic and "becoming," and often unconscious as well. Wanting to broaden my classification, which was truly not that scientific, I inserted the Chinese ideogram between the phrase and the word, and I translated the Chinese scroll in the delirious course of Western thought.)[35]

A similar theorization renders language a faithful mirror of the psychic landscape of the lyrical subject; the result is a form sheltered within imaginary walls. The ontological weight of isolation and confinement, together with the aborted leap towards transcendence, affect the life of Rosselli's sentences, which shake and flake off in the face of such a burden. The poet clarifies:

> [p]iù tardi presi ad osservare il mutare di questo delirio o rullo nel mio pensiero a seconda della situazione che il mio cervello affrontava ad ogni cantonata della vita, ad ogni spostamento spaziale o temporale della mia quotidiana pratica esperienza. Notavo strani addensamenti nella ritmicità del mio pensiero, strani arresti, strane coagulazioni e cambi di tempi, strani intervalli di riposo o assenza di azione […]. Ad ogni spostamento del mio corpo aggiungevo tentando, un completo "quadro" dell'esistenza circondantemi; la mente doveva assimilare l'intero significato del quadro entro il tempo in cui essa vi permaneva, e fondervi la sua propria dinamicità interiore.[36]
>
> (Later I took to observing the mutation of this delirium or scroll of my thought in accordance with the situation my mind confronted at each turn of life, at each spatial or temporal displacement of my daily practical experience. I noted strange thickenings in the rhythmicity of my thought, strange arrests, strange coagulations and changes of tempo, strange intervals of rest or absence of action […]. With each additional movement of my body, I would attempt a complete "picture" [*quadro*] of surrounding existence; my mind had to assimilate the picture's entire meaning within the period of time in which it remained there, merging with its own interior dynamism.)[37]

"Spazi metrici," Scappettone observes, "has challenged two generations of literary critics with its shuttling between sonic and graphic fact, between poetry's temporal and spatial expanse – by

[34] Rosselli, "Spazi metrici," in *Le poesie*, 338.
[35] Rosselli, "Metrical Spaces," 248–249.
[36] Rosselli, "Spazi metrici," in *Le poesie*, 339.
[37] Rosselli, "Metrical Spaces," 249.

insisting that poetry, scored and scanned upon a page, is fundamentally both architecture and noise."[38] Space, time, material daily experiences, and the erratic movement of thoughts collide in the squared perimeter of the poem: absolute and slightly claustrophobic, the cubes[39] that constitute *Variazioni belliche* crystallize in enclosed "quadri" the leaps that occur beyond, or perhaps against, their own oppressing structure. The rhythm of these lyrics, I believe, echoes the thumping noise that an imprisoned creature would produce against the walls of a cell: in a *variazione* that reads as an explicit homage to Baudelaire, Rosselli eloquently writes "[n]el mondo delle idee non vi era nessun pianto, ma nella/vita tutto era rosicchiato dal logorante pianto dei pipistrelli/che sbattevano di qua e di là: fantasia rotta ai muri e/i cantoni della casa umida di desideri incovocabili" [40] ("In the world of ideas there was no crying, but in/life everything was nibbled by the exhausting cry of bats/ fluttering here and there: fantasy broken to the walls and/corners of the house damp with uninvitable desires").[41] And yet, *Variazioni belliche* is everything but a solipsistic, autoreferential work. Conscious of the dangers that the torment of isolation can pose to a commune afflatus, Rosselli never fails to construct a voice that attempts to capture the aftershock and ethical implication of the crisis:

> Contiamo infiniti cadaveri. Siamo l'ultima specie umana.
> Siamo il cadavere che flotta putrefatto su della sua passione!
> La calma non mi nutriva il solleone era il mio desiderio.
> Il mio pio desiderio era di vincere la battaglia, il male,
> la tristezza, le fandonie, l'incoscienza, la pluralità
> dei mali le fandonie le incoscienze le somministrazioni
> d'ogni male, d'ogni bene, d'ogni battaglia, d'ogni dovere
> d'ogni fandonia: la crudeltà a parte il gioco riposto attraverso
> il filtro dell'incoscienza. Amore amore che cadi e giaci
> supino la tua stella è la mia dimora.
>
> Caduta sulla linea di battaglia. La bontà era un ritornello
> che non mi fregava ma ero fregata da essa! La linea della
> demarcazione tra poveri e ricchi.[42]
>
> (We count endless corpses. We are the last of humankind.
> We are the corpse floating putrefied on top of your passion!

[38] Scappettone, "Stanza as 'Homicile'," 34–35.

[39] We find one of the first appearance of the cube-form (or better, of its idealization as a vehicle connected to the research of meaning) in *Diario in tre lingue*: "non è dall'esterno che tu puoi risolvere il tuo mal de Dieu/(ritrovare Dio… - chiamiamolo pure tale)//Tao not satisfactory/(is a mechanism of living)//i King mécanique ondulatoire/meccanica ondulatoria//*you want the Cube*/it is not necessary to live//(diretto e unico rapporto con Dio)" (emphasis mine). Amelia Rosselli, *Diario in tre lingue*, in *Le poesie*, 113. This diary is part of *Primi scritti* (Milan: Guanda, 1980), composed between 1952 and 1963. These works offer significant traces of the ideological, philosophical, and creative roots of Amelia Rosselli's later works.

[40] Amelia Rosselli, *VB*, in *Le poesie*, 255. The image of the bat flying against rotting walls is the pulsing core of Baudelaire's last *Spleen*: "[…] when earth becomes a trickling dungeon where/Trust like a bat keeps lunging through the air,/beating tentative wings along the walls/and bumping its head against the rotten beams; […]" Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs Du Mal: The Complete Text of the Flowers of Evil*, trans. Richard Howard (Boston: D.R. Godine, 1982), 76.

[41] Rosselli, *War Variations*, 211.

[42] Rosselli, *VB*, in *Le poesie*, 201.

Calm didn't nourish me the dog days were my desire.
My pious wish was to win the battle, evil,
sadness, deception, irresponsibility, the multitude
of evil deception irresponsibility the administering
of every evil, of every good, of every battle, of every duty
of every deception: cruelty aside the inner game through
the filter of irresponsibility. Love love you who fall and lie
on your back your star is my dwelling.

Fallen in the line of battle. Goodness was a refrain
I didn't give a damn about but was damned by! The line
of demarcation between poor and rich.)[43]

Among the most quoted (and unsettling) pieces of the collection, this lyric could be taken as the first part of a diptych ignited by a collective inventory of the dead. Here, as in the next poem, Rosselli fixes in a multifaceted tableau (which blends a *passio* that is both melancholic and bellicose, hopeless and utopian) the mutual and personal response to an epochal shift. A poet of "research"[44] who consistently refuted a mere confessional definition for her own work, Rosselli's stances can be deduced in a famous essay on Sylvia Plath's poetry[45] titled "Istinto di morte e istinto di piacere in Sylvia Plath" (1980, "Instinct of Death, Instinct of Pleasure in Sylvia Plath"):[46] as Daniela La Penna noted, in the piece "one finds an explicit corollary to her [Rosselli's] poetic praxis in that it denies that hers is an autobiographical address to the reader, and chastises any attempt at equating her poetic persona with her public incarnations […]."[47] The horrific catalogue of the dead, and the image of a shared, rotting corpse that floats[48] on the waters of its own passion, elicits a similar enumeration of the desire's facets (a desire that oftentimes in Rosselli arises in the wake of a catastrophe, or coexists with it). The multitude of

[43] Rosselli, *War Variations*, 103.

[44] "«*Non tutti i poeti si uccidono o smettono di scrivere…*» «Certo, c'è Majakovskij e c'è Pasternak. V'è il poeta della saggezza e il poeta della ricerca, v'è il poeta della scoperta, quello del rinnovamento, quello dell'innovamento…» «*E tu?*» «Della ricerca. E quando non c'è qualcosa di assolutamente nuovo da dire, il poeta della ricerca non scrive. […]»" ("«*Not all poets kill themselves, or stop writing…*» «Of course: there is Mayakovsky, and there is Pasternak. There is the poet of wisdom and the poet of research; the poet of discovery, the one of renovation, and the poet of innovation…» «*And you?*» «Of research. And when there isn't something absolutely new to say, the poet of research does not write. […]»"). Amelia Rosselli, "Non mi chiedete troppo, mi sono perduta in un bosco. Intervista a cura di Sandra Petrignani," in *Una scrittura plurale. Saggi e interventi critici*, 290.

[45] Amelia Rosselli variously translated and wrote about Plath's poetry. Most famously, Rosselli worked together with Gabriella Morisco on Sylvia Plath, *Le muse inquietanti* (Milan: Mondadori, 1985). Some have also noted that, rather eerily, Rosselli killed herself on the thirty-third anniversary of Plath's suicide: a coincidence about which it is unknown "se fortuita o voluta: Sylvia Plath sceglierà di morire l'11 febbraio 1963, Amelia Rosselli l'11 febbraio 1996" ("whether it was by chance or intentional: Sylvia Plath chose to die on February 11,1963, Amelia Rosselli on February 11, 1996"). See Laura Barile, "L'albero del tasso: Amelia Rosselli traduce Sylvia Plath," in *La furia dei venti contrari. Variazioni Amelia Rosselli: con testi inediti e dispersi dell'autrice*, ed. Andrea Cortellessa (Florence: Le lettere, 2007), 246.

[46] In Amelia Rosselli, *Una scrittura plurale. Saggi e interventi critici,* 175–180.

[47] Daniela La Penna, "'Cercatemi e fuoriuscite': Biography, Textuality, and Gender in Recent Criticism on Amelia Rosselli," 282.

[48] In the original, "flotta": an interesting Frenchism (from *floter*) that stands as one of the many examples of plurilingualism in Rosselli.

falls[49] described here are communal and yet individual, and they are captured together with the recognition of class divisions and violence. Jennifer Scappettone notices the poet's complex dialectic between the self and the other(s) when writing that Rosselli

> strove to transpose broader sociohistorical conditions in verse – but without ever divorcing those conditions from phenomena experienced on an intimate, corporeal scale. The extraordinary circumstances of her childhood and adolescence prompted her not to self-exceptionalizing, expressivist gestures, but to the search for a choral idiom that would address afflictions shared.[50]

Thus, Rosselli's civic propensity lives in an opening: an active exchange that transcends the limits of the individual experience (without denying it) and leaps into the construction of a meaning that calls for ethical and moral participation. The risk of clumsily associating this call to the current "unprecedented times" (as the media incessantly call them) and the financial, existential, and social devastation the health emergency has amplified, is somehow tempting; however, that operation would represent a facile theoretical move. Instead, I argue that we must read Rosselli's lyric as a gesture towards an imaginable collective *locus*, a potential future where the "shared afflictions" of the present fight against "le somministrazioni/d'ogni male" ("the administering/of every evil") and erase the ominous line of demarcation between "poveri e ricchi" ("poor and rich").

The second piece of the tableau clarifies this position, while inserting into its imaginary the ubiquitous, and all too human, figure of Christ. The lyric's first line echoes the incipit of the previous poem – here the "infiniti morti" ("endless dead") replace the "infiniti cadaveri" ("endless corpses") from above, and a double exclamation adds a sarcastic tone to the entire piece:

> Contiamo infiniti morti! la danza è quasi finita! la morte,
> lo scoppio, la rondinella che giace ferita al suolo, la malattia,
> e il disagio, la povertà e il demonio sono le mie cassette
> dinamitarde. Tarda arrivavo alla pietà – tarda giacevo fra
> dei conti in tasca disturbati dalla pace che non si offriva.
> Vicino alla morte il suolo rendeva ai collezionisti il prezzo
> della gloria. Tardi giaceva al suolo che rendeva il suo sangue
> imbevuto di lacrime la pace. Cristo seduto al suolo su delle
> gambe inclinate giaceva anche nel sangue quando Maria lo
> travagliò.
>
> Nata a Parigi travagliata nell'epopea della nostra generazione
> fallace. Giaciuta in America fra i ricchi campi dei possidenti
> e dello Stato statale. Vissuta in Italia, paese barbaro.

[49] In my doctoral dissertation I extensively worked on the trope of "the fall" in Rosselli's *Variazioni belliche*, read as the trace of a double ontological movement towards and from transcendence. A small snapshot of this larger analysis can be found in Valeria Dani, "IF. An Altarpiece for Amelia Rosselli," *Vassar Review* 4 (2019): 56–61. Also, and crucially, see Emmanuela Tandello, "Il volo della Libellula," *Galleria*, no. 1/2 (1997): 47–57.
[50] Jennifer Scappettone, "Stanza as 'Homicile'," 11.

Scappata dall'Inghilterra paese di sofisticati. Speranzosa
nell'Ovest ove niente per ora cresce.

Il caffè-bambù era la notte.

La congenitale tendenza al bene si risvegliava.[51]

(We count endless dead! the dance is almost over! death,
the explosion, the swallow lying wounded on the ground, disease
and hardship, poverty and the devil are my cases of
dynamite. Late I arrived to pity – late I lay among
bills in the pocket troubled by a peace that wasn't offered.
Near death the ground returned to the collectors the price
of glory. Late he lay on the ground that rendered his blood
soaked with tears peace. Christ sitting on the ground on
reclined legs also lay in blood when Mary labored
with him.

Born in Paris labored in the epos of our flawed
generation. Lay in America among the rich fields of landlords
and of the stately State. Lived in Italy, barbaric country.
Fled from England, country of sophisticates. Hopeful
in the West where for now nothing grows.

The bamboo-café was the night.

The congenital tendency to goodness awakening.)[52]

The macabre declamation with which Rosselli chooses to open the lyric is the concluding scream of a sacrificial ritual: the dance is about to end, namely because the number of bodies is infinite. The piece is constellated, once again, by a series of falls – or better, by the aftermaths of different descents. "Cassette/dinamitarde" ("cases of/dynamite," or explosions that the lyric subject always seems to direct towards herself and language) are "la morte" ("death"), "l'esplosione" ("the explosion"), "la rondinella che giace ferita al suolo" ("the swallow lying wounded on the ground"),[53] "la malattia" ("disease"), "il disagio" ("hardship"), "la povertà" ("poverty"), and "il demonio" ("the devil"). Only later, the poet finally arrives at "la pietà": once again a dual, polysemic word – one that embraces the realm of compassion while also referring to the sculptural crystallization of maternal love towards the deposed corpse of Christ. "La pietà," in this sense, gathers under the same blood mark the martyrdom and the birth of Jesus

[51] Rosselli, *VB*, in *Le poesie*, 202.
[52] Rosselli, *War Variations*, 105.
[53] The bestiary of *Variazioni belliche* seems to pay particular attention to two birds: the dove and the swallow. Interestingly enough, the swallow (whose most famous appearance is in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, VI, 661-674) stands in Rosselli as the mythical (and material) incarnation of the aspiration to a more spiritual dimension. As in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (the bird appears there, at the end, as an emblem of impossible rebirth), in Rosselli the swallow is fixed in a song modulated on fragments and ruins. The animal is a symbol of a craved, and yet perpetually aborted, ambition.

(the verb "travagliò," referring to Mary, undoubtedly being an indication of this reading of mine), in a macabre synchronicity that I will also illustrate in the *Noli me tangere* analysis. A very vulnerable Christ, sitting on the ground in the same pool of blood where peace once lay, is captured simultaneously at his death and birth, and this tale paves the way to Rosselli's own biography ("Nata a Parigi…"). The poet chooses for herself, rather eloquently, the same verb used for Mary's labor ("travagliata") and builds a whirling and sarcastic spatial history of her displaced existence – which passes through the excessive statal power of the United States, ruled by rich landlords, and the barbarism of the Italian peninsula (where Rosselli will eventually settle). An insomniac night is identified with the brownish foam of a coffee; the congenital (which in Italian reads as a neologism blending the English term, "congenita," and "genitale") call to goodness seems to awaken again.[54]

The socio-historical reality of post-war Italy, chanted through the tormented saga of the poet, becomes the fertile humus onto which visions of Christ arise (via an eloquent identification with his martyrdom). His story (and history) is imbued with subjective and political connotations while, at the same time, it incorporates the anagogic[55] call that poetry seems to inevitably carry within itself. History, in other words, touches and allegorically translates the stations of Christ's sacrifice: the divine is shifted into the mundane, submerging itself in an opulent dance of images where the carnal becomes the center of reflection and attention.[56] We are here dealing with a diseased, mortal flesh[57] to which the possibility of resurrection is denied: storming out of his own sepulcher, Christ's imperative not to touch him reverberates into today's critical discourse around contagion and the prohibition of touching the others' flesh – and as we will see later, Rosselli digs the surface of the often-quoted *Noli me tangere* tale, obliquely inviting us to translate it into our vicissitude of collective loss and corporeal fear while desacralizing its untouchability.

[54] For a more biographical yet nevertheless significant interpretation of this poem, see Silvia De March, *Amelia Rosselli tra poesia e storia*, 125–126.

[55] I use the word "anagogic" following its exegetical definition: in Hugo of St. Victor's view, an anagogic reading of the Scriptures (which is a development of the allegorical one) takes into greater consideration the transcendental nature that a given image discloses: "Anagoge, id est sursum ductio, cum per visibile invisibile factum declarator" ("Anagogy, that is, an uplifting [takes place] when, through a visible fact, an invisible one is declared"). Cited in Paul Colilli, *Agamben and the Signature of Astrology. Spheres of Potentiality* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 114.

[56] I am here embracing Benjamin's articulation of the "allegorical way of seeing" that characterizes the Baroque: "[w]hereas in the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face – or rather in a death's head. And although such a thing lacks all 'symbolic' freedom of expression, all classical proportion, all humanity – nevertheless, this is the form in which man's subjection to nature is most obvious and it significantly gives rise not only to the enigmatic question of nature of human existence as such, but also of the biographical historicity of the individual. This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing, of the baroque, *secular explanation of history as the Passion of the world; its importance resides solely in the stations of its decline*" (emphasis mine). Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 166.

[57] "Indeed, the virus confirms the absence of the divine, since we know its biological nature." Jean-Luc Nancy, "A much too human virus," in *Coronavirus, Psychoanalysis, and Philosophy: Conversations on Pandemics, Politics, and Society*, 65.

II. Forbidden Touch, the Lost Flesh, and the Predominance of the Visible

Slavoj Žižek, among one of the most active participants in the animated debates over the emergence of the virus (and its theoretical consequences), fascinatingly chooses to introduce his first book-long commentary upon the pandemic (which appeared rather early in the crisis)[58] with a reference to the *Noli me tangere* tale:

> "Touch me not," according to John 20:17, is what Jesus said to Mary Magdalene when she recognized him after his resurrection. How do I, an avowed Christian atheist, understand these words? First, I take them together with Christ's answer to his disciple's question as to how we will know that he is returned, resurrected. Christ says he will be there whenever there is love between his believers. He will be there not as a person to touch, but as the bond of love and solidarity between people – so, "do not touch me, touch and deal with other people in the spirit of love." Today, however, in the midst of the coronavirus epidemic, we are all bombarded precisely by calls not to touch others but to isolate ourselves, to maintain a proper corporeal distance. What does this mean for the injunction "touch me not?" Hands cannot reach the other person; it is only from within that we can approach one another – and the window onto "within" is our eyes. These days, when you meet someone close to you (or even a stranger) and maintain a proper distance, a deep look into the other's eyes can disclose more than an intimate touch.[59]

The optimism of Žižek's claim paves the way, later in the book (the first of a two-volume series)[60] to a radical call for a new Communism,[61] one that relies on global solidarity and a strong faith in science ("coronavirus will also compel us to re-invent Communism based on trust in the people and in science").[62] What is interesting in the above passage is that, on the one hand, the gaze seems to occupy a privileged plane (to the point of obfuscating the power of "intimate touch").[63] On the other, it grasps the fluid ambiguity posed by the *Noli me tangere* story, where

[58] The book was released on March 24th, 2020.
[59] Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World* (New York: Polity Press, 2020), 1–2.
[60] Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic! 2: Chronicles of a Time Lost* (New York: Polity Press, 2021).
[61] More precisely, Žižek invokes the notion of "disaster Communism" (through which the state assumes a more central role in contrast to "market mechanisms") as an antidote to disaster capitalism. Žižek, *Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World*, 103.
[62] Ibid., 39.
[63] It is important to clarify that Žižek titles one of the brief chapters of *Pandemic! 2: Chronicles of a Time Lost* "A No-touch Future? No, Thanks!" (65–68). In this section, he utilizes a class lens in reading the emergence of what Naomi Klein called the "Screen New Deal" (an integration of technology into all aspects of civic life): "the Screen New Deal intervenes into class struggle at a very precise point. The ongoing viral crisis has made us fully aware of the crucial role of what David Harvey calls the 'new working class': caretakers in all their forms, from nurses to those who deliver food and other packages, empty our trash bins, etc. For those of us who were able to self-isolate, these workers remained our main form of contact with others in their bodily form, a source of help but also of possible contagion. The Screen New Deal plans to minimize the visible role of this caretaker-class who have to remain non-isolated, largely unprotected, exposing themselves to viral danger so that we, the privileged, can survive in safety. […] New forms of class struggle will erupt here" (67–68).

the acts of touching and seeing are entwined[64] in an ontological movement that often concludes with the supposed superiority of one of the two senses over the other.[65]

Within this (seemingly) perpetual battle, the pandemic has redefined the space of the visible, and it is undeniable that the necessary reliance on technology for professional or personal use has accelerated our entrance (and investment) in what could be called "an ultra-visible era."[66] The loss of touch, and the consequent dependability upon sight, has prompted Giorgio Agamben to return to Aristotle and the representability of contact[67] (*via* Giorgio Colli) in his "Filosofia del contatto" ("Philosophy of Contact").[68] Concerned with avoiding any abstractness, Agamben generatively turns to the *De Anima* and, more specifically, takes care to remind the reader that every sense possesses a correspondent medium (*metaxy*) that exercises a determining role in perceiving the external world.[69] The extraordinary characteristic of touch is that its medium (the flesh) is within ourselves, thus revealing that "nel contatto noi tocchiamo la nostra stessa sensibilità, siamo affetti dalla nostra stessa ricettività" [70] ("when we are in contact we touch our own sensibility, we are affected by our own receptiveness.").[71] The process (or event) of touching another body, therefore, activates the spark of subjectification, and the possibility of losing it might result in the loss of our own flesh:

> Noi abbiamo per la prima volta un'esperienza di noi stessi quando, toccando un altro corpo, tocchiamo insieme la nostra carne. Se, come si cerca oggi perversamente di fare, si abolisse ogni contatto, se tutto e tutti fossero tenuti a distanza, noi perderemmo allora non soltanto l'esperienza degli altri corpi, ma

[64] "Touch and sight are two senses that intertwine enigmatically through scripture and western philosophy, from Aristotle's ambiguity about touch and whether or not it could be called a sense, to Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy's postmodern deconstructive ruminations on *Noli me tangere*." Tina Beattie, "*The Touch That Goes Beyond Touching*. A Reflection on the Touching of Mary of Magdala in Theology and Art," in *Noli Me Tangere in Interdisciplinary Perspective: Textual, Iconographic and Contemporary Interpretations*, 335.

[65] The core of the evangelical scene is ultimately the nature of the flesh, which is "more than the matter of the body. It is the porous interface between the self, the other and the world, whereby sight and touch intertwine to create a sense of our being in the world and the world's being in us, and it is related to our sense of what is true. [...] This reversibility of touch and sight means that we find ourselves in a continuous movement from the perception afforded by visibility and touch to the invisibility of language and truth. This suggests a constant crossing over of boundaries, an experience in which the difference between subjectivity and objectivity is never fully collapsed, but neither can it be fully sustained. The self and the other, touching and being touched, seeing and being seen, constitutes a criss-crossing of the threads of connection which weave me into the world." Ibid., 341–342.

[66] Valentina Bartalesi, "Rethinking contact: the haptic in the viral era," *Aisthesis* 14, no.1 (July 1, 2021): 23.

[67] Remarkably, "the visual language of the *Noli me tangere* is mostly a matter of hands. How to represent the unrepresentable; how to depict the prohibition of touch in a medium of sight?" Barbara Baert, "The Pact Between Space and Gaze. The Narrative and the Iconic in Noli Me Tangere," in *Noli Me Tangere in Interdisciplinary Perspective: Textual, Iconographic and Contemporary Interpretations*, 198.

[68] Giorgio Agamben, "Filosofia del contatto," in *A Che Punto Siamo?: L'epidemia Come Politica,* Nuova edizione accresciuta (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2021), 101–102.

[69] "Per ogni senso esiste un medio (*metaxy*), che svolge una funzione determinante: per la vista, il medio è il diafano, che illuminato dal colore, agisce sugli occhi; per l'udito è l'aria, che mossa da un corpo sonoro, percuote l'orecchio" (Ibid., 102; "For every sense there is an in-between [*metaxy*], a medium that performs a determining function. For sight, that medium is the light which acts on the eyes; for hearing it is the air which hits the ear when moved by a sounding body" [Giorgio Agamben, "Philosophy of Contact," in *Where Are We Now? The Epidemic as Politics*, Second updated edition, trans. Valeria Dani {London: Eris, 2021}, 100]).

[70] Agamben, "Filosofia del contatto," 102.

[71] Agamben, "Philosophy of Contact," 100.

> innanzitutto ogni immediata esperienza di noi stessi, perderemmo cioè puramente e semplicemente la nostra carne.[72]
>
> (We experience ourselves for the first time when, touching another body, we also touch our own flesh. If, as is perversely being attempted today, all contact could be abolished, if everything and everyone could be held at a distance, we would lose not only the experience of other bodies but also, and above all, any immediate experience of ourselves. We would, purely and simply, lose our own flesh.)[73]

Perhaps without noticing, Agamben disrupts the long line of theorists assigning to the scopic the highest place on the podium of the senses: in doing so, he seems to follow Heidegger's diagnosis of the epistemic privilege assigned to sight, towards which the philosophical tradition has been primarily oriented from the beginning "as the mode of access of beings *and to being*."[74]

Among those who have challenged the superiority of seeing, Luce Irigaray constructed a critique that is particularly meaningful for the focus of my study. When famously reading Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as trapped in a "labyrinthine solipsism"[75] that does not truly leave space to an "other" whose "body's ontological status would differ from my own,"[76] the philosopher "turns to the maternal relationship as the source of a fundamental sense of bodily connection and dependence which is negated in the construction of the western masculine subject."[77] For Irigaray, sight and touch are not interchangeable. Indeed, there is a relation between the visible and the tangible; however, the two realms carry within themselves the same gendered dimension that characterizes the hierarchical and oppressive nature of the Western tradition. In an open confrontation with that structure, Irigaray states that there is "a human realm of touch before any possibility of sight, for between the mother and the child in the womb there is a fluid, tactile presence, a placental interchange that cannot be translated into metaphors of visibility."[78] Although the overt importance placed here on the maternal must be complicated by a more nuanced understanding of feminist theory beyond any trite essentialization, Irigaray's turn to the womb represents a formulation able to elucidate Rosselli's placement of the *Noli me tangere* episode on the unanticipated stage of hunger, birth, and loss. As the next section will attempt to illustrate, the disorienting precipitations that anticipate "la fine" are modulated on an excessive engagement with the flesh – a flesh that is born from affliction, imperatives pronounced by dying sons, immense bodies, and eerie theophanies.

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[72] Agamben, "Filosofia del contatto," 102.
[73] Agamben, "Philosophy of Contact," 101.
[74] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, ed. Dennis J Schmidt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 142.
[75] Luce Irigaray, "The Invisible of the Flesh: A Reading of Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 'The Intertwining—The Chiasm,'" in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 157.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Tina Beattie, "*The Touch That Goes Beyond Touching*. A Reflection on the Touching of Mary of Magdala in Theology and Art," 343.
[78] Ibid.

III. The Untouchable Body of Christ: a Strange Resurrection

In the complex appropriation of the sacred that constellates *Variazioni belliche*, a lyric emerges as an opaque vision of an unusual – and as every aspiration to transcendence in Rosselli, disappointed – resurrection. Such a vision takes possession of one of the most famous and represented episodes of the Gospel[79] and returns a different, enigmatic image of it: in a game of exchanges and transfigurations, Rosselli transforms the evangelical parable of the *Noli me tangere* into a tale about the absence of hope. One of the last mundane stories of Christ becomes the occasion for a lyrical intervention on writing, time, and the missed opportunity of redemption. The mythopoetic will of the author disarticulates the story within the abnormal texture of her own poetic apparatus, offering new interpretative values to its main characters. The original evangelical passage (which has occupied a portion of the pandemic imagination, as I have outlined above) spotlights Mary Magdalene, who weeps with concern and confusion next to Christ's empty sepulcher in the suspended aftermath of his death. Two angels are sitting where the body once lay, guarding the site:

> And they say unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? She saith unto them, because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him. And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus. Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away. Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master. Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not;[80] for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God. Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that he had spoken these things unto her.[81]

Rosselli incorporates this episode rather explicitly in one of the first lyrics of *Variazioni belliche*'s second section: the following poem, more than others, captures a blatant and subversive reprise of the Gospel that exposes a transformed vision of the body, of desperation, and of time. The poem is rhythmically cadenced by the insisted reiterations of birth images, punctuated by the adverb "dopo" ("after"), which offer a consequential and yet obsessive tone to the entire piece:

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[79] And yet, Jean-Luc Nancy clarifies, the *Noli me tangere* evangelical tale has attracted less iconographic attention "than the great canonical episodes of the annunciation or the crucifixion […]" Jean Luc-Nancy, *Noli me tangere. On the Raising of the Body* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 11.

[80] Notably, *noli me tangere* is the Latin translation of the Greek *mê mou haptou*, which could be rendered as "do not cling on me," and/or "stop holding onto me." As a result of this nuanced meaning, the *Noli me tangere* tale has nurtured interesting and contrasting debates on translation, the nature of Christ's resurrected body, and the limits of Mary Magdalene's faith. For an incredibly thorough account of the different readings that this story has attracted within different schools and traditions, see Outi Lehtipuu, "*I Have Not Yet Ascended to the Father*. On Resurrection, Bodies, and Resurrection Bodies," in *Noli Me Tangere in Interdisciplinary Perspective: Textual, Iconographic and Contemporary Interpretations*, 43–59.

[81] John 20:13-18 KJV.

Dopo il dono di Dio vi fu la rinascita. Dopo la pazienza
dei sensi caddero tutte le giornate. Dopo l'inchiostro
di Cina rinacque un elefante: la gioia. Dopo della gioia
scese l'inferno dopo il paradiso il lupo nella tana. Dopo
l'infinito vi fu la giostra. Ma caddero i lumi e si rinfocillarono
le bestie, e la lana venne preparata e il lupo divorato.
Dopo della fame nacque il bambino, dopo della noia scrisse
i suoi versi l'amante. Dopo l'infinito cadde la giostra
dopo la testata crebbe l'inchiostro. Caldamente protetta
scrisse i suoi versi la Vergine: moribondo Cristo le rispose
non mi toccare! Dopo i suoi versi il Cristo divorò la pena
che lo affliggeva. Dopo della notte cadde l'intero sostegno
del mondo. Dopo dell'inferno nacque il figlio bramoso di
distinguersi. Dopo della noia rompeva il silenzio l'acre
bisbiglio della contadina che cercava l'acqua nel pozzo
troppo profondo per le sue braccia. Dopo dell'aria che
scendeva delicata attorno al suo corpo immenso, nacque
la figliola col cuore devastato, nacque la pena degli uccelli,
nacque il desiderio e l'infinito che non si ritrova se
si perde. Speranzosi barcolliamo fin che la fine peschi
un'anima servile.[82]

(After God's gift there came the rebirth. After the patience
of the senses all the days fell. After the India
ink an elephant was born again: joy. After the joy
hell descended after heaven the wolf in the den. After
the infinite came the merry-go-round. But the lights fell and the
animals were fed, and the wool was prepared and the wolf devoured.
After the hunger was born the child, after the boredom the lover
wrote her poems. After the infinite the merry-go-round fell
after the warhead the ink flowed. Warmly protected
the Virgin wrote her poems: the moribund Christ answered her
do not touch me! After her poems Christ devoured the pain
afflicting him. After the night the world's entire support
fell. After the hell the son was born anxious to distinguish
himself. After the boredom the silence was broken by the bitter
whisper of the peasant woman looking for water in the well
too deep for her arms. After the air descending
delicately around her immense body, the daughter with
the devastated heart was born, the birds' pain was born,
desire and the infinite that once lost can never be found again
were born. Hopeful we stagger until the end may fish
a fawning soul.)[83]

[82] Rosselli, *VB*, in *Le poesie*, 204.
[83] Rosselli, *War Variations*, 109.

The lyric starts with a dense image of hope ("dopo il dono di Dio vi fu la rinascita" ["after God's gift there came the rebirth"]): this verse, however, will leave space to a song that is modulated on falls ("caddero tutte le giornate"; "scese l'inferno"; "caddero i lumi"; "cadde la giostra" ["all the days fell"; "hell descended"; "the lights fell"; "the merry-go-round fell"]). Precipitations are placed alongside brief moments of ascension – ecstatic instances of exit from oneself – that mark the impossibility of a leap towards (a/the) meaning: registering the aborted mystical desire follows an obsessive, frustrating pace. "La pazienza dei sensi" ("the patience/of the senses") gets solved through the fall of everyday life and the ink resuscitates an elephant (here indicating an unexpected size): joy. To its fulminous apparition follows hell and, shortly after, heaven pushes the wolf into its den. The infinite (or better, the search for the infinite) paves the way to the "giostra" ("merry-go-round") – a ludic, senseless, and disorienting activity. As the lights fall and the wolf is devoured, hunger and boredom are exhausted: from them a child (Christ, presumably) is born, and verses start to take shape. The ink, once again, is generated and grows from a "testata" ("warhead") and from the crash of the "giostra" that appeared just before. Now a peculiar, personal *Noli me tangere* makes its majestic appearance:

> […] Caldamente protetta
> scrisse i suoi versi la Vergine: moribondo Cristo le rispose
> non mi toccare! Dopo i suoi versi il Cristo divorò la pena
> che lo affliggeva.[84]
>
> ([…]Warmly protected
> the Virgin wrote her poems: the moribund Christ answered her
> do not touch me! After her poems Christ devoured the pain
> afflicting him.)[85]

Immediately recognizable is the replacement – which I believe is intentional – of Magdalene with "la Vergine": this substitution displaces the vaguely sensual layer of the original scene onto a maternal sphere, connecting the verses to Irigaray's thesis around touch and sight.[86]

Another major inversion of meaning lives in the use of the adjective "moribondo" ("moribund"): to choose this word to characterize Christ means to reinterpret more than consciously the evangelical text, placing it in a more ample discourse on finitude and the inaccessibility of transcendence. In fact, the word denies the content of the parable reworked by Rosselli: Christ is not resuscitated, he is agonizing. Rosselli's *variazioni* cannot ever escape a dangerous proximity with death: here the protagonist, with no possibility of prevailing over the end of life, has precipitated once again in immanence. It is noteworthy that a similar vision of the body is at the core of John's original story, as noted by Jean-Luc Nancy in his piercing study of the evangelical passage, since "[t]he resurrection is not a resuscitation: it is the infinite extension of death that displaces and dismantles all the values of presence and absence, of animate and inanimate, of body and soul. The resurrection is the extension of a body to the measure of the world and of the space in which all bodies meet [*côtoiement*]."[87]

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[84] Rosselli, *VB*, in *Le poesie*, 204.
[85] Rosselli, *War Variations*, 109.
[86] See the previous section and fig.1.
[87] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Noli me tangere. On the Raising of the Body*, 44.

What Rosselli obliterates is, instead, the exposure of the flesh of God to the brilliance of "glory."[88] His body cannot access this experience because it is not – or it is not anymore – a divine body, but a mangled one. Pure flesh.[89] The three words that the *almost corpse* pronounces in the face of someone else's desire to touch him seem to be the only faithful echo of the original scene.

Fig. 1. Barnaba da Modena*, Madonna del latte e Noli me tangere,* 1350–1386, panel painting, Cassa di Risparmio di Firenze art collection, photo by Sailko (Wikimedia Commons). This scene, which appears infrequently in studies devoted to the iconography of the *Noli me tangere* tale, crystallizes on a simultaneous plane the ambiguity between Mary of Magdala and the mother of Christ found in Rosselli. The clinging nature of desire, the maternal, the birth and death of Christ: all converge in an instant of temporal overlapping. The impossibility of touching that occurs below, in the mundane, corresponds to the carnal "excess" and dependency portrayed above.

As for the rest, the elements at play in the Gospel are dramatically overturned: Magdalene is here Mary; Christ has not triumphed over death, but he is at the acme of his own agony – Rosselli's lyric transfers in the ephemeral the theological material she chooses to engage with.

[88] Ibid., 45.

[89] Rosselli's *Noli me tangere* in a way negates the "intermediary time" creating "an intermediary space that is symbolized in Jesus' body. He can only be touched as a mortal human being 'in flesh'; the body of the glorified Jesus is different and remains out of reach of the human touch." Outi Lehtipuu, "*I Have Not Yet Ascended to the Father*. On Resurrection, Bodies, and Resurrection Bodies," in *Noli Me Tangere in Interdisciplinary Perspective: Textual, Iconographic and Contemporary Interpretations*, 59.

The poet does not hesitate to subvert the evangelical tale: Rosselli empties the truth from the truth – if the tangible relationship with faith collapses, then faith offers itself (as all the rest of the mundane sphere) to a transfiguration. Deprived of its ontological value, *the* story of Christ becomes *a* story onto which it is possible to apply the arbitrariness of an allegorical operation: the tale of the resurrection is hence likely to educe a personal reinterpretation. Undoing the immortality and the intangibility of transcendence is one of the favorite occupations of this poetry: the stations of Christ's sacrifice (together with his impossible resurrection), deprived of any holiness, become the secular posts of a private martyrdom. Mary is now writing "versi" ("her poems") while "caldamente protetta" ("[w]armly protected") her son pronounces an original *Noli me tangere*, and then he devours the "pena/che lo affliggeva" ("the pain/afflicting him") in a sort of nightmarish theophagy.

To this passage – which marks a pause of relief within the pounding repetitions of "dopo" – follow other images concerning falls and rebirths (onto which the description of a peasant who attempts to draw water from a too-deep well blossoms). After the "figlio bramoso/di distinguersi" ("son […] anxious to distinguish/himself" – once again, Christ), "la figliola col cuore devastato" ("the daughter with/the devastated heart" – Rosselli, who positions herself in a direct relationship with the above son) is born. The infinite "non si ritrova se/si perde" ("once lost can never be found again"): any effort is vain, and what is left is to keep staggering – in an unsatisfactory world, a "giostra" ("merry-go-round") that banally alternates birth and death – with the hope that "la fine peschi/un'anima servile" ("the end may fish/a fawning soul"). In other words, the faith that the whirlwind and the "pena degli uccelli" ("the birds' pain") would come to an end, and the anxious desire for the transcendental (which is already lost or is an empty simulacrum, anyway) could finally subside.

IV. Conclusion

The narrative around the pandemic has disclosed the potentialities and the limitations of critical theory for grasping the contours of the blurry threshold in which the world is currently stuck. The capitalist imperative of a return to a (supposed) normality, paired with disquieted reflections on technological surveillance and the role of the nation-state, have prompted us to read the crisis as a shifting event, almost as an occasion for imagining a different future. As I read Rosselli, whose lyrics approach us from afar, I wonder if the Christic visions of her verses, the articulation of one's flesh vis-a-vis the flesh of the other, and the aborted leaps to transcendence could open a line of inquiry that would make us wager with the catastrophe on a different, and certainly less linear, temporal plane. The isolation from which the poet speaks "clings with all its senses to the eternal":[90] but unlike the Christ who populates contemporary critical analyses, Rosselli's is an agonizing emblem who carries cadavers on his shoulders, being thrown into "the provisional, the everyday, the unreliable."[91] If contemporary critical theory follows the *Noli me tangere* imperative by not touching the texture of the evangelical tale itself, somehow keeping its untouchable holiness, Rosselli's poetics models a radical, iconoclastic engagement with religion. Having lost its aura of untouchability, Christ is desacralized by Rosselli who, almost embracing the role of the allegorist, separates the eternal from "the events of the story of salvation, and what is left is a living image open to all kinds of revision by the interpretative artist."[92] In the instant

[90] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 181.
[91] Ibid., 183.
[92] Ibid.

of danger and decay, altarpiece figures come to life and participate in history as mundane fragments of a lost continuity.

The collection *Variazioni belliche* thus calls for intense and attentive participation; however, it does not offer clear instructions for how to rethink the agonizing flesh or our endangered bodies in a moment of extreme risk. Rather, it invites us to dive into the whirlwind of images that arise from personal, political, and collective crises: no matter how hallucinatory and stuttering, the multifaceted allegories that animate this poetry constitute a revolt against a univocal meaning, a comforting solution, and any abstract depiction of a faceless subject. And perhaps including this defiant, *bellicose* language is precisely what we need while probing conversations around the episteme (and praxis) of the world to come.